

Congregations address accessibility

At the special delegate session of Mennonite Church USA in May, delegates passed a resolution addressing accessibility in our congregations, noting many different aspects of accessibility. Here, several Central District Conference congregations report how they are paying attention to these issues.

Read the Mennonite Church USA Accessibility Resolution: shorturl.at/IR189

Grace Mennonite Church, Pandora, Ohio

by Matthew Yoder

Long before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 26, 1990, decades before the earliest draft of the ADA was introduced in Congress in 1988, Grace Mennonite Church was making church accessible to people with disabilities.

In the mid-20th century, the first hearing assistance system was installed in the 50-year-old sanctuary. This required drilling holes in the wood floor and running wires along the pews to junction boxes equipped with plug-in headset jacks. Around this time, ages before our first Zoom worship service, the local phone company helped run wires from the church building to several local residences so that elderly and homebound members could listen to Sunday morning worship services from home.

Grace continues to work hard to update our accessibility. In December 1981, an elevator was installed at the junction of the original sanctuary (circa 1905) and the newer education wing (completed in 1963). The elevator currently provides access to our main-floor sanctuary, basement fellowship hall, high school Sunday school classroom, and accessible bathrooms. During a sanctuary renovation in 2011, the wired hearing assistance system was replaced with a wireless system.

Despite our efforts to welcome all who wish to worship with us, we still face challenges. The education wing is separated from the church foyer by two steps on the main floor, and from

the fellowship hall on the lower floor. The ground-level entry to our education wing is on a split level with the main and lower floors. There is currently no access to our education wing for those who have mobility challenges.

When we explored the possibility of installing a ramp or chair lift, we discovered that our current spaces do not allow for an ADA compliant ramp. Chair lifts would require significant and costly renovations. We continue to work at this challenge, realizing that all of our Sunday school classes are currently inaccessible to anyone who cannot traverse stairs. While

temporary relocations are effective, these are not long-term solutions. We continue to weigh the cost of longer-term solutions against the cost of not being able to welcome those with disabilities into our education spaces.



At Grace, two steps separate the education wing and the church foyer—a continuing challenge for accessibility.

Congregations address accessibility (continued)

In the midst of these struggles we here at Grace give thanks that we can offer worship and fellowship spaces that are accessible to all. We celebrate the passage of the accessibility resolution by the MC USA delegate assembly at the special delegate session in May. We encourage all Central District Conference churches to continue taking what measures you can to make your sacred spaces accessible to all people so that the image of God may be complete among us.

Milwaukee (Wisc.) Mennonite Church

by Rachel Stolpe

What does it look like to follow the Accessibility Resolution when you rent your worship space? At Milwaukee Mennonite, we have been meeting at Martin Luther, Lutheran Church (MLLC) since 2006. Over the past 15 years we have discussed changing locations and have even looked at other churches. We still end up staying at MLLC. One main reason is that it is a fairly new and modern building and very accessible. There are large bathrooms on each level, easy entry from the lower level and the upper level and an elevator. There are no pews; all the chairs are movable. That makes it much easier for people with limited mobility to sit comfortably.

A few years ago we worked with our host church to help buy hearing aids that connect to the PA system. The building has a “cry room” where a parent can sit, see the service and hear through speakers. Our host church is also easily accessed from the freeway system, has accessible parking lots and plenty of spaces for Sunday school and meetings.

There are several other things we have done to make MMC more accessible. We love to eat together, but several members have dietary issues. Some of these are continual, some are while pregnant, some are while nursing, so they are always changing. When we have a meal together, we have labels for each item. These list the name of the dish and the family who brought it. They also have a check list for dairy, gluten, vegetarian, and other. That way, we all


know what is in each dish. We also know whom to ask if we have questions. Our communion bread is always gluten- and dairy-free. Someone from the congregation usually makes it, so we know exactly what is in it.

Having to switch to Zoom worship during Covid was a learning process in a few ways. We learned that even when we can meet in person per Covid rules, there are reasons someone may still not be able to attend church in person— a physical or mental illness of someone or a family member might keep someone away. Therefore, we have kept the live stream going. Having the option to still be a part of the congregation is very important.

We have met in a few ways for Christian education and congregational meetings. We have been totally on Zoom and also have met in person with people attending on Zoom. When the adults meet, they always meet where a microphone can be used to help everyone hear better. When we meet in a hybrid format, there is someone monitoring the chat if someone on Zoom wants to share.

Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Assembly Mennonite Church has two systems to help people with hearing loss. The FM system, with headphones and receivers has been in place for some time. When their new worship space was built, they added a hearing loop system. This converts signals from a microphone into a digitized current and sends it through a wire loop in the floor. This creates a magnetic field that a hearing aid with a t-coil antenna can receive.

