

Tending Transformation

New and emerging communities of faith

by Karla Minter, chairperson, CDC Missional Church Committee

How does a new community of faith or congregation come into being? I have found that this question sometimes raises anxiety. Rather than allowing this anxiety to take hold, I invite you to begin answering this question by reflecting on the congregation or community of faith that is most familiar to you. Every congregation was once a new or emerging congregation. These stories may be recorded in minutes, congregational histories or through stories handed down from person to person. Consider exploring your congregation's beginnings by asking the following questions:

What is the origin story of your congregation?

Who were the people with the vision to begin something new?

What did they hope for?

Again, we ask, how does a new community of faith or congregation come into being? The scenarios are as diverse as the stories you have just uncovered about existing congregations' beginnings. No single strategy or prescribed formula could have birthed the breadth of 47 worshipping communities and congregations that Central District Conference (CDC) currently comprises. Of these 47 CDC congregations, nine congregations have joined in the past five years. An additional eight new and emerging communities of faith are in conversation with CDC and are in various stages of creating what does not yet exist. This

is exciting! These new origin stories, the many people with vision to begin something new and what they hope for build on the past and dare to shape the future.

CDC leadership, including Missional Church Committee, are committed to tending the transformation of these new and emerging communities of faith. Tending the emergence of what does not yet exist can be compared to the patient process of planting seeds or mixing

yeast with flour. The Gospels record Jesus' parables pointing to the sometimes hidden, often precarious, surprising and remarkable growth describing the kin(g)-dom of heaven as contrasted to the kingdoms of earth.

"The kin(g)dom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when

it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

The kin(g)dom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Matthew 13:31-33.

All essential elements are brought together under the right conditions—then we wait. For remarkable growth to occur, one needs the patience of waiting, persistence over the long run, and the power to proceed when the time is right. ©

The Gospels record Jesus' parables pointing to the sometimes hidden, often precarious, surprising and remarkable growth describing the kin(g)dom of heaven

Emerging faith communities help my faith emerge


by Tim Stair, member of CDC Missional Church Committee

Relating to emerging faith communities through the Missional Church Committee helps my own faith emerge in new ways.

They challenge me to think about how to be church in new ways. The Beloved Community in Charlotte, North Carolina finds its times of worship growing out of the work many of them do in their community. This is a different way of coming to church than most of us have experienced.

Emerging communities of faith help me identify important issues of faith and new resources for engaging those issues. For example these communities are often

addressing issues of racism and patriarchy from their outset as part of their understanding of their structures and discipleship. They've made me aware of new resources in those areas.

Emerging communities of faith call me to greater trust and faith in the work of God's Spirit. The number of communities that are emerging and the variety of ways in which they emerge tell me the Holy Spirit is still at work. Creating and sustaining any of our faith communities is hard work. The fact that these folks are willing to trust God and undertake these efforts with both faith and humility deepens my faith and gives me hope. 

Sacred Listening

by James Rissler, conference president

Throughout 2022, Central District Conference will engage in a "Sacred Listening" process. Volunteers will visit each of CDC's 47 congregations to engage them in conversation around a set of Appreciative Inquiry questions.

Appreciative Inquiry is a process focused on asking about what is positive or life-giving within communities. Often, simply engaging in this positive reflection brings benefits as we notice and desire to increase what we value. Appreciative Inquiry is especially helpful when we seek to intentionally learn from what is shared in order to dream about and plan for the future.

Last spring, Doug Luginbill, Emma Hartman, and our Board of Directors spent some time reflecting on the ways in which CDC has changed over the past few years.

- We have welcomed nine new congregations into CDC over the past five years.
- Our congregations have increasingly

affirmed the full participation of LGBTQ persons in membership, marriage and ministry, while as a conference, we continue to recognize and appreciate the diversity of theological understandings among our congregations.

- A number of potential emerging communities of faith have expressed interest in CDC, and we are exploring how best to nurture them. (See the article on hiring new staff on p. 4.)
- We have all learned new ways to relate across distance during the pandemic, and we all continue to discern what to carry forward into whatever our "new normal" will be.

