



Knowing Christ's Love...
Answering God's Call

September 2024

Connector

Stories and News from
Around the Conference

**Central
District
Conference**

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA



Oak Flat in Arizona. Photo: Paul Neufeld Weaver.

Sacred Listening Theme: Partnerships, Part 2

The September 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 an extended look at partnerships with Mennonite organizations, which we first shared in the August issue. Churches are engaged with so many partnerships that we felt it warranted a second issue. Inside you'll find information on the anniversary of Et Cetera Inc. in Bluffton, Ohio, birth of the Mennonite fair trade movement; a reflection on Apache Stronghold, working to protect the sacred Oak Flat from copper mining; and an invitation to participate in a leadership training for Our Whole Lives, a comprehensive sexuality education program; plus the latest installment of Doug's Mug.

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Sacred Invitations

by Jon Zirkle and Paul Neufeld Weaver

It was dark at camp in Oak Flat, Az. when we noticed a dad and his son with two friends. We approached them and introduced ourselves

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as Oak Flat accompanists. Jon recognized the dad as a member of Apache Stronghold – defenders of Oak Flat. We saw they were constructing a structure out of branches. “Come join us Thursday for my son’s first sweat.” Glancing at each other without time to discuss, we said, “We would be honored to come.”

We receive invitations all the time, but some turn out to be sacred, even transformative. Saying “Yes” to an invitation when the details of the invite are unclear can be unsettling. It involves saying “Yes” to ambiguity, “Yes” to possible risk, “Yes” to yielding control. Jesus calls us to accompany, to walk with those who struggle for justice. In the Gospel stories, rarely did Jesus give much instruction. Rarely did Jesus offer assurance that following will be comfortable.

Over the past few years Apache Stronghold has been reaching out to people of faith to join them in their efforts to protect their sacred land in Oak Flat or “Chi’Chil Bildagoteel.” Since time immemorial, Apaches have come to this sacred land for ceremony, prayer, gathering food and medicine, and to remember their ancestors who lived and died on this land.

For decades it has been known that large deposits of copper exist under this land.

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However, mining companies did not have access to mining here until language was slipped at the last minute into an omnibus defense bill in 2014, creating a path for the forest service to transfer this land to Resolution Copper, in exchange for lands elsewhere in Arizona. This is one more example of bypassing, disrespecting, and taking from indigenous peoples without acknowledging their spiritual practices rooted in reverence for this land.

Thursday morning (the Fourth of July) came and many male relatives, teachers, and friends had arrived in the night for the sweat, setting up tents and tending a sacred fire. With little to no instructions to us except for the advice, “watch and listen,” we walked over to join the group as they began this coming-of-age ceremony for a twelve-year old Apache boy. Observing the steps of the preparation for the ritual along with the others, we followed their lead in preparing ourselves before entering the sweat lodge.



Above: a sign at Oak Flat in Arizona. Above right: the grandmother oak at Oak Flat. Photo Credit: Paul Neufeld Weaver.

We didn't previously think of sweating as sacred, but as sweat dripped from our bodies like a steady rain, we all recognized the importance to this young man of this moment as we struggled together in the heat and steam. Sitting in the dark, everyone present was invited to share words of wisdom which might benefit this twelve-year old boy on his life's journey. What was beautiful and mysterious was the inner invitation we felt to reflect on our own coming of age and the role of elders in our own growth. When the sweat ceremony was

over and the closing blessings and words were shared, we all were offered the hospitality of food, water and kindness. To be included was overwhelming. Something in us will never be the same. It may take us years for us to fully make meaning of this experience.



Apache Stronghold invites others like you to accompany them in the struggle to save the holy ground of Chi'Chil Bildagoteel (Oak Flat). As outsiders from far away, it may not feel personal or meaningful to say yes to this invitation. Not yet at least. Perhaps understanding the sacredness of Oak Flat becomes deeper and more personal after sweating on that sacred earth, joining the sweat, tears, and prayers of indigenous sisters and brothers. One can only imagine how many sweats, prayers, and ceremonies have happened on this land for generations, how much the ancient oak trees have witnessed and supported.

