

CENTRAL DISTRICT CONFERENCE
Minutes
June 22-24, 2023
College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana
Tending Transformation

Thursday, June 23

- *Transformation as Sacred Journey led by Naomi Wenger
- *Pastor Appreciation Dinner at College Mennonite Church

WORSHIP I: College Mennonite Church

Theme: When the Church is the Church, the Community Rejoices

Texts: Proverbs 11:10, John 4:4-42, Jeremiah 6:13-14; 8:10b-11; 29:5-9

Speaker: Matt Pritchard

Offering: Anabaptist Disabilities Network

Ice Cream Social

Friday, June 24

Delegate Session I

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Come, all you peoples*, from *Voices Together (VT 2)*

Welcome

James Rissler (Emmanuel) welcomed delegates to the 67th annual meeting with the sounding of the gavel. He invited participants to introduce themselves around tables and to share what excites them the most about the church today.

State of the Conference Address:

James Rissler, (Emmanuel) shared that in searching for a word that might best describe the sense of who the conference is this year, he landed on the word ‘exploring.’ Last year’s descriptor was expecting. This year we will be exploring the ways we might be transformed by the things we worked on last year.

*Sacred listening with 35 or 40 communities of faith. Feedback from congregations indicated that they appreciated the process. James thanked the volunteers who participated in the listening process and are working to organize what was heard into theme reports.

*The Board also wants to continue exploring why 10 of our congregations chose not to participate in the listening sessions. In an attempt to be attentive to our congregations, the Board has been inviting congregational representatives to join us at each Board meeting.

*Communications: Mary Klassen resigned as conference editor and James thanked her for her work over the past few years. After a communications audit conducted by Marathana Prothro, Sarah Werner was hired as the Communications Coordinator. In addition, Flint Hills Design was hired to update the website.

*Matt Pritchard was hired as Associate Conference Minister of Emerging Communities of Faith. We now have dedicated staff time to explore how God is calling communities to be communities of faith. We tend transformation by being attentive to new things that bubble up.

Each congregation will be receiving a copy of *The Peace Table*, a storybook Bible published by

MennoMedia that emphasizing peacemaking, and a copy of *Believe and Be Baptized: Conversations on baptism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition* by John D Roth and Thomas Yoder Neufeld.

We are grateful for the sustained giving that enables us to fund excellent staff and to sustain the work we are doing. Congregational life and ministry will always be the center of our lives.

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Congregational Story: Olentangy Wild Church

Sarah Werner (Columbus) shared that the Wild Church movement began 14 years ago in Great Britain when a group of people wanted to worship outside. About ten years ago a Mennonite pastor in Ontario started the Wild Church movement in North America. Goshen Wild Church started 18 months ago. Sarah started a Wild Church in Columbus that started meeting the first Sunday of Advent. The group had been meeting once/month and recently began meeting twice/month. The service begins with welcoming words. Participants spend half of worship wandering around in the woods or sitting and meditating by the fire. They then return to the worship circle and share what they heard with the larger group.

Introductions: Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) introduced the following:

Resolutions Committee: Jeff Boehr (Lima), Kiva Nice-Webb (Chicago Community), Rich Preheim (Hively Ave)

Listening Committee: Carrie Mast (First Bluffton), Ron Byler (Eighth Street), Scott Coulter (Assembly)

Parliamentarian: Gerald Mast

Summary Review Minutes: Christine Guth (Eighth Street) summarized the minutes of the 2022 annual meeting. *A motion was made and seconded to accept the minutes of the 2022 annual meeting as written. Ardean Friesen (Silverwood), Arman Habegger (Grace). The motion was affirmed.*

Treasurer's Report/Presentation of 2023-2024 Proposed Spending Plan: James Rissler (Emmanuel) thanked congregations for their support and reported that CDC will meet the spending plan this year.

James directed delegates to the 2023-2024 spending plan on p33 of the report book. The spending plan includes budgeting for the Tending Transformation campaign.

Presentation of Gifts Discernment Committee and Slate: Brenda North Martin (Raleigh) introduced the members of the Gifts Discernment Committee: Laura Brenneman-Fullwood (First Urbana), Jon Hilty (Grace), Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street), Joel Miller (Columbus), and David Moser (Southside). She thanked those who accepted the call to serve in the conference and encouraged delegates to share names of those with gifts for conference work with the Gifts Discernment Committee. Brenda introduced the nominees presented on the slate (p35 of the report book):

*Board of Directors: Joel Miller (Columbus), president-elect and Lydia Brenneman (Lima), member-at-large

*Ministerial Committee: Brian Bolton (Shalom Mennonite Congregation) and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly)

*Missional Church Committee: Julia Gingrich (Eighth Street) and Gary Martin (Faith)

*Camp Friedenswald Board: Mark Roeschley (Mennonite Church of Normal), Chris Moser (First Bluffton) and Deanna Risser (Assembly)

On behalf of the Gifts Discernment Committee, Brenda moved to affirm the 2023-2024 slate of nominees. The motion was affirmed.

