



March 2024

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 Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio) knot quilts for MCC, an annual tradition that welcomes everyone in the community to participate.

Sacred Listening Themes—Welcome and Belonging

by Sarah Werner

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 March issue is welcome and belonging. These two concepts came up in nearly every listening session. It became clear that churches in Central District are invested in making their communities places where all people who walk through their doors feel welcomed and cherished. The articles in this month's

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issue reflect just a few examples of the commitments churches have made to be places of welcome.

Spirit-led Ministry in Refugee Resettlement

by Matthew Yoder

Over the summer and fall of 2023, my rural congregation resettled a refugee family in Bluffton, Ohio. Like us, you may wonder "how can this be?" In order to write this article, I conducted several interviews with participants. The following series of events is a case study in spirit-led, passion-driven ministry; in other words, decentralized leadership. As a result, I, as pastor, had almost no direct involvement in leadership and decision-making or day-to-day operations of this project. My role was to solicit occasional reports and share information with the congregation through our various communication channels as the project unfolded.

It all began with Facebook. A member of our "Today's Disciples" adult Sunday school class came across some information about Welcome Corps on Facebook. She then brought the information to her Sunday school class for discussion. Interest in the possibility of resettling a refugee family was high in the midst of ongoing reports

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of the global refugee crisis involving refugees from the Russia/Ukraine war now joining the steady flow of refugees from the earlier Iraq and Afghanistan wars and other refugees from various conflicts and climate change around the globe.

Individuals in the Today's Disciples class have internalized our congregational vision of following Christ by loving each other, living the way of peace and serving the world around us. They understand intuitively or explicitly that we do this because we are called to live out the love of Christ in our community. Members of the Today's Disciples class are always exploring practical ways to live out this vision.

Within two weeks of Today's Disciples' first conversation about Welcome Corps, Grace was holding congregational meetings to learn more and discuss possibilities. Within six weeks, a core committee of five individuals had formed to provide leadership for the project. These "Core 5" spent countless hours in online trainings, filling out forms, and learning about and meeting the many important Welcome Corps requirements for us to become a "sponsoring community." The vast and growing pool of other volunteers grew to include local friends, neighbors and members of our sister church by lineage, First Mennonite of Bluffton.

Financial support was forthcoming thanks to the perennial generosity of our congregation and community and the efforts of the project development chair, a member of the Core 5 and Today's Disciples. Other challenges arose throughout the process. Employment opportunities in our area are abundant but adequate housing can be hard to come by. Where would our refugees live? Late in the process we learned that our refugee family, Congolese by nationality, would be from a camp in Tanzania and their primary language would be Swahili. How would a black family get along in a predominantly white, rural, conservative community? How would we bridge the language barrier? As God would have it, a network of friendships produced a connection with a landlord who

was interested in this work and agreed to provide an apartment for the refugee family. A Congolese pastor and non-profit entrepreneur fluent in Swahili happened to be studying at Bluffton University and became our project language teacher and translator. Through conversations with local chambers of commerce, employers, ministerial associations and law enforcement offices, we were pleasantly surprised by the support and hospitality expressed by our predominantly white, rural, conservative communities. You just never know where the Spirit is coming from or where it's going! God's hand was visibly at work in these and many other seemingly serendipitous events that made it possible for a Congolese family from a refugee camp in Tanzania to make the geographical and cultural leap to Bluffton, Ohio.

In September of 2023, Dowe, Zabibu and their three young children arrived in Bluffton. Welcoming this family from a communal, matriarchal culture into our historically patriarchal and extremely individualistic culture was a bit of a shock for everyone. Over the months that followed, the love of Christ was lived out in countless ways by members of the Core 5 and other volunteers, perhaps nowhere else more plainly than in the willingness of two of the leading women of the Core 5 who adopted our refugee family. They spent long hours every day helping to teach and guide Dowe and Zabibu through cooking with modern appliances, finding employment, establishing a budget, learning where to buy groceries and other necessities, and navigating US social structures and governmental bureaucracy. The leadership, dedication and care provided by these two women were instrumental in the success of this project.

As with any passion-driven, spirit-led ministry, there is much reflection to do on what went well, what did not go well, and where we saw the hand of God at work. There is also much discernment to do about the possibility of subsequent refugee resettlement projects. When Gabriel announced to Mary the coming birth of the

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Christ, her immediate response was, “How can this be...?” Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore that which is to be born will be holy.” I think this pretty well sums up our experience.

Matthew Yoder is the pastor of Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio.



The youth of Keller Park Church with David Cramer. Photo Credit: David Cramer.

