

# CENTRAL DISTRICT CONFERENCE

Minutes of 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Session

June 23-25, 2022

College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana

*Tending Transformation*

## Thursday, June 23

\*Golf Outing organized by Ruth and Ron Guengerich

\*Bike/run/walk

\*Storytelling as a Tool for Spiritual Transformation led by Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau and Kay Bontrager-Singer

\*Pastor Appreciation Dinner at Assembly Mennonite

WORSHIP I: College Mennonite Church

Theme: Tending Transformation

Text: Romans 12:1-10, Galatians 6:14-18

Speaker: David Cramer

Offering: Natural Helpers

Ice Cream and Popcorn Social

## Friday, June 24

### *Delegae Session I*

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Come, all you people*, from *Voices Together* (VT 2).

### *Welcome*

James Rissler (Atlanta), president of the CDC board, welcomed delegates to the 65<sup>th</sup> annual meeting with the sounding of the gavel. He invited participants to introduce themselves around tables.

***State of the Conference Address:*** James Rissler (Atlanta) gave the State of the Conference address sharing the following highlights

\*The new conference theme chosen for the next biennium is Tending Transformation. The theme reflects our sense that God continues to do new things among us. We can't always control the new things happening but we can tend the transformation by paying attention to what God is doing.

\*We have begun an appreciative inquiry Sacred Listening process in which we hope to visit all 46 of our congregations this year to hear their stories, to hear how God's Spirit is moving among and transforming them. In the months to come, we will be sharing what we hear from one another. Next year, we will begin to ask how what we have heard shared might inform the way we are conference to one another.

\*The Church is changing in its relationship to our culture. There are more and more people who disavow religious affiliation and the church is less central to the social fabric of our lives. Yet many who say they have no religious affiliation also identify as "spiritual" in some sense. There is space for imagining new ways to engage those who do not think of church as an obvious part of their lives. As the Church changes, we have been excited to receive inquiries over the past couple years from individuals and small groups exploring whether and how they might form a community of faith in their area. We don't know whether any of these seeds will sprout and flourish, or what they will look like as they do. But we expect new models of being church to emerge. We are in the process of hiring a new Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith. This position will be up to .5 FTE and will be primarily responsible for engaging and resourcing these possibilities.

\*In order to hire a new Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith, and to

provide some funding to these emerging communities of faith, and to increase our support for missional activities and pastoral leadership development, we are engaging in a “Tending Transformation Campaign” to raise \$350,000 over the next three years.

\*Three and a half weeks ago in Kansas City, almost five of every six delegates affirmed the recommendation of MC USA’s Executive Board to retire the third section of the membership guidelines. This is the section that prohibited pastors from performing same-sex marriages.

\*We also passed, with a vote by 55.7% of delegates, the Repentance and Transformation resolution brought by Inclusive Mennonite Pastors, and co-signed by many of us individually, by several of our congregations, and by the board and ministerial committee of CDC. That resolution not only rescinds the membership guidelines, but it also repents of the harm that they and other policies of MC USA have done to LGBTQIA+ persons, commits to their having a voice in the development of any policies that specifically affect them, and commits to MC USA embodying a theology that honors LGBTQIA+ people in all future church statements as well as advocating for such a theology in conversations with broader Christian groups.

\*This is a moment that I, and many of us, celebrate. And many of us also wonder what will happen in the coming months. I had so many good, sincere, vulnerable, caring conversations with people in Kansas City who did not vote for Repentance and Transformation. I hope, deeply hope, that the care with which so many of us engaged one another in Kansas City will be carried back to our congregations and conferences, and that we will trust God’s Spirit to guide us, together, into the future.

\*It took me years to adopt a theology that fully honors LGBTQIA people within the church, and I am absolutely still learning. It took me years of study and relationships with so many faithful and gracious queer and allied people to help me see that God’s love encompasses all of us equally, regardless of gender or sexuality. If you’re not yet at that point, please hear me say that I understand, and I love you, and that the church needs you, MC USA needs you, CDC needs you. I so deeply believe that we are better together - better at being the Church God desires of us, better at being the body of Christ that reflects Christ’s love.

\*The state of Central District Conference, I believe, is expecting. We are being attentive and intentional as we tend the transformations God’s Spirit is inviting. We are doing the sacred work of listening to one another deeply, and we are committing resources to support new ways of being communities of faith. The Church is changing, and our conference will continue to change over the coming years. Our discernment remains grounded in faith, hope, and love, and with these three among us, I can’t wait to see where God leads us.

Jan Lugibihl, (Chicago Community) invited participants to reflect on the theme with their whole beings, minds, bodies and spirits. She led a body prayer, followed by a blessing.

***Congregational Story - Hively Avenue Mennonite Church:*** Mary Klassen shared that one of the pastors described the congregation as a revolving door of love. She shared several examples of why.

\*A young man from Tanzania visited the congregation. He was going to a university 200 miles away and did not know anyone in that area. Members at Hively knew a lady who lived in that city and she was able to help him get housing and settle into the area.

\*A family came to Elkhart from South Africa so the husband could study at AMBS and came to worship at Hively. They asked the congregation to pray for them as they navigated all the things that need to be done as new immigrants. Within a couple weeks, they found a strong connection at Prairie Street Mennonite Church and are now part of that congregation.