With all of these changes, our Board of Directors is planning an Appreciative Inquiry process we have named "Sacred Listening." In 2022, volunteers will meet with each of our CDC congregations, using a set of Appreciative Inquiry questions

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We want to hear how God's Spirit is moving throughout our congregations and conference, as we wonder how to tend the transformations we see beginning.

Sacred Listening (continued)

as the basis for our conversations. We want to hear how God's Spirit is moving throughout our congregations and conference, as we wonder how to tend the transformations we see beginning. We last did something like this about 15 years ago.

Our Board of Directors is working with Jewel Gingerich Longenecker and David Cramer from AMBS in planning this process. Jewel and David shared about Appreciative Inquiry with the broader Leadership Council at our most recent meeting on Oct. 30. Look for a list of the questions that we will use with each congregation in December's *focus*. Our intent is that they will open space to explore what is life-giving in our congregations.

We are seeking a group of 16-24 volunteers to visit our congregations. These volunteers will serve in one of three roles:

- Facilitator - asking questions and lightly guiding the sharing and conversation that results
- Notetaker - carefully capturing the conversation so that stories and themes can be shared with leadership and throughout the conference
- Sacred Listener - listening prayerfully throughout the conversation, and summing up what emerged most saliently

The Core Processes of Appreciative Inquiry

Bernard J Mohr & Jane Magruder Watkins

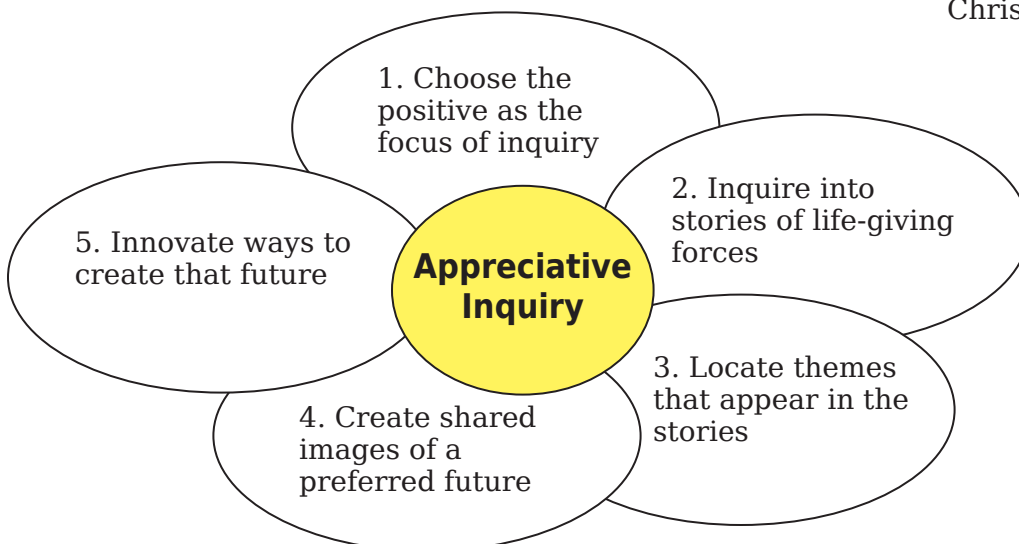


Chart reproduced from a slide in the presentation on Appreciative Inquiry at the fall CDC Leadership Council meeting.

If you feel that you have gifts for one or more of these roles, please let Doug, Emma, or James Rissler know.

We invite congregations to look ahead to 2022 and to choose one or two times when you could host a Sacred Listening visit. Emma will coordinate these visits, so please let her know the dates you choose. Please allow 90 minutes for this conversation, and invite broad participation from your congregation.

As we begin these visits, we will also explore ways to share what we are hearing with one another, with the permission of those who have shared their stories and reflections. Stories will make their way into our publications, our mid-year gatherings, and our annual meeting, and we will likely add a tab on the CDC website where notes or summaries can be read.

