



October 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 participant watches geese at Olentangy Wild Church on the banks of the Olentangy River in Columbus, Ohio. Photo credit: Sarah Werner.

Sacred Listening Theme: Worship

The October issue of the Connector concludes 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 on the diverse ways we worship together. Worship is at the heart of church life for many congregations in CDC and participants in the listening sessions reflected on the value of different ways to worship together. Some churches are lay led, while others have one or several pastors on staff. Congregations also enjoy experimenting with worship in new ways, using art and drama, worshipping outdoors, and hearing various guest speakers give the sermon.

This month we feature congregations who have been experimenting with wild church in the last year, as well as small groups who meet for wild church outside of their congregations. In addition to inventive congregational worship, the conference also provides opportunities for spiritual growth. One example is the series of quarterly zoom retreats on the topic of wisdom, and we invite you to participate in the next retreat happening in November.

In this issue:

Theme: Worship	pg. 1
Wild Church Across CDC	pg. 1
Wisdom Mini-Retreats	pg. 5
Installations	pg. 6

What is Wild Church?

by Sarah Werner

Wild church is a movement that has spread throughout the world as people of faith seek new ways to find connection with God, the natural world, and one another. Though Christians have been worshipping outdoors out of necessity since the beginning of the Church, the modern wild church movement got its start in Britain around 2012 with the founding of the Forest Church Network. It now includes dozens of communities who worship in a variety of natural environments throughout the UK. The Wild Church Network followed a few years later in North America, founded in 2016 by several women including Mennonite pastor Wendy Janzen of Burning Bush Forest Church in Kitchener, Ontario.

While each wild church is different, many use a format for their service that includes the following elements. Gathering and Grounding is the beginning part of the service where the worship leader welcomes everyone in and introduces the theme for the day. Reading and Reflecting is a time when the scripture and any other readings are read and the worship leader offers a brief reflection and guidance for wandering time. The third part is called Wandering and Wondering, where participants

Continued on pg. 2

Continued from pg. 1

are encouraged to either wander or sit quietly and listen for the voice of God speaking to them in creation. The final part of the service, Sharing and Sending, is a time for participants to share what message they heard with one another while wandering and to prepare to go back out into the world.

The summer issue of [Leader magazine](#), a worship resource published by MennoMedia, provided liturgies and reflections from leaders of Mennonite wild churches for congregations that wanted to incorporate wild church into their worship life, either for a single service or as an ongoing practice. Several CDC congregations gave it a try and their reflections are featured here. Additionally, Columbus Mennonite Church has a wild church small group that meets monthly on an ongoing basis. If your congregation has tried wild church, we welcome you to be in touch about your experience (sarah@mcusacdc.org).



Olentangy Wild Church meets around a fire in the winter months for warmth. Photo: Sarah Werner.

Restful Worship in Creation

by Stacey Lehman

Wild Church really made sense for us at Peace Mennonite Fellowship in Archbold, Ohio. We deeply value environmental care and are in the process of trying out new styles of worship. So wild church was a natural fit. For me personally, wild church was a compelling way to experience God speaking, and then hear from others what they experienced as well.

When I look at wild church through the lens of modern culture, it seems like a radical idea.

But I think perhaps the characters of the Bible wouldn't find wild church all that radical. In fact, many ancient cultures honored the connections between humans and nature. And so perhaps wild church is less about something new and more about an awakening to a very ancient way of connecting with the Divine.

I find that in my life I am often very busy indoors, isolated as I bustle from one thing to the next. And when I am outside, I am still busy working on something. Wild church offered me the chance to take a break from all that and simply be—in community with others, community with nature, and in communion with God. John O'Donohue shares a wonderful image about how our bodies are sisters with the earth, made from the same ancient clay. Sitting there on the hard clay of the earth, seeing all that had grown from it, and knowing that it had nourished me, it gave me a deep sense of appreciation for this beautiful world that God has given us. I think we all long to experience that connection.

If I had to offer some advice to a congregation considering wild church, I would say go for it! There are a lot of resources out there, and it really is easy to plan and lead. Also, make sure you bring a roll of toilet paper because at least in our case, the restrooms at the park didn't have any!

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Sharing Communion in Nature

by Jan Croyle

At First Mennonite Church in Wadsworth, Ohio we had heard of wild church and were delighted to find examples in *Leader magazine*. We decided to try all six versions described in the magazine: three hybrid and three off-site. The hybrid services were mostly in the sanctuary with our wandering and wondering happening outside. Our off-site services were in different places: at a park, in someone's front and back yard with woods, and on a farm with animals beside a pond.

At first, some were leery of the name. "I don't like the idea of getting wild during church." And some felt that few would share. We were pleasantly surprised that nearly everyone shared at least a sentence on where

Continued on pg. 2

Continued from pg. 1

they discovered God speaking to them. One member said it was like getting a multitude of mini devotionals.



