



May 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



Worship during the 2023 annual meeting at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

Listening for Wisdom at Annual Meeting

by Sarah Werner

This year's CDC Annual Meeting will be June 20-22 in person and via zoom at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. The meeting will include three days of meaningful community-building activities including worship, seminars, and time to socialize. Childcare will be provided for infants and preschool-aged children, and all are welcome to attend the worship services even if they have not registered for the meeting. You are also invited to bring a musical instrument to worship if you'd like to be part of the spontaneous worship band, with a brief rehearsal before the service.

Seminars

The gathering begins Thursday afternoon with a pre-conference seminar entitled "Listening Together" with Sally Weaver Glick. Picking up on our biennial theme of Listen - Wisdom is Calling, our pre-session seminar will focus on listening for Wisdom together. We will be creating a space to slow down and listen together for ways Wisdom invites each of us to deepen our sense of her call. We will be playing with a form of lectio divina, the ancient practice of being prayerfully attentive to a text

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from scripture, creation or our lives.

On Friday afternoon participants can choose from three seminars that focus on various aspects of church life.

Celeste Kennel-Shank, pastor of one of CDC's emerging communities of faith, will be presenting a seminar on seasons in the life cycle of congregations. During the seminar she will share stories from her book about the Community of Christ in Washington, DC: its start as an innovative church plant in 1965, pivotal moments in its middle decades, and its ending in 2016. She will also bring in observations from other recent publications and lead a discussion on the religious landscape today.

Bluffton University President Jane Wood and board of trustees members, Heather Reichenbach and Doug Luginbill, will provide an update and respond to questions regarding Bluffton University. During their seminar you can hear about the opportunities of the merger with the University of Findlay and about ways the Bluffton University mission continues to prepare students of all backgrounds for life as well as vocation, for responsible citizenship, for service to all peoples and, ultimately, for the purposes of God's universal kingdom.

Gerald J. Mast and Lisa Weaver—members of the Anabaptism at 500 Advisory Group—will describe

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new resources soon to be available from MennoMedia for commemorating five hundred years of Anabaptism, including the *Anabaptist Community Bible*, a commemorative story book, two devotional books, three children’s books, a digital app, and other materials. Gerald and Lisa will also share from their experiences about the challenges and joys of bringing these remarkable projects to fruition.



Above: Participants at the 2023 annual meeting enjoying ice cream and fellowship. Below right: Lydia Brenneman speaking at the 2023 annual meeting.

Worship

The worship service Thursday night will be centered on the theme “Holy Wisdom on the Way” through an exploration of Proverbs 4:1-13 by Carol Penner. Carol teaches practical theology at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario and was a pastor for many years as well as being a freelance writer. She has a blog of worship resources (leadinginworship.com), and recently released a Lenten devotional through Herald Press, titled *Unburdened: A Lenten Journey Toward Forgiveness*.

At the worship service on Saturday morning, Sibonokuhle Ncube will preach on the theme “Wisdom in the Christ Dress” using Job 29:14, Isaiah 61:10, Romans 13:14, and Galatians 3:27. Sibonokuhle is a licensed minister who currently serves as the co-regional director for Africa and Europe at Mennonite Mission Network and fellowships at Eighth Street Mennonite Church. Communion will also be served during worship.



Delegate Sessions

On Friday morning the first delegate session will include the state of the conference address, a congregational story, and presentation of the 2024-2025 leadership slate. We will also be introduced to the two congregations seeking to join the conference: Peace Mennonite Fellowship and Knoxville Mennonite Church. The morning session will conclude with a vote to accept St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship into membership. The afternoon delegate sessions will include a plenary session by Carol Penner and an MC USA Church Safety presentation.

The Saturday delegate session will include a congregational story, committee reports, and voting on the provisional membership bylaws amendment and the 2024-2025 spending plan. The session will conclude with the listening session report and a benediction. If you’d like to attend the annual meeting, be sure to register before June 7 [HERE](#).



Participants during a delegate session at the 2023 annual meeting hearing from conference committees.

Visit the CDC website

For details on the Annual Meeting, go to:

<https://mcusacdc.org/2024-annual-meeting/>

There you can find more information including:

- Registration form for the gathering, child-care, Pastor Appreciation dinner, and more
- Delegate Report Book, including items requiring action
- Information about housing and meal options
- Speakers and seminars
- Slate of nominees for the CDC board and committees



Tables from various Mennonite agencies and universities will be sharing materials at the annual meeting.

