



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

January 2026

Connector

Stories and News from
Around the Conference

**Central
District
Conference**

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA



Participants on the Trail of Death Pilgrimage through AMBS. Each day participants walked several miles of the trail in solidarity with those who made the entire journey. Photo: Katerina Gea.

Potawatomi Trail of Death Pilgrimage by Alaina Dobkowski

"Our journey was immediately across the Prairie, which at this point is entirely divested of timber for sixteen miles. The emigrants suffered a good deal, but still appeared to be cheerful." -September 22nd, 1838, Military Journal of an Emigrating Party of Pottawatomie Indians

"We soon found ourselves on the Grand Prairie of Illinois, under a burning sun and without shade from one camp to another. They are as vast as the ocean, and the eye seeks in vain for a tree. Not a drop of water can be found there- it was a veritable torture for our poor sick, some of whom died each day from weakness and fatigue." --Father Petit, letter to Bishop Brute

I grew up in western Michigan and currently live in Grand Rapids. Despite living in Michigan for the majority of my life, history books taught me far more about the

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Trail of Tears (the forced removal of South-eastern Indigenous nations) than about the Trail of Death: the 1838 forced removal of Potawatomi people from their ancestral homelands in southern Michigan and northern Indiana (just two hours south of where I live). This history, deeply connected to the land on which I live, has been largely erased from the collective memory of white culture.

Our connection to the story of the land we live on has been severed through intentional forgetting, selective retelling, and the manipulation of large portions of the historical narrative. In Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous author Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that "we can't meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration, without 're-story-ation.' In other words, our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?"

Who tells the story matters a great deal. The quotes above present two accounts of the same experience: an arduous journey across the Great Plains on the Trail of Death in 1838. Both were recorded by

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white men, yet men with vastly different roles and relationships to the Potawatomi. One, believed to be Jesse C. Douglass, was a military agent overseeing the forced removal of the Potawatomi. The other, Father Petit, was a priest who served among the Potawatomi people and whom they deeply loved, according to historical accounts and ongoing Potawatomi oral history.

It was not until I was a student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and learned about the course “The Trail of Death: A Pilgrimage of Remembrance, Lament, and Transformation” that I began to understand this history more fully. As students and participants, we traveled the route of the Trail of Death over ten days, stopping each day to walk portions of it.

As we traveled the route of the Trail of Death, we read these two accounts side by side. The narratives differed dramatically depending on who was telling the story and for what purpose. The contrast was stark: the same day that described people as “appearing cheerful” by one writer was described as “veritable torture” by the other. While Douglass sought to document the fulfillment of his military duties and justify the removal, Father Petit strove to bear honest witness to the suffering he observed.

Throughout our pilgrimage, we entered into practices of lament and truth-telling about the violence of white settler colonialism. We learned from Potawatomi elders and remembered their ancestors. We connected histories of white supremacy and Christian nationalism to current sociopolitical realities and we saw how narratives continue to be shaped today using similar strategies to justify violence against our neighbors, both locally and globally. We explored how acts of remembrance and the spiritual practice of lament strengthen our resilience and deepen our commitment to resistance and transformation. This journey profoundly changed my understanding of lament and remembrance as critical

spiritual practices as well as the way I practice ministry as a pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Anishinaabe land.

The Pilgrimage will be offered again May 11–21, 2026, and I invite those within the Central District Conference who are interested to join us. You can learn more at <https://ambs.edu/trail-of-death/>, or email me at amdobkowski@ambs.edu. I am grateful to be joining as a co-instructor alongside the incredible team leading this Pilgrimage: Katerina Gea (Faculty), Dr. George Godfrey (Potawatomi Elder), and Rich Meyer (Trip Navigator).



Participants in the Indigenous People’s Pilgrimage learn about ancient ruins located in the San Juan River valley. Photo: Phil Hart.

Indigenous Peoples Pilgrimage by Julie Hart

Last October six members of Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio) spent five days in Utah and Arizona with Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) in Navajo Land. We were exposed, through Navajo elders, leaders, and medicine men, to a significantly different worldview than the dominant modern worldview most of the US embraces as the only reality. This dominant worldview has shaped our culture since the founding of the US by European Christian colonizers starting in the seventeenth century.

