

## Social justice and solar panels

If you're traveling down North Lincoln Avenue in Urbana, Ill., among the first things you might notice when you pass First Mennonite Church's charming brick building with a steeple and white shutters are the solar panels on the rooftop of their building.

How does a Mennonite church of 150 members go about installing an array of photovoltaic solar panels? It takes a lot of patience, creativity and dedication by members of the Green Team, starting with smaller projects that lead to bigger impact.

In the spirit of their Anabaptist beliefs, this faith community has always had a strong concern for social justice and peace.

As humans continue to emit greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, the impacts of climate change, such as increased flooding and harsher droughts, will continue to affect more people and displace communities. Disruptions in natural weather patterns and growing seasons also have the potential to cause conflicts in regions of the world where water, food, firewood or other resources are scarce. Much of the burden of this devastation and unrest will be felt by people in developing countries who have emitted fewer greenhouse gas emissions and are least responsible for the problem.

Because of this, church members feel a biblical call to promote justice and peace for neighbors around the globe who will be negatively affected. They live out these convictions by taking action to lessen their impact on the planet as their community worships, interacts and shares space.

The Green Team collaborated with Faith in Place, a charity dedicated to inspiring people of diverse faiths to care for the Earth through education, connection and advocacy, and they



*Holly Nelson, Green Team leader for First Mennonite Church, Champaign-Urbana, stands next to the solar panels on the roof of the church building.*

started with small projects. They put up rain barrels to promote water conservation. They changed out old light bulbs to more efficient ones. Instead of throwing away plates and cups after church functions, they switched to washing reusable dishes to cut down on waste.

They also work with their neighbors down the road at Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center on an inter-faith peace garden. The fresh veggies cultivated by the two houses of worship are donated to a homeless shelter and a women's shelter.

Then the Green Team decided to tackle a bigger project that would make a sizeable impact on reducing the faith community's

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# Rain gardens add beauty and diversity

Matthew D. Hickman

Zippering and fluttering against a backdrop of wildflowers, hummingbirds and dozens of species of dragonflies and butterflies have come to inhabit the native prairie rain garden at the Mennonite Church of Normal. A 1700-square-foot turf drainage swale adjacent to the church parking lot was converted to a rain garden to increase landscape biodiversity, enhance the swale's ability to filter storm water runoff and promote curiosity and wonderment in children of the congregation and the neighborhood.

The project began in 2010 with removal of existing sod followed by cultivation of weeds throughout the summer. A highly-diverse seed mix of more than 100 species of prairie grass and wildflowers was sown on the soil surface in early winter. This 'frost-sowing' technique allowed for the freezing and thawing of winter soil to settle the seeds to depths optimal for germination. With a grant from the Illinois

Native Plant Society, 450 mature plant-plugs of 13 species were installed in addition to seeds.

The rain garden will serve as a butterfly habitat and life-cycle study area for the children of Normal's only Head Start classroom, hosted by the church in its building. Interpretive signage and materials, provided by the church, welcome visitors for tours.

One of our goals is to increase the ability of the swale to retain and filter storm water through the use of deep-rooted, perennial plants. Another goal of the rain garden is to increase biodiversity on the church property for both beauty and wildlife value. We also hope to promote wonderment through engaging green space for congregational children, the onsite Head Start classroom and families living nearby.

*Matt Matthew D. Hickman is Associate Pastor of Youth and Family Life at Mennonite Church of Normal in Illinois.*



## Social justice and solar panels (cont.)

carbon footprint. Creative visioning and financial incentives offered by the state of Illinois resulted in the idea of installing solar panels on the roof.

The 9.44kW photovoltaic array was installed in June 2014. The reduction in First Mennonite's greenhouse gas emissions is equal to planting 185 trees per year!

First Mennonite's sunny outlook and ongoing work to interweave creation care as a way of being in the life of the church gives hope that

other faith communities throughout Illinois can take action on a variety of scales to promote healthy communities and a healthy planet for future generations!

Want to learn more how your faith community can take smart energy actions? Then check out the programs of [www.faithinplace.org](http://www.faithinplace.org).

*Brian Sauder is the President and Executive Director of Faith in Place. He is licensed towards ordination by Mennonite Church USA and worships with Chicago Community Mennonite Church.*

## Combining learning, peace and creation care

“Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship is a congregation that loves to learn,” Amy Huser said. They also “have energy for creation care,” and combine the two in a growing emphasis in the congregation.

Amy moved back to Berne, Ind., about two years ago with a strong commitment to creation care. “It was a perfect mix of me bringing ideas and energy and the congregation being ready to get involved,” she said. When Amy offered to meet with people interested in creation care, more than half the people in the small congregation that Sunday joined the meeting.