\*That same Sunday, a family from Cuba arrived at Hively. They found Hively through another Cuban immigrant the congregation had helped several years ago. The congregation helped the family find temporary housing on the AMBS campus. They knew very little English and the congregation was not as bilingual as they want to be. The congregation introduced them to Prairie Street where they can worship every Sunday in the Spanish language.

There are people from many countries in the congregation. The congregation is shaped by them and continue to be transformed by their presence in congregational life. The congregation is sometimes

stretched to meet the needs of others and to bless them as they find new homes, including new faith homes in sibling congregations.

**Introductions:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) introduced the following:

Resolutions Committee: George Lehman (First Bluffton), Kiva Nice-Webb (Chicago Community), Rich Preheim (Hively Ave)

Listening Committee: Xaris Martinez (Chapel Hill), Carrie Mast (First Bluffton), Karl Shelly (Assembly)

Parliamentarian: Gerald Mast

*Youth Delegates/Mentors:* Lily Miller, Youth Delegate, Joel Miller, Mentor

**Summary Review of 2021 Annual Meeting Minutes:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) summarized the minutes of the 2021 annual meeting. *A motion was made and seconded to accept the minutes of the 2021 annual meeting as written. (Tim Stair (Hively Avenue), David Moser (Southside) The motion was affirmed.*

**Highlight Actions in 2022 Agenda:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) reviewed the agenda and highlighted actions and agenda for the delegate sessions.

**Treasurers Report and Presentation of 2022-2023 Proposed Spending Plan:** Tim Lind (Florence Church of the Brethren - Mennonite) thanked congregations for their support of the conference and thanked staff for their careful attention to expenses. CDC will meet its spending plan this year.

Tim directed delegates to the proposed 2022-2023 spending plan on p 24 of the report book. The spending plan includes budgeting for the Tending Transformation campaign. Action on the proposed spending plan will take place on Saturday, June 25.

**Presentation of Gifts Discernment Committee and Slate:** Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) introduced the members of the Gifts Discernment Committee: Sally Weaver Glick (Open Table), Peter Eash-Scott (Milwaukee), Jon Hilty (Grace), Joel Miller (Columbus), Brenda North Martin (Raleigh), and herself, She gave a brief description of how the committee works. Janeen expressed gratitude to those who say yes and for the spirit of discernment and intentionality of those who are invited. She acknowledged that there are individuals who are missed and encouraged delegates to share names of those with gifts for conference work with the committee. The more names the committee receives, the greater the possibility of diversity. Janeen introduced the nominees presented on the slate:

\*Board of Directors: Tim Lind, treasurer (Florence Church of the Brethren-Mennonite) and Christine Guth, secretary (Eighth Street)

\*Ministerial Committee: Ruth Guengerich (Eighth Street) and Drew Strait (Keller Park)

\*Missional Church Committee: Brian Moll (Cincinnati), Xaris Martinez (Chapel Hill), and David Voth (Grace)

\*Camp Friedenswald Board: Alita Yoder Funk (Silverwood), Steve Hartman Keiser (Milwaukee), Mark Roeschley (Mennonite Church of Normal), and Sarah Werner (Columbus)

\*Bluffton University Board of Trustees: Jane Roeschley (Mennonite Church of Normal)

On behalf of the Gifts Discernment Committee, Janeen moved to affirm the 2022-2023 slate of nominees. Steve Hartman Keiser (Milwaukee) seconded. The motion was affirmed.

**Commissioning Prayer:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) invited all new and ongoing committee and board members to stand. He thanked them for their willingness to share their gifts, experience, time and energy to the work and worship of Central District Conference. Doug led prayer.

### **Break/Snacks**

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Come, all you people*, from *Voices Together* (VT 2).

**Missional Church Committee Report:** Karla Minter (Open Table), chair of the committee, named

committee members: Xaris Martinez (Chapel Hill), Brian Moll (Cincinnati), Matthew Pritchard (Atlanta), Valerie Showalter (Madison), and Tim Stair (Hively Avenue). The committee used the theme of Tending Transformation to organize their work for the year. The work was divided into two main areas: Tending Transformation in Religious, Ethnic, and Racial Reconciliation (RER) and Tending Transformation in Growing Communities of Faith. The committee did a lot of work in this area the last few years, last year created an anti-racism grant, and continued that work this year. Growing Communities of Faith has had a lot of active work this year by providing support for the work the board has done in establishing an Emerging Communities of Faith grant and written some protocols for the grant. The committee also provided input into the Associate Conference Minister of Emerging Communities of Faith job description and provided a person to serve on the search committee.

Karla invited participants to reflect on their own congregational life and congregations that have influenced them over the course of their lifetime. It is congregations that influence us and propel us to do the work of reconciliation in our communities. Karla encouraged participants to read about the history of Central District found in *Walking Together in Faith: the Central District Conference 1957-1990* by Elaine Sommers Rich. Also, Perry Bush edited a collection of stories from congregations, including a sermon preached by Janeen Bertsche Johnson in 1999 when the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church were talking about merging. In that sermon, Janeen emphasized that stories from the past can help us move with grace and purpose into the future.

