

A neighborly sign for our times

by Karl Shelly, co-pastor, Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Good ideas have power; including the power to travel.

In September 2016, *The Mennonite* printed a story about a creative witness which traveled through a Virginia city. Matthew Bucher, pastor at Immanuel Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va., had the idea to erect a sign outside the church building welcoming foreigners. It read, "No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor" in three languages: English, Spanish, and Arabic. His sign was reprinted as yard signs and soon spread across Harrisonburg.

I shared Bucher's idea with Bethany Swope, member at Assembly Mennonite Church, and we were inspired to bring these signs to Goshen, Ind. Immanuel Mennonite Church made that easy to do. Swope downloaded the .pdf file from

their website, sent it to a local printer, and had 200 signs printed. We sold them in October for \$10 a sign, earning a small profit which we donated to Mennonite Central Committee.

This non-partisan but community-minded sign clearly resonated with a wide variety of people. All of our signs sold within two weeks. Many Christians liked how it echoed Matthew 25 which teaches that when we welcome strangers, we are welcoming Christ. Many non-Christians appreciated its message of compassion and hospitality, and how it offered an alternative to the mean-spirited partisanship on display during the election season.

After the election, the demand for signs picked up again, so we obtained and sold out another batch. This time the signs spoke a word

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At Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind., the welcoming sign stood in front of the "Peace" and "Joy" signs during the Advent season.

A neighborly sign for our times *(continued from page 1)*

of peace and solidarity into the widespread fear gripping Goshen's sizable immigrant community. They also served as a response to those who felt the election's outcome gave them permission to malign and intimidate people who are not white or U.S. citizens.

The United States has a long and complicated history with immigrants. At some points in its past, our country was recognized for its welcome of immigrants. The Statue of

Liberty reminds us of that generous spirit.

But that is not the current tone. This sign, with its various languages, speaks to Mexicans, Muslims, and other people new to the United States, offering an alternative to the pervasive xenophobia. It also serves as a call to reclaim our nation's better self, and to follow the ancient biblical call to welcome the stranger. That is an idea worth bringing to your community too. 🌍

Reign of God grant

Exploring racism and privilege and what questions they raise for us today

Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship and Columbus Mennonite Church received a Reign of God grant from Central District Conference for a learning experience at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. A multi-generational group from the two congregations toured the center and then reflected together on what they learned that will inform their anti-racism work in their two communities and their own understandings of racism and racial injustice. Renee Kanagy and Mark Rupp, pastors in the two congregations, share here some reflections about the experience.

Reflections on Freedom Center experience

by Renee Kanagy, pastor, Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship

Our congregations share social context. Broadly speaking, we are people of overlapping privilege. We share, too, intentional efforts to look under the veneer of privilege. There are a few that do not share in all the privileges of whiteness, education, and class. Their enduring, shaping presence fills out dimensions to our ways of being a body of Christ. Out of our shared experiences and desires to see the privilege our predominant whiteness brings us in its standard as normal, we met outside the Freedom Center one fall Saturday at the end of October. A group of around 30 of us from an infant and school aged children to adults in each decade of life into their 70s, began a journey through the history of slavery in the United States standing on

the balcony of the museum. The Ohio River, a boundary to the former slave state of Kentucky, in front of us.

We spent two hours experiencing stories of slavery. Two hours holding the tension of our discomfort in staring into the abyss of distorted hatred and pain. I was in awe that these 30 people walked out of the glorious fall day and opened themselves to these stories, these gut-wrenching experiences. I kept reminding myself that I have a choice in this, it is my privilege to set aside the weight of generational trauma for even this hour.

From the tour we gathered around tables for lunch. We shared stories of the steps our congregations are taking to move from comfort to the tension of seeing. The stories of steps and missteps in fumbling to find our footing as allies. Learning the rhythm of letting another's experience take the lead.

Then, children and adults of a spectrum of ages, took turns listening to each other. We spoke to what we noticed and what questions we take with us. I experienced a strengthening communion unfolding as we ate and listened and shared generously of ourselves.

Jesus often called the insiders—the privileged—to pivot toward discomfort. We did that day. We leaned into discomfort. The strength I carry from our communion empowers me to hold the tension, keep my eyes open, remain where I am not comfortable and yet called for the sake of my own transformation.

