

6/19/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER

Our Father, and source of life,

We praise you for our life and breath, for our families and livelihoods, for friendships, and all that gives us joy in daily life.

We thank you for the pathway of transformation that we find through the person of your Son Jesus.

You call us out of our selfish thoughts, concerned with not having enough, not being great enough, and not getting enough credit, to a renewed center of the love that Jesus showed us, and of receiving each moment in gratitude.

We gather today in worship in the name of this Jesus to know your Spirit to be present among us.

As today is Father's Day, we celebrate today the blessing of the fathers that are among us. We give thanks for the gifts of dads to nurture, provide for, discipline, train, and befriend their children throughout the many stages of life.

We look to the parental love and life-giving power that is in you from the beginning of creation to inspire our own work as parents and mentors.

Be the source of wisdom for the fathers and mothers and caregivers among us, in the joys and privileges of time with children, and especially in the challenges and exasperating moments.

We pray for our children and youth as they enjoy the activities of summer. There's no question that summer is here on full blast. We pray we can all experience rest and rejuvenation in this season.

We pray for folks traveling and venturing out on vacations or other sorts of travel, for both fun and safety. We pray for everyone to stay well on the hottest days.

We pray likewise for farmers in this season of wheat harvest, praying that they may be blessed in this endeavor.

We pray for everyone who lives with health concerns, immuno-compromise, or treatments that impact daily life. We pray for patience, for health, for companionship, and for enjoyment of what is possible.

We remember Lois Janzen as she now recovers from her fall and yesterday's surgery. May she rest and recuperate in the best way possible and experience the care of her family and others in her life.

We pray for all of our leaders, community and state, as well as national and global leaders dealing with the major challenges we hear about in headlines.

All these folks are fallible human beings with temptations, yet you work through people of influence, and you also work through each of us, regardless of our station in life.

Let us hear the word we most need to hear for today.

In the name of Jesus, through whom we understand your love, Amen

WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

These two scriptures, Hebrews 12:14, and Romans 12:1-2 were the basis of a message that Samuel Sarpiya gave at the Special Assembly in Kansas City that our delegates are going to tell you about.

Samuel comes from the Church of the Brethren denomination, which is another Anabaptist-related tradition. Yet this meant that Samuel could be a third-party without a particular interest in how the decision-making at the assembly went.

He spoke twice and our delegates recall feeling very inspired hearing him, which of course is more impactful in person. We are going to listen to his second message. Samuel recorded this message for churches that chose to listen the same weekend as the Special Assembly. We came to feel that the themes of Samuel's message are significant enough that we wanted you all to also hear it, and that it wouldn't be quite the same if I gave a sermon that tried to say the same thing.

Following the message, our delegates will share about how they experienced the assembly, the worship time, storytelling, and learning about the ministries of many churches in very different contexts. We will also hear summary of the particular resolutions studied or passed. I am very grateful for their willingness to share with you all from the heart in this service.

Before our delegates share, we first want to consider Samuel's plea for us to be able to see the image of God in those with whom we disagree. As we work together, our differences in theology, in our life experiences, and in our engagement with the Bible can be viewed as a problem or can be viewed as an opportunity to go deeper in our conversation, in our listening, and in our understanding of our convictions.

One way we are not conformed by the pattern of this world is by placing our primary identity in Christ in such a way that we seek to understand people we may feel at odds with.

May all of this serve the purpose of helping us follow the leading of the Spirit for the ministry that we have in the Goessel community and beyond.

DELEGATE SHARING

JOHN FAST

It has been many years since I have attended a church conference or assembly. So, I approached this event as an opportunity to focus on listening and learning. All that I heard and

learned that weekend is challenging to capture in this brief snapshot, but I'll try. I'll summarize it in three parts: 1) what I heard, 2) what I experienced and 3) what I think this Assembly means for Alexanderwohl.

1) What I heard: Samuel Sarpiya spoke to us and implored us to work on drawing the circle wider. We all have our circles of family, friends, and associates. But when it comes to sharing the love of Christ, we need to focus on drawing the circle ever wider. Our church circle needs to be an ever-widening circle of fellowship. To do that I heard Samuel tell us to seek to be the Third Way in a society that is growing ever more divisive. This means living above our differences and seeking a loving and intentional means to solve our differences. I heard that we need to focus less on the differences of our beliefs and instead focus on improving the way we behave towards one another. I heard that some of us are too concerned about what happens *under* the blankets rather than being concerned that everyone *has* a warm blanket. I listened to representatives of many Hispanic churches share their approach to being a welcoming congregation to all who enter their doors. I was especially moved listening Aldo Sihaan, a Philippino pastor from the inner city of Philadelphia, share about the struggles his members face, many of them recent immigrants. He also spoke of the joy his congregation shares with those around them even though many are simply trying to seek answers to basic survival such as finding jobs and housing. I listened carefully to my table partners and the tables around us as we discussed and shared around the table and between tables.

