



March 2026

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



Families cultivating the community garden at City Peace Church with Imagine Cincinnati. Photo: Jen Fisher.

Simons Studio at City Peace Church by Brian Moll

John and Maria sleep in the front seat of their aging sedan – once prized for its fuel efficiency, now the sole measure of stability for their growing family. Maria is five months pregnant. Their children, eight and six, have already switched schools twice this year.

They park near a school playground to shorten the morning commute. John grabs a few hours of sleep before catching the bus to his 11 p.m. shift at a local manufacturing plant. Maria will take the children to school before running to her part-time job across town. They are exhausted. Isolated. Determined.

Their story is one of hundreds in Cincinnati, where the average age of a person experiencing homelessness is nine, and children can change schools up to seven times in a single year. Throughout the year, more than 3,500 students in Cincinnati Public Schools will experience hous-

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ing insecurity.

Low wages and soaring housing costs are usually to blame. But the comments say otherwise: Just get a job. Stop being lazy. If I were you, I'd do better.

My friend Rev. Jen Fisher, Executive Director of Imagine Cincinnati (a CDC emerging community of faith that launched in 2023) turned me on to a podcast (via Cincinnati Public Radio) about the growing challenge of homelessness in our city. We sat together over breakfast one morning discussing ways to address the podcast's call for respite shelter partners: people and organizations who could potentially offer short-term stays for public school families on a waitlist for longer-term shelter space.

Our congregation, City Peace Church, had recently transformed our office space and marketplace apartments into affordable housing for immigrants and refugees. Additionally, an old garage on our property was retrofitted to house Imagine Cincinnati's family playgroups, a balm for the souls of so many parents in our neighborhood.

Jen is what they call a "go-getter," and

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she isn't shy about making requests. As I contemplated what more could be done, she slid an idea across the table.

"What about that storage space with the little bathroom in it we use for playgroups? Could it be turned into - housing for a family in need?" A wry smile broke across her face. She knew she was onto something.

I hadn't had a chance to speak yet - my brain needed more coffee first - but I then let her in on a little secret. "Our Peace and Justice Team has been thinking and praying about how we could transform that storage space into a respite room for immigrants, or for our neighbors who live on the street, or for LGBTQ+ folks rejected from their families. We've actually been thinking about this for a few years."

"Thinking is different than doing, Brian." Her smile became a smirk. Jen was goading me in all the most appropriate ways. Our friendship spanned more than fifteen years, starting out in New York where we started faith communities together, just before my career developed into serving our unhoused neighbors in the Big Apple.

We both landed in Cincinnati in 2021. Whether it was a divine appointment or dumb luck, we were eager to take advantage of any opportunity to serve together again. The idea of a respite room to help stabilize students experiencing housing insecurity was ripe for implementation.

Our Peace and Justice Team gave legs to the idea. Our Church Council helped us sort out how to dot I's and cross T's. And our Facilities Team was so excited about the idea, they began proper demolition on the old storage room - now called Simons Studio - as soon as our church gave the project an enthusiastic "thumbs up."

Conversations with Matt Pritchard, CDC Associate Pastor of Emerging Faith Communities, and Elizabeth Kelly led to a "Rise Up and Take Courage" grant request (approved!), along with support from MC USA's Justice Fund, local dollars, and a

grant we received through Imagine Cincinnati's local partnerships. Jen Fisher shared about the project, "I knew the church was thoughtfully discerning how their building could serve the neighborhood, and they've been incredible partners and a real source of inspiration for the families I serve. In a time when many are shying away from the idea of church, I'm proud to partner with and share the good they are doing to build peace in our city."



City Peace member Charlie Patty and a neighborhood contractor inspecting the future shower and bathroom.

We are also partnering with Mennonite Disaster Service on the initiative, who will provide volunteers to help our facilities team install a shower, new bathroom, and essentials for the room. The truth is, hurricanes and tornadoes can displace people in a moment; homelessness, however, is often a slow-moving disaster. Rents increase. A car breaks down. Fewer hours scheduled at work, or a sick child at home can subtly alter the direction of someone's life - slowly, but surely, ending in a terrific plight for everyone involved.

We aim to provide 4-6 weeks of stable living for a family, before they are placed in longer-term housing through other city agencies. In addition to the above partners, we are collaborating with Project Connect (an arm of Cincinnati Public Schools) to house and support our guests.

Folks like John and Maria are desperate, and determined. And, now, they are not alone.

