

Central District Conference Connector

Stories and News from across the conference

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“It’s scary being part of a church that cares so much”

by Jonathan Larson

A lunch-hour listening session at Raleigh Mennonite Church produced many memorable phrases, but this one trailed me as I wandered home that Sunday afternoon and through the following days.

Was it a throwaway phrase, I wondered, a rhetorical flourish? Or was it rooted in some story, some earthy experience? Weeks later the prompting came from CDC: ‘Might there be a moment



from these listening sessions that invited deeper probing?’

So, in a rainy chill of late November I went to seek out Olivia Martin, source of this description of belonging to a community of Carolina anabaptists. As we cradled lattes at a formica tabletop, this forty-something film maker began to trace a life story: its meanders, rapids, and swirling currents, its eddies and backwaters.

That growing up story rings true for a generation of peers: a passing acquaintance with church, a parent coming out as gay, scattered family, limited emotional resources, occasional abuse and lingering feelings of disarray and shame. She found refuge in a world of art, theater and film where she met her partner and together, they left for the bright lights of California. ‘Turns out that LA is a hard place with a lot of dark corners’ she says, explaining how two years later they retreated to home turf in Raleigh, and in time welcomed two daughters.

‘I found Jesus in my early thirties,’ she says. ‘Didn’t seem to need him before.’ The following years in the company of evangelical pastors she filled in some of the blanks in her Bible literacy. Her elder daughter came home from Sunday School one week chattering about Moses’ sister, Miriam. ‘Moses didn’t have a sister,’ countered a dubious Olivia, later humbled to learn she had missed some turns in the story.

However fervent the gospel preaching and caring, there dawned for Olivia the awareness

Doug's Mug: Formation and Transformation

By Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister



For the last eighteen months, our Central District theme has been *Tending Transformation*. The theme will also guide our Annual Meeting scheduled for June 22-24 in Goshen, IN. This theme came to mind a few weeks ago when I was reading the lectionary passage from Matthew 4:18-22. That's the story where Jesus calls his first four disciples: Peter, Andrew, James and John. All of them were fishermen and each of them, in response to Jesus' invitation, immediately left their jobs and followed Jesus.

I've always been blown away by this radical act of discipleship. In the case of the sons of Zebedee, they also left their father. How cold-hearted and wholly irresponsible of them! How could they up and leave like that? What transformation suddenly overwhelmed them?

What I had always assumed was that from that point on they were always with Jesus until he died. Upon reflection, maybe they didn't spend all their time with Jesus. Maybe the time they spent with Jesus was more like "night school," or week-long retreats, or "short courses" spread out over a semester. Whether it was 36 months of non-stop, intensive discipleship training or occasional engagements of days, weeks or months, it is clear that time spent with Jesus was transformative. The disciples' change in schedule and habit, spending time with Jesus, led to being transformed and becoming more like Jesus.

How does transformation in Christ or faith formation happen for you or within your congregation?

On January 20, several faith formation leaders representing 10 CDC congregations met via Zoom to reflect on how faith formation is happening in their congregations. There was a bit of lamentation that the old ways of Sunday School seemed to not be working. The Covid pandemic didn't help in eroding the old ways. But most of the time was spent sharing creative and interesting ideas that were being tried. Several talked about intergenerational or "child-accessible" activities that were done in family groups. Some talked about Advent activity kits that could be done at home around the table. There was a leaning toward "invitational faith formation" that asks "I wonder" questions and uses storytelling as primary methods of sharing faith. Pandemic restrictions invited more experimentation with outdoor faith formation events.

The institution of "Sunday School" has only been around for about 150 years. I'm not ready to give up Sunday School, but I am excited to learn about new approaches and new opportunities to engage with scripture, creation, and people of different ages and stages of faith.

The next conversation among faith formation leaders is scheduled for April 28 from 11:30-12:30 eastern time via Zoom. This is open to lay leaders as well as pastors.

Another faith formation practice that has grown over the past 25 years or so is spiritual direction. These one-to-one conversations with trained people of faith provide opportunities to recognize and reflect on how God is showing up in our lives. It is an invitational approach and invites curiosity and openness to God's many ways of being known in our world. You can learn more about spiritual direction from Mennonite Spiritual Directors Network at men-nosdn.org.

Sarah Werner named Communications Coordinator

Following the retirement of Mary Klassen as the editor of Central District's *Reporter* and *focus* newsletters, a communications audit was conducted to evaluate our communication needs and opportunities for the future. The CDC Board of Directors approved the creation of a Communications Coordinator at 15-20 hours per week. Added responsibilities include social media coordination, developing a broad communication strategy, and continually looking for ways to communicate stories in creative ways that will evoke a response from the congregations and community.

We are excited that Sarah Werner has accepted the position. Sarah is a worship leader and youth sponsor at Columbus Mennonite Church and the facilitator of the newly formed Olentangy Wild Church. In addition to her new role as Communications Coordinator, she teaches ecotheology and environmental justice courses at Pathways, an online seminary affiliated with the United Church of Christ, and is currently the Climate Justice intern for MC USA, where she is helping to plan the Youth Climate Summit for MennoCon '23.

Sarah states, "I am very excited to take on this new role as 'resident storyteller' for Central District Conference. I look forward to helping us all stay connected with one another and share resources among congregations."

Conference Administrator, Emma Hartman, and Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, who interviewed candidates, were impressed by Sarah's ability to tell a story, her various leadership roles in the church, her creativity, and her deep commitment to the church and Central District Conference. Sarah was licensed toward ordination in June of 2021 for her ministry with Pathways.



