



**Central  
District  
Conference**

A conference of  
Mennonite Church USA

# Reporter

**KNOWING  
CHRIST'S LOVE  
– ANSWERING  
GOD'S CALL**

**MARCH 2013**

Gardens, God and Growth

## First Mennonite of Champaign-Urbana and nearby mosque growing friendship

A garden space outside First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana has become not only a way for members to connect with God through nature, but a way to work alongside and get to know members of the Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center.

First Mennonite and the Mosque and Islamic Center (CIMIC) are a minute's walk apart and, because of the nearness, have always had a congenial relationship, sharing a parking lot, for example.



The groups' began to relate more following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Earl Kellogg, a member of First Mennonite who was involved early on in connecting with CIMIC, said that CIMIC opened up its doors and welcomed people

to learn more about Islam and the Muslim population in central Illinois. Kellogg also helped a CIMIC leader originally from Pakistan who was called to Chicago for interviews with U.S. officials around that time.

These circumstances led First Mennonite to decide as a church to think more about interreligious dialogue. Members of First Mennonite began visiting services at the mosque and members of the mosque visited the church. First Mennonite invited David W. Shenk, Eastern Mennonite Mission consultant, who has been involved in Muslim-Christian



dialogue for several years, to lead several sessions.

Kellogg said some sessions were held at the church and others were held at CIMIC. They discussed their beliefs, how those are the same and how they are different. There was never any sort of proselytizing, he said. Those conversations led into other joint seminars and sessions on broader theological ideas, including God and heaven, and the groups began to invite other area religious groups as well.

Brian Sauder, who started attending First Mennonite Church in 2008, began developing a garden in an empty lot by the church in 2009. Sauder earned his bachelor's degree in natural resources and environmental science from University of Illinois and said he's long been passionate about faith and ecology.

In 2010, the garden was officially named the Peace Garden, becoming a joint venture between CIMIC and First Mennonite.



*Continued on page 5*

“Visio Lectio Divina,” food and fellowship at regional gatherings

# Transformed through text and table

The new two-year theme for Central District Conference, “Transformed Through Text and Table,” seemed to come to life at this year’s regional gatherings. The Central region met February 8 in Elkhart, Indiana at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church. Columbus Mennonite Church of Columbus, Ohio hosted the East region gathering on February 15, and Chicago Community Mennonite Church hosted the West region on March 1.



By Tim Stair

A year ago regional gatherings seemed sparsely attended and at least one gathering was cancelled, although those that did attend reported having a great time together. However, this year’s gatherings were marked by robust attendance and participants repeatedly remarked that the content and pace of the days were well planned.

It was clear that participants at all three locations were energized by sharing with other congregations and by the planned input. Input included “Dwelling in the Word” focused on the Emmaus Road story from the Gospel of Luke. It also included input on the value of art as a spiritual exercise from Ruth Gingerich, and a

“Visio (or “visual”) Lectio Divina” exercise. In the latter, participants were invited to meditate on the text by creating their own artwork with a variety of mediums that were available (water colors, colored pencils, crayons and other art supplies). “Thank you for reminding me of the power of art as a medium for listening and responding to God,” responded one attendee.

Other highlights at each gathering were the congregational sharing and prayer around each table and, of course, the food.

Feedback from attendees indicated a struggle with liking the balance of activities that was given and wishing for more time for more congregational sharing while admitting that the time allotted is about all they can probably take in a day along with travel. It was clear that those who were present think the time was well spent, that attendees value the varying perspectives and a church setting in which it is okay to sometimes disagree, and want such gatherings to continue on either an annual or biannual basis.

That will be one with which the Central District Board will need to struggle, and in a time where many parts of broader church life are fraught with controversy, it’s not a bad problem to have.



Attendees sing “I owe the Lord a morning song” at the Central District Conference winter regional gathering at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind. Conference Minister Lois Johns Kaufmann described the regional gatherings as a “local family get together,” with the June annual meeting as the “extended family get-together.” Regional gatherings were also held at Chicago Community Mennonite and Columbus Mennonite.

# Mennonite Arts Weekend connected artists, others in ‘Touching Mystery’

The 12th Mennonite Arts Weekend brought more than 200 people together Feb. 7 to 9 to experience each other’s artwork, learn about one another and explore the theme of “Touching Mystery.”

A committee from Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship plans the biennial event, hosting the event at Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati.