Increasing the Competency of our Welcome

By David Cramer

At our annual membership recommitment service on September 11, 2022, Keller Park Church affirmed a new set of shared commitments that were recommended by our LGBTQ+ advisory committee. These included commitments to “welcome into full participation in the life of the church all who seek to follow Jesus in the pursuit of God’s kingdom” and to “extend Jesus’s table of belonging, membership, and shared ministry to people of every racial identity, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical ability, cognitive ability, socioeconomic status, marital status, or age, especially those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or harmed by the church.”

The journey that led our church to adopt these shared commitments goes back to a study of the book of Acts in 2018 and 2019. At the time, we were a part of a conservative evangelical denomination, and even if

many of us wanted to be more welcoming of LGBTQ+ people, producing a statement of welcome seemed like a remote possibility. But week in and week out, we studied Luke’s narrative of the Spirit’s transformative work in and through the early church. The early church didn’t have a coordinated plan to welcome gentile believers into their communion. Instead, despite their reluctance and even at times over their protest, they were led by the Spirit into encounters with gentile believers that left them forever changed.

We studied the story of Peter and John refusing to stay silent when the authorities commanded them to (Acts 4), and we created our own chant of defiance, which became our mantra over the next few years (and which the kids especially chanted with exuberance!):

*We must obey our Father above;
We won’t stop talking of Jesus’s love!
Whatever your color, whether weak or strong,*

Wherever you come from, we all belong!
This chant of allegiance to God over any human authority eventually led us into a discernment process regarding our denominational affiliation. When our former denomination adopted new statements of faith and practice that we could not in good conscience go along with, we made the difficult decision to disaffiliate and to seek affiliation with Central District and MC USA.

We still hadn’t had an official discernment process about our commitments to LGBTQ+ people, a number of whom were now active congregants. As with the early church, we realized that we needed to catch up to the work of the Spirit by discerning what that work means for us as a church. The early church called a council in Jerusalem, where they listened to the testimony of Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and others about the work of the Spirit among gentiles, concluding with a letter to the gentiles in which they wrote: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements” (Acts 15:28).

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We created an LGBTQ+ advisory committee to listen to testimonies of LGBTQ+ congregants and their families and to lead the congregation through a discernment process about how we could “increase the competency of our welcome”—a phrase we borrowed from Mixhi Marquis, co-founder of Mosaic Health & Healing Arts, a family practice in Goshen, Indiana, that is intentionally welcoming of LGBTQ+ patients.

We wrestled with difficult questions congregants raised over Scripture, theology, and ethics. We consulted books and watched documentaries. After a six-month process of discernment, we were finally able to say with the early church that it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden our LGBTQ+ congregants with any requirements beyond what the rest of the congregation was committed to bear. And so together as one body we affirmed our shared commitments to one another at our membership recommitment service.

Luke writes that when the gentile churches received the letter from the Jerusalem Council, “there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message” (Acts 15:31). I confess that at the end of our process I felt more anxiety and depression than I did joy. We had gone through a couple of difficult years of discernment and change, which resulted in the severing of relationships with people and institutions we held dear. Because of our commitment to extend our table of fellowship, some decided they could no longer sit at our table, while others publicly declared our table unclean.

But then something surprising began to happen. New individuals and families began showing up on Sunday mornings. When I would talk to them about how they discovered our little neighborhood church off the beaten path, consistently they would answer that they had been looking for a church where LGBTQ+ people were welcomed. Some of them even said that they wondered whether our church might be such a place, but it was only when they



A Keller Park Church family at South Bend Pride Festival. Photo Credit: David Cramer

read our shared commitments that they felt safe giving us a try. Now some of these people are active members of our church, and we couldn’t imagine life together without them.

It turns out that the process of discernment over becoming welcoming and affirming is simply the first (often difficult) step. The next step, as with the early church, is joyfully celebrating that decision by putting it into practice. For us, that has meant sponsoring a table at the South Bend Pride Festival. It has meant letting our youth decorate the youth room with flags and signs of inclusion. It has meant making our bathrooms gender-neutral and working toward making them more accessible. In short, it has meant following the Spirit’s lead on a never-ending journey of increasing the competency of our welcome. And it is a journey filled with joy!

David Cramer is pastor at Keller Park Church in South Bend, Indiana, and managing editor of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He is currently working on a pastoral research project titled “Affirming Acts: Exploring a Faithful Biblical Hermeneutic for Queer-Inclusive Churches,” funded by a grant from the Louisville Institute.

Doug’s Mug- A Cup of Hospitality by Doug Luginbill

Our [Central District Mission Statement](#) states, in part, that as a result of “knowing Christ’s abundant love” we share that love by “promoting a Christ-like community of hospitality where all are welcomed.”

