ROSEDALE, Ohio—Over 100 church and lay leaders gathered with Rosedale Bible College’s campus community November 12-14 to focus on reaching out to the surrounding culture while staying faithful to the call of discipleship.

RBC president Dan Ziegler opened up the school’s fourth Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium, “Reaching Out Without Selling Out,” with a discussion of his own study of the churches in the Conservative Mennonite Conference. He asked 110 ministers to describe their congregations and found considerable common ground. CMC churches hold a high view of Scripture, he said. They also focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ, believe that faith should be visible in good works, and take discipleship and outreach seriously.

He asked pastors, “What is the prime calling for your church?” Some answered that church was to be a place of discipleship and faithful witness. Others said their prime mission was to reach the lost. The way they perceived their mission “affected the way they did church,” said Ziegler.

Churches that focus on maintaining a faithful witness (“faithfulness churches”) can be skeptical of “trendy faith.” They seek affiliation, value church standards, often distance themselves from the surrounding culture, and tend to place greater value on Anabaptist identity. Older and more stable than outreach churches, they give two and a half times more to CMC organizations. They also experience drastically less growth (-3%, based on Keith Miller’s 2005 “A Statistical Survey of Growth Patterns in Conservative Mennonite Conference,” which covered the years 1996-2004.)

Churches that see their prime mission as reaching the lost (“outreach churches”) are often skeptical of church tradition and value personal conviction and autonomy. They eschew legalism and are more willing to engage the culture. These congregations are characterized by mixed ethnicity, “covert Anabaptism” (leadership may agree with it but doesn’t stress it), and more dynamic growth (33%, also based on Miller’s survey.)

About 43% of CMC attendees are part of faithfulness churches, while outreach churches account for 57% of CMC’s attendance.

Faithfulness churches, said Ziegler, need outreach churches to push conference growth. And outreach churches need faithfulness churches to provide mature workers and support for conference ministries. Most outreach churches were planted by faithfulness churches.

He acknowledged the limits of his study, but also said the tensions are real. “We have to find ways to do both of these things,” he said.

Outreach is an inevitable act of faithfulness. We can “bridge the gap by making the act of outreach essential to faithfulness.”

~ President Dan Ziegler

Dan Ziegler opened and closed the Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium, held November 12-14, with a discussion of his research into “outreach” and “faithfulness” churches in the Conservative Mennonite Conference.
Mel Shetler, senior pastor of Maple City Chapel (Goshen), spoke on how churches can reach beyond themselves. With attendance averaging over 700, Maple City has experienced 38 years of steady growth and is the largest church in the CMC.

Shetler grew up Amish and then Beachy Amish and joined the CMC when he got married. Excited about outreach, he helped start a youth center and coffee house in Goshen in 1971. Within three months, the center was packed with gang members and hippies, and things got messy.

Praying for direction, Shetler was impressed by the verse, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to me.” He changed direction at the center and taught from Isaiah one night. Seven young men responded positively to his message and went to church with him the following Sunday.

They did not look or act like the ethnic Mennonites in the church. The pastor took Shetler aside and said, “Mel, it should work, but it’s not going to. You need to start your own church.”

That was the beginning of Maple City Chapel. Shetler told the symposium audience that he believes the local church is “the hope of the world.” Using Acts 2 as a model, he explained that “the Word of God trumps everything” because it heralds the truth that “the gospel sets us free.”

“Truth is always found prescribed within a boundary,” he said, and the church has always struggled with “the boundary of truth.” The Pharisees made their circle so small they couldn’t live in it. Local churches need to make sure they’re doing nothing to distort the family of God or the structure of the church, making it harder for people to come in.

“The structure has to flow with the Gospel,” he said. It’s the Gospel that “transforms people’s lives. Teach them the Word.”

Shetler also stressed the importance of worship, fellowship, and “being a house of prayer for all nations. Every church should look like its community within a 20-minute drive.” He said 19 different nationalities are represented at Maple City.

When asked where to start in reaching out to the community, Shetler replied, “Outreach is an overflow ministry. Find out what your church and community are like.” He then advised taking a good look at the wineskin – how the church functions – and being careful not to distort it.

**Bikers, hippies and ethnic Mennonites**

Mel Shetler, senior pastor of Maple City Chapel (Goshen), told symposium participants it’s the Gospel that “transforms people’s lives. Teach them the Word.”

**Mixing it up in the city**

David Greiser’s address outlined why the church needs the city. Greiser has done urban ministry.

We need to consider urban ministry to the affluent and educated. We need to be ready for conversations with people about meaning and purpose.

~ David Greiser
before and is stepping down as director of Hesston College’s Pastoral Ministries program to take on the pastorate at North Baltimore Mennonite Church.

Greiser said “the received wisdom is that faith always struggles in cities.” He added that Americans in general, not just Mennonites and other Christians, have always had mixed feelings about cities.

Challenging the received wisdom, Greiser pointed to the Gospel’s coming to Antioch. It was “a watershed moment in the history of the Christian church...the first time the Gospel went to a large urban center.”

Antioch was probably the third largest city in the Roman Empire, akin to our Chicago, and the Gospel flourished there. It leaped over the ethnic barriers and became a Gentile Gospel, with a “wild mixture of Jews and Gentiles” breaking down the dividing wall of hostility, said Greiser.

