

## Outgoing MCUSA Executive Director Yanks a Chair From the Table

Ervin Stutzman Terminated Participation of California Delegate In A Pre-Convention Webinar On the Ground that the Delegate, Bruce Leichty, Was "Disruptive," Even Though Leichty Had No Voice. *Was It Really Leichty's Warning About Use of the Term "Anti-semitism?"*

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It wasn't too long ago that I remember MCUSA trumpeting the need to give everyone a "place at the table." Apparently those places are reserved only for certain marginalized people, though, not for aging dissenting churchmen like me, who remember a very different Mennonite Church and lament its increasing acculturation.

Almost a year ago, on June 16, 2016, Ervin Stutzman wrote a column called "A Time to Weep," after the "Orlando Nightclub Shooting."<sup>1</sup> In it Stutzman said he was weeping "as I think of the ways that our families and churches have rejected immigrants, foreigners and LGBTQ individuals, not truly giving them a place at the table."

Stutzman expressed hope that the church could "find specific ways for our church to extend that welcome...as we prepare to gather in Orlando for our convention next summer."

No doubt Stutzman was too busy extending his welcome to the marginalized folks preferred by the Democratic Party to respond to the Matthew 18 request I made to him after he prevented me from completing the webinar to which I had been invited as a congregational delegate June 15.

Bruce: (written minutes after I found that my connection was severed on the "Zoom" software used for the 6/15 webinar) "I hope you will explain to me who removed me from the delegate webinar just now, and why -- and prevented me from rejoining [when I] had not done anything other than attempt to make my voice heard [through the written chat and Q & A functions of the platform] and ask questions and give appropriate commentary []. If people are not prepared to take this level of dissent, what can I expect when I am participating in a table group at Orlando?"

Ervin: "I made the decision to remove you [] late in the presentation [] because you were being disruptive by use of the chat function to all participants. I welcome respectful dissent, but I determined that you were dominating the meeting via the chat function. If you choose to participate in the webinar on June 20 regarding the Israel/Palestine resolution, I ask that you direct your chat comments to the panelists, not to other participants. You may of course pose questions through the Q & A function, as long as you do it in a respectful way. [ ] ...You will not be allowed to dominate the table group [at Orlando] with your ideas. [] If any particular delegate tries to dominate the meeting, the moderator can use their discretion to limit that person's time at the mike. Shalom, Ervin."

Bruce: "This is extremely troubling and disrespectful. The idea that someone chatting [by typing comments accessible to other participant] and asking questions to the [webinar] speaker (!) could be disruptive or dominating is astonishing, and some of my comments were directed to all [participants] because that was an option presented [by the Zoom platform used for the webinar]."

I would like to confer with you by phone and believe an apology is in order. The rules for Orlando may or may not be fair to delegates but they will be evaluated for their level of respect and consistency with the way of Jesus."

Ervin: "I stand with the comments I made earlier, and I'm not disposed to a phone call at the moment. I would be willing to meet with you at the Orlando convention prior to the delegate session. If you wish, we could meet briefly with our parliamentarians to assure that they understand your request to have a dissenting voice recognized."

Bruce: "The issues I have are not mere parliamentary issues [], the issues I have...are about the appropriate treatment of a Christian brother, and these issues are (apparently) with you first and foremost at this point, although just last week I would not have imagined that you would have done what you did and that you would be saying what you are saying. Your 'shalom' is as hollow as that of others who revel in that word but not the reality. [] And of course you can choose to not converse with me to address the offense you have caused, but please note that I am humbly following the admonitions of Matthew 18. [] [I]f anything I am writing here resonates with you -- and I hope it does -- I remain open to a conversation."

I didn't hear further from Ervin. The above comments are, in all instances, edited extracts of longer e-mail messages; the bracketed words are added explanatory material. It is relevant to point out that I engaged in no name-calling in these e-mail communications, never used any foul language (just as I had not used any such language in my June 15 "chat" posts, and was as respectful as a dissenting voice can be in that same context). Perhaps the most pointed term I used--not in the "chat" room but during the subsequent e-mail exchange--was when I called the severing of my Zoom connection "fascist;" and perhaps my most pointed comments to Ervin were these: "You do not control the church, and under your leadership the church has suffered." I noted to Ervin that his treatment of me was not Christlike, and that it appeared I was viewed as a marginal figure, without influence, from a very small church (San Diego Mennonite Church) far from the Eastern centers of Mennonite decision-making.

But apparently it is OK with Ervin that I be kept on the margins, whereas the marginalization of more popular minorities is not. Indeed, Ervin apparently does control the church--or at least the process by which voices can be heard. I remember a time when we listened even to people we didn't think were being particularly "respectful"--some of them impassioned appeals from the floor at delegate assemblies, some of them were new Mennonites of color, influenced by the civil rights movement. But at Orlando delegates will be placed at tables with non-delegate invitees (from marginalized groups as identified by Ervin, presumably pursuant to his comments of last summer) to determine what the Mennonite church should look like going forward. Table-based participation in planning and voting, while it has some virtues, is a process designed to stifle unique voices. Ervin did not respond to me about how table groups are selected; his only response to an inquiry about what appears to be "stacking the deck" for the Future Church Summit was to suggest that anyone could "nominate" persons to be invited to the Summit (although they'd have to be approved by leadership. Where was that option even publicized?)

What else might a person want to know about the comments that I made that were so "disruptive" as to warrant severing my Internet link to the webinar? and about what has happened since?