David Powell, a user of the new system, wrote, “It is as though the speaker, perhaps 40 feet from me, is sitting beside me, talking just to me. Much of the noise from people whispering near me, children playing, etc., is eliminated. Without effort I can accurately hear announcements, message, hymn numbers, sharing time, any speech that comes from our sound system. I need not use energy and attention to understand. It is a technological blessing!” 

Sunday School class measures accessibility

Can you open the door if you are in a wheelchair? Are there large-print bulletins? How long has the congregation had hearing-assist devices?

These were questions that the youth at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Ind.) asked last fall in their Sunday School class. The teacher, Kathee Kirchner, followed the suggestion in the Shine curriculum to have the class complete the accessibility questionnaire provided by Mennonite Disabilities Network.* She presented this as a way of thinking about how we care for other people. "I asked them to pretend they were someone with a disability. What obstacles would they find?"

Kathee noted that they were more invested in this than some other lessons. "They were

eager to jump into the wheelchair and to wear the dark glasses." She added, "I didn't use a blindfold with this group because there would have been broken bones."

Class members discovered that in worship at Hively, people with disabilities can do almost everything. But that's not true of other activities, primarily because the education wing is on two levels with steps up and down to each.

As the class talked about what they learned, Kathee remembers that they were aware that there are few people at Hively with physical disabilities—currently none for whom the steps are a barrier. But then someone said, "I wonder why," recognizing that when you accommodate for various needs, it attracts people to join you. ⑩

*Mennonite Disabilities Network Congregational Assessment Survey:
www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/Resources/Pages/Survey.aspx

Conference communications reviewed; new strategies considered

by James Rissler CDC president

This is the last edition of *Reporter* that Mary Klassen is editing. When she announced her retirement to the Board, we asked how we might tend transformation during this transition, and decided to think about our Central District Conference communications strategies more broadly.

This summer, Marathana Prothro, Assistant Professor of Communication at Bluffton University, conducted a communications audit on the Board's behalf. She met at the beginning and the end of this process with a communications task group that included myself, Emma Hartman, Rachel Stolpe, Hillary Watson, Brian Schlabach and Trevor Bechtel. Marathana's recommendations were based on her review of current CDC communications (*Reporter*, *focus*, website, annual meeting report book, weekly emails, etc.) and three focus group meetings she held with a mix of pastors, congregational administrators and lay people.

Key strengths identified included the high trust we have in CDC staff, and the extensive information available on the CDC website. Key recommendations included more storytelling

focused on particular objectives (for instance, CDC's mission statement) and shared across better integrated platforms, as well as redesigning the website to make it easier to quickly find desired information and to highlight stories we want to share.

CDC's Board engaged Marathana's report with committee chairs at our vision day in August and are continuing to discern whether and how we dedicate additional resources to our communications goals. Focus groups stressed a desire to hear stories from our sibling congregations about how they are living out God's call, and we especially want to find ways to share stories that we are hearing through our Sacred Listening process across the conference.

While we work toward hiring a new person for a revised role, we will not publish the *Reporter* and *focus* for the next few months. We will continue to share Doug's Mug, and communicate plans for communications as we make them.

Thank you again, Mary, for your excellent work as CDC editor over these past years! ⑩

Sitting next to people I respect and admire

Reflections by Mary E. Klassen, outgoing CDC editor

On a recent Sunday, at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church where I worship, our pastor, Tim Stair, began the sermon by asking us to call out reasons why we go to church.

One member said, “So I can sit next to people I respect and admire.” And I thought, “That’s it for me, too. Or at least it’s one reason.” My faith is strengthened when I worship with people whose examples shine brightly, even when they are humble about it.

That’s also the reason why I am grateful to have been the CDC editor for the last six years. As I sat in meetings—mid-year and annual gatherings as well as board meetings—I sat beside and talked with people who are living out their faith in amazing, committed ways. I heard stories of congregations who are responding to where God is at work in their communities. I prayed, heard challenging sermons, found new dimensions in the Bible texts and (to echo the Grinch) found my own heart growing a size or two larger.

I have been able to hear and then share the ways congregations are working at being faithful: reparations to address injustices, hosting and helping immigrants and people who are incarcerated, immersions in the experiences of other cultures and races, honoring and using the gifts of all, especially people who identify as LGBTQIA.

The work of editing the newsletters is primarily about words, but not entirely. Images

also tell stories. In my memory of Annual Meetings there will always be the views of stained glass windows in Milwaukee and Columbus, artwork displayed across the chancel area at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, the sparks of guns turning into garden tools at the Bluffton gathering, and computer screens filled with faces as we met by Zoom.

For me, one of the most precious moments of each Annual Meeting is the blessing we do as we commission conference leaders, the members of the Ministerial and Missional Church Committees and the executive board. Stretching out to connect with each other (virtually during COVID)—that’s the image that sums up CDC for me. Here we are, next to each other, strengthening our faith and supporting each other, and so also strengthening Christ’s church in the world.

