



July 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



Worship at annual meeting was an uplifting experience and included children's time for folks of all ages, led by Clayton Gladish, pictured here.

In this Issue:

<b>Annual Meeting Review</b>	pg. 1
<b>Accessibility Resolutions</b>	pg. 2
<b>Resolution for Repentance</b>	pg. 3
<b>AMBS Graduates</b>	pg. 4
<b>Doug's Mug Appreciation Brew</b>	pg. 5
<b>Resolution for Criminal Justice</b>	pg. 6
<b>Photos from Annual Meeting</b>	pg. 7
<b>Installation Services</b>	pg. 8

### Annual Meeting at College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana

The 67th Annual Meeting of Central District Conference was a weekend of transformation and fellowship as we engaged with recent MC USA resolutions regarding accessibility and inclusion, repenting for the harms done to LGBTQ people, and reform for the criminal justice system. The weekend embodied the two-year theme of CDC, Tending Transformation, through worship, seminars, and in-depth conversations.

The meeting began Thursday afternoon with an engaging seminar by Naomi Wenger, a spiritual director, retreat leader and past co-director of The Hermitage retreat center in Three Rivers, Michigan. She invited us to think of spiritual practices like tools in a tool shed, where different tools are helpful to us at different points in our lives. We were also invited to participate in several spiritual practices, including focusing on our breath, praying with our whole bodies, and sitting in silent contemplation.

At the opening worship service Thursday evening, Matt Pritchard, Conference Minister for Emerging Communities, preached about the story in the Gospel of John when Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana at the beseeching of his mother Mary, who would have been called Miriam in Hebrew. He made the point that like Miriam asking Jesus to perform a miracle, we ask God to intervene in our world in our time of need, and God, like Jesus, listens to us. After the sermon we sang a rousing and powerful rendition of Mary's Magnificat, "My Soul Cries Out," including clapping of hands and stomping of feet. Whoever thinks church is boring has never been in a sanctuary filled with Mennonites singing at the top of their lungs about the downfall of the powerful and the uplifting of the oppressed!

Friday morning outgoing CDC president James Rissler addressed the state of our conference, describing all of our work in the past year in moving through a time of transition to greater strength

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

as we added two additional staff and raised over \$280,000 for the Tending Transformation Campaign. During a time of group reflection, my table mates shared mostly about the joy people feel at being here at conference events and the uplifting power of being in a large community of theologically-diverse folks who value practicing our faith in the world.

We heard from representatives of two emerging communities of faith—Sarah Werner of Olentangy Wild Church of Columbus, OH and Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff Moveable Feast of Chicago, IL—as well as from members of St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship, who are seeking to join Central District Conference.

On Friday evening participants attended one of four seminars on various aspects of church life. Joel Miller, pastor of Columbus Mennonite, led a workshop on marking adult life transitions through ritual and reflection, a project he has led for small groups at CMC for the past several years. Matt Pritchard presented a seminar on practical ways of observing and exploring God’s presence in our communities. Lora Nafziger, pastor at Assembly Mennonite Church, led a workshop on integrating the Bible with the book of Creation for an intergenerational audience using storytelling, Bible study, and ritual. Conference Minister Doug Luginbill led a panel discussion on tending transformation in agencies throughout the conference, with sharing from Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Central Committee, Bluffton University and Everence.



Saturday morning we had our second worship service where we heard from retired pastor Wanda Stopher. She shared stories of transformation from her own life after retiring from First Mennonite Church of Bluffton, OH and moving to the snowy town of Charlevoix, MI. Both worship services also included a children’s time hosted by Clayton Gladish, pastor at Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen, IN, where children of all ages were encouraged to come forward and listen to stories about transformation in the natural world.

Overall the mood of the weekend was celebratory and welcoming. We were joined by delegates from 34 different CDC congregations, two emerging communities, 12 church agencies, and a total of 120 people. We enjoyed reconnecting with old friends and meeting new faces. Several participants commented on the joyous atmosphere of these weekends and how good it is to hear about the work of other congregations in the conference.