Commissioning Prayer: Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) thanked all new and ongoing committee and board members for their willingness to share their gifts, experience, time and energy to the work and worship of Central District Conference. He led in prayer.

Break

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Cantai ao Senor (O Sing to the Lord)*, VT 113

Committee reports panel discussion: Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) invited Gayle Gerber Koonts (Assembly) from the Ministerial Committee, Karla Minter (Open Table) from the Missional Church Committee, and Jenna Liechty Martin (Eighth Street), executive director of Camp Friedenswald to report of the work of their respective committees using a panel format.

Ministerial Committee

The Ministerial Committee recognized the pastors who died in the last year:

- *Phil Mininger (Paoli)
- *Donald Nofziger (Eighth Street)

Newly credentialed pastors were recognized:

- *Peter Eash-Scott (Milwaukee)
- *Anton and Charlotte Flores (Atlanta)
- *Carolyn May (Jubilee)
- *Rachel R Miller (Eighth Street)
- *Marty Troyer (Columbus)
- *Carrie Mast (First Mennonite Bluffton)
- *Karla Minter (Open Table)
- *Julia Schmidt (Faith)
- *Tim Peebles (Chicago Community)
- *Mariah Martin (Faith)
- *Gwen Stetler (Jubilee)
- *Phil Yoder (First Mennonite Bluffton)
- *Pratik Bagh (Hively Avenue)
- *Debbie Bledsoe (Southside)
- *Kevin Chupp (Mennonite Church of Normal)

Congregational Story: Moveable Feast

Celeste Groff shared that Moveable Feast was formed, as the Holy Spirit formed the church at Pentecost, on the principle of solidarity with each other, with all other people, and with all of the creatures of the earth. The congregation engages in formation of several types: interfaith Sabbath suppers, Bible study book group, and a monthly Sunday morning house church. They partner with a Lutheran church to welcome migrants and tend a garden. Celeste shared the story of the baptism of Adrian Jay.

Acknowledging closing of Ames Mennonite Church

James Rissler (Emmanuel) gave a brief history and background of Ames Mennonite Church, which closed after 45 years of ministry.

Introduction of St Louis Mennonite Fellowship

Steven P Miller and Janelle Basinger shared that St Louis Mennonite Fellowship, a dual conference congregation, had been part of CDC until 2005. For reasons of proximity they chose to affiliate solely with Illinois Mennonite Conference at that time. The congregation is now choosing to affiliate again with CDC. Steven and Jenelle shared the mission statement of the congregation. They are now the only

Mennonite church located in south St Louis. Although there are ~60 people listed in the directory, there are ~20 who attend weekly. The congregation uses the consensus process for making decisions. They were founded in 1975. They appreciate that CDC is aligned in spirit and in deed with the MC USA guidelines. The conference is a good fit demographically. The congregation is in need of the support that CDC can provide. They are currently looking for a new pastor as they lament the circumstances that caused the current pastor to leave the state because of recent transgender laws in Missouri.

Dwelling in the Word/Visioning (PowerPoint presentation)

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) invited delegates to reflect on Exodus 3:1-10 using lectio divina. He invited table groups to share what they heard and caught their attention. Following table discussion, groups were invited to share what they hear with the larger group.

Introduction of Guests: Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) welcomed and introduced guests and representatives from Mennonite Church USA executive leadership and its agencies, Mennonite schools and from other organizations related to the conference.

Ken Hochstetler (Everence) briefly reviewed a proposal to reposition Everence from an agency of Mennonite USA to a ministry partner. The proposal will be brought to delegates at MennoCon23.

Lunch, Visiting Displays

Delegate Session II

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Sing a new world into being*, VT 809.

Jan Luginbill (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Tending Transformation: Jan Luginbill (Chicago Community) led a conversation with Debbie Bledsoe (Southside Fellowship) and Sarah Werner (Columbus) about the way they have experienced living with disabilities.

Debbie Bledsoe: Debbie noted that not all disabilities are visible. It is important to trust someone when they say they have different needs. She shared the disabilities she is living with and how they have impacted her life.

