



Knowing Christ's Love...
Answering God's Call

November 2025

Connector

Stories and News from
Around the Conference

**Central
District
Conference**

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA



Kristin Thomas Sancken, our new Church Safety Coordinator for Central District Conference.

New Church Safety Position Created by Sarah Werner

Central District Conference leadership welcomed Kristin Thomas Sancken as our Church Safety Coordinator in October. This new position serving approximately 8-10 hours per week was created to help the conference carry out the goals of the Prevention and Accountability Resource, which was adopted at the Mennonite Church USA convention this past July.

Kristin is our educator, resource person, and go-to person for Church Safety policies and procedures. She is available to review your church policies, train congregational leaders, and provide counsel and support. Kristin will work closely with MC USA leadership to follow up on all accusations of ministerial misconduct according to our new Prevention and Accountability Resource. Reports of abuse or misconduct can be directed to Kristin (kristin@mcusacdc.org) or Conference Minister, Doug

In this Issue:

Church Safety Position	pg. 1
Gestalt Pastoral Care	pg. 2
Congregations Aging Well	pg. 4
Bluffton Presidential Inauguration	pg. 5
CDC Mutual Aid Fund	pg. 5
Menno Action Courage School	pg. 6
Ordinations	pg. 6

Luginbill (doug@mcusacdc.org).

Kristin started her career as a social worker serving newly arrived Latin American teens with mental health conditions who needed help navigating the school system. She has also worked in community organizing and raising money and awareness about those who have suffered from adverse childhood experiences, which makes a person much more likely to have poor health outcomes as an adult.

During the pandemic she felt called to ministry after seeing how often the people she was caring for had no sense of hope, which is a need fulfilled by pastors rather than social workers. She got a Doctor of Ministry at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan where she studied the sacred art of writing. She wrote her thesis on stories of sexual abuse in the church and the generational trauma they cause to Christian women. In addition to her role with CDC, Kristin works in the field of trauma-informed book editing for people writing memoirs, walking with

Continued on pg. 2

Continued from pg. 1

authors through the writing and grief process as they tell their stories.

Kristin shared that she appreciates that Mennonite Church USA is taking a proactive role in preventing abuse in its member congregations and protecting the most vulnerable people. She said, "I enjoy working with people who are passionate about doing the right thing, but aren't sure where to start. That's what I'm most excited to get to do. Don't be intimidated by the new policies. Know they are there to help us all be better."

Kristin and her family live in Charlottesville, VA where they are currently members of an Episcopal Church. Her family formerly attended Charlottesville Mennonite and her spouse grew up at First Mennonite Church, Champaign-Urbana, a CDC congregation. Kristin spent part of her childhood in Central and South America and is fluent in Spanish.

To learn more about the new Prevention and Accountability Resource, [click here](#).



Gestalt Pastoral Care

by Donna Mast

After 28 years of serving as a pastor and a conference minister in Pennsylvania, and then a pastor in Goshen, Indiana, I retired from Silverwood Mennonite Church this

past March. It was bittersweet. I knew, body, mind, and spirit, that it was time, but I also knew I would greatly miss the wonderful people whom I had served. I am grateful that God called me into ministry, and then provided wonderful people and places to serve. I am especially grateful that the people of Silverwood called me to serve them at the end of my pastoring life.

I arrived in Indiana with my faith in God intact, but with my faith in the Church greatly shaken. At Silverwood, I experienced healing and a reason to believe in the power of a loving church community again. Silverwood did more than help me heal. They helped to equip me for ministry beyond the congregation. Let me explain.

I graduated from Eastern Mennonite Seminary (EMS) with a double major in Pastoral Care and Counseling and Christian Spiritual Formation. I was told by professors in both disciplines to remember which hat I was wearing. When providing counseling for a parishioner, don't confuse it with spiritual direction and when companioning someone on their spiritual journey, don't offer counsel. Remember to keep the two roles separate.

