



April 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



Faith in Place staff and volunteers plant a tree in Waukegan, Ill. Photo: Brian Sauder.

Celebrating Earth Day!

Welcome to the Earth Day edition of the Connector! This month we feature stories from CDC congregations and partner agencies who are doing important work in the midst of climate change and a difficult political environment. We hope their stories will inspire you to engage in creation care work in your own congregation.

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Cold Nights, Warm Blankets, and Climate Change

by Josh Richardson

This year at Saint Louis Mennonite Fellowship (SLMF), Mo., our relatively small congregation opened an emergency winter shelter for our unhoused neighbors. Over the course of the winter, we opened our doors on 12 nights when the temperatures dipped below 25 degrees, providing over 200 meals, over 100 beds, and countless emergency supplies including coats, blankets, Narcan, compassion, comradery, and love. This spring, we have started a garden on our grounds to sup-

In this issue:

Caring in an Adverse Climate	pg. 1
Faith in Place Tree Planting	pg. 2
Sabbath Gardening	pg. 3
The Intention Church	pg. 4
Mennonite Arts Weekend	pg. 5
Friedenswald Knitting Retreat	pg. 6
Licensing and Ordination	pg. 6

plement our food banks with future plans to convert all of our urban green space into food production through permaculture. We're also dreaming about using the inside of our building for indoor food production through hydroponics and aquaponics so that we can provide fresh food year-round.

While the connections between our ministries at SLMF and "creation care" may not be immediately obvious, both our food ministry and our emergency shelter are foundationally ministries around climate change as its impacts have become so enmeshed with the challenges we see in our community. At SLMF, we can no longer ignore the connections between the changes in our environment and the suffering in our streets. The shift in the energy stored in the atmosphere from the increasing concentration of greenhouse gasses is altering the patterns of the jet stream, pushing arctic air south to places like St. Louis - placing our unhoused neighbors in dire situations and increasing the need for emergency winter shelters. The altering of global climates is also devastating agricultural production, causing increased food prices and an emergent need for increased emergency food assistance from nontraditional sources within our community.

Continued on pg. 2

Continued from pg. 1

Despite any attempt to hide or ignore the realities of climate change by corporations and governments, we are all living in a time where almost every aspect of our lives, including our church ministry, is profoundly altered by our broken relationship with our environment, including the impacts of climate change. For our faith communities, every single one our ministries have, in part, become environmental ministries as climate change has reached all aspects of life. Even things like budgeting for our faith communities needs to include an understanding of how climate change is impacting energy and utility markets for accurate estimates of utility costs. For those of us who choose to purchase insurance, we must reckon with how climate change is driving up prices while decreasing insurance availability.

When we need to fix our buildings, we must understand that the costs for building supplies and repairs continue to climb well above historical projections amidst global resource wars. And, as peacemakers, we must be able to grasp how nation states are beginning to engage in violence to usurp precious metals needed for non-fossil-fuel-based energy production while posturing for trade routes opening in the arctic from the melting of polar ice. Perhaps most importantly for our ministries, we must grasp how the psychological impacts of resource shortages can create feelings of scarcity within local communities, driving political polarization, scapegoating of vulnerable groups, and ultimately partisan violence.

Last year CDC introduced the theme “Listen, Wisdom is Calling.” For us at SLMF, that listening has included the listening to the needs of our neighbors, including nonhuman creation and the land itself. And, in listening to those needs, we have found new life as a community with vision, purpose, and a hope that arises from participating in the love of God. We are walking into the future with our eyes wide open to how the world is changing because of climate change and environmental degradation. But our minds and hearts are set on participating in the long arc of history that bends toward justice. For now, that starts with hot food on cold nights, warm beds, and a small garden that we believe can change the world.



Faith in Place volunteers plant a tree in Zion, IL

Grant Funding for Tree Planting is Frozen by Brian Sauder

I serve as the president and CEO of Faith in Place, a faith-based environmental nonprofit working in Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. In 2024, we were awarded a \$1.9 million USDA Forest Service Urban Community Forestry grant. This funding, made possible through the Inflation Reduction Act, was designed to increase tree equity, mitigate extreme heat, and create jobs in historically disadvantaged communities across the Midwest.