Questions: Responses in italics

*What new ways do you want people to think about disability accommodations? *Extend grace and assurance that the disability is not a burden. Accommodations can look like so many things.*

*What important thing do you want people to think about themselves? *Be aware of what accessibility issues may need accommodations and let people know.*

*What is something that people can do now? *Do the Anabaptist Disabilities Network audit in your congregation.*

Sarah Werner: Sarah shared that she is living with increasing levels of disability and shared some of her story. She is happy to talk and answer questions about her disability.

Questions:

*How do you talk to God about your disability? *We all have imperfect bodies. After living a long time in my head, I am incredibly grateful for life.*

*Do you pray for your body? *I pray for healing from pain and for patience. I do not pray for healing. God created all of us to be exactly who we are. Who we are is holy.*

*What would you advise not to say to a disabled person? *It is not appropriate to ask someone why they use a wheelchair or crutches when you first meet them. Develop a relationship first, don't start a conversation with how folks look. The hardest thing about being in a wheelchair is that it's the first thing people see.*

Delegates were invited to talk together at their tables about the accessibility resolution.

Reporting back:

**Jaimie Houghton-Thompson (Maplewood)*: Being aware of one disability often makes other things more accessible as well and can make people feel a part of the congregation.

**Ron Ropp (Mennonite Church of Normal)*: The most undiagnosed illness is depression in the elderly. Losing physical, mental and other capacities add up and can become overwhelming.

**Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly)*: When trying to address accessibility issues, congregations face obstacles such as limited financial resources to put in elevators. Working with mental disabilities are often the most difficult.

**Samir Knego (Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship)*: Our table discussed how disabled people can support other disabled people, especially people with invisible disabilities.

**Peter Graber (Anabaptist Disabilities Network)*: The church needs to move to language of belonging and away from inclusion. Everyone belongs. Our job to help everyone feel like they belong.

**Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street Mennonite Church)*: Could we create a place on website that lists congregations with Zoom services and online services.

**Mark Moser (Emmanuel Mennonite Church)*: Our table discussed how important listening fits into accessibility. The more we listen to each other, the more the problem of disabilities works itself out.

**Beth Bontrager (Faith Mennonite Church)*: One way to make communion accessible when they are not comfortable with it is to invite them to cross their arms to indicate they would like to receive a blessing rather than partake in the cup and bread.

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Break

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Uyai mose (Come All You Peoples)*, VT 2.

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Tending Transformation: The Ministerial Committee led this session of worship and discussion

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Create in me a clean heart*. VT 141, refrain and v. 1

The committee presented the following litany:

Here we are God. Tending transformation in our souls and in our world.

We confess that change does not come easily for us, nor is transformation our daily prayer.

When we gather for worship, we prefer harmonies that lift our spirits,
words that affirm our faithfulness,
confessions in which we imagine others' sins and not our own.

We are not used to being called to repentance,

scolded for our narrow hospitality,
invited to imagine an even greater beloved community.

We wish to forget the sins of our past, sins of our forebears and our own,
sins that excluded and drew heavy lines between the welcomed and the shunned,
sins of slavery and sweatshops,
sins of forced removal of those who walked this land for generations before us,
sins of racism and patriarchy, environmental destruction and overconsumption.

The psalmist cries out:

“Dear God, don’t blame us for the sins of our parents.
hurry up and help us; we’re at the end of our rope.
You’re famous for helping; God, give *us* a break.
your reputation is on the line.
Pull us out of this mess, forgive us our sins—
do what you’re famous for doing!” (Psalm 79)

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Create in me a clean heart*. VT 141, refrain and v.
2

Silent reflection

As a Central District Conference, we have not yet fulfilled our mission.

We confess:

We have not fully understood Christ’s abundant love and we have sometimes refused to answer God’s
persistent call to share God’s love with one another and the world.
We have hoarded your good news and preached only to the choir.
We have made decisions that privilege the majority and diminish the gifts and calling of those who
have been marginalized.

We confess:

We have failed to build healthy and mutual relationships with one another across races and ethnicities.
We have narrowly defined who can be in committed and loving relationships and we investigated
pastors who performed marriages in good conscience and with the blessing of their congregation.

We confess:

We have refused to recognize the spiritual gifts of those who don’t fit our vision of god’s image-
bearers.
We are diminished in vitality and faithfulness by the loss of our LGBTQIA siblings who have chosen to
leave because of exclusionary practices.

We confess:

We have not affirmed the full status and worth of queer siblings as fully beloved by God.
We have driven wedges between marginalized groups, failing to creatively find welcome for all.
We have preached a shallow unity that left others further marginalized and alone.

