



April 2023

Connector

Central District Conference

A conference of Mennonite Church USA

Knowing Christ's Love...
Answering God's Call

Stories and News from
Around the Conference



Mennonite Arts Weekend culminated with a worship service attended by members of Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship, and MAW attendees.

Embracing Art in the “Between”

By Anne Hevener

The revitalizing power of art was on full display at Mennonite Arts Weekend (MAW) 2023, in Cincinnati, Feb. 3-5. For three decades, this biennial event has gathered artists and art enthusiasts to recognize the contributions of Mennonite artists and to celebrate the capacity of art to express and enrich the human experience. The theme this year, “Between: Embracing Vulnerability,” seemed especially fitting for the first Arts Weekend to take place since the emergence of the COVID pandemic in 2020.

In the opening session Friday evening, Bill Braun, a member of the planning committee, explained how the theme originated from the committee’s conversations about the division, polarization and boundaries that have become part

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of the mix of daily life. “This weekend,” he said, “is an opportunity to open ourselves to the possibilities of shrinking the spaces, easing the edges, blurring the boundaries, allowing ourselves—through the communal interaction with our presenters and their various expressions of art—to begin the process of becoming vulnerable ... to become open to new ideas, experiences, and relationships.”

The Friday program featured two of the Weekend’s artist-presenters, Jerry Holsopple and SaeJin Lee, who offered further reflections on the theme. Lee’s paintings and drawings were part of a multi-artist, gallery-style exhibition, which also featured art quilts by Rachel Derstine, ceramic work by Dick Lehman, woven baskets by Viki Graber, and folk art by Fraktur artist Lynn Sommer.

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Mennonite Arts Weekend, continued

Activities on Saturday included a full schedule of presentations with these artists as well as graphic designer Anne H. Berry, dancer-choreographer Talishia Keim Yoder, writer Daniel Shank Cruz, composer and pianist Joungmin Sur, printmaker-performance artist Angela Sprunger, organist Roseann Penner Kaufman, and musical group Girl Named Tom, Season 21 winners of *The Voice*. The group, composed of siblings Bekah, Caleb and Joshua Leichty, offered a Saturday evening concert, singing hits performed on *The Voice*, as well as several originals.

Mennonite Arts Weekend, which has been organized and supported by members of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (CMF) since its launch in 1992, is the outcome of much effort and planning by a small committee that consists of representatives from CMF, as well as Belmont Mennonite church in Elkhart; College Mennonite in Goshen; First Mennonite in Bluffton; and Willow Avenue Mennonite in Clovis, CA. Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments of the Weekend is that it can be uplifting and nourishing not only for attendees but for the artist-presenters as well. Fraktur artist Lynn Sommer noted that the invitation to be a presenter gave her the occasion “to reflect on what this art form means to me ... It pulled me deeper into a sacred space. For this I am grateful.”



Mid-Year Gathering Reflection

by Sarah Werner

Mid-year gatherings in CDC are always a great opportunity to connect with one another outside of our annual meeting in June. We recently held two gatherings, one at Columbus Mennonite Church on February 11 and the other at First Mennonite Church of Urbana on March 4. I attended the Columbus one and it was a lovely time of renewing friendships, hearing from other congregations, and learning what’s happening in the denomination.

The theme for the morning was the MC USA Accessibility Resolution from last year’s special delegate session as we continue to live into our commitment to include those of all abilities in congregational life. Rachel Stolpe gave an excellent presentation on the work of Milwaukee Mennonite to make their building and programs more accessible (see pg. 4). Pastor Mark Rupp also discussed accessibility at Columbus Mennonite, followed by a tour to see some of the changes in person.

In the afternoon we heard from Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities, Matt Pritchard. He explained his role and gave an overview of some of the congregations he’s working with, including both new communities and revitalization of existing churches. What stood out the most to me was his assertion that now is a great time to be a Mennonite! He said though we tend to be anxious about all of the churches that have left MC USA, right now is an excellent time to be in our denomination. We are a body of churches committed to social justice, nonviolence, and real change in a nation that is most often characterized by its militarism and overconsumption of resources. By being a witness to peace and justice in our culture, we hope that other

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Mid-Year Gathering continued

emerging communities of faith will choose to join us in our mission. Powerful words!

We also heard from Rachel Ringenberg Miller, the Denominational Minister of Ministerial Leadership about MennoCon23 and the upcoming delegate sessions. What most stuck with me were her words about the role of the denomination. She reminded us that MC USA exists to serve the needs of its member congregations, not for its own ends. She said we can do more good together than we can as individuals, and that the role of the denomination is to connect congregations with one another so that we can all affect change in the world as a unified body. Being connected does not mean we all have the same theological or political beliefs, but that we are committed to engaging in meaningful action together. I believe this speaks volumes about the strength of our denomination.