The impact of trees in urban communities is nothing short of transformative. Trees provide shade, improve air quality, mitigate flooding, and combat the heat-island effect—challenges that disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color. Faith in Place was eager to implement these projects, knowing they would create tangible benefits for the people who need them most.

Then, everything changed. On January 20, following his inauguration, President Trump signed the executive order “Unleashing American Energy,” which directly targeted the Inflation Reduction Act. This order placed an “immediate pause” on funding provisions tied to its grants and incentives—including the \$1.9 million that Faith in Place had been awarded.

The consequences of this action were immediate and devastating. Over 50 planned community-led projects across Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin were thrown into uncertainty. Jobs that were supposed to be created disappeared. Climate resilience efforts were halted. Communities that had trusted in the promise

Continued on pg. 3

Continued from pg. 2

of federal support were left stranded.

This was the first time in my 11 years leading Faith in Place that I've had to contact our partners and tell them we can't follow through on our commitments. These communities did everything right—they planned, prepared, and counted on this funding to make real change. Now, they are left with nothing but uncertainty.

In response, we decided to take action. On March 13, we joined a lawsuit filed by Earthjustice against the Trump administration, challenging the unlawful freezing of Inflation Reduction Act grant funds. The lawsuit argues that the administration's actions violate both the Constitution and the Administrative Procedure Act by arbitrarily halting funding that had already been allocated.

For us, this fight is about more than just one grant—it is about accountability and justice. Communities across the Midwest are counting on these grants to build climate resilience, create green jobs, and improve public health. Withholding these funds disproportionately harms disadvantaged communities who already face systemic environmental injustices.

We had carefully planned grant implementation, hiring staff and building infrastructure in good faith that the federal government would uphold its commitments. Now, with funding indefinitely frozen, the very ability of nonprofits to serve their communities is under threat.

Of course, Faith in Place is not alone in this struggle. Across the country, other nonprofits, small farmers, and community organizations are facing similar hardships as Inflation Reduction Act funding remains locked in political limbo. These delays are not just administrative inconveniences; they have real consequences for people's lives, livelihoods, and the future of environmental justice efforts.

Despite these challenges, Faith in Place remains steadfast in our mission. For us, this is a fight for environmental justice, and we will continue to advocate for the communities that need these resources the most. We are now calling on the administration to immediately release the funds and uphold its commitment to environmental justice and community resilience. Until then, we will continue to fight—not just in court, but in every space where

justice demands a voice.

The work of caring for each other and our environment is too important to be left unfinished. To get involved in this effort with Faith in Place visit: <https://www.faithinplace.org/ira-defense>.



Church members sowing seeds at the Sabbath Garden at Covenant Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Fla. Photo: Andrew Hudson.

Sabbath Gardening in Florida

by Andrew Hudson

At Covenant Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Fla., we have been meeting monthly since December to practice Sabbath Gardening (one of the perks of Florida's mild weather is being able to meet all winter). At our first meeting, we planted a cover crop and then reflected on the parable of the sower. The second month we were able to spend fifteen minutes observing that crop, Wild Church style, and then reflect on what we saw. This observation and reflection is one small example of developing a relationship with land over time. We participated in something, and the land did something with it - we are beginning to interact and do things together. That is the essence of what Sabbath Gardening is.

I cooked up the concept of Sabbath Gardening during my time at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, In. I have always been fascinated by the fact that in the Bible, Sabbath is a command that integrates human life with the land's needs. For humans, we are told to rest every seven days, and we are commanded to let the land herself rest every seven years. So when I rolled onto campus in 2019, I wondered aloud if the garden could use a rest the following summer, Leviticus-style. They

Continued on pg. 4

Continued from pg. 3

saw my point, but people didn't want to give up a whole year of gardening. So I came up with a different model: what if we divide the garden into seven parts, and let 1/7 rest every year? Then the same result happens, the whole garden rests one out of seven years, and we get to keep gardening. I have now taken this same model to my home congregation, Covenant Mennonite Church in Sarasota, where we are practicing sabbath for the land right where our church building is.

