



August 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



Charlotte Dillard anoints a stone that honors the Native Americans who once lived in the area of Paoli Mennonite Fellowship in Paoli, Indiana during their 50th anniversary celebration.

Paoli Mennonite Celebrates 50 Years

by Wally Shellenberger and Doris Weaver

We are attending the 50th anniversary of Paoli Mennonite Fellowship (Ind.), and as we enter the grounds a sign announces: "We who are many are one body in Christ." On a bit further we are greeted by an odd-shaped stone, standing erect like it has something important to say. The stone's copper plates read: "We honor the Shawnee, Delaware and Piankashaw people who lived and hunted on this land." About a quarter mile west of the PMF property is an 1803 boundary line drawn in a treaty between the US government and these three tribes. And on the rain-washed ridges of a nearby plowed field, PMF youth have found handfuls of flint arrow points and scrapers - they were here way before PMF. In Native American style, a PMF member spoke to the four directions, honoring the message carried by this stone

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and a woman elder of PMF, in the spirit of healing, anointed the stone with maple syrup provided by the adjacent trees.

Youth from the 1980s through early 2000s reflected on PMF's influence on their lives. They appreciated how the congregation puts faith into action and is willing to take risks. One youth shared, "PMF accepted me as a queer. My experience in the church was so different from that of many of my friends."

In 2000 members of PMF buried a ceramic time capsule, but when they tried to dig it up this year, they dug 12 holes but couldn't find it. A former youth, who was seven years old when it was buried pointed to the spot and with two shovel loads of dirt, the time capsule was discovered!

During the celebration we gathered at the PMF Memorial Wall. In 2000, at the 25th anniversary, we dedicated this space to remind us of stories lived by those now with us only in spirit. Bronze name plaques anchored in stones call us to remember. Now the number of plaques increases with each passing year. The shade of tall trees

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Above: Members of Paoli Mennonite Fellowship prepare to open a time capsule buried in 2000. Below right: A sign at the PMF orchard.

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and the stillness of the stones are witnesses to this sacred remembering.

Another part of this sacred remembering included recollection of the beginnings of the congregation. In 1975 a group of young healthcare professionals chose to relocate to a poor, rural area in southern Indiana with dwindling healthcare providers. The original intention was to assimilate into some of the existing local churches. Soon these pioneers sensed the need for a church community centered on Anabaptist faith understandings. They began to meet in homes, then grew into rented spaces. With increasing attendance, questions arose and many discussions ensued. Should we build? Where? What kind of building? Finally the group reached a decision by consensus. In 1986 they bought a new church building in rural Orange County, surrounded by native trees including maples, redbuds, and tulip poplars.

One youth of the '90s described the church as "a church community on the margins," like fence rows in a field or where the edge of a field meets the woods. Here saplings, shrubs, weeds and grasses celebrate their diversity – allowing new plants to emerge – offering shelter to quail and rabbits. In similar manner members expect God to surprise them with the emergence of something new from the diverse borderland which is our home. Per-

haps the emerging call is to work for justice and welcome for immigrants, as this tiny congregation supports their second refugee family and speaks out against destructive national policies that dehumanize immigrants.

As we leave the PMF grounds an orchard sign bids farewell: "A community thrives when the old plant trees under whose shade they will never sit," and the stone Cherokee blessing sends us on our way: "May the warm winds of heaven blow softly upon you and may the Great Spirit make sunrise in your heart."



Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship Dedicates New Meeting House

by Rena LeBlanc

On Sunday June 1, the congregation of Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship in Berne, Ind., ranging in age from 1 to 100, gathered to dedicate our new meeting house, located at 1195 Hendricks Street in Berne. Emmaus Road began in 2007 as a small group of Anabaptist believers who "wondered aloud" about the possibility of creating a fellowship intentionally engaged with the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. After meeting in private homes for several months, the Fellowship eventually began renting space at the South Adams Senior Center. We met there weekly though the spring of 2025.

In 2023, the local Episcopal congregation approached us about purchasing their building. After a period of discussion,

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Above: Children gather outside for the meeting house dedication of Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship in Berne, Ind. (Jenna Schmidt). Below: Howard Baumgartner, age 101, enters with his daughter, Jean Baumgartner Miller (Anita Rediger). Below right: Michael Spath leads the first service at the Emmaus Road meeting house (Anita Rediger).

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prayer, and discernment the decision was made to purchase it. A facilities and a fundraising committee did the initial work to prepare a renovation plan that would be accessible to all, was within a reasonable budget, and would meet the needs of our growing congregation. Renovation began in January 2025, and was completed in May, allowing for the first service to take place on June 1.



