

The calling to write—reflecting God's gifts

We reflect here with several writers about the gifts and challenges of this calling. In these pages it is not possible to hear from all the writers in our conference. So while each voice here is distinctive and valuable, each can serve also as an example of the varied writers among us—writers for children and youth, poets, writers of history, writers of resources for personal spiritual growth and writers who contribute to the life and work of the church.

Judith L. (Judy) Roth, Elkhart, Ind.

Serendipity & Me (Viking, 2013;
Scholastic, 2013)

Goodnight, Dragons (Disney*Hyperion,
2012, 2015)

Julia's Words (Herald Press, 2009)

Cups Held Out (Herald Press, 2006)

*Go to the Top: Leave the Crowd Behind with DeGarmo
and Key* (Gospel Light, 1991)



Joe Kotva

When I look at the world and ask myself, "What's the best way I can make a positive impact?" the answer is invariably—"Write." I'm shy, I have performance anxiety, I get nervous in crowds. A speaking platform or a marching presence would be a huge, ineffective leap for me. But I can write.

When I got upset about my reaction to the poor in Ensenada, I wrote a poem called "I Want to Carry Apples" headed by the verse Matthew 5:42. It helped me think through my feelings and actions. I later used the same experience to write a picture book (*Cups Held Out*) from a child's viewpoint.

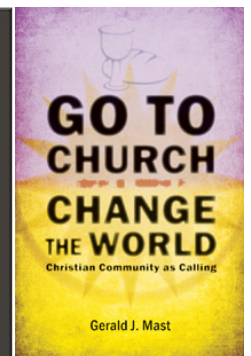
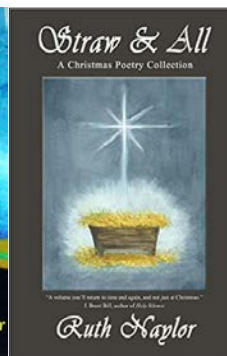
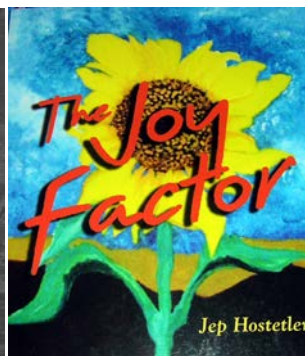
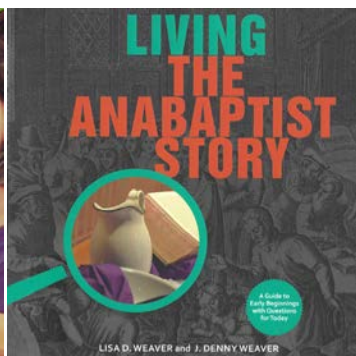
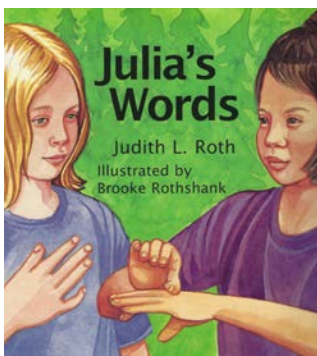
My husband's aunt and uncle are deaf. Through this relationship, and through some simple interpreting, I know a bit about the frustrations of communicating. This combined with the beauty of sign language and the joys of friendship led me to write the picture book, *Julia's Words*.

One of my core beliefs is the power of love and the gift of loving-kindness. This plays out in the picture book, *Goodnight, Dragons*.

I feel called by God to use my writing to help shine a light in the darkness. Writing, for me, is a great source of joy and frustration—the frustration comes mainly from the difficulty in navigating the publishing world. But the joy prevails.

Judy Roth also is editor of and contributor to *Skitsophrenia!: How to Get Up on Stage and Let All Your Creative Personalities Express Themselves As You Use Skits to Teach, Inform and Entertain!* (Gospel Light, 1990)

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Ruth Naylor, Bluffton, Ohio

A Family Affair, Finishing Line Press, 2013
Straw & All: A Christmas Poetry Collection,
Workplay Publishing, 2014



Long before I was trained in spiritual guidance, I was often touched when reading or listening to others share about how God was working in their lives. I learned to pay attention to my emotions. Sometimes the life around me offered insights and a line or two that I wanted to write down. A former boss and a former pastor encouraged my interest in writing.

