



October 2023

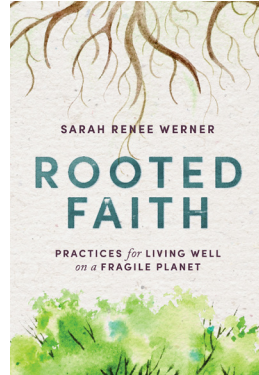
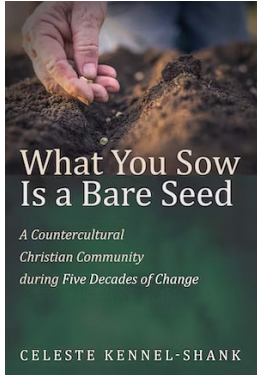
Connector

Central District Conference

A conference of Mennonite Church USA

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

Stories and News from
Around the Conference



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New Books Connect Worship and Action

Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff and Sarah Werner shared with each other about their recently released books. Sarah Werner is the communications coordinator for Central District Conference and author of [Rooted Faith: Practices for Living Well on a Fragile Planet](#). Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff is a bivocational pastor and journalist, the pastor of the Moveable Feast, an emerging community of faith affiliated with CDC, and author of [What You Sow is a Bare Seed: A Countercultural Christian Community during Five Decades of Change](#).

SW: Tell me about the community that you wrote about in your book.

CKSG: Community of Christ was an ecumenical congregation that started in Washington DC in 1965 with two couples in their house, and grew from there. A big part of the early Community of Christ was a peacemaking witness and life together. Even though co-founders John and Mary Schramm grew up in the Lutheran tradition, they came to a place as adults where they didn't feel that the Just War tradition was an adequate response to global conflicts. They were also inspired by the parish model advocated by George Weber as well as nearby Church of the Saviour, another ecumenical community in Washington DC, who believed that mission could be driven by the gifts and passion of the people, instead of by the leaders.

SW: Did you interview people from the congregation?

CKSG: Yes, I did more than 50 interviews with people who were part of the congregation, including John and Mary Schramm, who are still living. The archives were also a beautiful way to get to know people from the congregation who are no longer living or are no longer in contact. I love history and this was the first time I've written a work of this length and also this weaving together the context of the time with archival material and interviews.

SW: What led them to close in 2016?

CKSG: The community began by renting space. About ten years in, they decided to move to be closer to where most of the members lived, and they found a building to purchase. They started out as a countercultural church plant, but by the 2010s they were starting to deal with many of the same issues of established churches. Dwindling membership, the work of planning services every weekend and maintaining a building felt like a lot to them. That's not where they wanted to put their energy anymore. There's an important distinction I want to share that other congregations might be dealing with. I strongly believe there's no such thing as a too-small church. I want to push back against the narrative that getting too small has to lead to closure.

Continued on pg 2



Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff and Sarah Werner (Photo Credit left: Charissa Johnson)

Continued from pg 1

The question is not “are we big enough to be a church?” but “what can we do with what we have?”

SW: What do you want people to know about your book or about the Community of Christ church?

CKSG: The struggles that we’re having now in our communities are not entirely new and we do ourselves a disservice when we forget this reality. The religious landscape has been changing for some time. There were calls for renewal back in the 1960s and ‘70s in the larger church. They were asking some of the same questions we are asking. The way they lived into these questions can be a really good resource for us today.

CKSG: On the surface our books seem different but underneath there is a core of Christians believing that it’s not enough to simply go to worship services. Christianity involves a whole life of discipleship. Worship and action are connected. How do we bring our faith into our concerns about the earth?

SW: Mainly what I want to convey is that the people who wrote the Bible lived in very close relationship with the land. When you spend your whole life outside, when your wellbeing is connected to the crops that you grow and the animals you raise in your ecosystem, it gives you a really different perspective on faith. Jesus spent most of his ministry as a homeless wanderer, and the language he uses is agricultural to connect the gospel message with the land. There’s a very animist presence in the Bible that we miss when we interpret all of these images of the earth praising God in the Psalms and other wisdom literature as being mere metaphor. When we go outside and listen to the birds and the wind in the trees, we hear those passages differently. I want to help people connect their faith to their particular landscape. Helping people learn more about their local environment and what lives

around them can enable people to ground their faith in an embodied way in a particular place.

CKSG: One of the questions I think about a lot as a gardener is related to the Romans 8 text of all creation is groaning. After surviving a time of Chicago having the worst air quality in the world, in the midst of a drought, a question I struggle with is how do we fight back against despair?

