

Threatened With Arrest for Spreading the Gospel

Delegate Expelled from Convention For Tract Distribution

Convention center security are told to order Bruce Leichty off premises on threat of arrest; then after Leichty protests based on his delegate status, convention planner Glen Guyton conditions Leichty's further participation on acquiescence to Guyton ultimatum to not further distribute tracts. Stutzman turns a deaf ear.

After a morning worship service featuring God's mandate to "love everyone" including the least loved, convention security personnel acting on MCUSA executive orders told delegate Bruce Leichty to leave the convention center premises at Orlando 2017 Wednesday afternoon, July 5, on the first full day of the Mennonite Church USA convention, for failing to promise that he would cease distribution of his written appeal to fellow delegates, titled "The Resolution on Israel Palestine Should Be Rejected -- But Not Because of Its Critique of Israel." [link]

Leichty was approached by convention security officers as he was distributing materials at the end of an Israel-Palestine workshop during which he had stated to the group, without objection, that anyone interested could receive from him a newly published booklet on the criminalization of Israel critique, and his own analysis of the resolution.

He was told by a plainclothes security officer that he had to leave the convention grounds and not return, or face trespass charges, and that this had been ordered by MCUSA officials under the terms of Leichty's participation at the convention.

Only after Leichty explained that he believed his distribution of tracts--focused on convention business--was allowed even under

the overly restrictive terms that the church had established for written communications, was Leichty successful in getting security personnel to call two MCUSA officials, Glen Guyton and Scott Hartman, to the scene. By that time a number of uniformed security officers and a uniformed county sheriff were also at the scene, even though Leichty says "all I had done was peaceably engage in speech related to church business, and then explain why I believed this was allowed."

After accusing Leichty of a long history as a disrupter at prior conventions and insisting he was not taking away Leichty's status as a delegate--only his right to be present on convention center grounds--MCUSA convention planner Guyton ultimately remanded his order expelling Leichty after Leichty agreed "under protest" to not further distribute his flyers. A threatened "trespass warning" was not issued by convention security officers.

About a half hour later, when Leichty spotted executive director Ervin Stutzman in a nearby hallway, Leichty says he expressed his concern to Stutzman over the church's callous disregard for his delegate status and over any policy by MCUSA that prohibited delegates from sharing written materials about prospective church business with other delegates and other interested attenders.

"Ervin stated he had never met me previously, although I reminded him that we had visited once at an MCC sale held in Upland. I had spoken to him there of my concern over the growing acceptance of same-sex marriages in the church," notes Leichty, "and possibly he did not want to remember, although I realize he

meets a lot of people. Stutzman refused my request that he ask the MCUSA executive board to reevaluate church policy on convention communications by delegates, and he remarked several times that the church has 'long' had a policy that no one except paying exhibitors could distribute 'any' written material on convention grounds which he said he supported."

Stutzman expressed no concern or understanding about what had just happened, added Leichty, not even when Leichty pointed out that delegates have little if any recourse to communicate with other church delegates on complex subjects where relatively little time is available on the convention floor, if they are not permitted to put their thoughts in writing and bring such writings to the convention for sharing with other delegates in advance of the meetings.

Stutzman on June 15 had already cut off Leichty's Internet connection to a webinar to which Leichty had been invited as a delegate on June 15, which was the subject of a second tract that Leichty was distributing. [link] During the confrontation of Leichty by Guyton, "Guyton mocked me in front of convention security officers, by telling me 'you were even expelled from a webinar, now that takes some doing,' or some similar words," says Leichty. "Guyton said told me that a number of people had been concerned about my presence at the convention, but that he had a 'military background' as if to say he was not afraid of me."

"He went on to state that I had been removed from a prior convention, which is untrue; and he also told me that I had engaged in a misrepresentation on my written materials when I had stated

that I was a member of MennoPIN (the Mennonite Palestine-Israel Network--another false statement."

"After I assured him that I was in fact a member of MennoPIN, he then told me that he had been told by MennoPIN that I was not a 'member in good standing,' which was not something that had ever been communicated to me by MennoPIN--although I had been told in an e-mail by the MennoPIN steering committee that they would not place my name in nomination for 2017 steering committee member elections because (among other things) I was 'antisemitic.'"

