



June 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



A group of high school students talk about the moral implications of serving in the military with a registered conscientious objector from the US Air Force. Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg VA, April 22 2024. Credit: Georgia Metz

Sacred Listening Theme: Social Justice

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 compiled themes from these sessions, and we have been featuring a different theme in each month's Connector.

The theme of this month's issue is social justice, which many congregations discussed as being crucial to their mission. Church members shared about social justice projects they had created in their communities as well as work they participated in with others in their area. This issue features stories from some of these projects, including: counteracting military

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recruiting on high school campuses, helping newly-arrived immigrants navigate the legal system in claiming asylum, composting at Camp Friedenswald, and a reflection on growing up in a refugee camp in Gaza. We hope you enjoy these wide-ranging examples of social justice and hope it will inform the work you do in your own church community.

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Conscientious Objection for a New Generation

by Georgia Metz

"Oh yeah, I've heard about wars. We had wars back in the 1800s."

This was the answer from one 18-year-old when I recently asked high schoolers what they heard about war in their everyday lives. This bright, responsible, and personable young man from a Mennonite family shrugged when I asked him when he thought the US was last involved in a war. "I don't know, probably the Civil War."

This conversation happened as I was leading 30 Mennonite high schoolers in an exercise to illustrate the invisible presence of war and the military in their lives. They

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were surprised to hear that the US was at war in Afghanistan for almost their entire lives, only leaving that country in 2021.

Of course, what war looks like is different now. Instead of muskets and cavalry, or even trenches from WWII that teens may see in their World History class, today's conflicts are fought with targeted drone strikes and drawn-out counterinsurgency measures. Unbalanced and automated warfare happening far away may not feel like "real" war to youth and young adults. There is no involuntary draft and young people who grow up relatively privileged in a Mennonite community may not know many people who are actively involved in the military, providing even more distance between the reality of foreign conflict and our everyday lives and relationships.

At the same time, military recruitment has not ceased. Teens are exposed to aggressive recruitment in public schools and through social media. Ads for enlisting in the National Guard on TikTok and YouTube videos promise adventure, financial and career benefits, and the ability to "make a difference"- things anybody would want.

The Mennonite church has a long history of resisting militarism, dating back to our founding documents in 1525. Many of us have registered conscientious objectors to war in our families or have registered as a CO or refused to register for Selective Service ourselves. How will the next generation further this 500-year-old Anabaptist commitment to resisting participation in the military?

With the wars in Gaza and Ukraine dominating national news, this topic may be more relevant than ever. Recently, I was surprised, thankful, and hopeful when over 100 people, most of them teenagers, filled up the dining hall of Eastern Mennonite High School for a panel on actively responding to the US military and Selective Service registration. Five young people, including three college students and a registered conscientious objector recently discharged from the US Air Force, spoke about their peace convictions and interactions with the military. They encouraged

the teens gathered to complete a conscientious objector packet using materials from MC USA and to be mindful about how their future careers may intersect with the military. High schoolers were engaged and asked insightful questions. We even ran out of printed conscientious objector packets because the demand for them was so high!

From that event and conversations with other pastors, I have gathered some ideas and ponderings about how we might encourage an active response to militarism in our young people:

- Who are the conscientious objectors and/or veterans in your church? In your community? Would they be willing to share about their experience on a Sunday morning?
- At baptism, many people often read a statement of faith beforehand. Can we encourage forming and publicly stating a peace position as part of the coming of age process in addition to baptismal statements?
- Are there local college student groups or individuals who align with the Mennonite peace position and would be willing to come speak to youth? In the eyes of a typical teenager, college students and young adults are often the coolest and most interesting people to speak with.
- How are Mennonite churches reaching out to the communities that are most impacted by aggressive military recruitment to offer a different narrative and resources for life outside of the military? Here in Harrisonburg, VA many recruiters focus on children of refugee families. What does recruitment look like where you live?
- How can you involve veterans and/or military families in this conversation and hear their stories? I have been grateful for connections made through Veterans for Peace and the Center on Conscience and War. You may find there is someone willing to talk to you in the local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter.

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As we see on college campuses, a new and large antiwar movement is stirring; current middle school students may inherit a very different national landscape as they come of age. As the world changes, I hope that those who follow in the Anabaptist tradition everywhere will find new ways to encourage the next generation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and choose active nonviolence. Find more information on youth and conscientious objection [HERE](#).



The spring 2024 citizenship class at La Posada. Credit: Naun Cerrato.

CDC Was Present at the Birth of La Posada

by Naun Cerrato, board president

La Posada Immigrant Aid was born in response to the need for immigration legal services in Elkhart County, Indiana's immigrant community. This demand comes primarily from people who do not have the financial resources to cover the expenses of a private lawyer.