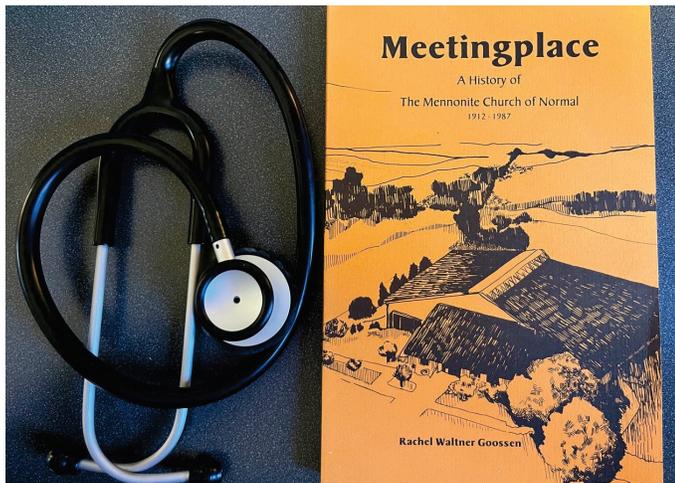
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If you or your church would like to partner with us on this project, either with start-up or ongoing operational costs, you can contribute here or reach out to me (brian@citypeacechurch.org).

The Simons Studio Initiative aims to bring healing and hope to our city by providing a temporary place of refuge for neighbors in dire need. We invite you to pray with us that God will do far more than we could ever ask or imagine.

In the words of Menno Simons, “True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant; it clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all creatures.”

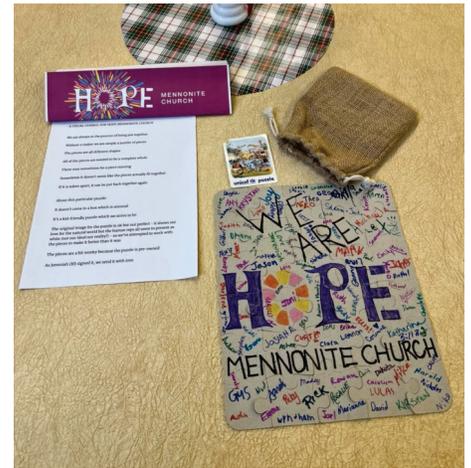


Manitoba Companion Congregation by Kevin Chupp

In September, following some international ecclesial matchmaking, our conference ministers arranged for me (from Mennonite Church of Normal, Ill.), and a representative from Hope Mennonite Church in Winnipeg to begin finding ways to “foster greater connection and deeper relationship between congregations across the Canada-U.S. border.”

Careless words and actions coming from the US made me eager to apologize to my Canadian siblings, at the very least. It also seemed like an important opportunity

Below left: Mennonite Church of Normal sent a stethoscope and book on the church’s history to Hope Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. Right: Hope Mennonite Church sent a puzzle and other gifts.



to remember that until 2002 Mennonites disregarded the 49th parallel as a border for their denominational bodies.

We started the conversation by Zoom to imagine the possibilities and decided to “introduce” our congregations to each other by sharing letters and symbolic objects. Amid the Canada Post strike, we got creative. From Winnipeg came a bubble mailer that required less processing. Inside were puzzle pieces that, when assembled, reveal the signatures of many from the congregation. The puzzle itself represents things about belonging, discerning, and approachability.

Then, with Matt Pritchard as courier, we sent a stethoscope to Winnipeg—a reference to our historic part in the hospital community and college of nursing in Normal. In the same tune, our vision statement that includes our commitment to the work of healing in our community and world. Having traded these little things made the connection more tangible and sparked imagination.

As we look for ways to continue the conversation, we focused on regular kinds of sharing with each other. We offer news updates and prayer requests on a monthly basis. Both congregations have space for sharing within the context of worship, so our commitments to pray for each other are visible to the whole congregation in that way. While there are some loose connections that preexisted this formal

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relationship (including some cousins), we are opening up new relationships and perspectives. Each of our congregations are facing unique opportunities and challenges, and yet we have resonance from those deep places of common convictions.

Of course, we have learned that not everything is so neatly separated by borders. With Minneapolis situated almost perfectly equidistant from each of our congregations we quickly realized that we all have relationships there and share serious concern about what has happened in recent months and what lies ahead for us in the US.

It has been a welcome reminder of the truth that Maya Angelou named so well: “Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.” Speaking from this side of the border, I can testify that we are finding this to be true.

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Breathe In, Breathe Out: Futility and Levity, on Repeat

by Amy Zimbelman

This year we are featuring guest blogs from conference and denominational leadership outside of CDC, and we welcome this contribution from Amy, the Conference Minister of Mountain States Conference.



The following is an excerpt from a sermon on Ecclesiastes chapter 3 that I preached in one of our Mountain States congregations in 2025. I wanted to adapt it and share it with you all in CDC.

“Despair, bliss, despair, bliss. And it’s only Tuesday. It’s only 11 in the morning. Despair again. Bliss again.” —Merle Feld

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven...”

(Eccl 3:1)

A few months ago, my four-year-old Owen asked why I was talking to myself while he played with Legos. I told him that I’m writing a sermon in my head—it has to do with opposites in a book of the Bible called Ecclesiastes—does he want me to read it aloud?

He did! He especially connected with a few of them: a time for planting and uprooting reminded him of Daddy’s garden. And he was right in the middle of tearing down his Lego boat, which he would of course build up again. When we got to the love and hate part, I asked him if you’re allowed to hate people. And Owen said very seriously: “No, you can’t hate people. But you can hate viruses.” (He was born March of 2020, so he’s heard more than his fair share about viruses.)