Above, below and right: First Mennonite Church of Wadsworth members gathered in a variety of outdoor spaces for their wild church services. Photo credit: Jan Croyle.

Each service had its unique highlights, but for me the best worship time was one we held at the park on the theme of interconnectedness. It was probably one of the longest services, yet no one seemed to notice. Even those who came for the noon picnic found themselves present in a circle of sharing and communion in an open and inclusive way. After our wandering and wondering time, we came together in a large circle. We passed around a talking stick to share something God brought to light in our walk, or we paused then passed the stick on. For communion, we first talked about how we feel most physically comfortable as we pray and worship. What do we do with our hands? Turning, opening, and lifting cupped hands places us in a vulnerable posture—expectant, empty, exposed, waiting to receive. When we



are the ones giving, we maintain some sense of power and control but receiving means that we're not in control of what we are given. We lifted our cupped hands and two people came around and poured cool water into them. We paid attention to how this cleansing cool water felt as the breeze dried our hands. Then each received a different number of pretzels and then a different size of grape clusters. The receiver was not in control of how much they received but they were in control of what they did with what they received. Did they eat it all or share it with creation (crumbs for the birds, juice for the soil)? One humorous thing we noticed was that when we passed the talking stick around, many held it as if it were a microphone being passed around.



When choosing a location for wild church, it's important to choose an accessible location with plenty of shade, to have printed details of the service so those who have difficulty hearing outside may read along, and to give the option for people to stay in their chair to listen and look for God while seated if the ground is uneven. It's also important to share with the congregation the excitement of trying something new, but also be open to people joining in as they feel comfortable. This is a freeing time of worship, not something to cause anxiety in their sharing. All sharing is good sharing. Sometimes we hear God speak to us in stories from our childhood—remembering the things we used to notice but no longer take the time.

We plan to hold more wild church services next summer and may even add some "wild chapels" occasionally during the week and in other seasons.

Taking Church Outside

by Rachel Stolpe

We at Milwaukee Mennonite Church (Wisconsin) don't have a pastor and do not own the building where we meet. Each year we have a handful of services in other locations for various reasons. Those services are usually very similar to our regular service, just somewhere else. What drew me to wild church was that it is not just moving your regular service outside. Over the past few years, I had been introduced to wild church through other CDC members who were doing it and was very interested. I kept it in the back of my mind, waiting for a good time to try it out.



Left: Members of Milwaukee Mennonite Church met at several locations, including Harrington Beach State Park on Lake Michigan. Below: Meeting at a shelter makes wild church possible on rainy days or when shade is needed. Photo credit: Rachel Stolpe.

When *Leader* magazine featured it as a suggestion for summer worship, I knew this was the time to try it out. Our worship team scheduled it for the first Sunday of each month. I led the first service and it went ok. We tried to sing a few hymns, but there were not many people so it was hard. I also neglected to calculate where the sun and shade would be, so it was very sunny with no shade. As part of my preparations, I enjoyed researching the history of the park and sharing that along with the land acknowledgement. The second time we had wild church it was much simpler and without music. We had planned to eat dinner



together at the park, but a HUGE storm rolled in and everyone headed home.

Right: from left to right, Sam Stolpe on mandolin, David Stolpe on guitar, Lauren Clark leading music/singing at a wild church service of Milwaukee Mennonite Church. Photo credit: Rachel Stolpe.



The next time, I scoped out the location and made sure we had ample shade. This third park is located in a very busy neighborhood with a lot of traffic all around. I found a space in the center of the park where it would be quieter. When we showed up on Sunday, the road through the park was closed, so we needed to pivot and meet in the grass by the main parking lot on a busy street. This meant pausing while ambulances, motorcycles, and other traffic passed by. Ironically, in the end, the part I found most meaningful about that wild church experience was the combination of sounds. I could hear birds, other animals, the water from the pond, the breeze in the bushes, along with the sounds of the neighborhood.

A wild church worship time is so much simpler than our regular service. The act of being grounded in a particular place and being aware of your surroundings is something we don't often do. Providing so much time for silence and personal reflection is also not built into our regular service. Allowing time for people to wander off and hearing what they saw, experienced, or heard is very freeing. I appreciated the information in *Leader* magazine that we are worshiping *in* nature and not worshiping nature. That distinction is very important. Since it is more informal, it was easier for youth to be present. One 11-year-old said, "Church was not so bad today." Usually he struggles to sit still for a regular service.

I would LOVE it if wild church became a regular part of our church schedule. I wonder if meeting in the same location is better than going to different places each time. The best

Continued on pg. 5

Continued from pg. 4

part for me was seeing that we don't need all the words, decorations, songs, and more words. God is speaking to us in so many ways, and when we are silent, it is easier to hear. Instead of us giving the sermon or reflection, God and the Holy Spirit are showing us what we need to hear or see. When we come back together and share what we each experienced, that is a holy time. It also levels the playing field for all of us, whether we are biblical scholars or not. We all can share what we experienced.