As we near the end of 2022, David Cramer will help CDC leadership to synthesize what we have heard, and to begin to draw out themes that have emerged. The Sacred Listening that takes place in 2022 is only the beginning of this Appreciative Inquiry process. As we locate themes in what is shared, we will imagine together what we hope for the future, and then explore how to help to create it.

As leaders within our conference, we get to see many of the ways in which God's Spirit gives life and energy to our congregations. We want to hear more. We want to share what we hear with one another. And then we want to dream together with God about how we might continue to grow in service to Christ's love. ☺

New hiring

Supporting conference congregations and new and emerging communities of faith

by James Rissler, conference president

The Board of Directors plans to hire additional conference minister staff in 2022 to work alongside Doug Luginbill. This decision is based on a desire to resource potential emerging communities of faith well, and a recognition that our conference size strains a single Conference Minister.

Over the past year, we have had conversations with eight persons or communities exploring becoming a new community of faith. Many of these are at an initial dreaming stage. The most developed is Beloved Community Charlotte, which has a pastor, Helms Jarrell, and a core group that worshiped remotely with Raleigh Mennonite Church during the pandemic and is now meeting together regularly for service and worship in Charlotte, North Carolina.

We see God's Spirit moving in our conference, continuing to transform us as new congregations take root among us. We want to be sure that we are in a position to responsively and flexibly tend the transformations the Spirit is leading. CDC's Missional Church Committee has been responding to emerging communities of faith and has done very good work over the past years anticipating how they might do so. But none of us expected so many conversations to begin at once, and they and the Board recognize that it is hard for the volunteer Missional Church Committee to consistently walk with such a variety of potential groups.

Doug is an incredibly gifted Conference Minister, and those gifts include humility and self-awareness. He has not worked extensively with church plants or new communities of faith in the past, and while he is enjoying learning more about resourcing them, he and the Board are hopeful that we might hire someone with a different set of gifts and experiences who could serve these emerging communities of faith especially well.

The desire to resource emerging communities of faith well is the primary impetus for hiring additional staff, and we will look for

candidates with a skill set that serves this goal. But the Board has also been monitoring Doug's workload (and Lois Johns Kaufmann's before him) closely, wondering at what point our deep appreciation for the long hours he serves should include sharing those hours with additional staff. As we plan to engage a "Sacred Listening" Appreciative Inquiry process with all our congregations next year (see article on pp. 2-3) and as Doug tends to a larger number of pastoral openings than usual, this feels like the right time to hire someone who can share this work.

With these two primary rationale in mind, we plan to seek a person to provide up to .5 FTE. While CDC has run budget surpluses for the last several years, this will still require some additional giving. We invite congregations to consider whether they can increase their financial giving to CDC in order to help us have the staff to tend well emerging communities of faith as well as our established congregations. As we share stories of these communities, congregations might also explore partnering directly with an emerging community of faith, as Raleigh Mennonite Church is doing with Beloved Community Charlotte.

In addition to asking congregations to consider whether they can give to this effort, we are developing a fund outside of the annual spending plan to support emerging communities of faith, revitalizing congregations, and leadership and pastoral development that our Missional Church and Ministerial Committees will lead. Our Board of Directors believes that \$350,000 over four years will allow us to respond to these new opportunities and continue to grow in our ongoing mission to "Know Christ's Love ... and Answer God's Call" together.

God's Spirit is at work among us. We want to listen carefully to that Spirit, and gently tend the transformation that God's breath among us brings. The Board welcomes your feedback and questions as we take this step together. ☉

Doug's Mug: The shape of liquid

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

No matter what liquid is in my mug, its shape is defined by the mug.

Can the same be said of churches? I have impressed upon my memory a lesson from J. Denny Weaver's Christian theology course at Bluffton University where he drew on the



blackboard several different worship layouts of various faith traditions; cruciform, semicircular, and circular. His point was that structure shapes theology and theology shapes structure.

