

Tending Transformation

Congregational stories describe tending and attending

Four Central District Conference congregations shared stories during the mid-year gatherings by Zoom, February 5 and March 5. Though very different, these stories all illustrated the CDC two-year theme, Tending Transformation. These congregations are listening to God's call for transformation and are responding to what they experience in their contexts.

Shalom Community Church Ann Arbor, Michigan

Trevor Bechtel

Shalom Community Church is in one of the most segregated counties in the country, Trevor Bechtel, pastor, noted, with very wealthy people and pockets of real poverty. An emphasis of the congregation is restorative justice, and they are one of the founding congregations of the Friends of Restorative Justice of Washtenaw County. For MC USA, they

are one of the sponsoring congregations of the justice resolution to be addressed at the special delegate session in May.

Until recently, they were met with indifference and resistance when they tried to implement restorative justice practices. But a year ago, a new prosecutor brought a commitment to making restorative justice part of the way his office works.

Trevor explained, "The Friends of Restorative Justice all of a sudden has opportunities to provide capacity for these new restorative



Trevor Bechtel is a pastor of Shalom Community Church. He also is Adjunct Lecturer and Poverty Solutions Student Engagement Coordinator at the University of Michigan.

Congregational stories (continued)

justice measures.” He added, “We are excited about the opportunity to create one of the first sets of restorative metrics to track how these cases move through systems in the county.”

A second emphasis in the congregation is doing work to repair injustices to people of color. Following the murder of George Floyd, the congregation wanted to do more than study and discuss books. However, the work of reparations “is a long work,” Trevor acknowledged, because it involves listening to and learning to know others.

Even with that acknowledgement, the congregation wanted to do something more than talking. So a study group proposed that they create a fund and make it available to meet needs in the community. The emphasis, however, would be to give complete control of that fund to others who would decide where it would go. John Powell, a member of the congregation who is African-American, agreed to form a committee that would make these decisions. The fund-raising happened in 2021 and the fund has reached almost \$100,000; disbursements will happen this year.

Trevor concluded, “We have worked at collecting this money and giving up control of

it. Now the question is: what do we do next? There’s something more we need to be doing, but how do we continue to do that something more? How do we do that as congregations of mostly white people?”

Americus Mennonite Fellowship

Americus, Georgia

Brian Kilheffer

We are a peace church in the deep south in the Bible belt, Brian Kilheffer, congregational leader and deacon, said. “We often hear the call of God for transformation in the cry of injustice of our neighbors, of the refugee or the stranger.”

Recently that cry has come from undocumented families in their community. “It was one of those calls that many of us didn’t see coming,” Brian said. “We got to know families as we worked with children in our tutoring program. It is a call that comes and it can be overwhelming. We are not always equipped for it. We make mistakes. But we try to walk alongside them.”

The largest for-profit detention center (Stewart Detention Center) was built just 45

minutes away. The congregation provides hospitality, visits detainees and provides packets of essentials as people are deported. The pandemic has made much of this more difficult.

“It’s been a journey—not something we planned,” Brian said. “But we heard a cry which we thought was God’s call.”

Brian also noted that members of nearby Atlanta Mennonite Church (former Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship and Berea Mennonite Church) also have been deeply involved in the ministry to undocumented immigrants.



Brian Kilheffer is Leader/Deacon of Americus Mennonite Fellowship.

Congregational stories (continued)

Raleigh Mennonite Church Raleigh, North Carolina

Melissa Florer-Bixler

It's fair to say that we have been living through an apocalyptic season—in the truest sense of the word,” Melissa Florer Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church, said in the March 5 mid-year gathering. “This has been a season when we have been unveiling who we are, when all the busyness and clutter of our lives are cleared away.

Tending transformation in her congregation, Melissa reported, takes the form of simple acts—things that make life easier for someone, visits to a new baby, visits to someone new to the church and community, a cucumber ready for someone to take home. Melissa's own family received the benefit of the tending and attending when they recently experienced several injuries. Soon her refrigerator was full of meals and her inbox was full of offers to help.