2) What I experienced: I would describe what I experienced as a HEART OPENING experience. Never have I been at such a large gathering where everyone I came into contact with was seeking so hard to listen, really listen to what others were sharing. Where so many people were prayerfully seeking to connect with those around them and seeking guidance from God. I also experienced an awareness of the rich diversity that makes up the Mennonite denomination. We here at Alexanderwohl may think of Mennonites traditionally from our Swiss-German-Russian roots, but the Mennonite denomination is so much more than that now. Contrary to popular belief, the assembly was proof that Mennonites have worked at evangelism! To hear so many diverse and uniquely different people from myself say "I am Mennonite, and a believer in Christ", helps to open my heart, and helps me to draw the circle wider.

3) What do I think this Assembly means for Alexanderwohl: I didn't come back with specific things to do or specific agenda, but I believe we can keep drawing the circle wider here at Alexanderwohl. I believe that is what God wants his people to do. I believe this means we need to focus less on differences we find between ourselves and focus more on how we treat each other both within and beyond our congregation. I came back feeling that we are on the right track with what we are trying to do here at Alexanderwohl, but that we have much work to do. I believe I better understand the importance of belonging to a conference and an even wider denomination that reaches world-wide. I hope that we can renew our circle and contact with our sister congregation in Dallas. I think we need to continue to work at drawing the circle wider and work to provide HEART-OPENING experiences for each other.

MARILYN UNRUH FLAMING

This was my first time to serve as a delegate to an MC-USA conference. Going into the 3-day weekend, I felt somewhat anxious, curious and hopeful. It turned out to be intense, hard work and a faith-deepening experience for me. I was grateful to share it with Megan and John; we had good and meaningful conversations.

I was assigned to a working table with 5 other persons from 6 states and conferences. In our conversations, we were encouraged to remember Samuel Sarpiya's comment that, "If Jesus is our center, the polarization is not where the energy will be." The 500-plus delegates took this to heart as there was a spirit of compassion and willingness to listen and discern together as we considered 4 resolutions.

The Accessibility Resolution will help MC USA recognize and remove barriers to belonging in our architecture, communication and attitudes. Through the stories we heard, I became aware of a broader spectrum of disabilities...from visible ones like mobility, hearing and seeing—to more invisible ones like anxiety, autism, and noise-adversity. When 100% of the delegates affirmed this resolution, we responded with sensitivity like this (demo of waiving hands in the air) instead of noisy clapping! At Alexanderwohl, we have already taken thoughtful steps by investing in accessible restrooms, the new elevator and entrance, and live-streaming our services. There are likely other simple changes in the way we do things that would give greater dignity to some in our church family. I think that's exciting.

The church statement titled "For Justice in the US Criminal Legal System" was brought for study—not for a vote. It suggests ways that churches can gain a better understanding of how our legal system has come to function, and how we might work for greater justice. Delegates voiced quite a bit of support for this resolution, as well as suggestions to improve it. We are encouraged to study this topic before the resolution is considered at the 2023 convention.

The organizational resolution to retire the MC-USA Membership Guidelines passed with 82.8% of the delegates in favor. These guidelines were originally approved in 2001 to facilitate the MC USA merger. The section related to homosexuality and membership has been debated ever since. By retiring the Guidelines, this resolution aligns policy with actual practice, since the majority of our area conferences do not enforce the ban on pastors officiating same-sex marriages. Individual conferences like Western District will continue to hold the responsibility for decisions about church membership and how pastors are credentialed. Here at Alexanderwohl, we will continue to make our own decisions about who we call as our pastors, according to the discernment of our own congregation.

Delegates then discussed the "Repentance and Transformation" resolution which calls for rescinding the membership guidelines, confessing harm done in the past to gay community and affirming their spiritual gifts in the church. The resolution also provides for representation on the Constituency Leaders Council and in the shaping of future theological statements. Many delegates acknowledged the harm done to the LGBTQIA community by individuals, congregations and the denomination. Some shared experiences of how inclusion has enriched their congregations. Some struggled with the tone of the resolution and the future impact for their churches and conferences. The delegate

body narrowly approved this resolution with 55.7% in favor. The difference between the vote results on this resolution and the Guidelines resolution may reflect a number of delegates who voiced LGBTQIA affirmation but wanted a resolution with more bridge-building words of forbearance with those who affirm only traditional marriage.

