



March 2025

# 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



Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church baptizing Elizabeth Johnson in the Eno River.

### Baptism Stories

This year Mennonites around the world are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, which began when a small group of Christians gathered in Zurich to baptize one another to affirm their commitment to Jesus at a time when the Church had aligned itself with the power of the State. As part of this celebration, we share here baptism stories from three CDC congregations.

#### *Saying Yes to Love*

by Elizabeth Johnson, Raleigh Mennonite Church (N.C.)

When I reflect on the journey leading to my baptism, I think of the paralyzed man who was lowered through a roof to be healed (Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26). His friends, full of faith and love, carried him to Christ when he couldn't get there on his own.

I arrived at Raleigh Mennonite Church broken. My previous congregation was not LGBT-affirming, which I realized only after coming out to some friends who then left the congregation and never spoke to me again. I learned that, as much as I loved my commu-

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nity, there were parts of myself I needed to hide for them to love me back. Over time, the shame of keeping my secret grew to the point that I couldn't even pray anymore. I felt so worthless that I couldn't imagine God wanting to hear from me.

I told everyone at my first RMC service that I was queer because, if I was going to be rejected, I wanted to get it over with. Instead, I was welcomed. It was a strange and frightening experience to receive a church's unconditional love. Over time I came to believe, in spite of myself, that if people like them could know me fully and still love me, then maybe it was possible for God to love me too. I began to understand that God loved me in the fullness of who God created me to be, not because I'd done anything to earn it, but because God is love. My baptism was me saying yes to the love that was always there, even before I knew how to accept it.

Little about my baptism or my life since has looked how I expected. I planned for the baptism in what I thought was great detail - praying, inviting friends and family, adding a single white dress to my otherwise all-black wardrobe - but was unprepared for the physical realities of being baptized. The chill of the

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early August water was a shock to me. The mud on my white dress and the difficulty of clambering up and down the riverbank were decidedly unglamorous, though also holy and real. I distinctly remember sitting in the river afterward, looking up at the entire congregation assembled on the hillside, and being struck with an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability. I was small and low and soaking wet, defenseless as a newborn child. At the same time, I felt safe. I'd finally found a community and a God I could trust with my vulnerability.

The unexpected changes that led me to that moment in the Eno River have compounded in the three years since. In the semester after my baptism, I abandoned the initial research area that brought me to graduate school to follow God's call to study the challenges and resilience of women in ministry. There was pain in setting aside the dissertation proposal I'd spent years working toward, but also great joy in my new topic and the opportunities for service and connection it brought.

More recently, my commitment to following Jesus has deepened through engaging in peace activism with other Mennonites for the first time. The terrifying existential question that once defined my relationship with God is now the least interesting thing about my faith. Because of the grace and patience of God and my community, I've become capable of loving and welcoming others the way I once needed to be welcomed and loved.

One of the things that drew me to the Mennonite tradition was the opportunity to make my own decision about baptism as an adult. I am deeply grateful to have had the choice to say yes to God's love after a period of wrestling and for those whose faithful witness helped me understand that love. On days when I still feel stressed or distant, I wear a vial of river water from the day of my baptism around my neck. It is a reminder of God's faithfulness to me in every circumstance and those who carried me to God when I couldn't make it on my own. It's a celebration of my second birthday, the day I was reborn into a new life of grace, freedom, and abundant love. It reminds me of who I am and whose I am: the child of a loving God, in whom I trust.



A vial of water from the Eno River collected on the day of Elizabeth Johnson's baptism. Photo: Elizabeth Johnson.

### ***Joining the Body of Christ***

by Kevin Chupp, Mennonite Church of Normal (Ill.)

The idea of offering a baptism preparation class began last summer at the request of two sisters who were eager to be baptized. They had attended MennoCon23 in Kansas City along with a handful of other youth from our congregation. There they were invited to participate in open communion as a part of the worship, which was different than what they had experienced at home. In our congregation, the historical practice has been that communion was for baptized Christians. After having a taste of communion, the older sister decided to pursue being baptized so that she could take communion with the congregation before she headed off to a Mennonite college in the fall. Her sister, who had shared in that experience, was eager to join her in this.

