

Central District Conference  
Minutes  
June 20-22, 2024  
College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana  
Listen! Wisdom is Calling

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**Thursday, June 20**

\*Seminar: Listening Together led by Sally Weaver Glick

\*Pastor Appreciation Dinner

\*Worship I: College Mennonite Church  
Theme: Holy Wisdom on the Way  
Text: Proverbs 4:1-13  
Speaker: Carol Penner  
Offering: LaPosada Immigrant Services

\*Ice Cream Social

**Friday, June 21**

*Delegate Session I*

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Let's Walk Together*, Voices Together #6.

**Welcome**

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) welcomed delegates to the 68<sup>th</sup> annual session with the sounding of the gavel. Joel Miller (Columbus) invited delegates to choose an object in the room and use it to tell a congregational story from the past year that you were involved in or one characteristic of your congregation that you especially appreciate.

**State of the Conference Address**

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) shared that Central District Conference can be described as a rich tapestry of individuals, congregations, emerging communities, and dreamers. Each August the board of directors along with representatives of the committees meet to dream and pray together and to set a vision for the next biennium. Last August, the group reviewed a summary of the findings of the sacred listening sessions.

\*Congregations value being welcoming and providing care for those in their communities.

\*We don't believe we have all the answers and we do believe that trying to follow Jesus and the leading of the Spirit will bring us closer to the church we want to be.

\*We are not afraid of questions and are at our best we provide non-judgmental spaces for them to be asked.

\*We take care of the members of our congregations in the big and small events in their lives.

\*We strive to keep our eyes and hearts open to the needs of our communities and the broader world, including homelessness, immigration, food insecurity, incarceration, climate change in the environment, doing anti-racism work, making reparations, violence prevention, and the situation in

Gaza.

\*We work on addressing these things in partnership with others in our communities, in other faith traditions and in the broader Mennonite world. We do this work in creative ways that use the gifts, dreams, and skills of the members of our congregations.

\*We valued the connections we forged with other CDC congregations, Camp Friedenswald, Bluffton University, MCC Relief Sales, and MC USA agencies and other para-church organizations we work with.

\*We care about our children and youth and their faith formation and want to find ways to value the gifts of the oldest ones among us.

\*We love to sing and produce music.

\*We shape our worship and leadership styles based on the gifts and discernment of our congregations.

\*Some of us have no paid leadership, some of us have pastoral teams.

\*All of us believe the church is stronger and more faithful if everyone's gifts are called out and nurtured and used.

\*We are all still trying to figure out how to address the changes, challenges, and learnings of the Covid years and wondering how to move forward.

As the leadership group reflected on the what we learned from the sacred listening meetings, worshiped and prayed together, we were led to the theme for this biennium of *Listen! Wisdom is calling*. Conference Minister, Doug Luginbill, has developed sermons and articles on the theme. Matt Pritchard, Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith has continued to listen for new groups being birthed in our midst and provided resources to help them grow. We will hear stories from two communities who wish to join CDC. Matt's work with emerging communities has prompted us to think about conference membership in new ways and led to the proposed bylaws amendment we will vote on later. We are a storytelling conference and Sarah Werner, our communications coordinator, has highlighted some of our stories in the Connector and other Anabaptist publications.

Individuals and congregations have contributed generously to the Tending Transformation Campaign bringing us closer to meeting our goal by next year's annual meeting. An anonymous donor has contributed \$50,000 to provide assistance to credentialed persons in the conference who have educational debt. Individuals and congregations have continued to support the work of the conference with your donations.

The Ministerial Committee is guiding us to new ways to live into repentance and transformation building on the powerful ritual from last year's annual meeting. We have provided healthy boundaries training for credentialed and lay leaders and will be providing a training on the Our Whole Lives curriculum in the fall. The Missional Church Committee has developed a plan to create and implement a conference wide vision of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Board and Leadership Council will be working with that proposal in the coming months. Members from several CDC congregations recently participated in a civil rights learning tour led by Mennonite Mission Network.

Jan encouraged participants to read the reports found in the report book and to visit displays in hallways. Several things to look forward to in the next year are quarterly Zoom retreats led by some of the spiritual directors in the conference, resources for a four week wisdom worship series, and an

invitation to congregations to share wisdom sayings from their lives. We want to learn from the wisdom of others. We are called to listen and pay attention to what we hear. Central District Conference is a place that calls out the stories of our people. We are not perfect, we are church. We are called together to listen and find ways to follow the wisdom we receive. May we share our wisdom with each other and the world around us.

Lydia Brenneman (Lima) led delegates in a centering exercise. She invited them to choose a word or sentence that has been wisdom to them and to think about it while participating in a breathing exercise.

**Congregational Story:** Ralph (Trey) Ferguson III, executive pastor of The Refuge Church in Homestead, Florida shared the story of the emerging community called The Intention Church. Trey serves as the pastor of The Intention Church. He shared that in 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic, much of what we did was done online. We learned about the church's failure to treat online communities as real and necessary. Shortly after things started shutting down in March 2020, a series of high profile and vigilante killings caught our national attention. We could not look away because we were stuck inside. Lots of people were confronted with uncomfortable truths about race that we previously had been able to ignore. Mostly white people came to realize that they had lived the majority of their lives without any meaningful relationship with anyone who didn't look like them or experience life like they did. The internet seemed like a feasible way to close that gap. Not everyone was looking to be entertained or enlightened, not everyone was looking for a new black friend to hide behind. A lot of people were simply looking for belonging. What the pandemic and all the increased time online exposed was the profound sense of isolation if not outright loneliness so many people were feeling. The church should have been set up to address this exact thing, but this was not always the case. Increasingly, Trey found more people reaching out publically and privately with all sorts of questions about justice, about history, about race, about faith, and about God. More people from around the country and the world viewed him as something only a few people had before – their pastor. These relationships looked different but he took them seriously.

When Trey graduated from seminary, he did so after turning in a capstone project on how digital engagement communities were reshaping society around us and how the church needed to take that seriously and to be intentional about it. Now three years later, he is preparing to launch The Intention Church. The purpose is to try to provide structure to a community that happened rather organically. A community committed to safety, belonging, growth, and ultimately, Christ. If people can meet spouses online, perform jobs online, and complete degree programs online, it may be time to admit that there are people ready to find Christ-centered community online. If they are ready to find Christ-centered community online, we have a responsibility to provide it for them. There are some gaps when online is viewed as an accessory. If we were to view online as the starting place and physical meet-ups as auxiliary, we can cover a bit more ground. Shortly after announcing the launch of The Intention Church as an emerging congregation of Central District Conference, someone online shared about feeling inspired to visit their local Mennonite congregation for the first time. That speaks powerfully to the fact that there are many people drawn to peace theology and never had the impetus to try it out. There is an opportunity to all of us to speak prophetically and to the theology they hadn't had exposure to in this setting. Even though The Intention Church is not official yet, it is exposing people to the Jesus focused, Anabaptist peace church tradition of the Mennonite church as well as the prophetic tradition of the black church of America. The Intention Church is trying to be intentional about the reality of the

way the internet is part of our daily lives. Online friends are real friends. Community online is real community even if it is not physical and church online is not only real but a necessary aspect of the coming reign of God. If we are to teach disciples about the love of God, we must be intentional about placing ourselves where the people are. That's what The Intention Church is all about.