What might Mennonites and other Christians learn from accepting the invitation to accompaniment, presence, and solidarity with Apache Stronghold and Oak Flat? Can we learn to receive invitations as a gift rather than a burden? What if we said yes to invitations as a prayer, trusting that Creator God will provide what is needed and accompany us on the journey?

Sarah Augustine, Executive Director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, encourages us to approach invitations to solidarity without dwelling on counting the costs, knowing the road ahead is not clear. Saying "Yes" is an act of faith.

For us, Apache Stronghold was the soloist, and we were the accompanists, not on the piano, but on the holy ground of Oak Flat, Az.

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We listened for cues from the soloist, watched, listened, and played along.

We invite you to:

- Pray for Oak Flat and pray for Apache Stronghold as they protect sacred Oak Flat from mining.
- Organize a group to sign on to the amicus brief in support of Apache Stronghold's case in defense of religious freedom to the Supreme Court.
- Sign the petition located [here](#).
- Support the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery by joining the Repair Network.
- Donate to COFA (Chi'chil Bildagoteel Oak Flat Accompaniment) <https://dismantlediscovery.org/donate/> (click donate and on the pull-down menu choose Oak Flat Special Fundraising or Oak Flat Training Accompaniment).
- Volunteer to serve or tap shoulders of those who could serve in accompaniment at Oak Flat.

Jon Zirkle is a member of Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind. Paul Neufeld Weaver is a member of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio.



Jon Zirkle (left) and Paul Neufeld Weaver (right) at Oak Flat. Photo credit: Paul Neufeld Weaver.

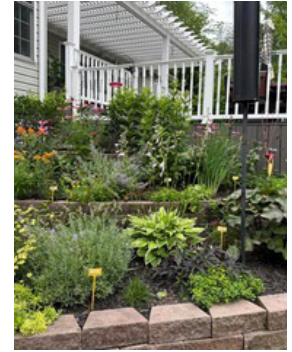
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Et Cetera Inc. Celebrates Fifty Years

by Mary Pannabecker Steiner

In 1946 pioneering Mennonite business-woman Edna Ruth Byler met women in the La Plata Valley who were struggling to feed their children. She began selling the beautiful needlework they made to friends in the US, sending the profits back to the sewing group in

Puerto Rico. In 1962 her project was adopted by the MCC as the Overseas Needlework and Crafts Project. Led by visionary Lois Kreider, members of First Mennonite of Bluffton opened the first Fair Trade storefront in the country in 1974, and called it Self Help Crafts. They began a thrift store called Et Cetera to raise money to buy the inventory. It was renamed Ten Thousand Villages in 1996 and now sells products from 30 countries worldwide, empowering workers to raise their standard of living, feed their families, and pursue an education. This year they are celebrating 50 years of Et Cetera, Inc. with events throughout the year.



Left: Tim Byers, volunteer and creator of the garden behind the Et Cetera Shop building. Right: Et Cetera garden. Photo Credit: Mary Pannabecker Steiner.

Today, Et Cetera Inc. is operated by a non-profit board and is sponsored by local churches in Northwest Ohio, including First Mennonite, Bluffton; Grace Mennonite, Pandora; Salem Mennonite, Elida; Lima Mennonite, Lima; Bluffton Presbyterian Church, Bluffton; English Lutheran Church, Bluffton; and St. John Bible, Pandora.

Et Cetera Inc. now encompasses three stores - Et Cetera Shop, a thrift store; Ten Thousand Villages Bluffton, a cultural gift store selling fair trade goods handcrafted by global artisans; and Book ReViews, selling gently used books. Each store employs a manager assisted by a team of volunteers. Et Cetera is part of a network of not-for-profit stores that support local and global relief, development, and peace projects of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Events in 2024 have included the annual volunteer dinner with family members of its founder, Lois Kreider, and her assistant, Celia

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Hilty; style show, garden tour, and pop-up customer appreciation days at the stores.

Et Cetera Inc. is planning two more community events – a Comforter Bash and Redo, Renew, Repurpose – to complete its 2024 year-long anniversary celebrating 50 years of Et Cetera's operation in Bluffton. Et Cetera Inc. will also have a float in Bluffton's annual Blaze of Lights Parade.