It was during my time as a conference minister that I experienced Gestalt Pastoral Care (GPC) for the first time. The founder of GPC, Tilda Norberg, was holding a workshop at EMS's School for Leadership Training and I attended. Tilda took the counseling of Gestalt and paired it with the listening of a spiritual director. GPC took my two majors and married them! I was hooked. During the most difficult year of my conference ministry experience, I took GPC's Foundation training. That training became my lifeline to sanity, and I had a strong desire to continue with the training.

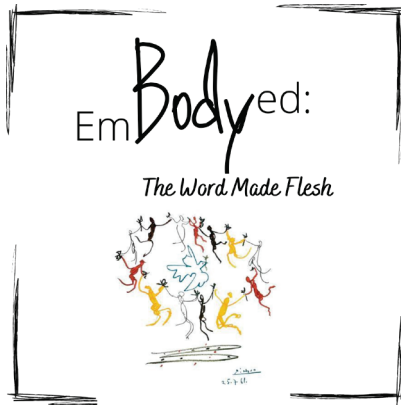
However, I was getting older and the training took time and money. I ended that year of training thinking God had nudged me into the training for sanity's sake, and I was grateful, but didn't think I could

Continued on pg. 3

Continued from pg. 2

justify continuing on with my GPC education.

My foundation training ended in 2015. A year later I began work at Silverwood. In 2020-21, Silverwood had a yearlong theme entitled *EmBodyed: The Word Made Flesh*. As the five pastors met to brainstorm ways this theme might be used in worship, Sunday school, and congregational life, I blurted out, "This is so GPC!"



From that point on, I was encouraged to continue my training. Silverwood not only paid for my training through continuing education dollars, but eventually

included Gestalt Pastoral Care Minister in my job title! Now, in retirement, I am continuing on as a GPC Minister.

GPC is something that needs to be experienced, but I will try to explain it a bit with words. It is a healing ministry, rooted in The Holy One. Other faiths would use other names, but for Christians, that Holy One is Jesus, the one who healed the blind and the lame, the leper and the demoniac, those needing healing in body, mind, and spirit. Gestalt is a form of counseling which sees a person as an organized whole that is greater than its individual parts.

We often think of the mind as holding wisdom, but Gestalt operates with the understanding that the body holds memories, traumas as well as joyful remembrances, and has a wisdom of its own. Gestalt Pastoral Care combines this gestalt, with spiritual direction and healing prayer to support a person in their healing journey. GPC Ministers offer guidance, knowing that we cannot predict how God will choose to heal, but that God will heal, because God's desire for each of us is healing and whole-

ness.

I offer GPC Counseling to both individuals and groups. An individual would come to me for a one-on-one session, but the way many people first experience GPC is in a retreat setting called Opening to Grace. This retreat could be a single day or take place over the course of two days. The 4-6 people who attend an Opening to Grace retreat have the opportunity to be the focus of the group as they are guided by the GPC Minister as well as observe the work of others in the group. Some healing often happens for those observing, as well as for those doing their work.

GPC Circles are another way for groups to experience this healing ministry. Based upon the Opening to Grace format, these groups meet over several weeks. Each week, a different person in the group is the focus. In this way each person has an opportunity to work over the weeks the circle has agreed to meet. GPC Circles work especially well for a few people, usually 4-6, from within a church to meet for work and support. Whether in a GPC Circle, an Opening to Grace Retreat, or meeting with a GPC minister individually, confidentiality is a firm commitment.

I am thankful to be able to offer GPC to others in my retirement. God's healing power is amazing. I have experienced it for myself through GPC and I've been privileged to witness healing in others as they've done their work via GPC as well.

Donna Mast Donna is married to Conrad Mast, who is one of the pastors at Hively Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana. Together, they have three adult daughters, two sons-in-law, and two grandsons. If interested in learning more about GPC or to schedule a session with her, Donna can be reached through email: donnamast@gmail.com, or by text: 724-493-4438.