SW: First it’s important to remember that the very fact that you are despairing about the world is a great asset because it means you care deeply about the planet. We often want to jump over grief to solutions, progress and hope, but there’s a lot of value in lamenting, which is reflected in the Bible. Lament is a valid way to address God and it helps us to keep working in the midst of grief. It’s also important to remember that you aren’t the only one who grieves. There is a huge community of others who also grieve, and we can do a lot of good when we work together and remember we’re not alone. It’s a relief in some ways for me to realize that I can’t fix everything, but I can do something, even if it seems small. There is also beauty in creation, even in the midst of tragedy.

CKSG: Something I think about sometimes, related to Revelation, is countering the idea that we’re getting airlifted up to a new earth. Yet if I believe that God will renew this earth, and if I keep doing all the things I can, individually and in community, am I ultimately still waiting for God to come and fix the mess we’ve made?

SW: I really resonate with the Jewish proverb about how God has no hands but ours. The ultimate goal for us as Christians is to foster this new kin-dom into existence, recognizing that that takes a really long time. And that also, the kin-dom of God is already on earth. Whenever we share community with others, whenever we reach out in love, that reflects the restored kin-dom already present. It’s an already and not-yet kind of thing. One of the things I really push back against in my book is our obsession with the Western notion of progress and focus on time. When we see good things happen, we think we’re heading in the right direction, and vice versa when things are bad. In many Indigenous and African cultures, the focus is on sacredness in space, on recognizing sacred spaces in community with one another. The goal is reverence, not progress, to paraphrase Sarah Augustine.



Members of the Anabaptism at 500 Advisory Group.

Working on the Anabaptist Community Bible

by Gerald J. Mast

When I was invited to join the Anabaptism at 500 Advisory Group, I soon became invested in the largest project we were supporting: the Anabaptist Community Bible. This Bible features Community Reflection notes submitted by nearly six hundred Bible study groups from a large variety of contemporary Anabaptist communities, as well as scholarly introductions, annotations, and essays supplied by Anabaptist writers working in biblical studies. Because this Bible commemorates the 500th anniversary of Anabaptist beginnings in 1525, it also includes marginal notes gathered from the first two centuries of Anabaptist witness: reflections on biblical passages from prison letters and testimonies in the *Martyrs Mirror*; from Anabaptist leaders like Menno Simons, Jakob Hutter, and Alexander Mack; and from other early Anabaptist devotional literature: prayers, songs, and confessions of faith.

I have been involved in creating content for all the categories I've mentioned. In the Religious Communication class that I teach at Bluffton University we engaged in a series of Bible studies that generated community reflection notes for Leviticus 4, Mark 10, and Psalm 27. I contributed an essay on the Apocrypha—books such as Tobit, Judith, and 1 Maccabees that are included in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not typically in Protestant Bibles. While the Anabaptist Community Bible will not include the Apocrypha, my essay summarizes the content of each of these books and highlights how Anabaptist communities made use of them.

The primary focus of my work on the Anabaptist Community Bible is the gathering of Early Anabaptist Witness notes from Anabaptist sources, with the help of a group of historians. We divided among ourselves the assignment of searching all fourteen volumes of *Classics of the Radical Reformation*, the *Martyrs Mirror*, *The Chronicle of the Hutterian*

Brethren, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, and several other Anabaptist source collections, for fitting commentary to be included along with the other marginal notes of the Anabaptist Community Bible. My part of this assignment included the *Martyrs Mirror* along with the works of Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Hans Denck, and Pilgram Marpeck.

I'm especially pleased to have been able to gather a substantial number of notes with commentary by Anabaptist women found in the prison letters and testimonies of the *Martyrs Mirror*, including such witnesses as Anna Jansz, Soetken van den Houte, Lijksen Dirks, Maeyken Wens, Weynken Claes, Claesken Gaeledochtor, Maeyken van Deventer, and Sijntgen van Rousselare.

In addition to writing Early Anabaptist Witness notes, I also worked through the notes submitted by other scholars to establish an initial draft collection of notes to be included in the Bible from early Anabaptist sources. This involved reducing the size and number of Early Anabaptist Witness notes when there were too many—for example in the gospels; while also searching for more notes from the primary sources when there were too few, for example in Ruth or Nahum. The outcome is that there will be Early Anabaptist Witness notes found in every book and associated with most chapters of the Anabaptist Community Bible. Besides providing inspiring and insightful reflection on the whole canon of scripture from our Anabaptist faith ancestors, the Early Anabaptist Witness notes also serve as a useful reference tool for pastors and scholars who are curious about how early Anabaptist communities understood and interpreted specific passages of the Bible.

The gigantic cloud of witnesses represented in this edition of the Bible is really quite astonishing: from the ancient words of scripture itself, to the many early Anabaptist testimonies, to the thousands of brothers and sisters in Christ represented in the Community Reflection notes, to the dozens of the church's Bible scholars bringing informed clarity and insight, all contributing immensely to our understanding of the Bible and to our faithful following of the way of Jesus Christ. The Anabaptist Community Bible is scheduled to be published in Spring 2025 by MennoMedia.

