
The FMC Vine

First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana

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ENCOUNTERS WITH WILLIE T. SUMMERVILLE by *Cindy Breeze*

On March 7, 2017 our community lost a genuine treasure. As well deserved tributes from school administrators, former students, city officials, church leaders, family, and friends honor Willie Summerville, I hesitate to offer my humble comments about the few times I intersected with him over a period of 40 years. I did not know Willie well, but the memories of the times I was privileged to interact with him are vivid and cherished.

I was a fairly new music teacher in the 1970's and teaching in a rural school district in Champaign County. While at a fall teachers' meeting of area schools, I chatted with two other music teachers, and we hatched an idea to combine our three choirs for a spring all-day music festival. Surprisingly, our administrators gave us their blessing to go ahead with our plan and a date was set. All we needed was a guest conductor. I asked the other teachers if they knew of Willie Summerville, the choir director at Urbana High School. Of course, they had heard of him, but none of us knew Willie personally. Thinking I had nothing to lose, I volunteered to boldly send him a letter inviting him to be our guest conductor for an all day choir festival and an evening concert. I mentioned in the letter that I understood this meant he would have to take a day off from his own teaching responsibilities but, if at all possible, we would very much welcome him as our first festival conductor. I heard from Willie immediately. YES, he would love to come to our festival! We three music teachers were ecstatic and got busy teaching our students the challenging pieces he had chosen.

I will never forget the festival day. Willie was so well prepared, to say nothing of his skill at coaxing sounds from those high schoolers

that we teachers had never heard. But it was his winsome, funny, and enthusiastic personality that endeared him to each student (and teacher). The day was over far too soon for all of us, but the evening concert where we showcased our festival music was well attended and well received – a standing ovation. The following year we again sponsored a choir festival and no one, most of all the students, wanted any other festival director. He once again graciously accepted our invitation.

These festivals were significant for all kinds of reasons: exposure to other directors, forming relationships with youth from other schools, and experiencing music that was more challenging than we teachers dared choose. But there was another benefit. In three totally white schools in three totally white communities, Willie gave our students a much needed experience with a person of color. I believe this was just as positive and important as our music making.

My second encounter with Willie was not quite as positive, but it was not his fault. The spring after that first music festival I took a number of students to Solo and Ensemble contest where one of the boys in my choir was slated to sing a beautiful song from the operetta, *Porgy and Bess*. However, for weeks he had refused my offer to help him with the solo, assuring me he had it all under control.

Not so much! While still on the bus ride to contest, he was still trying to memorize the words to the song. Once arriving at the host school, I went with the student to the room where he was to sing, and who should be his judge? Willie Summerville. Willie warmly greeted me with a hug and said he was excited to hear my student, knowing it would be wonderful. Gulp! I was pretty sure it was not going to be wonderful. And, I was right!

About 30 seconds into the piece, the student forgot the words and uttered a loud curse. I

mean loud! Willie stopped the proceedings and looked at me. "THIS is one of YOURS?" he asked. I softly replied, "Yes, he is one of mine." The result? My student got a 4 – and that isn't even supposed to be possible. The judging scale is 1 for excellent; 2 for good; 3 for fair – needs work. On the bottom of the judging sheet Willie wrote something like, "Young man, your behavior was totally unacceptable. I know your teacher, and I was embarrassed for her. I bet she tried her best to work with you. Listen to her next time."

At least ten years later, Willie was working with his Urbana High School choir to raise funds for their European choir tour. He and a group of his students were giving a mini-concert at Strawberry Fields on a Saturday when I just happened to stop by the store. I paused to listen to the music some distance away when Willie caught my eye. He stopped playing the keyboard, stood up, and came straight to me, embracing me with a warm hug. "Cindy, Cindy, Cindy," was all he said at first. Then to the gathered group, "Everybody, this here is a wonderful choir director I've known for years. Let's sing something special for her, shall we." The students went on to sing, as I stood there inwardly shaking my head thinking, how does he do that? How does he remember the name of someone he has only met three times and so many years ago? I wrote a check for the choir trip on the spot!

For a couple of years our congregation was paired with St. Luke's AME Church in order for the two congregations to get to know each other better. Besides pulpit exchanges and occasional social events, Willie Summerville, the choir director at St. Luke's, and I planned a hymn sing for the two churches in early May of 1999. The hymn sing was held at FMC, and while we were getting ready to lead it, I told Willie that it was a tough and emotional weekend for me. The day before I had broken several bones in my foot, that day our daughter moved to Germany for a semester, and the following day my brothers and I were moving our mother to a nursing home. During the hymn sing, Willie chose the hymn "Come, ye disconsolate." As he waited for the congregation to turn to the right page, he looked at me, winked, and whispered, "this one's for you." That was a special moment and indicative of his being tuned into the needs of others.