Karla shared a story of how she was influenced by Mennonite churches in the communities in which she lived throughout her life. Those congregations included Paoli, Lafayette Mennonite Fellowship, Chapel Hill, Raleigh Mennonite Church, Columbia City Church of the Brethren, Waterford Mennonite, Assembly, Faith Mennonite, and Open Table.

**Word from MC USA:** Rachel Ringenberg Miller, Denominational Minister of Ministerial Leadership, named things that might cause someone to contact her:

- \*a pastor looking to enter ministry and needing to fill out the Ministerial Leadership Inventory (MLI),

- \*a leader in a congregation wanting information about salary guidelines,

- \*a conference minister wondering about resources and needing extra support.

Rachel is working with Michael Danner.

Rachel shared that all the resolutions presented at the special delegate assembly in Kansas City in May passed. She directed delegates to pp 137-183 in the report book and invited them to review the resolutions and the staff impact statements for information and ways congregations can work toward living out the resolutions.

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Faith Begins by Letting Go*, from *Voices Together* (VT 585).

Jan Lugibihl, (Chicago Community) led a body prayer, followed by a blessing.

**Dwelling in the Word/Visioning:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) shared that tending transformation calls us to pay attention and invites us to be stretched, to be open and waiting, expectant people. He invited Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly) and Ray Person (First Bluffton) to read Ezekial 17:22-24 and Matthew 13:31-42, using the lectio divina method. He invited table groups to reflect on what they heard, what caught their attention, and to consider who might be seeking shelter and shade in our congregation's trees. How might this speak to emerging communities of faith? Following the discussion, table groups were invited to share what they heard with the larger group.

**Blessing Trenton Mennonite Church:** Trenton Mennonite Church was a member of the Middle District since 1893 and a member of Central District Conference since its beginning in 1957. Because of differing theological understandings, the congregation decided to discern its affiliation with another conference. In March 2022, Trenton affiliated with Ohio Conference. James blessed the congregation with prayer.

**Blessing of Keller Park:** James Rissler (Atlanta) reported that Keller Park had been gifted with a blessing

cup and blessings from conference congregations during worship on Thursday evening.

**Introduction of Guests:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) welcomed and introduced guests and representatives from Mennonite Church USA executive leadership and its agencies, Mennonite schools and from other organizations related to the conference.

### ***Lunch, Visiting Displays***

#### ***Delegate Session II***

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Come, all you people*, from *Voices Together* (VT 2).

Jan Lugibihl, (Chicago Community) led a body prayer, followed by a blessing.

**Term Review of Conference Minister:** James Rissler (Atlanta) introduced Phil Martens (First Urbana), Karla Minter (Open Table), and Ray Person (First Bluffton), who were part of the group who coordinated the term review of the conference minister. James explained the process and gave a summary of the results of the conference minister's evaluation. On behalf of the board of directors, James invited delegates to affirm the review with a round of applause. James led in prayer.

#### ***Camp Friedenswald Highlights:***

Jenna Liechty Martin (Eighth Street) shared that Camp Friedenswald began in 1950 as a ministry of Middle District and Central Conference. She wondered if the shared ministry around Camp Friedenswald had a place in bringing the two groups together to form Central District Conference. Like many others, Camp Friedenswald has felt the impact of trying to operate during the pandemic. They have also experienced the opportunity for something new and the sense of the Spirit at work. Jenna shared highlights of what has been happening at Camp over the past year:

- \*Construction of a new playground
- \*The theme for this summer, Shaped By Earth, invited campers to
  - \*\*make clay tiles from clay found at camp
  - \*\*learn the story of the land at Camp Friedenswald
- \*Camp has also been working at transformation by
  - \*\*learning more about the Potowatomi, who tended the land on which Camp is located
  - \*\*created a land acknowledgment statement
  - \*\*joined a repair network of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery coalition
  - \*\*partnering with Mennonite Men to plant 7600 trees on Camp land next spring
  - \*\*planted 50 trees around main camp
- \*New programs
  - \*\*Grand Camp held this past spring
  - \*\*Just Camp in late July
  - \*\*Restoration Retreat in October - partnering with the Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions
- \*Annual Women's Retreat

Jenna noted that many congregations see Camp as a partner and extension of their congregational ministry. Camp continues to extend an invitation to support congregations in their ministry for people of all ages. She shared words from participants at high school camp when they were asked about what they appreciated most about Camp. Jenna thanked congregations for their continued financial support, thoughts and prayers, and their time spent volunteering.

#### **Congregational Story: Southside Fellowship (SSF):** (PowerPoint presentation)

David Moser shared that the pandemic compelled SSF to reconsider and reinvent itself. The process began before the pandemic when the congregation hired two consultants to help them plan for their future. The theme of tending transformation resonates deeply with the congregation as they think about how to be a congregation that welcomes all. Each year, the congregation gathers together and reaffirms their desire to walk together in following Christ as a faith community. The commitment art piece for 2022 was the image of a labyrinth and participants were invited to sign their names in path of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a symbolic pilgrimage and a metaphor for the journey of transformation. SSF has put a lot of

work into the discerning of their vision for the future. The congregation listened deeply to who they are as a community, to who they are called to be, and how they are to play their part in transformation of God's work in the world. They crafted a new mission statement to help them remember who they are and where they are going. The mission statement begins with two questions:

- \*Who is God?
- \*How shall we live?

