November 2026

Connector

Stories and News from
Around the Conference

Central District Conference

A conference of
Mennonite Church USA

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



The three painted panels of the triptych at Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship in Berne, Indiana, created by Susie Huser to depict the beauty of creation.

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Emmaus Road Dedicates Triptych

by Sarah Werner

On Sunday, October 18, I had the privilege of being present for the unveiling of a triptych at Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship in Berne, Indiana. The three-paneled painting was created by artist Susie Huser to hang on the wall behind the communion table, providing a beautiful frame to the center of the worship space. The paintings are filled with the vibrancy of plant, insect and animal life, with over 50 named species present between the three canvases.

The paintings depict all four seasons between them and the diverse array of life that is present in each season. In the far left, a barren tree stands in the distance against a dark hill. Next to it the sun is rising, and below a beautiful Japanese magnolia is bursting into bloom, with birds and other plants around it.

A massive tree trunk takes up much of the center painting, with a variety of birds perched in its branches and flowers growing at its base. In the very center of the painting, framed by the trunk, is a large green luna moth and a cicada just below it. In the right panel the most striking figure is a large white barn owl in mid-flight beneath a bright full moon. The plants in this canvas are full of a fall bounty of fruit and seeds. Ribbon snakes slither in the roots below.

Susie led the Sojourners Hour before the service where she shared about some of the ideas that inspired the paintings. She spoke about the exquisite miracle of the animate creatures of the earth, sharing both her own reflections and excerpts from several authors. Her words washed over us as we gazed at the intricate painting and it felt as if the plants and animals were springing to life from the canvas. She also invited others to share a memorable poem related to creation, and several of the participants read poems that were meaningful in reflecting the sacred beauty of the natural world.

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Left: A meadowlark sings amidst flowers. Right: A close-up of the tree trunk with a luna moth and cicada. Below: Susie Huser shares about her work during Sojourners Hour.

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Susie shared, “This piece evolved through conversations that took place over a couple years, but carries in it conversations and experiences and relationships from the past 46 years, maybe more. My hope is that the panels celebrate and center connection, diversity, seasons, cycles, all types of song, and the magic and mystery of this woven life.” During the worship hour, the paintings were dedicated and were given a special blessing.

The members of Emmaus Road were ecstatic to see the paintings, which were several years in the making. Many of them shared what a joy it was to have a beloved member of the congregation share her creative gift in this way. Susie talked about her hope for the painting: “May this creation be a love letter that nurtures community through celebrating seasons of change, diversity, interconnection, and regenerative relationship.”



The invocation for the worship service that morning were written by Michelle Jantzi, a contributor to *Words for Worship 2*, and it reflected the theme of creativity and creation:

We praise you, Artist of Awe,
with every stroke of ink and splash of paint,
with chiseling of wood and molding of clay,
with kneading of dough and spooling of thread,
with the dance of spirit and body,
with the song of heart and voice.



Susie Huser, Michael Spath, and Anita Redger offer a prayer of blessing for the paintings during the worship service.

Susie Huser has an MFA in Writing and Poetics from Naropa University, an MS in Environmental Studies from Green Mountain College, and is working on an MS in Biodiversity Conservation and Management through University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. While completing her degree from Green Mountain College, she lived for nine months at Camp Friedenswald, during which time she created *A Year on Turtle Hill*, an illustrated, creative field guide for Camp and southwestern Michigan. Her in-depth knowledge of the natural world shines through in the paintings, which will be a blessing to the congregation for years to come.



Above: Current and former members of St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship sing joyfully during their final worship service in October. Below left: Helen Wells O'Brien, one of the first pastors, shares a message. Below right: The quilted banner of SPMF.

St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship's Final Celebration

by David Edminster

St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship joined with friends, family, and past members to celebrate its 42 years of dedicated service, and respectfully and joyfully ended the fellowship's mission in mid-October. It's not easy to decide to retire a church, but it's a natural part of a church's life cycle, and we had years to think about it, to assemble our archive, and plan our closing activities. Going forward we'll still assemble for monthly potlucks and mutual support.