My next encounter with Willie Summerville was by far the most significant. I found out about the opportunity to audit a University of Illinois graduate level course on Black Gospel Music that was being taught by Willie. I love this genre of music and knowing others at First Mennonite did as well, I asked the congregation if anyone would like to join me in taking the class. Kara Hjelmstad, Dan Matthews, and Bev Potts signed up, too. For an entire semester we met for 3 hours each Monday night, and it is one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had. However, it did not come without a few challenges.

During the first class session, Willie announced that there "are Mennonites in the room, people. Mennonites! Isn't that great? These people can really sing. You'll see." Then he added, "Cindy, oh Cindy. I am so glad you are here, and I want you to be my teaching assistant for the class, okay?" What is one to say to that request, especially when it came from Willie Summerville! I said, sure. What followed was a semester with weekly contact with this beloved guru, a semester of music-making that was soul feeding, and quite a bit of work for me.

There are so many standout moments in the class, but I'll share just two. During one class Willie talked about how African-American churches often sang the same song quite differently from one congregation to another. He used the "Star Spangled Banner" and "America" as two examples and had class members from different churches demonstrate what he meant. (The class was made up of African-Americans students except for the 4 FMCers.) After we heard several different renditions of the two pieces, Willie said to me, "Cindy, how do you Mennonites sing these two songs? Come to the front and show us?" I paused for a bit, trying to figure out exactly how to answer. Finally I said, "Uh, Mr. Summerville, Mennonites don't sing these songs in church." His response was a rather high-pitched kind of squeal, "What?" He continued, "Oh my goodness, why not?" I mumbled some short, probably very inadequate answer, while he responded with, "Come up here and tell us the history of the Mennonites." I know I did a really poor job of relating 500 years of history after about 10

seconds of preparation, but I gave it my best to explain why patriotic music was not something we sang in our congregations. From that point on, it was not uncommon for him to say, right in the middle of our learning a new piece of gospel music, "Cindy, now do you Mennonite sing this piece?" If I said yes, he would then ask me to demonstrate how Mennonites would sing it.

The second standout memory of this class was our final "exam." The exam was a public concert. For the dress rehearsal Willie said in class that he hoped Kara, Bev, and I wouldn't be offended, but he was going to bring in some of his church choir members to stand and sing behind us at the concert. I was rather surprised at that since I knew we were singing the songs pretty well. But, come to find out, it wasn't our wrong notes causing the importation of new singers. Their job was to tap us on the shoulder of the side we *should be* swaying towards. And that's what the women did...tap us on the right or left shoulder every time our stepping from side to side got out of sync with the rest of the group. I guess we had made it pretty clear earlier in class that we were unable to sing and move at the same time.

(Dan Matthews did not join us in singing, because Willie and the class accompanist had taken Dan under their "wings" to teach him to play in the black gospel style. He was busy playing the piano while the other accompanist played the organ.)

Fast forward to my retirement as Associate Pastor at First Mennonite – January, 2010. The committee who planned my wonderful retirement dinner surprised me by inviting Willie Summerville to the festivities. I was very moved by his attendance. Our encounters had been few over the years, but here he was, one busy, busy man taking the time to honor me with his presence. I will never forget his leading us in "Amazing Grace" from the piano that evening.

Finally, I have one last Willie Summerville moment, and it came a few months after my retirement. Clark and I took almost a year away from FMC after I retired, and while gone I did a research project on the hospitality of churches to first time visitors. One of the 40 churches we visited during that year was Canaan Baptist where Willie was choir

director. In that congregation newcomers were asked by an usher to fill out an informational card. Later in the service, the worship leader would use those cards to announce the morning's visitors. We were introduced and asked to stand. Immediately Willie jumped up from his seat with the choir and said something like, "Oh my goodness, this is Reverend Cindy and her husband. She's a Mennonite and can sing!" Talk about embarrassing! However, I have to admit, it felt like a really special moment, especially since almost everywhere we went to church that year no one acknowledged us at all. That is the sum of my total interactions with Willie. Tiny little blips in the life of Willie Summerville. However, they weren't such tiny little blips in my life, and I think this helps explain why he was so beloved. If he was so warm and effusive and memorable to someone with whom he was only marginally connected, think how he must have influenced and impacted all those who had significant relationships with him. I end as I began...we have lost a treasure.

I give you this one thought to keep.

I am with you still. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on the snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush,

I am the swift, uplifting rush

of quiet birds in circled flight.

