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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



Members of Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship worship together. Photo credit: Alaina Dobkowski.

Tending Transformation: Supporting Emerging Communities

by Sarah Werner

You encounter them daily. You might see them sipping coffee at your local shop or waiting in line at the grocery store. They might share your workplace or be in the stands at the high school basketball game. They might not articulate their values in the same language as us or express it in religious terms. Yet, their lives resonate with active peacemaking, social justice, and the inclusion of the marginalized. Many of them are familiar with the Scriptures. They aspire to embody these principles within a Christian framework. Unfortunately, many are unaware that Mennonites have lived out Jesus's peacemaking path for centuries. Now, we have a divine opportunity to invite them into our church communities. They can join as co-conspirators of the third way!

CDC fosters Christ-like communities, nurtures Anabaptist leadership and supports missional partnerships. Several years ago CDC made the decision to focus on providing resources to nurture the growth of emerging communities of faith. Resources from the Tending Transformation Campaign bolster emerging

In this issue:

Tending Transformation	pg. 1
Mennonite Action for Gaza	pg. 3
Sacred Listening Themes	pg. 4
Doug's Mug	pg. 5
Ordinations and Installations	pg. 6
Financial Report	pg. 6

faith communities. They subsidize additional staff hiring, contribute to clergy development, and catalyze missional activities. This collective support is a testament to our shared belief in the transformative power of peace church theology and practice.

As of December 31, 2023, six CDC congregations and 77 individuals/households have contributed \$253,000. The committed total is \$302,000. With your help, our \$350,000 goal is within reach. Contributions to the Tending Transformation Campaign can be made until June 30, 2025. Will you consider, in prayer, contributing to this campaign?

In January 2023, thanks to the generous contributions from the Campaign, we welcomed Matt Pritchard as a third-time Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith. Matt brings a wealth of expertise. He is passionate about fostering flourishing peace communities. He focuses on connecting with and resourcing emerging communities of faith. He also works on revitalizing existing congregations. Matt is collaborating with individuals from CDC, Mennonite Church USA, and beyond. He develops practical resources and guidance on best practices. He also creates the necessary processes for CDC to support emerging communities.

Continued on pg. 2

Continued from pg. 1

The addition of Matt to our team has marked a significant step forward in our commitment to nurturing and supporting emerging communities of faith. He is having a positive impact on our collective journey, and we are excited about it. We encourage you to take advantage of the valuable resources and support he brings. Whether you're seeking advice, resources, or a partner in your journey, Matt is your go-to person. Feel free to reach out to him – he's eager to assist you in any way he can.

We want to express our deepest gratitude for your unwavering support and dedication. We are undertaking transformative work. Together, we are making it a great time to be Mennonite. The possibilities that lie ahead excite us.

Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship of Grand Rapids, Mich. is an emerging community of faith that formally joined CDC in 2021 and has greatly benefited from the Tending Transformation campaign. GRMF got its start as a house church in August of 2018 with five families beginning to gather together weekly. The early leaders, Alaina Dobkowski and Susan Kragt, developed a relationship with the pastor of Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship and his wife (a house church in the Indiana Michigan Conference) until their retirement several years ago. The community went through an intentional discernment process together, discussing the core beliefs of MC USA using the Pathways study guide and decided they were a good fit for the denomination. They were drawn to Central District because of their strong stance on LGBTQ welcome, and were introduced at the 2020 Annual Meeting as a prospective member congregation, which was formalized in 2021 with full membership.

I spoke recently with Alaina Dobkowski, the current lay pastor of the fellowship and she shared her deep appreciation for the support they receive from CDC. Matt Pritchard, conference minister for emerging communities of faith, worked with the members of the congregation to develop a contract for the pastoral position Alaina now occupies. They have also received a grant from the Tending Transformation campaign to help fund this new position

as the congregation grows and continues to work towards financial sustainability. Dobkowski shared, "The support of the conference has been huge for us. They have been so excited about what our community is up to and welcoming us. The Holy Spirit has continually shown up and guided us in this whole process. It's been five and a half years since we began and we're a small community, but we feel our presence as a peace church in Grand Rapids is important and we wouldn't still be here without the support of the conference."



From left, Celeste Kennel-Shank, Zac Lowing, and Jeanie Wallenstein celebrating Twelfth Night and Epiphany January 6, 2024 in the Community of the Holy Trinity, where Moveable Feast has Sunday services. [Zac's T-Shirt says C.L.A.W.S Cat Lovers Against White Supremacy]

Moveable Feast is another emerging community of faith that has been nurtured by the conference. The community began in June 2022 as a monthly interfaith sabbath supper in the Albany Park neighborhood of northwest Chicago. In August 2023 they started meeting together 3 times a month on Sunday evenings for a Christian worship service in collaboration with an intentional Christian community in the neighborhood. They have continued with the monthly interfaith sabbath supper with overlap between the two groups. The supper has become an outreach to the community and includes atheist and agnostic folks as well as those who have been harmed by other churches but who are looking for spiritual community.