Later, while teaching creative writing, I recognized the value of preserving and sharing memories. Many Christian and secular publications encouraged me by publishing my work. More recently I realized I had enough poems for a couple of themed collections.

My first collection, *A Family Affair*, begins with memories of my grandparents and continues with the joys and sorrows of family experience through the generations. It ends with wanting to share the heritage of love with my own grandchildren. *Straw & All* contains 62 poems written during the holiday seasons beginning in 1969 and extending through 2013.

Obviously, my life and insights are not as important as the memories and reflections that they invite in others. I believe that personal experience is in many ways universal experience. It is my prayer that those who read my work will be reminded and encouraged to reflect upon their own experience of God's work in their lives. I am currently writing a spiritual autobiography dealing with prayer, God's presence, guidance and provision.

Lisa Weaver & J. Denny Weaver Madison, Wisc.

Living the Anabaptist Story: A Guide to Early Beginnings with Questions for Today,
Cascadia Publishing House, 2015



After Denny and Mary retired Lisa invited her Dad to join her in a project to create a "Top 100" list of Anabaptist and Mennonite terms,

places, people and historical events. This list went through many stages and transitions before settling into its final form as a series of 10 thematic chapters, or lessons.

What were the challenges and rewards?

Denny once told Lisa, "One of the most important characteristics in bringing a book to completion is a long attention span." We worked on this project for many years, and had to cross numerous hurdles before reaching the finish line. However, this father-daughter project brought many rewards, including the sharing of ideas and knowledge across generations.

How does your writing reflect your gifts?

The content of *Living the Anabaptist Story* highlights Denny's lifelong academic pursuits, while the structure of the text and the written style reflects Lisa's ability to present complex material in an organized, accessible, appealing manner. We are also deeply appreciative of the images collected by David Smucker, and the design work by Judith Rempel Smucker.

How has your writing contributed to your involvement in the church?

We used this material to co-teach the high school Sunday School class at Madison Mennonite Church. Our discussion questions, ideas for activities or extensions, and suggestions for further reading are included in the book. It has been a joy to hear of other congregations that have used the book as a Christian Education guide, for both youth and adult sessions.

Also by Lisa Weaver

Swords to Plowshares, Lion and Lamb Peace Center, 2015
On the Zwieback Trail with Julie Kauffman and Judith Rempel Smucker, CMU Press, 2011

Several of J. Denny Weaver's books

The Nonviolent Atonement (Eerdmans, 2011)
The Nonviolent God (Eerdmans 2013)

Jep Hostetler, Goshen, Ind.

The Joy Factor, Herald Press, 2007

Alongside my work in teaching medical students, I had a side career of doing public speaking,

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particularly on the topic of joy. I called my speech “The Joy Factor.” The speech had six points and was presented more than 1,000 times in the U.S. and abroad. I mention this not to brag, but to give some idea why I thought it might be a good idea to put my basic speech into the form of a book. Deeper than the speaking business, however, was my love of humor and my work with students in finding out more about how humor could help in healing.

What was challenging about this project?

The challenge for me was that I am not an accomplished writer. My writing followed the pattern of the way I speak in my presentations, so it was difficult to wrestle the book together, translating it from the stage to the written word. Herald Press was helpful in directing me to ways of bridging the gap.

What did you find most rewarding?

I was able to sell the book at many of my speaking engagements and it was fun to hear from people after they read the book. Selling books is not a way to make a living ... but it is fun to have people engage in conversations related to the six points in the book.

How does your writing reflect your gifts or what you sense God has called you to do?

For many years I enjoyed teaching medical students. The second part of my sense of calling is that I was always interested in the performing arts. At Goshen College I was in as many plays as I could manage. Add to this the gift of finding humor in many places and becoming a quasi-Mennonite humorist—that made it all come together. Hence the book.

How has your writing contributed to your experience of God or involvement in the church?

