



July 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



Above: Beth Bontrager leads music during the Saturday morning worship service at the CDC Annual Meeting. Below right: Carol Penner preaches on wisdom at the Thursday evening worship service.

## **Annual Meeting Overview** by Sarah Werner

Central District held its annual meeting June 20-22, at College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind. The theme of the meeting, "Listen! Wisdom is Calling" was woven throughout our time together in worship, congregational stories, committee reports, and sharing at our tables. It was a time of fellowship as we welcomed St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship (Mo.) into the conference and two more congregations, Peace Mennonite Church (Archbold, Ohio) and Knoxville Mennonite Church (Tenn.), were introduced. We also approved a change to the bylaws to create provisional membership for congregations seeking to join CDC.

The meeting began Thursday afternoon with a pre-conference seminar led by Sally Weaver Glick on the topic, listening for wisdom. This was the second in a series of mini retreats on wisdom, which began in May with a zoom retreat led by Karla Minter and will include three more sessions this fall and winter. About 30 people attended the seminar and we spent

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a good deal of the time engaged in the practice of lectio divina, which is listening for the voice of God speaking in biblical texts. We listened to several passages on wisdom read by different voices. She invited us to first spend time reflecting on their meaning for ourselves individually, and then we had a time of sharing in our table groups about what spoke to us in the passages. Weaver Glick encouraged us to think about how we approach problems in our culture, where we move directly from the problem immediately to a solution. We rarely take time to listen with compassion and sit with the problem before jumping into action. The liminal space between problem and action is uncomfortable, but this is often where the peace of God can be found if we are willing to listen.



On Thursday evening we worshipped together in the College Mennonite Church sanctuary, where we sang hymns, heard scripture read, and collected an offering for La Posada Immigrant Aid in Elkhart, Ind., which raised \$1626 for their programs to support their legal aid program for immigrants.

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We heard an engaging message on finding wisdom from Carol Penner, a professor of practical theology at Conrad Grebel University in Waterloo, Ont. Penner reminded us that wisdom is not an idea we read about in scripture, but an aspect of God that is alive and wants to be in relationship with us. We see so many problems in the world around us—climate change, political divisions, war—and wisdom is with us in the midst of it. Penner noted that in the Bible wisdom is portrayed as the feminine aspect of God, but that we often don't sing songs or pray to God in feminine terms. She ended by saying, "when you fall in love with wisdom, she's going to turn your life upside down in surprising ways."



Above: Jaimie Houghton-Thompson from Maplewood Mennonite Church in Fort Wayne, Ind. leads children's time at the Thursday evening worship service. Right: Jan Lugibihl, board president of CDC, gives the state of the conference address.

The delegate sessions began on Friday morning with a time of sharing at our tables and the state of the conference address given by Jan Lugibihl. We heard a congregational story from Trey Ferguson, pastor of The Intention Church, an online community just being born that is centered in the Black church and Anabaptist traditions. He shared that there are many folks who are looking for community and belonging online, and the Intention Church is a place for people to connect with others wherever they are.

Also on Friday morning we heard updates from Camp Friedenswald, the missional

church committee, and the ministerial committee about the important work being done throughout the conference. Jenna Liechty Martin, executive director of Friedenswald, shared that Camp has seen its largest number of campers since at least 1992 and that campers value it as a place to connect with one another away from the distraction of technology. Matt Pritchard, Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith, shared that the missional church committee has focused this past year on diversity, equity and inclusion training for pastors and churches, and shared updates from several emerging communities of faith in the conference.

Gail Gerber Koontz shared that the ministerial committee



Doug Luginbill, Jenna Liechty Martin, Gail Gerber Koontz, and Matt Pritchard present updates. Below: Stacy Lehman and Denton Yoder share the story of how Peace Mennonite Fellowship emerged. Pat McFarren tells about the long history of Knoxville Mennonite Church.



has started offering educational debt relief for pastors and noted that the committee held interviews with 11 leaders in the past year who were seeking credentialing in CDC.

The delegates voted to accept St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship (Mo.) into membership, and Peace Mennonite Fellowship of Archbold, Ohio and Knoxville Mennonite Church (Tenn.) were introduced to delegates as part of the membership process.

The Friday afternoon sessions focused on the new Safe Church program that MC USA recently launched. Carol Penner shared a message during the plenary session on the call to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (from Matthew 10:16).

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Above: Participants at annual meeting receive communion in small groups during Saturday morning worship. Below: Trey Ferguson shares a message on the power of words at the Saturday morning worship.