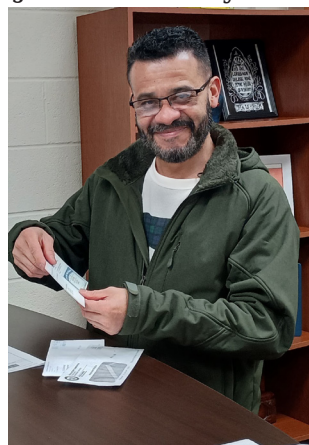
In the Hebrew scriptures, we read how God commanded his people to welcome and treat foreigners with love and respect. This commandment is one that we Mennonites respond to with compassion because it was something that God asked of the Hebrew people, reminding them that they too were once foreigners in Egypt. As we were thinking about how to meet this need, we asked how we could provide legal services to immigrants without neglecting our work as pastors in our local churches.

How did Central District Conference first become a part of La Posada? I re-

member when I was thinking about who could be a part of La Posada, one of the first pastors to receive the call was Pastor Tim Stair from Hively Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Ind.). I remember calling him and asking him to be part of forming a non-profit immigration organization. Pastor Tim responded very compassionately and engaged Mark Claassen, a member of Hively, to represent Hively, serving on the La Posada board of directors. Since then, the support we have received from Hively, Silverwood, Eighth Street, and other CDC churches in the Goshen/Elkhart, Ind. area has been such a blessing to us. Mark ended his service on the board after three years and now Megan Erwin represents Hively on our board and is helping us review our policies and procedures.

Where is La Posada and what do we do? We are located in two offices provided by Sunnyside Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind. We provide immigration resources through written materials, classes, legal counsel, and referrals in a faith-based context that is experienced as welcoming and safe, and focused on serving our vulnerable neighbors. In March 2023, La Posada received accreditation from the US Department of Justice to act as legal representatives in immigration cases. We have been on hiatus since November 2023 and are expecting reaccreditation soon with our new staff member, Rubi Astello.

La Posada is rooted in Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs. We obey the word of God in Jesus Christ by welcoming strangers and



providing hospitality as found in Matthew 25:35. If you are interested in finding out more, the La Posada phone number is 574-931-4228, email: office@La-PosadaAid.com, and the website is www.LaPosadaAid.com.

Levi Lorenzo Carpintero Romero receiving documents. Credit: Naun Cerrato.



Composting at Camp Friedenswald
by Sarah Werner

One of the many ways that Camp Friedenswald focuses on sustainability in their operations is the camp composting system, which started in 2015. When they began the composting program, staff weren't sure if it would be sustainable in the long term, but it has become integral to the operation of camp. Friedenswald uses a cube system of composting, where food is deposited between layers of wood chips in wooden cubes. It is a passive system that does not require turning, and compost incubates in the cubes for several months before being transferred to a larger pile using a tractor.

They started with 13 cubes and are now actively using 25 cubes, a demonstration of the wide scope of the project. After fermentation the compost is used on landscaping throughout camp, providing nutrients to flowers and shrubs. This system greatly reduces the amount of waste going to the landfill and has also diminished the number of racoons near the dumpsters.

During camps, environmental education programs, and other school group visits, the weight of the food waste is recorded and groups compete to see who can have the least amount of food waste. Campers take turns carrying the compost buckets from the dining hall out to the compost cubes, and there is even a blessing they say when the deposit it.

Composting is just one of many ways Camp Friedenswald is living into their mission of sustainability, and they recently received an award for Sustainable Business of the Year at the Michigan Sustainable Business Forum.

Compost Blessing

*Before the pail flows over with mac and cheese
or gives home to the fruit flies,
Before the mold grows green,
I lift thee from the camp table
and carry you out to the heap of hot soil.
I lift you towards the heavens
before I release you.
you are an offering
May you die well,
bless this dirt,
and become life once more.*
- adapted from a prayer by Lydia Wylie-Kellerman

Above left: The waste station at the Camp dining hall. Below: the compost pile. Photo credit: Amy Huser



Reflections on Gaza
by Tareq Abuhalima

Growing up in Gaza

I grew up in the Gaza Strip, Gaza City. I lived close to the Beach Refugee Camp, which is a severely deprived area. In the refugee camp, every day was a struggle to survive and what might be thought of as simple everyday tasks provided considerable challenges. I was born to quite a big family of 15 with my dad and mom. I have 7 brothers and 5 sisters. I remember I had a truly enjoyable childhood in Gaza—as I grew up close to my cousins and extended family. We always played and had fun. We did a lot of swimming in the Mediterranean and played soccer all the time. Along with my cousins, I studied at United Nations and Relief Work Agency (UNRWA) Schools. After I finished ninth grade, I moved to a private school that was granting university

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scholarships to its best students. After I graduated from high school, I was fortunate to get a scholarship and enroll as an English major at Al-Azhar University.

