

Art festival shapes congregational identity and mission

by Hal Hess, chair, Mennonite Arts Weekend, Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship

Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship's mission has many fingers pointing outward as members relate to community and church-wide programs through its occupations and volunteering. Mennonite Arts Weekend, a congregational effort, is an extension of that outreach focusing on welcoming the artists near and far and the artist within each of us.

Suzanne Marie Hitt comments that "hosting has enabled all of us to feel like we are catalysts for Mennonite art creation, whether we ourselves are artists or not."

As the host of the biennial Mennonite Arts Weekend, Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (CMF) has made a practice of celebrating the arts for 26 years and, naturally, artwork has become an important part of our worship and worship space. All who enter our building are greeted with stained glass art designed by Zac Nafziger (2016 presenter), as well as a colorful silk gonfalon, painted by Juanita Yoder (2010 presenter).

Flowing from rafter to rafter in our

Reporter is looking for additional stories of how art shapes worship and congregational life. Contact editor Mary Klassen, cdeditor@gmail.com, if your congregation has a story to share.



Bob Wells

Gonfalon, painted
by Juanita Yoder



Cara Hummel

At the 2016 Mennonite Arts Weekend, artist Kris Shenk poses in front of her piece, "Transformation."

sanctuary are hand-dyed fabrics reflecting a rainbow of colors by CMF member Joanne Sommers Love. The front of our sanctuary is bedecked with Connie Briggs' changing wall hangings suggesting the themes of the church seasons. A sculpture entitled, "The Healing Garment" and a blown-glass communion vase, created respectively by Esther Augsburg (2002 presenter) and Ryan Mellinger (2004 presenter), decorate the pulpit area. Hanging in our church basement, where the congregation hosts a biweekly community meal, is Kris Shenk's large mosaic wall-hanging, "Transformation" (above), which she created out of discarded "junk" supplied by CMF members and transformed into art.

These visuals along with poetry, prose, dramatic readings of scripture, well-crafted calls-to-worship and creatively presented children's stories reflect some of the many influences on us which enable us to sense God in the ordinary of our lives both in the church and in our weekday activities.

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Art festival shapes congregational identity and mission (continued)

“Cincinnati’s Mennonite Arts Weekend provides a forum for an area of life often unrepresented in the past by the Mennonite Church,” says Christine Schumacher. “This forum shapes our views and experiences through a lens most of us never knew or seriously acknowledged: how does The Divine and the commonness of life intertwine to lead us to new places of understanding of ourselves,

each other and God’s working among us?”

We have experienced the sense of God as we have interacted with not only the creations of art but also with new acquaintances of Mennonites across the continent. The planning and hosting of Mennonite Arts Weekend enables this coming together, pushing each of us to grow in conversation with the old and new, with creativity, the unexpected, opinion and skill.

The Art & Spirituality Journey Group of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship

by Violet Sears

Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (CMF) has developed a practice of creating journey groups to support its members. A Journey Group is a small group of people who gather around a common focus, oriented toward some aspect of spiritual journey. These can “provide a vital center of Christian formation in the midst of congregational life. Enriching and strengthening faith, they offer companionship and guidance for the journey of transformation and equip members for engaging with God’s mission in the world” (from *Tending the Center: A resource of the missional church from the Office on Congregational Life*). Journey Groups begin each fall and continue through the next spring.

The Art & Spirituality Journey Group was originally developed to give truly creative individuals, who felt like their creativity was blocked or restricted in some way, opportunity to work through the inhibitors of their lives. Our intimate group used *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron as our guide. As we made individual breakthroughs and blossomed within ourselves, it showed in our willingness to create once again. Our group had realized that art and creating was God-given. To honor God, we use our gifts ... all of our gifts.

Through this personal awakening, I noticed that even though our church honored Mennonite artists and arts through development, support and production of the Mennonite Arts Weekend (see p. 1), we did not celebrate our own gifts within the congregation with as much zeal. I wanted to change that, so our own weekend was borne—the CMF Celebration Of The Arts (or COTA).

Our inaugural weekend was in February

Reporter

Central District Conference



Violet Sears

Creators of the Celebration of The Arts at Cincinnati Mennonite Church: Violet Sears, Tiffany Miller, Connie Briggs and Patti Grice.

2013. Our description: “This event is dedicated to recognizing the importance of the arts in our lives and the significant contributions that artists make. We want to celebrate our gifts in our church, share our hidden talents, and support each other’s artistic endeavors. We hope you will be entertained as well as inspired and that this event brings us together, allowing us to see and appreciate ourselves and each other in new and interesting ways, while creating an outlet for creative growth.”

COTA happens on alternating years with the Mennonites Arts Weekend. Our congregants and visitors are treated to workshops, an art gallery, a boutique, a meal together and a talent show. On Sunday, we worship together with a service inspired by the theme of the weekend.