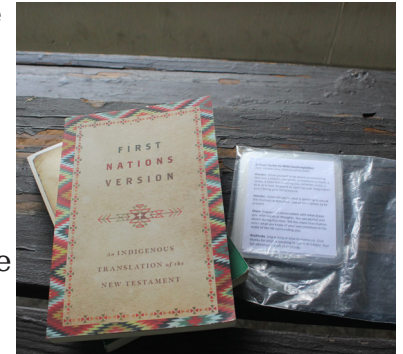
Above: Olentangy Wild Church meets at a shelter at a local park during the winter and at a more shady location in the summer. Right: The *First Nations Version of the New Testament* is a great resource, and cards offer guidance participants during wandering time. Photo credit: Sarah Werner.

Listening for God in the Urban Wilderness by Sarah Werner

Olentangy Wild Church held its first service on the first Sunday of Advent in 2022. It was the weekend after Thanksgiving and a cold and drizzly day, and I wasn't sure if anyone would be willing to brave the cold weather on a holiday weekend to try a different kind of worship practice together. People did show up and we have been gathering monthly for almost two years now in all kinds of weather to listen for the voice of God in the midst of the urban wilderness of Columbus, Ohio. OWC is a small group of Columbus Mennonite Church, but we have folks who participate from other Christian traditions as well.

We meet in two different parks around Columbus and in the winter enjoy gathering around a warm fire. There are always different sights and sounds as we gather through the different seasons—the deep quiet of winter,

the stunning beauty and hopefulness of spring, the heat and vibrant green shade of summer, and the drawing in amidst dazzling fall color in autumn. We are a core group of seven with others who come and go from month to month. Worship is always spontaneous in that I'm never sure what we will experience in nature or what will be shared during reflection time, but it is always a Spirit-filled time in community with one another and with creation.



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Listen - Wisdom is calling!

by Sally Weaver Glick and Jan Lugibihl

Every two years the CDC Board of Directors, staff and representatives from the Missional Church and Ministerial Committees and Camp Friedenswald meet to set a Vision and theme for our work in the next biennium. In August 2023 our discernment and prayer led us to "Listen! Wisdom is Calling" as our theme. Little did we know the richness that theme would provide for our work.

Over this past year, I (Jan) have felt the Spirit moving in that theme and in my own listening for the call of Wisdom. The quarterly Zoom retreats have been an important piece of that. CDC is blessed to count a number of grace-filled, wise spiritual directors among our membership and I'm grateful that Zoom has provided the opportunity to experience the gifts of those leading the retreats. Joining with other searchers has been a privilege and helped me deepen my understanding of the work of Wisdom in my life and the life of the Conference.

In Proverbs, Wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out in the busy marketplace, inviting people to come aside and feast with her. When CDC planned quarterly Zoom retreats to aid us in listening for Wisdom's call, I (Sally) wondered how well that format would work. I have found that it does work well—there is time for brief input from the leader, time away from the

Continued on pg. 6

Installations



Lauren Satchwell was installed and licensed toward ordination at Mennonite Church of Normal, Illinois on Sunday, September 15. Lauren serves quarter time on the pastoral team with Kevin Chupp and Lynette Miller. She is pictured here with members of the congregation. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill



Moriah Hurst was installed at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana on Sunday, September 29, where she joined the pastoral team. She is pictured here with Conference Minister Doug Luginbill. Photo credit: Lois Kaufmann.

Continued from pg. 5

screen for personal reflection and prayer, and time to connect with folks from the far-flung corners of our conference.

We began last spring with the question of “Who/what is Wisdom?” In one of the passages from Proverbs, Wisdom describes herself as participating with God in the work of creation, like a master craftsman or, depending on the translation, like a playful child. We had a time of playful, creative space during our hour or so away from the screen.

Our shorter retreat time before annual meetings was an in-person gathering, allowing us to listen together, using group Lectio Divina to prayerfully listen to a scripture passage in table groups. We were also introduced to a graphic of a transformation curve, a way of vi-

sualizing what can happen as we create space to listen to Wisdom together.

In August we looked at God’s manifold, multifaceted wisdom, drawing on Ephesians 3:10-12. We celebrated the diversity in that wisdom and again had time for playful, creative prayer, spending time in nature, playing with color, or putting our encounter with scripture into a pantoum, a structured Indonesian poetic form. I look forward to seeing what face of Wisdom we will encounter in our upcoming retreat times!

The next retreat will be Saturday, November 9, from 9-11am. You can join using this [zoom link](#). The link will also be shared in the weekly announcements for those reading the print version of the *Connector*.

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