Reflections on Freedom Center experience

by Mark Rupp, pastor of Christian formation, Columbus Mennonite Church

On a Saturday in late October of last year, Columbus Mennonite got the opportunity to partner with around 20 members of Cincinnati Mennonite to tour the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in downtown Cincinnati and discuss the ways our respective congregations are working toward racial justice. The day was rich with good discussion, fresh insights, and a renewed sense of the horrible legacy upon which so much of our society has been built. One moment of the day has stuck with me, and I have continued to wrestle with it.

At the end of the tour, our group gathered inside the slave pen that had been donated to the museum. We sat inside that reconstructed barn and learned about the conditions in which slaves were kept and the process by which they were bought and sold. Even though it had been sterilized and treated to be able to keep the barn inside a museum, a heaviness hung over the space. After sitting there and learning those horrible things, someone in the group asked a question that went something like this:

“Were there benevolent slave owners who were unaware of the things that were happening, or did people just not care?”

I’m not sure of the specific wording, but I distinctly remember hearing the words “benevolent slave owner” and cringing because it seemed like such a contradiction. To be benevolent means to be well-meaning and kindly. Can slave owners be benevolent? Are well-treated slaves any less slaves?

I don’t fault this person for asking this question because I think it came from a place that most of us, myself included, were also struggling with: How could anyone be aware of the realities of the slave trade and still



Members of the Columbus and Cincinnati congregations gathering in the slave pen at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center on their joint experience of learning about slavery.

participate in it?

Even if I get swept up in the system, can I still be good?

I have been left wrestling with the question of how much I try to live as a “benevolent slave owner” in a world where there are so many things that are not as they should be. It is easy to look back on the horrors of the slave trade and think that if I were alive then, I would have been doing all I could to shut it down. Hindsight can be a bit morally self-righteous in that way.

The truth is, I don’t know what I would have done if I had lived back then. No one does. The only thing we can know is how we live now.

And as we figure out how we hope to live now, maybe we should be asking ourselves whether we have settled for being well-meaning and kindly in a world that needs us to be holy and disruptive. ⑩

Reign of God grants, from CDC’s Missional Church Committee, match money raised by congregations for cooperative missional initiatives that involve two or more congregations in activities that honor “God’s continuing creative energy in establishing God’s reign in the world.” For information and an application, visit www.mcusacdc.org/resources/reign-of-god-grant/

Doug's Mug

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

My mug is overflowing with music. The Advent and Christmas season, while becoming a fading memory, was filled with much wonderful music. I've sometimes sung in the Bluffton community production of "Messiah" presented at Bluffton University. But this year I listened. What a gift to experience the Christian story presented in four dimensions; on the faces of the singers and instrumentalists, in the sounds of the melodies and harmonies, in the poetry of the scriptures, in the rapt attention of the audience.

The Christmas program at First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, was mostly carol singing. The children's Sunday School classes selected the carols and told us why they selected them; "We liked the way it sounds." "This one was easy to sing; not too high and not too low." "We know the words." It was inspiring to witness faith being passed along through song. At the end of the 40 minutes or so, my voice was shot but my spirit was energized!

I kicked off the New Year with a six-hour retreat which included paging through *Sing the Story* and singing about 25 percent of the songs. Because it is arranged by the liturgical year, I experienced the Christian story from beginning to end. From "Praise the One who breaks the darkness" through "My soul cries out," I was steeped again in God's salvation story in Christ. The two songs that stuck with me well beyond the retreat were "Jesus, be the center" and "Create in me a clean heart." These simple and repetitive words are good grounding for a new year.

Paul's letter to the Philippians contains what is thought to be one of the first Christian hymns. Sometimes referred to as the kenosis hymn, it describes the miracle and wonder of Christ's self-emptying and exaltation. (*Kenosis* means self-emptying.)



Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus;

*Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as
something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a
slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death,
even death on the cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him and
gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus,
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the father.*

Sip on these words for a while. ☺

Financial report

December 31, 2016

Year-to-date giving	
from congregations	\$112,382
Year-to-date plan	\$92,500
Difference between giving and plan	\$19,882

Year-to-date giving	
from individuals and families	\$16,330
Year-to-date plan	\$15,250
Difference between giving and plan .	\$1,080

Year-to-date expenses	\$104,316
Year-to-date spending plan	\$111,258

December was a very good month for the finances of CDC. Congregational giving and giving by individuals and families were both very strong, and expenses continue to run below the plan. We're so grateful for this generous support.

Report provided by Roger Nafziger, conference treasurer

Series continues: Art and congregational life Banners mark events for the congregation


Maplewood Mennonite Church, Fort Wayne, Ind., has a tradition with a history of at least 40 years. Records going back as far as 1977 show how each year, a banner is created and then as the year progresses, the congregation adds tags to mark important events and milestones in the lives of those who worship together at Maplewood, Lois Kauffman-Hunsberger reports.

The last few years, the banner has been created by youth who are assisted by an adult. The design matches the congregation's theme for the year, but the designers have the final choice of how it will look.

During the sharing time in Sunday worship services, events are noted so tags can be created for them. Or at times a tag may be prepared in advance and added during the service.

Lois says, "Maplewood continues the family banner tradition because we believe it is important to recognize and affirm the lives and activities of individuals and groups as we

seek to live into God's call and to be community with one another."

At the end of a year, the banner for that year is photographed and moved to a hallway where nine previous banners hang. When one becomes ten years old, the tags are removed and offered to the people or families that they honor. 



The latest example in Maplewood Mennonite Church's tradition of 40+ years in which banners mark significant events in the life of the congregation.

Prepare for upcoming gatherings

Central District Conference

Regional gatherings

Theme: Abounding in Love ... Abiding in Grace

Hear about conference work and learn to know others in the conference. Each gathering is 9:45 am to 3 pm.

February 25: Southside Fellowship (Lambright Center, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.)

March 4: First Mennonite Church, Urbana, Ill.

March 11: First Mennonite Church, Wadsworth, Ohio

Annual meeting

June 22-24, Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio

Hosted by the CDC West Ohio Region:
First (Bluffton), Cincinnati, Grace, Lima,
Emmaus Road, and Shalom Community

Mennonite Church USA Biennial Convention

July 4-8, Orlando, Fla.

Theme: Love is a verb

Early registration opens January 17

Visit convention.mennoniteusa.org for details of schedule, registration, speakers and more.

The Mennonite Church USA Executive Board has developed updated guidelines for proposed resolutions that serve as "Church Statements." For the document detailing these new guidelines, visit http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Developing_Resolutions_for_MCUSA_Dec_2016_update.pdf



Transitions



Caitlin (Cate) Desjardins was licensed toward ordination at Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (CMF) on November 20, 2016. Cate is a member of CMF and is currently serving as a chaplain at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.



Valerie Showalter wears a "chain of blessing" at her installation as Associate Pastor of Youth and Children's Ministries at Shalom Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va., on January 15, 2017.

Challenging ourselves

This Reporter tells how several congregations are challenging themselves to be more knowledgeable and welcoming of people who are different—in culture, race, life experience and social location. Bulletins and newsletters tell more examples:


Southside Fellowship, Elkhart, Ind.

"One way we can help create more peace in this world is by learning more about our neighbors, and with that knowledge we can more fully engage with them and offer them our respect. In February SSF will begin a worship series in which we will encounter and consider Islam." Plans include hosting Imam Mohammad Sirajuddin from the South Bend Islamic Center, who will speak in a Sunday worship service, and a trip to the Islamic Center.

Atlanta (Ga.) Mennonite Fellowship

The congregation attended a Las Posadas service at an Episcopal church in December. Several young people from the congregation were singing in a choir in that service, so the congregation joined in the service, which is a reenactment—traditional in Spanish-speaking cultures—of the journey of Mary and Joseph through the hills of Judea, looking for an inn.

Paoli (Ind.) Mennonite Fellowship

The youth in the congregation coordinate the sale of coffee from Café Justo as a fund-raiser for a trip to Guatemala. Café Justo is fair-trade-plus coffee, sold by the Mexican producers themselves so all proceeds go to the producers instead of being shared with distributors. 

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