



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

February 2024

Connector

Stories and News from
Around the Conference

**Central
District
Conference**

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA



Sacred Listening Themes—Care

In 2022 and 2023 volunteers from around Central District coordinated a series of listening sessions with member congregations in order to get a sense of how churches were adapting in the aftermath 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 fall compiling themes and ideas 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.

The theme of the issue for February is “Care” in many aspects. We will hear from three transitional ministers about how congregations care for one another in the midst of change. Retired pastor Wanda Stopher shares about caring for each other in end-of-life transitions and how to have difficult conversations around caring at the end of a life. This issue also includes a book review of *The Dream Lives On*:

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Dorothy's Word by Jacob W. Elias, about Dorothy Word, an Indiana woman who spent her life caring for young people and writing about issues impacting the African American community in Indiana. One aspect of care at the conference level is sharing with one another at regular gatherings, one of which was earlier this month over Zoom. We hope you enjoy this latest issue of the Connector and stay tuned for future themes.



Mid-year Gathering Summary

Around 80 people from 34 congregations joined in the CDC Mid-year gathering over Zoom on February 3 to explore more deeply the conference's theme, “Listen! Wisdom is calling.” We heard updates and shared with one another about congregational decision-making practices.

The gathering began with a lovely worship service featuring several voices

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reading scriptures about wisdom, followed by a reflection by Doug Luginbill on the theme of wisdom. Matt Pritchard shared about his work with emerging communities of faith. If anyone is interested in starting their own community of faith, there are many resources he can provide to assist you in this important work. Doug shared updates on two churches who have applied to join the conference: Knoxville Mennonite Church in Tennessee and PEACE Mennonite Church in Archbold, Ohio. We also heard congregational stories from Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio, Mennonite Church of Normal (Ill.), and Covenant Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Fla about the important work these churches are doing in their communities.

The second half of the gathering featured time for people to share in small groups about how their congregations make decisions on weighty matters. A theme that emerged from this sharing was that many congregations rely on some form of consensus to make decisions, and there are costs and benefits to this method. On the one hand, consensus allows for all voices to be heard instead of silencing minority dissent. On the other hand, consensus often moves at a very slow pace, which can be cumbersome or lead to greater harm in issues of injustice. One example of this that was shared by multiple congregations was the decision-making process around becoming welcoming of LGBTQ folks. Some congregations moved slowly with the process in order to build consensus around the issue, while others moved more quickly in order to reduce harm to LGBTQ people in the congregation who felt excluded. In his closing remarks, Doug noted that a characteristic of wisdom is being able to hold the paradox of both thinking more deeply about why things are and also how they could be different.

Our next conference gathering will be the Annual Meeting, June 20-22 at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind. We hope you can all join us for more fellowship and group discernment as we live into the call to listen to the voice of wisdom.



The Gift of Transitional Ministry

Transitional ministers are an important aspect of congregational life that are often overlooked. When a pastor leaves a church, especially if they have been serving for a number of years, the congregation enters a period of discernment before calling their next pastor. This is when a trained transitional minister is helpful. We asked three pastors from the conference to share about their experiences in serving in transitional ministry.

Caring for Congregations in Transition by Gary Martin

A transition between long-term pastors, guided by a trained transitional pastor, is a unique opportunity for congregations to reflect together on their story, clarify their identity, and discern their vision for the future. Many think that finding new pastoral leadership is the immediate priority after a resignation: “the new pastor will help us discern future vision.” However, since Mennonites have congregational polity, vision work belongs to the congregation. In light of this confusion, only a small minority of congregants tend to recognize the value of transitional work as it begins. But by the end of the transition period, a strong majority tends to acknowledge it was worthwhile. A sign of success toward the end is when a congregant observes, “These processes would be helpful for us to do on a regular basis in the future.”

After experiencing ministry in a variety of contexts, my passion for congregational health became clearer. I realized my gifts

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and experiences had prepared me for transitional ministry. Reflecting on over three decades in this specialized ministry, I have been blessed by observing the Holy Spirit at work within many congregations and individuals, bringing healing and/or new recognition of spiritual gifts and callings. Beautiful and dynamic things happen when all congregant voices are heard and valued. I believe the Spirit has provided what each congregation needs, to effectively pursue the Reign of Christ in their context. We simply need to listen and watch carefully, for these resources to appear among us. As the biblical stories consistently reveal, the Spirit's provisions show up in the most unlikely places and people.