Their love of learning led them to organize a trip to Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center, a nature sanctuary near Wolf Lake, Ind., owned by Goshen College. They also took a field trip to a blue heron rookery. The congregation has become involved with Hoosier Interfaith Power and Light, the regional chapter of an organization that brings together faith and environmental concerns. A significant part of the congregation’s identity is using rented space, so they can put limited resources into other areas besides building upkeep.

They have begun using the “Every Creature Singing” curriculum, developed by Mennonite

Creation Care Network. Amy said, “The Bible has such a strong voice for us to work at creation care. Not just Jesus, but the Bible as a whole calls us to this.”

This Lent some members are voluntarily monitoring how much gas they use. They will contribute from five cents to a dollar a gallon, and the congregation will determine how to use the funds. Part of this effort also includes writing to government representatives to urge action on reducing carbon emissions. “Working on systemic change means involving government leaders,” Amy believes.

Amy is studying in a program through Green Mountain College (Poultney, Vt.) to earn a master’s degree in Resilient and Sustainable Communities. Last fall the congregation sponsored her to attend the Rooted and Grounded conference on land and Christian discipleship at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. There she presented a paper on climate change in their region.

For 14 years Amy taught art, incorporating an emphasis on peace; it’s an approach that fits well with creation care, too, she said. “Everything is connected. That’s a big part of my faith. We need to be aware of how our actions affect everything.”

### Financial Report

From a financial point of view for Central District Conference, last month was a typical February. Congregational giving was down from January but still fine and year-to-date (starting July 1, 2015), giving from CDC congregations totals \$118,382, almost \$4,000 ahead of the plan for the year. Total revenue is only about \$3,400 less than our plan calls for but expenses are well below the plan for this time of year. Of course most of the annual meeting expenses are still to come. So overall, we are \$12,437 in the black with four months remaining in the fiscal year. Thanks to all for their continuing support of our conference.

— Roger Nafziger, Conference treasurer



Willow and Aden got acquainted with a sandhill crane during the Emmaus Road congregation’s field trip to Merry Lea.

Kathy Schwartz

## Camp Friedenswald: Stewards of the peaceful woods

Over its 65-year history, Camp Friedenswald has taken seriously the call not only to teach about and provide a place to enjoy God's creation, but also to be stewards of creation. The staff maintains a strong commitment to care for the resources and relationships entrusted to the Camp.

The November 2015 issue of their newsletter, *Friedensword*, reported on recent efforts:

**Compost.** For the first time last summer, we directed all organic waste from mealtime into raccoon-proof compost bins. Thanks to the reduced trash at meals and to the elimination of paper towels in the dining hall restrooms, we cut our waste from two to one dumpster a week!

**Pigs!** In the spring, two piglets joined the Camp family and by late fall, having been fed food scraps from the kitchen, the little piglets had become full-grown hogs. Raising the pigs has redirected food waste away from the dumpster, as well as provided a teaching opportunity for our summer campers.

**Invasive Species Removal:** Summer staff assisted in removing invasive bushes throughout most of Main Camp—over 20 acres.

**Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly:** We found a Friedenswald record of 19 butterflies during the survey this year. We are one of six places left in

the world that have a viable population of this endangered species.

**Energy Efficiency:** We have worked on installing motion sensors for lights in common areas and we are replacing bulbs with LEDs to save energy, time and money.

For more information about Camp Friedenswald's creation care efforts, visit the website: [friedenswald.org/stewards-of-peaceful-woods/](http://friedenswald.org/stewards-of-peaceful-woods/)



Summer staff members Simon Weaver, Lynea Kaethler and Sarah Hartman-Keiser work at clearing invasive bushes from the main camp area.

**CAMP FRIEDENSWALD**  
2016 SUMMER CAMPS

**WHO IS WISE?**

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.  
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

### Camp Friedenswald summer retreat schedule

We look forward to engaging 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 as we ask the question "Who is Wise?" We are excited to work with this text as we ask questions about our world and learn about the wisdom that those questions can bring. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

|                 |                               |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| June 13-18:     | High School Camp (grade 9-12) |
| June 20-22:     | Primary Camp (grade 1-2)      |
| June 20-25:     | Junior High Camp (grade 7-8)  |
| June 27-July 2: | Pre Junior Camp (grade 3-4)   |
| June 4-9:       | Junior Camp (grade 5-6)       |
| July 1-15:      | Family Camp I                 |
| July 18-22:     | Family Camp II                |

## Reflections from James Rissler, CDC board member

# God's spirit is wonderfully present

I have been on Central District Conference's board for almost seven years. I joined the board a young man, and now you can see the gray in my hair even after I shaved my beard, where it showed up the most. I began with a four-year-old car that now has over 200,000 miles. I leave incredibly honored to have had the chance to serve our small part of Christ's body. As I end my time on the board, the *Reporter* editor asked me to share a few reflections.

