



April 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



Members of Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind. worshipped in the church parking lot during the pandemic. Photo: Anna Yoder Schlabach.

### Outdoor Worship

The theme of this Earth Day issue of the Connector is outdoor worship. As spring begins and the first flowers of the season appear, it's easy to see the presence of God working in creation. We hear from two churches, Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind. and Columbus Mennonite Church in Ohio, about the different ways they have worshipped outdoors through the years. We hope this inspires your congregation to try new ways of worshipping together in creation.

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### Assembly Outdoors

by Anna Yoder Schlabach

Assembly Mennonite Church has had a long practice of meeting outdoors for a special service during the summer. When I was a child, this service was held at Ox Bow County Park, located along the winding Elkhart River on the north side of Gos-

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hen. Surrounded by trees, sunshine and birdsong, these worship services fed our souls each year.

I have fond memories of carrying in our blankets and chairs and worshipping under the trees, followed by a potluck picnic in a pavilion. This practice began sometime in the 1980s when much younger members of the congregation took canoes down the Elkhart River and gathered with others for worship at Ox Bow. Over the years, some folks took the bike path out to the park as well. But as Assembly grew larger and older, the appeal of gathering on blankets on the ground, as well as hauling out a sound system and hymnals for 200 people began to wane.

In 2019 our building underwent a major renovation, and we had just begun worshipping in our new space when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. We gathered on Zoom for a while, but as the weather warmed and we grew tired of screens, we began drawing on our tradition of worshipping outdoors by holding our services in our parking lot, in nearby woods, and in backyard neighborhood gatherings.

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Members of Assembly celebrated Advent at Witmer Woods on Sunday evenings during the pandemic. Photo: Anna Yoder Schlabach.

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For the Advent 2020, we gathered in Witmer Woods on Sunday evenings, just as the sun was setting. We bundled up, we made a fire, and we journeyed through the trees on paths lit by candles in paper bags. In lieu of singing we had a bell choir. It was lovely to gather in the cold and dark, but it was difficult for the very young and very old among us.

For backyard worship, we divided the congregation into 18 geographically assigned neighborhood groups with about a half dozen households in each. We provided worship materials for each group and they ran for seven weeks from August through September. As it turned out it was hard to know how many people would show up each week, and so some of the groups ended up merging together. These services included some singing, a peace lamp, a scripture and a story for children. In general, people still talk pretty fondly about backyard neighborhood worship.

For our parking lot worship services, we brought out carts of folding chairs, hymnals, a folding platform, tents for shade, a microphone and portable speakers, and a small table with a peace lamp. We chalked “aisles” so people had some guidance about where to set up their chairs.

In all of these ways of gathering, the singing was the highest cost. Singing outside (especially when distanced and masked as we were in the early days) was

disappointing compared to the rich music we were used to in our congregation. But the joy of being together each week was worth it. And new people began to show up.

The creativity and flexibility of our congregation was truly on display during that time, but everyone was grateful when we returned to our new indoor space where the acoustics are good and the weather wouldn’t disrupt our worship.

Worshiping outdoors seems like it should be simple, but it brings challenges around logistics, accessibility, weather and more. Many of us were stretched to the limit during the pandemic and we have not been eager to return to outdoor worship. But for people for whom church services have become too predictable or polished, one of the gifts of outdoor worship is that we are freed from “normal” ways of doing things. It gives us a chance to try new things and be a little more informal. We haven’t had an outdoor Ox Bow service since 2021, but perhaps this is the summer when we try again.

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## **Outdoor Worship at Columbus Mennonite Church**

by Sarah Werner

Columbus Mennonite Church has a long history of annual outdoor worship services. Each year in early June we leave our church building to worship at Highbanks Metro Park just north of Columbus, Ohio. As someone who feels most connected to God when I am in nature, this is my favorite worship service of the year. Gathering outside the walls of the sanctuary allows us to encounter God and each other in new ways.

Children’s time at the outdoor service is always memorable and incorporates the natural world into the message. One year a member who was an entomologist at Ohio State brought an assortment of insects for the children to look at, brightly colored

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centipedes and spiders. Animals are also part of the worshipping community at the outdoor service since people bring their dogs to sit alongside them on picnic blankets. Preaching in this context can feel a little bit like being St. Francis of Assisi, sharing the Gospel to all creatures. The birds and the cicadas sing along with us, making a beautiful chorus.

The relaxed pace of the outdoor service also offers a chance for fellowship, especially during the potluck lunch and optional afternoon hikes. I had only attended CMC for a few months when I went to my first outdoor service, and I remember the sense of welcome I felt at being invited to sit at a table with people I'd barely met but who have since become good friends.