The course *Leading Congregations in Transition*, through AMBS, provides extensive resources for transitional and long-term ministers. They include how to quickly develop trust and evaluate the congregation as an emotional system, and then how to discern strategic priorities within the limited timeframe of the transition. There are also many resources for guiding the congregation in their transitional work.

Gary Martin recently retired from 48 years of ministry as a settled pastor, church planter, mission staff, and seminary instructor. Transitional parish ministry has been his focus since 1990. He has taught transitional ministry for 25 years, most recently in "Leading Congregations in Transition," in the Practical Leadership Program at AMBS. He is a member of Faith Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Transition and Mutual Care

by James Rissler

While I have done some training for transitional ministry, I have not yet served as a transitional pastor to a congregation. However, I have just completed an interim pastorate with Emmanuel Mennonite Church, and see this ministry as also grounded in care for congregations in transition. This care is shared in the ways that any congregation experiences the care of a pastor as they participate in and support leadership, worship, and pastoral care. But it also has its own flavor in the

midst of a congregation's transition from a settled pastor toward a new long-term pastor. Whether or not a congregation engages a transitional pastor to help them discern who they are before calling a settled pastor, they naturally are discovering their identity apart from their prior pastor, and anticipating who they might become. An interim pastor can encourage that process in gentle ways, even if they are not as explicitly guiding a discernment process. I hope that Emmanuel experienced me as reassuring them of their goodness and resilience through change, and encouraging them to trust and grow in their gifts, to then be offered in community with their new pastor as they together discern a vision for God's calling.

I will also say that as in any congregation, care is mutually shared. For the fifteen months of my interim pastorate, I pastored Emmanuel at a distance, traveling to be with them 2-3 Sundays a month and otherwise engaging them remotely through zoom, phone calls, and email. I was so impressed with Emmanuel's care for one another, and especially appreciative of the lead that their elders took in providing pastoral care alongside me. I deeply appreciated the relationships that I formed with the congregation, the ways that we shared in leadership, and the caring way that we said goodbye at the end of my interim role. I look forward to hearing how they grow and thrive with their new pastor, César Moya, and his wife Patricia, as they care for one another and discern how best to care for their community as well.

James Rissler is working on his D. Min. in Leadership through AMBS and is exploring opportunities for transitional ministry to which he can commute from Macon, Ga., where he moved with his family last summer.

Chaplains of Transitions

by Elizabeth Kelly

I spent most of my vocation serving as a hospital chaplain. When staff would ask me what I did, especially at critical times, I would respond, "I'm here to help patients and the people that love them (families),

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get from Point A to Point B. And Point B is beyond the parking lot.” It was so easy for us to focus on the clinical event inside the walls of the hospital that we didn’t consider what families might need after they walked out the door. And often the families were too distressed to wonder what they might need. They would get to the parking lot and have long conversations about what to do next and who was going to do it. Part of my role was to companion them in discerning those next steps, especially in the absence of the person who had “kept them all together” or been the “strong one” through difficult times.

I think of Transitional Ministry much in this way. When we in churches find ourselves in a space of ending, losing, or letting go, it is helpful to have someone come alongside us to help discern our next steps and formulate a plan to take them. As transitional ministers, we won’t make the journey into the future with churches, we just support congregations into a new phase of being. I consider it a privilege that congregational families have allowed me to companion them in the ending, losing and letting go times.

Elizabeth Kelly is gainfully unemployed and chairs the Board of Directors of Mennonite Home Communities of Ohio (Bluffton) and the CDC Missional Church Committee. In her spare time, she works on home projects, hangs out with friends, and watches for spring to come.

If you are interested in pursuing transitional ministry, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary offers a course on leading congregations in transition through their Practical Leadership Training Program. For more information, please visit: <https://www.ambs.edu/practical-leadership-training/>. If you are interested in transitional ministry in CDC, please contact Conference Minister Doug Luginbill: doug@mcu-sacdc.org.