Three others joined our class as we walked through the biblical story, the history of our faith, and talked about what it means to own your story of faith. When the class was finished, three were ready to be baptized, one decided they were not quite ready, and another became too busy with other commitments.

The two sisters opted to be baptized in our church during worship. They confidently shared with the congregation about their faith and why they were seeking baptism. Their parents stood with them in front of the congregation who, together, renewed their own covenant with God and pledged to bear each other's burdens, inviting the Holy Spirit to make us all into one body.

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A couple weeks later, the other student was baptized, opting to be immersed into the lake following worship during our church retreat at Menno Haven. There, in the slippery shallow edge of the lake, she shared about her faith, said no to all that is destructive, said yes to Jesus' creative way of peace, and was invited into the body of Christ before those who were gathered there—surely including some creatures who were also bearing witness to God's endlessly creative love in their own way. Three were baptized, but we were all blessed by the varied beauty and mystery of this acted out response to God's universal invitation.

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### ***Baptism in the Great Outdoors***

by Julia Schmidt, Faith Mennonite Church (Goshen, Ind.)

On June 16, 2024, we baptized five youth under a large oak tree in a city park in Goshen. This was a significant moment for Faith Mennonite as it had been many years since there had been any baptisms and there had been no youth baptisms in recent memory.

All the youth wanted to be baptized outside at a location that was meaningful to our congregation. They decided that the service should take place under a huge oak tree in a city park where the church had met during the pandemic and continues to meet a few times every summer.

Because there was no place to be baptized by immersion nearby, we decided to pour water over their heads. To help make it more meaningful, my co-pastors and I decided that we would use the same plastic pitchers for their baptism that we use every Sunday when Faith hosts a meal after our service. We believe that our meal is a continuation of our worship and we say the words of institution every Sunday before we eat. It felt significant that the baptisms were connected to this weekly ritual.

So on that baptismal Sunday, we gathered under the oak tree, sang songs such as "I Saw a Tree by the Riverside," and each youth getting baptized read a faith statement, followed by a blessing from a parent or mentor. I then poured an entire pitcher of water over each

one of them as they knelt in this sacred spot. My co-pastor Mariah helped each one up, welcoming them as a sibling in Christ and anointing them with oil.

It was truly a privilege to take part in this sacred act and to see the water wash over each youth getting baptized. It felt so joyful to have our community gathered under an oak tree, to recognize youth taking this public step into a life of faith. It was fun to be able to start new traditions, ones that we hope will continue, as I plan to offer the baptism class every few years.

I had been pastoring at Faith for a little over a year when I started to teach a baptism class this past spring at Faith Mennonite Church for junior high and high school youth. I emphasized that deciding to get baptized did not mean that they have all their questions about faith answered. Rather, it is a public declaration of choosing to be on the path of faith, leaning into the questions and into one's commitment to follow Jesus.

Over the weeks together, we read from Michelle Hershberger's book, *God's Story, Our Story*. We had an overview of the whole Bible and the youth named themes they heard throughout the Bible. We talked about spiritual practices and what it means to be a part of a faith community. We reviewed the history of the church and learned stories of the early Anabaptists and discussed the importance of believer's baptism. We visited Menno Hof in Shipshewana to hear more of the Anabaptist story and have a hands-on experience.

It was such a privilege to hear the youth discuss questions from Michelle's book and wrestle with some of the big questions of faith. I was so impressed at the depth of their participation, the deep questions they asked, and the ways they engaged in conversation. They all took the class seriously and spent time making the decision for themselves if they wanted to take part in the ritual of believer's baptism.

After the class ended, I met individually with each of them to hear how their faith has been shaped, to answer any questions they may have, and to learn if they want to get baptized. Some chose not to get baptized, yet they remained engaged. From my first two years of pastoring, baptism Sunday has easily been my favorite Sunday so far.

