



August 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



Carrie Mast, Adam Phillips, and Phil Yoder of First Mennonite Church Bluffton at MennoCon 23.

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### Menno Con 2023

by Sarah Werner

MennoCon23 and the MC USA delegate sessions took place at the Kansas City Convention Center last month, July 3-9. The week was packed with worship, meaningful seminars, and opportunities for fun, enjoyed by many folks from Central District congregations. The week had a joyous feeling, a celebration of being together and living into our faith commitments to justice and belonging.

The worship services were intergenerational and bilingual, which gave them a special energy and made for a meaningful experience. During the gathering songs at the beginning of each service, youth danced enthusiastically at the front of the worship space and even paraded around the aisles in a conga line, pulling in folks as they passed. We sang songs in both Spanish and English, and the worship leading was also bilingual, with each scripture and prayer being presented in both languages. We heard sermons from a range of folks in MC USA, including Nelson Okanya, the global missions president for the Center for Serving Leadership in Pittsburgh; Brian Moll, pastor of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship; Iris de León-Hartshorn, associate

executive director of Operations and the director of Human Resources for MC USA; Dianne Garcia, pastor of the Roca de Refugio church in San Antonio, Texas; and Jon Carlson, the newly-appointed moderator for MC USA. Thursday morning's worship featured a panel of people representing several generations of Mennonites, moderated by the worship leaders.

Seminars were offered throughout the week during MennoCon, including offerings from CDC folks. We had the opportunity to learn about churches going solar with Jennifer Schrock and got an introduction to the *Called to be Bad* podcast hosted by Mariah Martin. Sarah Werner led a seminar on coping with climate anxiety, while Janeen Bertsche Johnson shared about the growing wild church movement. Clayton Gladish co-led an intergenerational workshop on LGBTQIA belonging. Joel Miller led a workshop on marking adult transitions, and Doug Luginbill led a session on tending healthy pastor-congregation relationships. The seminars reflected the diversity of social justice issues that people in the denomination are engaged with, and was a powerful reminder of the good work that the church is able to do collectively.

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Youth and adults from CDC enjoying ice cream at Insomnia Cookies. Photo credits: Sarah Werner and Lora Nafziger.

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There were also special activities for youth. On Tuesday evening, Central District hosted all CDC youth at Insomnia Cookies for a desert social. Youth from seven states joined us for a time of informal fellowship and tasty treats. On Friday, MC USA, Mennonite Creation Care Network and Anabaptist Climate Collaborative co-hosted the Youth and Young Adult Climate Summit, attended by over 300 youth and young adults from around the country. We heard from some excellent speakers, including CDC’s Luke Kreider, Sarah Nahar, and Sibonokuhle Ncube, with Janeen Bertsche Johnson, Mark Rupp, and Sarah Werner providing leadership for the worship services. If you’d like to read more about the Summit, check out [this article](#) by Jeremy Fuzy from WordandWay and [this one](#) by Christle Hain of MC USA.

Meanwhile at the delegate sessions on Friday and Saturday, constituents voted on three resolutions related to program entities, agency affiliation, and how often to meet. Delegates overwhelmingly approved a resolution to clarify the role of program entities, a move that will help the Executive Board simplify language in MC USA bylaws. Delegates also approved by a large margin the resolution to change the status of Everence and Mennonite Health Service Association from program agencies to program entities/ministry partners. Delegates narrowly defeated a resolution to switch from a two-year to a three-year meeting cycle for Menno-Con and delegate sessions. Delegates were moved by the sharing of youth, who deeply value the opportunity to meet with one another every two years and remain connected to the denomination. In reflecting on the vote, newly affirmed Moderator Jon

Carlson shared: “...what we yearn for is togetherness, closeness, a sense of fellowship, even family with one another ... This is something we can build on and grow together. It is remarkable that, in this church with our recent history, we still have this desire to be the family of God together.”



Members past and present of Emmanuel MC attended the 40th anniversary celebration. Photo credit: Paula Moser.