Today we place empty chairs among us, representing those whose gifts have not been welcomed,
and chairs shrouded in obscurity, representing others who chose to remain hidden.

Those who have been rejected and discouraged,
those who could not trust or feel safe to be truly themselves in the church.

Leaders whose lives and careers have been disadvantaged in material and economic ways due to discriminatory policies around credentialing, ordination, and professional ministry in CDC.

During the silent reflection which will follow our song, you are invited to light a candle and place it on one of the tables near an empty chair, symbolizing someone you know whose gifts have not been welcomed by the church or someone who has not been able to be fully themselves in the church.

Create in me a clean heart, VT # 141; refrain and v.3

Silent reflection and lighting of candles

We believe and confess you are a God of forgiveness and reconciliation,
a God of hope and new possibilities.

The psalmist pleads,

“Oh! Teach us to live well!
teach us to live wisely and well.
Come back, God—how long do we have to wait?—
and treat your servants with kindness for a change.
Surprise us with love at daybreak;
then we’ll skip and dance all the day long.
Make up for the bad times with some good times;
we’ve seen enough evil to last a lifetime.” (Psalm 90)

Tending transformation begins by pulling away the curtains of denial,
recognizing the image of God in the stranger and the other,
confessing the brokenness we have caused and must own.

Tending transformation calls us to pay attention,
to know ourselves and our motives more fully,
to open ourselves to the power of the holy spirit,
to let go of our desire for control so that God’s transformation seeps into us like gentle rain softening
the soil.

Tending transformation invites us to love ourselves more fully,
to nurture the image of god within us,
to receive Christ’s life-giving bread and wine, nourishing our bodies, as vines rooted in the soil of god’s
love,
to bear fruit worthy of repentance, fruit that nourishes a hungry world.

The psalmist asks,

“Why not help us make a fresh start—a resurrection life?
then your people will laugh and sing!
Show us how much you love us, God!
give us the salvation we need!
I can’t wait to hear what God says.
God’s about to pronounce God’s people well,
love and truth meet in the street,
right living and whole living embrace and kiss!
Truth sprouts green from the ground,
right living pours down from the skies!

Oh yes! God gives goodness and beauty;
our land responds with bounty and blessing.” (Psalm 84)

Create in me a clean heart, VT # 141; refrain and v. 4

Silent reflection

Central District Conference is tending transformation.

We are taking steps toward repentance,
and journeying toward transformation.

The CDC Ministerial Committee is seeking to live into the repentance and transformation resolution affirmed at the special delegate session of Mennonite Church USA in May of 2022.

We have been on this journey for a while, sometimes clumsily, sometimes boldly.

In 2015, we affirmed a theological understanding for credentialing which provided the foundation for treating all credential requests the same way, regardless of sexual orientation.

In 2018, we ceased conducting credential reviews of pastors who officiated same-sex marriage ceremonies with the support of their congregations. More recently conference minister, Doug Luginbill, met with some of these pastors to hear about their experience.

In 2022, we partnered with Camp Friedenswald, the Missional Church Committee and the CDC Board of Directors to provide financial support for Mennonite leaders of the LGBTQIA community to participate in a visioning retreat at Camp Friedenswald.

In 2022, we extended an open invitation to be heard, inviting members and allies of the LGBTQIA community to share stories of how they have experienced life in the Mennonite church. Two individuals have responded so far.

We confess that our journey toward repentance and transformation is not complete.

We are sorry for the way our policies, our boundaries, our conformity, and our silence has marginalized and shunned followers of Christ.

We lament that there are empty chairs among us today.

We will continue tending transformation.

The Apostle Paul assures us,

“But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the love of Christ. For Christ is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart....Christ came and ‘announced the good news of peace to you who were far away, and to those who were near’; for through Christ, we all have access in one spirit to our God. This means that you are strangers and aliens no longer. No, you are included in God’s holy people and are members of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2)

Silent reflection

In 1971, Keith Schrag was ordained as a minister of the gospel in Wichita, Kansas.

In 1977, Ames Mennonite Church was born and Keith Schrag was called as their pastor.

In 1987, Keith was called before the CDC Ministerial Committee which was meeting at Camp Friedenswald. He was called to account for his lifestyle. As a gay man, his leadership was in question. Keith relinquished his credential and was asked to step down from serving on the Peace, Service and Justice Committee.

In July of last year, Ames Mennonite participated in a sacred listening process. Some participants shared about the challenges of being a welcoming congregation in the Mennonite church and the pain they experienced from the conferences to which they were connected.