## Christmas Giving Project

by Rhonda Gibson

During the Fall of 2024, the 3-5 grade school class at First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana (Ill.) painted birdhouse banks. Each child took their bank home and worked to save and collect money for their Mennonite Central Committee Christmas Giving Project. The children saved in hopes of raising enough to purchase a farm animal for those in need. In December, the children baked items for the congregation to eat during fellowship time, decorated their classroom, and invited people to donate to their effort. Between their saved money and donations from the bake sale, the class raised \$981.00 – more than enough to purchase one of everything in the guide. They were very excited!



The 3-5 grade class at First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana with their bake sale goodies. Photo: Rhonda Gibson.

## Reparations at Columbus Mennonite

by Joel Miller

Several years ago Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio) began to explore the possibility of paying reparations as a way to live into our commitments to nonviolence and antiracism. The payment of reparations is one way that individuals, families, and church communities can address income inequality between white people and people of color as well as confront the legacy of land dispossession of Indigenous nations. After a period of discernment, we committed as a congregation to reparative debt payments. We began by adding \$5,000 for this purpose to our annual budget, and increased it each year to reach \$20,000 this past year. Reparations committee member JoAnn

Knapke shared, “It is important for me to acknowledge the need for reparations as part of healing and reconciling my relations to those I am as guilty of hurting as those people in the past who started the wrong.”

We initially included this under our Missions giving. However, through the counsel of a Native faith leader we have moved it to the Facilities category. This better classifies it as a cost of ownership rather than charity. A little bit about the choice of language:

- Reparative debt payments is the phrase we’re using for incorporating our commitment to antiracism and contesting white supremacy into where we direct funds.
- Reparative indicates that acknowledging past harms isn’t enough. Justice calls for concrete steps toward repair.
- Debt stakes out the nature of the relationship between those who have profited from stolen land and unpaid labor, and those who have suffered its generational consequences.
- Payments likens this to a bill owed, rather than a gift given.

Every year we have directed half of the payments toward a Native-led organization and half toward a Black-led organization, to be used however they deem necessary. The Native American Indian Center of Central Ohio (NAICCO) has an active Land Back campaign through which they intend to purchase 20 acres to create a center for cultural programming. Toward the end of 2024 NAICCO sent out a letter to supporters celebrating their current total of \$396,737 raised. They continue to welcome donations and are actively searching for land in Franklin County and the surrounding area.

The other organization we pay reparations to is called Land of the Freed, and is led by descendants of the Randolph Freedpeople. In the early 1800s Virginia slave owner John Randolph wrote in his will that his 383 slaves would be freed after his death. The estate purchased 3200 acres in Mercer County, Ohio for these formerly enslaved persons to settle and farm. However, as they traveled up the Miami-Erie Canal toward their land they were confronted by a white mob that forced them out of the county. The freedpeople dispersed

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and set up communities in Miami and Shelby counties. Two initial projects of Land of the Freed are revitalization of the African Jackson Cemetery outside Piqua, and surveying the exact location of the land parcels purchased for the freedpeople. This second goal was just achieved as a joint project with Miami University. Storytelling and reparation are future goals.

CMC member and pastoral intern Bethany Davey shared, “For me, being engaged in the church’s reparations work has been a tremendous gift. The experience has been an invitation into truth-telling about our community’s land and human relationships historically and today. I am deeply appreciative that this ongoing truth-telling work is paired with a commitment to reparative financial action. For me, this commitment provides a theological and ethical framework for responding to ongoing harm in a manner that is both symbolic and practical. I am deeply grateful for the community’s commitment to this work. For me it is both sacred and liberative.”

It’s worth noting that both organizations/campaigns have the word “Land” in their title. Loving the land, listening to the land, and learning the history of the land are integral to our faith journey and, we pray, the repair of harms, for the flourishing of all.

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### **Doug’s Mug: A Little Water**

by Doug Luginbill

I have a little water in my mug. What a difference a little water can make! Is your pancake batter too thick? Add a little water. Do you need to clean up a mess on your kitchen counter?

Use a little water. Do you have an extra guest for your soup lunch? Pour in a little water! Is someone asking to be baptized? Find a little water!

It was a little water that gave birth to the Anabaptist movement on January 21, 1525. Five hundred years later, we are still talking about that little bit of water poured over the heads of Blaurock, Grebel, Mantz, and others.