In their book, *Restoring the Kinship Worldview*, educator Wahinkpe Topa and psychologist Darcia Narvaez, compare

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kinship worldview values with dominant worldview values in a way I found helpful in understanding the differences between Navajo and Western cultures. There is a focus on community success rather than personal success, an emphasis on an economy of gift rather than consumerism, and an understanding of humans as a part of the natural world rather than separate from it. The kinship worldview also values generosity as the highest expression of courage rather than aggression, and sees humans as fundamentally good rather than fundamentally sinful and corrupt.

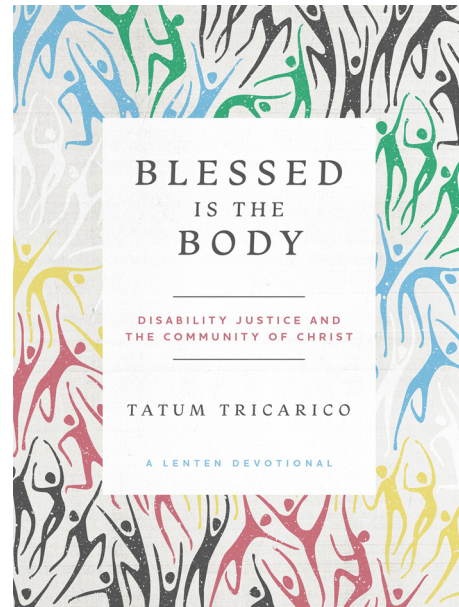
I experienced these Navajo or Indigenous group values through our experiences and sharing from elders. The Navajo used personal stories and examples from nature to communicate with us. It was hard to understand much of what they shared because, true to my dominant culture, I learn better from lists, tables, and contrasts. With stories, the listener must concentrate deeply for the multiple truths there are to offer based on one's own life experience and development. Listeners often came away with different perspectives on what was most important.



Participants met in the sanctuary of the church each morning to discuss a daily lesson, and each evening closed with reflections. Photo: Phil Hart.

One valuable lesson I drew from the Pilgrimage was that the natural world, even the high desert, filled with huge rock formations, cactus, and sage brush, has a lot to teach us about God and the human

experience. We all share a deep belief in a higher power but often call it by different names. The Indigenous elders taught me that my worldview, while dominant, has created the global climate change crisis we are in, and adopting at least parts of the Indigenous worldview can help us retrieve our kinship with nature and each other to find our way out. Details about upcoming trips through MMN are available at: www.mennonitemission.net.



Blessed is the Body Lenten Devotional by Sarah Werner

This year's Lenten devotional from Herald Press, *Blessed is the Body: Disability Justice and the Community of Christ* by Tatum Tricarico, is a thoughtful and accessible reflection on biblical texts centering disability and how they can inform the life of the church. Tricarico is an activist, theologian, and director of Christian education at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church in Charlottesville, VA. She weaves her own first-hand experience as a Blind person and stories of disability justice from US history together with various Scripture texts in the journey of Lent.

Each week focuses on a particular passage and each day includes a short reflection on a few verses of the passage, along

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with questions to consider and a practice to connect the reflection to daily life. Among the Bible stories featured are the call of Moses, Jacob wrestling with God, and several of the healing miracle stories in the Gospels.

Several themes stood out in the book. The first is that disabled people are an asset to the church because they bring a unique perspective on spirituality. Tricarico shares the insight of Eden, an autistic person, who explains that their neurodivergence allows them to have a heightened sensory experience of the natural world, which gives them a strong spiritual connection to God (47).



Tricarico also pushes back on the all-too-common experience that disabled people have with unwanted attention they receive from religious people who want to pray for their healing. In her discussion of Jacob wrestling with God, she notes that Jacob comes away from the encounter

both blessed and disabled. His disability is a visible sign of his blessing, not of a sin or lack of faith. She writes, "The real blessing of Disability...comes in being able to wrestle with God and with ourselves enough to find blessings in the midst of that wrestling" (66).