**Introductions:** Joel Miller (Columbus) introduced the following:

*Resolutions Committee:* Jeff Boehr (Lima), Kiva Nice-Webb (Chicago Community), and Rich Preheim (Hively Avenue)

*Listening Committee:* Naomi Baumgartner (Silverwood), Kevin Chupp (Mennonite Church of Normal), and Jan Croyle (First Mennonite Wadsworth)

*Parliamentarian:* Gerald Mast (First Mennonite Bluffton)

*Youth delegate:* Clara Lind (Eighth Street)

**Review of 2023 Annual Meeting Minutes:** Christine Guth (Eighth Street) summarized the minutes of the 2023 annual meeting. *A motion was made and seconded to accept the minutes of the 2023 annual meeting as written. Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street), Jaimie Houghton-Thompson (Maplewood) The motion was affirmed.*

**Treasurer's Report/Presentation of Spending Plan:** Joel Miller (Columbus) directed delegates to p52 of the report book. The conference completed the financial year with income above expenditures. He thanked individuals and congregations for their contributions and gave an update of the Tending Transformation Campaign. He invited delegates to share any questions re the income and expense statement.

Question: Does CDC donate funds to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)? *CDC does not donate conference funds through our spending plan to MCC but does pass on any donations from congregations and/or individuals that come in designated for MCC.*

Proposed spending plan: Joel directed delegates to p35 of the report book. The plan for 2024-2025 is ~8% above the current spending plan due mainly to increased personnel costs that follow the MC USA salary guidelines. The plan tracks closely with previous year's spending plans. Joel invited questions re the 2024-2025 proposed spending plan.

Questions:

\*Why has the amount allotted for the Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) meetings decreased from \$5000 to \$3000? *The amount decreased because the CLC has moved to meeting via Zoom every other meeting, which reduced travel costs.*

\*How do you calculate how much you expect to receive in donations to cover the expenses of the spending plan? *Each fall, we gather information from congregations (total spending plan and number of giving units) to project how much of the spending plan congregations can cover. We use that information along with a projected amount of giving from individuals to build the income side of the spending plan. Generally we invite congregations to donate between 4% and 5% of their spending plans to help cover conference expenses.*

\*Doug Luginbill noted that the conference does maintain a cash reserve of ~ six months of the spending plan to cover an unexpected decrease in income or emergencies.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Joel moved to accept the 2024-2025 spending plan as presented. Delegates will vote on the proposed spending plan on June 21.

**Presentation of Gifts Discernment Committee and Proposed Slate:** Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street) introduced members of the committee: Laura Brenneman-Fullwood (First Urbana), Brenda North Martin (Raleigh), David Moser (Southside), George Lehman (First Bluffton), and Chuck Gibson (First Urbana). She directed delegates to p36 of the report book and named the nominees for 2024-2025:

- \*Board of Directors: Melissa Florer-Bixler (Raleigh), member-at-large and Brian Johnson (North Danvers), member-at-large
- \*Ministerial Committee: Robin Walton (Columbus) and Matthew Yoder (Grace)
- \*Missional Church Committee: Elizabeth Kelly (First Bluffton) and Anton Flores-Maisonet (Atlanta)
- \*Camp Friedenswald: Kendra Yoder (Southside), Evan Miller (Open Table), and Allison Troyer (Grand Rapids)

*A motion was made and seconded to affirm the 2024-2025 slate of nominees. Michael Crosby (First Urbana), Richard Wildermuth (Madison). The motion was affirmed.*

**Commissioning Prayer:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) thanked all new and ongoing committee and board members for their willingness to share their gifts, experience, time and energy to the work and worship of Central District Conference. He led in prayer.

### **Break**

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom*, VT 196.

**Committee reports panel discussion:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) invited representatives from the Ministerial Committee (Gayle Gerber Koontz, Assembly), Missional Church Committee (Matt Pritchard, Atlanta), and Camp Friedenswald (Jenna Liechty Martin, Eighth Street) to share what their respective groups are doing. He invited them to respond to the following questions:

- \*Share one or two important actions/decisions that your committee or group made during the past year.
- \*When you consider various options for making decisions, how did wisdom show up?
- \*Share a story that demonstrates how you are carrying out CDC's mission statement to know Christ's love and answer God's call.

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Rain Down*, VT 703.

Lydia Brenneman (Lima) led delegates in a centering exercise. She invited them to choose a word or sentence that has been wisdom to them and to think about it while participating in a breathing exercise.

**Receiving St Louis Mennonite Fellowship into Membership:** A motion was made and seconded to receive St Louis Mennonite Fellowship as a member of Central District Conference. Beth Bontrager (Faith), Heidi Sommer Simones (Cincinnati). Delegates were invited to cast a paper vote.

**Introduction of Peace Mennonite Fellowship, Archbold, Ohio:** Denton Yoder and Stacy Lehman described the origin of the congregation and the discernment process that led to their congregation's name and their choice of conference membership. David Elkins is serving as the interim minister along with several leadership teams. They are working on creating their structure and deciding how they want to be church together. They are currently looking for a church consultant to help them in this work. Peace has a listening and planning team that is working at creating a building that is environmentally friendly and will be a place that serves their community. Denton invited anyone with insight and resources to contact them.

**Introduction of Knoxville Mennonite Church:** Pat McFarren shared that Knoxville is a small group of people that meets in a house that was formerly a dwelling for Catholic nuns. The congregation longs to love as Jesus loved and show compassion to all. We live by the faith and actions that Jesus taught. They believe that everyone is included. Early in 2021, one of the elders encouraged the congregation to be more intentional about LGBTQ inclusion. They devoted time to prayer and discernment, and developed a survey asking the congregation about how they felt about inclusion of LGBTQ persons. They received 23 responses: 74% were in favor of changes in the way the congregation included LGBTQ persons. The majority were also in favor of joining a conference that welcomes inclusion.