"MennoPIN touts itself as a leaderless network, but I was told to speak first to Andre Gingerich Stoner about that judgment, and he in turn disavowed being part of MennoPIN and referred me to Tom Harder the night of July 4. When I asked Tom to give me the reason why that judgment was reached about me, he gave me no examples of any antisemitic speech or conduct that I had engaged in, but merely stated that my communications with MennoPIN proponents of a 2015 Kansas City proposed resolution had been disruptive. I had opposed the resolution proposed at that time for reasons similar to my opposition to the 2017 resolution."

Leichty says that the events leading up to the confrontation by security officers on July 5 caught him off guard, particularly since he had already by that time spoken with numerous delegates and had given them his two information tracts as well as a booklet by Alison Weir ("The International Campaign to Criminalize Criticism of Israel").

Leichty said that the timing of the threat of arrest was particularly ironic in that a number of the points he made in his

analysis had just been made in different ways at the seminar where he was distributing the tracts. That seminar was conducted by a panel of two, Palestinian human rights lawyer Jonathan Kuttab, and Rabbi Brant Rosen of Jewish Voice for Peace. "I was talking with Brant and a Mennonite pastor from Illinois, and we were the last three persons in the room, when convention security came into the room and ordered me to leave."

"It is true that I had been approached by the same security officer a few minutes earlier, who told me he I was not permitted to distribute my materials; however, since he did not speak for the church--and I don't believe he told me at that point that he had been specifically directed to me by any church officials--and since I had announced the availability of my materials without objection during the seminar, I had told him politely that I would not do so in the spirit of communicating with fellow members of the church on matters of concern."

"That led to his return with back-up officers telling me that I was to leave the convention center and not come back."

Leichty says he then explained why he believed he was justified in having attenders at that seminar receive his materials, and he asked that he be allowed to speak to the church officers who had allegedly ordered his detention and expulsion."

"As a lawyer I soon realized that I could not be the subject of a formal detention, but when they started talking about treating me as a trespasser and being subject to arrest and criminal prosecution if I returned to my duties as a delegate, I knew I had to try to resolve the situation rather than just walk away. I was

also prevented physically at one point from leaving the seminar room by the convention security officer who told me I was ordered to leave. He shifted his position several times as I was trying to walk out of the seminar room to block my passage, and then accused me of bumping into him, apparently attempting to manufacture an allegation of battery against me."

Added Leichty, "A few days before arriving to the convention earlier I sent out an e-mail to over 100 e-mail addresses that were related either to MennoPIN or to the Israel Palestine webinar conducted by MCUSA on June 20. In that e-mail I indicated that I was attaching my two tracts, and that I would also 'have flyers in paper form available to delegates at Orlando, and will also have booklets just published by Palestinian rights activist Alison Weir.'"

"Shortly after that, I got an e-mail from Glen Guyton, someone who I had never met or previously corresponded with, purporting to tell me that I would not be allowed to distribute the statements at the convention."

Guyton wrote: "Hello Bruce: I see you are in full swing preparing for Orlando 2017. I am glad you are taking your delegate role seriously. I am attaching a link for the Orlando 2017 program book. Please make note of page 4 and the following paragraph: "No literature (fliers, brochures, handouts, books, etc.) may be passed out beyond the exhibit hall area. Seminar and workshop leaders can distribute handouts as necessary during their session."

The message continued: "We ask that our participants refrain from passing out materials in and around our contracted space, such

as the delegate halls, worship halls, etc. Exhibitors do pay for the privilege of disbursing materials inside the exhibit hall. Thank you in advance for your cooperation. See you in Orlando."

Leichty says that he jotted off a note to Guyton--who had been part of the webinar where Leichty was expelled--stating: "Glen, no one including you can prohibit the distribution of material relating to matters of concern at issue to delegates. That is not how we relate to each other in the church. I hope you rethink this hostile attitude. No one need fear the truth--and I am happy to hear or read opposing points of view. Sincerely in Christ, Bruce."

Notes Leichty, "It could be that the substance of my tracts has no bearing on what happened to me, but in any case I do have to protest this way of functioning in the church, particularly where I was never told that my delegate status could be stripped by law enforcement surrogates of the church at any time where my concerns could be heard and processed."

"I believe that the reason I was reported--by someone not known to me and intent on suppressing my message--is in fact attributable to my message, whereas I feel just as strongly that what I was spreading was the gospel, the 'good information' of Jesus, as explained on my website www.goodinformation.org."

"I hope that at a minimum members of the church will rally to ask the Executive Board to make sure that such threats of summary delegate arrest or suspension do not happen again, and also that there be some mechanism in the future for written intra-delegate communications to be shared at our conventions."