Sounds are not something that printed newsletters can convey. But when I miss the kind of spiritual boost that comes from a CDC gathering, I will simply get out my voice recorder—one of the essential tools of my work—and listen again to “Kyrie eleison,” as we sang it at the Annual Meeting in 2018. Or I will remember “Holy Spirit, bless us with a yearning,” by Adam Tice and Katie Graber. That’s another reason I go to church—to sing. And it’s another reason why my work with CDC has been such a blessing.

Thank you, all. 🙏



This photo shows one of my favorite CDC moments—a commissioning prayer, this one in 2018 with Matthew Erdel, Michael Gehman, Jon Hilty, Doris Poole (at back), and Winifred Saner.

Doug's Mug: A mug full of ability

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

In 1990 when the Americans with Disabilities Act was became law, I was the new director of Camp Friedenswald. I was pleased with the newly added, sloped walkway to the chapel, which was funded by a generous donor. We were on our way to "accessibility!" While



private, non-profit institutions like Camp Friedenswald were not required to comply with this law, I wanted to find out what would be required if we did comply. A consultant, with the assistance of his wheelchair, greeted me one morning as we began our tour of the camp. We began in the

dining hall. He gave a tug on the door. "This door requires too much force to open." Then he crossed into the dining hall. "The threshold is too high." Thus began a sobering and humbling realization that we would have a lot of work to do and resources to acquire if we were to become fully accessible. And thus began a baby-step in understanding accessibility.

The MC USA Accessibility Resolution, affirmed by delegates in May, states its purpose as helping us "recognize and seek to remove the barriers to belonging in architecture, communications and attitudes that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in church life; and to bring wholeness to the Body of Christ as those barriers are removed, and all people are fully integrated into the community of faith." This is grander and more wholistic than my understanding of accessibility in 1990.

Our Central District Conference Mission Statement says that one of the ways we respond to God's persistent call is by "Promoting a Christ-like community of hospitality where all are welcome and where grace-filled relationships flourish, and patience and generosity are practiced."

Hospitality and accessibility seem to flow naturally together. Both hospitality and

accessibility invite awareness, paying attention, asking questions, expanding understanding, and investing financial, emotional, and wisdom resources. They also invite a shift toward recognizing and affirming abilities (the image of God) in all persons, rather than lamenting or sorrowing over disabilities.

My grandmother had claustrophobia. When her body no longer allowed her to climb the steps at church, even though there was an elevator, her emotional and physical disabilities made it almost impossible for her to worship with her faith community. She was grateful for pastoral visits, listened to cassette tapes of worship services and sang hymns at her piano.

As a faith community that embraces baptism upon confession of faith (adult/believers baptism) how do we affirm, bless and offer baptism to those who aren't able to articulate their faith? I have witnessed beautiful baptism services that focused on the abilities of those often identified as disabled.

How are our beloved potluck meals and communion services accessible to those who are able to enjoy most foods but not all foods?

Several CDC congregations provide quiet spaces for some who are disturbed by loud and sudden noises like clapping.

I confess that I sometimes feel like I don't know what is and isn't acceptable in worship or community gatherings any longer. I confess that dollar signs appear before my eyes when I imagine the construction projects required to attain greater accessibility. I'm still learning.

I am grateful for the Mennonite Church USA Accessibility Resolution Study Guide written by my colleague Joanne Gallardo. This resource will help us better understand the questions to ask and what to pay attention to as we seek to practice hospitality with accessibility in mind.

Whether we are talking about disability or accessibility, we are all called to celebrate the abilities which exist in each of us, all bearers of the image of God. I am especially appreciative of the abilities of Mary Klassen who is editing her last issue of *Reporter*! Mary, may you find much joy in the next season of life! ☺

Installation



Rebecca McDaniel

Tim Peebles began as interim pastor of Chicago Community Mennonite Church on July 1, and he was installed on July 11. He previously served as transitional pastor at CCMC and at Madison Mennonite Church. Pictured above from left to right: Tim Peebles (interim pastor), Linda Becker (church council co-chair), Patty Peebles (Tim's wife). Not pictured is church council co-chair April Lo.

Licensing



Paula Luginbill

Susannah Larry was licensed as part-time interim pastor of Keller Park Church, South Bend, on August 7. Susannah also is assistant professor of biblical studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.

Financial report

August 31, 2022

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| Year-to-date contributed support | \$36,254 |
| Year-to-date plan | \$46,396 |
| Difference between giving and plan | -\$10,142 |
| | |
| Year-to-date expenses | \$37,482 |
| Year-to-date plan | \$52,230 |
| Difference between expenses and plan | -\$14,748 |

After two months of activity, congregational support is about \$12,000 below spending plan needs, while expenditure is nearly \$15,000 below budget.

In addition to regular Conference spending plan income and expenditures, the Tending Transformation special campaign has received \$32,100 thus far this year. An additional \$52,000 was received during the 2021-2022 financial year, before the campaign was officially launched.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

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