



November 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



### Honest Rituals

by Alison Casella Brookins

“Jessica wants a ritual,” my husband said as he walked into the room on his phone. Our friend Jessica had posted on The Socials a semi-joking desire for a cleansing ritual or something to work through some childhood trauma.

I love rituals. They get our deepest needs out of the silent depths of our hearts and into our bodies. They put our deepest truths into action. I experienced this at our wedding ceremony, where we carefully crafted a somewhat unorthodox ritual that honestly represented who we both were, what we wanted our marriage to be, and asked those present to witness and support us in living that out. Our wedding changed our reality.

When I left congregational ministry and moved into medical chaplaincy, I no longer had a home for the parts of my calling that involved writing sermons and liturgies and dreaming up rituals. A lot of pastor friends doubted this move for me. “I think you’ll be great at chaplaincy,” was the feedback of one trusted friend. “I just think you’ll hate it.”

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Dear reader, I didn’t hate it. I loved it. Chaplaincy is a ministry of moments; it is being fully, deeply present with people exactly where they are for particular moments in time. It is witnessing to moments of movement in their lives, movement through grief, towards acceptance of grace, into and beyond anger.

And after all that, chaplaincy is leaving the room, knowing you may never see that person again. It is trusting that what happened between you and within the other person was real, that it matters despite its brevity, and that it may bear fruit you will never see and could never anticipate. It is trusting that someone else will be there for them in the next moment of need, and the next, throughout their lives.



Alison Casella Brookins and her husband Jake Casella Brookins during their wedding ceremony

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Yet, I did miss working with rituals.

“I think you should talk to Jessica,” my husband said, when I hesitated.

He knew how much I wanted to create rituals with and for people; I had been scheming and dreaming for over a year about a way to walk with people through things from marriage to difficult childbirth to gender confirmation and craft rituals to make tangible what is most true inside of them.

I had named this idea Honest Rituals. I didn't know Jessica well. She was more my husband's friend than mine, and she knew me through book clubs and game nights, not as a “spiritual leader.” Reaching out felt scary, but incredibly, Jessica said yes. Over a few months, she trusted me with some deep hurts and the vulnerability of her longing for something in her to shift. She did the work; I just held together all the pieces of what she gave me, weaving her longing for a new reality into a ritual.

We performed the ritual one evening on the shore of Lake Michigan as the sun set, Just Jessica, me and a few close friends. She spoke hard words, burned things, threw rocks into the water with a Yawp! and hugged us all hard.

This ritual changed Jessica's life, in ways that continue to unfold. This experience gave me the hutzpah to finally launch my business, connecting all the parts of who I am and what I want to do: I call myself a Free Range Chaplain, preaching, writing, and crafting honest rituals that change lives, ministering to moments of movement in peoples' lives.

It's a work in progress, but so am I. Find me at [www.alison-casellabrookins.com](http://www.alison-casellabrookins.com).



Members of seven communities gathered at Americus Mennonite Fellowship in September.

## **Solidarity with Immigrants**

by James Rissler

Members of seven communities joined together for worship, fellowship, and discernment about what it means to live in solidarity with immigrants September 8-10 at Koinonia Farm and Americus Mennonite Fellowship in Americus, Ga. Building on prior gatherings among Americus Mennonite Fellowship, Atlanta Mennonite Church, and Emmanuel Mennonite Church, we were joined by members of Casa Alternativa, a ministry of hospitality and accompaniment with immigrants in Atlanta; Ministerio Jehovah Luz y Esperanza, a Garifuna congregation now worshipping at Atlanta Mennonite Church; First Haitian Church of Americus, now worshipping at Americus Mennonite Fellowship; and Koinonia Farm. A CDC Reign of God grant allowed us to ensure that costs were not a barrier to participation.



Left: Anton Flores-Maisonet and others during worship. Right: Participants leading a song.

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Participants meeting in small groups for discussion.