Know of an emerging community of faith within the CDC? Know of an emerging community of faith with the values of CDC but not yet part of it? Want to help start an emerging community of faith? CDC's new Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith would love to connect! Email Matt Pritchard at matt@mcusacdc.org

“I Just Want to Make a Difference, cont’d”

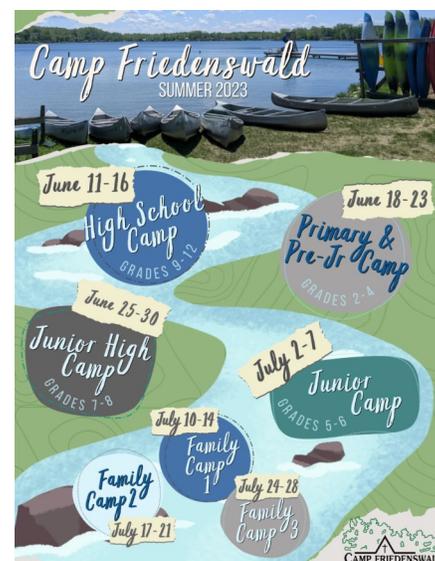
that the Good News announced there came finally to a ‘But ...’. While gays were gladly received and cared for, there were red lines they could not cross. A mentor told her, “You will survive in a conservative church, but only if you remain a dissenting activist.” That sage truth set Olivia and her partner on the search.

The pandemic took more than its pound of flesh from a team of film makers. Close work on sets became impossible. The business of short film collapsed. ‘Shucks, we were wiping down groceries and listening daily to dreadful headlines,’ she recounted. The family made its acquaintance with hardship. Then Olivia’s partner came out as trans. Midst these stresses, they crossed the online path of Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church. Melissa, she says, was ‘a real get’. ‘In her voice I hear the Spirit talking. She loves the Gospel and lives it. And when she tells the truth, it makes me cry.’

When the pandemic eased its grip, they went in person to discover this congregation where they were engulfed with the warmth of welcome and fulsome music. ‘Where does this joy come from?’ she asks incredulous. Her ‘barefoot children’ embraced with affection by a community that seeks out and acknowledges everyone’s gifts. ‘For Pete’s sake, our nine year old daughter led music last Sunday,’ she says. But even more, there seemed no silent ‘But ...’

“That’s why belonging at RMC is ‘scary,’ she echoes. ‘We’re in so many transitions, we bring our messy stories. Will the love see us through the week? But here’s a church that wants us to grow in the life we’re living, however untidy or threadbare. They’ve even guided us to counsel for managing our finances. They see us for who we really are, and to our disbelief, they want what they see,’ she says as she gazes out the windows at the rain. ‘It seems in this church; you can be wrong and be loved just the same. Despite the screwiness of our times, RMC is a nest of wonder and creativity.’ She’s still making peace, though, with some aspects of traditional Mennonite culture. ‘Do we have to eat soup all the time?’ she asks with a twinkle.

‘And I’m still trying to sort out that pacifist thing,’ she adds. ‘I’m a fighter at heart. Always have been.’ In service of that battling heart, she recently made a short film about Dreama Caldwell, a Carolina daycare supervisor who made her acquaintance with the injustice of bond regulations in our prisons and has set out to seek reform. Olivia is the storyteller in her corner. In that role she embodies the very best of Anabaptist struggle, aspiration and witness.



Registration for Summer Camps at Camp Friedenswald is now open .
[Register here](#)

Doug’s Mug, cont’d

I’ll offer one more opportunity. The year 2025 marks the 500th anniversary of what is often identified as the birth of Anabaptism. The Anabaptism at 500 Project (anabaptismat500.com) is seeking 500 small groups to study four passages of scripture and respond to some questions about what was learned. I encourage each CDC congregation to form at least one study group for this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Formation in Christ. Discipleship training. Tending transformation. By whatever name it is called, our journey of faith is ongoing throughout our lifetime. You are invited to find ways, new and old, to drink deeply from this well of living water.

MENNONITE *Arts* WEEKEND, February 3-5, 2023

Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship ~ <https://mennoniteartsweekend.org/>

~Look for our in depth article coming in April's next issue



GNT & Talashia



Viki



Rachel



Rosi



Jerry



Joungmin



Angela



Dick



SaeJin



Daniel



Anne



Girl Named Tom held a Jam Session with the youth.



Lynn



Hymn Sing

Upcoming Events

Mid-year Gatherings

In person or by Zoom

Register at www.mcusacdc.org

*Mar 4, 9:45a-3p Central Time

First Mennonite Church
Urbana, Illinois

2023 Annual Meeting

June 22-24

College Mennonite Church
Goshen College
Goshen, Indiana

Financial Report

Dec 31, 2022

YTD Contributed Giving:	\$156,558
YTD Plan:	\$139,189
Difference between giving and plan:	\$17,369
YTD Expenses:	\$118,014
YTD Plan:	\$156,689
Difference between expenses and plan:	-\$38,675



Mariah Martin and Julia Schmidt were installed at Faith Mennonite Church on January 22, 2023. They join Kay Bontrager-Singer to make up the pastoral team. Julia was also licensed toward ordination. Pictured L to R are Julia Schmidt, Kay Bontrager-Singer, and Mariah Martin. Photo taken by Terry Reinford Martin.