In the prayer of dedication, Anita Rediger expressed thanks for the congregations that had worshiped in the building before. The prayer concluded with the blessing: "From this day forward, let it be a place for the gathering of the people of

God, for proclaiming the Gospel, where all are welcome at your table, a Light to the world, comfort for the weary, welcome to the stranger, a sanctuary for those in need, where the sounds of children are embraced, and a place for bringing life and

hope to us and to the community."

Michael Spath led a group of children in marking the threshold with a historic Christian blessing - CMB+ (Christus Mansionem Benedicat: "may Christ bless this house", followed by a cross and the year, 2025.) To honor the elders in the congregation, songs for the day included Voices Together #158 "Gott ist die Liebe" and VT #631 "Take Thou My Hand," hymns that have been meaningful in our community for many decades.



In Michael's sermon, he tied the story of Emmaus Road to the biblical story, the story of Christianity, and the history of Anabaptism: "And us, what's our story? We didn't ask for this mess, but it's come to us in our generation, so the Way has chosen us, too. It's our turn now. Today, not tomorrow, it's our turn. Let us solemnly pledge, we shall fear no consequence in following the way of Jesus, no matter what, no matter where it leads. Berne needs what we have to offer; Indiana ... America ... the Church does, the world needs the good news, the Jesus we offer here. That's right, little Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship. The world needs us...Are we ready? Shall we pick up the mantle from our foremothers and forefathers, bold and fearless? Are we ready to tackle the world and tackle the church, both so desperately in need of real good news? Are we ready to be who we say we are; are we up to the task? All

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I'll say is, 'I wouldn't bet against us.' Because for 17 years, for 500 years, for 2000 years, for Jesus people, when the odds are against us, that's when we're the most dangerous, because the Spirit, She blows where She wills."

After 17 years of renting, Emmaus Road is excited to have our own dedicated space, to increase our presence in and welcome toward our community. We continue to seek to be a clear, compelling, and honest witness to the way of Jesus in our community. All are welcome to join us for a public celebration planned for November 2 as we celebrate our life together on the road of faith in the way of Jesus.



Above left: The cover of *Stitch by Stitch*. Above right: One of the banners created by Lisa Weaver and the children at Bethany United Methodist Church in Madison, Wisc. Right and opposite page: Pages from the book *Stitch by Stitch*. Photos: Lisa Weaver.

Stitch by Stich

by Lisa Weaver

"Felt and scissors, buttons and thread, stitch by stitch, come see what's ahead!"

For Lisa Weaver (Madison Mennonite Church, Wisc.) and Judith Rempel Smucker (Home Street Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba), distance is not a barrier to creativity. Phone calls, digital files, and well-aligned artistic visions have resulted in four separate book projects worked on across state and country lines, with the most recent being a brightly-colored board book for children called *Stitch by Stitch*:

God's Love I See. The project began in fall 2023 as a felt banner created by the Sunday School children of Bethany United Methodist Church (Madison, Wisc.) where Lisa is Director of Children's Ministries. Drawing inspiration from the creation story in Genesis and using brightly-colored felt, embroidery floss and buttons, the children and adult helpers sewed stars, flowers, animals, and people. The background of the banner featured darkness and light, connected by the purple of sunrise or sunset.

As the multi-week sewing project wrapped up, Lisa started thinking about what a lovely picture book the images would make. She wrote a simple rhyming text and sent it to her frequent collaboration partner Judith, along with a photo of the banner. A talented photo-collage artist, Judith immediately saw the potential of the project, and began perusing board books from the library as she considered various approaches for a young reader.

As Judith worked with photos of the individual figures on the banner, she freely resized, multiplied, or flipped images for visual effect. For example, the felt banner included one turtle, but the board book



features this same turtle in various sizes to create a parade of turtles leaving the water. On another page spread, all the people from the banner are lined up and holding hands, creating a beautifully diverse community. The bright eyes and pointy ears of a kitty-cat peeks out from each page until it finally appears in full body in front of the

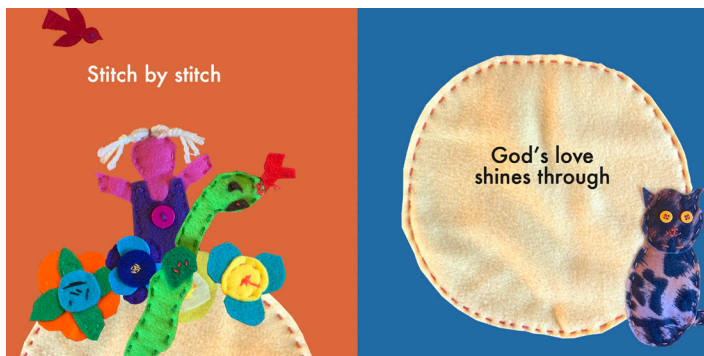
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moon. (Or sun, if you are looking at the banner!) When Lisa and Judith decided a few more creatures were needed for the water spreads, fish sewn by the Sunday School children of Madison Mennonite Church (where Judith's granddaughter is a member) were added to the project.