**Presentation of Bylaw Change:** Jan Lugibihl directed delegates to p48 of the report book. Jan reviewed the current two-year process for membership in the conference. Matt shared that for emerging congregations or those without a conference, the two-year process can mean that they are without 501© 3 status or the formal support of a conference for key things like credentialing while they wait for full membership. Provisional membership enables leadership to compassionately respond to these situations while retaining our value for relationally based full membership. The bylaws change we are recommending allows the board to codify policies and procedures for membership as listed in the report book.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Joel Miller (Columbus) moved to affirm provisional membership as outlined on p48 of the 2024 report book. The vote will occur on June 22. Jan invited clarifying questions.

\*Rich Preheim (Hively Avenue): Just to clarify, would a congregation with provisional membership continue to work toward full membership? *Provisional members must be working toward fulfilling the membership criteria.* Could provisional membership be used by a congregation while they decide if they want to do something else? It is for congregations wanting to become a member of CDC. *Yes, that is correct.*

\*Georgia Metz (Shalom Mennonite Congregation): Are provisional congregations allowed to access the same grants as full members? *Yes for both CDC and MC USA.*

Delegates were invited to move into table discussion re whether they could support the resolution.

**Dwelling in the Word:** Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Bluffton) invited delegates to reflect on how they dwell in the Word and listen to God's wisdom. Does God's wisdom come through scripture? Can the interpretation of scripture only be done by pastors and theologians? Early Anabaptists argued that the wisdom did not come only from the State churches, but that scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. We still hold this belief today. (Confession of Faith, Article 4).

Over the past year, Doug has been searching for all the words of wisdom found in the Bible, including the Apocrypha. Wisdom is present even before creation and is sought at the end of Revelation. Wisdom always appears as feminine and shows up in times of trouble.

After reading Ephesians 1:15-19 and Ephesians 3:8-12, Doug invited delegates to engage in table discussion and reflect on the scripture and the following questions

- \*Who is someone who has embodied or offered wisdom for you?
- \*Paul talks about a 'mystery hidden for ages.' (Eph. 3:1-9) How do you understand that mystery? Why is it mysterious?
- \*Ephesians 3:10 offers a challenge and invitation to the church. Do you believe it? How do you understand 'the rich variety' of God's wisdom? How do you understand the church's invitation to make known the wisdom of God to the 'rulers and authorities?'

**Introduction of Guests:** Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) welcomed and introduced guests and representatives from Mennonite Church USA executive leadership and its agencies, Mennonite schools, and from other organizations related to the conference.

### **Lunch**

### **Delegate Session II**

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Draw the Circle*, VT 802.

**St Louis Mennonite Fellowship Membership Vote Results:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) announced that there were 88 ballots returned and the vote was unanimous to receive St Louis Mennonite Fellowship (SLMF) into membership. Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) presented a blessing cup filled with blessings from conference congregations. Steve Miller, representing SLMF responded.

### **Plenary Session**

Doug introduced the plenary session: three 15 minute sessions of input by Carol Penner, each followed by a time of table discussion. Each table discussion ended with Doug singing one verse of *In the Beginning* (VT 270).

### **Section 1**

Ruth Guengerich (Eighth Street) read Psalms 51:1-12. Carol Penner shared the story of David and Bathsheba and its cautionary tale of unaddressed sin. She talked about the need for safe place policies in congregations. Jesus told his disciples to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. We need to watch for sin and believe the best in people. How do we find wisdom when there is conflict in the church? Abuse can tear the church apart. It is even more difficult when the violence involves misconduct by a church leader. Pastoral abuse happens more often than you think. Often churches accuse the victim of lying and have a hard time believing that someone they know could abuse someone. There is a power differential. How will we respond to victims when they come forward?

Delegates were invited to table discussion to respond to the following questions:

- \*Can you think of a time when someone came to the church and said they were harmed by

someone else in the church whether through words or actions? (Just think about this question.)

\*What was the reaction of yourself or others to the person who was harmed? The focus is how you did or did not support the victim.

\*Looking back now, how was wisdom calling you and your congregation to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves?

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) sang verse 2 of *In the Beginning* (VT 270).

## Section 2

How can we as a church reach out to people who have offended by violating a boundary or physically or sexually harmed someone? There is usually a period of not knowing if the person actually offended or if they are falsely accused. Many times the people in the church support the offender because they are sure that because they know the person and the person claims they did nothing wrong, he/she is innocent. Often people who supported an offender can feel betrayed or guilty.

Sometimes offenders over achieve in other areas to deflect attention away from their offense. They choose one person to abuse. People who abuse are part of the community. They have deep problems and need help. How do we reach out and help them heal? How do we help them take responsibility for what they have done? How is wisdom calling us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves?

Most people who abuse others are very good at lying, even to themselves. Just because they are caught doesn't mean they can immediately change the behavior that is so ingrained in them. They need love and support but don't believe everything they say. We can say we love you and support you but your actions show what is inside your heart. You have to change your actions. We can encourage people who abuse to see a qualified specialist trained in abuse and do the hard work they need to do.

People who abuse are profoundly self-centered and have a hard time developing empathy for the person they harmed. Sometimes people who have abused are desperate to make things right. They have lost a lot and sometimes think that if only they can sit down with the person they have abused and apologize, things would get fixed. But hard experience has shown that quick apologies are counter productive and don't work. If we love people, we must encourage them to do the hard process and therapy. Victims are on their own journey and may not be ready or willing to accept an apology. People accused of abuse need to leave the congregation so they can be adequately cared for. Often people who are forced to leave a congregation blame the victim.

One of the hardest dilemmas conference ministers and leadership councils face is to talk about sanctions and what will help this person and whether they can be in ministry again. Being a pastor is not a human right, but it is a privilege. If someone has abused their power, it is more important to protect the innocent and vulnerable than for a minister to be able to use their gift.

Delegates were invited to table discussion to respond to the following questions:

\*Can you think of a time when someone in the church harmed another person through words or actions –maybe it was sexual abuse, maybe it was sexual harassment, maybe it was bullying, maybe someone yelled at someone in church? (Just think about this question.)

\*What was your reaction or the reaction of others to the person who did the harm?



\*Looking back now, how have we been calling you and your congregation to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves?

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) sang verse 3 of *In the Beginning* (VT 270).

### Section 3

Wisdom is calling the congregation to the journey of healing as well. Whenever we see abuse in the congregation, we see turmoil as well. Everyone reacts differently to abuse and yet we have to make decisions together as a congregation. How do we act in the congregation? Abuse in the congregation undermines trust in our faith and in other people, especially the pastor. This results in a theological crisis, personal crisis, and financial crisis. What do we do?

God is an impossibility specialist. God can help us walk through even the messiest of situations even when no one else can. It takes a lot of work—lots of church meetings, church board meetings and trying to figure out how to support the victims and the offender, their families, and the congregation.

Congregations also need to do a lot of soul searching. Were there warning signs we should have seen? How could this have been prevented? It is easier to work on a church safety policy than it is dealing with something after it has happened.