What does this resolution mean for Alexanderwohl? It's important to understand that the MC USA resolutions are not binding; they are an invitation—an invitation to **OUR** church to discern where and how **WE** are called into God's mission of hope and healing.

Over the years, the question of who is welcome at our own table has at times been painful. We have struggled with questions of inclusion related to this issue as well as divorce, women in leadership, racial equality, military service, mental health, and others. I imagine we will continue to experience some "holy frustration" as a delegate described the messy work of following Jesus in our times. Samuel Sarpiya observed that we are known as an historic peace church and others are watching us. He said that how we as Mennonites deal with our sincerely-held differences can be an important witness of God's love in our broken, polarized world.

A delegate shared this simple statement that touched my heart: "Jesus didn't choose a wall; he chose a table. We must all bring a chair. Let us bring two—one for me and one for you."

My prayer is that our table here at Alexanderwohl will be large enough for all of our different chairs because, with Jesus at the center, the table is where we can best discover God's will together.

MEGAN DUERKSEN

"There is invitation in our discomfort" – I heard this quote last summer and I have embraced it over the last year. It has helped me to hold tensions in my own mind; making space for curiosity, imagination, and learning. When the opportunity to attend the delegate session came up in May, I definitely had discomfort about it – not only because of the content being discussed, but also because I'm quite an introvert and haven't always felt comfortable sharing in meeting situations. However, I took my discomfort as a sign that maybe the Holy Spirit was nudging me towards spiritual growth. And, I can honestly say this was one of the most meaningful weekends I have ever encountered.

I appreciated how the weekend was set up for storytelling. I teach language arts to middle schoolers during the school year, which means I teach stories, we listen to stories, we write stories – I suppose this is one reason that the emphasis on storytelling resonated with me that weekend.

I think all 3 of us heard individual stories from the people at each of our tables and from delegates who chose to speak at the microphone during the weekend. And we were able to share our own stories with others as well. But On Saturday afternoon, we heard from a panel of pastors sharing the stories of their ministries. Here are some stories we heard from them:

As John said, one pastor we listened to was Aldo Sihaan, a pastor of a Filipino Mennonite church in Philadelphia. He gave a testimony of the challenges of his church members who

worship in what used to be a dive bar in central Philadelphia. He shared about the pain of many immigrants he serves and their fears, particularly over the last few years. He shared their struggles to simply help each other survive financially day by day and the realization that members may be there one day but not the next. He summarized the struggles of immigrant believers so well – their compassion and generosity is inspiring. This is not a pressing issue we struggle with here, of course, but it is an important story for us in order to grow in our capacity for compassion and empathy.

Vickie Pruitt-Sorrels from Chicago wondered if she should return to her Mennonite Church after seminary. What called her back to the church she grew up in? --"the lobby!" It was the community, the relationships, the fellowship that drew her back in and continues to fuel her ministry. I felt a connection to her story because I do understand the importance of relationship in our churches, and the lobby is a place where connections are made.

Megan Ramer shared about their Seattle Mennonite Church's ministry to the homeless. In fact, when the church opened, they had homeless people sleeping on their doorstep. They are partnering with the city and beginning a big housing project to address the need for shelter in Seattle. We obviously don't live in an urban setting, but again, her story reminds us of how God's work can look different depending on the setting and needs surrounding us.

After hearing these stories from PA, IL, and WA, I was reminded that we here at Alexanderwohl are such a small piece of the Mennonite story and of God's bigger story, but we have our purpose and passions here, too, of course. What might we be excited about here in our location?

After this weekend with church members from all across the country, I further realize that Telling our life stories, and in turn, listening to others' life experiences, is an important aspect of our spiritual growth, both personally and corporately. If we only hear the stories in the small circles we live and work in, we may miss the beautiful story that God continues to write. We need to hear and listen to each other in order to further Jesus' mission here on earth - to love each other, to have compassion for one another, to widen the circle. Malinda Berry, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at AMBS, challenged us to look at each other with compassion and curiosity rather than judgment, which IS possible when we choose to listen with open hearts and minds.

Before we finish, we leave you with this question: Are we ready and willing to share and listen to each others' stories here at Alexanderwohl?