Later in the afternoon we had the opportunity to listen and pray for one another in small groups, a beloved tradition at mid-year gatherings. It is a beautiful exercise if you want to adopt it in your own congregation, and left me feeling uplifted and supported.

We welcome your input as we continue to figure out the best way to build connections in the conference between annual meetings. If you have thoughts for future gatherings, please feel free to contact Conference Minister Doug Luginbill at doug@mcusadc.org.

Do you have an idea for a future issue of the Connector? We're always looking for stories to share with our member congregations. Feel free to email Sarah Werner at sarah@mcusadc.org.



St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship and Neighborhood House

by David Edminster

St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship (SPMF) is located on the historic West Side of St Paul, Minnesota, across the Mississippi River from downtown. It has served as a haven for refugees and immigrants throughout its history: Irish, Eastern European Jews, Lebanese Christians, Mexicans, Hmong, Somalis, Karen (from Myanmar), and dozens of other ethnic groups have made their homes here.

In 1897 the women of Mt Zion Temple founded Neighborhood House on the West Side to serve the needs of this constantly changing population. It has thrived and grown, and is a major source of all kinds of support for those who need it. Its food shelf feeds thousands and SPMF has been a supporter of the food shelf for many years. It's part of our annual budget, and we give individually, and all of this is matched in whole or in part by Ev-erence. Our congregation has numbered fewer than a dozen members for at least 20 years, but we're able to play a part in the community through our volunteering and money. We rent our worship space and make do without a pastor or staff, and as a result our internal expenses are low and we're able to dedicate more than 20% of our budget to external donations. Being a tiny church has its many challenges, but advantages, too.

Our Journey with the Accessibility Checklist at Milwaukee Mennonite

by Rachel Stolpe

At our fall Leadership Council meeting we discussed the importance of the Accessibility Resolution passed in Kansas City in 2022 and how we could implement the ideas and help bring focus to the issue, including encouraging congregations to conduct an accessibility audit. Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADN) offers two audits: a brief checklist a full-scale audit.

I did the [Brief Accessibility Checklist](#) and it was quick and easy. We rent our space, so we don't have a lot of control over the building, but there are many things we do have control over. One Sunday, I printed the checklist and, armed with a pencil for notes and a tape measure, I started walking around our building.

As far as the physical building, the only issue I found was that the front door has an automatic opener, but it was not turned on, making the door heavy and hard to open. The easiest change we made was to be sure to always have a greeter at the door and to make sure the button is plugged in. This person can assist with the doors, point out where the bathrooms and coat racks are and hand out the assistive hearing devices or the large print hymnal. The barriers that we still need to address are the ones like: adopting a Church Policy on Disabilities, talking with families to be sure their needs are being met, and discussions with the members on this topic in general.

MMC is a small, lay-led congregation. In that way, it was easy for me to do the audit and report back to the Leadership Team. I am on the Worship Team, so we added the Greeter position to our sign up and let the church know about it. On the other hand, we don't have a pastor to meet with the families and check on their needs.

We are also so small and are all stretched so thin, that writing a policy might be a very low priority. I am working to have accessibility be our focus for the summer.

I would highly recommend taking a few minutes to read through the checklist list and think about the barriers listed. Make a list of places where your church falls short, physically and interpersonally. Pass the action items on to the appropriate teams and keep following up. Remember too, you can always reach out the Central District office staff to put in touch with other congregations.

Accessibility Process at Southside Fellowship

by Debbie Bledsoe

I compare the journey towards accessibility with the journey towards LGBTQ+ welcome, a process that many communities in CDC have done. The first step is laying the groundwork for LGBTQ+ welcome by educating ourselves. Practicing what we've learned comes next: cisgender people sharing their pronouns, converting bathrooms to gender-neutral, moving away from binary language, using non-male pronouns for God, etc. Next, a public statement of welcome is created, and folks dedicate themselves to listening and trusting.

Creating a space of welcome for folks with disabilities is similar work. You educate yourselves, trust those who tell you what they need, and you work together to create an environment where all can participate. You might publicly state that disabilities are welcome, change your language to be more inclusive, start inviting folks to take whatever posture feels best for them when singing, and might look at your space with a critical eye looking for ways that folks are excluded.

At Southside Fellowship, we have started this work. We clearly showed ways that

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Doug's Mug: Donkey Dung

by Doug Luginbill

Yup, you read that right. I've got a mug full of Donkey Dung! You see, I was reading again the familiar story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Depending on which Gospel you



read, there is either a donkey (John 12), a colt (Mark 11, Luke 19), or both (Matthew 21). In John 12, Jesus simply "finds a donkey and sits on it." The other three Gospels (synoptic Gospels), tell the story of how Jesus instructs his

disciples to go to into the city and they will immediately find a donkey and/or colt tied there. They are instructed to untie it and bring it to him. And, Jesus says, "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'"

The Lord needs it!?

