



August 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



Mennonite Action marchers entering Washington DC. Credit: Micaiah Landis.

Sacred Listening Theme: Partnerships

The August issue of the Connector continues our yearlong theme honoring the main ideas that arose out of our sacred listening process among congregations in 2022 and 2023. The focus of this edition is partnerships with Mennonite organizations. Many church members shared that they support organizations beyond their congregation and feel connected to a web of other Mennonite institutions, including universities, camps, and relief efforts. The articles here illustrate some of these partnerships as well as the more recent peace-building work of Mennonite Action.

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Mennonite Action March to DC

by Sarah Werner

On July 18 Mennonites and interfaith allies from the US and Canada embarked on an 11-day, 135-mile march from Harrisonburg, Va. to Washington, DC. Singing hymns and holding evening worship services along the way, the "All God's Children March for a Ceasefire" drew attention to the suffering, death, and destruction unfolding in Gaza. Upon their arrival in Wash-

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ington on Sunday July 28, the Mennonite marchers joined an [interfaith coalition](#) that countered the annual conference of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and challenged US lawmakers to consider an alternative, interfaith viewpoint than the Christian nationalist agenda espoused by CUFI. The marchers ranged in age from 11 to 74 and walked about 13 miles a day.

[Mennonite Action](#) is a movement of Mennonites bonded by a common belief that we have a responsibility to use our voices as powerfully as possible for the cause of peace and justice. Their website explains, "We are members of an historic peace church who are mobilizing fellow Mennonites and Anabaptists across the United States and Canada to use creative

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Marchers slept in churches and camped in fields each night during the journey. Credit: Gwen Friesen.

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nonviolent actions to demand a ceasefire, a release of all hostages and political prisoners, end the US and western funded occupation of Palestine, and build for a lasting peace.” They have held a number of protests, vigils and actions since the war began, and the march was their biggest action to date.

Members of CDC congregations were well-represented, including: Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio), St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship (Mo.), Chicago Community Mennonite Church (Ill.), Covenant Mennonite Fellowship (Fla.), Raleigh Mennonite Church (N.C), Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship (Ohio), First Mennonite Church of Bluffton (Ohio), and many folks from Shalom Mennonite Congregation in Harrisonburg, Va. where the march began.

“As Christians and Mennonites, Christ calls us to peacemaking and to be on the side of the downtrodden and the oppressed,” said Emily Hershberger of Shalom Mennonite Congregation. “That’s why we are calling for an immediate, permanent ceasefire and for our government to stop providing arms to Israel as it kills tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians.”

Mary Yoder of Columbus Mennonite Church shared: “Mennonite Action inspired me to keep working on social justice issues for Palestinians. It was invigorating and in some ways almost magical to see so many people from so many faiths come together and sing really well and to encourage each other and confront Christian Zionism.”

Theda Good also of Shalom said, “Marching was a visible and physical way to NOT pretend everything is normal in the world, especially Gaza. The march was also a way to be in community with others when we can feel so helpless in the face of massive political genocide and decades of inhumane treatment of the Palestinians.”

Conference Minister Doug Luginbill also participated in the march. He shared, “I went to DC thinking I was participating in a demonstration and I found myself in church! Mornings began with centering and prayer. Walkers sang and built com-

munity along the way. Evenings were opportunities to share food and reflection. I experienced both ‘celebration’ of God’s creation and ‘witness bearing’ to one another and the world. This intergenerational and intersectional event demonstrated God’s love for the whole world, especially for those living through the horrors of the war in Gaza. ‘Palestine will be free’ were the words to a song we sang often as well as our hopeful prayer.”



Marchers in rural Virginia. Credit: Gwen Friesen.

Tom Benevento also of Shalom Mennonite Congregation recounted: “It was inspiring to walk and stand with fellow Mennonites and friends who seek to hear God’s call of love and nonviolence for all. To make space to focus on the tragic suffering and genocide in Gaza was both difficult and crucial. There is more to do.”