SSF is exploring new ways of being church together:

- \*In addition to long-term small groups, the congregation meets once a month in 'Sunday small groups' in place of worship. The groups are rotated every six months and provide a way to deepen relationships.
- \*The congregation has increased their time at Camp Friedenswald, including the baptism of four youth at the Camp
- \*Continued to have fun together, i.e., dressing up like saints at an All Saints Day party
- \*Cried together, i.e., remembering, grieving, and celebrating the life of Carol Epp, a long time member of SSF and who worked for many years for MC USA coordinating the MC USA conventions. Recently dedicated a new oak tree on the AMBS campus.

Part of the transformation the congregation is going through is a discernment process that involves returning to the original vision of wanting to focus their energies and resources more on ministry and mission than on a building. They are in the process of selling their office building purchased 20 years ago. The funds from the sale will be used to augment their ministry. They hope to hire another part-time pastor to work alongside David, increasing their footprint in the community. An undocumented person in the congregation was interested in buying the property but could not access bank loans. Another member loaned the money for the purchase. The church offices are being moved into the basement of the AMBS chapel, which expresses the congregation's ongoing desire to support the work of the seminary. SSF has been renting from AMBS for almost 55 years. The congregation recognizes the need to trust the Spirit in the transformation of them as a congregation.

**Storytelling stations:** Delegates were invited to participate in the following four storytelling stations. Each station told their story four different times, each 20 minutes in length. After 20 minutes, the participants rotated to another storytelling station.

- \*Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice with Jane Roeschley
- \*The Great Adventure with Lamar Nisly of Bluffton University
- \*Journey/Amahoro Ministries - Charles Baraka/Lavon Welty
- \*65 Years with CDC - Janeen Bertsche and Perry Bush

### **Break/Snacks**

**WORSHIP II: "Swords to Plowshares: Story and Song"** A children's musical based on *Swords to Plowshares: The Creation of John P Klassen's Mennonite Central Committee Medallion* written by Lisa Weaver and led by Eliza Jacoby Stoltzfus.

Offering: Ukraine

### **Dinner**

#### **Free Time or Seminars at CMC**

- \*Faith in Place: Ecological Crisis is a Spiritual Crisis with Brian Sauder
- \*The War in Ukraine: History, Memory and Peace Church Responses with Perry Bush
- \*Let the Children Come to Me with Lisa Weaver
- \*Called to be Bad with Mariah Martin
- \*Natural Helpers with Julia Schmidt

**Saturday, June 25**

**WORSHIP III: CMC sanctuary**

Theme: Tending Transformation

Speaker: Susannah Larry

Text: Ezekiel 47:1, 7-12, Revelation 22:1-2 or 1-6

Offering for Central District Conference

Communion

**Break**

***Delegate Session III***

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Come, all you people*, from *Voices Together* (VT 2).

Jan Lugibihl, (Chicago Community) led a body prayer, followed by a blessing.

**Congregational Story: Shalom Mennonite Congregation:** (PowerPoint presentation)

Brian Bolton shared that as the congregation was tending the transformation brought on by the pandemic, there was much uncertainty. Where did they go? Will they come back? The pandemic offers them the opportunity to try new things -- throw things at the wall and see what sticks. One of those things happened on Palm Sunday fo 2022 after it had been two years since they had celebrated Palm Sunday together. They prepared for a Palma Paloosa event with various activities laid out on tables. As people gathered together some of them had a look of joy at being together for the first time, the joy of simply being together is palpable. Along with Palma Paloosa, others things that have been sticky are other rituals such as

- \*graduations

- \*blessings of babies

- \*mourning losses

- \*drumming up of the sun on Easter followed by worship and breakfast

- \*Pentecost birthday party with pinata and parachutes

- \*Potlucks have morphed into monthly snacklucks and potlucks in the park

There were plans already in place before the pandemic to respond to growth in the congregation by changing structural plans and expanding the pastoral team to three with the addition of Georgia Metz and Krista Showalter Ehst. This change allows them to spend more time caring for each other and honoring and welcoming the diversities that exist within and around their community. Growth is stretching preconceived notions of congregational culture and identity.

Shalom has continued its signature hospitality and quest for justice and shalom for those inside and outside of their community. That includes the joys of refugee sponsorship, Habitat house building, speaking Christ's peace in the face of war, singing for their lives as they call for an end to frivolous fossil fuel projects in the state. Christ's love is calling them back to their center and a call to love, justice and peace.

**Ministerial Committee Report:** Ray Person, chair (First Bluffton)

Ray invited delegates to read the committee's report on page 45 of the report book. He introduced members of the committee: Brian Bolton (Shalom Mennonite Congregation), Kay Bontrager-Singer (Faith), Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly), Robin Walton (Columbus). Doug Luginbill serves as an ex-officio member of the committee. Ray noted that much of the work of the committee occurs in credentialing interviews, both licensing and ordination, of clergy. The committee will also continue to find ways to help congregations address patriarchy and racism in the church by providing workshops and other resources to congregations as they welcome more diverse clergy. The past two years have been particularly stressful for pastors and the committee wil continue to discern how to support them and find ways to move forward.