Everyone could relate to “the mystery of how artists get to where they are,” said Hal Hess, a founding member of the event, but the elaboration on the theme also “got so much deeper than that too. We were thrilled with this development and how people used it in small but significant ways.”

Hess, and his wife Chris Schumacher, have been involved in organizing the weekend since a committee began talking about the event in 1989. Mennonite Arts Weekend seeks to “celebrate the contributions of Mennonite artists by supporting them in their efforts to ‘reclaim their identity/relationship with the church,’” according to the event’s website.

A major focus of the weekend is connection, Hess said. That includes connecting Mennonite artists with other Mennonite artists, but also bringing together people interested in the arts.

The gallery of work at the event in Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian’s gym purposefully includes “coffee, finger foods and seating for conversations and connections to happen.”

This year, Mennonite Arts Weekend brought in 244 registrations for the event, including those of 26 presenters and their significant others and families. Growth of the event has spurred the last several years after the planning committee began work-



*An attendee at the Mennonite Arts Weekend browses in the event’s gallery.*

ing with representatives from several Mennonite churches. Before that, attendance had been between 80 and 90 at the event.

The keynote speaker this year was Irma Fast Dueck, who gave the main address Friday night and led worship Sunday morning. Fast Dueck is the professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Steel Wheels, an Americana folk band from Virginia, gave the formal concert Saturday evening, as the featured performers.

Other presenters at this year’s event were:

- Jean Janzen, poet;
- Marilyn Houser Hamm, song leader and pianist;
- Randall Stoltzfus, painter;
- Jim Clemens, composer and accompanist;
- Angie Clemens, music educator and song leader;
- Eric Kaufmann, ceramics;
- Judy Clemens, writer and novelist;
- Karen Thiessen, textile and mixed media artist;
- Kristi Glick, jewelry artist and metalsmith;
- Sarah Boyts Yoder, mixed-media painter;

*Continued on page 5*



*Above: Sunday morning worship at Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church with combined choirs of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship and Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian performing. Right: The Steel Wheels, an Americana folk band, perform.*



# Columbus Mennonite finds advantages of emailing Lenten devotions

Columbus Mennonite Church is experimenting with a new way of distributing its Lenten devotions.

The church has regularly had members of the congregation write the devotions every other year during the Lenten season, usually handing out in a booklet before Ash Wednesday.

This year, though, the church decided to email a new devotion out every day of Lent.

Robin Walton, a member of Columbus Mennonite's worship commission and the church's worship leader through Lent, said that church leaders have seen several advantages to emailing the devotions.

"No one can read ahead," said Walton. "They have to wait and read that day's devotion when it is emailed. In the past, people were often so curious about what other's wrote that they went home and

*...church members have noticed how the "devotional is taking on a 'real time' nature."*

read the whole booklet cover to cover when they first got it!"

Emailing the devotions also means that the devotional organizer

has more time to find people to write, instead of having to have everything compiled before the start of Lent. Walton said too that church members have noticed how the "devotional is taking on a 'real time' nature."

"People can write a devotional for next week based upon their contemplation of our Lenten worship theme, scripture, the sermon, or world events, new insights, or a current life event," she said. "We are hoping that this will make the devotions even richer as we experience a kind of spiritual synergy as the Spirit works in each of us."

So far, people have written about composting, communion and cancer, among other themes, Walton said.

On the years that the church does not organize a congregation-written devotional, leaders assume members will find another form of spiritual discipline for Lent. On the years for the devotions, the worship commission asks a coordinator to handle the Lenten Devotional, publicizing it through the church's bulletin, monthly newsletter and through

## Thoughts While Composting

1 CORINTHIANS 15:47 AND 49

*The first person was of the dust of the earth, the second person from heaven...And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly person, so shall we bear the likeness of the person from heaven.*

Sometimes, when I dig into compost, I try to understand the universe—I know, but it's true.

I try to understand that this hollow rhizome I hold in my hand, once an iris, emptied by worms, motionless, "dead," is no less alive than me.

That here, where the sun shines on my bent-over-back, and I feel the warmth of it, that here in the present is not just a passing feeling, but some glimmer of Truth.

The sun warms the soil, seeds sprout, I consume them along with star particles, super nova dust, and somehow I live and breathe.

That this planet is explosion inverted, star catastrophe united into soil, water, rhizome, worm.

I am, literally, dust.

Sarah Zwickle,  
Columbus Mennonite Church,  
March 6 Lenten Devotion

email and asking for contributions. That person sends out a sample and a suggested format for a devotion and leaders also talk with individual people about writing a devotion.

