

Listen! Wisdom is Calling Listening Committee Report
Annual Meeting June 2024

Omie: Good Morning! We are the Listening Committee for CDC 2024: Omie Baumgartner from Silverwood Mennonite, Kevin Chupp from First Mennonite of Normal, and Jan Croyle from First Mennonite Wadsworth. We are happy to report what we have heard while listening in the hallways, business meetings, seminars, and worship.

Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.

In our first worship service, I heard the warm voices of people greeting each other and singing together. In the scripture Proverbs 4:1-13, the way of Wisdom was presented. In it, Wisdom encouraged us to embrace her and hold her close, for Wisdom will honor us as we nurture her. We listen, learn, discern, and practice the ways of Wisdom.

From the children, I heard words of wisdom. I followed up on the children's story and spent some time talking with the children about Wisdom on Friday afternoon. While it is a difficult word to describe, the children were able to share their ideas when asked: What can we do to make the world a better place? They eagerly responded with these ideas: Pick up trash. Be kind. Plant a garden. Stop destroying the forests. Pick up toys. Help people get the things they need like homeless people need homes. Hungry people need food. Stop wars like the Civil War, or the civil war in Ethiopia or WWII. And finally, a young girl full of wisdom responded Help people imagine. Let's let that one resonate for a while.

In her message, Carol Penner from First Mennonite Church in Vineland, Ontario instructed us to be on the lookout for wisdom because Wisdom comes to us from all kinds of people, from all kinds of places, and from all kinds of situations. She declared Wisdom is pursuing us and wants to save us. For our offering, Patty Gorostieta shared about the ministry of La Posada Immigrant Aid where Wisdom is working with real people to listen, discern and provide for those in need. Finally, David Shenk and Ardean Friesen shared proverbs from the book [African Proverbs - The Wisdom of a Continent](#) compiled by Annetta Miller. One of my favorites noted "A wise person like the moon, shows the bright side to the world." (Africa) And one that made us laugh stated "A wise person does not need to be told twice. (Kenya)

The worship service closed with James Gingerich from Eighth Street Mennonite leading us in singing VT 196 "Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom", and I will close with the words from Verse 1. "Come and seek the ways of Wisdom, she who danced when earth was new. Follow closely what she teaches, for her words are right and true. Wisdom clears the path to justice, showing us what love must do."

Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.

Delegate sessions operated in a way that was open and involved many faces and gifts. While such reporting has the potential to be dry and tedious, the conversational tone and use of humor by those leading discussion on

budget and bylaws made the discussion much more playful and engaging. The explanations given in response to questions and concerns always felt like they honored the questions, and often anticipated them, while also guiding us to the “heart” that motivated such changes. We encounter wisdom in the way we have been led to joyfully face change while staying consistent and accountable to our shared values and our history.

Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.

Look around the room. What can we hear from the objects around us? What wisdom can they bring to light about our congregations? A chair, an oil lamp, a scrunchy crocheted thingy?

Breathe in 2,3,4 hold 2,3,4 and out 2,3,4. Lydia Brenneman asked us to grab a gem of wisdom—one word or a thought. Hold it in your hand.

I will be sharing the wisdom—calling that was happening throughout the conference. Pay attention, she’s still here. Trey Ferguson of the Intention Church reminded us of the uncomfortable truths exposed during COVID. People were looking for belonging through this profound sense of isolation. We needed to feel connected, but it wasn’t safe to meet together. We needed technology. The church needs to take technology seriously. The Intention Church is a community committed to safety, belonging to Christ. People were ready to find a Christ centered community online. Instead of making zoom the add on for hybrid worship, zoom is the main meeting place for this Jesus focused, peace church of the Mennonites. The Logos is the intention of God.

North Danvers Mennonite Church finds joy in service, both local and far away. By far their joy is found in fellowship together—through food and sharing both their joys and sorrows while learning from one another. North Danvers shows us the need to trust God with what is right in front of us. Ah wisdom.