## **Emmanuel Mennonite Church Celebrates Forty Years of Ministry**

by Paula Moser

Emmanuel Mennonite Church is a small congregation in Gainesville, Florida, but our numbers and hearts swelled on May 27-28, when we joined with people from all the years of Emmanuel’s life to celebrate its fortieth anniversary. Almost fifty people, some traveling from as far away as Oregon, attended, including a plethora of pastors, with every pastor from Emmanuel’s past joining in the celebration. We spent the weekend looking through photo albums, playing volleyball, swimming, eating, singing, fellowshiping, and laughing at old stories. Our early youth had grown up, our adults had become elders, and many of our members had passed on, but love, gratitude, and devotion remained.

In 1983 Phil Kniss was only twenty-three years old when he helped plant the church and became its first pastor. He reminisced about the early church members choosing the name “Emmanuel” because “We believed that yes, God was with us.” He shared their desire to witness to the community by being a church that kept Jesus as the center of their faith and engaged in public witness for peace and social justice.

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Emmanuel Mennonite Church was also the first pastoring position for our second pastor, Heidi Reigler Kreider. Both of her children were born during her years at Emmanuel. She recalled the hospitality and fellowship, "...with baby showers not just for the women but for everybody." She remembers the church as, "A place where all ages could interact and worship and participate and learn together." Her husband, David Kreider, chuckled about going to a church conference that was advertised for pastors and "wives." Heidi also remembered the experience of Emmanuel folding thousands of paper cranes for the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "a creative, beautiful expression of peace and light."

Eve MacMaster, Emmanuel's third pastor, served for twenty-one years, more than half the life of the congregation. She spoke about community and world issues that came to Emmanuel's attention, including farm worker concerns, migrant concerns, race concerns, and interfaith concerns. She pointed out, "You don't go looking for issues, they are right in front of you. You just pay attention to who's hurting and be like Jesus, and go to the pain."

James Rissler, Emmanuel Mennonite Church's current interim pastor, led us through a joyous, interactive service. César Moya, who will soon arrive from Colombia, South America, to be Emmanuel's next pastor, joined us via zoom and Juan Moya translated the service for Spanish speaking attendees.

One of the more poignant experiences was watching the reunion of a group of Emmanuel's children, now young adults, reunited after decades apart. With spouses and children in tow, they embodied the public witness Emmanuel set out to be in the very beginning, one of compassion, integrity, and faith. They shared with the congregation how Emmanuel's message of peace and kindness shaped their lives and relationships.

As our voices and emotions soared in song we fleetingly wished to be together every week, just like this. Instead, Emmanuel's past members are spread throughout the world sharing God's love and our hope for peace and justice.



Friends reconnecting at Emmanuel Mennonite Church's 40th anniversary celebration. Photo credit: Paula Moser.

### **AMBS hosts Jewish-Mennonite symposium on reading the Bible after the Holocaust**

by David C. Cramer, IMS Managing Editor  
Jewish and Mennonite leaders and scholars gathered May 8-10 in Elkhart, Indiana, for in-depth conversations on Scripture, faith and theology at a symposium hosted by Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). Titled "Jews and Mennonites: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust," the event brought together eight rabbis and Jewish scholars and 14 Mennonite pastors and scholars seeking to grow in mutual understanding, build relationships and counter antisemitism together. "This symposium broke new ground in Mennonite-Jewish dialogue with compelling content, relationship building and frank discussions," said Rabbi Noam Marans, the American Jewish Committee's Director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations. "Even as we learned more about one another, there was no avoidance of the most challenging issues."

The event was the second in a series of planned gatherings following the adoption of the resolution Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine by the Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) Delegate Assembly in July 2017 in Orlando, Florida. One of the commitments named in the resolution is to "seek deeper relationships with Jewish communities and actively oppose antisemitism." Jackie Wyse-Rhodes, PhD, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at AMBS, appreciated being able to strategize with rabbis and Jewish scholars at the symposium about ways to avoid anti-Jewish readings of Scripture. "I have no doubt that this remarkable symposium will serve as a touchstone for AMBS going forward as we pursue and prioritize interreligious dialogue," she reflected. "What we learned in our three days

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together is already helping us develop additional strategies for training our students to call out and condemn latent and overt antisemitism in some streams of Christian biblical interpretation and in our communities.”