When we gather around tables for an MC USA special delegate session in

Kansas City on May 27-30, 2022, we will bring with us the faith structures that have shaped us. One of the "faith structures" that has shaped Anabaptists for nearly 500 years is the tendency to splinter and fracture into disparate groups when disagreements arise. I was reminded of this in a recent "Believe and Be Baptized" event led by Mennonite historian and Mennonite World Conference leader, John Roth. In summarizing some of the challenges we have experienced regarding baptism, John noted that we Mennonites "committed ourselves to seeing the unity of the body of Christ as integral to our sense of church and mission." However, I think our history would tell us that our heavy emphasis on "unity" has paved the way to our fracture.

What if unity was not so much something to be achieved but rather recognized as a gift received from Christ nearly 2000 years ago? Or, what if unity is found not in resolutions and polity documents but rather in the belief that all humans carry within themselves the image of Creator God as the poet of Genesis 1 so beautifully proclaims?

At the "Believe and Be Baptized" event, John Roth (and other Mennonites who have been in conversation with Catholics and Lutherans

about baptism for several years) extended an invitation to us all. "We call for collective and individual soul searching as to why it has been so difficult for us to hold together the quest for purity and the quest for unity, among ourselves and with other churches."

What if that invitation to contemplate the tensions between these two spiritual streams—purity and unity—were to be constantly before us as we discern the resolutions we are invited to engage prior to the special delegate session in May 2022? See resolutions at www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/delegate-resources-special-session-may-2022/

These resolutions invite us to ask hard questions about how we imagine being a diverse church together. These resolutions challenge us to own our complicity in injustices through the systems of which we are a part, including within the church itself. These resolutions invite us to tend transformation within ourselves, our congregations, and our church structures.

Our structures shape our theology and our theology shapes our structures. May our mutual recognition of our brokenness as well as our redemption in Christ shape our conversations together. These conversations themselves will shape us. ☮

Resources for pastors and congregations


Visit www.mcusacdc.org, the CDC website, for a wide variety of resources, including materials for:

- pastor and congregational evaluation
- study of racism and white privilege
- Reign of God and Clergy Development grants
- Healthy Boundaries training
- Ministry transitions
- Equipping church treasurers
- Worship and Christian formation

Call for artists

Central District Conference is extending an invitation to artists to apply to create a work of art representing the new two-year theme of Tending Transformation. We will choose four artists from among the applicants. Please apply by sending your name and contact info (mailing address, email address and phone) to office@mcusacdc.org by December 31, 2021. We will let you know if your application has been accepted no later than January 15. Deadline to complete the piece will be May 15.


The art should interpret the theme, “Tending Transformation,” and be at least 24x36 inches. Artists may use any media. A stipend of \$250 is available for creating the piece. After the annual meeting, the pieces will rotate among congregations and then will be sold in a silent auction as a fundraiser at the 2023 Annual Meeting.

For additional details, visit the conference Facebook page: www.facebook.com/centraldistrictconference 

Licensing



J. Tyler Klassen

Susannah Larry was licensed toward ordination at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind., on Sunday, November 14. Susannah is associate professor of biblical studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and she preaches regularly at Hively and in other churches. Doug Luginbill, conference minister (left), led the licensing. With Susannah are Will Larry, her spouse, and their three daughters, Gabby with Susannah, Carissa with Will, and Debbie (not pictured). 

Financial report October 31, 2021

Year-to-date contributed support	\$74,631
Year-to-date plan	\$79,500
Difference between giving and plan	- \$4,869
Year-to-date expenses	\$72,110
Year-to-date plan	\$82,350
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$10,240

After the initial trimester of the 2021-22 financial year, the Central District Conference financial report reflects good overall health, with a net income over expenses of \$6,000. Congregational contributions are above budget but somewhat below last year’s results to this date. Expenses are also comfortably low, but closer to the spending plan than last year. It appears that the conference is slowly returning to a more typical pre-pandemic income and expenditure pattern.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

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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
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org