What about sabbath for people? The more I have done this, the more I have seen people strain themselves - often unnecessarily - in gardening. Habits of overwork run deep. Often they are generational. In Sabbath Gardening, we always emphasize listening to our bodies and taking breaks whenever we have the urge. That is the essence of Sabbath, developing our ability to listen to the inner voice while also connecting with community, which includes the earth.

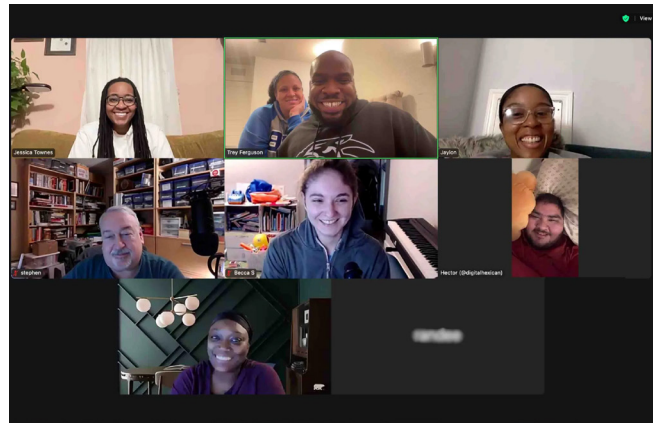
Sabbath Gardening is a way of integrating two processes that modern society separates artificially: personal health and ecological health. Both benefit when people get to know a place, which is a popular concept in both regenerative agriculture and the wild church movement. Sabbath Gardening helps us get to know the land where we worship. Even if people in a church have never thought consciously about the land they steward, the relationship is there. A garden, if done prayerfully, can be a way to wake up to that relationship.

I will be traveling around up north in June, from Pennsylvania to Chicago, on a sort of Sabbath Gardening learning and sharing tour. I'm interested in both learning from groups that do gardening, and talking with those



who are interested in how a Sabbath Gardening framework can help them. People are welcome to write me at: sabbathgardening@gmail.com.

Left: A cover crop of mustard greens at the Sabbath Garden at Covenant Mennonite. Photo: Andrew Hudson.



A Zoom gathering of The Intention Church.

The Intention Church

by Trey Ferguson

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us a lot about ourselves. Five years after the world shut down for the sort of global health event we typically only see once a century, we saw our schools, places of employment, churches, and communities stretched to their limits.

Truthfully, nothing has been the same since. I do not offer that as a praise or a critique, only as a testimony. It is a testimony that has led directly to The Intention Church. In the land before COVID, much of our communication already took place in the digital sphere. In the land since COVID, we found more jobs, schools, and cohorts moving online. To many, it felt unnatural, until it didn't. Whether or not this is a good thing is immaterial. It is a thing we must acknowledge. Just as the printing press helped lay the groundwork for the Reformation, we find ourselves in the midst of another upheaval during this digital revolution.

And that raised a question: what does faithful ministry look like in a world of digital connections? In our congregation, it looks like de-centering the preached word as the primary means of hearing from the Spirit of God, and re-centering the priesthood of believers. However, we have not abandoned the preached word entirely. A typical week with Intention begins with a short sermon (the longest message to date has been 13 minutes) being released on all of our social media channels (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) and email lists each Thursday with some questions for reflection.

Then each Sunday, we gather on Zoom at

Continued on pg. 5

Continued from pg. 4

4 pm. After waiting for any technology glitches that participants might have, we give newcomers an idea of what they can expect over the next hour and fifteen minutes. On a typical Sunday, there will be a couple of volunteers reading scripture passages for our reflection—often one person will read from the Psalter before another volunteer reads the passage that serves as the foundation of the message for that particular week. And then our resident poet laureate will read a poem she’s written in conversation with the passage and message of the week.

After this the sharing continues. We break up into rooms of no more than eight people where they are free to discuss anything from the message or passage that resonated with them, or anything that they struggled or disagreed with. Recognizing that we don’t always come with insights ready to go, groups are also given optional reflection questions if they need any starting points for discussion.