Of special delight to both Lisa and Judith is that the stitches of the children can be seen - in whatever stage of development the sewer happened to be: new, seasoned, or somewhere in between. The creation process is evident in all its joy-filled imperfection!

Copies of *Stitch by Stitch* can be ordered in person or online via [The Book Deal](#) in Madison, or the [Common Word Bookstore](#) in Winnipeg.



Doug's Mug: "What is it?"

by Doug Luginbill

There's something unfamiliar in my mug...and it's good. Remember the story of manna in the wilderness found in Exodus 16? When the Israelites discovered manna on the ground, they said, in Hebrew, *Man hu?* which means "What is it?" It became their bread of life. Something unfamiliar and unknown became their salvation.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus is calling disciples. When Philip discovers Jesus and decides to follow him, "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in



the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'" (John 1:45, NRSV). Nathanael is less than impressed, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" he scoffs. In Ched Myers' commentary on Mark, *Binding the Strong Man*, he says that saying someone was from Nazareth (Nazorean) was like saying someone was from "Nowheresville." Galilee, the province that included Nazareth, was looked upon "with contempt and suspicion by most southern Jews" (p. 128).

You might say that the faithful from the historical religious center of Jerusalem would have looked upon Jesus and said, "What is it?" This Jesus became the bread of life. Someone unfamiliar and unknown became their salvation.

Five hundred years after Mantz, Grebel, and Blaurock defied political and religious authorities and baptized one another, people might be asking of the Mennonite church, "What is it?" For over 400 years the Mennonite church was mostly of European ancestry, rural, and quiet. Today 37% of Mennonites live in Africa compared to 3% in Europe and 30% in North America. (<https://mwc-cmm.org/en/membership-map-and-statistics/>) Mennonite Church USA includes the following members of the Racial Ethnic Council:

- Iglesia Menonita Hispana,
- African, Belizean & Caribbean Mennonite Mission Association (ABCMMA)
- African American Mennonite Association (AAMA)
- Indonesian Mennonite Association (IMA)
- Native Mennonite Ministries (NMM)
- Asian Mennonite Ministries (AMM)

Today we worship in many languages, sing different songs, preach and lead with different styles, emphasize various gifts, and practice multiple spiritual disciplines. In Central District Conference we have less diversity ethnically, theologically, and culturally than our denomination or Mennonite World Conference. While homogeneity makes some things easier (we don't

fight much at Annual Meetings), it also challenges our hospitality, makes it harder to relinquish power, and diminishes the creativity of the Holy Spirit.

At Follow Jesus '25 (Mennonite Convention), held July 8-12, we zeroed in on one thing that unites us all, our desire to follow Jesus. But remember that that Nazorean is often unfamiliar, scoffed at, and suspicious in a culture bent on marginalizing, disappearing, and othering those who are “not like us.”

What is it that will guide our church for the next 500 years?

What is it that centers our faith and pulls us together?

What is it that offers living bread?

What is it, our salvation?

At Follow Jesus '25 I attended a seminar by John Roth, the Project Director of the Anabaptism at 500 Project. He offered the following “Signposts for Looking Forward”:

1. “Pay attention to creative, courageous

forms of local witness.” What is it in your local community that is the presence of God’s kin-dom right now?

2. “Recover the spiritual practice of confession.” What is it that we are called to repent, confess, and reconcile?

3. “Be curious about the global Anabaptist church as if our future depended on it.” What is it that we must learn from our global siblings?

4. “Practice receptive ecumenism.” What is it about other people of faith that is compelling and inviting?

5. “Look to the rock from which you were hewn?” What is it about Anabaptism that offers life-giving bread to each of us and to our world?

Friends, my cup is running over with curiosity. What is it that God is calling us Anabaptists/Mennonites to do and be today and into the future? Let’s walk this journey together with courage, curiosity, creativity, and a risky hope that is nourished by the bread of life.

Financial report

July 31, 2025

2025/2026 income to date	\$ 27,235.55
2025/2026 plan	\$ 29,417.92
Difference btwn income and plan . .	-\$ -2,182.37
2025/2026 expenses to date	\$ 25,346.74
2025/2026 spending plan	\$ 30,924.89
Under-expenditure against plan . . .	\$ 5,578.15
Difference between actual year-to-date income and expenses:	\$ 1888.81

The budget new year finds us stable. Actual expenses are below projection and giving slightly behind. Overall, the actual figures sound a positive note.

Report provided by Steve Jolley, conference treasurer

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