A few years ago Eve Miller, a young adult in the congregation, chose to be baptized in the river at the outdoor service. It was a beautiful ritual and an anomaly for our congregation where baptisms are usually done in the sanctuary.

The outdoor service is a unique, holy celebration of God's presence in creation, and I am grateful it has become a long-standing tradition at Columbus Mennonite.



Eve Miller was baptized in the Olentangy River during the outdoor service at Columbus Mennonite Church in 2024. The congregation participated from the riverbank (above left), while pastors Joel Miller and Mark Rupp accompanied Eve in the river (above right). Photos: Jenny Campagna.

## **CDC Revisits Article 19**

by Sarah Werner

At the CDC leadership council meeting last fall, the board shared that there was a congregation who was interested in affiliating with our conference who had not previously been part of an Anabaptist denomination. Some of their members were hesitant to pursue a relationship with CDC because Article 19 in the Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective defines marriage between one man and one woman as the only proper context for sexual intimacy, thereby challenging the place of LGBTQ people in the life of the church. While more recent statements of repentance and transformation have been affirmed in both the denomination and our conference, the language in our confession of faith remains a barrier for those unfamiliar with our recent repair work.

We decided to form a task force to revisit Article 19 and to form a response to it. The task force has been meeting for the past four months, and in mid-March led a discussion of Article 19 at the virtual Mid-Year Gathering. Participants discussed the following questions in small groups:

1. What do we still affirm in Article 19? What do we not affirm?
2. What is most important to you as we revisit this statement?
3. What other questions come up for you?

Here are some of the main themes we heard. People appreciate the emphasis of Article 19 on relationships and the fact that God created us to be in relationships of various kinds with one another. Single people are given equal respect to married people, and there is an emphasis on community beyond the nuclear family. The discussion groups noted that the language of marriage as being between a man and a woman does not reflect our abundant welcome and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, and were wary of language that views divorce as a failure and that lifts up

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obedience as an ideal for children.

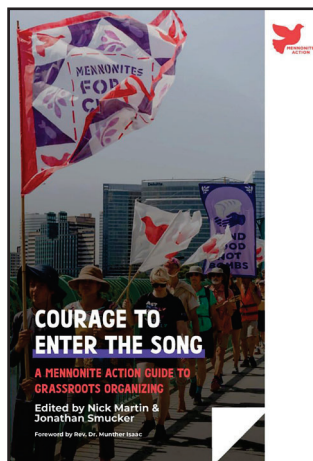
Those present felt that covenanted relationships built on mutuality and care should be the basis of a statement of faith regarding family life. Purity culture has led to distinct harms that we do not want to perpetuate in our communities, and a common theme shared was a desire to have an aspirational document rather than a judgmental one.

Many questions arose in the course of our discussion, including how this document might be helpful to our congregations once complete, and what our relationship is with the rest of the Confession of Faith beyond Article 19. The members of the task force also want to hear from you, and there are several ways for your voice to be heard on this issue. We will continue this discussion at the Annual Meeting at Eastern Mennonite University this summer (June 25-27), and hope you can join us. You can also feel free to be in touch with any member of the task force: Clayton Gladish (clayton@silverwoodmc.org), Emma Hartman (office@mcusacdc.org), Gerald Mast (mastg@bluffton.edu), and Sarah Werner (sarah@mcusacdc.org).

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## Mennonite Action Book

Mennonite Action has a new book out, *Courage to Enter the Song: A Mennonite Action Guide to Grassroots Organizing*. It includes practical tools for grassroots movement organizing and comes equipped with a four-week Bible study designed for Sunday school classes or small groups. David Cramer used the book for a workshop during Pastors and Leaders Week at Anabaptist



Mennonite Biblical Seminary this past February. He shared, “The room hummed with energy and excitement as pastors engaged the study and discussed how to take what they were learning back to their churches. Recognizing that it can sometimes be difficult to discuss politically charged topics from the pulpit, they saw opportunity in the chance to engage these questions with the mediation of the study guide.”

The book is available to order for your congregation [HERE](#). While the Bible study can be done at any time, Mennonite Action is encouraging churches to consider joining a national web of churches committed to participating over the month of May. At the end of the month there will be a debrief call for participants to discuss what they have learned.



Dorothy Shank of Ridgeway Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va. with a “Vote to Love Your Neighbor” bumper sticker.

