



April 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



The Camp Friedenswald oak savanna.

Sacred Listening Themes: Curious and Open to Change

by Sarah Werner

In the past two years, 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 this month's issue is curious and open to change. Many congregations in Central District shared in sacred listening sessions about various projects and ideas that arose to address the changing needs of their congregations. This was especially pronounced during Covid, but

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being open to change and willing to adapt to new circumstances is important at any time. The articles this month reflect some of the ways CDC members have responded to changing needs in their communities, including green burial, community gardens, and responding to the war in Gaza. We hope you enjoy some of these stories as well as the preview of the Annual Meeting, which will be held at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, June 20-22.

Inhabiting the Land in Life and Death

by Valerie Showalter

Living justly with and on the land is a priority for many Mennonites, especially in an era of increased concern around climate change, heightened awareness about the fragility of our watersheds, and in contexts where access to affordable housing or farmland creates barriers for sustainable communities. Yet, in our work to live ecologically-just lives, we often overlook another way of living into our Anabaptist, shalom-inspired theology of creation: through our dying and end-of-life wishes.

As a part of my Doctor of Ministry course at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, I am hoping to bridge the gap

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between our living theology of creation care and our dying theology and practices for creation justice. To do this, I have developed a basic research question: “How does a life lived close to the land impact Mennonites’ thoughts on death, dying, and burial?” Or, more simply, “How does our relationship with the land impact our end-of-life wishes?” This question has developed from the intersections of my ministry within Central District Conference, my personal interests in creation justice and communal rituals, and the dearth of discussion, particularly within white Mennonite culture, in addressing how to align our last wishes with the core values of our lives. Though American Mennonite theology has historically included perspectives on human relationship with creation and the nature of human death, there has not been a merging of these theological understandings. I am also keen to highlight how American Mennonites’ historic view on the land has been impacted by white, European cultural norms of land use and ownership, and that addressing this also serves to bring our theological priorities to bear on how we use the land for burial.

Last summer, I conducted initial interviews with a handful of CDC members as a way of testing the research question and to listen for insights and patterns in interviewees’ responses (with more to follow). Of note, each of the interviewees in the pilot are white with predominantly European ancestry. Interviewees lived in a variety of settings, including rural, suburban, and urban areas, and identified with the concept that they “lived close to the land,” which could be interpreted in myriad ways (e.g., farming, gardening, hiking, etc.) Of the themes that emerged from the interviews, I will highlight three for now.

First, our sense of our ancestral history is fragmented and limited to generations of living memory. While each of the interviewees had at least a vague sense of familial migration and settlement in the US, most stories beyond two or three generations back had been lost. What was known, however, was that for several of the inter-

viewees, at least one strand of their family line—and often more than one—had been Mennonite or Anabaptist at the time of immigration and this continued throughout multiple generations to the current day. Several interviewees mentioned an awareness that their families would have settled, mostly as farmers, in areas where Indigenous peoples had been systematically removed from the land, though this awareness was rarely noted in the telling of ancestral stories.

Second, just as stories have been lost about ancestral connection to the land, there has been generational silence on the topics of death, dying, and the rituals surrounding death. While interviewees recounted funerals they’ve attended from childhood to adulthood and noted the general patterns of a funeral, few experienced open conversations within their families regarding aging, death, and dying. “We don’t talk about stuff like this,” one interviewee said with a laugh. Additionally, returning to ancestors’ gravesites is not a common practice, though interviewees often knew where their grandparents or great-grandparents were buried.

Third, living close to the land seems to correlate with a clear vision for choosing ecologically- or environmentally-friendly methods for one’s end-of-life and burial. Interviewees consistently noted a desire for their bodies to “return to the earth” in a natural state. Yet this is where most of the interviewees stalled in their responses. Barriers to further clarity on the practical aspects of burial included uncertainty about state regulations on the disposal of bodies, a lack of awareness of what types of alternative burial options were available in their area, and/or uncertainty about the actual ecological implications of their currently preferred method.

As my research continues, I anticipate reaching out to CDC member congregations to add to the pool of interviewees. If you or someone you know lives close to the land and is up for talking about death, feel free to reach out. I look forward to sharing my final research in the coming years!



Children playing in the Keller Park Church community garden. Credit: David Cramer



Keller Park Church Garden
Keller Park Church in South Bend, Ind. has a community garden. It has become a place where members of the congregation gather in addition to providing needed produce for neighbors.

Community Gardens Galore!

A handful of CDC congregations are currently involved in community garden projects, and the photos below capture the special joy of gardening for the benefit of neighbors.



