

# Children welcome at table too

**Jennifer Rupp**  
**Sarah Rohrer**  
*Goshen College*

Each morning they leave parents behind, ready to pursue the convention theme – “God’s Table, Y’all Come” – in their own ways.

Carol Grieser of Goshen, Ind., director of the children’s convention, makes one thing clear: “This is *not* a babysitting service. This is a convention.”

A total of 183 children are registered in grades 1-6, along with 33 preschoolers, 10 toddlers and half a dozen infants.

The children in grades 1-6 do a wide variety of activities throughout the day. First they meet in their “family” groups, arranged by grade and named after Bible characters, such as Mary, Zacchaeus and Matthew.

Then they move into worship time, with singing, Bible stories and drama. The children return to their family groups for snacks before dispersing for two hour-long workshops each day. They play cooperative games, learn about disabilities, do crafts

with fabric art, enjoy music and learn about other cultures and backgrounds. The children know the next activity is about to begin when they hear a tambourine.

Parents pick up their children around noon for lunch, and the children then return for special activities in the afternoon hours.

One of the highlights was watching “Miracle in Lane Two,” and then being able to interview Justin Yoder of Middlebury, Ind., a member of the youth convention and the inspiration for the film. By week’s end, the children will also have visited Fernbank Museum, a place for science, as well as the King Center, and joined voices in Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once served as pastor.

In the preschool program, Susan Graber of Newton, Kan., the director, said she wants “kids to feel safe and secure” as they participate in various activities and listen to Bible stories.

Toddlers also experience the children’s convention. “We have stories and singing with them,” said Judy Friesen, of Hesston, Kan. “More importantly, we teach them



**Worshipful kids:** Children singing “Lord, I lift your name on high.”

Photo by Sarah Shirk

[that] actions have results. They need to use a soft touch.”

The main objective for the volunteers as they work with the toddlers and infants is to transmit love and care.

No activities are planned for the children on Sunday or Tuesday, so that they will be able to attend the intergenerational worship

services with their parents. The children will be given worship bags with paper and pencils, modeling clay, Bible story activities and snacks.

As they learn about coming to God’s table, the children’s convention helps to create friendships and add fun for the youngest Mennonites at Atlanta 2003.

# Convention-goer for life: Johns

**Michelle Wade**  
*Goshen College*

Since at least 1921 Mennonites have met in churchwide conferences in a variety of venues – Mennonite colleges, large campgrounds such as Estes Park and then university campuses, including Bowling Green, Purdue and Iowa State. In recent years, big-city sites such as Philadelphia, Wichita, Kan., and Orlando, Fla., accommodated ever-larger numbers of convention-goers.



Photo by Michelle Wade

Galen Johns, 83, has attended all the conventions since 1951.

The evolution of the conference into a major five-day convention prompts the question: Who at Atlanta 2003 has ventured to more gatherings than anyone else?

When 83-year-old Galen Johns wandered into the *mPress* newsroom and announced that he had attended all the conventions since 1951, he just might have provided the answer. From New Paris, Ind., Johns attended his first conference in Goshen, “because it was close to home.”

While attending churchwide meetings for so many years is impressive in itself, one unique feature of Johns’ attendance is that he has almost always stayed at campgrounds since 1963 when he and his wife got their first recreational vehicle.

Johns remembered that he didn’t stay at

a camp site in 1987 when the assembly was at Purdue University. For that meeting he served as a coordinator, a role which required him to be present at any time.

Before 1971, Johns said, the meeting was not called the General Assembly, but was simply known as the General Conference.

Johns also recalled that the 1983 convention in Bethlehem, Pa., was the first one in which adult delegates from the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church met together in combined sessions.

Johns was a delegate to the official sessions from 1953 until 1985, but now he is retired and attends as a participant in the worship services and workshops. He said he keeps coming to the conventions because he “enjoys it.”

Johns continues to live in New Paris and attends Benton Mennonite Church, which he served as its first pastor. He also served as the secretary for the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference for 28 years.

Clearly, Galen Johns has seen many changes in Mennonite meetings in his lifetime. Attending Atlanta 2003 during this inaugural year of the Mennonite Church – while staying at a campground about 18 miles away – represents another personal milestone.

# Holding hands at ‘God’s Table’

*Special friendship focuses on abilities*

**Jennifer Rupp**  
**Sarah Rohrer**  
*Goshen College*

As children dispersed for workshops, one pair left holding hands: Sally Kauffman and Audra Baker.

A fourth grader from Surry, N.D., Sally has limited vision. Audra Baker, a third-year nursing student at Eastern Mennonite University, volunteers at the children’s convention as Sally’s personal assistant.

Sally, who is attending a convention for the first time, said she has especially enjoyed making pictures with stickers and playing soccer in A-Junction.

While they participated in the “God’s Children ... Many Kinds of Abilities” workshop, Audra helped Sally feel several objects set in one pile so that Sally could “see” through her fingers.

“When we talk about God’s table and inviting people of all backgrounds – including those with disabilities – we have an example in our midst,” said Carol Grieser, director of the children’s convention, as she watched Audra help



Photo by Brian Schlabach

Audra Baker helps Sally Kauffman, who is attending her first Mennonite Church USA convention, join a workshop table.

Sally at the workshop.

Grieser said the two have become good friends. “You see them walking down the hall chatting. ... Sally was a little bit skeptical at first, but Audra has just helped her so much. Now, Sally comes in with a smile and hates to leave.”

Sally confirmed the friendship: “I didn’t want to go to the hotel. I wanted to stay!”



**Reinventing Aging** Shirley Yoder Brubaker and Contributors

“Aging is a process in which all of us are chronologically, emotionally, and spiritually involved. Where we are in the process determines which information we will deem valuable and applicable to our lives. Each of the chapters of *Reinventing Aging* provides an opportunity to deal with the real issues facing the reader.”  
—Justina Heese in the Foreword Paper, 208 pages, \$10.99

**Soul Care: How to Vision, Plan, and Guide Inspirational Retreats** edited by Rose Mary Stutzman

These retreat guides have been gathered from spiritual mentors with years of experience leading retreats. They are richly varied, including hiking or canoeing, focus on grief or finances, geared toward families or small groups or individual solitude, and many more. Whether you are new to retreat planning or have led retreats for years, *Soul Care* will provide the resources you need for effective retreat ministry.  
Paper, 200 pages, \$17.99



**You are invited to an Author Signing**  
Monday, July 7, 9:00 to 10:00 p.m.  
to be held at the  
**Provident Bookstore**  
Ruth Stoltzfus Jost  
Melodie M. Davis  
Michele Hershberger  
James O. Lehman  
Myron Augsburg  
Barbara Reber  
*Come and meet our newest authors and save \$2.00 on each featured book purchased!*