Jane Roeschley and Rachel Stolpe, the CDC volunteers leading the sacred listening process, were also told that a statement of apology, sent by conference minister Lois Kaufman and the Ministerial Committee in 2015, was so meaningful. Keith teared up recalling Janeen Bertsche Johnson's warmest welcome when Keith was at Central District Conference annual meeting in 2015.

Keith remained an active member of Ames Mennonite until January of this year when the congregation closed and Keith retired to Goshen.

Between August of last year and January of this year, Doug Luginbill received three inquiries wondering if Keith's credential could be reinstated. Keith had not requested this.

In April of this year, the Ministerial Committee met at Camp Friedenswald. Keith responded to our invitation to be heard and shared his story with us. Keith wondered if there might be the possibility of reinstating his credential.

After Keith left the meeting, the Ministerial Committee discerned that reinstating Keith's credential as a retired minister of Central District and Mennonite Church USA honored the spirit of repentance and transformation.

In conversations with former conference minister, Mark Weidner, and MC USA Minister of Ministerial Leadership, Rachel Ringenberg Miller, both agreed that reinstating Keith's credential was appropriate.

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) reinstated Keith Schrag's credential with the following words:

Keith Schrag, on behalf of the Central District Conference, I apologize for the pain, marginalization, and separation, that you experienced from the conference. We recognize your prophetic and pastoral gifts, walking with and ministering to many who were marginalized. You were a pastor to many throughout your nearly sixty years of ministry in Kansas, Iowa, and other communities. Today we recognize you as a credentialed leader in Central District Conference and Mennonite Church USA. Keith, continue to preach the word, share your gifts, and bear witness in word and deed to the gospel.

Keith was presented with a certificate of ordination and gifted with an anointing flask.

Delegates were invited to discuss the following questions with their table groups:

*What are some of the feelings you experienced during this worship time?

*When you imagine repentance, do you think mostly in personal terms? What does it mean for institutions, like the church or government, to repent? What might this look like?

*How could you imagine your congregation seeking to live into the *repentance and transformation resolution*?

*In her book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, author Danya Ruttenberg states, "For the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud (commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures), and for our guide Maimonides (a Twelfth Century philosopher and scholar of Jewish law),

forgiveness is much less important than the repair work that the person who caused harm is obligated to do. The Hebrew word that is often translated as ‘repentance’ is *tshuvah*, which literally means ‘returning.’” What are your thoughts about this understanding of forgiveness? To what are we to “return?”

Table groups were invited to share responses via open mic:

- *Elizabeth Kelly (First Mennonite Church Bluffton): This was a profound, powerful and deep experience. It is an example of the hard work of repair that needs to be done.
- *Brenda North Martin (Raleigh Mennonite Church): We need time for silence and time to feel this experience. We acknowledge Keith’s willingness to be vulnerable.
- *Frank Trnka (St Paul Mennonite Fellowship): (via Zoom) I would like to have been there in person.
- *Ron Ropp (Mennonite Church of Normal): We are thankful for this burning bush. It’s been a very long time. It hurts to look back on what has happened.
- *Jaimie Houghton-Lake (Maplewood Mennonite Church: Jaimie will share her experience when she goes back to Maplewood but wishes that everyone could have experienced the feelings that were present and are so important.
- *Phil Yoder (First Mennonite Church Bluffton): We talked about the grief and what it means for an institution to apologize.
- *Paul Brubaker (Paoli Mennonite Fellowship): The first response was that this is good. Words aren’t big enough.

Dinner

Free Time or Seminars at CMC

- *Tending Transformation Across Mennonite Ministries with Doug Luginbill
- *Discovering God’s Work in Your Community: An Interactive Seminar with Matt Pritchard
- *The Bible and the Book of Creation (that is, the whole earth) for an Intergenerational Audience with Lora Nafziger
- *Marking Adulthood Transitions Through Ritual and Reflection with Joel Miller

Saturday, June 24

WORSHIP II: College Mennonite Church
Theme: Transforming Practice
Texts: I Corinthians 11:17-26
Speaker: Wanda Stopher
Offering: Central District Conference
Communion

Break

Delegate Session IV

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Cantai Ao Senor (O Sing to the Lord)*, from *Voices Together (VT 113)*

Rachel Stolpe (Milwaukee Mennonite Church) announced the winners of the art auction.

Congregational story: Silverwood Mennonite Church - Donna Mast
Donna shared the story of the discernment process Silverwood used to determine its stance of LGBTQ inclusion.

