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KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE—ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Memorial Garden becomes holy space

A project that has come to have significant meaning for the Silverwood Mennonite Church congregation began in 2012 with a simple question at one table during a congregational meal: "What do you think about cremation?"

That question launched a study group, bringing together people who were interested not only in cremation, but also in providing a space for cremains and in other issues surrounding the end of life.

Six years later in 2018, the Silverwood Mennonite Memorial Garden was established between the church building and a wooded area to the west. It includes a columbarium with niches for cremains and a scattering garden. Other Mennonite congregations in Goshen provide one or the other; Silverwood offers both.

Tim Wall, an architect who serves on the

columbarium committee, explained that the congregation was mostly in support of the project from the start. Those who were concerned about the cost were reassured to know that as people pay for niches, the construction cost would be recovered.

Other than a small amount of maintenance, the Memorial Garden does not add to the congregation's expenses.

After the congregation approved the project, however, it sat dormant for several years because of other priorities. The congregation needed to replace its heating and cooling system and that required changes to the foyer. That, in turn, led to plans for enlarging the foyer to include a coffee bar and more space for fellowship.

Some people feared the columbarium project would never happen, admitted Donna Mast,



The Silverwood Mennonite Memorial Garden includes a scattering garden (foreground) and columbarium for cremains. Kent and Gay Yoder, members of the congregation, have done the landscaping and selected hostas specifically because of their names, such as "Praying Hands" and "Stained Glass." The wooded area around this garden is part of the congregation's property and also is available for scattering ashes.

current member of the Silverwood pastoral team. But the columbarium and memorial garden were included with the other projects, and fund-raising was successful enough that all the work could be completed.

Securing support from the wider community was not difficult. The biggest concern for city leaders was what would happen if the church closed or moved, and the Silverwood team could assure them that it is easier to move the niches than to move buried remains. Because the city of Goshen does not have zoning for a columbarium, the entire property, including the church building, is now zoned as a cemetery.

The columbarium has one wall with 45 niches. A foundation has been set for a second wall and there is space for a third farther in the future. A scattering garden, filled with hostas and a tree, is surrounded by a curved path of bricks. Families may engrave bricks on this path as a memorial to family members—those whose cremains are scattered or those who are buried in other places. In addition, a row of bricks in the path honors each pastor and the years when he or she served the congregation.

Niches in the columbarium are available to those who are or have been part of the congregation and for close family members who might not have another location available. The

cost of a niche is \$1,000, significantly less than the usual costs of a burial plot, vault and casket.

However, “we treat it like a burial,” Tim explained. A niche is opened by a member of the committee—usually Tim, family members place the ashes inside, and then the committee member closes the niche with the expectation that it will not be opened again.

“I was brought in as designer, but it has been a meaningful experience for me to be involved,” Tim said. “It’s an important function to the church, even for people who don’t have a need for it.”

Donna encourages families who place cremains in a niche to have a simple ceremony as they take that step. Some don’t envision they need this, she said, but “as I’ve worked with those, they have agreed that maybe it would be nice to have a spiritual marker, and afterwards have been grateful.”

Tim explained, “It was the right spot, but we didn’t realize until later that we would be able to see it from the sanctuary.” He added, “It’s the luck of location. It’s private, but with the lights it’s a secure location. We’ve been told people come to sit and spend time here. It’s a little bit of a sacred space.”

Donna concluded, “It’s a holy time, and a holy space. You can sense that.”



Part of the brick walk surrounding the scattering garden includes bricks with the names of all the congregation’s pastors and the years when they served the congregation.

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