Should it happen to your congregation, even with a safety policy in place, there are many resources available to help deal with abuse in the church. The process won't happen in a month but will take a long time. Addressing abuse is the work of the church. Churches can be very resilient.

Delegates were invited to table discussion to respond to the following questions:

\*Have you been part of a congregation that was dealing with abuse of some kind? (Just think about this question.)

\*What worked to foster healing after abuse? What did not work so well? Did you draw on outside resources, Why or why not?

\*Looking back now, what lessons was wisdom teaching you and how do you make sure those lessons aren't forgotten?

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) sang verse 4 of *In the Beginning* (VT 270).

Open mic sharing:

\**Kerry Strayer (Columbus), Table 7*: We talked about the importance of having a neutral person to guide the conversation. How do we make sure an abuser doesn't leave and go on to another place? How do you protect the rights of the abuser, but not allow it to happen again?

\**Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street), Table 3*: We talked about the various psychological struggles that abuse creates and that we need to acknowledge those as being normal. It is normal to feel betrayal, to feel confusion, and to feel vulnerable. We need to have someone helping the congregation work through those internal struggles.

\**Ted Larrison (Assembly)*: In many congregations, we do a good job teaching the children what is good and bad touch. After conversation at our table, I am aware that we need to be talking about healthy boundaries with all of the adults in the congregation as well. We assume that the adults will be

responsible, but that is not always the case.

*\*Michael Crosby (First Urbana):* I want to share a practice that has been meaningful for our congregation. Our safe church policy requests an annual safe church workshop. It is a requirement for anyone in the congregation who is going to work with children and youth over the next year. It is also strongly encouraged that everyone in the congregation participate. We have a lot of latitude for what constitutes a safe church workshop, so we have done things like healthy touch and boundaries in the congregation, medical response and how to work the defibrillator, and multi generational conversation about what makes church a safe place for you. While we don't get everyone to attend, we do emphasize that this is a work we do together. We devolve into a place of insecurity if we think that just having a safe church policy is going to prevent abuse. It requires a collective vigilance that we are all here taking care of each other. Safe church policies are not good at preventing abuse. They outline what we do when there is an instance of abuse in the congregation and this kind of vigilance is far more important when we think about preventative work.

*\*gwyn stetler (Jubilee):* There is a difference between accessing effective reentry resources for offenders and shunning.

*\*Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly):* Some of us remember when we didn't talk about sex at all in the church. We had no policies. We muddled through if we addressed abuse at all. Looking back, we should recognize that we have done some good things and know that we are not in the same place. Collective vigilance is important because there is another generation coming up, new people in the church, and we don't want them to forget all the wisdom we have learned.

*\*Joel Miller (Columbus):* My congregation had a safe church policy in place before I became the pastor. We have worked to incorporate it into the culture. Almost every year when we have new members coming into the church, someone will say how important it was that we have a safe church policy in place and that is why they have come. That is something people appreciate and are looking for in a church.

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) led delegates in reading a litany.

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led delegates in singing *O Holy Spirit, Root of Life*, VT 376.

## **Break**

### **Delegate Session III**

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom*, VT 196.

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) introduced Rachel Ringenberg Miller, denominational minister for Ministerial Leadership for Mennonite Church USA (MC USA).

Rachel shared what has been happening across Mennonite Church USA:

- \*MC USA is 15 conferences strong

- \*Next national gathering is July 8-12, 2025 in Greensboro, North Carolina

- \*We will celebrate 500 years of Anabaptism together

- \*Rachel is often asked about the state of Mennonite Church USA

  - \*\*God is creating new life and ways for us to flourish even if we can't see it yet.

  - \*\*MC USA is in the stage of discerning what comes next for us. What is this new thing that is springing forth? Who is God calling us to be now with the people who are present now and the

people who might join us in the future?

**\*\*God** has chosen to work with us and through us. The hope is that as we approach 500 years, we take the opportunity to reimagine by looking back to where we have been, to consider where we are, and to dream about where God is calling us next.

Rachel shared a slide presentation on safe church and the resources available from MC USA.

Rachel encouraged pastors and leadership to read through their safe church policy at least once per year and get to know it. Knowing the policy will keep you focused. Policies are in place to keep us from doing what is easiest and to help us do what is best. She also encouraged congregations to watch the Safe Church webinar, [Navigating Your Protection Policy During Crisis](#).

Delegates were invited to table discussion to discuss what safe church policies and practices look like for their congregations.

Open mic sharing (responses in italics)

**\*Georgia Metz (Shalom Mennonite Congregation):** Georgia would be interested in talking to anyone who has vulnerable adults included in safe church policies. Vulnerable adults means adults with disabilities such as Parkinsons, Alzheimers, and other disabilities. We have them in our policies but there is a lot of concern about logistics re visitations by pastors. She also wondered about policies and best practices you have found that are life-giving and nurture strong relationships around teens, mentors, youth ministers, and texting. *Rachel Ringenberg Miller responded that in the church she pastored before taking this role, the congregation had adult children living at home who had various disabilities. It was important to those parents that vulnerable adults were included in the policies. The requirements were similar to the policies for children, i.e., two adults.*

*Texting: Churches do it different ways. A best practice is to have some kind of agreement or the covenant between mentor, parents, and the child. It is important to openly communicate about what is expected. Information is still evolving around how to use texting in the congregation.*

**\*Karla Minter (Open Table Mennonite Fellowship):** Karla shared a response she received from Michael Danner: We have safe church policies for children, youth and vulnerable adults. We have Healthy Boundaries Training for pastors. There are a whole lot of other people left. What we are doing is good and we need more. In our congregation we don't have young children but we have a lot of adults who are together a lot. We need more to speak into healthy boundaries for participants in the congregation, not only pastors. There is a document about lay leaders that was created by MC USA that we link to on our safe church policy. It is not very visible currently. Again that is for lay leaders and there are still other participants in the congregation. We would welcome another kind of conversation for just being together in a healthy way. *The best way to have this kind of conversation is to start having them in the congregation. One of the table discussion questions was, "How often do you talk about what is appropriate touch or not in church life? How often do we talk about sex and sexuality in our congregations? Having these conversations provides the space for more conversation. The biggest key is being open to talk about it, being honest and vulnerable with one another.*

**\*Scott Troyer (Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship):** Re texting: Scott works professionally with youth. Some of the practices/policies we have with youth include having another unrelated adult on the text, limited hours for response, and to document the text like phone call. A question I have is "Is there any

specific guidance for congregations that are very small? We have 17 people, five of them are children. We also partner with another church to do our children's programming and are currently using their safe church policy. Is there guidance that is specific to very small congregations?" *We were talking about how difficult it is when the congregation is small. Rachel Ringenberg Miller suggested contacting Nancy Kauffmann and talk with her about what ways you can work at being a safe church when you are a smaller congregation.*

*\*Sarah Werner (Columbus Mennonite Church):* Columbus has a practice of having a "Keeping CMC Safe" Sunday. Once a year, the whole congregation gets safe church training because it is incorporated into the worship service. We have a sermon on a theme related to any aspect about how we create safe communities not only for children but for adults and any intergenerational interaction. It normalizes talking about safe church in the community. We also did a fire drill that could be used for an active shooter situation. We wanted everyone to know that there are multiple ways to get out of the sanctuary, not just the way they came in. We have sanctuarians, who sit in the foyer every Sunday. The service begins at 9:30 and at 10:00, the doors lock. If someone arrives late, the sanctuarian has to physically let them in. We also have a button that you can hold down for three seconds to alert emergency services that something is happening such as a fire or someone in distress. It also helps keep people in the sanctuary safe.