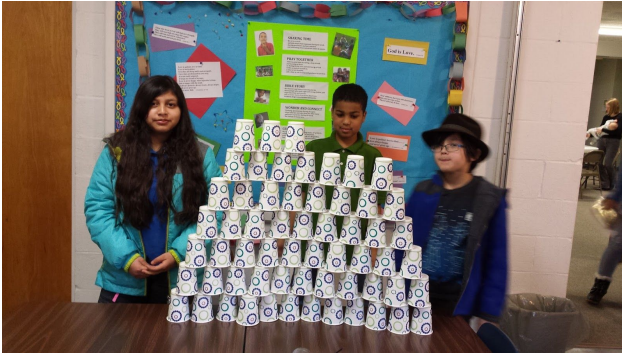
I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not think of me as gone.

I am with you still in each new dawn.

~Native American Poem~

Kindergarten-Fifth Grade Sunday School



The teachings of the Upside Down Kingdom are sometimes hard to do, illustrated by erecting a pyramid of upside down cups, one-handed, within one minute's time! But with steady faithfulness, both are rewarding.



Prayer shawls symbolically embody the thoughts and prayers that the makers have for the receiver. Can you imagine a world covered in such shawls?

For more information on Christians and prayer shawls:
http://www.ttvonline.net/prayer_shawl.html
<https://www.theshofarman.com/tallit-prayers-hawlfactsandhistory.htm>

Committee Reports

In *Christian Education Committee* we brainstorm about possible ideas for adult Sunday School classes but sometimes an idea doesn't fit neatly into a Sunday morning time slot. Tom wondered, in light of the political climate, if there would be a way to focus energy in a group setting. This group would commit to sharing information about opportunities and discerning responses and actions. Out of that idea, in March, Laura shared a meditation on her experience in a Base



Making a fleece prayer shawl for John Otto taught us that prayer can take many forms and always surrounds us with the energy of God's love and light.



We had a treasure hunt and found buried treasure in the Peace Garden, while learning that real treasures are stored in the heart

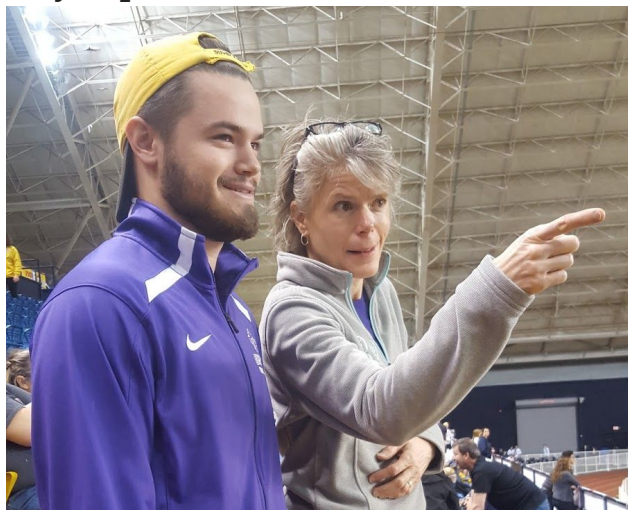
Liberation Theology group when she lived in England.

About it she writes, "It grew out of the idea of the Christian Base Community movement in Latin America (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>) and was appealing to several of us who connected our faith with being active for social justice. We would gather every week, about 10 of us, and do a set liturgy, which was about 10-15 min. After our liturgy, we would share about what was going on for

us and often we would either hear from a visiting speaker who was working on a social justice campaign, plan an action, or actually engage in an action that evening. That could range from letter writing, holding an event—like a social where we would sell fair trade items, or going on a protest—like against the Trident nuclear missiles. The group helped me to organize anti-war (Iraq) marches and gather materials for refugee kits. It was a great setting to feel supported in our faith-based activism and a very nice place to incubate ideas for campaigns. I still keep in touch with many of those folks.”

Would you be interested in such a group? Here's an idea that needs some help to fly!

May Caption This



March 'Caption This' Results



Editor's Choice:

"Are you sure MTD means "Mennonite Transit District"?"

Honorable Mention:

"FMC provides a place for the congregation's shunned people to worship."

"UC-MTD's new bus stop."

"No! I WON'T cross my legs! Mom said it's unhealthy."

"Cover for 1985 Grammy winning gospel-bluegrass album "Pew Sitters" by the White Heath Boys"

"We heard Mennonites stash money into whatever these things are..."

"Shunned for inappropriate worship behavior"

"Distracted Street Evangelizers"

"Four part harmony - any time, any place."

"Sitting in the back row"

Applesauce-Raspberry Jello (mennonitegirlscancook.ca)

3oz. pkg. raspberry jello / 1 cup hot water
 10oz. pkg. frozen raspberries / 1 cup applesauce
 1 cup sour cream / 1 cup miniature marshmallows

Dissolve Jello in hot water. Add frozen raspberries and blend carefully. Add applesauce. Pour into 9-inch square pan. Chill until set. Combine sour cream and marshmallows and spread over top of set Jello. Cover and Chill. Serves 6-8. If you want to present this dish in an individual parfait glass do not spread the sour cream mixture on top of the set jello. Keep it separate and layer the ingredients.

