

## Annual Meeting offers ways to explore our “yearning”

**F**or a second year, Central District Conferences Annual Meeting will happen by Zoom and will build on the theme, “Spirit, bless our souls with yearning.” Saturday, June 26, 9 am to 4:30 pm is the scheduled time for the online meeting.

### Worship

The day begins with a pre-recorded worship service. Communion follows at 10 am; participants are encouraged to have communion elements ready when they join the session.

### Seminars

Five breakout sessions occur the second half of the morning:

**Climate justice is pacifism**, led AJ Delgadillo and Nicole Litwiller from Center for Sustainable

Climate Solutions

**New and Developing Communities of Faith: Engage the Possibilities!**, led by the CDC Missional Church Committee

**Faith Formation**, led by Shanna Peachy Boshart, Mennonite Church USA denominational minister for Faith Formation

**Remembering our Congregational History**, led by Lisa Weaver and J. Denny Weaver

**Congregations and Reparations: Conversation and Action**, led by Joel Miller and Trevor Bechtel

### Delegate business

Delegate sessions in the morning and afternoon will be opportunities for hearing a state of the

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Central  
District  
Conference  
Annual Zoom  
Meeting

Saturday  
June 26  
9:00-4:30 ET



Art work commissioned from four artists in 2020 emphasizes the theme, “Spirit, bless our souls with yearning.” See more: [mcusacdc.org/annual-meeting-2021/worship/](https://mcusacdc.org/annual-meeting-2021/worship/)

## Annual Meeting (continued)

conference address, approving the spending plan, affirming nominees for conference leadership positions, getting an overview of conference congregations, and voting on accepting Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship into the conference. Reports from conference committees and Camp Friedenswald are also planned.

### Afternoon focus: Diverse and inclusive congregations

A featured part of the meeting is the afternoon session on “Building Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Congregations.” All leadership groups in CDC congregations are especially invited to join this session, which begins at 1:30 pm. (Registration is required.)

Betty Pries, consultant with Creedence & Company, will be the main presenter for this session. Creedence & Co., based in Kitchener, Ont.,



Betty Pries

## Annual Meeting information and registration

[mcusacdc.org/annual-meeting-2021](https://mcusacdc.org/annual-meeting-2021)

- Detailed schedule
- Order of worship and worship leaders
- Descriptions of the seminars
- Delegate information
- Registration form (Cost: \$10 for the day)

works with organizations and congregations to help them in renewal, change and achieving goals.

### Mennonite Women

A session specifically for Mennonite Women is set to begin at 4:45 pm on Zoom. The speaker is Melissa Florer-Bixler, who will talk about her newest book, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace*. All are welcome to attend this session; there is no cost, but registration in advance is required. 10

## Faith Mennonite Church marks local COVID deaths with public memorial

For two weeks, March 29 to April 11, a memorial display of flags stood on the lawn outside the Elkhart County courthouse in Goshen, Ind. Faith Mennonite Church in Goshen

set up this memorial to recognize the 428 local people who died from COVID-19 in the previous year. One white flag represented each of these, and blue flags on the perimeter represented loved ones outside the county who died.



The memorial display on the Elkhart County, Ind., courthouse lawn acknowledged the loss of local people to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cynthia Friesen Coyle, who proposed the memorial idea and secured approval for it, said in a news release, “This will be a visual reminder of the magnitude of loss here and around the world. We envision it as a space where individuals and small groups of people can safely come together, walk among the flags, remember their loved ones and reflect on the losses of others. Our hope is that the memorial will be one of many places of reflection and healing for our community in the coming months.” 10



## Antiracist training, meetings with police, finding ways to be welcoming

### First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, addresses racism and white privilege

by Theo Andreas and Jan Wiebe

This year Americans have been forced to stare in the face the reality that racism continues to profoundly shape life in our country. Many churches have responded with the recognition that the call to follow Jesus includes the call to dismantle systemic racism that perpetuates oppression and injustice. Out of this desire, Brent Schroeder initiated the formation of the Racial Justice Ministry at First Mennonite Church in July 2020 with a goal of undoing white supremacy and racism in the church, local, and national communities. The ministry is co-chaired by George and Anita Lehman, Jan Wiebe, and Theo Andreas. This article provides an update on some of the activities so far.

The ministry started by purchasing access to an anti-racism training made available by MCUSA and Widerstand Consulting. A group started meeting via Zoom to view and discuss things such as history of race and racism, white supremacy culture, and implicit bias. Thirteen church members completed the training, and others viewed parts of it and participated in online discussions.