## Vote to Love Your Neighbor Campaign

by Erin Conway

What does it really mean to love your neighbor? Dorothy Shank of Ridgeway Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va. pondered this question as the 2024 US presidential election divided communities, families, and neighbors. This tension led her to reflect on Jesus’ words in Luke 10 about the most important commandments: love God and love your neighbor.

One phrase kept coming to her: “Vote to Love Your Neighbor.” What began as a local idea quickly became a shared

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project. With the support of Ridgeway, a small team printed yard signs and placed them around town ahead of the November election. But when the ballots were counted, the message didn't fade. It spread.

Soon, yard signs, car magnets, and T-shirts were making their way across the country to people who wanted to bring a visible reminder of compassion and unity into their own communities.

The word "vote" catches attention—and sometimes raises eyebrows. But it also leads to conversation. Ridgeway hopes that viewers will think of voting in a broad sense. "To vote means to choose," Shank says. "It means taking action and giving your support to something. It can be as simple as how we behave in traffic and as complex as how we care for creation."

Yes, the message is political. "We believe it always will be," Shank says. "From Jesus' birth to his death, his life created political tension. Similarly, our church fathers and mothers, the Anabaptists, were killed for their courage to redefine what it meant to follow Jesus."

At its heart, the project isn't at all about partisanship. It's about making deliberate daily decisions—to treat neighbors across the street and across the world with compassion, respect, kindness, dignity, and care.

If this message resonates with you, Vote to Love Your Neighbor materials are available at <https://www.muddyfeet.shop/collections/vote-to-love-your-neighbor>.



## Doug's Mug: A Mug of Angst

by Doug Luginbill



*Angst: a feeling of deep anxiety or dread, typically an unfocused one about the human condition or the state of the world in general.*

Our US bombs are falling on yet another nation. Economic disparity between rich and poor

in the US and around the world continues to widen. Palestinians find little relief. ICE agents' broad nets capture and detain innocents. Melting glaciers threaten coastal communities. Authoritarianism is on the rise around the world. Bombed oil and gas facilities belch toxic clouds into the sky. Mennonite Church USA continues to lose member conferences and churches.

I wish I could dump my mug of angst and fill it with something more positive. But this is our world, our time...**our opportunity.**

Angst is a feeling, a state of mind. It is our spirit's response to a reality that seems out of our control and on the brink of disaster. Sipping a mug of angst as we take in the daily news can lead to despair and depression. But we have choices. We can set aside our mug of angst. We can moderate our intake of news. We can drink from other founts.

*Come, thou fount of every blessing.*

Now, I'm not suggesting that we ignore the news or our reality. I'm not promoting rainbows and unicorns. But I am inviting ongoing engagement with the church, the body of Christ. Our scriptures are packed with stories of disaster, disappointment, despair, and death. And they are packed with resilience, rest, repentance, and resurrection.

What are the **opportunities** before us as Christ's church today? Here are some thoughts.

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1. Pray: Centering prayer, contemplative prayer, angry (imprecatory?) prayer, guiding prayer; these are some of the ways we can express our deepest longings and our deepest complaints to God. Such prayer may help us focus and clarify our feelings and experience.
2. Petition: Call and write to legislators expressing your desires. A helpful app is "Five Calls." <https://5calls.org/>
3. Protest: Carry signs, march with similarly minded peers, offer alternative perspectives rooted in the love and justice of God, attend courage training from Mennonite Action.
4. Persist: Remain rooted, grounded, and centered in Christ whom we follow. Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 seem appropriate, *Proclaim the message; **be persistent** whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.*
5. Pensive Posture: A thoughtful, reflective, and wise posture toward others can provide opportunities for relationship building, reality framing, and understanding.
6. Praise: Look for the beauty and humor in God's creation. Pause and give thanks, for God's creation is Very Good. If you are sipping from a mug of angst,

you are not alone. During Jesus' Gethsemane prayer, he pleaded with God to remove "this cup" from him. Crucifixion was not something Jesus desired or dutifully submitted to. It was an unjust, duplicitous, horrendous execution at the hands of anxious rulers and authorities. Jesus was caught in a scandalous snare. What he did have some control over was his response to the lies, criticisms, and blame that came his way. He didn't invoke violence. He didn't call for rebellion. And, perhaps most perplexing (and transformative?) of all; he forgave. I would much rather sip from a mug of grace, love, and forgiveness. God, help me to choose wisely.

*Come, thou fount of every blessing.*

## Licensing



On Sunday March 22, **Alaina Dobkowski** was licensed toward ordination at Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship in Michigan.

Photo credit: Paula Luginbill

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