Conrad Gratz also of Columbus Mennonite Church shared the following: “I joined this march intending to walk most of the way but was called on to drive a truck and trailer, one of the three vehicles used to support the marchers, a good use for my almost forgotten skills from days working on the family farm. The march went through two mountain ranges and the Shenandoah Valley. It followed highways where our signs and flags would be visible to the most people. We camped in fields and stayed in churches and campgrounds. Sometimes we were confronted by angry people insisting we leave the area, but mostly we experienced signs of support and many acts of kindness, generosity

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and people showing interest in our cause. Churches of many denominations housed and fed us, often going out of their way to accommodate us.”

Once they arrived in Washington DC, the marchers met up with other members of the Interfaith Coalition for Palestine, made up of Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and fellow Christians from other denominations. Some of the marchers spent several more days meeting with their congressional representatives, proclaiming a faith perspective that countered the Christian nationalist message of CUFI, and singing in the rotunda of the Hart Senate building,



College Hall, Bluffton University. Credit: Gerald Mast.

Bluffton University, the University of Findlay, and Two Centuries of Church Divisions and Mergers

by Gerald J. Mast

In my childhood church community, we made frequent use of the Christian Hymnal, published by the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite—which is the official name of the Holdeman Mennonites—a plain group with revivalist inflections of Anabaptist teaching. John Holdeman, from Wayne County, Ohio, founded this church in 1859 when he broke away from the Ohio Mennonite Conference because of two significant influences: the writings of Menno Simons and the ministry of John Winebrenner, founder of a US denomination now called the Churches of God, General Conference. John Holdeman had experienced spiritual renewal when he attended revival meetings at a Churches of God

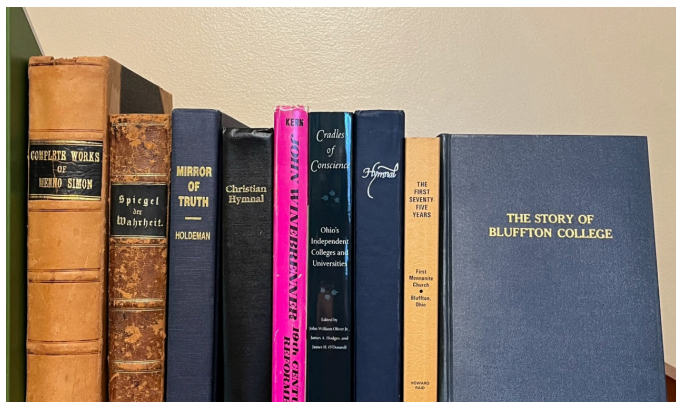
congregation and he wanted to restore this awakening to the Mennonite church, which is why the official name of his group envisioned being a Mennonite inflection of the Churches of God.

When I learned about the proposal to merge Bluffton University (Bluffton, Ohio), where I teach, with the nearby University of Findlay (Findlay, Ohio), I recalled singing from the Christian Hymnal and became curious about John Winebrenner and the Churches of God, the denomination that founded the University of Findlay and that had influenced John Holdeman. I learned that Winebrenner was a German Reformed pastor from Pennsylvania who because of the influence of Methodist revivalism experienced a spiritual conversion that led him to reject Calvinist beliefs such as predestination and to be rebaptized by Jacob Erb, a minister of the United Brethren church.

The United Brethren were a denomination formed in 1800 through the collaboration of former Lancaster Mennonite Conference bishop Martin Boehm and former German Reformed Church minister Philip William Otterbein, both of whom like Winebrenner had been influenced by revivalist Methodism. Around the time of John Winebrenner’s conversion in 1830, he broke his ties with the German Reformed Church and began organizing a new circle of churches, which became known as the Churches of God. Winebrenner also embraced the abolitionist cause and founded the Harrisburg Anti-Slavery Society. In 1882, the Churches of God established Findlay College as a church school in Findlay, Ohio, and in 1942 added Winebrenner Theological Seminary to the campus.