Save the Date for Annual Meeting
College Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN
and via Zoom
June 20-22, 2024



Care: Advance Conversations

by Wanda Stopher

One of the multitude of things that became clear in our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is that presence with and care for the dying is a basic, widely held value for families, caregivers, congregations, and healthcare workers. Isolation from loved ones who were actively dying was one of the deeply painful truths about our lived experience in those days. Yet, one often-avoided component of caring for one another is engaging in conversations about end of life before the end of life appears imminent. I hope to make a case today for advance, deliberate conversations over time, about end of life, beginning before death seems near.

First, advance conversations about death provide the opportunity to explore and express our values both in our living and dying days. There are many ways to shape these conversations, but one that I have appreciated is the Best Three Months conversations developed by the Conscious Dying Institute. Imagining that your life will end in three months, participants explore five domains, identifying the values they hold in each domain and considering how those values might be expressed more fully both in life and in death. The five domains are: spiritual, physical, emotional/relational, legacy, and practical. Talking about these things helps to clarify what is important to each person about their spiritual life, body, relationships, what they most want to leave behind, and the nit-picky details.

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Second, although death and life are two sides of the same coin, the loss of life in death causes deep sadness and grief. Advance conversations about death will definitely include processing our grief at the losses death includes. In his book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Francis Weller writes, “For the most part, grief is not a problem to be solved, not a condition to be medicated, but a deep encounter with an essential experience of being human.” And “grief and love are sisters.” We grieve the loss of what we love. And in the words of Lama Rod Owens, “Grieving is an act of self-care.” Grief is a vehicle for navigating our losses and for integrating our pain into the emerging life that is opening before us. Advance conversations about death put us on the path to grief that is indeed an act of self-care, and that also expresses profound care for those we love.

Third, although in our culture grief has both been neglected and mostly relegated to a private matter, grief is most effective and powerful as an act of community. As people of faith we value community, giving and receiving counsel, learning from one another, and supporting each other. Advance conversations about death and life, living and dying, are acts of community in which we challenge, grow, and belong to one another deeply. Our faith communities are a profound gift for many reasons and the perfect place to explore and hold advance end of life conversations.

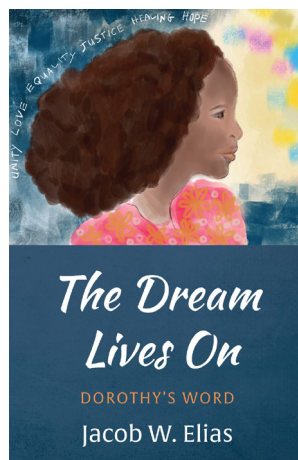
Wanda Stopher is a retired pastor now living in northern Michigan, where she loves gardening, tromping in the woods, and fishing.

The Dream Lives On: Dorothy's Word by Jacob W. Elias

Review by Sarah Werner

The book *The Dream Lives On* is a collection of newspaper columns written by Black Indiana-native Dorothy Word with commentary by her friend Jacob Elias, a retired pastor and professor emeritus of New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Word was an elementary school teacher from Fort Wayne who began writing columns for local newspa-

pers in Indiana after her retirement from teaching in 1995. Many of these columns focused on the issues faced by the African-American community and prominent Black public figures in American history. Elias does an excellent job of gathering stories from Word's friends and family to illuminate her life and give context to her writing. Elias organizes her columns into five categories: village, family, school, heritage, and dream. For each of these he provides some context for the theme and includes stories from Word's life, as well as framing thoughts and questions at the end of each chapter to help readers think more deeply about each theme.



The book is named for the dream that Word had of a “more hopeful future for her people,” Elias recounts. She details the struggles of the Black community in her columns and Elias sheds light on Word's own experience of discrimination during her life. Word's writ-

ing reflects the thoughts of a woman who cared deeply about her students during her teaching career and about the struggles and joys of those in the communities where she lived in Indiana.

The book is engaging and accessible, with each chapter featuring a small sample of columns Word wrote during her life. They discuss current issues, historical events, and many advocate for the importance of family and community in living a full life. I sat down to read just the first chapter, but found myself an hour later almost halfway through the book. Elias has crafted a very readable story around the original writings of Dorothy Word, including her role in the Indiana Mennonite community. The book is published by Resource Publications and is also available at online booksellers.

A man with glasses and a dark suit over a light blue shirt is standing at a wooden podium. He is gesturing with his right hand while speaking into a microphone. A microphone stand is visible to the left of the podium. The background features a window with horizontal blinds and a colorful patterned cloth hanging on the wall.

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