Omie: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.

In the afternoon, we sat at tables to listen and learn together. I listened while people described the Central District Conference as a community growing in Wisdom. We are welcoming, caring, following Jesus, not all knowing, and not afraid of questions. We work together to address the problems around us. Our connections shape our worship as we celebrate the gifts of all.

As we gathered, Beth Bontrager from Faith Mennonite led us in singing “Draw the Circle”. Next, Lydia Brenneman from Lima Mennonite helped us center ourselves, and Carol Penner explained the structure of the afternoon worship/plenary session. She referenced Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel as she introduced the tension between watching for sin around us and thinking the best of others. This Wisdom of Serpent and Dove supported our discussions at our tables around these three questions. Wisdom is calling, will we listen to the victims of abuse who come forward? Wisdom is our constant companion; how will it guide us in our walk with offenders? Wisdom is calling, how will we foster healing after abuse. Care was taken to be mindful that the discussions might trigger some difficult feelings, and people were available to offer support.

At the end, the mics were open for people to share the nuggets of wisdom heard around the tables. Kerry Strayer mentioned the importance of a neutral party in the process. Janeen Bertsche Johnson recognized the normal nature of the psychological cycles of feelings. Ted Larrison noted that children have safety training, yet adults need healthy boundary training, also. Michael Crosby shared about ongoing Safe Church workshops, and Joel Miller stated a Safe Church policy is important to new members exploring our congregations, and Gail Gerber Koontz said shunning is not an effective practice in the process of reentry.

I will close with VT 196 “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” Verse 3. “Sister Wisdom, come, assist us; nurture all who seek rebirth. Spirit guide and close companion bring to life our sacred worth. Free us to become your people, holy friends of God and earth.”

Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.

We have been blessed that our “business” included and centered the stories and experiences of those who are new to us—and we credit that to wisdom of those who planned these meetings

- The story of The Intention Church, invited us to realize the growing need for cultivating online expressions of church, and challenges us to account for the reality that “online friends are real friends.”
- The story of Peace Mennonite Fellowship shows us the momentum of a movement that flourished organically as people simply responded and showed up because they felt the need for such a community to exist.
- The story of Knoxville Mennonite invited us to join with our siblings who are eager to learn from us in growing as an inclusive community, and they seek fellowship with us in a spirit of resonating compatibility.
- I was grateful to have spilled my kombucha yesterday afternoon. As I hurried to get paper towel, I was outside the room when the vote for affirming St. Louis Mennonite was announced, and I could hear from a distance the burst of celebration that comes from a growing community.

We are inspired by these conversations, and we see the wisdom that has led us to hire an Associate Conference Minister of Emerging Communities of Faith, who makes sure these stories are front and center in our discernment about the life of the church, rather than an afterthought. The wisdom we meet in this process invites us to a continuing openness toward the ecclesially homeless who find their way to us.

Those of us who are not a part of emerging communities are also encouraged and blessed by the story of a 173-year-old congregation, in North Danvers Mennonite Church, that is intentionally cultivating lives of joy, through giving their energy to fellowship, providing their space for community that extends beyond the congregation.

Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.

Rain Down! Rain down your love on your people! For our second centering Lydia asked us to hold our hand over our heart. Holy wisdom is on the way. Feel your heart beating. Allow the wisdom of God to flow through the blood in your body.

Doug read from Ephesians 1 + 3 “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you.” There are 345 uses of wisdom as translated into English in the Bible. Wisdom comes from scripture—inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, interpreted along with Christ.

Wisdom was calling through our three seminars. Gerald Mast led Anabaptist 500th Anniversary. Wisdom is calling. They’re coming. They’re coming. They’re coming as blue books as brown books and black, those soft books and hard books in paper and print, in apps on our phones, with wisdom in pictures and etchings from Martyr’s Mirror. Be patient, wisdom cannot be rushed.

