

Youth play with neighborhood kids

Paul Schrag

Mennonite Weekly Review

It didn't take much to start a party in the parking lot at Wyndham Creek apartments on Friday.

Some big balloons. Soap to blow bubbles. A wad of newspaper and tape for a baseball. Sidewalk chalk. A jump rope. And a group of Mennonite teenagers ready to have fun.

"I like to see the kids smile," said Nichole Irving of First Mennonite Church in Canton, Ohio. "They're all so cute!"

Members of Irving's youth group were among approximately 615 Mennonite youth convention participants who worked – or, in Irving's case, played – on servant projects Friday.

More than 200 youth served with Wyndham Missions, a Christian ministry that organizes outreach events in 52 apartment complexes in Atlanta.

By the end of the convention, approximately 3,800 MYFers will have served, said Arloa Bontrager, servant project coordinator.

At the Wyndham Creek apartments, about 20 Mennonite teenagers from Ohio and 15 Hispanic children ate ice cream bars, played simple games like freeze tag and generally had fun in whatever ways they could think of.

The hard part was knocking on doors to ask wary parents, many of whom spoke little English, to



Vanessa Harper, right, of Canton, Ohio, blows bubbles with Jubia, a girl who lives at Wyndham Creek apartments, while Katie Hamman of Lima, Ohio, watches.

send their children outside.

"At first it was boring," said Raymon Mayfield of Canton. "But now it's cool. The kids are real cool, especially karate man."

Karate man would be Rameses Peralta, 11, who enjoyed practicing martial arts moves with Mayfield.

Then Peralta noticed a hopscotch game that one of the teenagers had drawn on the sidewalk.

"Who likes that game?" he asked.

"Do you?" a teenager asked.

"Yeah."

So karate man became hopscotch man.

"Having fun?" someone asked him.

"Yeah."

"What do you like?"

"Everything."

Playing with kids for a couple of hours might not change a life, but different groups can develop healthier perceptions of each other.

"The most important thing you can do is get to know somebody and understand them," said Darin Nissley, youth pastor at First Mennonite of Canton.

"It's that knowledge that can transform you as far as some of the judgments you make about people. . . . Evangelism is about building relationships."

When it was time to go, and hugs and goodbyes were exchanged, several children asked if the youth were coming back.

They weren't. But, perhaps just as good, another group of Mennonite youth would be back the next day.

"My prayer is that these young people will catch the vision to do their own ministries back home," said Tim Cummins, Wyndham Missions director.

They just might, especially knowing that sometimes, Christian ministry can be all play and no work.

Mennonites stand by immigrants

Charles T. Jones

Mennonite Mission Network

Marked by objections to tone and calls for clarification, the Mennonite Church USA delegate assembly yesterday nevertheless approved a churchwide policy of support and encouragement of immigrants who have arrived or will come – legally or otherwise – into the United States in search of a better life.

Document drafters who reasoned that most Mennonites were immigrants once stated, "We believe that when we welcome strangers, we welcome Jesus."

Welcoming strangers is one thing, some delegates said, while registering complaints that the document is too shrill in its criticism of the U.S. government and its increasingly strict immigration policies.

Delegates were given about 15 minutes to comment on the proposal after the position document was presented by the church's peace advocate, Susan Mark Landis, and by the moderator for the fast-growing Hispanic Mennonite Church, Marco Güete.

"We reject our country's mistreatment of immigrants, repent of our silence, and commit ourselves to act with and on behalf of our immigrant brothers and sisters, regardless of their legal status," the document states.

A delegate, Lois Hochstetler, said those at her table were concerned about what she called the "arrogant" and "blanket" rejection of current U.S. immigration laws. "We need to not be arrogant in deciding what we can do away with," she said. "We have a need for laws that regulate immigration. We need to respect them, but also address those that are unjust."

Another delegate, Keith Swartzendruber of Arlington, Va., concurred. "We're concerned about the negative language against the U.S.," he said. He complained that the document talks down to church members, and "tends to be a little paternalistic in its language."

Overall, he said, "We are concerned about unjust laws that hinder legal immigration and are applied inconsistently to illegal immigrants after they're here."

Neil Amstutz of McPherson, Kan., said he and his neighbors back home were concerned about what isn't in the statement. "What's absent here are some of the links to what is responsible immigration policy post 9-11, but cutting down some of the abuses," he said.

Patrick McFarren of Asheville, N.C., said the statement on immigration is basically a starting point for study. "What are 'Mennos' doing about it?" he asked.

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