Reflections on the Illinois Mennonite Conference Annual Assembly - March 31-April 1, 2017

Eight of us traveled to Menno Haven for the 2017 IMC Annual Assembly: Rebecca Bare; Abby, Michael, Eliza, & Silas Crosby; Jan Sabey; Kathy & Keith Springer; and Debra Sutter. Here are some reflections, respectfully submitted:

"I cried when it was time to leave." –Eliza

Keith Springer

Compelled by Christ's Love was the theme of Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC) Annual Assembly 2017 which convened at Menno Haven Camp & Retreat Center, March 31-April 1. The theme was based on 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (NIV). One highlight of conference for me was the unanimous acceptance and welcome of Carlock Mennonite Church as a member of IMC. On Friday evening, representatives from Carlock were in attendance and shared with us the history of and composition of their congregation. Carlock is located just west of Bloomington-Normal and their pastor is Doane Brubaker.

"Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC) is a thriving network of healthy Anabaptist Christian congregations through which congregational members and their neighbors experience and manifest the reign of God through Christ Jesus, as enabled by the Holy Spirit." This mission statement of IMC has led the Missional Leadership Team (MLT) to adopt four ENDS statements with the following priorities: Relationships, Diversity, Leadership Development, and Healthy Congregations.

Table groups at conference were to discuss (as much as possible in the short period of time we had available) a discernment process that may be required in the event that a circumstance arises within IMC that is not clearly addressed by current policy and practice as expressed in the IMC Constitution. The document that we examined was drafted by IMC leadership. I observed general agreement that the key to this discernment process is the statement of Mutual Trust at the end of the document: *"This discernment process will be helpful to the degree that the participants trust the Holy Spirit to be at work as the participants engage in healthy, Jesus-centered, dialog marked by love, transparency, grace, and a listening posture."*

IMC treasurer, Aaron Birky, gave a financial report for 2016-17 on Saturday. Noteworthy is that IMC realized a net loss of \$7,565.59 in the operating fund. This loss was offset by using this amount from "Undesignated Funds" in the Funds Account. It was reported that one way to reduce operating expense will be to discontinue utilizing an IMC office. Instead, Executive Conference Minister Michael Danner and Executive Assistant Holly Mason will have an office in their respective homes.

Brief reports were given by representatives of various agencies of Mennonite Church USA. I found it helpful to learn that the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) will no longer use the building at Congerville as a collection facility for goods for relief. From now on goods should be delivered to Metamora Mennonite Church. For a complete reading of the IMC Annual Report, including the financial report, go to illinoismennonite.com.

Rebecca Bare

Although I have attended the Central District Conference (CDC) meetings many times, this was the first time I had attended an IMC meeting.

Friday evening, during the welcome, we were introduced to Carlock Mennonite Church. They requested to be part of the IMC fellowship, moving their membership from the CDC. There were also worship songs and a sermon by Pastor Michael Danner.

The sermon, in a nutshell, was this: Christ calls us to 1) evangelize and 2) do good works/ follow Christ. Mennonites do the second very well, but what about the first? Are we afraid to approach our neighbors and talk about Christ?

At Saturday breakfast, I sat with a group of people from all over Illinois. We talked about how more and more people are going to college, which is good, but who will be the plumbers and electricians of the future? Are high schools and churches emphasizing higher education too much and manual labor/service jobs too little? Some people thought the answer was yes. I found the discussion very interesting.

We started the morning session by lighting a candle in remembrance of MJ Sharp, who followed God's calling to serve in the Congo and recently lost his life there. We were reminded that when we dedicate our children to God, we tend to forget what we are dedicating them to.

After we accepted the Carlock Mennonite Church into the IMC, we heard reports from different agencies, such as Mennonite Central Committee and MC-USA. We caught a glimpse of what the MC-USA meeting will be grappling with in Orlando this summer; that is, what is God calling us to do now? What is MC-USA's response to immigration?

During the budget talk, it was noted that the IMC offices have decommissioned and the two conference employees, Michael and Holly, will be working from home. There is a plan to hire someone to reach out to the Spanish-speaking congregation in IMC.

The afternoon discussion groups focused on discussing a formal approach to discerning church conflicts.

All-in-all, I found the IMC meeting similar to the CDC meetings – worship, budget meetings, reports from agencies, a chance to meet people. I have to admit that my perception of the IMC was of grey-haired people. I was pleasantly surprised to see people of all ages.