Doug Luginbill (First Bluffton) thanked Rachel Ringenberg Miller for her input.

### **Break**

### **Seminars**

\*Anabaptist 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary led by Gerald Mast

\*Bluffton University led by Doug Luginbill

\*Seasons in the Life Cycle of Congregations led by Celeste Kennel-Shank Groff

### **Saturday, June 22**

\*Worship III: College Mennonite Church

Theme: The Word of the Wise

Texts: John 1:1-14; Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:1

Speaker: Ralph Ferguson III (Trey)

Offering: Central District Conference

### **Delegate Session IV**

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom*, VT 196.

Lydia Brenneman (Lima) led delegates in a centering exercise. She invited them to choose a word, sentence, or mantra that has been wisdom to them and to think about it while participating in a breathing exercise.

### **Congregational Story: North Danvers Mennonite Church (presentation)**

Brian Johnson (North Danvers Mennonite Church)

North Danvers Mennonite Church is 173 years old. They meet in a building that was built in 1872 so the congregation has been gathering for worship in the same space for 152 years. I was asked to share a

story of what brings the North Danvers congregation joy and where the energy is as they listen to how wisdom is calling in the community that they serve.

We are currently in a worship series called the 'Life of Joy' as we work our way through Paul's letter to the church in Phillipi. We began with a focus on joy in service as we thought about joy in partnership as is mentioned in Phillipians 1. This coming Sunday's service is centered around grace as we look at Phillipians 3. A week from now, the service will be centered around community as we focus on joy in fellowship as we think about how important it is that we are not on this path alone but that we journey together in faith.

Brian invited the congregation to share on what brings them joy. He heard two main points:

- \*service together both in the community and on projects that are farther afield
- \*fellowship that they have together brings joy

Brian shared some of the ways that the congregation creates times of fellowship together:

- \*Fellowship time following worship with snacks and a potluck the last Sunday of the month. There is time to talk about what is happening in our lives, with children and friends.
- \*Every other week a group gathers for coffee and devotions led by a long time member of the congregation. They share music, celebrate birthdays, and bring snacks. They share both their sorrows and their joys. Sorrows are lessened and joys are increased as they are shared together.
- \*Friday morning coffee fellowship that started about nine years ago. Many of the members live in close proximity to the building even though it is in a rural area. This is a come and go as you please group with no agenda other than to be together and to share. There is only one rule: You are welcome to talk politics, but if you do, you have to sit at a table by yourself. Having this rule forces us to talk about all kinds of things such as the history of the community in this setting, learning about families, sharing jokes, etc. The other rule is that we have to sit at the same table. Over the years there have been a significant number of people who have no other connection to the congregation come and participate regularly in this gathering. There are many people, not only in Danvers, but in many places who are hungry and thirsty for not only coffee and cinnamon rolls, but for fellowship. They want to be heard and share their stories with one another. They enjoy this time of building meaningful relationships.

The fellowship hall was built and dedicated in 1988. It was created when a man in a wheelchair needed a way to get into the building. Instead of building a small room for access to a lift, the congregation decided to build a fellowship hall that was ground level so he could use the lift just like everyone else. Sometimes I worry about what is going to happen in the future. The lesson for us here is that when we look at what is right in front of us and trust in a God who is able to incredibly more than we can imagine, if we are faithful with what is in front of us, then what we do will be used in ways that we never could have imagined. The fellowship hall is used in all kinds of ways, not only for our congregation, but in the community.

***Missional Church Committee Report*** (presentation): Matt Pritchard (Atlanta Mennonite Church)

The Missional Church Committee has three grants: Anti-racism Grant, Reign of God Grant, and the Emerging Communities of Faith Grant. Over the past year, the committee has revamped the process for grants to make the process more relational, more flexible, and to provide greater support for the

grantees. The committee is seeking to walk alongside applicants in the process and to learn from what the applicants learn through the grant process. We encourage experimentation even bold initiatives that may not succeed. We recognize that writing is only one way to communicate and encourage use of whatever form of communication that is comfortable for applicants. The hope is that the application will be used as a guide to the information we are looking for.

The Anti-racism Grant is available to CDC congregations at up to \$500/year. It is restricted to specific trainings but to what will help the congregation move forward toward anti-racism.

The Reign of God Grant needs to be more than one CDC congregation working together and is a 1 to 1 match. The grant can be up to \$2500. They need to be new cooperative initiatives between two or more congregations.

The Emerging Communities of Faith Grant is for new emerging communities of faith. The grant is for \$8000/year for up to three years. Matt shared examples of emerging communities that have received grants over the past year.

The committee is also working on a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) proposal within the conference. More information will be available over the next year.

Jake Elias (Eighth Street) shared that the dream lives on for racial, ethnic, and religious reconciliation. These themes are highlighted in the Three Provocations document as an expression of Central District Conference's desire to work on reconciliation. Jake has written a book, *The Dream Lives On*, about Dorothy Word whose articles were rooted in the public forum called the Kokomo Tribune. The weekly newspaper articles focused on racial issues, ethnic violence, white supremacy, and various programs seeking to bring reconciliation. Dorothy Word, an African American woman dreaming of a hopeful future for her people, advocated for African American scientists, athletes, inventors, and others often not recognized for their contributions. She writes not as a noted scholar, politician, or journalist, but as a layperson from the back row of public visibility. Her voice needs to be heard.

Jake first got to know her when he was a pastor at Parkview Mennonite Church and reconnected with her when she was in the beginning stages of dementia. Although she could no longer be understood, she had left a legacy of articles through which her voice could be heard.

Dorothy Word was an African American woman from Fort Wayne. She was a charter member of the Fair Haven Mennonite Church and was baptized there. She came to Goshen College as a student but left after one year because she did not feel accepted, especially by the faculty members. Her articles tell the story about why she left Goshen College and what it felt like to return 42 years later as a speaker. She also talks about being a Black teacher in Fort Wayne, and many other issues, including why Columbus Day is not worth celebrating and needs to be replaced by reflections about the pain offered by this country toward indigenous people. The goal is to stimulate conversation, prayer, and action to address the racism that is still alive in our day.