In an attempt to find local and national issues to get involved with, the ministry went on to host bi-monthly Zoom conversations on the impact of racism on housing, policing and the justice system. In our meetings on housing, we've discussed zoning regulations, considering a village welcoming statement, and housing rehab, among other things. A housing group continues to meet to learn more about the topic and how we might be able to welcome more diversity in Bluffton. A guest speaker knowledgeable about bail reform spoke to our group about the problem of jailing people who are accused of minor offenses and awaiting trial. Cash bail systems discriminate solely on the ability to pay, and often have long-lasting impacts on trial outcomes, jobs, housing and families. Jan participates in a weekly Racial Justice Committee in Lima to explore bail reform locally. Four FMC members participated in an all-day bail reform workshop sponsored by the ACLU.

A conversation with Tyson Goings and Quincy Salcido from Bluffton University centered around experiences of Black students in our village. While some students feel comfortable shopping and walking around town, others feel more comfortable going to Lima where they feel more welcome. Learning about uneasiness with the Blue Lives Matters stickers on police vehicles led us to a Zoom meeting with Bluffton's Chief of Police, Ryan Burkholder, about department policies, practices and community relations.

Judy Steiner researched and compiled a list of racial justice-themed books for our church to purchase for the library. Most are books for children and youth, but will be appreciated by adults as well. Gary Wetherill donated children's books with Native American themes.

Other activities in worship services and in Sunday School groups have strengthened and complimented the work of this ministry. The high school youth, led by Carrie Mast, are discussing Drew Hart's book *Trouble I've Seen*. The classes led by Ray Person on Bible and Empire and by Perry Bush on History of Race and Ethnicity have added to the depth of understanding of these issues.

Going forward, we are hoping to find more concrete ways to act. Our next meeting is to learn about actions other churches in Central District Conference are taking, including an invitation to join Shalom Mennonite in Ann Arbor in a reparative act. We are grateful for participation from a wide variety of people in the church, and welcome others to join our work at any point. ☺

Central District Conference leaders have made a commitment to undoing racism and building intercultural competence, encouraging congregations and members to do this in their own contexts. We are sharing stories of these efforts in *Reporter* and *focus*. Please send stories of what your congregation is doing to [cdceditor@gmail.com](mailto:cdceditor@gmail.com).

— Mary E, Klassen, CDC editor

## Video tells the story of careful discernment and joy of LGBTQ inclusion

Telling First Mennonite Church's joy in being an inclusive congregation was the goal—a narrative contrary to what is often told in which “queer Christians are seen as the source of consternation and division in the church.”

That message from Michael Crosby, pastor of First Mennonite Church in Champaign-Urbana (FMC), shaped the vision for a video about the congregation's journey in embracing people who identify as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning). The video, “God's love is for everybody,” has recently been completed; see links at right to view it.

“The purpose of the video isn't to say what a great church we are because we're inclusive; it's to show the bumpy road of our experience, where we failed and how we eventually got there,” Dan Schreiber explained. Dan edited the video, working with interviews and other recordings done by Ella Lubinski, who grew up in the congregation and now works in the film industry.

Several people who were central to the congregation's 2009-2010 and 2014 discernment processes were selected for interviews, and an open invitation was extended for anyone who wanted to share. Key voices in the video are Kaye Massanari, Laura Brenneman-Fullwood (an ordained Central District Conference chaplain), Jo Brenneman-Fullwood, and current FMC pastors Deb Sutter and Michael. Many more people were important in the discernment, Dan explained. However, Kaye, Laura and Jo shared such compelling reflections that their words are the center of the film.

The result is a 30-minute video that has two purposes:

- Helping congregations interested in starting a discernment process for welcoming LGBTQ+ people into their congregations.
- Creating a historical record within FMC for new people coming into the church.

In the video, Michael makes a statement that reinforces the importance of the congregation's work. Through the discernment and public statements, Michael says, the congregation

has taken some of the onus off of the people who identify as LGBTQ+ and put it on the congregation. “We say this is the work we did as a congregation .... The congregation has decided what God is calling us to bless, and we want to do that despite any consequences.”

Dan concluded, “It's possible to tell such a story only when brave and articulate folks come forward to tell it. For that, we are all grateful.”

To view the video “God's love is for everybody” visit:

**fb.watch/57Stv317h-/**

or

**www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEXLJZalRc4**



*Laura and Jo Brenneman-Fullwood's 2019 marriage and Laura's ordination are significant parts of the FMC story included in “God's love is for everybody.”*



*In the video, Deb Sutter, one of the pastors of First Mennonite Church, explains some of the ways the congregation prepared to make its decision to be publicly welcoming of people who identify as LGBTQ+.*

# Doug's Mug: Fifth generation

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

If my mug were a crystal ball, or, better yet, a time machine, I would want to experience two points in time; circa 1890 and circa 2150. Why, you ask? Well, according to Exodus 20:4-6 and Exodus 34:6-7, there's this thing about the sins of the parents being visited upon their



children's children to the third and fourth generation. So, I figure if I could go back to 1890 (five generations), I might be able to observe the sins of my great-great grandparents that have led to some of the brokenness in our world today. And, if I

could go forward to 2150 (five generations) I might be able to glimpse the results of my own sin that my great-great grandchildren are still experiencing. And maybe, just maybe, I could change both history and the future!