Pastor Deb

I love going to Menno Haven. For me it is a place to relax and be refreshed as I walk in the woods. So when I was there for the IMC Conference, I got into the woods early Saturday morning for a muddy walk :) It was also good to spend time in the van with others attending from FMC, and to see people I knew from various places in Illinois. Friday evening was spent in worship, Saturday morning in reports, and Saturday afternoon in discussion of a discernment plan. Carlock Mennonite Church joined IMC during the weekend, leaving the Central District Conference (CDC).

The discernment plan discussion was a little concerning to me. Although it was presented as a plan to put a process in place to address disagreements or concerns before they arise, it was not clear to me when or how it would actually be used. If it would be used as a tool to promote understanding, it could be good, and probably worth the time commitment it could require. If, however, its aim is to bring all churches to consensus on an issue, I fear it could lead to frustration and hurt. Do keep IMC leaders in your prayers as they process how to move forward.

Jan Sabey

One of the special parts of going to the IMC Annual Assembly is car-pooling with friends from FMC and the interesting conversations that occur. I traveled with Keith and Kathy Springer, Rebecca Bare, and Pastor Deb Sutter. Keith and Kathy had just returned the day before from spending a month in Mississippi on a SOOP mission assignment. They had some wonderful stories and insights to share. Some of us also had an interesting conversation about worship, particularly the meaning of communion to each of person.

The actual events started on Friday evening with worship, some introductions, and a teaching by IMC Minister, Michael Danner. He reminded us that Jesus tells us how to make disciples. He said that a disciple trusts Jesus and is one who is growing in obedience to Christ. So to help people become disciples we should invite them to trust Jesus and then help each other grow in faithfulness and obedience to Christ. Michael Danner suggested that Mennonites are not comfortable with the inviting part of that process. Then he challenged us to consider if we are so compelled by Jesus' love that we see every person we encounter as someone God loves and wants to be in relationship with,

if they aren't already, and are we are ready to speak of God's offer of reconciliation to them. He said we are in the place to consider what kind of a world we want to create by reaching out to people in the name of Jesus. To make it personal -- Is the world a better place because I have met Jesus? I have found his message and his questions to be personally thought-provoking and challenging?

Saturday morning included an information time with representatives from a variety of MC-USA agencies sharing short reports. Of note: The Mennonite Disaster Service won a member of the year award from a volunteer disaster coalition (VOAD) to which it belongs. MDS is one of the smallest agencies in the group and was recommended for the award by the Red Cross, the largest disaster relief agency in the group.

We also spent considerable time hearing about the IMC financial situation which is tenuous. Kim Litwiller, the associate IMC minister is resigning and will not be replaced. The IMC offices are being shut down and the two staff will work from their homes. At his request, Michael Danner will receive no raise this year. He will also receive no pension set-aside for the year. Rather he has asked that that \$6,000 (of pension set-aside) be used to hire a staff person to focus on outreach to the Hispanic churches of IMC. Michael gave three stunning statistics that supports his willingness to make this sacrifice: (1) Of the 46 churches that comprise the IMC, 9 are Hispanic. (2) Of the 6,000 individual members of IMC, 3,000 are Hispanic. (3) The Hispanic churches are the fastest growing churches in the conference. A good look at the IMC spending plan for the next year shows a very lean operation with a vision. I felt humbled and challenged as I read the numbers and considered the possibilities -- either to grow or to wither.

The afternoon session focused on responding to and providing feedback to a draft of a procedure for mediating strife between churches in the conference. We worked in table groups. During the report-out period, it was evident that these were knotty, difficult points to discuss, and there was a wide variety of ideas to amend, expand, clarify, and omit bits of the original document. Back to the drawing board for the IMC committees that presented it. Sighhhhhhhhhhh.....

Mixed in among all of these structured activities were fellowship times, particularly over snacks and meals (the Menno Haven food was delicious, as usual!). There were some new folks to meet and some returning folks from whom to get updates.

A couple of side notes: (1) I slept in one of the newly-renovated dorms Friday night. They are truly lovely and comfy. Thank you, Keith and Kathy Springer and all of your hard-working renovation colleagues. (2) The worship was OK, but all of the singing was of melody-driven praise songs, most unfamiliar to the majority of the attenders. I do wish we had sung at least one or two hymns in harmony, maybe even a capella. Maybe next year.

This was my fourth or fifth time to attend IMC as a delegate from First Mennonite. Each year I come away with new respect for the work of the conference staff and leadership, with new knowledge about the wider work of IMC and MC-USA, and with deep gratitude. God is still very much at work in the larger church. It is easy to become congregation-focused and lose that wonderful sense of the wideness of God's mercy, creativity, patience, and love.

Pastor Michael (compiler of these reflections)

Meaningful to me was the conclusion of Kim Litwiller's service as Associate Conference Minister. We have hosted her several times at FMC -- in connection with ordination and congregational discernment. She has been a powerful presence at pastor gatherings and in her advocacy for Conference youth these last few years, and was also a primary source of continuity in the transition from Chuck Neufeld to Michael Danner as Executive Conference Minister. As Kim shared, God has taken hold of her life in remarkable ways and she is on to the next part of her journey. We released her with a blessing.