She said she remembered a story in the Bible about paying attention: Hagar had been cast out by Sarah into the wilderness and she wondered if her baby would survive.

Melissa reminded listeners, “As she weeps, God sends a messenger, and the messenger offers a blessing to Hagar. In response, the woman gives a name to God. She says, ‘This is the God who sees me.’”

“In this apocalyptic season, I am so grateful for the witness of Raleigh Mennonite, a church who in this season has seen one another, who follows after the God who sees us.”

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship Goshen, Indiana

Karla Minter

Karla Minter described how Open Table Fellowship in Goshen, Ind., attends to the

Spirit each week as they “make the sermon together.”

This small group meets on Sunday mornings in a house (owned by Faith Mennonite Church). First, they share bread together—more often baked oatmeal—and then they pray the Scriptures together. Using the practice of Lectio Divina in community, they read a Scripture text, reflect on it in silence, reread it, reflect in more silence, read it again and share what has captured their attention and how it connects with their lives.

“We realized this is very Anabaptist, the sense of priesthood of all believers, the sense of interpreting the Scriptures together,”

Karla noted. “We have found this to be very life-giving and sustaining.”

“Over time, we hear how people are tending to the Scripture and the Spirit and their lives and how they are responding out of that—it's formative, it's encouraging and it's how we



Melissa Florer-Bixler is pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church.



Karla Minter is a member of Open Table Mennonite Fellowship.

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Congregational stories (continued)

Open Table (continued)

make the sermon together.”

It is a practice that works well by Zoom, Karla added. Also, it works well with a small group and it works well when there is no pastor preparing a traditional sermon.

Whatever is happening in the lives of the group members comes into making the sermon together, and they trust that they go out into the world in a transformed way because of their deep listening and sharing.

“There was a time when we asked, ‘Is this enough? Are we enough? Did we spend enough time preparing?’” Karla admitted at the beginning of her sharing. When she concluded, she said, “We have found it is enough and it is the way Open Table is tending the transformation of our lives.”

Financial report February 28, 2022

Year-to-date contributed support	\$172,375
Year-to-date plan	\$164,700
Difference between giving and plan	\$7,675
Year-to-date expenses	\$142,937
Year-to-date plan	\$164,700
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$21,763

Eight months into the fiscal year, Central District Conference continues to show good financial health, thanks to the support of member congregations and the oversight of expenditures by Conference staff. To end February, income exceeds expenditures by nearly \$30,000. Thirty-eight of our affiliated congregations have made contributions to CDC during the current financial year.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

Author encourages intergenerational exploration of Anabaptist faith

Lisa Weaver, co-author of *Let the children come to me: Nurturing Anabaptist faith in families*, introduced the book in the CDC mid-year Zoom meetings and suggested multiple ways to use it.

Lisa and Elizabeth Miller, the author team, and Judith Rempel Smucker, designer, created the book for use in intergenerational settings. Each of 12 units focuses on a practice or concept in Anabaptist faith. Each unit includes two stories, one from Anabaptist history and one from the current global community of Anabaptists. Also included are ideas for projects that tie in with the theme.

Madison (Wisc.) Mennonite Church, where Lisa is a member, is using the book in monthly Saturday sessions through the year. Lisa noted it also may be used in family settings, perhaps especially when grandparents are visiting. Or it can be used in congregational retreats, small groups, children’s time in worship or Sunday school classes.

Camp Friedenswald is shaping their April 8-9 Grand Camp around this book, inviting grandparents (or grand-friends) and grandchildren to come for that spring weekend. (friedenswald.org/retreats)

The book was published by Cascadia Publishing House in 2019 and is available from online booksellers.



Scenes from Madison Mennonite’s exploration of a unit in *Let the Children Come to Me* by Lisa Weaver and Elizabeth Miller.