Celeste Kennel-Shank, pastor of Moveable Feast, has received support from Matt Pritchard as well through good conversations and strategizing on logistical considerations. Kennel-Shank shared, "I'm really grateful to be

Continued on pg. 3

Continued from pg. 2

part of this conference and the denomination. This is really important, since church planting can be lonely work. It has felt really audacious at times to be the pastor of this new community. I'm really grateful to be firmly part of a conference that is investing in communities of faith with staff and financial resources." While Moveable Feast is ecumenical, they are a Mennonite-rooted community, and they are grateful for the support of and accountability to CDC.

CDC recently welcomed the Atlanta-based Ministerio Jehova Luz & Esperanza (MJLE) as an emerging community in the conference. Started during the pandemic, MJLE has a strong partnership with Atlanta Mennonite Church and meets in the same space. The Spanish-speaking community is led by Ana and Dio Arauz who are newly licensed in CDC. They are connected with the Mennonite Garifuna movement.

The Tending Transformation campaign has been a great asset to the conference as we welcome new emerging communities of faith and continue to grow as the larger church in this time of great social change.



Ohio Mennonites outside the offices of Senator Sherrod Brown singing together. Photo credit: Sarah Werner.

Mennonite Action for a Ceasefire in Gaza by Sarah Werner

On December 19, 2023, Mennonites in 40 cities across the US and Canada came together for a day of action to call for a ceasefire in Gaza. CDC congregations participated in actions in Columbus, Ohio; Chicago; Mishawaka, Ind.; Madison, Wisc.; and Raleigh, N.C. It was a meaningful day of worship, singing, and public

witness for peace outside the offices of elected officials throughout North America.



Mennonites protest outside the Mishawaka, Ind. offices of Rep. Yakym. Photo Credit: David Cramer.

Around 150 Mennonites from the northern Indiana and southern Michigan area joined together to attend the action at the offices of Rep. Rudy Yakym in Mishawaka, Ind. to call for a peaceful resolution to the war in Gaza. David Cramer, teaching pastor at Keller Park Church, shared the following, "I've been to protests before, but it's been a long time since I've been a part of a faith-based protest like this one. I appreciated the ways the organizers carefully orchestrated the event to weave together our Mennonite faith commitments with a call for a permanent ceasefire. We sang hymns, heard testimonies from those who have lived in or visited Gaza, including a Palestinian, listened to a children's story about the everyday lives of people living under occupation, and entered Rep. Yakym's office to share directly with his staff our call for a ceasefire. I believe his staffers were moved by the words that were shared and that media coverage helped get the message out to constituents. More than anything, the event inspired our congregation to learn more about the conflict and how we can act for peace as followers of Jesus."

Karla Minter, pastor/doula of Open Table Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, also attended the action in Mishawaka. She shared, "As members of an historic peace church, we are bringing our message to our representative and offering a narrative to other Christians that 'Mennonites for Ceasefire' in Gaza is consistent with our Christian faith and practice."

Continued on pg. 4

Continued from pg. 3



Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church, with fellow Mennonites in Raleigh, N.C. Photo credit: Xaris Martinez.

Over 50 Mennonites from Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship and Raleigh Mennonite Church worshipped outside the offices of Senator Ted Budd. And about 50 Mennonites gathered in Chicago in the lobby of Senators Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth for an impromptu worship service and to call the senators to support a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

In Columbus Mennonites from eight congregations across Ohio gathered outside the office of Senator Sherrod Brown to sing hymns and pray. While Sen. Brown was not available, a member of his staff listened as three Mennonites with first-hand experience of the violence experienced by Palestinian people shared stories from Gaza and the West Bank. When asked why she thought it was important for Mennonites to organize for a ceasefire in Gaza, Robin Walton of Columbus Mennonite Church said,

"I feel like if Mennonites think of Jesus as the Prince of Peace, they need to figure out the politics of that and how that applies to our society and the world, and here is a prime example of that." Lydia Brenneman of Lima Mennonite Church in Lima, Ohio shared, "I've lost two family members in Gaza, but also I have a friend who is a student at



Mary Ellen Meyer (Open Table MF) with great-grand children at the children's activities table. Photo: Karla Minter.

Bluffton University. He's lost three sisters to the violence. My heart just breaks when I think about that. And not only do we want a permanent ceasefire, but the only way that's going to happen with US pressure is if the US stops funding the Israeli military."

Mennonites including those from Milwaukee Mennonite Church gathered in Madison, Wisc. and sang hymns for peace together in the office lobby of Sen. Tammy Baldwin. Two days later Sen. Baldwin announced her support for a ceasefire in Gaza.

On January 16, 2024, hundreds of Mennonites from throughout the country gathered at the US Capitol, including CDC folks from Columbus, Ohio, Chapel Hill, N.C., Bluffton, Ohio, South Bend, Ind., and others.