- \**Leaders in Training:*

  - \*\*Journey: David Miller (AMBS) explained a bit of how the Journey program works and

recognized J P Schumacher (First Bluffton) and Charles Baraka (Madison) for graduating from the Journey program. Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) recognized Gloria Bucher (First Bluffton), Lavon Welty (Eighth Street) as mentors for JP and Charles respectively. David presented a certificate of completion and Doug presented a lamp to each of them. They will also receive a one year subscription to the Vision journal, and a free registration to Pastors and Leaders conference. David thanked Gloria and Lavon for serving as mentors and gifted them with a one year subscription to Vision and a free registration to the Pastors and Leaders conference. Doug led in prayer.

Jan Croyle (First Wadsworth), who graduated last year from Journey, shared about her experience in Journey. Jan described the Journey program as “something more.” As an accountant, she felt the need for something more in her life. Journey enabled transformation in her life, something she did not know she could be. She encouraged participants to consider the Journey program to open the world of the Bible and build relationships. In the middle of her Journey program, the pastor, Charles Bontrager, resigned. Jan felt the call to become the interim pastor of the congregation. Jan felt the call from within and the congregation affirmed the call from without. Eventually, she was called to be the pastor of the congregation. She was supported and affirmed in her discernment from Doug, Journey, and the conference.

*\*Recognition of new pastors/credentialed leaders*

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) recognized new pastors and credentialed leaders:

- \*Brian Moll (Cincinnati) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Sarah Werner (Columbus) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Susannah Larry (Hively Avenue) licensed toward ordination,
- \*David Cramer (Keller Park) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Carrie Badertscher (Keller Park) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Georgia Metz (Shalom Mennonite Congregation) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Krista Showalter Ehst (Shalom Mennonite Congregation),
- \*Peter Janzen (Maplewood) transferred credential from Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference,
- \*Clayton Gladish (Silverwood) licensed toward ordination,
- \*Jason Kuniholm (Covenant)

Doug expressed gratitude for their leadership and willingness to serve.

*\*Remembering pastors who have died*

Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly) remembered the life of Robert Coon, who died July 2021.

**ACTION: 2022-2023 Spending Plan:** James invited questions re the spending plan. On behalf of the Board of Directors James moved to affirm the 2022-2023 proposed spending plan as presented. The motion was affirmed unanimously.

**Everence:** Steve Bustos (Silverwood) shared a presentation about resources provided by Everence. Some of those resources include:

- \*Everence Foundation: \$158M contributed, \$72M distributed with 20% given to local congregations.
- \*My Neighbor credit card: \$440,000 distributed
- \*Sharing Fund giving program: \$819,000 distributed; 21 CDC congregations participated
- \*Local volunteers. Stewardship advocates
- \*Individual participation in various plans Everence offers
- \*Healthy pastors, healthy churches, Wellness, and Financial Planning Subsidies Lilly grants
- \*Financial choice: talk to trained counselors about finance, including debt management
- \*Safe Church grant of \$350 to create safe sanctuaries
- \*Youth Savings Week - July 11-15

**Art Auction:** James Rissler (Atlanta) announced that the art auction raised ~\$1600 for the Tending Transformation campaign.

**Open Mic:** [James]



\**Karla Minter (Open Table)*: Karla shared three grants available from the Missional Church Committee:

\*Anti-racism grant,

\*Reign of God grant,

\*Emerging Communities of Faith grant (matching grant)

More information about the grants can be found at [mcusacdc.org](http://mcusacdc.org) under Resources/Missional

\**Joyce Schumacher (Grace)*: Joyce shared a story from when Doug Luginbill was installed in his first pastorate at First Mennonite Bluffton in 1996. Her mother walked to the front and said to the congregation, "Please, as Doug serves you, be kind to him."

\**Willard Roth (Eighth Street)*: Willard thanked CDC for having a conference minister and investing in that conference minister over the years. He shared the following story from Southside Fellowship (SSF) in light of the actions of MC USA in the last few weeks.

In 1993 SSF entered into an intensive study, which they identified as a time of discussion, deliberation, and discernment to provide each member opportunity to voice convictions and concerns to explore more fully issues related to the 'acceptance of persons in gay and lesbian relationships as members of the church.'

After that intense, thorough, prayerful, guided study, Mark Weidner, who was the conference minister at that time, wrote a memo to other congregations in the conference, in which he said, "During calendar year of 1993, SSF spent a good deal of time on a study of spirituality and sexuality and how to respond to the requests for membership from a person living in a same sex covenant relationship." On September 25, 1994, the congregational chair wrote, "November 21, 1993, 75 members met to bring closure to the year long study on spirituality and sexuality and to respond to the request for membership from the person living in a same sex covenant relationship." A lengthy discussion did not resolve in consensus. The meeting ended by adopting with some dissent, the statement, "While we continue to have differing opinions among us, we affirm that SSF will continue to receive into membership as we always have, anyone who actively affirms the SSF commitment statement and signs the annual commitment pledge form." Mark wrote, "Since that decision, I believe about a half dozen persons have left the church. It is hard to say their leaving was directly precipitated by this issue or if it was the last straw. This has left the congregation with a somewhat smaller base. SSF is open to dialogue with other congregations on this matter of gays in the church and has sought to do this all along while they were considering what to do with this particular member being received. SSF appreciated the one CDC congregation that requested opportunity for dialogue on the issue. Representatives from First Mennonite Church Berne initiated and hosted a dinner meeting in Fort Wayne for conversation with SSF elders. The atmosphere was cordial and mutually enriching – a model for agreeing and disagreeing in love." Willard stated that as the pastor at the time, that conversation was one of the most moving of his experience. All of us know the difference between congregations and the importance that Berne has been in this conference, and yet that was an extremely cordial conversation.