Once we spend around 30 minutes in small group discussions, we reconvene the larger gathering and, group by group, we share some of the major themes that were discussed. It’s in this time of group sharing that the Spirit speaks most robustly.

To seal our time of communal sharing, we gather for the Lord’s Supper each Sunday. People bring their own elements, we pray over them, and then we say the words of institution. We remember all of the people that sat around the table with Jesus on the night that he was betrayed. We reflect on the body which was broken for the disciples of Jesus, and also for the world. We meditate on the blood of the new covenant, which was given in order that we might be released from the captivity of our own sins and the constraints placed on us by the sins of others. We reassemble the lifeblood and body of Christ in ourselves and within our community each and every Sunday. And then we receive a benediction and look forward to the next time we are able to gather.

Each Tuesday evening, a small group of people gather for an intercessory prayer meeting. On the first and third Thursday of each month, there’s also an evening Bible Study. Because the digital world is the primary setting of our gatherings, we also have an active Facebook

group and a Discord server for the many people who wish to connect with us but cannot make our scheduled gatherings. This is what faithful ministry can look like in a world of digital connections.

We are not here to replace the local church. In fact, many people in our community attend (and even serve in) local churches. But the local church is often limited in how it ministers to those who may join online. The online audience (as an extension of the local gathering) will often miss connections that the rest of the congregation enjoys. In inverting that structure, The Intention Church views local gatherings as an extension of our online community. And the Spirit of God is not at all constrained by such an intention.



Left: Participants at a hymn sing during Mennonite Arts Weekend. Right: Artists from throughout the US and Canada displayed their work. Photos: Sarah Werner.

Mennonite Arts Weekend

by Sarah Werner

Artists gathered once again February 7-9 for Mennonite Arts Weekend in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was a lovely time of sharing and fellowship, with around 200 in attendance and 16 featured artists from a variety of disciplines. Mennonite Arts Weekend is held every other February and features artists and art enthusiasts from across the United States and Canada. The event has been organized by members of Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship biennially since 1992.

This year’s theme was “Engaging in the Mysteries of the Creator,” and the weekend began Friday evening with an opening program that included a reflection on the work of Mary Oyer, an ethnomusicologist who was foundational in shaping Mennonite singing as

Continued on pg. 6

Continued from pg. 5

we know it today. Rebecca Slough shared about Mary Oyer's journey that began as a young music teacher at Goshen College and led her to the study of African music, gospel music, and the shaping of several Mennonite hymnals over the last fifty years.

On Saturday artists presented a full range of workshops and seminars on topics ranging from theopoetics and music to painting and pottery, while the band The Dangling Particles shared their unique blend of jazz and folk at a wonderful evening performance. Mennonite Arts Weekend is always a meaningful place for people to come together to celebrate art in an uplifting and welcoming environment.



Below left: The knitters spent a cozy weekend of knitting and fellowship at Lakeview Lodge. Above left: Mittens made by one of the participants. Above right: The weekend included times of worship as well as workshops on knitting techniques. Photos: Gwen Gustafson-Zook.



Knitting Retreat at Camp Friedenswald

There were 23 participants at the first annual knitting retreat at Camp Friedenswald in Cassopolis, Mi., held March 28-30. Program director Gwen Gustafson-Zook offered words for reflection during some of the group knitting sessions and worship. It was a peaceful time of fellowship and retreat for all involved.

A verse that captured the theme of the weekend was: *"They keep this world going. And the practice of their craft is their prayer."*
— Sirach 38:34

Licensing and Ordination



Carrie Wenger was licensed towards ordination on Sunday March 9 at Shalom Mennonite Congregation in Harrisonburg, Va. Carrie is a chaplain at Sentara Medical Center in Harrisonburg. Photo: Paula Luginbill.

Phil Yoder was ordained as pastor of First Mennonite Church of Bluffton, Ohio on Sunday, March 23. He is pictured here with Chaska Yoder. Photo: Paula Luginbill.



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