What happened in Antioch illustrates a principle. “The more urban the environment,” he said, “the more the gospel flourishes. The larger the city, the more diverse the people, and the more difficult its problems, the higher the conversion rate.”

Why is this principle true? “The accumulated wisdom says people in cities are hard, jaded, cynical and difficult to reach.” Challenging that wisdom again, Greiser said that people who choose to live in urban areas tend to be unconventional people who are somewhat more open to new ideas. And people facing difficult problems sometimes recognize that they need a savior.

When he pastored in Philadelphia (West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship, 1984-1993), he was amazed at the people who accepted Christ, including a wealthy Jewish businessman and an ardent young feminist.

Greiser concluded with an exhortation. If it is true that the Gospel can flourish in cities because the power of Christ is more demonstrable and people are more open, he said, then we who are not part of the city need it.

When asked how rural churches could be a part of engaging the city, Greiser said people could start by considering moving to the city. Churches could also partner with urban congregations and build relationships. “The good help is relationships, friendships, connections and availability,” he said. Just sending in workers who aren’t really part of the church is not always helpful.

Addressing a question about the danger of being contaminated by things in the culture that are bad, Greiser said, “We have a long history of separation from a lot of things that would water down who we are.” For him, it was helpful to look at other people’s models of being Christian, such as the work of Tim Keller. Now he looks at culture not as an enemy but as something to be redeemed.

Living out the teachings of Jesus

After a panel discussion, people broke up into Round Table discussions with symposium speakers and others on topics including the Anabaptist witness in Zimbabwe, the organic church, reaching out from community, outreach as Ordnung, being pro-life and pro-peace, and getting to know the CMC. On Friday evening, John D. Martin of Shippensburg Christian Fellowship (Penn.) presented his church’s vision for bearing witness to the Kingdom of God. Western Christians, he said, ignore many of the hard sayings in the Gospels.

The main theme of Scripture is not the “scarlet thread” of Jesus’ atonement but rather the Kingdom of God.

No interpretation of Scripture is the proper interpretation if it violates the teaching of Jesus.

~ John D. Martin

John D. Martin, a Bible teacher at Shippensburg (Penn.) Christian Fellowship, said that “our salvation is a means to an end, the end being the Kingdom of God.”
The Kingdom is intended to demonstrate the excellence of God’s character and his manifold wisdom, and this theme runs through the entire Bible.

The Gospel has morphed into “Save me,” making it an individual matter. This doesn’t make very good Christians, said Martin. “Our salvation is a means to an end, the end being the Kingdom of God.” The whole goal of the new birth is to enter the Kingdom of God.

Shippensburg Fellowship was founded by a group of people who studied through the Bible and became more and more excited by the possibilities of the Kingdom. Today they try to live out the teachings of Jesus, studying the Bible and “hammering out” their understanding of what it means together.

“No interpretation of Scripture is the proper interpretation if it violates the teaching of Jesus.” They filter the epistles through the Gospels and not vice versa.

This approach has led them to certain conclusions about how they live. “We’ve required members to live close by, not usually more than three miles from the meetinghouse,” he said. Everyone in the congregation puts what’s over and above their basic needs in a common treasury.

The brothers meet once a month to ask what medical issues they have. They’ve had many health expenses and are not a wealthy group. “We dig deep and give until it’s been paid,” said Martin.

They also make no investments and don’t save up money for retirement, a rainy day or building a bigger house. It’s difficult, and sometimes messy, but “when we live out these hard teachings, people see it and ask, ‘What is this?’ and then we can preach our sermon.”

When asked if such high standards didn’t make it hard for people to come in, Martin said that when people come to Christ, they baptize them into the Kingdom of God. But before joining the community, people need to live in it to make sure they fit there. If they don’t, the church directs them to other congregations where they might feel more at home.

What we’re up against

On Saturday morning, RBC faculty member Phil Barr painted a picture of Western secular culture in “broad brush strokes” to give his listeners an idea of what people in the secular world are thinking and of where the battleground is. He also presented the challenge of evangelizing and restoring to faith nominal Christians—those who claim to be Christian, but who don’t belong to or regularly attend church.

To provide context, Barr gave a brief history of the impact of urbanization and industrialization on faith and the family, and traced the intellectual and religious developments that led to a fragmented church and the rise of modernism and postmodernism. In discussing the forces shaping our culture, he noted that “we are not immune to these things.”

Ziegler concluded the symposium with a recognition of the tensions between churches that do church differently. Those who are more geared toward outreach tend to see the faithfulness churches as legalistic and possibly xenophobic, seeking comfort and security. Those who emphasize faithful witness tend to see outreach churches as seeking comfort by trying to get away from accountability.

Comfort and self-service can be behind both models if the motives aren’t pure, said Ziegler. Citing Jesus’ call in Luke 9 to pick up our cross and lose our lives for him, he said, “When we die to self, this [outreach vs. faithfulness] model is short-circuited. Or more positively, it’s cross-pollinated.”

Outreach is an inevitable act of faithfulness, he said. We can “bridge the gap by making the act of outreach essential to faithfulness.”

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