We are always looking for fresh ideas and for new ways to engage with each other. We would like to get to know other congregations with similar interests as well!

September 2016

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Inviting children to explore connections with creation

by Kathy Cender Martin, First Mennonite Church, Champaign-Urbana

I believe faith and spirituality become more meaningful for all of us, and especially for children, when we develop an awareness and understanding of our connections with the natural world. The biblical teachings on love, peace and restoration apply to all, including the whole of creation, and not just humans.

Jesus walked and taught outdoors, observing the plants, trees, mountains, rocks, birds and animals. His method of teaching included stories and parables about the natural world. He nurtured his soul with prayer and meditation in the open air of wilderness and the beauty of nature. The Psalms and the Old Testament are full of references to the wonder and joy of numerous aspects of creation. It is important to remind ourselves that we are dependent on the miracles of nature for our daily lives. As a teacher of the Kindergarten through fifth-grade class, I am privileged to communicate amazement, excitement and gratitude about this fabulous creation that surrounds us and that we are an intimate part of.

At First Mennonite Church (FMC) in Urbana, we are fortunate to have a fenced, green space next to our building that provides a safe place to play and learn. In the past, a Peace Garden has been planted and maintained cooperatively with members of FMC and the neighboring mosque, Central Illinois Mosque and Islamic Center. This year, our class asked if we could plant a small section with a vegetables and flowers, while the larger area was managed by adults of both our church and the mosque as a native prairie and pollinator garden. The garden is an example of beauty and a gift of nature that we share with our community.

As our class works and plays in the space, we are able to integrate and illustrate important life concepts along with the Sunday School lessons, such as:

- 1) respect for all living creatures, especially the lowly earthworm that we found in abundance in the rich, composted soil;
- 2) the inter-related web of life in the breaking down of plant material as we cleared the garden and prepared for planting;

- 3) awareness of the life cycle as we bury seeds and wait for them to resurrect;
- 4) recognition of our dependence on water, sun, clean air and good soil.

All of these concepts are taught with discussions about recognizing God as the creator and divine presence, the great mystery in everyday life, everywhere in miracles around us and within us.

We have used the outdoor space for the following lessons:

- 1) Isaac and the Wells: While discussing peaceful ways to resolve conflict, we talked about current water shortages, not wasting water and sharing resources.
- 2) Moving Toward Canaan: We acted out the

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Ready to water the plants: (l-r): Students Fernando, Mary, Rafael, Megan, Soren, Andrea and Hazel and helpers Mary Krick and Megan Cox.

Inviting children to explore connections with creation (continued)

story as spies observing the land, then reported what we noticed and discussed how to trust God and not be afraid. We introduced Nature Journals to record daily observations about our land and community.

- 3) Jesus in the Wilderness: We learned that Jesus wanted quiet time to feel God's presence. We tried having each child choose a separate place to slow down, take a deep breath, and become quiet and listen. This was just a short time of "meditating," only about two to three minutes for this age group. Afterwards, we talked about what sounds we heard, how it felt, what we might have learned, and that we can find quiet times and places of our own.

Peer Review report

by Doug Luginbill, CDC Conference Minister

On Aug. 19, nine representatives of CDC and three members of the Mennonite Church USA Peer Review Team participated in a Pilot Peer Review process. The on-site visit was part of a Pilot Peer Review as identified in the Membership Guidelines Resolution passed at the MC USA convention in Kansas City in 2015. CDC was chosen for the Peer Review because of the decision we made to license for ministry a gifted and well-qualified individual in a committed, same-sex relationship. (See additional information in the April issue of *focus*: <http://bit.ly/2cox8z9>)

The agenda for the visit included prayer, sharing, listening and reflection. Mark Rupp shared the story of his call to ministry and his journey to becoming licensed toward ordination. The purpose of the Peer Review was fourfold:

- Understanding the context of Central District Conference
- Understanding CDC's decision-making process in regards to licensing for ministry
- Reflecting on the impact CDC's decision might have on the broader church
- Evaluating the Pilot Peer Review Process itself

In the classroom, we have a Creation Care Corner with interesting things we have found, such as fossils, feathers and rocks. Each child has a mini-magnifying glass to examine the objects. In addition to starting seeds, we have worked on various crafts, such as making rain sticks, fall leaf prints and bird feeders.

There are many ways to integrate experiencing the natural world in our Sunday School lessons. The changing seasons offer all kinds of activities and learning opportunities. Local libraries have resources for inspiring ideas. MennoMedia's Shine curriculum has incorporated helpful suggestions for many lessons, and I hope there will be an increasing focus on creation care as a foundation for all future curricula.

Representing CDC were Lois Johns Kaufmann, retired conference minister; Lisa Weaver, Board president; Arman Habegger, Board president-elect; Ron Adams, Ministerial Committee chair; Joel Miller, pastor of Columbus Mennonite and previous Ministerial Committee member; Michael Miller, Human Sexuality and Faithful Relationships Task Force committee member; Mark Rupp, Pastor of Columbus Mennonite; Doug Luginbill, conference minister; and Emma Hartman, administrator.