Meanwhile, in 1899, just south of Findlay in Bluffton, General Conference Mennonites established Central Mennonite College. In 1914, they added Witmarsum Theological Seminary to the campus, while changing the college’s name to Bluffton College. Witmarsum Theological Seminary closed on the Bluffton campus in 1931 and reopened in Chicago fourteen years later as Mennonite Biblical Seminary in affiliation with the Church of the Brethren’s

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These books illustrate the complex connections among denominations. Credit: Gerald Mast.

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Bethany Theological Seminary (and which eventually became Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary after several mergers).

In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren—a union of the Evangelical Church and the United Brethren through which John Winebrenner had been rebaptized—joined with the Methodist Episcopal Church to form the United Methodist Church. In 2002, the General Conference Mennonites (GC) merged with a different denomination—the Mennonite Church (MC)—to form Mennonite Church USA (echoing the earlier merger in 1994 of the denominations’ two affiliated seminaries in Elkhart). Dr. Lee Snyder, the first president of Bluffton with a Mennonite Church rather than a General Conference Mennonite background, helped Bluffton transition to affiliation with the Mennonite Church USA, which she served as the denomination’s first moderator.

This newly merged denomination included among its area conferences both the Lancaster Mennonite Conference from which Bishop Martin Boehm had broken in 1800 to help form the United Brethren and the Ohio Mennonite Conference from which John Holdeman and the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite had divided under the influence of John Winebrenner and the Churches of God. During Lee Snyder’s presidency, Bluffton College also changed its name to Bluffton University, reflecting the addition of graduate programs in business and education.

Early in the 1980s, the General Confer-

ence Mennonites, the Mennonite Church, and the Church of the Brethren had begun work on a new joint hymnal, published in 1992 as *Hymnal: A Worship Book*—the primary hymn book from which I have sung during most of my adult life. During the early years of this hymnal project, two additional denominations participated in the preparation of the hymnal: the Mennonite Brethren and the Churches of God, General Conference. The contributors from the Churches of God listed in “Hymnal Project Personnel” at the front of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* include Marilyn Rayle Kern, a Findlay College and Winebrenner Seminary alum who eventually served as pastor at two Mennonite congregations: Oak Park in Chicago and First Mennonite in Bluffton. Marilyn’s daughter Kathleen Kern is a Bluffton alum and prolific writer well known for her work with Christian (now Community) Peacemaker Teams.

In 2018, Dr. Jane Wood, who is a member of the United Methodist Church, became president of Bluffton University. Under her leadership, Bluffton University has now entered into an agreement to merge with the University of Findlay—formerly Findlay College. From the church history perspective that I have been sketching, the background conditions of possibility for this new partnership include the dynamic and disruptive spiritual awakenings of the 19th century, along with the many organizational affiliations and mergers that followed in the 20th century and that reverberate in our own time of systemic instability as well as energizing new relationships. The proposed merger can thus be seen as an unfolding event in a larger story of church institutions—and their hymnals—striving to attend and adapt to the challenges of human history and the movements of the Holy Spirit, while remaining faithful to the calling of Jesus Christ and the purposes of God’s universal kingdom.

Gerald J. Mast is Professor of Communication, Forum Director, and Church Relations Coordinator at Bluffton University. He is a member of First Mennonite Church, Bluffton.



David Moser with campers on the first evening of camp. Credit: Jackson Steinmetz.

Wisdom of Children and Groundhogs by David Moser

Pre-junior campers come to Camp Friedenswald fresh out of second and third grade, their eyes beaming with excitement. At the first campfire in Mosquito Hollow eighty-five pairs of bright eyes looked back at me, their camp pastor. I paused a moment peering into their eyes. I told them what I saw as I circled the campfire, “I see the light in your eyes.” Again, and again, I said to individual children, “I see the light in your eyes. I see the light in your eyes, and your eyes, and your eyes.” Children sat fixed in silence, waiting, wondering if I could see the light in their eyes too. I assured them, “I can see the light in your eyes.”