### **Tending Transformation through Accessibility and Inclusion**

A large part of the delegate sessions focused on hearing about and discussing three recent MC USA resolutions. One of these was the Accessibility Resolution, passed in 2022, which commends churches to “remove barriers to belonging in architecture, communications, and attitudes that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in church life.” We heard from Sarah Werner and Debbie Bledsoe about their experiences with disability in church life, including advice on how congregations can be more welcoming for those with disabilities

both visible and invisible. Sarah shared that it's important for people to realize that we are all created whole by God, whether or not we are disabled, and that church should be place where we all feel a sense of belonging as children of God. Debbie reminded us that it's important to listen when people in our congregations ask for accommodations and to be willing to make changes based on the needs of the most vulnerable in our community.

One participant noted that we are in the midst of a move from inclusion to belonging, which is a much more powerful witness. It isn't about making space for everyone, but making sure each person is valued, welcomed, and has a place to be fully themselves in the community. Belonging was a theme that ran throughout the time, a concept that goes beyond simply inclusion or equality, but recognizes the value of each person in the community and listens for their unique gifts. It is only when we create communities of belonging that we are able to foster the kingdom (or kin-dom) of God on earth.

If you are interested in learning more about making baptism accessible for those in your congregation with developmental disabilities, Anabaptist Disabilities Network has just released a new resource for congregations: *Believing and Belonging*, an accessible membership and baptism curriculum. It is available from Brethren Press at [this link](#).



### **Tending Transformation through Repentance**

The second resolution discussed in the delegate session was "A Resolution for Repentance and Transformation," passed in 2022. As part of CDC's commitment to live out this resolution, members of

the ministerial committee participated in a Litany of Lament to repent of past harms to LGBTQ people seeking leadership in the conference. Several empty chairs were placed around the edges of the room and other chairs were shrouded with fabric to represent those whose gifts were not welcomed by the church and those who obscured their identity to avoid being cast out. During a song, participants were invited to light a candle to symbolize someone they know who were not welcomed in church or who were forced to keep part of themselves hidden.



The liturgy also included an apology to Keith Schrag, who was the pastor of Ames Mennonite Church from 1977-1987. In 1987 he relinquished his credential during a ministerial committee meeting at Camp Friedenswald when he was questioned for being a gay man, but continued to serve Ames MC as a lay leader until retiring to Goshen in January of this year. At the end of the litany, Keith was asked to come and join the ministerial committee at the front of the room, where Conference Minister Doug Luginbill offered a tearful and heartfelt apology on behalf of the conference and gave Keith a certificate of ordination. The whole service was a powerful experience for those gathered, and many were overcome with emotion afterward. Brenda North Martin of Raleigh Mennonite Church shared, "Our words aren't empty when someone says, 'Thank you' back to us." An apology becomes more than words on a page when we work to restore relationships with individual people who have been harmed and resolve to do better.

## AMBS Graduates

20 students from AMBS graduated on April 29, including five with connections to Central District.



**Debbie Renee Bledsoe**, most recently from Raleigh, NC, graduated with a Master of Divinity with a major in Pastoral Ministry. She also was selected to receive this year's Award for Excellence in Preaching from the seminary's Church and Ministry Department.

Debbie is currently serving as a licensed pastor at Southside Fellowship in Elkhart. She has been called to pastor at First Mennonite Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Her home congregation is Raleigh Mennonite Church. She is married to Emily Bledsoe.



**Sibonokuhle Ncube** of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, graduated with a Master of Divinity with a major in Theological Studies: Peace Studies. She also was selected to receive this year's Award for Excellence in Missional Leadership from the seminary's Church and Ministry Department. Ncube

is presently serving as Regional Director for Africa and Europe with Mennonite Mission Network in Elkhart. She previously earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Community Development Studies by research focusing on Social Accountability of Faith-Based Interventions. She also earned a Master of Science in Development Studies from the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo, and a Bachelor of Science with Honors in Rural and Urban Planning with a major in Project Planning and Management from the University of Zimbabwe in Harare.