Those arriving Friday evening shared in a meal and hymn sing at Americus Mennonite Fellowship. The heart of our gathering was from 9-4 on Saturday at Koinonia Farm. We ate breakfast and lunch together and worshiped at the beginning and end of our time. We reflected on ways that we had individually engaged intersections between Mennonites and immigrants, and then each congregation shared the ways in which they are working in support of and solidarity with immigrants. Jorge Vielman, from MCC's Miami office, outlined the biblical call that motivates our work with immigrants while also sharing about MCC's resources. We spent time in mixed small groups reflecting on how our faith informs how we think about and respond to immigration, and we spent time in congregational small groups reflecting on our own contexts and how we felt called toward the future, then sharing these reflections with the larger group.

Everyone reported appreciating hearing the stories that each group shared, and the ways that we are supporting immigrants in



One of the collaborative worship services planned by the seven communities gathered.

our communities. We wondered a bit about the differences between welcome or support and solidarity. Several members of the immigrant communities represented articulated the importance of listening to their stories, or better, experiencing their lives in their countries, in order to understand what they face in choosing to come to the United States.

Throughout our gathering, we interpreted between Spanish and English. We also had moments in which we worshiped without interpretation - a song in Garifuna, a prayer in Creole. When we split into mixed small groups, we ensured that each group had at least one person able to interpret between Spanish and English. Worship on Sunday was centered upon an interview by Anton Flores-Maisonet, interim pastor at Atlanta Mennonite Church, with two asylum seeking families about their journeys, the reasons for them, and where they had felt God's presence alongside them. We intentionally tried to center the immigrant voices among us, and feel that we improved upon prior gatherings, while recognizing that this needs to remain a central intention.



Singing during one of the worship services.

Our gathering was rich, but there is also a sense that we have only begun to wonder about how our groups might work together in the future. Anton Flores-Maisonet, Brian Kilheffer, and James Rissler, the primary planners for this gathering, will continue to invite the congregations and groups represented to reflect on what are our next most faithful steps, in our contexts and together.

## Peace Table Bible Review

by Matt Pritchard

My 5-year-old daughter, Shifra, eagerly chimes in, “Read me the story with my name!” Her enthusiasm doesn’t stop there; she adds, “Can you read the one with [my 1-year-old sister] Miriam’s name too?” Soon we find ourselves delving into one or more of the other texts from *The Peace Table: A Storybook Bible*, a 2023 release by [Herald Press and Brethren Press](#) under the Shine label, thoughtfully designed for elementary-aged children.

This remarkable book introduces young readers to a wide array of texts from the Scriptures, placing a pronounced emphasis on the theme of peacemaking. Notably, it delves into lesser-known narratives, such as the courageous midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, featured in Exodus 1.

With more than 140 carefully selected passages, the book presents these stories and texts in a language tailored to suit the age group. It encourages readers to ponder essential questions and apply the teachings of the Scriptures to their own lives. These stories are thoughtfully presented against a backdrop of diverse illustrations, prayers, contextualization and suggested practices. I especially appreciate the inclusive representation of God, avoiding gendered or exclusively male references.

In addition to the conventional Western Bible order of the books, *The Peace Table* offers twelve distinct peace paths categorized as Peace with God, Peace Inside, Peace with Others, and Peace with Creation. These paths enable readers to explore the scriptures in fresh and meaningful ways, enhancing their understanding.

The illustrations within the book are nothing short of stunning. *The Peace Table* prominently features black and brown people while embracing the rich tradition of placing scriptural texts within one’s own cultural heritage. The depictions of people, for the most part, accurately reflect their black and brown identities.

Furthermore, there are numerous illustrations that place the narratives in various cultural contexts. As a father of children with Puerto Rican, Ashkenazi, and Appalachian backgrounds, who feel equally at home in a synagogue and a church, this diversity is of paramount importance.

*The Peace Table* offers valuable extras at the end of the book, including kid-accessible written prayers, maps and suggestions for prayer practices, as well as ideas and exercises for practicing peacemaking. The editors provide substantial support for adults reading these stories alongside children under their care, offering guidance on “Children’s Faith Development” and “Talking about Difficult Stories.”

While the book is highly commendable, I do wish the editors had refrained from including the exclusively Protestant “Books of the Bible” in the Extras section. Similarly, I would have preferred the inclusion of stories from the intertestamental/deuterocanonical books, as they are part of the Anabaptist/Mennonite historical tradition.