What was the light I was seeing? Wisdom: the steady, bright light of experience and knowledge growing inside each child. The theme at camp this summer was Animal Kin-dom. The goal was to connect more deeply with all God’s creatures that share the gift of life with us. Like us, animals have a light in their eyes, a light uniquely their own. The early Celtic Christians of Ireland, like the Native Peoples of North America, acknowledged the deep kinship between humans and animals grounded in wisdom. The 7th Century Celtic monk, Adamnán praised God for this bond when he wrote, “Praise be to you, O God, who has made every animal wise in the instinct you have given it.”

My goal for the first campfire was two-fold. One, for the children to experience animals as possessing their own unique

wisdom; and two, to love animals even more for knowing this. The philosopher Susan Neiman noted, “To care about the fate of the world, you must love at least a piece of it.” If the fate of the world hangs in the balance of what we choose to love, then focusing a child’s innate ability to love is cause for hope. Primary-age campers naturally love animals. It did not take a lot to convince them animals are our kin. Trusting in small beginnings, I only needed one ambassador to flame their love for all animals and set the tone for the week.

Charlie the Woodchuck unknowingly volunteered for the job very early Sunday morning before camp began. He had been unwisely, but happily, living in a burrow in the middle of a friend’s vegetable garden. The sweet smell of overripe cantaloupe lured him into a cage trap. On my way to camp, I picked him up. He was resigned to his cage and smelled like fear. I looked into his sad eyes and saw light and wisdom.

At the campfire that evening, I placed Charlie in his cage on a pedestal stump high enough for the kids to see him. He sat quietly in the cage, his fate unknown. I asked the campers what unique groundhog wisdom Charlie might possess. They said things like, “He is very good at digging tunnels.”

“He is good at finding food to eat, and knows what plants are poisonous to him.”

“He knows to hibernate when it gets too cold outside.”

Someone said Charlie had had a stressful day penned up in a cage. We all agreed that animals are happier when they are free to live their lives guided by their unique wisdom. An apology was made, “Charlie, we are sorry you have had a long and scary day cooped up in a cage.” The campers joined antiphonally with one voice in blessing Charlie:

“Go. Be free, and follow your groundhog wisdom. May you live a long and happy groundhog life in the peaceful woods.”

Then I placed Charlie’s cage on the ground with the door facing away from the campfire, pointing him up the path leading out of Mosquito Hollow. I opened the cage

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door. Charlie sat there quietly, not moving, unsure if the offer of freedom was real. What felt like a long minute passed, and eighty-five children sat in perfect silence, expectantly, not wanting to frighten him. Then, Charlie took a few tentative steps toward the door. When his nose reached the threshold of the cage, he bolted as fast as his little legs would carry him. He ran up the hill and off into the woods. The children broke into a raucous cheer.

All week children came to me one at a time and in small groups. Excitedly they would report, "We saw Charlie!" Charlie was everywhere, and every groundhog was Charlie. The children convinced me Susan Neiman is right, "To care about the fate of the world, you must love at least a piece of it." When a child loves Charlie in every groundhog, perhaps that is enough. One cannot help but hope for our planet's future. I, myself, saw three Charlies on my drive home from camp. May the wisdom of children and groundhogs save us all.

David Moser is pastor at Southside Fellowship (Elkhart, Ind.) and spent a week in the peaceful woods during Pre-Junior Camp. This is a reflection from his time as camp pastor at Camp Friedenswald in southern Michigan and was originally published on Friedenswald's blog, reprinted with permission.



Pre Junior Campers (rising 3rd and 4th graders) gather on the first day of camp. Credit: Jackson Steinmetz.

Financial report July 31, 2024

2024/2025 to-date income \$30,347
2024/2025 plan \$ 30,735
actual versus budgeted income (\$388)

2024/2025 to-date expenses \$23,651
2024/2025 spending plan \$ 30,735
Under-expenditure against plan \$7,084

After the initial month of activity in the 2024/25 financial year, the conference is again off to a positive start. Contributions from member congregations are \$7000 above the budgeted amount, while all income together is just \$400 below budget.

On the expenditure side, total costs were about \$7000 below budget for the first month of the new year.

Tending Transformation campaign income for July 2024 was \$5,500, bringing the campaign total to \$293,500. The overall goal is to reach \$350,000 by the end of the current financial year.

Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer

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