Of course, it wasn’t the water alone that sent state leaders into a tizzy or compelled women and men to sacrifice their lives. It was the symbol the water represented. Baptism, freely chosen upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ as teacher, Lord, and Savior; that’s what caused the ruckus. Baptism is a public symbol of one’s ultimate loyalty, one’s commitment to model one’s life after Jesus, one’s faith in a Savior for this world and the next. It’s amazing what a little water can do!

I recall the first baptism I conducted as a newly called pastor at Hope Mennonite Church, Wichita, Kan. The congregation had a wonderful tradition of using pitchers, hand made by a local potter, to hold the water. The pitcher, which included the date of the baptism, became a gift for the individual as a reminder of their baptism. A mentor for one of the high-school seniors being baptized asked how much water they should put in the pitcher. I responded, “Whatever you think is the right amount.” (What I meant was, “Just a little bit!”) The young man being baptized was dressed neatly in khaki pants. He knelt down, sitting back on his heels. I poured the entire contents of the pitcher (not just a little bit) over his head which streamed down upon the front of his khaki pants. I extended the right-hand of fellowship and helped him to stand. There he stood before the congregation, newly baptized, a member of the church, and with an embarrassingly large wet spot on an unfortunate part of his pants. There were chuckles from the congregation. He blushed.

What does that little bit of water mean to us who are baptized? Are we sometimes embarrassed by our faith, our congregation, our denomination? When a measles outbreak is centered in a Mennonite community in Texas, are we quick to say, “That’s not us!” When Mennonite Church USA enters into a lawsuit against the United States Department of Homeland Security, are we squeamish? When we are in a conversation next to a stranger on a plane and religion comes up, do we claim our faith? Do we consider it convenient to say that we don’t need to talk about our faith because we live it?

Because of our celebration of 500 years of Anabaptist faith and because of the

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increasingly hostile political environment in which we live, I anticipate that we will have opportunities to talk about, promote, and defend our Anabaptist faith. Some people will be critical. Some won't care. Some will be curious. Some will want to join us in our journey. At times we might feel like the young man standing before the congregation with wet pants. That's ok. We know what that little bit of water means.

With courage, joy, hope, and love, let us remember that little bit of water and may it continually cleanse and shape us into the people God is calling us to be...no matter the cost.

**A Letter of Peace**

The following letter was sent to Doug Luginbill and Nathan Lutjens (Executive Conference Minister for Central Plains Mennonite Conference) by Michael Pahl, the Executive Minister for Mennonite Church Manitoba:

*Greetings to you in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. I'm writing to you as MC USA*

*conference ministers of area churches with congregations that are in closest proximity to Manitoba. As the US and Canada begin a trade war which will cause harm to the most vulnerable among us on both sides of the border, and as you are experiencing tremendous pressure from Christian nationalism in the US, I wanted to reach out to you to assure you of our ongoing prayers for you.*

*We share a citizenship that is neither Canadian nor American; we share an allegiance to Jesus as Lord that is greater than our allegiance to any nation. May you know that we as Mennonite Church Manitoba stand alongside you in that higher citizenship and greater allegiance. We stand with you, upholding you in prayer, as you seek to overcome evil with good. We are with you regardless of what happens between our two nations.*

*May you have the wisdom of the Spirit, the compassion of Christ, and the steadfastness of God our eternally loving Parent as you provide leadership and care to your congregations in these days.*

*Yours in Christ, Michael*

**Financial report  
February 28, 2025**

2024/2025 to-date income . . . . . \$ 223,291  
2024/2025 plan . . . . . \$ 217,239  
Income received above budget . . . . . \$ 6,052

2024/2025 to-date expenses . . . . . \$212,946  
2024/2025 spending plan . . . . . \$ 244,349  
Under-expenditure against plan. . . . . \$31,403

Difference between actual year-to-date income and expenses: . . . . . \$10,942

Central District Conference finances are looking strong as we enter the final trimester of the financial year. Congregational support is very healthy as usual, while individual giving is higher than usual.

The Tending Transformation campaign has been fully pledged, with only about \$10,000 yet to be received to meet our three-year goal of \$350,000.

*Report provided by Timothy Lind, conference treasurer*

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