I wholeheartedly recommend that church communities make *The Peace Table* readily available to their families, particularly since Shine is aligning its elementary curriculum with this resource. I have personally purchased multiple copies and shared them with friends and family, all of whom have loved it. Every Mennonite family with elementary-aged kids or younger should possess at least one copy of *The Peace Table*. It’s a valuable addition to any child’s spiritual education.



Miriam, Matt and Shifra Pritchard reading together.

## Jo Ropp Memorial Fund for Faith Formation

If your congregation is interested in purchasing *The Peace Table Bible* or youth Sunday school curriculum, the Jo Ropp Memorial Fund for Faith Formation is currently providing grants. The fund was established in memory of Jo Ropp, an educator from central Illinois who devoted her life to teaching and developing Sunday school curriculums in the Mennonite Church, including working for Herald Press and for CDC. If you want to donate to this fund, send your contribution to Central District Conference, 1015 Division St, Goshen, IN 46528 and note Jo Ropp memorial in the memo line. If you are interested in a grant, email Emma Hartman at [office@mcusacdc.org](mailto:office@mcusacdc.org).

## Doug's Mug: Wisdom

I am not a connoisseur of fine wine. But I've heard that those who are connoisseurs are able to recognize the various notes of wine. According to [drinksurely.com](http://drinksurely.com), "Wine tasting notes are a way for wine lovers to understand their palates better, begin to notice similarities and differences in wine, and speak more eloquently about wine. They can better inform your wine pairings, too."



I wonder if discerning the wisdom of God has some similar characteristics. How do we discern the rich variety of God's wisdom?

Back in June I had a dream in which I was told to read Ephesians 3:8-12. It's the first time I've ever had such a dream so I was intrigued. Immediately upon awakening, I read the text. Ephesians 3:10 especially caught my attention. It states,

*Through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

Wow, through the church God's wisdom is revealed! Do you believe it? Is it true today? Can the broken and imperfect institution of the

church still reveal the wisdom of God? Are we church people connoisseurs of God's wisdom, constantly discerning the nature, character, flavor, and rich variety of God's wisdom?

Slightly changing the [drinksurely.com](http://drinksurely.com) definition above, it might be accurate to say, "Wise discernment is a way for wisdom lovers to understand their God-given soul better, begin to notice similarities and differences in wisdom, and speak more eloquently about wisdom. This can better inform your wise actions, too."

I was so intrigued by my dream that I scheduled a Zoom meeting with Tom Yoder-Neufeld, the author of the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Ephesians. He wisely directed me to the Wisdom of Solomon chapter 7:23ff which reflects on the character of wisdom.

*There is in her (wisdom or Sophia) a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle.*

*For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.*

*For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.*

*For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of God's goodness.*

That's a lot to take in. The various notes of wisdom pop out in all kinds of interesting ways in this text. What catches your attention? Where and through whom do you notice God's wisdom being revealed? How does your church make known the wisdom of God?

I look forward to experiencing our CDC theme: Listen! Wisdom is Calling.



# Installations and Ordinations



**Josh Richardson** was installed and licensed toward ordination at St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship on Sunday, October 22 in St. Louis, Missouri. He is pictured here in the center with Doug Luginbill (left), Liz Malcott (right). Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.



**David Cramer** was ordained at Keller Park Church in South Bend, Indiana on Sunday, October 29. Photo credit: Doug Luginbill.



**Chaska Yoder** was licensed toward ordination at First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio on Sunday November 5th for her work as a chaplain at Mercy Health St. Rita's Hospital in Lima, Ohio. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.

## Financial report October 31, 2023

2023/2024 to-date income . . . . . \$95,558  
 2023/2024 plan . . . . . \$101,228  
 Shortfall of giving vs. plan . . . . . -\$ 5,670

2023/2024 to-date expenses . . . . . \$98,075  
 2023/2024 spending plan . . . . . \$112,862  
 Under-expenditure against plan . . . \$14,787

Both income and expenditure are lower than foreseen by the spending plan. We have spent about \$2500 more than we received during the first third of the year. As usual, however, giving from CDC member congregations is strong and above budget. Twenty-five member congregations have contributed to CDC thus far this year.

Tending Transformation campaign income for the year to date is \$26,850, bringing the campaign total to \$235,200. 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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