- *Began as a conversation within the pastoral team and determining where the pastoral team was by telling stories
- *Team took the conversation to the board
- *Board spent much time in conversation over many meetings before bringing the conversation to the congregation
- *Pastors were present at the board meetings
- *Board sought feedback from other congregations and from the LGBTQIA community
- *Conducted a congregational survey that asked what the fears and hopes were, provided a map of different stances along the way and asked people to identify where they were on the continuum.
- *After receiving the raw results back from the survey, two pastors edited the comments so they were anonymous
- *Further discuss/discernment took place within the congregation in the following ways:
 - **Adult Sunday school classes met six times covering how to agree and disagree in love
 - **Congregation heard stories of a gay person, stories from parents with gay children, and stories from the pastors
 - **Cafe conversations were held on three Sunday afternoons. The conversations began with centering and commitments to listen and respect each other.
- *Following the conversations, a special board meeting was held to prepare for a final congregational meeting.
- *The congregation met for a special congregational meeting after worship. It began during lunch and went all day. During the discernment process, they were not able to come to consensus until it was noted in the statement that the congregation did not all agree. When that was added, the congregation came to consensus.

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Tending Transformation: Led by the Missional Church Committee

Elizabeth Kelly (First Mennonite Church Bluffton) opened with reflections on Micah 6:1-6 and introduced Trevor Bechtel (Shalom Community Church) who presented background on his work with the [For Justice in the U.S. Criminal Legal System](#) study resolution. He noted that Mennonites have long been people opposed to war but have not always been clear about how that relates to policing.

- *The passion behind this study resolution began with two college students.
- *It is a reformist resolution that calls for some concrete things, i.e., cash bail. It doesn't call for an abolition of prisons or defunding the police.
- *The resolution calls for people to study and learn about our system and how it works in our communities.
- *The hope is that the resolution will invite us to respond by thinking about our anti-war stance and the use of guns against humans.

Elizabeth invited delegates to spend time around their tables considering what they brought to the session and what they heard. She invited them to use the following focus questions in their discussion, to take notes of key conversation topics and questions and to write them down for consideration by the Missional Church Committee after the annual meeting.

- *What questions does this topic raise for you as an individual and as a member of a congregation?
- *What inspires you and/or your congregation?
- *What follow-up information, conversations, resources would be helpful for you congregation to have for engaging in this study and discussion?

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Sing a new world into being*, from *Voices Together* (VT 809)

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) led delegates in a centering prayer and closed with a prayer of blessing.

Congregational Story: Raleigh Mennonite Church - Brenda North Martin

Brenda shared the story of how her congregation has been creating relationships within the minimum security prison in Raleigh. It was especially challenging during the Covid pandemic. Some of the things they are doing to provide social opportunities for women close to release or on work release include:

- *Monthly birthday parties
- *Playing bingo and bringing meaningful prizes
- *Providing worship services
- *Providing ice cream for July 4 or Mothers Day celebrations
- *Taking women out into the community
- *Forming support groups around women who have been released.

She noted that when you become involved directly with women who have been involved in the system, you realize the injustice in the system,

Elizabeth invited delegates to share at their tables using the following guide:

- *Name a significant theme (or two) discussed at your table.
- *Name one thing we want to see happen in the next year.
- *In what ways does this session promote learning/conversation about social justice?
- *In what ways does this session prompt congregational action?

Responses:

*Lynn Miller (First Mennonite Church Bluffton): Lynn worked in prison ministry. One of his observations is that when it comes to shutting down prisons, economics is part of problem as well as injustice.

*Gwen Gustafson-Zook (Open Table Mennonite Fellowship): Relationships are important and can be and need to be nurtured in many ways, There is a need for belonging both in prison and when coming out. Churches are particularly suited for this.

*Anita Rediger (Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship): Anita has been learning a lot about Israel and Palestine through her involvement with MennoPin. She has learned about the economics of imprisonment.

*Rick Buterbaugh (Evanston Mennonite Church): Rick has served 31 years as a staff person in the Salvation Army Reentry Center. He is appreciative of the resolution but acknowledged there is always more that can be added. He is seeing the results of the possession of guns and reentry help such as counseling, violence counseling, and family/marriage counseling.

Elizabeth closed the session with a blessing.

ACTION: 2023-2024 Spending Plan: Tim Lind (Florence Church of the Brethren Mennonite) thanked congregations for their continued support of the conference. On behalf of the board of directors, he moved to affirm the 2023-2024 proposed spending plan as presented. The motion was affirmed unanimously.

Open Mic: James Rissler (Atlanta Mennonite Church) invited delegates to share comments via open mic.