I find different understandings of humor in different conferences within MCUSA. Some conferences are simply “wound more tightly” than others. I have been asked to do weekend retreats for individual congregations because, to quote one pastor, “Our people seem a bit joyless.” My mantra is often, “You can be on a river of joy in a boat full of sorrow.” Obviously there is a wide spectrum of understanding of humor from person to person and from congregation to congregation.

Gerald Mast, Bluffton, Ohio

Go to Church, Change the World, Herald Press, 2012



At the time I wrote the book, my employer—Bluffton University—had received a grant to explore and expand resources for helping our students consider what it means to live out of a vocational calling. At the same time, I had been interested in the question of what it means to live out of a calling in a way that reflects Anabaptist commitments to discipleship and Christian community. So, this writing project was an opportunity for me to explore an Anabaptist understanding of vocation that would satisfy my personal curiosity and also contribute to our discussions on campus about inviting students to fulfill their callings as a community practice, not just a career choice.

What were the challenges and rewards?

My early drafts of the book were more academic and complex in writing style. Herald Press editors encouraged me to simplify the style and reduce the size of the manuscript to make it more accessible. This was a difficult discipline for me but ultimately a good experience that helped me learn to write for broader audiences than merely academics. The most rewarding aspect was the process of sharing draft chapters with colleagues at the university and receiving feedback, experience stories, and wonderful ideas that helped me to improve the manuscript.

How does your writing reflect your gifts or what you sense God has called you to do?

My writing is an expression of my commitment to the mission of the church of Jesus Christ that I made in baptism. My best writing is done in collaboration with friends and mentors who share that commitment to the church and who help me to express my ideas in more accessible and interesting ways. I have always loved the church—no matter how frustrated I have often been with it—and almost everything I write is motivated by that deep attachment to the body of Christ and my strong desire for the church—including myself—to become more faithful to way of Jesus Christ.

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How has your writing contributed to your experience of God or involvement in the church?

In my writing, I seek to bear witness to the great gifts of wisdom and truth that have been given to us in scripture, in the Christian tradition, in our Anabaptist heritage, and also in the ancient craft of rhetoric or persuasion—which is my academic discipline. Writing is a way for me to express love and care for a topic and for my audience. So, when I write about the church, I find that it intensifies my affection for the church. When I write about people and events in our Anabaptist past, I find that I feel closer to those people and events. When I write about God—which in a way is really the point of all my writing—I also feel closer to God and, paradoxically, more reverently aware of God’s otherness and mystery. ©

Financial report

August 31, 2017

Year-to-date giving
from congregations \$12,409
Year-to-date plan \$32,083
Difference between giving and plan -\$16,674

Year-to-date giving
from individuals and families \$3,292
Year-to-date plan \$3,833
Difference between giving and plan . . -\$541

Year-to-date expenses \$32,001
Year-to-date spending plan \$35,263

The new fiscal year for Central District Conference began on July 1. During these first two months, total revenue for the conference, including some earned income, has totaled \$17,382 which is about \$16,000 less than planned. Congregational giving was \$12,409 against a plan of \$32,083 and giving outside of the congregations was \$3,292, only a little less than the planned \$3,833. Spending for the first two months was about \$32,000, \$3,260 less than the spending plan allows. In summary, we are about \$16,300 behind so far this year.

Report provided by Roger Nafziger, conference treasurer

Oak Grove celebrates visual arts

Oak Grove Mennonite Church, Smithville Ohio hosted “Celebrating the Arts,” a visual art exhibit with instrumental music, on April 29 and 30, featuring the work of more than 20 Oak Grove artists. People of all ages participated by bringing their creations to the church Fellowship Center where they were displayed.

This first event was open to the public as an outreach to the community and beyond. Adults exhibited paintings, drawings, graphic design, wood block renditions, fiber and metal art depicting Bible stories, traditional and three dimensional art quilts, wooden bowls that were hand crafted on a lathe, to name just some of the forms of art. Children’s Sunday School teachers also exhibited the work of their students that included collages, paintings, and figures that illustrated Bible stories.

Youth and senior citizens were coloring at the art therapy table as guests listened to the live music and viewed the exhibit. A creative vegetable train was on hand to sample as well as appetizers and juice for refreshments.

Photos documenting some of the work were displayed in the church foyer the following Sunday.