Ncube's home congregation is Brethren in Christ Community Church in Bulawayo. While at AMBS, she has attended Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, IN. She is married to Bhekisisa Ncube,

and they have three daughters. Her parents are Edward and Nomusa (nee Nyoni) Ndhlovu of Bulawayo.



**Andrew Ray Hudson** of Portland, OR; Sarasota, FL; and Elkhart, IN; was honored during the Commencement Service in anticipation of completing his Master of Divinity with a major in Pastoral Ministry in December 2023. He also received a Commendation in Garden Leadership from the Academic Dean. Hudson is developing a ministry of helping congregations grow in their sense of sacred belonging to place and land, drawing especially on biblical wisdom to do so. He previously earned a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from Reed College in Portland. His home congregation is Covenant Mennonite Fellowship in Sarasota. His parents are Hank and Cheryl Hudson of La Grande, Oregon, and he has an adult son.



**Deanna Risser** of Goshen, IN, graduated with a Graduate Certificate in Theological Studies. She will continue in her role as Vice President for Administration and Chief Financial Officer of AMBS. Risser previously earned a Master of Business Administration from Indiana University South Bend

and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Bluffton (Ohio) University. Her home congregation is Assembly Mennonite Church in

Goshen. Her parents are Alice Risser and the late Dennis Risser of Goshen.

**Sandra Vielman** of Plantation, FL, graduated with a Master of Arts: Theology and Global Anabaptism. She also received



*Continued on page 5*

*Continued from page 4*

a Commendation in Intercultural Peace Studies from the Academic Dean. She is discerning future plans. Vielman, who completed part of her degree at a distance, previously earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Hispanic Ministries from Goshen (Indiana) College. Her home congregation is Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart. She is married to Jorge Vielman (MA 2001), and they have three adult children.



### **Doug's Mug Appreciation Brew**

I have a mugful of Appreciation Brew on my desk. But unlike most drinks that grow stale over time when left open, Appreciation Brew keeps on fizzing. That's how I'm experiencing the Sacred Listening Project. As our Central District Conference Sacred Listening Project draws to a close, the experiences and stories are fizzing right along. Nearly thirty volunteers visited thirty-four of our forty-five congregations over the past fifteen months. Currently seven volunteers are reading through and summarizing the reports that were generated from each of the congregational visits. For these volunteers I am deeply appreciative. THANK YOU! And for those from our participating congregations who showed up early or stayed late at church to share your stories, THANK YOU!

While I am excited to see both the common themes across our conference as well as the unique character of each congregation, I am already hearing positive results of this endeavor.

One person told me that their congregation was

a bit nervous about having conference representatives show up and ask them questions. They had been through some recent challenges and were concerned that those were going to be brought up. At the end of the listening session, there were words of affirmation and gratitude for the opportunity to simply share their stories and be listened to. I've heard similar comments from other congregations. One pastor reflected that being listened to is kind of like being loved! Another congregation found it meaningful that people from other parts of the conference wanted to come and visit them.

Not only did congregations appreciate sharing their stories, but I've also heard from a number of volunteers how much they enjoyed visiting other congregations and hearing their stories. One person commented, "Wow, if I lived in that community, I'd love to be part of that congregation." Other listeners were excited to bring things they learned back to their own congregations for consideration. This sharing and retelling of stories provide wisdom and energy to the church. It's kind of like spiritual cross-fertilization. We might even find that we are being transformed through this experience.

Sometimes people ask, "What are you going to do with all those stories?" or "What's next in the process?" As I mentioned in the opening paragraph, we have some sleuths reading through the stories and identifying common themes and unique stories. We'll continue to share what we've learned in the CDC Connector and other ways.

I also imagine that these summaries of themes and ideas will give excellent guidance to our CDC leaders as we provide resources and support our congregations. We will be better able to answer the questions, "Who are we now as a conference? What do we value? How is God calling us today?"