That response has always baffled me. What if I were sitting on my front porch and a band of strangers stop by and start getting into my car parked in front of my house. Would the conversation go something like this?

"Hey, what are you guys doing! That's my car!"

"Yup, we know. But the President needs it."

"Oh, by all means. Please take it. And let me gas it up first!"

That's not how I would imagine the conversation going. There would be a whole lot of other questions going through my head before I released my car to these strangers. Questions like, "Wait, what?!" "Who are you?" "How long will you need it?" "Will you bring it back?" "How can I trust you?" "Oh, and do you mean President Wood from Bluffton University? The President of the Chamber of Commerce? The President of

the United States? **What president?!**"

That is exactly the question the "Triumphal Entry" poses to the readers! **To what Lord are you lending your donkey?**

It's likely that Jesus is engaging in a bit of political theater, perhaps even political sarcasm, as he arrives in Jerusalem. Other Lords (Pilate, Herod, military rulers) enter cities on war horses. When the rulers are in town people know that anything they own is fair game for the rulers to "borrow" for their own purposes. Jesus' instruction to tell the owner of the donkey/colt, "the Lord needs it," leaves the owner little recourse than to let the animal go. **Did the animal owner know to what "Lord" he was releasing his animal?**

Every day we make thousands of choices. (An article in [Psychology Today](#) suggests we make 35,000 choices a day!) Some of these choices involve deciding who our "Lord" is. How will I spend my leisure time? How will I respond to that ridiculous Facebook post? What will I teach this child? How will I invest, spend, share, or save my discretionary income? Why do I feel compelled to best my neighbor? Who will I hang out with? How will I protect myself? What will I do with my life? **To what Lord will I give allegiance?**

The Gospel writers' stories of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross are filled with "what Lord" questions. There's questions about paying taxes, resurrection, donations to the temple, who washes whose feet, who's the greatest, and who will remain with Jesus throughout his trial.

The Season of Lent is an invitation to ask ourselves again these transformational questions about who we follow. If you happen upon some piles of donkey dung along the path, that's a good sign! So, scoop some up as a reminder that Jesus is a donkey rider. And toss it in your garden. Perhaps a mustard seed will soon sprout! But that's another story for another time.

Accessibility at Southside continued disabilities are welcome and accommodated on our website. We set up a fidget table, use scent-free candles, continue to include zoom worship, worked on our sound system, and we invite people to “stand or sit tall” when singing. We pastors are willing to provide transcripts of our sermons and we have purchased copies of the large print Voices Together. We used the ADN guidelines and invited the youth into this conversation. We’ve started with a few small changes but we have much to learn.

Just as many of us did around Queer inclusion, we can do this work around disability inclusion. It may seem daunting, but hear my encouragement: it can be done! Open the conversation, remind folks that the world isn’t set up to welcome disabled folks, study the guidelines offered by ADN and others, be proactive and honest about what you are trying to

do, and be willing to hear when people tell you things do not work. Receive feedback as an opportunity to create a greater welcome for all God’s creation. Lastly, lean on each other as a conference, with your local churches, and in our pastor/peer groups. And remember that this isn’t just for those that are disabled now; it is for our churches and the people who make it up who are aging. We are all “temporarily able-bodied” so this work is for all of us.

Annual Meeting
 June 22-24, 2023,
 Goshen College
 College Mennonite Church
 Registration will open May 1
 with a deadline of June 10

Financial report
February 28, 2023

Year-to-date income	\$181,181
Year-to-date plan	\$185,585
Difference between giving and plan . .	-\$4,404
Year-to-date expenses	\$152,030
Year-to-date plan	\$208,918
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$56,888

With two-thirds of the financial year completed, congregational contributions are about \$4,000 below projected spending plan needs. On the expense side this report reflects a significant under-expenditure due to the timing of staff hirings.

The CDC Tending Transformation campaign is a special fundraising effort officially begun in the current financial year. The goal of the three-year campaign is to raise \$350,000 for additional staff and program funding for emerging communities of faith. To date \$282,750 has been pledged, and \$147,500 has been received.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

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Email: sarah@mcusacdc.org
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Central District Office:

Doug Luginbill, conference minister
 Emma Hartman, administrator
 Matt Pritchard, minister for emerging communities
 1015 Division St., Goshen, IN 46528

Toll-free: 800.662.2264
Phone: 574.534.1485
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org
Follow us on [Facebook](#)