Annual Meeting Schedule

Thursday, June 22

- 2:00 pm Registration begins
- 3:00 pm Listening Together seminar
led by Sally Weaver Glick
- 5:00 pm Pastor Appreciation Dinner
- 7:30 pm WORSHIP I
Theme: Holy Wisdom on the Way
Texts: Proverbs 4:1-13
Speaker: Carol Penner
- 9:00 pm Ice Cream Social

Friday, June 23

- 8:30 am Delegate Session I
Welcome and State of the Conference,
Congregational Story, 2022 Annual Meeting Minutes, Treasurer's Report, 2024-2025 Leadership Slate
- 9:45 am Break/Snacks
- 10:15 am Panel discussion of committee reports, Presentation of Provisional Membership Bylaws amendment, Introduction of Peace Mennonite Fellowship and Knoxville Mennonite Church, vote to accept St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship into membership
- 11:45 am Lunch in the dining hall or on your own
- 1:30 pm Delegate Session II
Announcement of St Louis Mennonite Fellowship vote and response, Plenary

session with Carol Penner

- 3:15 pm Break
- 3:30 pm Delegate Session III
MC USA Church Safety presentation
- 4:50 pm Break
- 5:00 pm Seminars
Anabaptist 500th Anniversary - Gerald Mast
Bluffton University - Jane Wood, Heather Reichenbach, and Doug Luginbill
Seasons in the Life Cycle of Congregations - Celeste Groff
- 6:00 pm Dinner

Saturday, June 24

- 8:30 - 9:30 am WORSHIP II: CMC sanctuary
Theme: Wisdom in the Christ Dress
Speaker: Sibonokuhle Ncube
Texts: Job 29:14; Isaiah 61:10; Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27
Offering for Central District Conference
Communion
- 9:30 am Break
- 10:15 am Delegate Session IV
Congregational Story, Missional Church Committee, Ministerial Committee, Vote on Provisional Membership, 2024-2025 Spending Plan, Open Mic, Listening Committee Report
- 12:00 pm Close of Annual Meeting



Participants at the 2023 annual meeting singing together before a delegate session.

New Congregations Seeking Membership with Central District Conference

Two new congregations seeking membership in the conference will be introduced at the annual meeting this year—Knoxville Mennonite Church in Knoxville, Tennessee and Peace Mennonite Fellowship in Archibold, Ohio. We will hear more from them during the meeting, but here is a brief version of each of their stories.



Above: Bible school activities at Knoxville Mennonite Church. Below right: A church school class from the 1940s or 1950s outside the church building.

Knoxville Mennonite Church

by Melissa Mink

In the fall of 1917 Charles B. Byers, a Mennonite from Columbia, Pennsylvania came to Knoxville to begin mission work. He and his family found a home on West 4th Avenue and services were held there for 6 years until the Mennonite Gospel Mission was built with the support of the Virginia Mennonite Mission Board. The first service in the new building at the corner of West 4th and University Avenue was held on January 1, 1922. This was the first mission church built by the Virginia Mission Board and pastors and support staff were provided by the Virginia Conference. The early years of the church focused on sharing the good news of Jesus, and much attention was given to work with children. This included a church school and, for many years, a large summer Bible School program. Over the years, hundreds of children came



to worship at the small 33' by 40' building in the downtown area. Today, guiding and nurturing of children continues to be an important focus for the congregation.

In 1977 the church relocated to the current address at 4401 Sullivan Road. The facility consists of a large stone house with a multifunctional addition that is the sanctuary for worship services. The sanctuary has also been utilized for daycare services, Bible school programs, as well as a staging center for charitable events.

In February 2008 Pat and Jan McFarren became the pastors at Knoxville Mennonite. Working together with Pat and Jan, the church continues to strive to reflect the life of Jesus and lovingly support those whom God brings to our group. In the more than 100 years since that early beginning in 1917 we at Knoxville Mennonite Church hope we have modeled the words of Menno Simons, who taught that Christians should, "Show mercy and love, as much as is in them."

Pat McFarren shared the following:

This body of believers we call Knoxville Mennonite Church knows that "God is on the move" all around us and, if we are alert and discerning, we may participate in what God is already doing in our world, our neighborhood, our classroom. Wherever we are we want to "practice the Presence" and be yielded to it. Our Mission Statement reflects our understanding of Jesus' invitation to us to follow Him.

Mission Statement:

We at Knoxville Mennonite Church are a community of believers working to know and love God and each other. We are committed and accountable to one another. Using scriptures as our foundation, and as Christ's disciples, we willingly seek to love all people. We believe Christ calls us to be servants and peacemakers, providing hope and healing in a broken world.



Above: Bible school activities outside the current building.



Candles on the worship table at Peace Mennonite Fellowship.