Whew! That sums it up, with apologies for some redundancy, but it seemed good to offer the experience from multiple perspectives. Thank you to those who offered their time to represent us at the IMC gathering. If you have questions, any of us will be glad to respond.

FMC Famous: Bruce Miller

T.V. -- The VINE

B -- Bruce

T.V.: I am always curious about where people grew up and what their family was like. Where are you from and how did you get to Urbana/Champaign?

B: I grew up in west-central Illinois, halfway between Galesburg and Burlington, Iowa. My dad was a veterinarian (mostly cattle and hogs); mom was a homemaker. They met at Ohio State, which is where they met Oleta's parents. The two couples shared the upstairs of a Church of the Brethren rooming house and our dads were a year apart in vet school.

I came to Urbana for grad school. After we married, Oleta moved here from Iowa City.

T.V.: Bruce, you come into church, quietly take your place in the pew. You do good children's stories for worship. How long have you been a member of FMC?

B: 22 years, since Easter, 1995. Before that I was a common-law Mennonite for seven years. Oleta and I moved here from the Chapel of St. John the Episcopalian on the west side of campus.

Lots of people here do fine Children's Stories. I have had my share of clunkers.

T.V.: Where did you and Oleta meet? and when was that?

B: In her parent's living room in Columbus. Not dramatic, as we were only a few weeks old. We met again about 26 years later in my parent's living room and took an instant dislike to each other. Things proceeded slowly from there.

T.V.: What do you do for a living? and where do you do that?

B: I work in technical support for a local software company, helping customers install and use our products. These can be NASA engineers with messy equations or naive teens with their first computers. Former FMCer Jerry Keiper was a co-founder of the company and helped me get the job there.

T.V.: Do you have favorite "pastimes" or hobbies?

B: I'm primary care giver to Oleta's menagerie. We are currently down to two

dogs, two cats, and two rabbits. Oleta's friend Elaine moved in with us a year ago; she has two cats which I feed when Elaine is out of town for a weekend. It happens that each pair of beasts is one female and one male. We have achieved gender balance in the furs.

For no practical purpose, I make up pieces of lyrics for others' songs.

Menno Night, you bring us joy, you bring us cheer.

Menno Night, I'm sure glad I'm not a pastor here.

T.V.: You and Oleta adopted children from Russia. Where are they now, and how are they doing?

B: The eldest, Alona (she prefers Alana), and her 2-year-old son, Sasha, are staying with the youngest, Dasha, in Champaign (just east of Centennial High). Middle daughter Katya is near San Antonio, TX. Alana and husband Nikolai are the "poor but happy" type. She hopes to talk him into moving to the US; I don't expect that real soon. Maybe a visit first. Katya has a full-time job in the office of an upscale apartment complex. Dasha is working as a barista (coffee chef) and front-desk person at the iHotel. She has ideas and applications in for longer-term possibilities.

T.V.: If you could go anyplace in the world, where would it be and why would you want to go there?

