



July 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



Participants gather for opening worship at Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio at the 2025 CDC annual meeting.

Annual Meeting Recap

by Sarah Werner

Central District Conference held its annual meeting June 19-21 at Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio, where 145 participants, including 12 children and youth, came together for three days of fun and fellowship. The meeting continued the biennial conference theme, "Listen! Wisdom is Calling" as we also honored the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist Movement.

The meeting began Thursday afternoon with a seminar led by Associate Conference Minister of Emerging Communities of Faith Matt Pritchard and Elizabeth Kelly of the Missional Church Committee entitled "Contemplating Radical Hospitality." The workshop offered a contemplative space to reflect upon an upended interpretation of the story of the prodigal son(s). In small groups participants were asked to identify who and where the marginalized were in their churches and the larger communi-

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ties they inhabit and to imagine how they might take this conversation back to their churches in order to expand their hospitality to people who have experienced marginalization.

On Thursday evening we gathered at Grace Mennonite Church in nearby Pandora, Ohio for our opening worship service. Perry Bush, emeritus professor of history at Bluffton University and CDC historian, shared a message on the theme "Anabaptist Wisdom in History" as part of our celebration of the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism. Bush traced the history of the Anabaptist movement and discussed how Anabaptists have defined themselves as separate from the world in various ways. He pointed out our "ugly failures" of cultural accommodation to the false wisdom of racism, patriarchy, and homophobia. He also highlighted our more recent efforts to define ourselves by our work for peace and justice, actively engaged in service to the world instead of retreating from it. Along with rousing hymn singing and a wonderful Children's Time by Heidi Sommer Simones,

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Above: Participants at the pre-conference seminar. Photo credit: Elizabeth Kelly.



Above left: Perry Bush preaching at the Thursday evening worship service. **Above right:** Heidi Sommer Simones during Children's Time at the Thursday evening worship service.



Above: Oliver and Kevin Chupp at the Pastor Appreciation Dinner on Thursday evening.



Above: Enjoying fellowship and dessert at the Thursday evening ice cream social.



Left: Participants at the Friday afternoon Wild Church seminar held at Bluffton Nature Preserve.



Above: Table discussions were an important part of the delegate sessions, held in Marbeck Center.

Left: The listening committee, hard at work. Pictured from left: Michael Crosby, Robin Walton, and Anna Yoder Schlabach.

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the service also included an offering collected for Lima Mennonite Church's Haitian ministry where over \$3,000 was raised in support of Haitian immigrants in the community.

On Friday morning, Board President Jan Lugibihl opened the first delegate session and we began with a joyful hymn and some opening conversation at our tables. Lugibihl summarized the state of the conference and acknowledged that our world feels very different now than it did in past years. Some of our congregants live in fear, while others worry about the future of our country. She also reflected on the great need for wisdom in these times as the theme for the past two years encourages us, "Listen! Wisdom is calling." We need each other and we can be stronger together as we share our lives with one another.

Karl Shelly from Assembly Mennonite Church (Goshen, Ind.) shared a congregational story about their decision to take up a second offering each month for the repayment of debts owed to Black and Indigenous people who have been harmed by colonialism and racism. Shelly stated, "We make these payments to become more who we were created to be, to move towards repentance and repair."

We heard the minutes from last year and the 2025-2026 budget was presented. We continue to be in a strong financial position, with income exceeding expenses thanks to the generous contributions of congregations. We voted to approve the 2025-2026 leadership slate and we prayed for the incoming leaders.

Executive Director Jenna Liechty Martin shared about the summer camping program at Camp Friedenswald. Camp is a meaningful place of connection for campers, a place of hope and joy in the midst of a difficult social environment for young people, and they are having a record-breaking year of attendance, with over 100 campers each week. Camp is cel-

ebrating its 75th anniversary this year.

Knoxville Mennonite Church of Tennessee and Peace Mennonite Fellowship of Archbold, Ohio were introduced for membership in CDC, and next year there will be a formal vote to approve them for full membership in the conference. Conference Minister Doug Luginbill gave an update about First Mennonite Church of Chicago, outlining its history as a church plant in an immigrant community in 1918 and the calling of its first African-American pastor in the late 1960s. The congregation has not met in the building since 2020 and few remaining members survive. They are currently seeking buyers for the building.

We then had an extended conversation about the Prevention and Accountability Resource that will be voted on at the upcoming MC USA delegate session, including fruitful table conversation on how we can make our churches safe places for children and vulnerable adults.



Above: At the Friday afternoon worship service, participants were invited to bring an object that represented the movement of the Spirit in their congregation, and these were shared at the front table.

The afternoon session was brief and included a presentation of the evaluation of Doug Luginbill, which demonstrated overwhelming support for Doug's work. The board recommended renewing his term of service as conference minister for another three years.

This was followed by a time of worship and sharing at our tables. For this worship service,

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participants were invited to bring an object that represented something the Spirit was doing in their congregation this year. We shared about our objects at our tables and then celebrated communion with one another. The Friday afternoon experiential seminars were a big hit, with people choosing to tour Schumacher Homestead, to participate in a Wild Church service at Bluffton Nature Preserve, or attend a hymn sing.