Because of the guidance that Mark Weidner provided and that the conference has provided historically through the years, it behooves us to keep investing in conference ministers for the good of all of us.

\**David and Sharon Rensberger (Atlanta) via Zoom*: David and Sharon expressed appreciation for the availability of Zoom, which made it possible for them to serve as delegates from Atlanta Mennonite Church when Covid concerns and travel costs made it seem unwise for them to travel to Goshen.

\**Paul Neufeld Weaver, (First Bluffton)*: Paul was recently appointed director of the Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center. The Center is searching for half time graduate assistant, who will receive full tuition for two years plus a stipend and other benefits. The expectation is that this person would be the hands and feet of the Center for the next two years. They would like to have someone in place by August.

Paul noted that *Swords to Plowshares*, the book that yesterday's musical was based on, was produced by the Center. The Center wants to be a resource for congregations as well as for the conference.

\**Karen Miller Mareco, (Columbus)*: Karen attended the Celtic Pilgrimage storytelling session. She stated that it made her think that her annual pilgrimage is to the annual women's retreat at Camp Friedenswald. She encouraged all of the women to consider attending this year's event, September 16-18.

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Faith Begins by Letting Go*, from *Voices Together* (VT 585).

### **Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) Report:** PowerPoint presentation

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) shared the makeup and purpose for the CLC within MC USA. CDC representatives are president of the board, James Rissler (Atlanta), president-elect of the board, Jan Luginbill (Chicago Community), and the conference minister, Doug Luginbill. Doug shared that he has found CLC to be a place where conference and constituent groups can share openly and honestly around tables and recognize the various voices and perspectives that are brought to the denomination. CLC provided counsel that conferences and congregations would benefit from some resources at the

denominational level as we talk about the resolutions brought to Kansas City. MC USA staff heard the counsel and provided numerous written resources and webinars for congregations that are still available and relevant as we live into the resolutions approved by the delegates at Kansas City.

One change that the Repentance and Transformation resolution brings to CLC is that there will be a newly formed LGBTQIA representative group at CLC. The voices of Queer folks will be at the table, MC USA is drawing the circle wider. This widening of the circle will cause some congregations and conferences to feel they no longer belong in the circle. This paradox of religious life, where the inclusion of some causes others to feel they no longer belong, is painful. How is God's Spirit calling us to respond to this perpetual reality? MC USA is offering a special webinar, What now?, on July 18 at 7p.

The polity of CDC provides wise counsel as we seek to love and show concern for one another and as we seek to help each other even as we do not feel the need to control one another. The last section of polity in the final section, states,

*“. . . Every person in Central District Conference is called upon to actively seek God's will, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to share what we have heard with our [siblings] in our congregations and in the wider conference. . . .*

*We understand this individual responsibility, this call to mutual accountability— difficult as it may be— to be at the heart of Anabaptism. . . The church is a voluntary community which each person enters on the basis of [their] own individual decision and confession of faith— an individual, responsible, adult decision, which calls us into mutual relationship with each other. The Anabaptists believed that this is what the New Testament clearly teaches.*

*We face the future transition with some uncertainty, but also with anticipation, believing that, as we continue walking together in faith as responsible disciples, our Lord will continue to transform us in ways wonderful and new.”*

May we continue to pay attention and tend this ongoing transformation.

#### **MCC Great Lakes Report:**

Kelly Shenk Koontz (Assembly), program director for MCC Great Lakes, described the work of the program director and thanked congregations for their support of MCC. That support makes global and domestic work possible.

#### **Listening Committee Report:**

Carrie Mast (First Mennonite Bluffton) shared themes she heard during the 66<sup>th</sup> annual meeting:

- \*Trees
- \*Transformation requires faith
- \*Storytelling
- \*Transformation cannot be controlled
- \*Transformation through art
- \*Some of our best moments of tending transformation have included an element of intentionality
- \*Children leading worship
- \*Transformation takes time and often comes with challenges, hard work, and exhaustion before we get to something new
- \*Transformation requires periods of transition
- \*Our transformation includes a hybrid format
- \*Transformation might feel like we are being stretched by God
- \*Transformation means letting go and sometimes saying no
- \*Transformation calls for change

***What I heard during CDC delegate sessions and in the hallways*** Karl Shelly (Assembly Mennonite)

If CDC were a tree, it would have 66 rings – some wide from years that were flush, others narrow from times of scarcity. There are currently 48 birds nesting in its branches. They've migrated to this annual

gathering from nine states. In this CDC tree you'd find some warblers, grackles, chickadees, barn owls, and definitely a few cuckoos. All are precious in God's sight.

In James Rissler's *State of the Conference* report, we heard an emotion-filled message suggesting we are a body that is "expecting." But to what exactly are we giving birth? And who exactly is responsible for this pregnancy? [Aren't metaphors fun?]