The Fellowship was founded in the mid-1980s as a multicultural, bilingual church to serve the West Side neighborhood of St. Paul, which has historically been a landing place for waves of immigrants. In the ensuing years, as the Fellowship chose to affirm the full participation of its LGBTQ members, it became a magnet for gay and lesbian Mennonites and a lightning rod for denominational disapproval. Our mission funding was withdrawn, our vibrant MVS unit was shut down, and we lived under sanctions for fifteen years. Maintaining our membership in our conference was a grueling, humiliating process, during which our group shrank, but became fiercely committed and united. We crafted our Common Ground in the mid 1990's, a statement of our unifying principles which served us well for the next three decades.

Our acceptance into Central District Conference was a heartening turning point for the Fellowship. We acknowledge that it was a challenge for the conference to accept a church under sanctions, and we are deeply grateful that CDC thoughtfully accepted our transfer. We have thrived as a small lay-led church for about 25 years, and in our own way have set an example of how a church can function even when financial constraints dictate that there will be no paid staff. We have relied on each member's willingness to volunteer repeatedly and often, sometimes performing strange tasks like preparing and delivering a sermon! Our life together was also simplified by the fact that we don't own a building, and we were welcomed as renters in a neighborhood church.



With favorite hymns, musical performances, shared remembrances, and cake, we laid down the Fellowship in October. But we didn't vanish from the earth! Our archive has been accepted into the Tretter Library at the University of Minnesota, and a digital version will be made available. We also invite you all to watch for our upcoming book, which will undoubtedly be a blockbuster!

Safe Church Corner
Columbus Mennonite Church

Columbus Mennonite Church in Ohio hosts a yearly “Keeping CMC Safe Sunday” each April for Child Abuse Prevention Month. They invite outside organizations and speakers to train congregants in safe practices for working with children and vulnerable adults. The service emphasizes the wellbeing of the congregation’s children and how everyone can contribute to their safety and development. In addition, volunteer expectations and training requirements are clearly outlined on the church’s website. 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

Conference Administrator Position

Central District Conference is seeking an 80% to full time conference administrator beginning January 1, 2027. The administrator collaborates with other staff and volunteers to assist pastors and congregations in their ministries. This is a role for someone who loves bringing order and care to complex work, uses technology skillfully, and sees their work as a calling; serving a church community that is growing and changing. Read a cover letter from the conference minister and see a full job description here. To apply, send a cover letter and résumé to conference minister, Doug Luginbill at doug@mcusacdc.org by December 14. Résumés will be reviewed beginning November 15.

Mennonite Arts Weekend

When: February 5-7, 2027
Where: Cincinnati, Ohio.

This weekend celebrates the creativity and discipline of Anabaptist and Mennonite artists. Presentations by musicians, visual artists, writers, and craftspeople start on Friday evening and conclude with Sunday morning worship. Activities and workshops designed specifically for children (pre-K - high school) are planned.
Early-bird registration ends Nov. 30, 2026.
Find the list of presenters and registration/ location information at:
https://mennoniteartsweekend.org



Journey Program Participants

Current CDC Journey participants and their mentors met together at the recent Fall Weekend Learning Event at Amigo Centre in Sturgis, Michigan. They are pictured above from left to right: Doug Luginbill, Ardean Friesen, Jeremy Shue, Kay Bontrager-Singer, Peter Eash-Scott, Valerie Showalter, and Amy Stauffer-McNutt.

Ardean is a member of Silverwood and so is his mentor, Jeremy. Peter is a member of Milwaukee Mennonite and Valerie is his mentor, pastor at Madison Mennonite. Amy is a member of First Mennonite, Sugarcreek. Her mentor is Kay from Faith Mennonite.

Doug's Mug: A Little AI
by Doug Luginbill



We might as well take a sip of AI since it is all around us. It's hard to miss the political debates, the economic impacts, the amazing capabilities, and the dire warnings surrounding discussions of Artificial Intelligence. On the one hand, I recognize AI as simply a tool of human invention. Like all tools, AI can simplify tasks, save time, and increase efficiency. And, like all tools, AI can be used in nefarious, harmful, and egregious ways. It appears that AI is here to stay and like all new technologies, people of faith will discern when and how to utilize it. Here are a few ways that Central District staff recently used AI.

