



September 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 Keller Park Church during the interview for the CAP project. Photo credit: David Cramer.

CDC Churches Offer Unified Witness in a Polarized State

by David Cramer

Researching Indiana congregations in the months leading up to the 2024 election, the Congregations and Polarization Project (CAP)—a research initiative of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University Indianapolis—found that, while churchgoers across Indiana are every bit as polarized as the general U. S. public, pastors have sought ways to promote internal unity by minimizing political divisions.

Funded by the Lilly Endowment, CAP is “an effort to learn how congregations in Indiana are dealing with the current climate of cultural and political division” by “looking at the ways religious congregations approach many difficult topics such as racism, immigration, abortion, gender identity, gun ownership, and economic inequality.”

An early report describes how many

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churches seek to keep the peace internally by maintaining a politically neutral or “purposely purple” stance publicly.

“Most evangelical congregations will insist that their primary mission is individual salvation, not social change,” the report finds, while “even Catholic parishes with strong pro-life stances are unlikely to speak, publicly, on social and political issues.” Even as “some congregations actively seek to practice peace,” only a “few see it as their mission to actively seek this peace in the wider communities they serve.”

One small but significant outlier is found in the CDC. In September 2024, CAP director Art Farnsley met with a dozen Elkhart-area Mennonite pastors of congregations in CDC and Indiana-Michigan Conference at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS). This was the first stop on a listening tour of ten sites across Indiana. Along the way, Farnsley provided summaries of what the researchers were gleaning.

“We ask all the pastors on our listening tour which issue most energizes or alarms

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the members of their congregations,” he writes in his summary of the AMBS meeting. “For these Mennonite pastors, that issue is America’s role in supporting Israel in its war in Gaza.”

In other stops on the tour, “Israel/Gaza/Palestine was only mentioned one other time, only in passing,” Farnsley notes, causing him to conclude that the AMBS meeting “provided a reminder of the incredible diversity among religious values and priorities. What Mennonites see as crucial to a Christian witness is not necessarily what other Christians see at all.”

CAP is now turning its attention to issues that highlight polarization, starting with immigration. In a recent report, CAP team member Lauren Palmer describes how many pastors feel “tension between what they understand to be central to the gospel—caring for each other and strangers alike—and what their congregations believe to be politically or culturally necessary.”

“This is a delicate balancing act,” Palmer writes. “Say too much and you risk alienating members, sparking conflict, or even driving people away. Say too little and you risk failing to speak to an issue that most pastors believe has clear moral and theological implications.”

Not only is there tension between pastors and their congregants; many churches experience “competing views among members.” To navigate this tension, many pastors opt for “a kind of cautious silence, or a reliance on indirect approaches such as speaking about love, neighborliness, and compassion without explicitly naming immigration.”

Palmer observes that this “is a strategy that preserves unity, but it can also leave underlying tensions unresolved.” For many pastors, immigration exposes broader questions about the nature of their leadership: “What does it mean to guide a community when persuasion feels unlikely? What does faithfulness look like when

clarity risks division?”

Here again, a counterexample is found in the CDC. As a pastoral consultant for CAP, I invited Farnsley to meet with congregants at Keller Park Church in South Bend, Ind. to hear their story of the congregation’s decision to house an undocumented mother and her infant in the church’s community house—a story I shared in an *Anabaptist World* article.

Last October, Farnsley met with ten congregants in the community house following



The community house where Keller Park Church provided housing to an undocumented family is across the street from the church. Photo: David Cramer.

a Sunday morning service. Drawing on a transcript of that meeting, I wrote a summary report, “Unity Through Solidarity.” In the write-up, I describe how the example of the congregation’s response to a woman in need “offers a different approach to unity that centers on solidarity with those who are most marginalized within society.”

“Neither aggressively neutral nor purposely purple,” I observe, “the congregation has been able to forge unity amid difference not by ignoring or downplaying hot-button political issues but by addressing them on a human level, asking how those most vulnerable are impacted by federal, state, and local policies and how the church is called to respond.”

“The emphasis on prioritizing the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized,” I

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continue, “is based not on a particular shared political ideology, in other words, but on deeply rooted theological and biblical convictions about the dignity of each human being and what is sometimes called God’s ‘preferential option’ for the vulnerable.”

As one congregant shared in the meeting, “caring for the marginalized and oppressed isn’t just about handing out a food box. It’s the theological conviction behind all the other things we do.” Another congregant noted that “the fact that the board could say ‘yes’ confidently, knowing the congregation would back them up, goes back to the environment we’ve built.” Yet another reflected, “Today, there’s no question. If ICE agents came to our building, we know exactly who we would be standing in front of to protect.”

