



Central
District
Conference

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

focus

June 2021

KNOWING CHRIST'S LOVE—ANSWERING GOD'S CALL

Love in the time of Corona—embracing our community center roots to meet the needs of neighbors in the midst of crisis

By Carrie Badertscher and David C. Cramer

Easter morning is the highlight of the year at Keller Park Church in South Bend, Indiana,* where the two of us are copastors. We begin with a brunch, then have an Easter egg hunt for the kids, and then end with a celebratory service in which we proclaim Jesus's victory over death: "He is risen!" "He is risen, indeed!"

Last year our Easter celebration looked different, but it was no less profound. On March 13, 2020, with news of the spread of the Coronavirus, we made what seemed like a difficult decision: to cancel Sunday services for the remainder of March. We assumed that these were temporary measures and that we would gather again for our beloved Easter service.

Then we received word that the South Bend Community Schools would be closing in light of shelter-in-place orders. We knew this meant that many of the kids in our neighborhood would go without adequate nutrition since many of them rely on school meals throughout the week. And so, on March 16, our congregation transformed our sanctuary into a food distribution center. We stacked chairs and put tables in their place. Boxes of cereal and bottles of Propel filled the front of the stage where music equipment once stood. Large

*Keller Park Church has requested membership in Central District Conference. Delegates will vote on this request at the Annual Meeting on June 26.

roasters and to-go containers covered the ministry table. Bright colored masks made by volunteers found their place in the sound booth. We assembled a small but dedicated team of food preparers and distributors from those who live in walking distance to the church. The rest of the congregation contributed by making donations to our "COVID-19 response" fund or by dropping off groceries at the parsonage.

All of this was new, and yet it felt familiar. If you had come to the corner of Sherman and Bryan in the Keller Park neighborhood back in the 1950s, you would have found Barkley's grocery store, where you could get groceries on your way home from work at the Studebaker automobile plant. After Studebaker closed in 1963, the grocery store became unsustainable, and in 1968 the building was bought by a nearby church, who turned it into



Keller Park Church transformed the sanctuary into a food distribution center at the beginning of COVID-19 shutdowns.

the Christian Community Center—a place where neighborhood youth could get off the street, get a snack, and play slot cars or have a supervised boxing match. Some of our elderly congregants still tell stories of these early days.

Eventually those who oversaw the center began meeting on Sunday mornings, and the building was renamed Agape Missionary Church, after the New Testament word for self-sacrificial love. Congregants viewed the church as a place where people love one another and their neighbors, caring for both spiritual and physical needs. Eventually they changed the name to Keller Park Church, yet the mission remained constant: to seek the peace of our neighborhood by sharing God's love with our neighbors.

In January 2020, the only grocery store within walking distance of the church closed, creating a three-mile-wide food desert with Keller Park at the epicenter. In response, the church increased the output of our food pantry in partnership with the Northern Indiana Food Bank. For years we had been giving out food boxes to neighbors who stopped by on Tuesday afternoons during office hours. But in January 2020, a group of young mothers in the church decided to begin meeting during food pantry hours to provide a hot meal for neighbors in need.

So by the time we announced our food distribution ministry to the congregation, they were already mobilized and well-prepared to spring into action. Over the past year, we served thousands of hot meals and food boxes on Wednesday nights and Saturday and Sunday mornings. Now we continue to serve every Saturday morning. Each family who comes receives a hot meal to-go and additional food items, such as meat, bread, eggs, milk, cereal, and canned goods. We also continue our Tuesday food pantry, which gives out another couple dozen food boxes per week.

While the stated purpose of the food distribution ministry is to provide a stable food source for our neighbors, it has grown to be so much more. We have heard the giggles of a child whose mama came to the church to pick up Easter pancakes and also received a bag of empty plastic eggs and a bag of candy for an at-home Easter egg hunt. We have heard the lament of neighbors as they come to the church to share that a family member contracted the virus or passed away. We have celebrated with

neighbors who can finally reunite with their family. We received a letter from a family who had been laid off from their jobs and were coming to receive food. The letter, decorated with a springtime landscape by the family's six-year-old daughter, read in part, "Not only is the food delicious; it is also filled with so much hope and love."

Last year on Easter morning, an elderly woman arrived at the church at the end of our serving time. She said that she was homeless and had been living out of her car. She had made a wrong turn and ended up in front of the church where she saw the sign for a free meal. More than free food, she asked if she could receive prayer. Across the threshold of the front doors of the church, we prayed for her and then passed her a warm breakfast and a box overflowing with food.

We then went to the stage, started the livestream on a smartphone, and—surrounded by boxes of food—declared into the camera: "He is risen!" To which our congregants replied from their homes, "He is risen, indeed!"

Carrie Badertscher is community pastor and David C. Cramer is teaching pastor at Keller Park Church in South Bend, Indiana. A previous version of this article appeared at the Patheos blog Anabaptist Revisions.

Keller Park Church

Location: urban South Bend, traditional homeland of Pokagon Potawatomi

Mission: Seeking the peace of our neighborhood by sharing God's love with our neighbors.

Vision: To become a church that follows Jesus, the prince of peace, and embodies God's peaceable kingdom in the Keller Park neighborhood, the city of South Bend, and beyond.

Baptized members: 50

Total congregants: ~125

Children under 18: ~50

Racial makeup: ~85% white, ~15% non-white (Black, Latinx, Asian-American)

Annual budget: \$85K

focus is published by the Central District Conference, Mennonite Church USA. To be added to the email subscription list, contact the editor, Mary E. Klassen, at cdceditor@gmail.com.

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