The answers to those questions are wrapped in some mystery, but there are the telltale signs of the Holy Spirit moving among us, planting new saplings, bringing high trees low and low trees high, and beckoning us to be transformed.

In other reports and stories during the delegate sessions we heard that the church is *changing* – changing as leaves do in new seasons.

The pandemic has changed us in a variety of ways,

- including in how we gather. This hybrid gathering is one example of that.

We also heard that CDC is changing:

- We were once a rural-based conference; now we are more city-based.
- We're changing in that we're adding staff.
- We're changing in that we're dreaming new dreams (Tending Transformation campaign)
- We're in touch with new emerging congregations. We're also saying goodbye to a long-time CDC congregation that has left us for another conference. Despite our conference retaining a geographically-descriptive name, we have become much more a conference of *affinity* rather than of *geography*.

We heard how congregations are changing

- Hively Ave has become a revolving door of love.
- Shalom Mennonite is growing and re-experiencing the joy of simply being together.
- Southside Fellowship is restructuring, and has named two questions key to their ongoing discernment: *Who is God? How shall we live?*

Camp Friedenswald is changing

- It is learning more about how its land was once inhabited by the Potawatomi nation, and as a result Camp is now part of the Repair Network working at Indigenous solidarity and restitution.

MC USA is changing

- A month ago, it retired the controversial membership guidelines. And more revealing of who the denomination has become, it adopted the Repentance and Transformation Resolution – a resolution endorsed by a number of CDC congregations, and a clear call to address the harm, the violence done to LGBTQIA people. We wait to see how this will shape who we become as a denomination.

Unlike at Kansas City, we at this gathering did not hear or discuss any prophetic or social justice resolutions at this gathering. Does that mean we don't think there is much good that comes from taking a stand or charting a course of action together? And that we would rather simply offer each other the examples of our congregational action?

We also heard a question concerning a great mystery: What is the meaning of "GC"? (who knows?)

In the midst of all this change, it was observed that strong trees provide refuge -- a place where birds of every kind and color can land. Recent science has confirmed what many Native People have said for centuries – that strong, tall trees communicate with and support new trees.

So what new saplings or what different color of bird need the support that a conference such as ours can give?

That, friends, is a question that invites transformation.

***\*What I heard during worship and in more informal conversations during this annual conference***  
Xaris Martinez (Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship)

Surrounded by colorful art and by fellow CDCers over Zoom, we were called into worship by the newest communities among us (Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship and Keller Park Church), who reminded us

of how we continue to welcome and be blessed by one another.

We sang in unison, in harmony, in multiple languages, and while clapping and dancing, giving us hope that we can, together, sing a new world into being—a new world “where each gender, class, and race brings its rainbow gifts and colors to God’s limitless embrace” (VT 809).

This new world requires that we be transformed—individually and collectively. While many of us grew up believing that this transformation required self-negation, David Cramer called out this kind of thinking as toxic theology, perhaps even deadly. What transformation truly requires is celebration—a celebration of the unique and diverse gifts that each of us brings to our congregations, conference, and denomination. It is when we show up as fully ourselves that we can discern together “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

We celebrate the ways in which this conference provides a safe and accessible place for many of us to show up as fully ourselves—and we remember that there are still many among us and in other conferences whose gifts we have failed to celebrate. We celebrate the ways in which the recent votes in Kansas City are calling our denomination to be transformed and be a place where our queer siblings are honored and celebrated as the people of God that they are—and we remember that this transformation requires confessing and repenting of past harms, engaging with love and care across our differences, and ensuring that those who continue to be marginalized among us are not pitted against each other but are instead listened to, learned from, valued. We are better, together.

We asked God to take our lives, our moments, our days, our hands, our feet, our intellect, our lips, our silver, our gold, our will, our love, our very selves, and use it all to tend the transformation already underway among us (VT 759). Do we mean it? Hands at our waist, hands reaching out, hands cupped at our hearts, hands outstretched—are we ready to come to God’s table, to name what is broken in our lives, to be nurtured by the bread and the cup, to offer the peace of Christ to each other?

As we tend the transforming work of God in our midst, Susannah Larry reminded us that many of the trees we have relied on, admired, and built our faith around will fall. Some of those trees will be burned down to ash as we reject the ways of empire and learn new ways of being church together. Some of those trees will come down as the climate changes around us, some because we failed to care for them well. After all, some of us in this conference are known for killing plastic plants ...

But in the midst of what may look like rubble, God reminds us to look again—to pay attention, to slow down, to listen. Do you see the new seeds falling on the ground? Some of them will sprout and flourish, others will wither and dry up. Do you hear the birds as they pick up branches to form nests? Some of them will fly away. Do you feel the wind blowing around you? That’s the Spirit, rooting us, transplanting us, taking us on a migrant journey. Do you hold a leaf that our children drew in your hand? Their creativity and imagination will continue to inspire us. Some of the fallen trees among us will get made into playground benches, some into pews for our meeting houses, some into shelter for those who are unhoused in our community, some into paintbrushes and knitting needles and pencils, and some will be used to light bonfires where we will gather to laugh, mourn, and share our sacred stories of transformation.