See, I Am Doing a New Thing!

by Paula Snyder Belousek

In the next year we are featuring guest blogs from conference and denominational leadership outside of CDC, and we welcome this contribution from Paula, the Conference Minister of Ohio Conference.

Ohio was recently designated an AARP state—meaning that one quarter of our population is now age 60 and over. Between 2020 and 2024 alone, the number of older adults in Ohio increased by 10%. Yet Ohio is not unique. By 2035, the United States will be a nation with more older adults than children.

Despite these shifting demographics, one of the laments I hear most often from our congregations is that there are fewer children and young families than in the past. The temptation is to believe that if we could just attract a few more young families, this would be the recipe for church vitality. Yet if our communities themselves are aging, there may simply be fewer young families to be found—and if that becomes our primary focus, we risk missing what God is doing right here and now.

Ohio Mennonite Conference's theme verse for 2025-26 comes from Isaiah 43:19: "See, I am doing a new thing!" As I've meditated on this passage, written to

God's people living in exile in Babylon, I can't help but wonder what this promise might say to us today. What might God's intention to "do a new thing" mean for our aging communities and churches? How might this new thing connect with the shifting demographics of our state, our neighborhoods, and our congregations?

Instead of investing all our energy in trying to attract young families, what might it look like to respond to the spiritual hunger of baby boomers who long ago left behind the faith of their childhoods?

Can we imagine being communities of Christ followers equipped to respond to the epidemic of loneliness, especially among elders who have lost a spouse or their social circle to death?

What new thing might God want to do through a population of healthy, active older adults eager to share God's justice and peace in their neighborhoods?

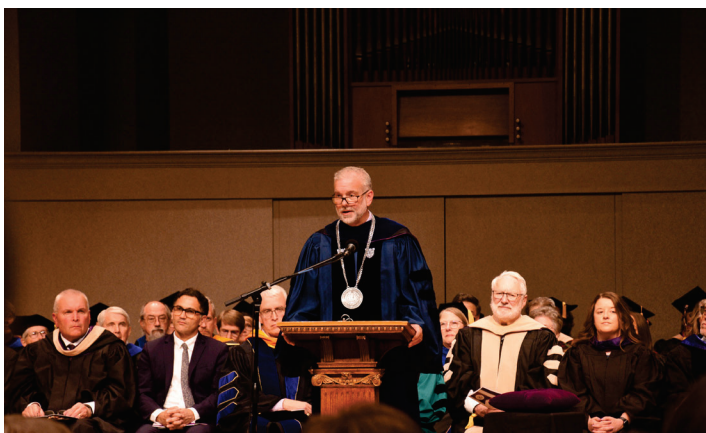
Can we develop a vibrant theology of retirement—one shaped by Jesus-centered service, work, play, and rest?

I ask these questions not because I have the answers, but because this demographic shift calls for a prayerful, creative response if we want to join in where God's Spirit is already at work. Instead of viewing an aging population as a challenge to overcome, I believe God is inviting us to see this as a moment of opportunity—to imagine new forms of ministry, community, and faithfulness.

Just as God led the Babylonian exiles home, this same God speaks to us today: "I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland... to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise."

Isaiah 43:19-21

Paula Snyder Belousek has been the Conference Minister of Ohio Mennonite Conference since June 2025. She lives in Lima, OH with her husband and teenage son.



Alex Sider during his inauguration service at Bluffton University on October 2. Photo credit: Olivia Zuercher, Bluffton University.

Bluffton University Installs New President

Alexander Sider, Ph.D., was appointed interim president of Bluffton University in February 2025 and appointed as president by the Board of Trustees in July 2025. A native of Grantham, Pa., Dr. Sider earned his Ph.D. in Religion from Duke University (2004), an MTS from The Divinity School at Duke University (1998), and a B.A. in Religion (Philosophy concentration) from Messiah University (1995).