CDC is flourishing. People who come to our gatherings comment on the joy and laughter that is present. Our budget has ended in the black for several years in a row. And we are blessed with incredibly gifted and faithful leaders. The opportunity to share with and learn from so many good and faithful followers of Jesus is what I have appreciated the most about my time on the board. Our conference is one that abounds in love and abides in grace.

In my seven years, we have given a lot of energy to the important work of journeying and discerning with congregations who have chosen to leave CDC because they felt we are not sufficiently committed to a traditional understanding of marriage. My first year on the board was an interim appointment to finish out the term of someone from First Mennonite Church, Berne, after that congregation left CDC. Several other congregations also have left, and it's possible that others will. I mourn that we have not been able to successfully remain together, because I ardently believe that our shared commitments to following and serving Jesus the Christ are much broader and deeper than our differences over how we read the Bible. I take comfort that congregations generally parted well, and that I began genuine friendships with people from these congregations during our conversations about their relationships to conference.

Congregations have joined our conference as well, offering new gifts to us all. These congregations all appreciate our relational polity. Reign of God grants encourage congregations to partner in missional ways—seeking together God's presence in the world and joining in with God's ongoing activity.

*Reporter*

Central District Conference

Regional gatherings encourage us to join together to worship, to fellowship, to pray and to learn from one another. God's Spirit is wonderfully present in our congregations: food pantries, community gardens, debt forgiveness; ministry with (not to) the homeless, the undocumented, the less able; apple fritters, Swiss heritage, Schmeckfest; Vacation Bible School, study series, active youth; heavenly music, inspiring preaching, grace and love



J. Tyler Klassen

extended to each other through celebrations and the darkest shadows. Perhaps I have been fortunate to hear these stories more than some while serving on the board, but they are there for us all to hear—in the *Reporter* and *focus*, and especially whenever we gather face to face.

My abiding hope for our conference is that the joy we share in following Jesus will be infectious. That we will continue to share our love of God and our love of the church, which continues to provide grace and love and wisdom and truth, even with all its messiness. That we will know each other, and that all people will recognize us as faithful followers of Jesus, because we love abundantly, recognizing the extraordinary grace that has been given us by our Creator.

It has been an honor to serve God by serving on CDC's board. I will miss it. May we continue to abound in love and abide in grace, together.

*James Rissler is pastor of Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship, Atlanta, Ga.*

March 2016

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## Terri Geiser ordained



**T**eresa (Terri) Geiser (left) was ordained for ministry on January 31 at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind. Lois Kaufmann (right), conference minister, led the ordination segment of the Sunday morning service; Nina Bartelt Lanctot, Constantine, Mich., preached. Terri has holds a Master of Social Work and earned a Master of Divinity at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She serves as chaplain at Elkhart General Hospital.

**Editor's note:** This issue of *Reporter* continues an emphasis on creation care and attending to environmental concerns. For previous stories, see the November 2015 *Reporter*: [www.mcusacdc.org/news-2/cdc-reporter/](http://www.mcusacdc.org/news-2/cdc-reporter/)

As the new editor for Central District Conference I am grateful to all the writers who responded so willingly to short-notice requests for stories. It is inspiring to learn how congregations and organizations are taking seriously our responsibility to care for the beauty, diversity and vibrancy of what God has created. — *Mary E. Klassen, CDC editor*

## Mark your calendars

Central District Conference Annual Meeting will be June 23–25 in Columbus, Ohio, hosted by Columbus Mennonite Church.

## Central District editors explore perspectives on the land

**R**yan Dallas Harker, part of the Hively Avenue Mennonite congregation in Elkhart, Ind., and Janeen Bertsche Johnson, member of Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, are editors of a new book, *Rooted and Grounded: Essays on Land and Christian Discipleship*.

Janeen and Ryan co-chaired the planning committee for the Rooted and Grounded conferences at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and invited 20 of the 55 presenters from 2014 to contribute to the volume.

The book is part of the Studies in Peace and Scripture series of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at AMBS and was published by Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock.



*Janeen Bertsche Johnson and Ryan Dallas Harker signed copies of Rooted and Grounded, Essays on Land and Christian Discipleship at a book celebration.*

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