Of course, this is fantasy. And I struggle with the idea of God punishing my prodigy for my own sins. And furthermore, what can just one person do to change history or the future? Yet, I also recognize how sin does have consequences that ripple out well beyond the time and space of the sinner. And I believe that individuals can and do affect change. I think Jesus calls this "bearing fruit." You might check out Matthew 25, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these ...," and John 15, "go and bear lasting fruit."

Is there hope beyond the third and fourth generations? Is there a pathway to a "fifth-generation"? Is it possible for God's people to get through generations of racism, militarism, economic inequity, spiritual/theological elitism and the offspring they bear? Can we reclaim the "original blessing" of God and purge the "original sin" that festers?

What would it be like to think "fifth-generation" as we reconvene for worship post-pandemic? What would it mean to think "fifth-generation" as we learn more about racial injustice and explore police reform? How would

casting an eye to the "fifth-generation" shape our faith-formation programs or transform our personal and congregational spending plans? How would acknowledging the sins of the past generations enable a more peaceful world for the "fifth-generation" to come?

"Fifth-generation" thinking also raises questions about repentance and forgiveness. Is it possible to repent for the sins of our parents' parents? Is it possible that our confessions will save our children's children? Can we confess something for which we believe we are not personally responsible? Can we risk personal change for the sake of a future generation that we can hardly imagine?

It is personally comforting to imagine ourselves more enlightened and more faithful than past or future generations. Yet I wonder what past and future generations would think of such confidence?

Is there room in our worship for lament and confession? Is there space in our hearts for humility and open-handedness, for transformation and generosity?

And what about that other promise from God? *Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.* (Exodus 34:6-7a) 10


## Journey Program

When God calls someone to leadership, a journey begins. Perhaps you are on that journey. Perhaps you are looking for mentors and companions along the way. Central District Conference invites you to join **Journey: A Missional Leadership Development Program**. This program is for lay leaders, pastors, church planters and other emerging leaders who are called without specific training for ministry or who are exploring a call to ministry. The early registration deadline for fall is July 13 with the final registration deadline on August 10. For information visit [www.ambsedu/journey](http://www.ambsedu/journey), or contact your pastor, or Doug Luginbill: [confmin@mcusacdc.org](mailto:confmin@mcusacdc.org) or 574-534-1485. 10




## Ordination



**Alison Casella Brookins** (center), pastor of Chicago (Ill.) Community Mennonite Church, was ordained on Sunday, April 4, 2021. With her was her spouse, Jake Casella Brookins (right); Celeste Groff, CMC associate pastor (left); and Erin Coleman Branchaud, a neighbor and pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In this photo, Celeste is presenting a gift to Alison—an issue of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*. 

## Bluffton University mural declares “Black Lives Matter”

An idea launched last fall came to fruition this spring on the Bluffton University campus. Tajah Upshaw, one of the student leaders of the Multicultural Student Organization, proposed the “Black Lives Matter” banner. She also worked with the Brave Spaces (LGBTQ+) group on campus to include other underrepresented voices.

Tyson Goings, director of multicultural student development, Bluffton President Jane Wood and the board of trustees all supported the idea. This spring students led a campus forum presentation about the banner, and when weather permitted, students were invited to paint the message on the sidewalk south of Founders Hall. 

## Financial report

### April 30, 2021

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Year-to-date contributed support . . . . .     | \$199,583 |
| Year-to-date plan . . . . .                    | \$192,011 |
| Difference between giving and plan             | +\$7,571  |
| Year-to-date expenses . . . . .                | \$168,313 |
| Year-to-date plan . . . . .                    | \$198,239 |
| Difference between expenses and plan . . . . . | -\$29,926 |

The Central District Conference financial picture continues to be strong after ten months of activity in the 2020–2021 financial year. Our year-to-date income is well above the targets set by our spending plan, and our expenses are below budget in every major budget category. The current surplus of income over expenses is over \$36,000.

We look forward to completing another positive financial year over the coming two months.

*Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer*



*This “Black Lives Matter” banner on the Bluffton University campus was designed by student Tajah Upshaw with input from other groups and an invitation to students to help with the painting.*

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