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She explained that wisdom calls us to live in this tension between watching for sin and believing people when it comes to incidents of clergy abuse. Penner shared, "Wisdom is calling us when those who have been harmed come forward. Will we respond with compassion? I hope so." Rachel Ringenberg Miller followed with a presentation of the Safe Church program documents and the new website that has resources for background checks, policy consultations, and speakers, which can be found at: <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/church-vitality/safe-church/>.



On Saturday morning we started the day with worship and a powerful message from Trey Ferguson of the Intention Church who shared about the incredible power of words. He reminded us that the Bible is a compass that points us toward the Word of God, but that a compass is an aid on the journey, not an end

into itself. The Bible exists to point us toward wisdom, which became embodied in Jesus and calls us into relationship.

The closing delegate session began with a congregational story from North Danvers Mennonite Church (Ill.) shared by Brian Johnson, who shared about some of the ways the church

fosters community through regular morning coffee and fellowship gatherings, where people can share joys and sorrows with one another, whether or not they are part of the congregation.

The main action of the morning was a vote to create a provisional membership category in the CDC bylaws to make our conference more welcoming to emerging communities. The change allows a congregation to keep its non-profit status, insurance, and conference support during their time of discernment before formally joining the conference.

All in all the annual meeting was a wonderful time of fellowship, worship and sharing



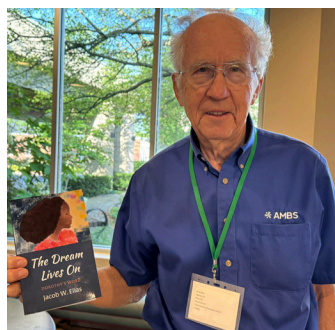
Above: Lydia Brenneman leading a time of centering during the delegate session. Above Right: Sarah Werner, Ben Kreider, Carrie Mast, and David Shenk are some of the newly credentialed leaders in CDC. Below right: Gerald J. Mast and Lisa Weaver lead a seminar on the Anabaptist Community Bible Project.

with one another. There were 143 people in attendance along with 9 children and 35 congregations represented. Rachel Hershberger coordinated the child-care program with helpers Malinda Berry, Jane Loop, and Marta Bergstresser. Throughout each of the delegate sessions, Lydia Brenneman



helped us center ourselves through meditations and reflections, and Beth Bontrager led us in regular singing breaks. During the open mic time at the close of the meeting, people

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Celeste Kennel-Shank and Jacob Elias with their books at the bookstore table, which featured works by a dozen CDC authors.

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shared gratitude for the ability to gather together and for our shared commitments, including counter-recruiting efforts, the safe sanctuary program, and of how welcomed even first-time attenders felt. When the children were asking during worship the first evening what wisdom might look like, one child answered, “Help people imagine.” It was certainly a gathering of imagining and sharing wisdom with one another in a variety of ways. We hope you can all join us for the annual meeting next year, June 19-21, 2025, in Bluffton, Ohio.



## Four Week Wisdom Worship Series

by Joel Miller

*“Wisdom from on high is dawning.”*

It was August 2023 and the CDC board was gathered for our annual visioning retreat. After generating a range of ideas for the next biennial theme, displayed on multiple large post-it notes around the room, informed by our recent listening sessions with congregations, we paused for a time of worshipful re-centering. Into the silence, our Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, sang through Voices Together 238 as the rest of us listened:

*Wisdom from on high is dawning.  
Even now a golden ray  
shines into a world of shadows  
from the realms of endless day.  
Hidden womb who birthed the heavens,*

*in the womb now hides away.*

From this and the following verses of this Advent hymn, the ideas scattered about the room coalesced around a single theme large enough to hold them all within its wide embrace: “Listen! Wisdom is Calling.”

That’s one way of telling the origin story of our Wisdom theme.

Wisdom itself is intertwined with the great origin story of our scriptures. Proverbs chapter 8 celebrates Wisdom as the first of Creator’s acts. Wisdom, it declares, was there from the beginning, “rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (Proverbs 8:31). Wisdom is displayed in the calls for justice from the Hebrew prophets and the writings of the sages. Jesus becomes the embodiment of Wisdom in his ministry. Out of resurrection life comes the call of the church to be a manifestation of God’s Wisdom, all the while remembering that we are first and foremost listeners to that which long precedes us.

Listen! Wisdom is calling.

This worship series is an invitation to enter into the delights of Wisdom. Wisdom dawns not just from on high, and not just at the beginning of time, but all around and within us, in the air we breathe and in the soil that sustains all life. It blooms not just out of the pages of our scriptures, but from the collective wisdom of varied cultures around the world. These four weeks of worship traverse the full arc of the biblical story: Creation, Justice, Jesus, and the Church. They draw equally from both Testaments. Congregations are encouraged to adopt what is useful, adapt to your context, and add what enhances. It is our prayer that in entering more deeply into the ways of Wisdom, we will live more fully into the Way of Jesus.

