



25 years of NOAC

story and photos by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

It was our 14th conference, it was our 25th year,” said Debbie Eisenbise, director of Intergenerational Ministries and staff coordinator for Inspiration 2017: National Older Adult Conference.

Like all NOACs, this year’s was held at Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center, a facility formerly run by and still related to the United Methodist Church. Known fondly as “Lake J,” it is set around a beautiful lake in western North Carolina, in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains.

With a registration of 855 people including participants, staff, volunteers, and guest speakers, the conference is still going strong, a quarter century after its inception.

Despite the fraught cultural and political environment, Inspiration 2017 was marked by the warmth and humor that have become NOAC hallmarks. The antics of *NOAC News*, the ice cream socials, each afternoon’s wide choice of recreation and sports options among crafts, educational workshops, and bus tours—all contributed to an event that, after 25 years, still doesn’t take itself too seriously.

NOAC speakers don’t “talk down” to aging participants, and the conference is designed with a respect for aging that may be found wanting elsewhere. The many repeat participants come anticipating NOAC’s wacky sense of humor, but also expect cutting-edge speakers, top-notch worship, and direct—sometimes no-holds-barred—discussion of current issues.

The name Inspiration 2017 was chosen because of comments received in the evaluations of the 2015 event. “They came for inspiration,” Eisenbise said.

She describes NOAC as “a multi-faceted conference” and an event where people can not only reconnect with friends and have an enjoyable time together, but also take time for

education, exploration, and faith-filled worship. “And it is a time for service,” she said. “It enables people to receive as well as to give. It reminds people of the legacy that they are building and leaving to the next generation.”

The timing of NOAC is key to its success, Eisenbise said. It is held at just the right time of year, the week of Labor Day, after school starts again and grandparents are “freed up” from family commitments to take time for themselves.

Others have not been able to replicate this success, she added. Other churches trying to hold older adult gatherings “are amazed at the consistency in our numbers.” She cited the example of a large Protestant denomination that also holds older adult conferences at Lake J, but with an attendance of fewer than 200, and declining.

Another key to success is that those who attend have an “incredible investment and input” into the speaker line-up and program, Eisenbise said, mentioning the large number of evaluations received after each NOAC. More than 450 hand-written evaluations were received from the 900 participants in 2015, for example. Older adults are “listened to” at NOAC, Eisenbise said.

How NOAC got its start

The conference was started by the former Association of Brethren Caregivers in 1992, but “the seeds for NOAC were sown in the decade of the 1980s,” said Jay Gible, former ABC executive. “The first seeds were sown when the Brethren Health and Welfare Association (BHWA) linked up with newly employed General Board health and welfare staff to coordinate caring ministries within the denomination.”

Although an older adult conference was not on the agenda of BHWA, the idea kept surfacing. “Wow, what did I get

myself into?” was Gibble’s feeling when the task of making the idea into reality fell to him. He soon had helpers: Hubert and Alice Newcomer, the first volunteer coordinators, and a planning committee that included Evelyn and Paul Bowman, Ann and Jim Garber, Becky and David Waas, Dee Keller, and Lona Norris. “That was an amazing group of resourceful persons,” Gibble remembered.

Guiding principles developed by that first team have lived on, he noted, including the emphasis on combining “a variety of program and group options balancing inspiration, education, entertainment, recreation, relaxation, and socializing.”

Planners thought they might offer the conference every four years, as is done with National Youth Conference. However, participants at the first NOAC had a different opinion and shared it strongly. “Many of us will not be around four years from now,” was the word Gibble heard repeatedly. In evaluations after the first NOAC, “the vote was overwhelming” to hold the conference every two years.

For some time, NOAC was organized by ABC. The conference then survived a new denominational configuration when ABC and the former General Board merged into the Mission and Ministry Board. At that time, ABC’s caring ministries were merged into the denomination’s Congregational Life Ministries.

“The ‘seeds scattered and sown’ in the 1980s, germinated to ‘wheat gathered and grown’ in the 1990s, and has been celebrated as ‘bread broken and shared’ by NOAC attendees for the past 25 years,” Gibble concluded.

‘Everybody had a piece in it’

“Everybody has had a piece” in NOAC, which has helped make it a “one of a kind event,” said Kathy Reid, also a former ABC executive who was one of the church leaders shepherding the merger of ABC and the General Board. Following the merger, she served as associate general secretary for the denomination.

Reid mentioned, in particular, the way the Fellowship of Brethren Homes has been involved in NOAC, but many other Church of the Brethren groups also have sponsored and supported the conference including Bethany Seminary, Brethren Benefit Trust, On Earth Peace, the church-related colleges and universities, Brethren Press, and more.

NOAC represents “the generation that shaped and formed me,” Reid said. “This was the place I met all my former pastors” and other mentors such as teachers and youth leaders. “It’s the last vestige of the church in what we could call its golden years as an institution.”

Reid still has trouble fully identifying the reasons for NOAC’s staying power. To say it is just an older adult conference sells it short, in her opinion. The people who attend “are cutting-edge type people. They don’t want every workshop to be about aging. They pay attention to politics and world events. NOAC is very thoughtful.”

What is NOAC’s importance to the church? “For the people who come to NOAC, this is church,” Reid said. The conference “keeps a segment of people connected to the church, who might not feel that way necessarily.”

NOAC’s success for 25 years may signal that it will be able to continue into the future—and she hopes it does. “It is so unique and a special thing,” Reid said. “It validates a really important population of the church.”

“Generation to generation we’re called to welcome Jesus, even as Jesus welcomes us, every moment of our lives.”

—Rodger Nishioka



“The office of servant of God is a major office... This is about service as we might think of giving one’s whole being to the office.”

—Steve Reid



“God designed the church at its best when old and young serve alongside each other... God is every bit as interested in the old as he is in the young.”

—Missy Buchanan

“Our job is to help this country navigate this ... demographic change that so many white folks are afraid of... You can do this. It’s part of your vocation as Christians.”

—Jim Wallis



“How needed courage is in our world today... Our children and our grandchildren—they need us to be brave, to pass on the gift of what it means to be Brethren in the world at this exact time.”

—Susan Boyer

“One [seagoing] cowboy led to another and another and another. Their stories were so compelling ... and I was hooked. I hadn’t meant to become a historian and an expert... All I wanted to do was write my novel. But when I saw those stories were hiding away ... my mission changed.”

—Peggy Reiff Miller



“Go now into the scared places of this weary world. But don’t go by yourself. Go with the whole community of God, joyful generations making all places sacred.”

—Wendy McFadden