

## Pastor Report to Congregation - May 2017

As Allegheny Mennonite Conference has been working at articulating a clear vision for what kind of conference we wish to be moving forward, we have at numerous times been drawn to the work of Palmer Becker in his short booklet entitled *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* Becker states there are three Anabaptist core values: 1) Jesus is the center of our faith; 2) Community is the center of our lives; and 3) Reconciliation is the center of our work.

I believe we would do well to consider these three core values as we reflect on the life of our congregation.

In what ways is Jesus the center of our faith? Each Sunday we gather for worship to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and that we have been called to walk with Jesus in faith and action. Our times of worship are planned so that we have opportunity to offer our gratitude, thanks and praise in song and in prayer. Our children's time and sermon times give emphasis to what it means to walk with Jesus as the way, truth and life. Our most recent Adult education series on Greg Boyd's *Myth of A Christian Nation* has focused on what it means to be Kingdom of God Christians while living in the breach of Kingdom of the World realities. At the same time the downstairs gathering for Adult education focus has been on the stories of Genesis and the biblical account of how those early pilgrims managed as Kingdom of God people in the midst of a harsh and challenging landscape.

We know that in many respects the real challenge to our faith takes place when we leave our time of worship and return to our homes and communities. Our daily work, our daily interactions with family, neighbors, co-workers and classmates - can be a challenging place to test out our deepest held convictions that Jesus is the center of our faith. Perhaps we would do well to spend some time in the near future discussing what situations challenge us the most and discern together how we work at these challenges.

Since we declare that community is the center of our lives, we know that working at healthy relationships within the faith community is of great importance in our walk with God. Our most recent *Community Cafe* was an effort to discuss and discern how we can continue to nurture those life-giving relationships in community. Elders group and Leadership Team will be spending more time in the

future considering ways in which we can continue to build-up the community and make it a more central part of our lives in the hectic pace of our schedules. One way in which we can stay more connected is through daily prayer for those who have asked for prayers the previous Sunday morning. I have found it helpful to go through our church member and participant list regularly and think about and pray for each person who is a part of our community. I'd encourage you to try that as a regular spiritual discipline as well.

As we declare that reconciliation is the center of our work we are reminded that we need to be aware of our need to commit ourselves to healthy spiritual disciplines that foster a growing trust in God and one another. We are human - which means we fall short of the mark - which means we are in need of extending and receiving forgiveness for those times in which we hurt another or feel that pain ourselves.

Reconciliation takes courage - but I sense it also takes a strong dose of humility - recognizing our human frailties and our desire to be right. In an age of ever-increasing polarities perhaps the Christian virtue of humility is needed all the more.

I leave with you for your consideration a portion of an opinion piece published recently in the New York Times by writer Peter Wehner (NYT, Sunday, April 16, 2017).

At the core of Christian doctrine is the belief that we have all fallen short, that our loves are disordered and our lives sometimes a mess, and therefore we are in need of grace. As a result, one of the defining qualities of a Christian's witness to the world should be gentleness, an irenic spirit and empathy. The mark of genuine humility is not self-abasement as much as self-forgetting, which in turn allows us to take an intense interest in the lives of others.

But that is hardly the whole of it. Epistemological humility should also characterize Christians. In my last conversation with him before he died in 2015, Steve Hayner, who was president of Columbia Theological Seminary and an enormously [influential figure](#) in my life, put it well. "I believe in objective truth," he told me, "but I hold lightly to our ability to perceive truth."

What Steve meant by this, I think, is that the world is unfathomably complex. To believe we have mastered it in all respects — that our angle of vision on matters like politics, philosophy and theology is just right all the time — is ridiculous. This doesn't mean one ought to live in a state of perpetual doubt and uncertainty. If we did, we could never speak up for justice and moral truth. It does mean, however, that we're aware that what we know is at best incomplete. "We see

through a glass darkly” is how St. Paul put it in one of his letters to the Corinthians: We know only in part.

My point is not that humility is uniquely available to Christians; it is simply that Christian teaching and tradition affirm its importance.

Humility is a sign of self-confidence; it means we’re secure enough to alter our views based on new information and new circumstances. This would be a far more common occurrence for many of us if our goal was to achieve a greater understanding of truth rather than to confirm what we already believe — if we went into debates wanting to learn rather than wanting to win.

This is a challenge for people of every faith and people of no faith, but as Robert Putnam and David Campbell write in “[American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us](#),” Christians and other religious Americans, while generally better neighbors and “more conscientious citizens than their secular counterparts,” also tend to be “less tolerant of dissent than secular Americans.”

Certitude can easily become an enemy of tolerance but also of inquiry, since if you believe you have all the answers, there’s no point in searching out further information or making an effort to understand the values and assumptions of those with whom you disagree. It’s worth noting, too, that our checks-and-balances system of government assumes that none of us has all the answers and therefore no single person should be trusted with complete authority.

Humility believes there is such a thing as collective wisdom and that we’re better off if we have within our orbit people who see the world somewhat differently than we do. “As iron sharpens iron,” the book of Proverbs says, “so one person sharpens another.” But this requires us to actually engage with, and carefully listen to, people who understand things in ways dissimilar to how we do. It means we have to venture out of our philosophical and theological cul-de-sacs from time to time. It’s worth the effort.

As Tim Keller, one of America’s most influential evangelical thinkers, [says](#): “You can’t disagree with somebody by just beating them from the outside. You have to come into their framework. You critique them from inside their own framework; you don’t critique them for not having your framework.”

A friend of mine recently told me that humility — a virtue he would be the first to admit he recognized only later in life — is elusive, a perpetual goal, almost always a little bit out of reach. The wiser we become, the more we see how much we don’t know and how much we need others to help us know.

The greatest among you shall be a servant, Jesus said, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. For people of the Christian faith, no one humbled himself more, or was exalted as much, as Jesus himself. The cross made the resurrection possible; humility prepared the way for hope. Which raises this question: If humility was good enough for Jesus, why not for the rest of us?

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