

CARRIE:

We are the official Listening Committee: Scott Coulter (and his pronouns are he/him), Ron Byler (and his pronouns are he/him), and Carrie Mast (and my pronouns are she/her), and while we recognize the official theme of this 67th Annual Meeting of the Central District Conference was Tending Transformation Part II, we also noticed a theme that was an undercurrent in all of our time together: listening. Which also names us. (Listening Committee.) And we'll take this very important honor of having a theme named after us, even if we were the ones naming this theme. And now this honor bestowed on us.

Truly, though, we did recognize listening as a theme in the work of:

- the Board of Directors and many volunteers across the conference who conducted Sacred Listening sessions with 35 congregations and continue to listen between the lines to consider why 10 churches did not participate;
- the Ministerial Committee and Doug as they conducted interviews with 18 pastors who emerged to lead congregations;
- the Ministerial Committee and Doug who, in the work of repentance and transformation, listened to 2 queer pastors share their stories;
- the Missional Church Committee who is listening for ways they can support congregations beyond financial resources and grant applications;
- Camp Friedenswald where we learn to listen to the earth to deepen our connections with her and Jenna Liechty Martin who is always listening for our stories from the Peaceful Woods;
- Matt Prichard who hears the calls of people in between the Mennonite Churches looking for the peace theology and simple living practices espoused by Mennonites;
- Sarah Werner who writes, edits, and photographs after listening to our congregational stories to remember;
- And all of you as you listened to the stories of:
 - Emerging communities:
 - Olentangy Wild Church pastored and tended by Sarah Werner
 - Moveable Feast pastored by Celeste Groff
 - St Louis Mennonite Fellowship who seeks membership in our conference - welcome back!;
 - Silverwood Mennonite who shared honestly the kind of time and waiting involved in the transformation to a queer affirming congregation;
 - Central District Conference who shared a story that unfolded over decades, too many decades, during which we caused deep harm. And as the story unfolded, we lamented together, and through the generous and gracious spirit of Keith Schrag, we experienced reconciliation, and as Wanda Stopher preached this morning, re-membering.
- And as you listened to Seminar leaders:
 - Naomi Wenger as she guided you in a spiritual practice and embodied prayer;
 - Doug Luginbill and friends from MCC, Mennonite Mission Network, Everence, and Bluffton University as they described the transformation their organizations are seeing in those they serve as well as how their organizations are seeking ways to transform themselves to better serve others;

- Matt Pritchard as he shared a tool to help us listen to those in our communities to help us connect with our neighbors;
- Lora Nafziger as she told stories about how Assembly is using the earth all around us to teach the Bible to young and old;
- Joel Miller as he shared the process he developed at Columbus Mennonite to mark and celebrate the transitions and transformations of adulthood.

In all these ways, we extend the honor of having a theme named after us, to all of you, for the very important work of listening you have already engaged in, and must continue to do as followers of Christ, in the work of the church through Central District Conference.

SCOTT

Much of our work together as conference delegates this weekend has been exploring what the commitments, made by the three MC USA resolutions, mean for us: for our conference and for our congregations. We have been invited to consider what work there is for us to do, and what fruit will come.

Again, this has been a work of careful listening together: listening to voices of those whose bodies have been marginalized, and listening to what our own bodies are telling us. These are some of the ways we listen for the work of God.

We heard that tending transformation requires adaptive leadership: improvisation, risk-taking, and imagination, and a willingness to set bold intentions and to tackle problems that evade simple definition.

Here are some of the things that we heard when we listened:

Accessibility

- Disability can be invisible. Listen and trust those who request accommodation.
- Everyone needs accommodation at some point; able-bodied experience is temporary.
- We all inhabit imperfect bodies. God makes all people the way they are. We are whole as we are, with our disabilities.
- Everyone belongs. It is our job to help everyone experience belonging.
- Communicate clearly what accommodations your congregation offers.
- Invitation to embodied spiritual practice should be accessible to different types of bodies, different kinds of physical ability.
- Everyone can learn and become more self-aware through listening to those with disabilities.

Repentance and Transformation

- We are not used to being called to repent.
- Transformation has not been our daily prayer.

- Appropriate repair comes out of a good listening process.
- We have failed to share God's love and good news fully.
- We have privileged the majority, and we have shunned and excluded the marginalized.
- We have been diminished by saying "no" to many individuals' gifts in the church.
- We are sorry.
- We are taking concrete steps toward repentance.
- Tending transformation is practicing more love for ourselves.
- The journey is not complete.
- God is a God of forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, and new possibility.
- Our feelings are deeper than can be expressed in words.

For Justice

- We are asking: How can we connect our historic peace witness to contemporary conversation around policing, prisons, and the US Criminal Legal System?
- We hope people will study and learn about how policing and the criminal legal system works in the US.
- Our congregations can be communities of belonging for people coming out of incarceration.
- Listening to those who experience incarceration energizes our advocacy for change.
- We are grateful for opportunities to be in relationship with prosecutors, police, and others in the legal system as we advocate for reform.
- Some of us have experienced parachurch prison ministry as an opportunity for relationship-building across theological and denominational lines in the wider church.

RON:

Sing a new world into being, live the promise you believe, we sang. And sing we did, throughout our conference. We sang with gusto and joy.

Thursday evening, Matt Prichard told us that we must "insist like Mary (Miriam) that God (Jesus) take action in our world of need." As I heard the stories of our congregations' journeys throughout our time together, it is clear to me that Matt's words are deeply grounded in the work of our congregations to actively be a part of God's mission in our world.

It was my task to try to comment on our worship together. That was not as easy as it may sound because our worship and our work were intertwined and both were deeply rooted in our conference theme, "Tending Transformation."

Throughout our time together, I heard over and over of the opportunity we see in people turning away from church, but possibly turning toward our understanding of peace and wholeness. James Risser told us in his state of the conference remarks, that last year, the word was expecting, but this year, the word is exploring ministry development. We don't yet know what the fruit of our conference labor will be.

I talked to a number of new congregations and new participants to CDC and all were expectant - and exploring - of their relationship with us and they found CDC to be a welcoming place. One comment from our table groups about eagerly sharing resources speaks to how CDC congregations can equip each other for ministry. Our reading of Exodus 3 helps us, as one of us said, to see burning bushes everywhere!

Our conference continues to re-form and reshape itself, to breathe and pay attention.

Our three resolutions on accessibility, on repentance and inclusion and on the criminal justice system were received enthusiastically and prayerfully. A highlight for me was seeing the credentials of my friend and fellow congregation member Keith Schrag restored. Praise be to God!

Our work and worship these days made clear to me our deep desire to tend transformation in our hearts and in our world. But we also recognize the challenges ahead. Said one, "we confess that our journey toward repentance and transformation is not complete. Tending transformation includes:

- Pulling back the curtain of denial,
- Opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit,
- Nurturing the image of God within us,
- And bearing fruit for a hungry world.

Did I say we sang?

We sang, *Where no children ever hunger, but are filled with God's shalom,
Where all people work for justice, where all hate and vengeance cease.*

This is Central District Conference. We are a community of faith, tending transformation. Christ lives in us and God is at work among us.

CARRIE:

This is the story of the Central District Conference at this moment on June 24, 2023, a conference that listened together, laughed together, remembered together, lamented together, wept together, celebrated together. It is why we look forward to chapter 68.