I have always appreciated the congregations of Central District Conference. This appreciation has only grown over these past months of storytelling. I hope that we will continue to drink from this appreciation brew and that it will never grow stale!



**Tending Transformation in the Criminal Justice System**

The third resolution discussed in the delegate session was “For Justice in the US Criminal Legal System,” passed in 2022, which calls the church to confront injustice in the current system through learning, speaking with prisoners, supporting families affected by incarceration, divesting from private prisons, and advocating for just treatment for all people in the criminal legal system. Trevor Bechtel of Shalom Community Church in Ann Arbor, MI was one of the co-authors of the resolution and shared about why it is needed now more than ever. We also heard from Brenda North Martin of Raleigh Mennonite Church about the interfaith ministry they participate in at the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women. Before the pandemic they built relationships with incarcerated women through monthly birthday parties and other events. She described how devastating Covid was to the women, who have been incredibly isolated since the onset of the pandemic, with the prison only scheduled to reopen to visitors this summer. She shared that it’s only once you get to know the women incarcerated there that you are able to understand how broken our current system is and how much change is needed.

*Continued on page 6*



**Left:** Retired pastor Wanda Stopher of Charlevoix, MI preached Saturday morning on transformation.



**Right:** Lydia Brenneman of Lima Mennonite Church was our worship leader for the weekend.



**Above left:** Adam Tice, of Faith Mennonite Church in Goshen was our song leader for worship.



**Above right:** Empty and shrouded chairs represented silenced voices during the Liturgy of Lament Friday afternoon.

**Below:** Communion was served at the Saturday morning worship service.





Representatives from two emerging communities of faith as well as from St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship offered congregational stories. **From left:** Sarah Werner, pastor of Olen-tangy Wild Church (Columbus, OH); Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff Moveable Feast (Chicago, IL); and Steven P Miller and Jenelle Basingerof St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship (MO).

**Above:** Naomi Wegner leading a seminar on transformation as a sacred journey Thursday afternoon.



**Clockwise from top left:** Members of the ministerial committee performing the Litany of Lament, Karla Minter illustrating the work of the misional church committee using legos along with Jenna Liechty Martin and Gale Gerber Koontz, Matt Pritchard and Miriam Pritchard Moraff, people enjoying ice cream from The Chief Friday evening, a spirited table discussion during the Friday delegate session.



# Installations



**Tim Peebles** was licensed toward ordination Sunday, June 11 at Chicago Community Mennonite Church. He began serving as their interim pastor in June 2022.



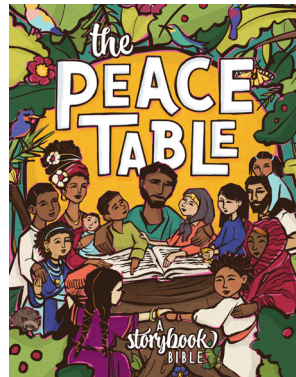
**Daryl Turley** was licensed toward ordination at Columbus Mennonite on Sunday, June 4. Daryl is a chaplain at St. Mary's Medical Center in Huntington, WV. He and his wife, Tricia, are members of Columbus Mennonite.



**Gwyn Stetler and Carolyn May** were installed and licensed toward ordination with Jubilee Mennonite Fellowship, Bellefontaine, OH on Sunday, May 21. They are meeting at a restaurant called The Olive Tree. They both began on May 1. Carolyn is half-time and Gwyn is eight hours per week.



**From left:** New pastors introducing themselves and their place of ministry, a copy of *The Peace Table Bible* was given to each CDC congregation, some of the beautiful pieces donated for the art auction, created by Allison Troyer of Grand Rapids, MI.



**Central District Connector**  
**Volume 2, Number 5, July 2023**  
**Editor: Sarah R Werner**  
**Email:** sarah@mcusacdc.org

*Connector* is published nine times a year. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

**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](#)**