Doug's Mug: Tea leaves

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

The phrase, “reading the tea leaves” suggests that one is looking for guidance, perhaps answers, or even a prediction of future events. We make hundreds of decisions every day: what to wear, what to eat, what project to work on, how to occupy our free time, and so forth.



Most of the time these decisions are quick and easy. But there are other decisions that linger, hang out in the backs of our minds, interrupt our sleep, or sit in the pit of our stomach like the last swallow of tepid tea at the bottom of our mugs. How shall we decide?

In the church we like to call the decision-making process “discernment.” Discernment suggests intentionality, open discussion, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the priesthood of all believers sharing their voices together. “Worshipful work” was a popular churchy phrase in the 1990s which suggested that our worship and work are one. That idea still resonates with me. The work of the church is done in the spirit of worship, recognizing God’s presence. Ultimately, we hope that our discernment leads to decisions that glorify God.

Because many of us are conflict averse, we prefer to avoid talking about the hard stuff. When we know our perspective is very different from someone else in the congregation whom we love, we’d rather not stir the pot.

Jesus seems to offer multiple responses to conflict. He had harsh words of religious leaders and sometimes called them names (whitewashed tombs and hypocrites). He sometimes refused to intervene in conflicts. He said he came to bring peace, praying that his disciples would be “one.” He said he came to bring a sword, resulting in father against son, mother against daughter, etc. He headed toward Jerusalem, even as he knew the conflict

that awaited him. He went to quiet places to pray when he felt overwhelmed.

Perhaps it is inevitable that discernment, no matter how well it is done, will encounter conflict and disagreement. Making a decision ultimately requires setting some other options aside. That’s what it means to “decide.” The decisions we make do have consequences. We can predict what some of the consequences will be, but we can’t predict every consequence. No matter how certain we are about something, a humble and open spirit remains vital.

Healthy discernment in the church invites the following:

1. A prayerful spirit which recognizes the constant presence of the Holy Spirit.
2. A spirit of curiosity and openness that seeks greater understanding.
3. Ensure an environment of trust and safety so that various perspectives can be heard, and questions can be asked.
4. Clarify the issue or question being discerned and stay on topic.
5. Share accurate and researched information about the topic.
6. Tell stories that make real the issue being discerned. Abstractions go only so far.
7. Biblical reflection and an awareness of how one’s faith tradition has engaged the topic.
8. A respectful sharing of ideas, perspectives, beliefs, and stories. Full engagement.
9. Take the time needed to honor both the process and the people affected by the topic.
10. Live into the decision(s) and make adjustments along the way.

I offer several resources for further guidance and study, which you can find on the next page.

I pray that the tea leaves in your mug invite a big gulp of healthy discernment. ☕

Licensing



Carrie Badertscher (left) and David Cramer (center), pastors of Keller Park Church in South Bend, Ind., were licensed toward ordination on February 21. Doug Luginbill, conference minister (right) led the licensing portion of the worship service.

Ordination



Paul Meyer Reimer

Anna Yoder Schlabach was ordained on Sunday, March 6, at Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., where she is a member of the pastoral team. With her above are Doug Luginbill (left), conference minister; Brian Yoder Schlabach, her spouse; and Sophie and Caleb, Anna's and Brian's children.


Resources for discernment in the church

(See Doug's Mug, page 5)

The Colossian Way—A process for positive engagement during congregational conflict. (colossianforum.org/the-colossian-way-experience/)

Seeking God's Will Together—A resource developed by Central Plains Mennonite Conference. (www.amazon.com/Seeking-Gods-Will-Together-Discernment/dp/1500219959)

In Tune with God: The Art of Congregational Discernment—A book by Sally Weaver Glick. (www.amazon.com/Sally-Weaver-Glick-Tune-Congregational/dp/B00SB2JWBC)

Peaceful Practices, A Guide to healthy communication in conflict—A resource from Mennonite Central Committee. (mcc.org/peaceful-practices) 



2022 Annual Meeting

June 23-25
College Mennonite Church
Goshen, Indiana

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