Rabbi David Sandmel, PhD, Chair of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, expressed hope that Mennonites would continue the work that took place at the symposium. “It is heartening that some in the Mennonite Church are seriously addressing these important and difficult matters, and especially that they have chosen to do so in a dialogic process with representatives of the Jewish community,” he said. “The biggest challenge is ensuring that the fruits of these discussions are disseminated and come to inform the daily life of the entire Mennonite community.” “The issues discussed in this symposium have direct implications for pastors and congregational life,” noted Joel Miller, MDiv, Pastor of Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church. “Understanding Jewish readings of Scripture, the significance of Israel for Jewish peoplehood, and ways Jews are engaging their local communities helps us be better Mennonites.”

Lisa Schirch, PhD, Richard G. Starmann Sr. Professor of the Practice of Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, said that her experiences at the symposium are informing a study guide she is writing with Kathy Kern of Community Peacemaker Teams to help Mennonites understand their own history of antisemitism and their unique role in the Holocaust. Rabbi Max Weiss, Rabbi of Oak Park Temple B’nai Abraham Zion in Oak Park, Illinois, expressed his gratitude for the event. “It was one of the most well run groups of its type that I have had the opportunity to be part of,” he said. “We had the opportunity to have meaningful conversations in groups and most importantly at shared meals that went beyond surface discussions, enabling us to engage across our differences and look for areas of shared experience.” The symposium was organized by a planning committee composed of Andy Brubacher Kaethler, John Kampen, Barbie Fischer and Sarah Tanzer;

AMBS MDiv student Isaiah Friesen served as event coordinator. IMS sponsored the event, with supporting funds from the Faith Formation Collaborative (formerly the Center for Faith Formation and Culture) at AMBS, MC USA and the Schowalter Foundation.



Participants at the Jewish-Mennonite symposium at AMBS. Photo Credit: David Cramer

## **Trauma and the Church Community**

by Sarah Werner

In the last few years we have grown more aware of the widespread impact that emotional trauma has on individuals and communities, including congregations. Two events at CDC earlier this year focused on how being mindful of trauma can help pastors and lay leaders provide spiritual support to their congregations.

At the Ohio pastor peer gathering in March we were treated to a comprehensive presentation about trauma by Ryn Farmer and Tammy Baumunk from Crime Victim Services, a program in northwest Ohio whose mission is to cultivate crime-free communities through anti-oppression practices, restorative justice and accessible services. Ryn and Tammy explained that trauma is an event or series of events that involves actual or threatened harm, that places overwhelming demands on the body system, and results in the person experiencing intense fear or helplessness. They made clear that this is a normal response to an abnormal event. A traumatic event can be a single major event like a car accident, the death of a friend or family member, a family deportation, a house fire, or a violent incident at school. It can also be a series of smaller events that lead to trauma, such as relationship violence in the home, bullying or harassment at

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Youth during MennoCon worship. Photo credit: Ken Krehbiel for MC USA. © 2023 Mennonite Church USA.

## Thoughts from the Editor: My First MennoCon

by Sarah Werner

This was my first time attending MennoCon, and it was an exhilarating and somewhat overwhelming experience for this committed introvert who spends most of her time either working in a quiet house or sitting in the backyard. I have some visceral memories imprinted on my body from the week—the joyous feeling of recognizing so many familiar faces from Central District, the intense heat radiating from the Kansas City pavement, and the drumbeat of the music during worship reverberating in my chest, a shared rhythm pulsing through the bodies of everyone else in the room, binding us together in an elemental way. But two aspects of the week stood out to me in particular that are worth sharing—the intergenerational nature of MennoCon and the emphasis on welcoming diversity through bilingual worship.