Similarly, in her reflection on the healing of the blind man in John 9, she recognizes that healing stories in the Gospels can more accurately be called "changing stories" (112). Tricarico argues, "This concept broadens God's work and shows that God's love takes many forms, rather than just a one-size-fits-all cure" (112). In the Gospels God changes people's bodies, and that allows them to once again be part of their community, but that change is much more encompassing than simply

physical healing.

In the final pages of the book, Tricarico reflects on the powerful image of the Last Supper as told in Matthew 26. She writes, "In the Lord's Supper, we are pushing against this connection between health and wholeness, recognizing the elements as the broken body and blood of Christ that makes us whole" (170). Christ, in the act of crucifixion, becomes disabled, and so can relate to our own human finitude. After the resurrection he is recognized by his disability, the scars on his hands and his side, as the story of Thomas demonstrates in John 20.

Tricarico's devotional is an excellent resource for congregations and individuals who are interested in reflecting on embodiment and human finitude during the Lenten season. Much more than simply a devotional book, *Blessed is the Body* is also a much-needed lesson in disability justice and the wisdom that disabled voices bring to the Christian faith.



Take Courage!

Mutual Aid Fund Helps Communities

The Rise Up Take Courage Mutual Aid fund started by CDC last fall has assisted six congregations with needed aid so far. The vast majority of the funds have gone to provide meals for food-insecure households. First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana, Ill. requested money to donate to Sola Gratia Farm, a community farm that grows fresh vegetables for low-income residents of the community.

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The donation will help them cover the cost of labor and transportation to get the produce into the hands of those that need it. Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, In. requested funds for a meal service operated by the Center for Healing and Hope that provided 200-300 locally-sourced frozen meals to immigrants and other low-income patients of the center. If you would like to request assistance, click [here](#). If you are able to donate to the fund, click [here](#).

Announcements

Shaine Claiborne at Emmaus Road

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship of Berne, Ind. welcomes prominent Christian author, pacifist, and activist, Shane Claiborne for a Saturday evening reception, April 18, 6:30pm, and on Sunday morning, April 19, 9:00 a.m. Sojourner's Study Hour & 10:15 a.m. worship.



Shane Claiborne worked with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, and with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Baghdad, Iraq, during the 2003 war, advocating for peace and Jesus way of nonviolence, which he detailed in his book *Of Grace and Bombs*.

With others, in 1998, Shane co-founded The Simple Way in Philadelphia, where with Tony Campolo, in 2007, he also co-founded "Red Letter Christians," a movement of those committed to Christian voluntary simplicity and social justice, to living "as if Jesus meant the things he said." In addition to his commitment to nonviolence, Shane is an advocate for the homeless, the abolition of the death penalty, justice in Palestine and Palestinian human rights, ending gun violence, climate justice, and care for the planet.

Shane's book, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence*, 2019, was in partnership with Michael Martin of

RAWTools, an organization that transforms guns into garden and hand tools, "swords into plowshares," symbolizing peace. Other books include: *Executing Grace - How the Death Penalty Killed Jesus and Why It's Killing Us*, 2016; *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, 2010; *Follow Me To Freedom: Leading and Following as an Ordinary Radical*, 2009 (with John Perkins); *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals*, 2008 (with Chris Haw); *The Irresistible Revolution*, 2006.

His works have appeared in *Esquire*, *Christianity Today*, *TIME*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's been interviewed on Al Jazeera, CNN, NPR, and others.

In 2010, Shane received an Honorary Doctorate from Eastern University, and in 2023, he received the The King Center's Beloved Community Award for Social Justice from Dr. Bernice King (daughter of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King).

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship is located at 1195 Hendricks Street, Berne, IN, 46711.

Join us on Saturday evening and Sunday morning!

Great Lakes Regional Mennonite Spiritual Directors Retreat

Minding the Spirit, Reminding Our Hearts
April 27-29, 2026 at Lindenwood Retreat and Conference Center, Plymouth, In.

Come join other Mennonite spiritual directors and ecumenical friends, as we meet to reflect on spiritual direction in this time of social upheaval when we've had to re-imagine so many of our old models and ways of being. Spend time in a space where we share our longings and our learnings and seek to deepen our understanding of ways to work with those with whom we walk.

Questions? Email Julie Carlson at holy.listening.julie@gmail.com