*Heidi Sommer Simones (Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship): Heidi extended an invitation to attend the Mennonite Arts Weekend hosted by Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship in February 2024.

*Jan Croyle (First Mennonite Church Wadsworth): Jan extended an invitation for women to attend the Women's Retreat at Camp Friedenswald, Sept 15-18, 2023.

*Gwen Gustafson-Zook (Open Table Mennonite Fellowship): Gwen expressed her delight in being at the annual meeting. She heard that we are moving from inclusion to belonging.

*Lydia Brenneman (Lima Mennonite Church): Lydia mentioned the work being done by the Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) and encouraged folks to attend some of their workshops that are planned for MennoCon 23.

*Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street): Janeen share information about the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at Anabaptist Mennonite Seminary (AMBS).

Listening committee report: Carrie Mast (First Mennonite Church Bluffton), Scott Coulter (Assembly Mennonite Church), and Ron Byler (Eighth Street Mennonite Church) shared the following:

Carrie:

We are the official listening committee: Scott Coulter (and his pronouns are he/him), Ron Byler (and his pronouns are he/him), and Carrie Mast (and my pronouns are she/her), and while we recognize the official theme of this 67th Annual Meeting of the Central District Conference was Tending Transformation Part II, we also noticed a theme that was an undercurrent in all of our time together: listening. Which also names us. (Listening Committee.) and we'll take this very important honor of having a theme named after us, even if we were the ones naming this theme. And now this honor bestowed on us.

Truly, though, we did recognize listening as a theme in the work of:

*The Board of Directors and many volunteers across the conference who conducted sacred listening sessions with 35 congregations and continue to listen between the lines to consider why ten churches did not participate;

*The Ministerial Committee and Doug as they conducted interviews with 18 pastors who emerged to lead congregations;

*The Ministerial Committee and Doug who, in the work of repentance and transformation, listened to two queer pastors share their stories;

*The Missional Church Committee who is listening for ways they can support congregations beyond financial resources and grant applications;

*Camp Friedenswald where we learn to listen to the earth to deepen our connections with her and Jenna Liechty Martin who is always listening for our stories from the peaceful woods;

*Matt Pritchard who hears the calls of people in between the Mennonite Churches looking for the peace theology and simple living practices espoused by Mennonites;

*Sarah Werner who writes, edits, and photographs after listening to our congregational stories to remember;

*And all of you as you listened to the stories of:

**Emerging communities:

**Olentangy Wild Church pastored and tended by Sarah Werner

**Moveable Feast pastored by Celeste Groff

**St Louis Mennonite Fellowship who seeks membership in our conference - welcome back!

**Silverwood Mennonite who shared honestly the kind of time and waiting involved in the transformation to a queer affirming congregation;

**Central District Conference who shared a story that unfolded over decades, too many decades, during which we caused deep harm. And as the story unfolded, we lamented together, and through the generous and gracious spirit of Keith Schrag, we experienced reconciliation, and as Wanda Stopher preached this morning, re-membering.

*And as you listened to seminar leaders:

**Naomi Wenger as she guided you in a spiritual practice and embodied prayer;

**Doug Luginbill and friends from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mennonite Mission

Network (MMN), Everence, and Bluffton University as they described the transformation their organizations are seeing in those they serve as well as how their organizations are seeking ways to transform themselves to better serve others;

**Matt Pritchard as he shared a tool to help us listen to those in our communities to help us connect with our neighbors;

**Lora Nafziger as she told stories about how Assembly Mennonite Church is using the earth all around us to teach the Bible to young and old;

**Joel Miller as he shared the process he developed at Columbus Mennonite to mark and celebrate the transitions and transformations of adulthood.

In all these ways, we extend the honor of having a theme named after us, to all of you, for the very important work of listening you have already engaged in, and must continue to do as followers of Christ, in the work of the church through Central District Conference.

Scott

Much of our work together as conference delegates this weekend has been exploring what the commitments, made by the three MC USA resolutions, mean for us: for our conference and for our congregations. We have been invited to consider what work there is for us to do, and what fruit will come.

Again, this has been a work of careful listening together: listening to voices of those whose bodies have been marginalized, and listening to what our own bodies are telling us. These are some of the ways we listen for the work of God.

We heard that tending transformation requires adaptive leadership: improvisation, risk-taking, and imagination, and a willingness to set bold intentions and to tackle problems that evade simple definition.