Keller Park Church community garden. Credit: David Cramer



The sharing shed at Grace Mennonite Church. Credit: Matthew Yoder

A Sharing Shed: Long ago, the members of Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio, decided to develop a community garden as a food ministry to Pandora. Gardens require lots of hard work but they often yield an over-abundance. In addition to nurturing beauty, creation care and community, the gardens' excess yield went to local food banks in our area. With increasing restrictions on what kinds of donations food banks can accept, they needed to find a new way to share the abundance of God's creation with those in need. Four hard-working and dedicated individuals constructed the new "Sharing Shed" where fresh produce is shared during the growing season and dry goods are shared during the winter months.

Atlanta Mennonite's Farm Partnership

Atlanta Mennonite Church in Georgia has several acres on their property that are currently being used in partnership with the Paideia School's urban agriculture program, which operates a working farm on the land. Students learn about agriculture, ecology, and nutrition while working the land. They donate more than two-thirds of the produce grown annually (totaling several tons) to local community partners in food-insecure neighborhoods in addition to operating a CSA.



Fields in early spring at Atlanta Mennonite Church.

CDC Updates on Israel/Palestine

by Sarah Werner

There has been a great deal of activity among CDC members responding to the war in Israel/Palestine this year so far, including delegation visits, participation in Mennonite Action events, and visits to members of congress.

John Kampen, a professor at Methodist Theological School of Ohio and former CDC pastor, visited Israel in January on a delegation with the Jewish Studies Faculty Solidarity Mission to Israel through his affiliation with Hebrew Union-College. During the tour they visited with colleagues at universities in Israel and toured some of the areas destroyed in the attack by Hamas.

Kampen shared, “The three-day tour of colleges and universities throughout Israel underscored the multicultural nature of their student bodies. The two schools next to Gaza were most diverse. About five miles from the Gaza strip, Achva Academic College’s student population is about 35% Bedouin, also including Israelis, Israeli immigrants, and Arabs. Sapir College in Sderot, a half a mile from the Gaza border, has similar diversity. Ten faculty members were murdered, nine of them on October 7. Both schools play integral roles in the lives of the Jewish and Arab villages in southern Israel.

“The Vice-President for Student Services at Tel Aviv University talked about the challenges of bringing Jewish and Arab students back into the same classrooms after the experiences of the fall.

“Most disturbing was the immediate isolation Israeli faculty members experienced within the international academic communities. Lecture invitations revoked, lecture invitations not forthcoming, article submissions returned without consideration, e-mails unanswered, a “soft boycott.”

The delegation also visited Hostage Square near the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, where artists created a large but empty 200-person dinner table to receive the remaining hostages once they are released.

Doug Hostetter, a peace pastor with membership at Evanston Mennonite and



Caption: The empty table at Hostage Square in Tel Aviv. Credit: John Kampen.

a member of Pax Christi International UN Advocacy Team, visited Congressman Richard Neal as part of a group and presented him with a letter urging him to support a ceasefire in

Gaza. In it he described becoming friends with some of the staff from a development NGO in Gaza City, including Amgad Al-Mhalwi, who was able to send updates to Hostetter after the October 7 attacks. Hostetter wrote in his letter, “Amgad lost his home in the early weeks of the bombing and has moved his family over a dozen times to homes of friends and relatives, school buildings and hospitals in the futile effort to find safety for his wife and two children under 5 years of age. After all of the places he had sought shelter that been attacked, he and his family have ended up in the massive tent encampment in Rafah, near the Egyptian border.”

Al-Mhalwi asked Hostetter to pass a message along to Congressman Neal, saying: “We are now here in a tent in Rafah. People die here every day because of waiting. We want to return to our homes. We want freedom and peace. We do not want to die. Too many of my family members have been killed.

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Left: Meeting with Congressman Neal. Right: Amgad Al-Mhalwi at a camp in Rafah. Credit: Doug Hostetter.

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We want to travel and live in freedom and dignity. When we were driven from our home near Gaza city, our children have become sick. My children are suffering and we are tired. Please ask your government to support an immediate ceasefire to end this war, enable immediate humanitarian aid, and allow our families to live and return to our homes.”



Left: Mishawaka action. Credit: Peter Ringenberg. Right: Gainesville action. Credit: Juan Moya.

Other Mennonites in CDC were involved in protests and vigils during Holy Week that were organized through Mennonite Action, including Chicago Community Mennonite Church, Emmanuel Mennonite Fellowship in Gainesville, Fla., and several congregations in the Michiana area, including Keller Park Church.

