

Mennonite World Review

Putting the Mennonite world together

WHEN TRADITION MEETS CULTURE

Immigrants from former Soviet Union challenge German secularism



Ben Goossen

Attendees of *Frankenthaler Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde*, a *Russlanddeutsche* church near Frankenthal, Germany, fellowship after a worship service in October.

BY BEN GOOSSEN
For Mennonite World Review

BERLIN — The sanctuary is full and still. An usher walks the perimeter, opening windows first on the men’s side and then on the women’s. Behind the pulpit, to the left of the seated choir, the third preacher of the morning holds our attention. He speaks in fluent German, his words rounded by traces of Russian and *Plautdietsch*.

The sermon carries us to the Mennonite colonies of the early Soviet Union. Dissolved by Stal-

in in the 1930s and ’40s, these settlements barely exist in living memory. Yet on this Sunday morning, as we listen to stories of Bolshevik persecution, of deportation and enslavement in Central Asian *gulags*, they are as real as the love of Christ.

“Imagine the faith,” the speaker says, pausing to collect

The vitality of their congregational life provides a fascinating contrast to Germany’s increasingly empty state churches.

his emotions, “of those men who stood in the village squares to the last moment, proclaiming God’s word until the atheists’ bullets cut them down.”

I am visiting a Mennonite congregation near Heidelberg, one of hundreds established over the last 40 years in Germany by immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Arriving

from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Siberia and elsewhere, Mennonites and related Anabaptist groups have settled in large numbers across West German cities. In a matter of decades, Germany’s Anabaptist population has swelled from a few thousand members to as many as 100,000.

Colloquially known as *Russlanddeutsche*, meaning Germans from Russia, these immigrants have helped establish a new ethnic subgroup within Germany. High German is most often spoken in the home, although many

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Word game

■ Bible quizzing tournament marks 40 years of study and fun

BY KELLI YODER
Mennonite World Review

For a Bible quizzing, the end-of-season invitational tournament is like the World Series of Quiz, says coordinator Fred Hertzler of Lancaster, Pa.

He and his wife, Chris, are helping to plan and organize the 40th annual Mennonite Bible Quiz invitational at Lancaster Mennonite School March 21-23.

The Hertzlers have been involved with the Scripture memorization competition for junior high and high schoolers for 20 years. In the last few years, interest has grown steadily, especially in their area.

“It seems to be the thing to do,” Fred Hertzler said. About 350 student quizzers are expected to demonstrate their memorization of Exodus at the invitational. That’s 77 teams — 48 of them from the Lancaster area.

In 1974, when Don Yoder of Harrisonburg, Va., first had the idea for an invitational, there were 12 teams.

He said it was an effort to get more youth involved in the annual Ohio Conference meeting. At the time he was the conference youth minister.

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Conference leaders call 2 events ‘catastrophic’

BY TIM HUBER
Mennonite World Review

Leaders of several Mennonite Church USA conferences have expressed concern to the denomination’s Executive Board about issues related to homosexuality.

Franconia Mennonite Conference posted a letter from leaders of five of the conferences on its website Feb. 27.

The letter, dated Feb. 12, cit-

ed two recent actions:

■ Eastern Mennonite University’s review of its employment policy that prohibits hiring people in same-sex relationships; and

■ Mountain States Mennonite Conference’s licensing of a pastor in a committed same-sex relationship.

The letter describes the two events “as catastrophic for our constituencies.”

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RETURN TO IRAN

Mohammad Ali Shomali, director of the International Institute for Islamic Studies, left, speaks with Daryl Byler, director of Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University. MCC U.S. staff and representatives from EMU and Canadian Mennonite University traveled to Iran in February. It was the first time MCCers have been granted visas to visit since 2009. *Story on page 9.*

Ron Byler/MCC

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