In his reflection on our meeting and my report, Farnsley describes how the witness of Keller Park Church defies the patterns CAP finds across the state. “In my typology, Keller Park Church (KPC) would be ‘Warriors’,” he writes. “They engage culture head-on, speaking and acting with a unified theological and ethical voice. (I’m sure there are disagreements, but on big issues, they have found their shared groove.) David argues persuasively that they are in fact seeking unity—not within culture, but with the poor and vulnerable. They are not purposely seeking division with the dominant culture, but if their unity with the poor leads to such division, that is a cost they are willing to bear. Or, to be honest, it is a cost they embrace.”

Typically writing with the objective neutrality of a religious studies scholar, Farnsley allows himself a moment of editorializing: “Their actions here—helping a poor, vulnerable mother and her infant in an emergency—strike me as Christian to their core. What Would Jesus Do? It’s not really for me to say, but surely this is what Jesus would have done.”

To learn more about CAP and the cen-

ter’s other projects, visit raac.indianapolis.iu.edu/. To share a story about how your church is addressing a polarizing issue, email raac@iu.edu.

David Cramer is communications assistant program director for the Institute for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame. An ordained CDC minister, he previously served as pastor at Keller Park Church and managing editor at the Institute of Mennonite Studies, AMBS.

Safe Church Corner

Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship

(N. C.), though small and without its own worship building, committed to developing a context-appropriate Safe Church policy. After drafting an initial version, they consulted parents and caregivers for feedback and additions. The policy balances protection and compassion by outlining care for adult survivors of child abuse and a reintegration process for offenders that both safeguards vulnerable people and affirms the offender’s inherent worth. Congratulations to this church’s staff and board for doing the preventative work of good policy writing!

For more information, help or support with your church’s safe church policies, contact the Central District Conference’s Safe Church Coordinator, Kristin Sancken at kristin@mcusacdc.org

Studying Wild Church

by James Rissler

On May 2, Janeen Bertsche Johnson and I graduated from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind. as the first two graduates of its new Doctor of Ministry in Leadership program. Doug Luginbill (First Mennonite Church of Bluffton, Ohio) and Charles Buller (Silverwood Mennonite Church of Goshen, Ind.) will graduate next May.

My professional dissertation, “How

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Faith-Adjacent People Experience Spirituality in Wild Church,” focused on the spirituality of people attending Atlanta Mennonite Church’s Wild Church experiment who identify as spiritual but not religious. Through interviewing six faith-adjacent individuals and conducting a focus group with five Wild Church leaders from AMC, I found that they experience spirituality in nature, emphasize feelings of spirituality over intellectual reflection about it, value slowing down and being attentive, seek without needing to know or fully understand their spirituality, and value communities of care.



Participants meet for Wild Church on the grounds of Atlanta Mennonite Church (Ga.). Photo: James Rissler.

Over the past year, AMC has held monthly Wild Church services on our property in place of our regular worship. We share our property with a forest preschool and the urban farming program of another private school, and we have enjoyed the participation of several families and faculty from these organizations. We hold space in these services for diverse spiritualities, and usually have more people attend Wild Church services than regular ones.

We all enjoy the ability to intentionally slow down and be more attentive to nature. Sometimes, some of us have a sense of encountering the divine as we do so. We try to be open to learning from one another’s senses of spirituality. Children participate easily. What they notice and share is

just as relevant as what adults do. Some of us adults also feel free of the need to interpret our feelings through theological lenses as we might in regular worship. In the words of one of the AMC leaders that I interviewed, it feels freeing to be able to “just show up.” Several people take turns collaborating to plan each Wild Church service, including some who identify as faith-adjacent.

I was motivated to engage faith-adjacent people from a sense that the role of the Church in our society is changing. Statistics from groups like Pew, PRRI, and Gallup readily show that identification with religious faith and participation in communities of faith has sharply diminished over the past decades. Today, almost three in ten Americans identify as “nones,” and more than a fifth of Americans say that they are spiritual but not religious. In my interviews with faith-adjacent people, there were a variety of experiences with the Church, and different levels of wariness of it. One person talked about the need for “trust signals” (signs, website, word of mouth) that communicate that engaging will be safe. Our prior relational connections were essential to people being willing to give Wild Church a try. It feels increasingly important to me that we not try to bring these people into regular church or Christian faith, but instead find ways to build a new kind of community of care with them beyond the walls of our building and the rhythms of our worship.