### ***Ministerial Committee Report***

Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Bluffton) reported that there are only three congregations in pastoral

church processes.

Journey Program: Participants this year were Charles Baraka (Madison Mennonite), Jan Croyle (First Mennonite Wadsworth), April Lo (Chicago Community), and Rachel Stolpe (Milwaukee Mennonite) Rena Le Blanc (Emmaus Road) will be studying at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) this fall.

Where do pastors come from? They come from us, from within our congregations, from within our communities. Doug encouraged participants to tap shoulders and encourage those who are called to serve the church.

Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly) recognized the newly credentialed and/or installed ministers in the conference:

- \*Ana Arauz (Ministerio Jehová Luz y Esperanza), licensed toward ordination
- \*Dio Arauz (Ministerio Jehová Luz y Esperanza), recognition of previous ordination
- \*David Cramer (Keller Park), ordained
- \*Benjamin Kreider (Chapel Hill), licensed toward ordination
- \*Carrie Mast (First Mennonite Bluffton), licensed toward ordination
- \*César Moya (Emmanuel), recognition of previous ordination
- \*Sibonokuhle Ncube (Eighth Street), licensed toward ordination for her work at Mennonite Mission Network
- \*Tim Peebles (Chicago Community), ordained
- \*Josh Richardson (St Louis), licensed toward ordination
- \*David Shenk (Florence), licensed toward ordination
- \*Daryl Turley (Columbus), licensed toward ordination as a chaplain
- \*Sarah Werner (Columbus), ordained as pastor of Olentangy Wild Church
- \*Chaska Yoder (First Mennonite Bluffton), licensed toward ordination as a chaplain

Michael Crosby (First Mennonite Urbana) remembered the credentialed leaders who died this past year.

- \*Chibuzor Ozor, (Ann Arbor Mennonite Church) died on July 31, 2023.
- \*Earnest Porzelius, (First Mennonite Bluffton) died October 13, 2023
- \*Leonard Wiebe (Eighth Street Mennonite Church) died April 3, 2024
- \*Ron Ropp, (Mennonite Church of Normal), died June 4, 2024

***ACTION: Proposed Bylaw Change for Provisional Membership:***

Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) opened the floor for discussion of the amendment of the proposed bylaw change for provisional membership.

\**Michael Crosby (First Mennonite Urbana)*: Michael affirmed the proposal. The proposal does create some awkwardness in the way we relate to MC USA. A congregation with provisional membership status cannot send delegates with voting rights to CDC, but can send voting delegates, because of its non-distinction, to MC USA delegate sessions. Michael wanted to acknowledge the odd polity situation and cautioned about creating pathways to conferences sending additional delegates to MC USA.

\**Janeen Bertsche Johnson (Eighth Street Mennonite Church)*, Table 3 noted that the tradition of waiting a year to accept a member is not a long standing tradition. That started when we brought in Atlanta

Mennonite Church in at the start of the merger of Mennonite Church USA. The denomination asked us to wait a year until the Southeast Mennonite Conference could work with Atlanta. We decided to make that a practice because we liked that get acquainted time.

*\*Beth Bontrager (Faith Mennonite Church):* Table 1 discussed the financial aspect of provisional membership. Provisional members are eligible for grants. They wondered if provisional members are included in the budget, i.e., do they receive a letter inviting giving. How are they included in the budgeting? *We will give some thought to that. We certainly would invite support.*

*\*Gayle Gerber Koontz (Assembly Mennonite Church):* Who decides whether progress has been made after a year of provisional membership? *The Board of Directors will make that decision.*

*\*Jaimie Houghton-Thompson (Maplewood Mennonite Church):* Table 17 had the privilege of sitting with a pastor of one of the emerging communities. During the break, Jaimie asked Matt about what this change would mean for emerging communities of faith and how they are supported. We learned from the pastor how much support is needed for an emerging community that we take for granted. Becoming a provisional member means having more support for emerging communities of faith. Jaimie appreciates the forethought of CDC leadership in creating the status of provisional membership.

The motion was affirmed unanimously.

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *How Clear Is Our Vocation*, VT 547.

Lydia Brenneman (Lima) led delegates in a centering exercise. She invited them to get comfortable and turn inward to know what was going on in their mind, heart and bodies and to participate in a breathing exercise.

**ACTION: 2024-2025 Spending Plan:** Jan Lugibihl (Chicago Community) opened the floor for discussion of the proposed 2024-2025 spending plan. The motion was affirmed unanimously.

**Open Mic:** Joel Miller (Columbus Mennonite Church) invited delegates to share comments/reflections.

*\*David Moser (Southside Fellowship):* David expressed gratitude for the work Matt Pritchard is doing. He shared that a friend of his in Northern Ireland, who works in West Belfast has a vision for an Anabaptist fellowship in that part of Belfast. The Anabaptist Network in the United Kingdom has unraveled, but his friend was able to make a connection with Matt, who has been a listening ear and positive presence. Central District Conference has been caring for people beyond our immediate borders.

*\*Dan Nester-Detweiler (Evanston Mennonite Church):* Ron Ropp was one of the best things that ever happened to our family. Dan appreciated how Ron spoke up for people at the last delegate session. Dan also appreciated that we devoted time to church safety. It is certainly important to protect our most vulnerable from an increasingly dangerous world. He was glad to hear the circle of concern extended to teenagers and expanded to vulnerable adults. Dan trusts and prays that we will be faithful in what is right in front of us and that we remember our commitment to correct the church's long history of harm against a person's space and how they look, how they love, or how they live. He hopes and prays that we will expand and extend our circle of care to a world where mental health and housing is increasingly less of a birthright and more of a struggle. May the church truly be a safe space within the world.

*\*Sheila Gruenhagen, (Peace Mennonite Fellowship):* Sheila thanked the delegates for welcoming Peace Mennonite Fellowship. Being a beginning church is scary and it is such a relief to know that we have so



many people that are behind us and helping us.

*\*John O'Brien (St Paul Mennonite Fellowship):* John thanked Emma Hartman for her work in Central District Conference.

*\*Georgia Metz (Shalom Mennonite Congregation):* Georgia drew attention to p201 in the report book to past resolutions about resisting military recruitment of youth in our context. Now that Congress is debating automatic selective service registration, it is especially important for Mennonite and peace church congregations to be educating our youth about the reality of the military and selective service and do counter recruitment in our local communities. Georgia would love to talk to anyone about youth peace education and conscientious objection. Her email address is georgia@shalommc.org.