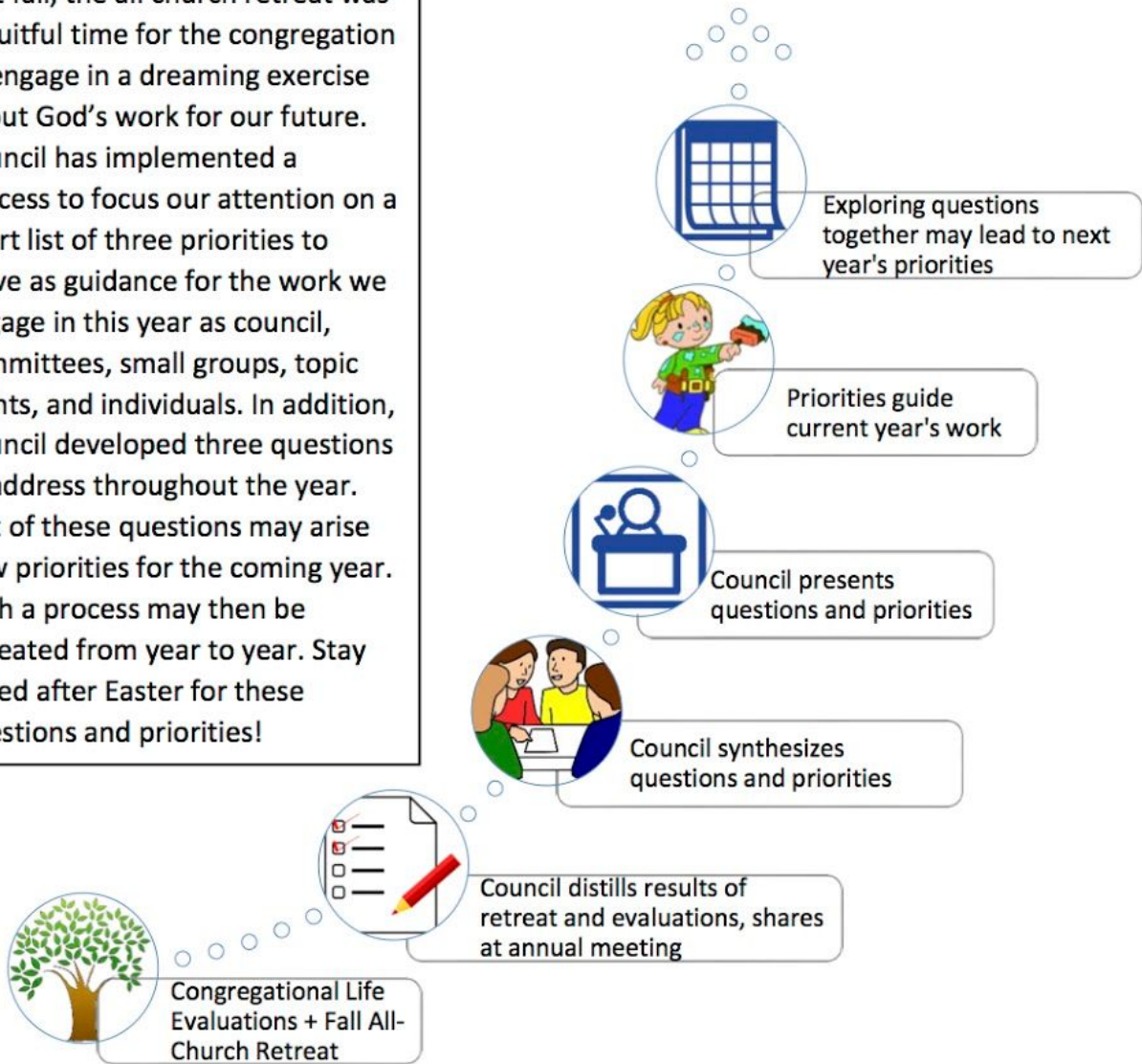
B: Stonehenge. Cool, strange, primitive, and very clever. Dasha wants me to go with her to New Zealand to see Hobbit Heritage sites. There are some big cities I might be interested in taking a 2-3 hour tour by bus of - London, Tokyo...

T.V.: If someone dropped off a big chunk of money at your house, what would you do with it? Think about it being \$100 or maybe a million dollars.

B: \$100 would get lost in the general swirl. With a \$ million, after taxes, charities, and administrative overhead, there might be enough left to take to Ohio State and see about setting up small scholarships in my parents' names. (That ignores Oleta, who might have suggestions.)

FMC Priorities Planning Process

Last fall, the all church retreat was a fruitful time for the congregation to engage in a dreaming exercise about God's work for our future. Council has implemented a process to focus our attention on a short list of three priorities to serve as guidance for the work we engage in this year as council, committees, small groups, topic nights, and individuals. In addition, Council developed three questions to address throughout the year. Out of these questions may arise new priorities for the coming year. Such a process may then be repeated from year to year. Stay tuned after Easter for these questions and priorities!



Look for the detailed information in your FMC mailbox on April 30th.

Love is a Verb: Remembering MJ Sharp and the witness of 'a kind soul'

Posted on April 4, 2017 on

<http://mennoniteusa.org/news/love-verb-remembering-mj-sharp/>

Note: This article initially appeared in *The Mennonite*. By Gordon Houser.

HESSTON, Kansas (Mennonite Church USA) – Michael (MJ) Sharp, whose death in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was confirmed by the United Nations on March 28, was “a kind soul,” said his mother, Michelle, in an April 3 interview. John, his father, added that Michael always had a strong intellect but a soft heart.



You may expect parents to speak so highly of their child, but similar comments have poured in from the many people around the globe who testify to the impact Sharp had on their lives. Since he went missing on March 12 along with a fellow UN worker and four Congolese nationals while investigating an arms embargo and possible human rights violations in the Kasai region of the DRC, John and Michelle have heard from countless people and felt great support.

Some of that support has come from the FBI agents assigned to this case, who delivered the news that one of the bodies found outside Kananga on March 28 was Michael's. People have ideas about the FBI, said John, but these agents “were not only good investigators but pastoral in relating to us.”

What led MJ to this point? From early on, said his parents, he was always curious and caring. They named him Michael Jesse, the latter name after his paternal grandfather. And his initials, MJ, were the same as an important mentor to his maternal grandfather. The preschool Michael attended in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, had three Michaels, so Michael himself suggested that he be called MJ.