The youngest among us reminded us to “wonder and watch, wonder and wait, wonder and watch and wait” (*Swords to Plowshares*). We are an advent people—waiting for birth, expecting transformation, singing together of a new world that is coming where all of us are free (VT 416). May our minds be stretched and our hearts enlarged as we experiment and explore and discern and affirm (VT 585). “Come, Lord Jesus, come. Holy Spirit, come” (VT 49).

***\*What I heard during Storytelling Stations & Seminars and in more informal conversations*** Carrie Mast (First Mennonite Church Bluffton)

It is interesting to note that storytelling in all kinds of ways is a crucial ingredient of how we are Tending Transformation; much of our time together gathered together as conference is simply storytelling. Even this listening report is the story of CDC’s 65th Annual Session.

It seems that we are so eager to be together doing our storytelling that we didn't even wait for the start of the annual meeting; approximately 30 of us gathered together for a PRE-conference seminar with Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau and Kay Bontrager-Singer to learn how to use Storytelling as a Tool. This seminar provided the creative space and time for putting learning into action as participants were transformed from participants to storytellers with one another.

Great stories often come from our adventures in travels, and yesterday afternoon, we were invited to an odyssey around College Mennonite to hear about Pilgrimage, the Great Adventure, some fruit from the Journey program, and our trek together as CDC over the last 65 years. Through these four storytelling stations, we learned:

- \*from Jane Roeschley that Pilgrimages are Spiritual Practices as she shared her own Celtic Pilgrimage experiences;
- \*From Lamar Nisly, Paul Neufeld Weaver, and Clara Matthews how first year Bluffton University students are taking The Great Adventure together in the Smoky Mountains to deepen understandings of self and others through connections within classroom communities in a natural setting;
- \*From Charles Baraka and Lavon Welty how completing the Journey program led to Amahoro Ministries which works through workshops to heal hearts and bring reconciliation to Burundi and the Great Lakes Region of Africa;
- \*From CDC Historian Perry Bush and Janeen Bertsche Johnson how Central District Conference formed from the Middle District Conference and the Central Conference in 1957 - with an excellent compilation of the comings and goings of each congregation who has played a role in any of these conferences - as well as visits down memory lane and a few rabbit trails with David Bertsche and Ron Ropp as they shared their recollections of what they were doing around the time of that 1957 merger.

Last evening was really more storytelling in the shape of seminars. We listened to stories of transformation happening through organizations that are addressing the ecological crisis and another that is connecting immigrants with community volunteers who speak their language and can refer them to services in the community for food, transportation, housing, jobs, language classes, and legal help. We learned how a book can be a tool of transformation by way of nurturing the development of Anabaptist faith practices in families. We heard how a podcast can transform our thinking about complex issues in the world, and some of us considered how war and conflict is transforming Ukraine, and how our own peace church responses might help alter the course of transformation from war to peace.

**Thanks to:**

- College Mennonite Church, Goshen College, and local families for hosting us
- Staff and volunteers who set up meeting rooms, informative booths, snacks, and coffee
- Worship and song leaders for reminding us of the incredible resources that our musical heritage
- Artists who shared their multimedia presentations and art work with us
- Members of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Southside Fellowship, and Shalom Mennonite Congregation for sharing their stories of transformation with us
- Rachel Ringenberg Miller for bringing us greetings from MC USA. We're grateful that we are one of the eight conferences she will be working with in the months and years to come.
- Les Gustafson-Zook for updating us on the work of MCC in Ukraine
- The representative of MCC Great Lakes for updating us on the domestic, national, and international work of MCC
- Phil Martens for ensuring CDCers could join the meeting over Zoom
- Doug Luginbill for the ways in which he pastors all of us and for graciously accepting our affirmation of his gifts and ministry through applause
- James Rissler for his state of the conference address, where he vulnerably shared how he has grown and who he has learned from and let his voice break as emotions washed over all of us.
- Jan Luginbill for leading us in embodied prayer and for helping us figure out what the colored dots on our name tags meant

And last, but absolutely not least, Emma Hartman for, well, for absolutely everything! I truly don't know how this conference would function without your administrative and logistic skills and your wisdom and perspective. Gracias!

Once upon a time there was the Central District Conference, a group of people committed to listening to the Spirit, to going wherever their efforts in tending transformation may take them, knowing the support of their traveling companions and the love of God and the peace of Jesus Christ as constants in their journey of faith. Amen.

**Evaluations/Committee Nominations:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community Mennonite Church) invited delegates to fill out the evaluation forms and share suggestions for committee nominations.

**Close of Delegate Sessions:** James Rissler (Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship) recognized the retirement of Mary Klassen (Hively Avenue Mennonite Church) and thanked her for work as editor of the conference publications and her care in helping us listen to each other. He thanked Tyler Klassen for his offerings of photography. James presented a wire Tending Transformation Tree to Mary as a parting gift.

James closed the 2022 delegate sessions with the sounding of the gavel.

**Closing:** Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Church Bluffton) closed the 2022 annual meeting with prayer.

**Children's Program:** Thanks to Lora Nafziger (Assembly) for coordinating childcare and to Christa Janzen (Assembly) and her helpers for leading the K-Gr5 programming.

Emma Hartman  
Recorder