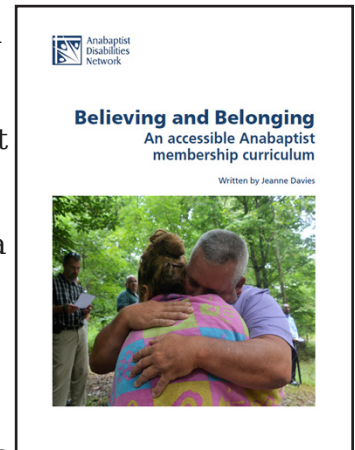
Emmanuel Mennonite Church held an action against the war in Gaza at a busy intersection near their church. They displayed banners with anti-war phrases and gave handouts to drivers and people on the street. In Mishawaka over 150 Mennonites from across Indiana and Michigan gathered outside of Rep. Rudy Yakym’s office for a service of lament for the nearly 1,200 Israelis killed in the October 7 attack by Hamas and the over 32,000 Palestinians killed in the subsequent bombardment of Gaza by Israeli Defense Forces. As part of the service, approximately two dozen participants laid on the ground in a “die-in,” symbolizing the thousands of innocent Palestinians killed by bombs and ammunition funded by US tax dollars appropriated by Congress.

New Baptism Resource from ADN

by Sarah Werner

Believing and Belonging: An accessible Anabaptist Membership Curriculum by Jeanne Davies, director of Anabaptist Disabilities Network, is an excellent resource for adults with developmental disabilities who are considering baptism. It tells the stories of the Bible and the Church in a beautiful, accessible format. In the introduction to the teacher’s edition, Davies explains, “The most important lesson that your students will learn about Jesus is their experience of the church, including you. This is an experiential curriculum. Knowing Jesus is not the same thing as knowing things about Jesus. Our hope is to have our students encounter the living Christ and want to follow him.”

In religious education with both youth and adults, we too often focus on talking about Jesus rather than embodying his message. This curriculum was a breath of fresh air in this regard, and I felt that it could easily be adapted for use with all young people and young adults considering baptism.



The stories are simple and powerful, featuring voices from the Bible who showed bravery and love in the midst of adversity and misunderstanding, something people with developmental disabilities can relate to. The reflection activities were equally appealing—going outside to look at the night sky after hearing the story of God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky, or giving food to a food pantry after hearing the story of Ruth.

The curriculum also incorporates ideas and practices that will be helpful in connecting with concrete thinkers, offering suggestions like connecting with the feelings of each story and connecting the story with the student’s experience and the world around them. *Continued on pg. 6*

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It also emphasized that many people with developmental disabilities do not get to make many, if any, decisions about their own lives, and that baptism is a decision for each person to make for themselves. The curriculum offered alternative ways to celebrate people who choose not to be baptized or are not able to choose and welcome them into full belonging in the congregation. Additionally, it encouraged students to participate in leading elements of worship, whether in leading a prayer or a song, or sharing about their experience.

Mario and Jon Lehman were two of the student testers and their mother Tracey Lehman shared the following about their experience: “They sit, listen, and seem to understand much of the content. They like to do one or two of the activities. That’s saying a lot because they aren’t often interested in reading stories with me.” All in all, it was a thoughtful, lovely curriculum that introduces people to baptism and the church in an inclusive and welcoming way.

CDC Annual Meeting is Coming!

Where and When: College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, June 20-22

Highlights include:

- Three congregations seeking membership in CDC this year—St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship (Missouri), Knoxville Mennonite Church (Tennessee), and Peace Mennonite Church (Archibold, Ohio)
- Inspirational worship and messages from Carol Penner and Sibonokuhle Ncube on our theme, Listen! Wisdom is calling
- Learn how your congregation can participate in Anabaptism at 500 Project
- Build new friendships and renew old bonds
- Registration opens May 1 on the CDC website: <https://mcusacdc.org/>

Financial report March 31, 2024

2023/2024 to-date income	\$217,114
2023/2024 plan	\$ 227,764
amount under budgeted income . . .	-\$10,650

2023/2024 to-date expenses	\$ 232,404
2023/2024 spending plan	\$253,939
Under-expenditure against plan . . .	\$ 21,535

Total Central District Conference income after nine months of activity in the 2023/24 fiscal year is about \$10,000 below spending plan projections. However, member church contributions continue to be well ahead of budget. On the expense side, administrative support costs are slightly above budget, while expenses for the year-to-date overall are around \$20,000 under the spending plan.

Tending Transformation campaign income is now at \$65,550 for the year, bringing the campaign total to \$273,900. The campaign goal by the end of the 24/25 financial year is \$350,000.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

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