Above left: Melissa Florer-Bixler preaching at the Saturday morning worship service. **Above right:** Joel Call and Phil Yoder sharing the Children's Time message at the Saturday morning worship service. **Right:** The youth participants share a mural they created at the end of the Saturday morning delegate session.

On Saturday morning we gathered for our final worship service in Yoder Recital Hall. Phil Yoder, pastor of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton (Ohio) and Joel Call of Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio) both led us in some fantastic music and shared a memorable Children's Time message about the importance of dreams. An offering taken at the Friday and Saturday worship services raised over \$2,000 for CDC.

Melissa Florer-Bixler, pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church (N.C.) led us in reflecting on the theme "Wisdom for the Future Church." Florer-Bixler shared that forecasting the future is always a murky endeavor, but that the church's prophetic work is to speak the truth about what is happening in the world and stand up against injustice. In the midst of wars, cor-

porate greed, and genocide we are called to be a witness and to speak words of hope that are stronger than the forces of death.

The worship service was followed by the final delegate session, which began with a congregational story from Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio). Pastor Joel Miller shared about their congregation's journey toward reparative debt payments that are now part of the operating budget of the church and the Black and Indigenous organizations that receive these funds. Matt Pritchard gave a report on behalf of the missional church committee, which has worked to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the conference, as well as to support emerging communities of faith with grants that totaled \$32,000 this year.



Gayle Gerber Koontz reported on behalf of the ministerial committee that six clergy have been credentialed in the past year, and that for the first time the conference has been able to offer educational debt relief to pastors, with \$36,000 granted to 12 pastors. April Lo and Rachel Stolpe were also honored for their completion of the Journey Program.

The meeting closed with an affirmative vote on the 2025-2026 spending plan and an open mic time, where several participants shared about how meaningful it was to spend time with people who care deeply about the suffering in the world and are working to confront it. All in all the annual meeting was a wonderful time of fellowship, worship and sharing. Janeen

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Bertsche Johnson of Eighth Street Mennonite Church (Goshen, Ind.) led us in singing during the delegate sessions and Jeff Boehr, pastor of Lima Mennonite Church (Ohio), provided centering meditations. Georgia Metz of Shalom Mennonite Congregation (Harrisonburg, Va.) and Carrie Mast of First Mennonite Church Bluffton coordinated the children and youth programming with help from Trusty Schumacher and Sarah Phillips, also of First Mennonite Church Bluffton.

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Seminary and Journey Graduates

On May 3, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind. celebrated the graduation of 33 graduate students, including three with connections to CDC. (AMBS photos credit: Brittany Purlee)



Melika Faith Kauffman Hersberger of Normal, Ill. anticipates completing her Master of Divinity from AMBS with a major in Pastoral Ministry in August. She is pursuing a pastoral ministry assignment. Melika previously earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Goshen (Indiana)

College. Her home congregation is Mennonite Church of Normal. Locally, she has attended Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind. Melika is married to Ross Hersberger, and they have two children.

Stephen C. Lowe of Morgantown, W.V., graduated from AMBS with a Master of Divinity with a major in Theological Studies: History, Theol-



ogy and Ethics. He is serving as Pastor of Morgantown Church of the Brethren, a congregation of the Church of the Brethren (West Marva District) and Mennonite Church USA (Allegheny Mennonite Conference). Stephen previously earned Bachelor of Arts degrees in Education and Music from Goshen (Indiana) College. While at AMBS, he attended Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind.



Daniel Teye Nuerthey of Dodowa, Accra, Ghana, graduated from AMBS with a Master of Divinity with a major in Theological Studies: History, Theology and Ethics. He plans to pursue work in teaching and pastoral ministry. Daniel previously earned a Bachelor

of Theology from Good News Theological Seminary in Oyibi, Accra, Ghana. His home congregation is Zion Life Prayer Center in Dodowa-Odumse, a congregation of the African Independent Church. Locally, he has attended Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind.

Rachel Stolpe of Milwaukee, Wisc. graduated in June from the Journey Program at AMBS and was honored at the recent CDC annual meeting. She is a member of Milwaukee Mennonite Church. For her independent project, she wrote, "The Book of Fallacious,"

a look at sayings which are assumed to be biblical, but usually are not. Only six copies were hand printed and bound, but now more are available on demand at Amazon. Rachel plans to continue to attend Milwaukee Mennonite and experiment leading a Wild Church option on Wednesday evenings.



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April Lo of Chicago, Ill. graduated in June from the Journey Program at AMBS and was honored at the recent CDC annual meeting. She is a member of Chicago Community Mennonite Church (Ill.). Her independent project focuses on the practice of baptism and its relevance for Ana-

baptist congregations today. The Journey Program has enabled her to find joy, light, and meaning in her leadership roles at

church during a time of career transition in her life.

Baptism Survey

April Lo is focusing on baptism for her independent study project for the Journey Program and you are invited to participate! [Click here](#) or scan the QR code to fill out a survey to gather information about baptism trends in CDC congregations.



Installations and Ordinations



Dennis Miller was licensed and installed for specific ministry on Sunday, May 25 at Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.



Karla Minter was ordained on Sunday, June 1 at Open Table Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, Ind., where she serves as pastor/doula. Photo credit: Janeen Bert-sche Johnson.

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