The Peer Review Team consisted of Elizabeth Troyer Miller, trained mediator from Central Plains Mennonite Conference; Mary Etta King, transitional conference minister of Mountain States Mennonite Conference; and Terry Zehr, associate conference minister of New York Mennonite Conference.

The Peer Review Team, in consultation with CDC leadership, will develop a way of reporting what was learned from the Pilot Peer Review and present it at the next Constituency Leaders Council meeting in Hesston, Kan., Oct. 17-19. Prayers for wisdom, confidence and patience are requested as together we discern what it means to be the church today. (See related article on page 5.)

Doug's Mug

"My cup runneth over!"

By Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

I don't know a better biblical phrase to describe what I am feeling after less than a month as Central District Conference conference minister. My cup runneth over with...

- Information
- Names to learn
- Gratitude for Lois Johns Kaufmann's excellent leadership
- Appreciation for CDC leaders
- Admiration for Emma Hartman's knowledge and history of CDC
- Meetings
- Praise for God's faithfulness and steadfast love
- Prayerful, thoughtful, and faithful fellow ministers



The list could go on but I hope you have the sense that this ministry is rich, energizing and stretching. I want to reflect on two events during my initial week that have demonstrated this overflowing richness.

Visioning Day: Our cups ran over with a call to love.

On Aug. 20, thirteen members of the CDC Board, committee chairpersons, Emma and I met at Faith House in Goshen, Ind. Woven throughout our work together were the words of I John 4:7-21; "Beloved, let us love one another...." This rich and challenging text invited us to reflect on how our conference equips congregations and members to love one another. Specifically, we were drawn to the

challenges of racism and violence that plague many communities where we live. Racism and violence seem to reflect John's observation that "those who do not love a brother or sister whom [we] have seen, cannot love God whom [we] have not seen." How might we help to resource one another to more fully live into John's command: "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Please watch to see how this sense of call to address racism and violence plays out in the coming year.

Peer Review: Our cups ran over with sharing and listening.

On the afternoon of Aug. 19, nine members of CDC met with three members of a Mennonite Church USA Peer Review Team. (See page 4.)

As the four hours of prayers, deep sharing and reflection unfolded, we discovered that systems and processes put in place to guide us through troubled waters are both helpful and hurtful. They are helpful in that they can provide spaces where real stories can be shared on a personal and deep level. They are hurtful in that the gifts and callings of real people, affirmed by one community, are questioned and challenged by another community.

This is the story of the church in all generations. We both bless one another and hurt one another because we have not yet fully experienced the Kingdom of God. My prayer is that we can live more fully into the vision of John that "God's love is perfected in us."

It seems appropriate that my first week as Conference Minister included both "reviewing" and "visioning." It's how we learn together what God is doing in our midst. May our eyes and ears be open to God's presence and vision among us.

Doug Luginbill began serving as conference minister for Central District Conference on August 15. His email address is confmin@mcusacdc.org.

Russell Jensen installed

Russell Jensen was installed as pastor of Maplewood Mennonite Church, Fort Wayne, Ind., on August 28. He most recently was pastor of Belmont Neighborhood Fellowship, a missional congregation reaching out to the poorer neighborhoods of Elkhart, Ind. Prior to that he served as co-pastor of Middlebury (Ind.) Church of the Brethren. Originally from New Zealand, Russell also was pastor of Karori Baptist Church in the capital city, Wellington.

He has studied at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and New Zealand Baptist Theological College. He has been a school teacher and for three years served as a volunteer in several areas in Israel-Palestine.

Russell and Denise, his wife, have three daughters.



Russell Jensen (left) was installed as pastor of Maplewood Mennonite Church on August 28, 2016. Doug Luginbill (right), CDC conference minister, officiated at the installation.



Bob Wells

Stained glass artist Zac Nafziger stands with the piece he created for the entryway of Cincinnati (Ohio) Mennonite Fellowship. For more about how art shapes the congregation's mission, see stories on pages 1 and 2.

Financial report

August 31, 2016

Year-to-date giving	
from congregations	\$20,420.82
Year-to-date plan	\$30,833.33
Difference between giving and plan . .	-\$10,412.51

Year-to-date giving	
from individuals	\$1,010.00
Year-to-date plan	\$5,083.33
Difference between giving and plan . . .	-\$4,073.33

Expenses in the first two months of our fiscal year were almost \$3,900 under what was planned.

Report provided by Roger Nafziger, conference treasurer

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Email: cdceditor@gmail.com

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Central District Office:
 Doug Luginbill, conference minister
 Emma Hartman, administrator
 1015 Division St., Goshen, IN 46528
Toll-free: 800.662.2264
Phone: 574.534.1485
Fax: 574.534.8654
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org