1. All of my "chat" comments were made early in the June 15 webinar. I don't remember the exact language of the comments, and of course the information is no longer available to me, but I believe I made a total of five or six short comments via the "chat" function, and I indeed did address these comments to all participants, which was one of the two options provided on the Zoom platform. (The other option was to "chat" only to the leadership.)
2. By the time my connection to the webinar was severed at about an hour into the 90-minute webinar, I believe it had been at least 20 minutes since I had chatted. At a certain point, I shifted from "chat" to asking questions (about the Israel-Palestine resolution) to Jonathan Brenneman who was making a presentation about the resolution proposed for Orlando 2017.
3. My "chat" comments were in response to reporting that was being done to delegates. At no time had any of us as participants been told that the chat function was limited to certain purposes.
4. As I recall, my first chat comment was to say that I believed that the "anti-racism" emphasis of the church had assumed a role that was disproportionate to the church's many-faceted purposes. I asked, why isn't the church also devoting equal attention to anti-classism, honesty and humility. (I had in mind that the Bible talks far more about economic justice than it does about race, and that it has been a long time since I have seen any Mennonite statements or slogans which devote any attention to telling the truth and being honest.)
5. I believe my second chat comment during the webinar was one of surprise and dismay when it was reported that the Executive Board--acting without seeking delegate counsel--had decided that the ministerial credentialing policy and procedures for conferences relating to Mennonite Church USA would be left totally to the conference. I jotted a comment expressing my dismay at the way this had been handled (i.e. by the Board alone) and sharing my opinion that a ministerial policy should be uniform throughout the church, and that the adopted policy was clearly a way to permit conferences to license those who were either in same-sex "marriages" or who had no compunctions against performing such "wedding" ceremonies--even though the official position of the Mennonite Church USA is one of disapproval of same-sex "marriages."
6. My third and final comment through "chat," as I recall, was when the term "racial-ethnic" came up. I noted that this term, applied in official MCUSA literature to non-white persons, was a misnomer, since all of us are racial and all ethnic. Another delegate (Cyneathea Millsaps) then made a comment (the only delegate to have responded to any of my comments), noting that it was important to "my group" that "minorities" have a voice in the church. I responded with words to the effect that "my group" believed that there were many people who really didn't have a voice in the church, and that race or skin color or language shouldn't be the deciding factor in which interest groups get voices. It bears repeating that these chat remarks were all written, since delegates had no ability to speak. At no time did I get warned about "disruptive" remarks.
7. The fact that I was disconnected so long after I had stopped "chatting" suggests to me that Ervin Stutzman was being disingenuous when he said that he made the decision to disconnect me because of my disruptive chat comments. Here's what I suspect really happened: either (1) one or more other participants complained to him (through the use of the "chat to leaders" function), and he elected to honor their complaints by severing my connection because of political reasons;

(2) it was something else I said in the course of using the Q and A function on the Israel-Palestine resolution that was the real reason I was disconnected.

8. Right before being disconnected I had just raised a question about the use of the term "anti-semitic" in the resolution. Although I had asked a number of questions, all of my questions had been ignored except one, and in response to the response that Jonathan Brenneman gave, I pointed out that one had to be cautious about using the term "anti-semitism," since it is a term bandied about very liberally now, and since it is being applied to those who are critical of either America's Israel policy or about the unhealthy influence of some adherents of Judaism generally in the public square, observing "we know that there are aspects of religious communities that can be unhealthy because we know that to be true of our own"). As I have pointed out elsewhere, there are certain things one is simply not allowed to say in the United States without recrimination (see the article I wrote, "What Do You Do When a Federal Court Finds You to be Anti-Semitic?" at [www.goodinformation.org/about](http://www.goodinformation.org/about)).<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself would be at risk for the anti-semitic label based on his scathing comments to the Jewish leaders of his day.

9. You can decide for yourselves whether it is coincidence that there was no chat function for the Israel-Palestine resolution webinar that I took part in June 20.

10. And you can decide for yourselves whether it is coincidence that I have been assigned to a table group for the "Future Church Summit" which includes the lawyer parliamentarian for the convention (Ed Diller), a board member of Mennonite World Review where I have long been a dissenting member (Franconia Conference "executive minister" Stephen Kriss), the conference minister of my own conference, Pacific Southwest, whose support for same-sex marriages I deplore (Clare Ann Ruth-Heffelbower), and Regina Shands Stoltzfus, co-founder of the Damascus Road "anti-racism education program."

Will there be room at this table--and not just room, listening ears--for the views of one whose chair was already yanked away by the executive director of the denomination?

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1. At the risk of going off topic, there are many anomalies surrounding this event just as there are anomalies surrounding a number of other "domestic terror" incidents in the U.S. Among many critical comments about these anomalies that can be found on the Web, some of the most credible are written by Paul Craig Roberts, former assistant treasury secretary in the Reagan administration (see [www.paulcraigroberts.org/2016/06/20/orlando-wrap-up-paul-craig-roberts](http://www.paulcraigroberts.org/2016/06/20/orlando-wrap-up-paul-craig-roberts)). Regardless of what one thinks about the Orlando narrative of the authorities or the analysis done by Roberts, it is telling that it is individuals such as Roberts--not leaders in MCUSA--who are willing to come out and question contemporary governmental and media narratives, and who are willing to say boldly, "we know governments lie in order serve their agendas," something my generation of Mennonites already recognized in the 1960's and 1970's but which seems to have been strangely forgotten--at least until the current administration.

2. The Good Information Advocates website was recently reformatted by someone without my input and no longer reflects the organization I would prefer.