Bluffton University shared that the pulse of a new institution in beginning to beat. Can you hear it, or are you covering your ears? After ending 4 years now financially in the black, we hope to merge with Findlay College not because we are scared, but so that we can be more—be better—have great synergy.

Celeste Groff led Seasons in the Life Cycle of Congregations. There are two stages of church: gathered church and dispersed church with a continuous expectation that church is not contained in a time or place. The parish model invited the congregation to engage everyone in their area—attending worship was optional. A “spiritual will” was deciding what legacy of projects, tasks, focuses they will leave. Being older doesn’t mean we have to be set in our ways. “There is no new life without death first.”

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In our third worship service, I heard singing, praising, laughing, and a few soft Amens! Trey Ferguson from The Intention Church in Miami, Florida led us on a journey of reflection and celebration. Using John 1:1-14 and Proverbs 3:19-29 & Proverbs 8:1, he began getting us involved by singing the B-I-B-L-E. He shared that B-I-B-L-E is Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. Once he had us engaged, we traveled with him and pondered the importance of the Word becoming flesh. He said God sends Wisdom to pursue us, to chase us. Wisdom does not dwell in words. Wisdom wants a relationship with us. If you want to know what Wisdom looks like, Wisdom looks like Jesus. He proclaimed that if Wisdom is calling, we must let its light shine. Let us be radical in our living. Let us be radical in our loving. Let us be radical in the ways of justice. Let us be radical in our communities and in our world as we follow Christ Jesus who shows us the way. Finally, let us slow down so Wisdom can catch us!

We celebrated communion together, and stations were available for anointing. We closed the service by singing VT 832 “The Lord Lift You Up”.

I will close with VT 196 “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” Verse 2. “Listen to the voice of Wisdom, crying in the marketplace. What the Word made Flesh among us, full of glory, truth and grace. When the Word takes root and ripens, peace and righteousness embrace.”

Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.

We see wisdom in facing head on the discussion of “safe church.” We are grateful for wise guides in these conversations as we realize the prevalence of abuse within the setting of congregations and feel the need for a more thorough response from the church. We are grateful to be able to engage together around tables on such important issues, and we trust that our tables, congregations, conferences, and denominational groups will continue to urge each other on toward greater faithfulness in protecting those who are vulnerable among us. These wise relationships will continue to bless us as we ask new questions and encounter new challenges.

As wide as the scope of our conversation has been, wisdom would have us imagine whether there is room for expanding, or “Drawing the Circle Wide” if you will:

- Perhaps we can imagine how to invite deeper involvement from youth delegate(s)—and make these meetings engaging enough and perhaps for them, that the next round there might be plural delegates.

- As we partner with an emerging internet church community, perhaps we can overcome our Zoom creativity fatigue to invite those folks joining us from a distance to participate more thoroughly at these meetings.
- As I am attuned to notice, we have a number of folks raised in other than Mennonite traditions here, and I tend to find them, and wonder whether we ought to have some sort of support for these folks. The established roots of cradle Mennonites, with deep connections across the church and our institutions is a serious gift, but it is also a challenge for some of us who are coming in.

Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.

Sophia, like our listening chime does not remain in one place. She moves—never stagnant. Pay attention to the wisdom that surrounds us and is among us in all of creation. So many wonderful wisdom nuggets to grab and hang onto—wisdom calling out to us:

- People everywhere are created equal.
- We are a story telling conference.
- We are excited about what we are called to next.
- Seasons of the earth are ways to listen for wisdom from creation.
- If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plan.
- We choose community building, over congregational buildings.
- It's not church until you eat together.
- Wisdom is always on the menu, but it is not necessarily the most popular item.
- People are finding rhythm in rituals.
- Wisdom calls from all ages and stages of life.
- Be wise as serpents and as innocent as a dove.
- Wisdom is chasing you, but you are much faster.
- We are not perfect. We are church!
- And it's a good time to be Mennonite! Amen!