Peace Mennonite Fellowship

by Joyce Klingel Smith

On a June evening in 2023, a group of individuals and families from Northwest Ohio came together out of a desire for a more welcoming and inclusive church community. The impetus for our gathering came from the fact that many of the local Mennonite churches we had been a part of had recently voted to leave Mennonite Church USA. Disappointed in this decision, we hoped to create a space where people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations would be welcomed and accepted, where hard questions about following Jesus could be asked, and where living with uncertainty was welcome.

Initially, we met outdoors but soon realized we needed to find a building. By this time, attendance was averaging 70-90 people. We felt that our formation as a group was being led by the Spirit of God and that we were to continue meeting as a worshipping community. After meeting in several venues, we were offered a large meeting space in the Adriel Foster Care and Adoption Building, north of Archbold.

As we began talking together about organizing and finding a name for our community, many felt it was important to retain our identity as “Mennonite.” Everyone had an opportunity to suggest names for our faith community and after several rounds of discernment, PeopleEverywhereAreCreatedEqual, PEACE Mennonite Fellowship was born. As we considered several options for conference membership, we felt Central District’s beliefs and practices closely aligned with who we wanted to be. After meeting with Doug Luginbill, we affirmed

the decision to continue exploring membership in CDC.

A Steering Committee of ten individuals presently gives leadership but we are beginning to work at identifying a leadership model that fits who we want to be. Dave Elkins serves as our temporary ministry leader.

We will soon celebrate our first anniversary as a fellowship and are excited about what the future holds for us and where God might be leading us as we look for opportunities to serve God in our local communities and beyond.

We also look forward to continuing the process of joining CDC and serving together to make known God’s love to all.

Check us out at <https://www.facebook.com/peacemennonitefellowship>.



Above: Joe Delphia leading a Children’s Time lesson at Peace Mennonite Fellowship.

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AMBS Graduates

On April 27, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary celebrated the graduation of 22 students, including four with connections to Central District.

Alaina Dobkowski of Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship anticipates completing her Master of Divinity with a major in Pastoral Ministry in August 2024. She also was selected to receive this year’s Award for Excellence in Biblical Interpretation from the seminary’s Bible Department.



Alaina, who has completed most of her degree from a distance through the MDiv Connect program, plans to continue serving as Pastor of Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship and working with anti-racism organizing and education.

Isaiah Friesen of Saint Paul, Minnesota and Paoli Mennonite Fellowship anticipates completing his Master of Divinity with a major in Theological Studies: Peace Studies in August 2024. He also was

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selected to receive this year's Award for Excellence in Theological Studies from the seminary's History, Theology and Ethics Department. He plans to seek work in Minnesota in ministry, higher education or the nonprofit sector. While studying at AMBS, he served as an intern at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. Prior to his AMBS studies, he attended and interned at Belmont Mennonite Church in Elkhart, a congregation of Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.



Carrie A. Mast of First Mennonite Church Bluffton anticipates completing her Graduate Certificate in Theological Studies in August 2024. Carrie, who has taken most of her courses from a distance, plans to continue serving as Associate Pastor of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio.

Carrie previously earned a Master of Arts in Organizational Management and a Bachelor of Arts in English Education from Bluffton (Ohio) University.

Jonathon Wesley Zirkle of Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen and Southside Fellowship in Elkhart anticipates completing his Master of Arts in Christian Formation in August 2024. Jon feels called to support the spiritual lives and holistic wellness of men through involvement with Mennonite Men and beyond, and plans to begin offering individual spiritual direction. He's open



to the leading of the Spirit as to how his ministry unfolds. For now, he said his seminary experiences will infuse his work as Director of Bushelcraft Farm in Elkhart and his work with the Wood-Land-Lakes nonprofit land trust in Indiana.

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Zoom Retreats on Conference Theme

Listen! Wisdom is Calling, the theme guiding our Conference work, offers many possibilities for personal and corporate reflection. We invite you to take some time with the theme through a series of quarterly Zoom retreats led by Central District Conference members who are gifted spiritual directors. The first of those retreats is outlined below. Watch for information about coming retreats in August, November and early 2025.

Join us Saturday, May 18th, 9-12 Eastern Time, 8-11 Central Time, for an on-line retreat, "Wisdom: Who/What is Calling?" Amidst community, spiritual practices and individual time, we will consider who or what comes to mind when "Wisdom" is named and explore how that image shapes our experience of "Wisdom" when encountered in biblical texts, worship, study or conversation.



Karla Minter, spiritual director and pastor/doula at Open Table Mennonite Fellowship will be your guide for the morning. Join us!

No pre-registration is needed. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89487998038?pwd=S-DExVDU3a2N4QWxkSjBtWE5FdWlZZz09>
Meeting ID: 894 8799 8038
Passcode: 243888

Central District Connector
Volume 3, Number 5, May 2024
Editor: Sarah R Werner
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The *Connector* is published monthly. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

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