Studying on a Scholarship

When I started studying English, my language skills were not so good. So, I started to connect and make friends that were in the same specialization as I was. Doing so, I met two fascinating guys, Khaled and Salah Jadallah. They were specializing in English Literature and thus were few steps ahead of me. Khaled and Salah were so helpful and responsive whenever I asked a question or needed academic help. I graduated from Al-Azhar University, Gaza in 2019 with a GPA 3.3.

Embarking upon my work journey

After I graduated from university, I was fortunate enough to get a contract with UNRWA to work as an English Language Teacher at the very school where I had been a student. It was an amazing experience full of “hi again” and “welcome back!” As time went by, I started to grow more interested in the field of non-overnmental organizations. I applied for Youth Vision Society of Gaza (YVS), and I got a position with them as project coordinator position. As I started working with YVS, I got to know Doaa El-Massri, a prominent peacemaker who had managed Edward Said Public Library (ESPL) for the past four years. Doaa was well-loved and everyone enjoyed her talks. She was fascinated by the idea of ESPL expanding and opening new branches all over Palestine.

Youth Influencers for Change Project

At YVS, I managed the Youth Influencers for Change Project (YIC). YIC aimed at contributing to full, effective, free, and dynamic youth social media influencers in their work to reduce discrimination and violations against basic human rights in the Gaza Strip. Through this project, I worked with 25 social media influencers who pledged to use their social platforms for awareness-raising and educational purposes related to the project so that we could reach wider audiences for the common good. As we progressed, the project was

showing success and promise. As a result, I was invited by fundraising NGOs in Sweden to visit Stockholm and start collecting funds for this project to keep going, and I succeeded in securing funds for this project until 2027. In 2022, the project started to reach out to those in power and hold them accountable for the decision-making process in Gaza.



Mennonite Action for peace in Gaza, Mishawaka, Ind. Photo credit: Peter Ringenberg.

Bluffton University

In 2020, I was on a Zoom call with an NGO called Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN), which aims at establishing connections with people from the Gaza Strip. Through this connection, I was asked to assist a professor from Bluffton University, Paul Neufeld Weaver, with his course on Cultural Exchange. At the time, the trips of this course were cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions and Prof. Weaver planned to conduct this course virtually over Zoom, connecting his students with students from around the world. When I heard of this, I stepped up and started recruiting students from Gaza for the project. It was a successful program for both students from Gaza and the US. Prof. Weaver and I were able to sustain the program for three years with the sponsorship of the US Consulate in Jerusalem.

Lion and Lamb Peace Arts Center

In July 2022, Prof. Weaver reached out to me and recommended that I apply for the position of a Graduate Assistant at Bluffton University, Ohio to work as a co-director of the Peace Arts Center. I applied and got an academic approval from

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Bluffton University. It took me seven months of coordination to get the US Visa and get out of Gaza, but in the end it worked out and I arrived in Bluffton on January 10, 2023. Now in person, I work with Prof. Weaver on multiple activities at Lion and Lamb, including the program of Teaching Peace to Children, through which Lion and Lamb partnered with Bluffton Elementary School to deliver sessions on peace for kids. Students at the school liked the program activities, which included Dabka dance, storytelling, singing, and other cultural activities. This fall, the program will be extending into its fourth phase. Also, this fall, I will officially graduate with my Masters in Business Administration from Bluffton.

How Israeli Attacks on Gaza have Affected Me Personally

- October 27, 2023, my sister Randa was killed by Israeli Forces.
- November 18, 2023 my sisters Reem and Nareman were shot dead by an ex-

- tremist Israeli on their way to evacuate.
- October 11, 2023, my friends Khalid and Salah Jadallah were killed in an Israeli bombing.
- October 14, 2023, my friend Yousef Dawas was killed by Israeli bombing.
- October 31, 2023, my close high school friend Abed El-Badrasawi was killed with his family in an Israeli bombing.
- November 9, 2023, my high school friend Motasem El-Dahdouh was killed in an Israeli bombing
- November 30, 2023, my uncle was killed in an Israeli bombing.
- December 7, 2023, my friend Doaa El-Massri was bombed with all of her family and they were killed.

The peace that Gazan people hold in their minds and hearts is so valuable because it's begotten from violence and struggle. They hold it close because they were born without seeing it and they hope for a different future.

**Financial report
May 31, 2024**

2023/2024 to-date income	\$279,614
2023/2024 plan	\$278,378
amount under budgeted income	\$1,236

2023/2024 to-date expenses	\$281,236
2023/2024 spending plan	\$310,370
Under-expenditure against plan	\$29,134

With only one month of activity remaining in the 2023/2024 financial year, we are very happy to note that overall income is slightly above budget, while expenditures are comfortably below budget. It appears likely that Central District Conference will once again finish the year on a positive financial note. At our annual meeting later in June we will consider a new spending plan for the 2024/2025 year. We hope many of you will bring any questions and comments about the budget to that meeting.

Tending Transformation campaign income is now at \$76,300 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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