- We have lots of meetings. Some are using it to take notes and summarize discussions.
- Otter AI is being used to produce closed captioning in real time when in Zoom meetings. This assists those who benefit from both seeing and hearing words.
- It has helped create websites for our Emerging Communities of Faith.
- It facilitated updating the job description for the Administrator Position.

Artificial Intelligence has been the topic of two of our monthly pastor peer gatherings. Some interesting questions came up.

- Can worship leaders use AI to create prayers, calls to worship, and benedictions? And if it is used, to whom do we give credit? Should we give credit to AI?
- Is sermon preparation research using AI significantly different than a typical Google search?
- If I feed all my sermons into AI and ask it to create a sermon on a specific topic using my previous sermons, is that ethical?
- In a loneliness culture, how do we feel about parishioners who develop chatbot relationships? What if that chatbot was programmed to represent an Anabaptist perspective/persona?

I confess, some of these questions make my head hurt!
But what if AI could be a tool for reminding us who we are? What if every time we heard "AI," it reminded us of our **A**nabaptist **I**nfluence! And what if our Anabaptist Influence was the "tool" we turned to whenever we had a question, a curiosity, a desire to know something, or were seeking relationship? Here are four core aspects of Anabaptism that provide wisdom and discernment both historically and today.

1. Anabaptist followers of Christ are informed and formed by the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures. Any intelligences, artificial or otherwise, should be tested by a faithful reading of scripture.
2. Anabaptist followers of Christ yield themselves to the creativity and transformative power of the Holy Spirit. AI is incredibly "knowledgeable," yet it cannot claim to be "spirit inspired."
3. Anabaptist followers of Christ commit to the wise way of Jesus, wherever this may lead. The wise way of Jesus often challenges the accumulated knowledge of culture, politics, and religion.
4. In community, Anabaptist followers of Christ steward the church to become sacrament for the world. The church must never forget that we are given a grace/gift from God and that we are to extend that grace/gift to the world around us.

Let us continue to drink deeply from our AI, allowing God's Spirit to be our intelligence, our hope, and our peace.



Members of the CDC leadership council worship together during their meeting in October at Camp Friedenswald.

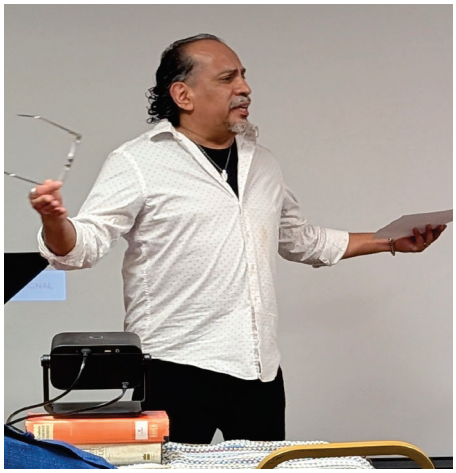
CDC Leaders Work on Intercultural Development

by Sarah Werner

This year the CDC leadership council has been engaging in trainings to help our conference leadership to become more interculturally competent and aware of how power is wielded. The leadership council is composed of CDC staff, the ministerial committee, the missional church committee, and the CDC board. We meet twice a year at Camp Friedenswald, and the past two gatherings have each had a special focus. In April we invited two guest facilitators to speak to us about power and boundaries. At our most recent gathering in October, Nekeisha Alayna Alexis, the intercultural competence and undoing racism coordinator at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, joined us to talk about the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which assesses intercultural competence. Each of us were asked to complete the IDI prior to our gathering, and Nekeisha spoke to us about where we are as a group when it comes to intercultural competence, which is how well we are able to understand and relate to people from cultures different than our own.

Our hope in engaging in this work is to ensure that we as a conference can welcome diverse members and be aware of our own ideological blind spots. Our conference continues to grow every year, and we want to be a place where new ideas and healthy ways of being together are also welcome.

Licensing



Francisco Gonzalez is serving Flourish Community, a provisional member of CDC in Hendersonville, N.C. He was licensed toward ordination and installed on October 8. Photo: Matt Pritchard.

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