From an early age, said John, he had theological discussions with his son. “He had a curious mind,” John said.

MJ often paid attention to people that others didn't notice. Michelle said that when he went to church camp, he would befriend kids others ignored. Then, later, he got letters from many of these kids. She told about an experiment he conducted when he was in high school. He borrowed an outfit from a friend that included a hat and wig to make a person look like a woman who was down on her luck. MJ wore this and showed up on the doorsteps of people he knew. When they answered the door, he just said, “Food, food.” None recognized him, and only one family actually invited him into their home and gave him food.

His stunt made the *Goshen News*, Michelle said, but he didn't do it for publicity. “He was just curious.”

They once got a letter from a woman in France who had been an exchange student at Bethany Mennonite High School in Goshen. She said MJ was the first person to welcome her at the school, and, years later, he helped her buy a car.

One of MJ's friends from high school was Andy Gingerich, who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He says MJ had visited Albuquerque and told Andy he planned to make that his home base once his assignment with the U.N. ended.

John Sharp said MJ was entrepreneurial. He thought he might go into business.

Kate Stoltzfus, another classmate at Bethany, says MJ bought a house during his senior year of high school and took care of several properties as a summer job during his college years. “He was super innovative and wasn't afraid to think big or take risks,” she writes.

“MJ was always good at languages,” said Michelle. He graduated early from high school and went to Costa Rica, where he picked up some Spanish. At Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, he minored in German. After graduating from EMU in 2005, he served as a Mennonite Mission Network worker with the German Mennonite Peace Committee's Military Counseling Network (MCN) in Bammental, Germany.

Later, he earned a master's degree in peace studies and conflict resolution in 2010 from Philipp University of Marburg, Germany.

"MCN was especially important in MJ's development," said John. MJ became friends with U.S. soldiers and had to learn how the military worked. He also learned about the effects of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). His skills at listening and helping others find more peaceful directions served him well later in the DRC.

From 2012 to 2015, MJ served with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Eastern Congo. There, said Michelle, it seemed he found his calling.

"He was always pushing himself mentally and physically, said John. "He had a sense of adventure."

In the DRC, MJ went to churches and built relationships. Eventually he learned where the militia camps were. He then traveled there, sometimes walking for hours, and talked with militia leaders. He told his parents once that even if someone believes in myths, you can still listen to them. Then you can point them to alternative ways of reaching their goals.

Many of these militia leaders came to trust MJ. Once, while he was celebrating Christmas at his parents' home in Hesston, Kansas, a colonel called him from a forest in the Congo to ask his advice.

MJ told his parents that he felt safe in the DRC. He said MCC was respected and Americans were usually safe. He said he felt even safer when he was working for the U.N. The groups fighting there preferred having a U.N. presence to having U.S. involvement.

Still, John and Michelle said, they knew he was downplaying the danger.

Violence in the DRC is not new. From 1998 to 2003, a second civil war in the Congo is estimated to have killed 5 million Congolese citizens, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. In addition, fighting continues in the country, with at least 70 paramilitary groups operating there. The Council on Foreign Relations reports there are at least 2.7 million internally displaced people in the country and another 450,000 Congolese refugees living abroad. The conflict has also circled around the international demand for Congo's natural resources, many of them used to develop high-tech devices such as cell phones. In addition, in 2016, DRC President Joseph Kabila refused to institute an election process, which has led to an increase in tension and violence across the country.

"How do we stop contributing to ongoing war and strife for our friend and the many Congolese brethren and for everyone's sake?" writes Sarah Thompson, executive director of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). "This is a question that's been haunting me, even as I work in leadership for CPT."

MJ served with CPT in 2009 in Hebron and At-Tuwani, Palestine.

Last October, MJ and his team — including fellow U.N. worker Zaida Catalan of Sweden, who was killed with him — reported to the U.N. that DRC government soldiers were killing civilians while wearing uniforms of militia groups. The report also implicated the governments of Uganda and Rwanda. In December, MJ and a member of the U.N. Security Council met with representatives of those governments.

MJ's U.N. team went back in January and began working in a new region where there was fighting, said John and Michelle.

The last time they spoke with MJ was on Feb. 22, when his sister Laura was having a baby.

"It's a tragic, senseless, terrible loss," said John.

In reflecting on MJ's life, he noted that if we really believe in loving our enemies, "we should be producing hundreds of MJ's." Not necessarily to do what he did, he said, but "we are all called to reach out to those who are hopeless."

They added that MJ did not do the work he did because it was dangerous but because he cared for the Congolese people. The danger was peripheral. "He focused on doing the job," said John. "He was more interested in the process than in the results.

John and Michelle said MJ's body is to be flown back to the United States this week. The family plans to spread his ashes in the places that were important to him, including the DRC.