Dr. Sider has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and came to Bluffton in 2006. Here, he has served as Professor of Religion, The Harry and Jean Yoder Scholar in Bible and Religion, Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, Director of University Assessment Programs, ADA Coordinator, department chair, faculty, chair, academic dean and vice president.

Raised in the Brethren in Christ Church, Dr. Sider has always been drawn to the importance of faith in both the lives of individuals and within higher education. He attended Raleigh Mennonite Church in North Carolina prior to becoming a founding member of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in 2004.

Dr. Sider and his wife Kathy Dickson, a 2003 Bluffton alumni, have two children, Evan and JD and reside in Bluffton where they attend First Mennonite Church.



Take Courage!

Rise Up, Take Courage Mutual Aid Fund

As a way to help our congregations respond in this moment of deep need and faithful possibility, Central District Conference is opening the Rise Up, Take Courage Mutual Aid Fund.

As communities face cuts to SNAP, intensified border and ICE enforcement, the growing need for legal support, and the threat of Christian nationalism, along with housing instability, voter suppression, and widening economic inequity, we know that faithful leaders are already showing up with courage, compassion, and creativity.

The CDC Missional Church Committee wants to stand with you. This fund exists to resource your faithful response, whether that means feeding families suddenly without assistance, accompanying those targeted by raids, protecting vulnerable neighbors, or building community resilience in new ways.

We currently have \$40,000 available in initial funds and invite your congregation to request what you need to support your work or to financially support an essential organization you work with in your community.

We invite congregations and individuals across CDC to contribute to this mutual aid fund so that together we can continue to meet the needs of this moment. Click [here](#) to apply for assistance. Click [here](#) to donate to the fund.



To Build Our Courage Tour

Mennonite Action is going on tour! Join them this fall for the Mennonite Action Training School.

Our team is traveling across the west coast, mountains and plains, east coast, and midwest in four swings, meeting with Mennonite Action groups at every stop. We'll enjoy food and worship together, and

dive into critical trainings like Grassroots Organizing 101, Nonviolent Action 101, faith based non-cooperation in the authoritarian moment, and preparing your church to meet the moment in front of us.

Tour Dates at CDC Churches:

Sun Nov 16 in Harrisonburg, Va
 Sat Dec 6 in Bluffton, Ohio
 Thurs Dec 9 in Columbus, Ohio
 Wed Dec 10 in Cincinnati, Ohio
 Sat Dec 13 in Goshen/Elkhart, Ind.
 Mon Dec 15 in Raleigh, N.C.

Click here for more information and to register for the event:

<https://www.mennoniteaction.org/tour>

Ordinations



Chaska Yoder was ordained at First Mennonite Church of Bluffton, Ohio on Sunday, October 5. Chaska is a hospital chaplain at St. Rita's Medical Center in Lima, Ohio. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.



Brian Moll's ordination was recognized on Sunday, October 19 at City Peace Church (formerly Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship). Brian is pastor of City Peace Church. Photo credit: Paula Luginbill.



Georgia Metz was ordained at Shalom Mennonite Congregation in Harrisonburg, VA on October 25. Georgia is pastor of Shalom along with Brian Bolton and Krista Showalter Ehst. Photo credit: Howard Zehr.

Central District Connector
Volume 4, Number 9, November 2025
Editor: Sarah R Werner
Email: sarah@mcusacdc.org

The *Connector* is published every six weeks. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

Central District Office:

Doug Luginbill, conference minister
 Emma Hartman, administrator
 Matt Pritchard, minister for emerging faith communities
 Kristin Sancken, church safety coordinator
Mailing address: PO Box 1199, Goshen, IN 46527-1199
Phone: 574.534.1485
Email: office@mcusacdc.org
Web: www.mcusacdc.org
Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) @centraldistrictconference and [Bluesky](#) @centraldistrict