Here are some of the things that we heard when we listened:

Accessibility

- * Disability can be invisible. Listen and trust those who request accommodation.
- * Everyone needs accommodation at some point; able-bodied experience is temporary.
- * We all inhabit imperfect bodies. God makes all people the way they are. We are whole as we are, with our disabilities.
- * Everyone belongs. It is our job to help everyone experience belonging.
- * Communicate clearly what accommodations your congregation offers.
- * Invitation to embodied spiritual practice should be accessible to different types of bodies, different kinds of physical ability.
- * Everyone can learn and become more self-aware through listening to those with disabilities.

Repentance and transformation

- * We are not used to being called to repent.
- * Transformation has not been our daily prayer.
- * Appropriate repair comes out of a good listening process.
- * We have failed to share God's love and good news fully.
- * We have privileged the majority, and we have shunned and excluded the marginalized.
- * We have been diminished by saying "no" to many individuals' gifts in the church.
- * We are sorry.
- * We are taking concrete steps toward repentance.
- * Tending transformation is practicing more love for ourselves.
- * The journey is not complete.

- * God is a God of forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, and new possibility.
- * Our feelings are deeper than can be expressed in words.

For justice

- * We are asking: How can we connect our historic peace witness to contemporary conversation around policing, prisons, and the US criminal legal system?
- * We hope people will study and learn about how policing and the criminal legal system works in the US.
- * Our congregations can be communities of belonging for people coming out of incarceration.
- * Listening to those who experience incarceration energizes our advocacy for change.
- * We are grateful for opportunities to be in relationship with prosecutors, police, and others in the legal system as we advocate for reform.
- * Some of us have experienced parachurch prison ministry as an opportunity for relationship-building across theological and denominational lines in the wider church.

Ron:

“Sing a new world into being, live the promise you believe,” we sang. And sing we did, throughout our conference. We sang with gusto and joy.

Thursday evening, Matt Prichard told us that we must “insist like Mary (Miriam) that God (Jesus) take action in our world of need.” As I heard the stories of our congregations’ journeys throughout our time together, it is clear to me that Matt’s words are deeply grounded in the work of our congregations to actively be a part of God’s mission in our world.

It was my task to try to comment on our worship together. That was not as easy as it may sound because our worship and our work were intertwined and both were deeply rooted in our conference theme, “tending transformation.”

Throughout our time together, I heard over and over of the opportunity we see in people turning away from church, but possibly turning toward our understanding of peace and wholeness. James Rissler told us in his state of the conference remarks, that last year, the word was expecting, but this year, the word is exploring ministry development. We don’t yet know what the fruit of our conference labor will be.

I talked to a number of new congregations and new participants to CDC and all were expectant - and exploring - of their relationship with us and they found CDC to be a welcoming place. One comment from our table groups about eagerly sharing resources speaks to how CDC congregations can equip each other for ministry. Our reading of Exodus 3 helps us, as one of us said, to see burning bushes everywhere!

Our conference continues to re-form and reshape itself, to breathe and pay attention.

Our three resolutions on accessibility, on repentance and inclusion and on the criminal justice system were received enthusiastically and prayerfully. A highlight for me was seeing the credentials of my friend and fellow congregation member Keith Schrag restored. Praise be to God!

Our work and worship these days made clear to me our deep desire to tend transformation in our hearts and in our world. But we also recognize the challenges ahead. Said one, “we confess that our journey toward repentance and transformation is not complete.” Tending transformation includes:

- pulling back the curtain of denial,
- opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit,
- nurturing the image of God within us,
- and bearing fruit for a hungry world.

Did I say we sang?

We sang, “Where no children ever hunger, but are filled with God’s shalom,
Where all people work for justice, where all hate and vengeance cease.”

This is Central District Conference. We are a community of faith, tending transformation. Christ lives in us and God is at work among us.

Carrie:

This is the story of the Central District Conference at this moment on June 24, 2023, a conference that listened together, laughed together, remembered together, lamented together, wept together, celebrated together. It is why we look forward to chapter 68.

Evaluations/Committee Nominations: Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community Mennonite Church) invited delegates to fill out the evaluation forms and share suggestions for committee nominations.

Close of Delegate Sessions James Rissler (Atlanta Mennonite Church)

James expressed his gratitude and joy in serving as president of the Board of Directors for CDC. He closed the delegate sessions with the sounding of the gavel, which he pass on to Jan Lugibihl. He received a standing ovation from the delegates.

Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) led in singing *Sing a new world into being*, from *Voices Together* (VT 809). Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Church Bluffton) closed with prayer.

Children’s Program: Thanks to Aimee Weishaupt (Silverwood Mennonite Church) and her helpers for coordinating childcare and leading the K - Grade 5 programming.

Emma Hartman
Recorder