# Muslims and Mennonites growing through Peace Garden

Continued from page 1...

Each year, the garden has taken on a different theme. Last year's garden had a salsa theme, with members of First Mennonite and CIMIC getting together for a get-together with lots of salsa after the harvest.

As spring slowly arrives this year, Sauder and others are planning this year's garden. The garden will have a Perisan garden layout with different plots dedicated to different plants from different Mediterranean countries this year, he said. They'll end the year again with a tasting and celebration.

Sauder also began holding a class during the church's Sunday school hour for people from the church and CIMIC to get together to talk about issues related to food, including genetically modified organisms (GMOs), starvation and migrant workers.

"I think the class went so well because people had been working together," he said. People were able to share honestly and openly with one another because the relationships had been formed in the garden.

Sauder said CIMIC and First Mennonite have used the garden for other events as well, including a special event on the International Day of Peace.

Kellogg noted that both groups realize that continuing and growing their relationship takes dedication all around, but that both groups have been continually learning from each other and are working to continue.

"It's been enlightening I think to witness the kind of piety they have and the kind of focus they have in trying to serve people, particularly people in the margins," Kellogg said.

Sauder noted too that the relationship has definitely been "a two way happening."

The shared parking lot, the garden and the groups' dedication to dialogue, Sauder said, has grown "this great neighborly relationship."



# "Touching Mystery" theme of Mennonite Arts Weekend

Continued from page 3...

- Tim Swartz, painter;
- Tina (Swartz) Burkholder, writer;
- Ted Swartz, playwright and actor.

Each was invited to give a preview Friday night of the workshop or presentation each would be giving Saturday. Hess said each was welcomed to relate his or her presentation to the weekend's theme, but it wasn't required. Many did touch on the theme in some way, even if by exploring the mystery of how a person ends up where they did.

"Presenters were so much into the innovation of their art into the larger cycles of life, their own development, their own evolution from young to where they are now."

For more information on Mennonite Arts Weekend and Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship's involvement, check out [www.mennoniteartsweekend.mennonite.net](http://www.mennoniteartsweekend.mennonite.net).



## Covenant, Atlanta hold joint church retreat

Atlanta Mennonite Church invited Covenant Mennonite Church congregants in Sarasota, Fla., to join Atlanta for its annual church retreat.

The retreat was planned for John Tanner Park in Carrollton, Ga., Feb. 28 to March 2. The weekend retreat was to focus on Central District Conference's history of welcoming congregations on the edges elsewhere, as well as the theme for the next two years: transformed through text and table.

## Chicago Community MC exploring climate issues

Through February and March, a group from Chicago Community Mennonite Church has been meeting Sunday mornings to discuss climate change.

Those sessions have included the topics of taking stock of the climate emergency humans and the planet face and looking at renewable energy and the possibilities for implementing and advocating for renewable energy at personal, community and political levels.

## Hively Avenue helping expanding church plant

Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind., has welcomed The Rios de Agua Viva (Rivers of Living Water) Church to meet in Hively's sanctuary on Sunday afternoons.

Rios de Agua Viva is a church plant affiliated with the Missionary Church that outgrew their small apartment meeting place, with attendance between 15 and 25 adults.



## Mennonite Church of Normal sends comforters to tornado victims

Mennonite Church of Normal (Ill.) has produced more than 20 comforters for people affected by the tornados in Washington, Ill. The church held a dedication for the comforters on Sunday, Feb. 2, before sending them to Washington families. Here is an excerpt of the prayer said during the dedication and also sent along with each comforter on an attached card:

*...when storms wipe out whole areas of a community,  
and we are left with questions about why,  
we find we must live in the Mystery that is you.*

*But even with questions that have no easy answers,  
we are a people that claims a faith in you,  
a God who works good in every kind of situation.*

*And so, these quilts and comforters are concrete evidence of that good;  
that in spite of the loss and destruction on November 7 in Washington, Il,  
through your people, you work good.*

*Thank you for this project – these acts of goodness in response to devastation.  
We dedicate these comforters and quilts – and all the many kinds of love and labor that  
have gone into them.*

*Thank you for these evidences of your grace and goodness.*

*We pray for the individuals and families that will receive these many lovely comforters  
and quilts,  
that these gifts of our hands,  
will be an expression of care and comfort in a tumultuous time,  
and will wear long and well as a symbol of your unending presence and goodness...*

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