— Joanne Murray, Chair of the Oak Grove Arts Committee ©



Two Oak Grove children, Brian and Maggie, view their Sunday school class paper flowers.

Is that a storm in my mug?

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

The idiom “tempest in a teapot” describes a small disagreement or inconvenience that has been exaggerated out of proportion. There are a number of recent developments



in our culture and in our denomination that are worth careful observation. Are they “tempests in teapots” that, with time, will blow over without much lasting effect? Or are they storms of Harvey and Irma proportion that reform coastlands and

alter life for years and decades to come? The following observations come to mind.

The Future Church Summit, which formed a major part of the MC USA Convention in Orlando in July, resulted in both a reaffirmation of core Anabaptist values as well as an invitation to lament and transform structures and practices that exclude and wound. (I encourage you to read the full report at <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/future-church-summit-outcomes-report/>) Together we affirmed, among other things, that:

- The life and teachings of Jesus Christ are central to our faith.
- We experience God’s Spirit in community.
- God is in the margins.
- We value being a peace church: living out faith through service and justice.

We also lamented that:

- We have often marginalized people of color, women, and LGBTQ people.
- We harbor racism within ourselves and within our church structures.
- We do not attend fully to spiritual vitality and spiritual formation.

How is God’s Spirit storming our way of being church? How is God forming us for the future?

Within our broader culture the protests and counter protests that occurred in Charlottesville and in other communities were a stark reminder that race-based hate and evil are real, that power and privilege are being challenged on many levels, and the church finds itself in the midst of this messy, angry, complicated moment in history. How have we enhanced this storm by our actions or lack thereof? How are we part of the rebuilding efforts?

And there are other, devastating, life-altering storms. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma were catastrophic. Floods in Bangladesh, India and Nepal have left millions of people displaced, and left over 1,200 dead. A hydrogen bomb test in North Korea and threats of war from the US are reminiscent of Cold-War era fears. The future of 800,000 children and youth, protected by the executive action known as “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” (DACA), is in question. How does our faith invite us, compel us, to respond to these storms?

Bruce Tuckman, back in 1965, identified four stages of institutional transformation; forming-storming-norming-performing. He later added a fifth stage, mourning. One of his points is that it is important to name a storm when we experience it. We don’t benefit from downgrading serious storms to a tempest in a teapot. Another point is that change rarely happens without a storm. In terms of our faith, we might consider The Flood narrative of Genesis 7-9; the Jonah story; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; and perhaps the Reformation of the 16th century.

Our faith compels us to lean into the storm, allow it to reshape and reform us, let it clarify our values and norms as God’s people, and then move us toward performing the unique work God is calling us to in this season of our faith. All along the way we have permission to mourn what we experience as loss. ©

Licensing and installations



Jake Hess (center) was licensed for ministry at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind., on July 23. He and Tim Stair (left) were then installed as copastors of the congregation. Jake is a 2013 graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Tim has been an interim pastor at Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, and other area congregations. He also serves as a consultant with Mennonite Health Services.



Mark Frey symbolically 'installs' Alison Brookins (right) as their pastor during a children's story in the service of her licensing and installation Chicago Community Mennonite Church on August 13. Alison is a 2017 graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Training opportunity

Lombard Mennonite Peace Center is offering a one-day workshop Conflict Transformation Skills for Churches on October 21 at First Mennonite Church in Indianapolis, Ind. This workshop will focus on the biblical basis for conflict transformation, styles of responding to conflict, communication skills necessary to resolve conflict peacefully, strategies to prevent destructive conflict in churches, and a model for working at congregational decision-making in a win-win manner. For information, call Lombard Mennonite Peace Center at 630-627-0507 or visit www.lmpeacecenter.org/workshops/cts/.

*Conflict Transformation
Skills for Churches*



**MENNONITE
Arts WEEKEND
2018**

Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship and the Mennonite Arts Weekend planning committee will host the 2018 festival Feb. 2-4, 2018, at Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. For information, visit www.mennoniteartsweekend.org or contact Hal Hess, halhess@gmail.com

Central District Reporter
Volume 61, Number 5, September 2017
Editor: Mary E. Klassen
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Reporter is published six times a year. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

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