The Sacred Art of Hymn-Writing

by Adam Tice

Twenty years ago this October I completed a homework assignment that changed my life. My Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary professor, Rebecca Slough, had given our class the task of writing a Psalm paraphrase in the form of a hymn. We were to take no more than thirty minutes to wrestle with the potentially frustrating exercise.

Far from becoming frustrated, I found the task stimulating. The strict constraints of metrical forms with their requirements of line length and syllable accent provided puzzles to be solved. Reaching the expected rhyme words with conclusions that were satisfying and inevitable without being glib



or contrived felt electric. In the words of Mark Twain, “the difference between the almost right word and the right word is the same as that between a lightning bug and lightning.” Seeing my delight in the process, along with a few more subsequent efforts, Rebecca suggested that I might have found a new vocation.

As I dove into this new world, attending Hymn Society conferences and engaging mentors I found there, I identified a particular “accent” to pursue. My study of Mennonite hymnals revealed something of a gap. We had very few words to sing that were written by Mennonites. There were some exceptions, to be sure, but by and large the theology we placed upon the lips of our congregations week after week was assembled from across the Christian spectrum—Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian—with little emerging from within our own sphere. In my Mennonite circles singing has been described as among the most essential components of worship. We memorize what we sing; it shapes our theological vision; we turn to our hymnals in times of joy and sorrow. What might it look like if we not only borrowed our sung language of worship, but produced it ourselves?

Thus I began trying to write the kinds of texts that we didn’t yet have available to us. What might a Mennonite “accent” be in song? Not only in terms of distinctive theology, but in our approach to com-

munity, our understanding of the world around us, and even the register of our language? I soon found that my Mennonite accent appealed far beyond the relatively small world of Mennonites. One of my early texts, “The Church of Christ Cannot Be Bound,” was included in Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, and Reformed hymnals before reaching Mennonite pews—and it is a paraphrase of Menno Simons himself. I am frequently delighted to hear stories of people identifying my texts as seeming Mennonite before realizing who the author is. This even occurs when the theology expressed is shared across a wide spectrum. I don’t think I could hide my Mennonite accent even if I wanted to.

For that first assigned hymn twenty years ago, I paraphrased Psalm 130, which begins “Out of the depths I cry to you.” Even when I haven’t been in a place of needing to lament myself, I have frequently been drawn to writing songs of deep sorrow. I have found those texts to be the most profound examples of enabling congregations to voice something previously unexpressed—or even inexpressible. I think the most “Mennonite” of those songs is one that emerged from a dream: “When Pain or Sorrow.” It was only after writing the song down that I recognized the gap that it filled. While we had songs of commitment of ourselves to God and to the church, this song expresses the community’s commitment to a suffering individual. The refrain ends with the commitment, “We will hold on to you.”

After two decades of writing my output has slowed substantially. I have written around 300 texts, some of which have found their way into Mennonite worship—which is humbling and gratifying. My current work for GIA Publications provides me the opportunity to cultivate the work of other writers and composers who are finding theological gaps to fill in their own accents. I find this mentoring role just as satisfying as writing my own work. And surprises still come my way. My boss, Kate Williams, is an emerging Roman Catholic composer. She recently asked me for some texts to “noodle” with during a period of depression. From the handful I sent her she selected my paraphrase of Psalm 130—my very first text, written twenty years ago—and an hour later sent me a beautiful recording of her brand new tune. The ripples from that homework assignment continue to expand.

Doug's Mug: Missional Mirinda

by Doug Luginbill

You may know by now that I love fruit. I enjoy raising a variety of fruit in my garden. Fruit smoothies are often my lunch. So, as I was seeking an alliteration for the title of this Doug's Mug, I ran across a fruit drink called Mirinda. It originated in Spain in 1959 and it means "amazing" in the Esperanto language. It's made with real fruit juice. Unfortunately, it is not marketed in the US so I've never tried it. But it sounds, well, amazing!

At the risk of sounding pompous or prideful, I would describe CDC's shared mission as mirinda, amazing. Our mission is, "to know Christ's abundant love in who we are and how we live, and to answer God's persistent call to share that love with one another and the world." Our mission is rooted in love language. Our mission seeks to bear the fruit of love. We abbreviate this mission by simply saying, "Knowing Christ's love...Answering God's call." For nearly 25 years, this mission statement has been the foundation of our conference and has served us well.

As the Sacred Listening process concluded, several volunteers reviewed the summaries of our visits and looked for themes that capture the spirit of CDC. Jan Luginbuhl, our board president, then created a beautiful one-page summary of these summaries. It was mirinda, amazing!