I wonder whether we will be able to develop a sense of caring community that extends beyond our once a month Wild Church services. We invite Wild Church folks to join AMC events that are less churchy - a play about immigration detention, for instance. We invite AMC folks to join other events on our property that partners welcome us to such as monthly land tending workdays. Do we all have the time and energy to give to this cross-pollination so that we learn to know one another more

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closely and develop a sense of being community together? Time will tell.

Through my interviews, I learned some things about how a few faith-adjacent people attending Wild Church at Atlanta Mennonite think about their spirituality. Perhaps more importantly, I got even more excited about the possibilities for engaging faith-adjacent people in exploring our spirituality together and developing a sense of caring community among us. I look forward to our congregation continuing to learn with and from faith-adjacent people as we share in Wild Church, and as we look for ways to be community together beyond our practices of Christian worship.

If we're successful, perhaps this will show one way the Church might evolve, continuing to share God's love, but with greater space for people to participate without embracing our faith.

If you are interested in reading my dissertation, or watching the public presentation of it, please reach out to me at jamesrissler@gmail.com.



Participants at the weekly immigrant justice vigil in Sarasota, Florida.

Sarasota Immigrant Justice Vigil Passes One Year

by Andrew Hudson

A group of congregations in Sarasota, Florida, including CDC member Covenant Mennonite Fellowship (CMF), recently

held our 53rd weekly vigil in support of Florida immigrants.

The vigil began when a local group of clergy heard that members of the Miccosukee tribe in the Everglades were asking for prayerful accompaniment. Miccosukee leader Betty Osceola called on Christian clergy to care for both the land and the people incarcerated at the Big Cypress Detention Facility (sometimes cheekily referred to as Alligator Alcatraz). A handful of local Sarasota clergy traveled south, joining religious leaders from across the state.

We gathered around two primary concerns. First, the detention facility held people in poor conditions, marked by inadequate water and sanitation. Individuals were locked together in densely packed spaces, with little protection from the extreme South Florida weather, which have rightfully made headlines.

The demonstrations also called attention to a reality that slipped past most media reports. The facility sits on land where the state had previously built a small airplane tarmac—a project the Miccosukee had long resisted because it encroached on sacred ground. In June we briefly celebrated the closure of the Big Cypress facility, but that celebration quickly turned to lament. None of our brothers and sisters held there were released, but were simply transferred to other detention centers. We remain deeply concerned by these transfers, which occurred with poor communication to families, often moving individuals to facilities far more difficult for loved ones to visit.

The initial gathering in South Florida sparked similar demonstrations statewide. At one point, ten weekly vigils were being held up and down the peninsula. Locally, the cause found support from the faith-based organizing group SURE (Sarasotans United for Responsibility and Equity). CMF member Rev. Dr. Mary Alice Mulligan, SURE's board co-chair, helped our local

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vigil find solid footing. Guided by her and a small group of leaders, our focus naturally expanded to include local immigrant issues. Now, locals, including folks from CMF, regularly bring music and poetry to the gatherings, alongside vital political and legal analysis regarding the realities facing both detainees and our immigrant neighbors.

Different immigrant groups have raised our awareness and offered concrete ways to get involved. Each week we hear from an immigrant support organization about how local families have been affected by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and how small donations have made a tangible difference for them. We have also helped coordinate two overlapping food-delivery operations collectively known as Food for our Neighbors, taking cues from immigrant communities about where deliveries are most needed.

All the while, we continue to gather. Our numbers usually range between 25 and 50 people. Once, when a storm threatened, attendance dropped to 13 (though the rain ultimately held off), and at times it has swelled past 100. The ad-hoc leadership on any given week is granted wide latitude in shaping the vigil. Sometimes it takes the form of a Christian liturgy. Other times it carries a different religious flavor, such as Buddhist, and the Unitarian Universalists frequently bring their own distinct presence. There is profound grace in watching people weave their spiritual convictions together from so many different traditions.

Retired Methodist pastor Stephen Hoffman led our one-year anniversary gathering, encouraging us to press on with a quiet sense of both joy and purpose. "This vigil has brought a lot of people together in different ways over the past year," he noted, "and it can keep being a place for doing the right thing."

As we enter our second year, we are looking for ways to better support immigrants, to sustain each other, and to speak truth to power in more direct ways. The prayer, the singing, and the quiet fellowship are building a community among us - one that continues to foster both resilience and hope.

Installation



David Elkins was installed as pastor of PEACE Mennonite Fellowship in Archbold, Ohio on Sunday, August 23.
Photo: Paula Luginbill

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