When I was a young person growing up in the Presbyterian church in Texas, conferences for youth and adults were completely separate. I never attended a presbytery meeting or a General Synod gathering, and in the same way, only adults who were youth sponsors ever experienced the comprehensive youth conference program. My experiences of the larger church, beyond my congregation, were always only in the presence of other youth. We danced, climbed ropes courses and swam in the river together, but it always felt like we were an entirely different entity than all of the “adult meetings” where policy was formed and debated and “adult worship,” which was mostly subdued hymn-singing and quiet prayers, not the lively, fun

worship we experienced at camps and conferences.

Given this, the intergenerational worship services were one of the aspects of MennoCon I most enjoyed. As someone solidly past the young adult phase of my life, I loved the energy of the youth as they worshipped together with us older folks. They spread their enthusiasm like holy fire throughout the room by doing the wave, weaving around the room in a conga line, and singing with arms raised in the front. I know not everyone is into praise music, but it was hard not to catch the zesty aliveness of these moments.

Another unexpected but lovely part of worship was its very bilingual nature, a clear recognition of the strong Latino presence at the gathering. Both the band and the worship leaders sang and prayed in Spanish and English interchangeably, so that both languages were woven together in a beautiful tapestry of holy presence. Worship leaders Jeff Hochstetler and Ana Alicia Hinojosa traded off sharing the scripture reading in each language, while the translation was projected on the screen.

Similarly, each of the song leaders at one point during the services led songs in Spanish, and sometimes even in both languages during the same song. During our final worship service on Thursday evening, they asked those who are church planters to stand and receive a blessing from the congregation. I noticed that almost all of those who stood were seated in the section where Spanish translation services were being provided. I know there is a lot of angst among the leadership about those who want to leave the denomination, but we are also growing in new ways and becoming a more diverse group.

I felt enriched by the opportunity to worship God in multiple languages and with people of all ages. Though it will require more work on the part of the denomination, I was also heartened that young people were the most vocal advocates for gathering together more often. They want to remain connected to one another and to the church, and that is wholly to be celebrated.

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school, poverty, or homelessness.

At Pastors and Leaders Week at AMBS this spring, trauma was one of the main topics of conversation. Pastor Matthew Yoder of Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, said similarly, "As pastors, we are ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ and ministers to the human beings we serve. Through ministry, I've become increasingly aware of how many of us are wounded by trauma. Trauma awareness training feels like a significant step toward becoming a more effective minister of the gospel and to my people."

For those of us in the church setting, it's important to understand that trauma affects people in different ways, and what might seem like an over-the-top response to a small situation can actually be the result of that person trying to deal with a traumatic event. The effects of trauma can show up in a number of ways, such as irritability, isolation, and difficulty with memory. It can also cause anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. These emo-

tions and actions can be triggered by things like a loud or chaotic environment, unpredictable situations, or sudden changes or transitions.

Retired chaplain and spiritual director Robin Walton said, "Trauma is an existential pain so deep that it is often invisible and beyond the understanding of others. As a Spiritual Companion, I can imagine with some individuals, inviting God, the creator and ultimate companion of each one, into our conversation as the one who understands, even feels the pain and can be the healing companion as the individual seeks to be made whole again."

The best way to connect with someone who has experienced trauma is to be compassionate and to recognize that we can walk with someone who is having trouble without taking on their problems as our own. If you have experienced trauma in your own life, it's important to find safe people who you can share your emotions and experience with. Ideally this person would be someone outside your family who can help you process your experience. There are lots of people and resources available.

## Financial report June 30, 2023

2022/2023 income . . . . .	\$287,946
2022/2023 plan . . . . .	\$278,377
Surplus of giving over plan . . . . .	+\$9,569

2022/2023 expenses . . . . .	\$264,080
2022/2023 spending plan . . . . .	\$261,148
Excess expenses over plan . . . . .	\$2,932

CDC has once again completed a very positive financial year, closing at the end of June with total income of about \$24,000 over expenses. Expenditures were very close to those projected in the spending plan. We are once again particularly grateful that support from member congregations exceeded projections by about \$6,000.

The CDC Tending Transformation campaign through the end of the 2022/2023 financial year raised \$208,000. The goal of the three year campaign is to raise \$350,000 for additional staff and program funding for emerging communities of faith.

*Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer*

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