- Saturday, October 19, 9 am-4 pm: Comforter Bash – Arthur/Lugibihl Center, Pandora. Fifty comforters will be knotted and fifty hygiene kits will be assembled for MCC. A light lunch will be served and refreshments will be provided throughout the day. Each shop will have a display with shop items for sale.
- Saturday, November 30, 5-7 pm: Bluffton Blaze of Lights Parade. Et. Cetera Inc. will have a float in the parade.
- Saturday, December 14, 2-4 pm: Bluffton Family YMCA – Redo, Renew, Repurpose. Children enrolled in BFR programs will be invited to create things using a variety of used items. The children's items will be on display during the event. Local persons who create by repurposing items will display their work.

The planning committee includes Joyce Schumacher, Susie Gratz, Heidrun Awad, Cindy Luginbill, Shirley Sommer, and Mary Pannabecker Steiner. For more information, please visit: <https://fmcbluffton.org/et-cetera-shop-50/>



Our Whole Lives Facilitator Training

By Phil Yoder

Central District Conference is sponsoring a training for anyone interested in learning about and teaching the Our Whole Lives curriculum. Our Whole Lives (OWL) is a sexuality education program that was created by the United Church of Christ. OWL helps participants make informed and responsible deci-

sions about their relationships, health and behavior in the context of their faith. It equips participants with accurate, age-appropriate information in six subject areas: human development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behavior, sexual health, and society and culture. It provides not only facts about anatomy and human development, but helps participants to clarify their values, build interpersonal skills and understand the social, emotional and spiritual aspects of sexuality.

OWL requires facilitators to be trained in order to provide the programming in one's church. CDC is seeking to provide this training for instructors who have interest in teaching about healthy human sexuality and faith. This could be a pastor or Sunday School teacher. This training will prepare instructors to teach the grades 6-9 and 10-12 curriculums.

Who: Anyone interested in teaching the OWL curriculum. This training will focus on grades 7-9 and 10-12.

When: Nov 15-17, 2024, Begins at 6p Friday and ends at 3p on Sunday

Where: Camp Friedenswald, 15406 Watercress Way, Cassopolis, MI 49031

Registration deadline: November 1

Cost: \$200 per person

Contact us at (574) 534-1485 or office@mcu-sacdc.org

Our instructors are:

Sue Ellen Braunlin (she/her) has been an organizer for reproductive rights and advocacy for people criminalized for their own pregnancies in Indiana. Twenty years ago she helped launch the Our Whole Lives sexuality education for K-12 in her congregation and has continued to lead Our Whole Lives programs in other congregations and community settings in Indianapolis and to train facilitators in the Midwest.

Kathleen Baldwin, MSW is a sexuality educator, trainer, program developer and coach who works with diverse communities to promote sexual health and rights for over 35 years. She has written several curricula and manuals to promote healthy sexuality and sexual rights, and she has been a national trainer for Our Whole Lives sexuality education since 1999.

Doug's Mug: Resistance

by Doug Luginbill



I invited my two pastors, Phil Yoder and Carrie Mast, along with long-time First Mennonite, Bluffton members, Jeff Gundy and Ruth Naylor, to a conversation about the Holy Spirit. I was curious about how they understood and experienced the Holy Spirit. It was a rich and ongoing conversation that I can't begin to capture here. Towards the end of the 90+ minute conversation, Phil and Jeff both suggested that I might find it interesting to read *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* by Dorothee Soelle (2001). I was going to be spending over 50 hours in a car during vacation at the end of August so I took them up on the offer and read the book.

Soelle was a German theologian, Vietnam and Cold War opponent, and one intrigued by the connections she observed between spirituality/mysticism and social action. In *The Silent Cry*, Soelle references the radical reformation and Anabaptism numerous times. One of the "mystics" that Soelle mentions in *The Silent Cry* is Thomas Müntzer, a 16th century Anabaptist put to death in 1525 for his involvement in the peasant uprising in Muehlhausen, Germany (see pages 84-89). While Thomas Müntzer is often critiqued by our Anabaptist historians for his participation in a violent uprising (and to be clear, I also reject violent resistance), I found Soelle's description of Müntzer's spirituality intriguing. Müntzer identifies a three-fold "preparation for God" that begins with "wonderment." We might use words like awe or amazement. One of Müntzer's favorite images from nature is the rainbow which he understood as an eternal sign of God's covenant.