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(For the full resource, go to <https://mcusacdc.org/resources/worship-christian-formation/>)



## Doug's Mug—Potlikker

by Doug Luginbill

Growing up on a hog farm in rural Pandora, Ohio, I occasionally heard my older brothers, in a fit of frustration, cry out, “You potlikker!”



(Yes, I learned to use the term as well, although I thought it was spelled “pot-licker.”) Usually, the term was reserved for a particularly stubborn pig, refusing to move along the aisle or up the ramp to the market truck. I never gave much thought to the origins of the word.

In May, seven folks representing seven different CDC congregations participated in a seven-day Civil Rights Learning Tour led by Mennonite Mission Network. It was a humbling, eye-opening, and meaningful experience. We heard the stories of newly arrived asylum seekers, housed by [Casa Alterna](#) in Atlanta. We heard Wisdom shouting in the street, lifting her voice in the square (Proverbs 1:20), as a woman drew attention to the plight of the homeless, the destitute, the immigrant, the human. We toured the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) (lynching memorial) and museums telling the story of slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, the Great Migration, Civil Rights, and mass incarceration. We listened with fascination as Joanne Bland gave us a tour of Selma, AL and told of being jailed 11 times by age 13, partly as a ploy to distract police from adults planning the march from Selma to Montgomery. Joanne is co-founder and former director of the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma. We heard Joanne’s sister share her experience of celebrating her 15th



Community Center in Selma; Joanne was in prison 11 times by age 13. Credit: Doug Luginbill.

birthday on that historic march. We mourned the detailed retelling of the Klan murder of three civil rights workers outside Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964. You can read about it here: (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2024/mississippi-klan-killings-1964-impact-history/>). And we ate delicious southern food.



Asylum seekers share their food and their stories at Casa Alterna in Atlanta, GA. Credit: Matt Pritchard.

It was during an evening meal at Open Door Mennonite Church in Jackson, MS that pastor Hugh Hollowell drew our attention to the broth from the smoky collard greens. “That’s potlikker on your plate. Use the cornbread to soak it up.”

The website [bonappetit](#) says, “Potlikker (or “pot liquor”) is the brothy liquid gold left behind after boiling greens and beans—and its roots in Southern culinary traditions and heritage run deep.” (<https://www.bonappetit.com/story/what-is-potlikker>).

I had no idea that the slang term I used on the farm had another meaning and that its slang usage had roots in racism and the disparagement of the poor.



Leroy Clemens recounts the story of the murders of the three Civil Rights Workers. Credit: Doug Luginbill.

Learning tours, as I mentioned, are eye openers.

They provide a new way of seeing, a different way of understanding, and a recognition that there is much to learn. Learning tours can cause embarrassment and induce guilt. They are also stepping-stones to freedom, reconciliation, and wisdom.

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Above: Lynda Blackmon Lowery tells about the march from Selma to Montgomery when she turned 15. Below: Memorial to the three murdered Civil Rights Workers. Credit: Doug Luginbill.

Maya Angelou famously said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

Listen! Wisdom is calling. A characteristic of Biblical Sophia or Wisdom is her invitation to listen. Sirach 6:34 and 37 state, “If you love to listen, you will learn; if you give your mind to it, you will grow wise. Rise early and visit those you discover to be wise; wear a path into their door.”

At our CDC Annual Meeting in June, we were invited to experience God in feminine imagery. We were reminded of the importance of Safe Church Policies and Practices. (<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/church-vitality/safe-church/>). And we were encouraged to imagine God and the church in wider and expansive, life-giving ways.

The Holy Spirit continues to move among us, drawing us toward greater wisdom that is deeply rooted in God’s creative, transformative, and just shalom. Let us drink deeply from the rich, liquid gold of God’s pot likker.



## Installations



**Charles Baraka** was licensed for specific ministry on Sunday, July 1 at Madison Mennonite Church in Madison, WI. Charles serves as the director of Amahoro Ministries for Communities which provides peace building, healing and reconciliation, education and community development in central Africa. Charles and his wife, Gilertine Harerimana (Gigi), also provide support and encouragement to refugees in the Madison area.

### Save the date!

**What:** Our Whole Lives training for lifespan sexuality education

**Who:** pastors, youth leaders, and anyone who works with young people

**Where:** Camp Friedenswald

**When:** November 15-17, 2024

Registration will be available in August. Further information can be found at:

<https://www.uua.org/re/owl>

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