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Paula (my spouse) and I experienced such hospitality as we visited [Knoxville Mennonite Church](#) (KMC) on February 25. Knoxville Mennonite has begun the process of joining CDC. A congregation of 30-40 generous souls of all ages, KMC enjoys a potluck meal on the first Sunday of the month. They want CDC folks to know that



if you are traveling I-75 or I-40 on a Sunday morning, please stop by to worship with them at 11:00 am. They are only a few minutes from the Interstate on the northwest side of Knoxville.

Another aspect of KMC's hospitality is sharing their facility

with three young-adult siblings who are without other family or home. This act of hospitality for over two years, while not always logistically easy, demonstrates what "a Christ-like community of hospitality" looks like in northwest Knoxville.

Our CDC theme through June of 2025 is "Listen! Wisdom is calling." I have been going through the Bible, finding and reading scriptures that explicitly mention "wisdom." In Hebrew, Wisdom is "Chokma" and in Greek she is "Sophia." Always personified as feminine, Sophia was present with God and a participant in the creation of the world. Proverbs 8:24-27 proclaims:

*When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.*

*Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when God had not yet made earth and fields.
or the world's first bits of soil.*

When God established the heavens, I was there.

Sophia also extends hospitality to all who seek her. While likely less familiar to us who use Bibles without the Apocrypha, the Book of Sirach 15:2-4 states:

*She will come to them like a mother,
will greet them like a young bride.*

*Her food is the bread of understanding;
her drink the water of knowledge.
They will lean on her for support,
and rely on her without shame.*

In many ways, Jesus reflects the character and persona of Sophia as described in the Hebrew Bible. Compare, for example, Sirach 24:17, 19 with John 15:5.

Sirach 24:17, 19 reads:

*Like the vine I bud forth delights,
and my blossoms become glorious and
abundant fruit.*

*"Come to me, you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruits.*

John 15:5 says:

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those
who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.*

A consistent theme that appeared through our Sacred Listening process was, "CDC congregations value being welcoming and providing care for their members and those in their communities." Hospitality, sharing meals together, welcoming and sharing generously with the stranger, these are gifts of the Spirit that God has given to the church. Let us continue to drink deeply from the cup of hospitality!

Finding Belonging as a Nomad

Amy Aschliman

When I was in first grade, I moved from a small farming community in central Illinois to the city of Chicago and attended public school there. I had a strong sense of belonging with my family in my rural Mennonite church community, and while this foundation remained a connection in my life, I felt uncertain about belonging in my new place. I made a few friends but was remarkably quiet and observant of this new community. I was fascinated by the very diverse cultures present there: the new lingo, food, value systems, the games children played. My curiosity and admiration outweighed my sense of displacement.

Even though I felt like an outsider during those young years, I believe my listening and learning there ultimately has given me a wider sense of connectedness with community and humanity. Connection

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doesn't only occur with those with whom you share particular roots. This experience helped me develop the attunement that I need in my present vocation as a hospice chaplain.

As a chaplain, I walk into unknown homes and nursing facilities everyday. It is humbling to receive the welcome of families into such intimate spaces at these most tender times. I am awed at the courageous ways families allow themselves to receive support, and the ways suddenly I seem to belong on the couch among the inner circles of loved ones. I trust that my professionalism, openness, and sensitivity convey welcome and belonging to the families I work with, and this is how we are able to share these meaningful moments together, forging instant connections from scratch.

I walked into a room yesterday where a daughter was with her mother, a new patient of ours who had come into hospice care already transitioning. The patient was mostly non-verbal at this point, but I spoke reassurances and care to her, moistened her mouth with a sponge swab when she requested water. The daughter was crying throughout the visit, reassuring me she "held it together" for the visits from other team members. I welcomed the sacredness of her tears and acknowledged their healing power. I affirmed the significance of their relationship, the importance of this moment, the care and love shared. She reviewed memories, feelings, spirituality, and next steps. She looked out at the busy downtown streets below and commented about the world going on while everything is stopping for her. We sat together, right where we belonged.

Sometimes as I travel these streets from patient to patient, I am reminded of the nomadic nature of Jesus in his itinerant ministry of miraculous encounters. He formed these sacred connections, fully present with people in a particular moment, meeting the people where they were. But I am also reminded of who he traveled with, the disciples, and the sense of belonging that he relied on to sustain him in this work. Hospice chaplains work on interdisciplinary teams of nurses, social workers, and certified nursing assistants. I have done many joint visits with my team members, and we are constantly calling and messaging each other to discuss patients and our experiences. I also communicate frequently with my chaplain colleagues. The sense of belonging and shared experience with my colleagues makes this work sustainable.

There have been times in life where I have felt a sense of deficiency around a lack of deep-rooted long-term relationships. But I am learning that growing edges and gifts are often two sides of the same coin. I am happily nomadic, knowing that my Divine Source flows through me and humanity, empowering us to find connection and belonging in miraculous moments everywhere.



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