On the first morning of our vacation in the Tetons, Paula and I stood in wonderment as we observed a double rainbow at sunrise. And on our last morning, as we were departing the Tetons and heading toward Yellowstone, we were treated with another rainbow. Indeed, wonderment seems an important aspect of faith!

A second step in preparing for God, according to Müntzer, is "Entgrobung" (A process that turns us back from the rough ways we have made our own.) We might call this repentance, transformation, or new birth. Repentance was a central aspect of early Anabaptist spirituality; both personal repentance and a turning away from the corruption they observed in the state churches of the time.

Müntzer's third step is "lange Weile" or "the long while." Soelle interprets this as "freedom from the constraints of time, from rushing after whatever diverts us at any moment." In our seemingly ever-accelerating pace of American culture, Müntzer's invitation to see the long-road (eschatological vision) of God's justice and peace is both invitational and unequivocal. This lange Weile includes resistance. Müntzer and other 16th century Anabaptists were not the "quiet in the land" nor were they "non-resistant" in the face of injustice and tyranny. They lived out their faith in resistance to evil systems and unjust laws. Eventually, there was general agreement among Anabaptist leaders, explicitly stated in the Schleithem Confession (1527) that the use of the "sword" is not a means of resistance to be exercised by followers of Christ. "Also, He [Jesus] Himself forbids the [employment of] the force of the sword saying, 'The worldly princes lord it over them, etc., but not so shall it be with you.'" (Sixth Confession).

When you drink from your mug of resistance, what does it taste like? What and how are you invited to resist? What does this look like in "the long while?"



A double rainbow at Grand Tetons National Park in Wyoming. Photo credit: Doug Luginbill.

Installation



Seth Miller was installed as the pastor of Oak Grove Mennonite Church in Smithville, Ohio on Sunday, September 1. He is pictured here with his spouse Kristie and daughters Abigail, Rebecca, Susannah along with Herb Hershberger who welcomed them to the congregation. Photo credit: Doug Luginbill.

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***The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* by Stuart Murray** by Sarah Werner

The New Anabaptists is a follow-up to Stuart Murray's highly popular previous work, *The Naked Anabaptist*. In this new book, Murray outlines the practices common to the Anabaptist movement in the UK and also includes three chapters written by leaders involved in helping promote emerging communities of faith in the British Isles. Murray is one of the founders of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network

(AMN), an organization that provides resources on Anabaptism to churches and individuals in the UK (<https://amnetwork.uk/>).

The book arose from a gathering where members of AMN developed a list of the core convictions that guide their work. The common practices are grouped into chapter topics: starting with Jesus, baptism and communion, multivoiced church, truth-telling, simplicity and sharing, and peaceful witness. Murray describes how each of these practices are rooted in the Christian tradition and why these are particularly important to Anabaptists.

The most compelling part of the book for me was the second section on how these common practices are lived out in emerging communities of faith. In Chapter 7, Alexandra Elisha a pastor and church planter in London, describes the work of Incarnate, the church planting initiative of AMN. In the next chapter Karen Seturaman shares her journey in starting SoulSpace Belfast, an emerging faith community seeking to heal sectarian divisions through worship, chaplaincy, and fellowship. In the final chapter, Juliet Kilpin details the work of Peaceful Borders, an AMN project to support asylum seekers and migrants after a transformative trip to an overwhelmed refugee camp in Calais, France.

The book is a great read for anyone seeking wisdom on the essential practices of a relatively new manifestation of the Anabaptist movement and how we can best share the gospel of peace in a post-Christendom world. There is a helpful appendix at the end that includes liturgies and prayers that incorporate the core practices for study and worship.



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Email: sarah@mcusacdc.org

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Central District Office:
Doug Luginbill, conference minister
Emma Hartman, administrator
Matt Pritchard, minister for emerging faith communities
Mailing address: PO Box 1199, Goshen, IN 46527-1199
Phone: 574.534.1485
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org
Follow us on Facebook and Instagram @centraldistrictconference