The summary begins, "CDC congregations value being welcoming and providing care for their members and those in their communities." Being an openhearted and compassionate community is what we aspire to be. That sounds like love!

Are we perfect? No! Do we miss the mark? Absolutely. Are we hypocrites? Probably. But I would prefer to have an eye on an amazing destination and fall short than to have a wandering eye that is constantly distracted toward lesser goals. Another common theme is, "We don't believe we have all the answers and we do believe that trying to follow Jesus and the leading of the Spirit will bring us closer to the church we want to be, the



church Jesus calls us to become."

Jesus asked a lot more questions than he answered. As part of a 500-year-old Anabaptist community which has centered Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, asking questions seems to be an important part of our faith formation and journey. Yet, our responses to these questions are also significant. We may not land on a definitive answer, but it seems important to land in the near vicinity of God's preferred future. We confess that the "church" is God's project, not our own creation. We seek the Spirit's wisdom which breathes new life into all creation. We desire justice that rejects violence as a means to a more beloved community. We affirm that the image of God dwells in all humanity. What else would you add to this list?

Over my nearly 40 years of ministry, I often ask myself, "What is the purpose of the church?" My current working definition is something like, "The purpose of the church is to celebrate and bear witness to the creative and transformative wisdom of God's love." As I've read through the Sacred Listening reports and summaries, I saw many examples of congregations celebrating and bearing witness to God's love both within the congregation and in the broader community. Let's keep drinking from this mirinda (amazing) mission to which God has called us!

Do you have creative work you'd like to share with the CDC community? If so, email Sarah Werner at sarah@mcusacdc.org to have it included in a future issue of the Connector.

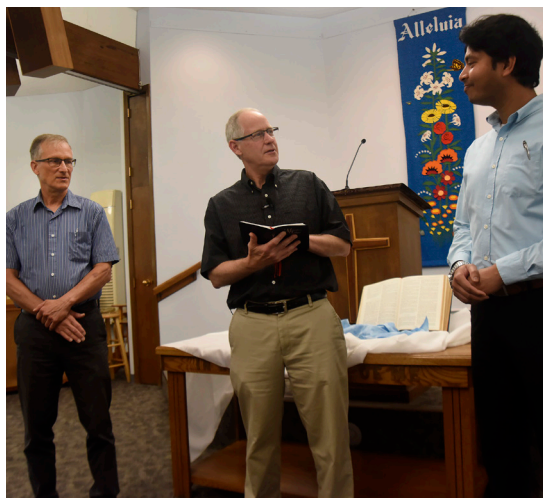
Journey Program Invitation

When God calls someone to leadership, a journey begins. Perhaps you are on that journey. Perhaps you are looking for mentors and companions along the way. Central District Conference invites you to join Journey: A Missional Leadership Development Program. This program is for lay leaders, pastors, church planters, and other emerging leaders who are called without specific training for ministry or who are exploring a call to ministry. The early registration deadline to apply for winter 2024 is December 6, 2023, with the final registration deadline on January 10, 2024. For more information visit www.ambs.edu/journey, or contact your pastor, or Doug Luginbill at doug@mcusacdc.org or 574-534-1485.

Installations and Ordinations



Ben Rudeen Kreider was installed as the new pastor at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship on Sunday, September 3rd in Chapel Hill, NC. He is pictured here at center with Doug Luginbill (left) and Alli Rudeen Kreider (right). Photo credit: Xaris Martinez



Conrad Mast and Pratik Bagh were installed at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, IN on August 20th. Conrad (left) and Pratik (right) are pictured here with Doug Luginbill (center). Photo credit: J. Tyler Klassen.



Sarah Werner was ordained at Columbus Mennonite Church on Sunday September 17th in Columbus, OH for her work as a theological educator and pastor of Olentangy Wild Church. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.

Financial report August 31, 2023

2023/2024 to-date income	\$42,998
2023/2024 plan	\$50,614
Shortfall of giving vs. plan	-\$7,616

2023/2024 to-date expenses	\$46,351
2023/2024 spending plan	\$56,431
Under-expenditure against plan . . .	\$10,080

With two months of the new 2023/2024 year completed, CDC is off to a good start toward its financial goals. Both income and expenditure are lower than foreseen by the spending plan, which is not unusual for this time of the year. We have spent about \$3000 more than we received over the first two months. Giving from our member congregations continues to be strong.

Tending Transformation campaign income for the year to date is \$3,600, bringing the campaign total to \$211,950. These contributions are already being put to work to support new communities of faith, leadership development, missional activities and necessary staffing for these involvements.

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 faith 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 and Instagram @centraldistrictconference