Nearly 150 Mennonites held a sit-in in the rotunda of the Canon House office building, singing hymns and praying before being arrested. More information can be found here: <https://www.mennoniteaction.org/> Above photo credit: Xaris Martinez.



Upcoming: Sacred Listening Themes

In the past few years, volunteers from around the conference coordinated a series of listening sessions with member churches in order to get a sense of how they were adapting in the midst of the Covid pandemic and the new creative ways of worshipping and being in community with one another that arose in its midst. The CDC board spent last year compiling themes from these sessions with the goal of sharing what we found with the wider conference. With that goal in mind, each issue of the Connector this year will focus on a theme from the listening sessions, exploring the many ways congregations nurture one another, worship, and work for good in their communities. This was a transformative process for both the volunteer listeners and the participants, and we are excited to share the many stories we gathered with you throughout the year.

Doug's Mug- Emerging Churches

I wonder what conference leaders imagined when Central District Conference was born? In 1957, when Central District Conference emerged through the joining of the Middle District and the Central Conference, there were forty-one congregations spread across eight states. Today there are forty-six congregations representing eleven states. Of those original forty-one congregations, eleven remain. Some closed. Some joined other Mennonite conferences. Some merged with other congregations. Some became independent or joined non-Mennonite denominations. So, where did the other thirty-five congregations that are now part of CDC come from? Twenty-five congregations are new congregations that didn't exist in 1957. Ten congregations joined from other conferences or denominations.

What surprises you about this story? What encourages you? What do you lament? What are you curious about? How is God's wisdom at work through the church, in all its shifting and changing? (See Ephesians 3:8-12)



What is curious to me is that few of the new twenty-five congregations were intentionally "planted" by conference leaders. They emerged, mostly in urban areas, where Mennonite Voluntary Service workers landed, where college students studied, and where professionals found work. It could be described as a "gather-up

all the Mennonites in the area and see if they become a church" approach. While this still happens occasionally, what I've observed is that there are two primary occasions for starting new Mennonite faith communities.

The first is growing curiosity about Mennonite/Anabaptist faith. Our emphases on discipleship, taking seriously the life and ministry of Jesus, non-violent justice making, serious biblical engagement, community discernment, and congregational polity are attractive to some. When we are at our best, people who have experienced pain, manipulation, or abu-

sive authoritarian leadership in congregations have found a refreshing approach in Central District Conference. Others are convinced of the non-violent Christ and have become skeptical of war, an ever-expanding military-industrial complex, and a growing reliance on guns for protection. These folks are finding a home in Mennonite faith and are creating new faith communities. (See the story of Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship in the Anabaptist World article; [A Church Shows Up Unannounced](#).)

The second observation of how new communities of faith emerge has to do with experimentation in worship experiences. Can God be experienced more fully when worship and table fellowship happen together? (Several CDC congregations have a meal together each time they gather for worship.) Can God communicate through observing God's creation in ways that aren't as noticeable through word and song? (The "Wild Church" movement emphasizes guided worship outdoors.)

I've also observed a growing emphasis on active social justice with a desire to affect policy and judicial decisions. (Mennonite Action is the most recent movement of grassroots organizing to call for a ceasefire in Israel/Palestine. Over 250 Mennonites showed up in Washington, D.C. on January 16.

In an attempt to faithfully respond to the movement of God's Spirit among these emerging communities of faith across CDC, our board of directors approved the Tending Transformation Campaign in December 2021. (See Sarah Werner's accompanying article.) We want to be able to respond with guidance, financial support, and encouragement to these emerging communities. Central District leaders don't plant churches. God coaxes, nudges, and inspires people in their local communities to respond to Christ's love and God's persistent call to proclaim the Gospel of peace, healing, and hope. We want to partner with God and those whom God calls so that creative peace churches will emerge and thrive across many communities.

What do you imagine our community of churches will look like in another 66 years?

Installations and Ordinations



David Shenk was installed and licensed toward ordination on Sunday, December 3, 2023 at Florence Church of the Brethren Mennonite in Constantine, Michigan. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill



Sibonokuhle Ncube was licensed toward ordination at Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana on Sunday, January 7 for her work with Mennonite Mission Network as regional director for Africa and Europe. Photo credit: Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau.

Financial report December 31, 2023

2023/2024 to-date income	\$178,263
2023/2024 plan	\$151,843
Surplus of giving vs. plan.	\$26,420
2023/2024 to-date expenses	\$152,082
2023/2024 spending plan	\$169,293
Under-expenditure against plan. . . .	\$17,211

Strong calendar year-end giving from member congregations and individual supporters have brought the conference into 2024 in a very positive financial position. After six months of activity our income is at about 53% of the annual plan, while expenses are at 45%.

Tending Transformation campaign income for the year to date is \$45,850, bringing the campaign total to \$254,200. 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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