*\*David Shenk (Florence Church of the Brethren Mennonite):* In response to the earlier question about Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and whether CDC gives money to MCC: MCC is entering into a time of serious questioning about its conduct toward its workers. Many of us have had some involvement with MCC throughout the years and not just in an institutional way but in a way of forming our lives, our faith, our view of the world, and our connections. David asked that participants hold the people in MCC, which includes us as supporters, workers and administrators there, in prayer. There are some tough decisions that need to be made.

*\*Naun Cerrato (LaPosada):* Naun thanked Central District Conference for what they have done for LaPosada. LaPosada has individuals coming from Africa, Asia, and Europe. He thanked participants for showing compassion, mercy, and putting this into practice and opening the stage for individuals to speak.

*\*Ralph Ferguson III (Trey) (The Intention Church):* Trey has often been asked, "How did you end up getting connected with CDC? When a friend of his, who was not part of Central District, was trying to pull him into the Mennonites, Trey noted that the Mennonites were not real black and one of the things he needed to make this work with Anabaptism was that it had to be an environment in which people were willing to give him a chance to be him and not to feel awkward being himself. Being here the last couple of days has made him glad that he was connected with this particular conference. His wife, who was online and not used to Mennonite worship, texted him about the beauty of so many things she has not encountered before. Trey affirmed the ministry and presence of the Spirit in the conference.

***Listening Committee Report:*** Naomi (Omie) Baumgartner (Silverwood), Jan Croyle (First Mennonite Wadsworth), Kevin Chupp (Mennonite Church of Normal)  
Omie, Kevin, and Jan shared what they heard in worship, in the halls, in delegate sessions, and seminars.

### **Omie: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

In our first worship service, I heard the warm voices of people greeting each other and singing together. In the scripture Proverbs 4:1-13, the way of Wisdom was presented. In it, Wisdom encouraged us to embrace her and hold her close, for Wisdom will honor us as we nurture her. We listen, learn, discern, and practice the ways of Wisdom.

From the children, I heard words of wisdom. I followed up on the children's story and spent some time talking with the children about Wisdom on Friday afternoon. While it is a difficult word to describe, the children were able to share their ideas when asked: What can we do to make the world a better place? They eagerly responded with these ideas: Pick up trash. Be kind. Plant a garden. Stop destroying the forests. Pick up toys. Help people get the things they need like homeless people need homes. Hungry

people need food. Stop wars like the Civil War, or the civil war in Ethiopia or WWII. And finally, a young girl full of wisdom responded Help people imagine. Let's let that one resonate for a while.

In her message, Carol Penner from First Mennonite Church in Vineland, Ontario instructed us to be on the lookout for wisdom because Wisdom comes to us from all kinds of people, from all kinds of places, and from all kinds of situations. She declared Wisdom is pursuing us and wants to save us. For our offering, Patty Gorostieta shared about the ministry of La Posada Immigrant Aid where Wisdom is working with real people to listen, discern and provide for those in need. Finally, David Shenk and Ardean Friesen shared proverbs from the book African Proverbs - The Wisdom of a Continent compiled by Annetta Miller. One of my favorites noted "A wise person like the moon, shows the bright side to the world." (Africa) And one that made us laugh stated "A wise person does not need to be told twice. (Kenya)

The worship service closed with James Gingerich from Eighth Street Mennonite leading us in singing VT 196 "Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom", and I will close with the words from Verse 1. "Come and seek the ways of Wisdom, she who danced when earth was new. Follow closely what she teaches, for her words are right and true. Wisdom clears the path to justice, showing us what love must do."

**Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

Delegate sessions operated in a way that was open and involved many faces and gifts. While such reporting has the potential to be dry and tedious, the conversational tone and use of humor by those leading discussion on budget and bylaws made the discussion much more playful and engaging. The explanations given in response to questions and concerns always felt like they honored the questions, and often anticipated them, while also guiding us to the "heart" that motivated such changes. We encounter wisdom in the way we have been led to joyfully face change while staying consistent and accountable to our shared values and our history.

**Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.**

Look around the room. What can we hear from the objects around us? What wisdom can they bring to light about our congregations? A chair, an oil lamp, a scrunchy crocheted thingy?

Breathe in 2,3,4 hold 2,3,4 and out 2,3,4. Lydia Brenneman asked us to grab a gem of wisdom—one word or a thought. Hold it in your hand.

I will be sharing the wisdom—calling that was happening throughout the conference. Pay attention, she's still here. Trey Ferguson of the Intention Church reminded us of the uncomfortable truths exposed during COVID. People were looking for belonging through this profound sense of isolation. We needed to feel connected, but it wasn't safe to meet together. We needed technology. The church needs to take technology seriously. The Intention Church is a community committed to safety, belonging to Christ. People were ready to find a Christ centered community online. Instead of making zoom the add on for hybrid worship, zoom is the main meeting place for this Jesus focused, peace church of the Mennonites. The Logos is the intention of God.

North Danvers Mennonite Church finds joy in service, both local and far away. By far their joy is found in fellowship together—through food and sharing both their joys and sorrows while learning from one

another. North Danvers shows us the need to trust God with what is right in front of us. Ah wisdom.

**Omie: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

In the afternoon, we sat at tables to listen and learn together. I listened while people described the Central District Conference as a community growing in Wisdom. We are welcoming, caring, following Jesus, not all knowing, and not afraid of questions. We work together to address the problems around us. Our connections shape our worship as we celebrate the gifts of all.

As we gathered, Beth Bontrager from Faith Mennonite led us in singing “Draw the Circle.” Next, Lydia Brennenman from Lima Mennonite helped us center ourselves, and Carol Penner explained the structure of the afternoon worship/plenary session. She referenced Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel as she introduced the tension between watching for sin around us and thinking the best of others. This Wisdom of Serpent and Dove supported our discussions at our tables around these three questions. Wisdom is calling, will we listen to the victims of abuse who come forward? Wisdom is our constant companion; how will it guide us in our walk with offenders? Wisdom is calling, how will we foster healing after abuse. Care was taken to be mindful that the discussions might trigger some difficult feelings, and people were available to offer support.

At the end, the mics were open for people to share the nuggets of wisdom heard around the tables. Kerry Strayer mentioned the importance of a neutral party in the process. Janeen Bertsche Johnson recognized the normal nature of the psychological cycles of feelings. Ted Larrison noted that children have safety training, yet adults need healthy boundary training, also. Michael Crosby shared about ongoing Safe Church workshops, and Joel Miller stated a Safe Church policy is important to new members exploring our congregations, and Gail Gerber Koontz said shunning is not an effective practice in the process of reentry.

I will close with VT 196 “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” Verse 3. “Sister Wisdom, come, assist us; nurture all who seek rebirth. Spirit guide and close companion bring to life our sacred worth. Free us to become your people, holy friends of God and earth.”

**Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

We have been blessed that our “business” included and centered the stories and experiences of those who are new to us—and we credit that to wisdom of those who planned these meetings

- The story of The Intention Church, invited us to realize the growing need for cultivating online expressions of church, and challenges us to account for the reality that “online friends are real friends.”
- The story of Peace Mennonite Fellowship shows us the momentum of a movement that flourished organically as people simply responded and showed up because they felt the need

for such a community to exist.

- The story of Knoxville Mennonite invited us to join with our siblings who are eager to learn from us in growing as an inclusive community, and they seek fellowship with us in a spirit of resonating compatibility.
- I was grateful to have spilled my kombucha yesterday afternoon. As I hurried to get paper towel, I was outside the room when the vote for affirming St. Louis Mennonite was announced, and I could hear from a distance the burst of celebration that comes from a growing community.

We are inspired by these conversations, and we see the wisdom that has led us to hire an Associate Conference Minister of Emerging Communities of Faith, who makes sure these stories are front and center in our discernment about the life of the church, rather than an afterthought. The wisdom we meet in this process invites us to a continuing openness toward the ecclesially homeless who find their way to us.

Those of us who are not a part of emerging communities are also encouraged and blessed by the story of a 173-year-old congregation, in North Danvers Mennonite Church, that is intentionally cultivating lives of joy, through giving their energy to fellowship, providing their space for community that extends beyond the congregation.

**Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.**

Rain Down! Rain down your love on your people! For our second centering Lydia asked us to hold our hand over our heart. Holy wisdom is on the way. Feel your heart beating. Allow the wisdom of God to flow through the blood in your body.

Doug read from Ephesians 1 + 3 “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you.” There are 345 uses of wisdom as translated into English in the Bible. Wisdom comes from scripture—inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, interpreted along with Christ.

Wisdom was calling through our three seminars. Gerald Mast led Anabaptist 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Wisdom is calling. They’re coming. They’re coming. They’re coming as blue books as brown books and black, those soft books and hard books in paper and print, in apps on our phones, with wisdom in pictures and etchings from Martyr’s Mirror. Be patient, wisdom cannot be rushed.

Bluffton University shared that the pulse of a new institution in beginning to beat. Can you hear it, or are you covering your ears? After ending 4 years now financially in the black, we hope to merge with Findlay College not because we are scared, but so that we can be more—be better—have great synergy.

Celeste Groff led Seasons in the Life Cycle of Congregations. There are two stages of church:

gathered church and dispersed church with a continuous expectation that church is not contained in a time or place. The parish model invited the congregation to engage everyone in their area—attending worship was optional. A “spiritual will” was deciding what legacy of projects, tasks, focuses they will leave. Being older doesn’t mean we have to be set in our ways. “There is no new life without death first.”

**Omie: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

In our third worship service, I heard singing, praising, laughing, and a few soft Amens! Trey Ferguson from The Intention Church in Miami, Florida led us on a journey of reflection and celebration. Using John 1:1-14 and Proverbs 3:19-29 & Proverbs 8:1, he began getting us involved by singing the B-I-B-L-E. He shared that B-I-B-L-E is Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. Once he had us engaged, we traveled with him and pondered the importance of the Word becoming flesh. He said God sends Wisdom to pursue us, to chase us. Wisdom does not dwell in words. Wisdom wants a relationship with us. If you want to know what Wisdom looks like, Wisdom looks like Jesus. He proclaimed that if Wisdom is calling, we must let its light shine. Let us be radical in our living. Let us be radical in our loving. Let us be radical in the ways of justice. Let us be radical in our communities and in our world as we follow Christ Jesus who shows us the way. Finally, let us slow down so Wisdom can catch us!

We celebrated communion together, and stations were available for anointing. We closed the service by singing VT 832 “The Lord Lift You Up”.

I will close with VT 196 “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom” Verse 2. “Listen to the voice of Wisdom, crying in the marketplace. What the Word made Flesh among us, full of glory, truth and grace. When the Word takes root and ripens, peace and righteousness embrace.”

**Kevin: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is Calling.**

We see wisdom in facing head on the discussion of “safe church.” We are grateful for wise guides in these conversations as we realize the prevalence of abuse within the setting of congregations and feel the need for a more thorough response from the church. We are grateful to be able to engage together around tables on such important issues, and we trust that our tables, congregations, conferences, and denominational groups will continue to urge each other on toward greater faithfulness in protecting those who are vulnerable among us. These wise relationships will continue to bless us as we ask new questions and encounter new challenges.

As wide as the scope of our conversation has been, wisdom would have us imagine whether there is room for expanding, or “Drawing the Circle Wide” if you will:

- Perhaps we can imagine how to invite deeper involvement from youth delegate(s)—and make these meetings engaging enough and perhaps for them, that the next round there might be plural delegates.

- As we partner with an emerging internet church community, perhaps we can overcome our Zoom creativity fatigue to invite those folks joining us from a distance to participate more thoroughly at these meetings.
- As I am attuned to notice, we have a number of folks raised in other than Mennonite traditions here, and I tend to find them, and wonder whether we ought to have some sort of support for these folks. The established roots of cradle Mennonites, with deep connections across the church and our institutions is a serious gift, but it is also a challenge for some of us who are coming in.

**Jan: Listen! [Chime] Wisdom is calling.**

Sophia, like our listening chime does not remain in one place. She moves—never stagnant. Pay attention to the wisdom that surrounds us and is among us in all of creation. So many wonderful wisdom nuggets to grab and hang onto—wisdom calling out to us:

- People everywhere are created equal.
- We are a story telling conference.
- We are excited about what we are called to next.
- Seasons of the earth are ways to listen for wisdom from creation.
- If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plan.
- We choose community building, over congregational buildings.
- It's not church until you eat together.
- Wisdom is always on the menu, but it is not necessarily the most popular item.
- People are finding rhythm in rituals.
- Wisdom calls from all ages and stages of life.
- Be wise as serpents and as innocent as a dove.
- Wisdom is chasing you, but you are much faster.
- We are not perfect. We are church!
- And it's a good time to be Mennonite! Amen!

**Evaluations/Committee Nominations:** Joel Miller (Columbus) invited delegates to fill out the evaluation forms and share suggestions for committee nominations.

**Results from Raffle:** Matt Pritchard (Atlanta) read the names of the winners of the raffle drawing.

**Close of Delegate Sessions:** Jan Lugibihl closed the delegate sessions with the sounding of the gavel.

Beth Bontrager (Faith) led in singing *Wisdom from on high is dawning* VT 238. Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Church Bluffton) closed with prayer.

**Children's Program:** Thanks to Rachel Hershberger (Faith Mennonite Church) and her helpers for coordinating childcare and leading the K-Grade 5 programming.

Emma Hartman  
Recorder