And then we listened to the Byrds song.

The author of Ecclesiastes claims that reality is a cycle, like the seasons. Whatever has happened—that’s what will happen again.

And as this author processes the cyclical nature of the world, he uses this word: hevel over and over—38 times in this short book.

What is hevel? Hevel is literally the vapor exhaled while breathing, the waste product of our lungs. Here and then gone, you can’t even see it unless it’s cold outside.

Everything, all of this, the author says, is [exhale].

Interestingly, the word gets translated a host of ways: futility, vanity, absurdity, insubstantiality, meaninglessness.

Maybe. Those interpretations could be true. Maybe the fact that something doesn’t last forever, that it’s here and then gone, and perhaps back again, maybe that moves it towards meaninglessness. Like the movie Groundhog Day: over and over, with each repetition decreasing its value.

Or—because two things can be true at the same time, and because we can always

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talk back to the text—maybe the fleeting nature of things makes them more precious, rather than less. Think of a loved one in hospice. If you were told, “This is the last day of breaths this person will breathe, the last words they will speak,” wouldn’t you hang on every word?

Hevel is true. Futility, absurdity, and meaninglessness are very real. Hevel seems to apply when we read the headlines to learn of so much violence and oppression in our country and world. Here in Mountain States, when 31 people are detained or deported in one year from Roca de Refugio in San Antonio, it’s too much. Despair and futility and powerlessness seem to prevail.

Those in the throes of meaninglessness have much to teach.

But something else is also true, singing in the background: ruah.

Ruah is another word for breath, air, or spirit.

You’ve probably heard this word narrative. It’s one of the words for breath. God breathes, and humans are alive.

Life-giving breath, wind. This animating force, this spirit of living creatures. Maybe as the seasons come and go, and we breathe in and out, maybe ruah is true too. Maybe all this, every last air particle, is nothing short of sacred and precious and holy.

We yearn for no one to be ripped away from their family. We yearn for everyone to have what they need, in the US and around the world. We yearn for shalom because we all are connected; we all are infused with God’s breath.

And so, we lament and act. We share



An oil painting of Amy Zimbelman and son Bennett by Adrienne De Forrest of Boulder Mennonite Church, Colo.

resources and prayers and small kindnesses. We protest and make calls and get involved locally to work against the many ways justice and peace are being undermined. If we are not currently in crisis, our moral injury/outrage finds us aligning ourselves with those who are in crisis, just as Jesus did.

In *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu exhorts us, in the face of suffering, to “be appalled. It’s so wonderful that we can be distressed,” he says. “It would be awful if we looked on all of that horrendousness and we said, ‘Ah, it doesn’t really matter.’”

Or as Roca’s Pastor Dianne Garcia says: “Let it bother you.”

And right on the heels of crying out for justice, we remember that we will not be able to resist despair with despair. The seasons are not always months long; sometimes they are mere minutes. Despair gives way, over and over again, to beauty and wonder and levity that will keep us alive and sane and pointed towards God, towards Love, in these times.

As Cesar Chavez said: “We draw our strength from the very despair in which we have been forced to live. We shall endure.”

Because coupled with our despair is our desire to connect, to love. “It’s incredible how compassionate and generous people can be,” Desmond Tutu says. Our ability to turn towards others to honor our mutuality and relieve suffering leads to joy somehow, and creates a “virtuous cycle” rather than a vicious cycle. We are brought back to each other, to the goodness in ourselves and others, again and again.

We shall endure, Church. We shall lament. We shall resist. And against all odds, we shall hope, too. And as we do, may we keep breathing Life and Love in and out, in and out, until every last one of us can breathe a sigh of relief.

Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman is the Conference Minister of Mountain States Mennonite Conference. She lives in Colorado Springs with her husband and two sons.



Annual Meeting

Save the date for the upcoming Annual Meeting! There will be time for worship, fellowship, workshops, and play. We hope you can join us.

Where: Eastern Mennonite University
Harrisonburg, Virginia

When: June 25-27, 2026

Registration opens on May 1

Installation



Robin Walton was installed as Pastor of Congregational Care at Columbus Mennonite Church (Ohio) on Sunday, March 1. Photo: Laura Steiner.

Financial report February 28, 2025

Income	
2025/2026 income to date	\$ 230,755.20
2025/2026 plan	\$ 240,676.67
Difference between income and plan.	\$ -9,921.47
Expenses	
2025/2026 expenses to date	\$ 221,483.01
2025/2026 spending plan	\$ 247,399.14
Under-expenditure against plan	\$ 25,916.13
Difference between income and expenses . . .	\$ 9,272.19

We are over half of the way through the current fiscal year and are once again in a strong financial position. While income has been a little lower than anticipated, expenses have been lower than the spending plan. Thank you for your contributions to the ministry of CDC.

Report provided by Steve Jolley, conference treasurer

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