

Reflections: Peace Retreat at Camp Mount Hermon

The weekend of Aug. 12-14 at Camp Mt. Hermon was Amazing—our District’s historic Peace Retreat! It was sponsored by the former Witness Commission, with workshop leaders from On Earth Peace, Bethany Seminary, and our local District! There were about 21 youth/young adults that attended this retreat and at least that many adults! It was a weekend packed with multi-generational discussions of concepts relating to conscientious objection, peace, militarism, violence, and the Church. Below are some statements from some who attended this retreat:

“The Peace Retreat gave me the unique opportunity to really analyze why I believe in peace. It was great to hear from a variety of perspectives and experiences. The genuine fellowship with fellow believers provided a special time to reunite with old friends and meet new friends.”

Jamie Frye—Monitor congregation

“Although I have been involved in many discussions on peace throughout the years, I have been a member of the Church of the Brethren, attending a retreat that was fully focused on this topic was a first for me. I was very impressed with the open and honest way that the topic was presented. I was impressed with the personal sharing from those who have taken the path of resistance to war and the various ways they have done this. Steve Ward’s excellent power point presentation and heartfelt message was moving and impressive. The Retreat was well organized, and strong capable leaders helped to make it impactful. Our youth were fully engaged and I cannot believe that they didn’t come away with information and thoughts that will greatly affect the choices they make related to war. I personally found myself wishing that it would be possible for all of the youth in the District, as well as our adults to attend an event such as this.”

June Switzer—Hutchinson Community congregation

“I got to understand more about being a conscientious objector and got to meet some great new friends.”

Ben Patrick—Monitor CoB

“I always love going to Camp Mount Hermon and was especially excited to hear that this weekend was solely focusing on peace! As soon as we arrived and throughout the sessions, it became apparent to me how important and necessary it is to work together intergenerationally. What a diverse age group we had. The range was anywhere from young children, all the way to persons who had been drafted in World War II and Vietnam, who made the conscious decision of serving our country elsewhere, and were willing to share their stories with us. The learning came as much from the discussions we had as an entire group, as well as different impromptu conversations between everyone throughout the weekend. I really appreciated the effort that was put into making this happen; we could tell that everyone was (and still is) passionate about peace and simply passionate about learning how to practice peace. Right now, as a student at Manchester College, some would say it should be easier for me in some ways to become connected with a peace-oriented group, but nonetheless, it takes conscious thought and work from everyone, wherever you are, to become actively involved in the pursuit of peace. And 'Peace', as big as that concept is, does not happen overnight; rather, by the smallest, everyday actions, we can learn to live in more just and right-relations with each other, hopefully allowing our actions to speak our beliefs.”

Kristen Hoffman—McPherson congregation

“The Peace retreat was so good. The leadership was excellent. They were the best. It gave me a whole new perspective on the term peace and how to live it. Not only was it one of the best learning experiences I’ve ever had, it was so fun. I hope that we can have more events like this soon.”

Grant Tuttle—Holmesville congregation

“The Peace Retreat was a great experience, which challenged both young and old in the meaning of peace. I especially appreciated Steve Ward’s presentation.”

George Eisele—Olathe congregation

“I loved the retreat because it really made me question the beliefs of our denomination, our government, and personally, what I think is right and wrong. It helped me see a point of view (CO) that usually isn’t pushed as heavily as some other positions on war. It also helped me understand how being a pacifist doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be passive. In fact, it’s more beneficial to become active within the pacifism”

Joanna Hoffman—McPherson congregation

“I can’t remember when I have enjoyed and benefited as much from a Western Plains District activity, except possibly the Gathering. The retreat was obviously well-planned and carried out on an organized and timely basis yet allowed time for unexpected changes in schedule (rain) or interest. The built in ‘rest time’ for some of us ‘old timers’ was great.

Enten Eller brought many gifts to the table including his commitment and sacrifices for peace and his unique ability to identify with young and old alike and to encourage youth to be involved in peace by both action and word. A highlight for me was Steve Ward’s presentation of ‘Famous non-Brethren C.O.’s ‘and his special gift at telling things ‘like they are’ including the recognition that ‘propaganda techniques’ are common to both war makers and peacemakers. We just need to be upfront that we are only sharing one viewpoint on the subject. God loves and Jesus died for all people—not just the ones that think like we do. Do we really welcome ALL people in our churches or only those who think like we do? According to this presentation some of the greatest war makers have become some of the strongest peace makers! It kind of reminds you of Saul who became Paul, one of Christ’s greatest apostles. The weekend was brought to full bloom by a great cloud of witnesses from those already mentioned others involved in watches and encouragement such as Cheryl Mishler, worship and campfires such as Shawn Flory-Replogle, those sharing their experiences as CO’s, the many enthusiastic youth and their leadership by Jen, Cheryl, Shawn, and others. And finally, a BIG thanks to Joanna and Hazel for making it all possible and feeding our souls as well as our bodies. I heard many good comments from the youth that they liked the weekend just as it was.

For this ‘BIG’ Kid, the weekend was a great balance and will be one of my best memories. I hope we can do this again in the near future.”

John Doran—Antelope Park congregation

“It was excellent the panel of four shared three different ways you could respond when we had an active draft: non-registration, 1AO—a non-combatant, and CO—non-participant in the military but willing to do alternative service. It is unfortunate that our current draft law requiring registration does not have any provision, other than non-registration, to state your position in regard to participation in war.”

Marlo Oltman, Hutchinson Community congregation

I am hoping that we, as the Church of the Brethren in Western Plains, can begin having these Peace Retreats on a regular basis. As the Peace Advocate for our District, I would have to say that I feel like we (the Church of the Brethren) have begun to let our peace stance slip away. Like Kristen said above, it takes a conscious effort on our part to practice and to live out peace and to pass it on to following generations. Have we been doing this in our churches? Are we teaching our youth about peace? about alternatives to military? All we have to do is open the Scriptures and read the words of Christ to know that peace is not just something we talk about. It isn’t a “historic” idea that doesn’t relate to us here and now, but that it is love in action and is needed more now than ever before in a hurting world full of violence and hatred.

If we are to follow the teachings of Christ and truly take Jesus seriously then are we willing to take a stand for those things that make for peace?! It's a radical concept to the rest of the world, but then we follow a radical prophet from Nazareth do we not? Or is there really anything good that can come from Nazareth?

Words for thought... ☺

In Christ,
Joanna Davidson-Smith