



June  
2015

# Scattered Seeds

Children of the Kingdom Sowing the Word  
—Matthew 13

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David Boshart speaks at the Covenant Conference in Des Moines, Iowa, April, 2015

## Covenant offers a way forward

### Seeking unity through both shared beliefs and spiritual practices

by Shana Peachey Boshart  
Conference Minister for Christian Formation

It has been said that we are living in a season of “discontinuous change.” *Continuous* change develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be anticipated and managed. *Discontinuous* change is disruptive, unexpected, and creates situations that challenge our usual way of thinking.

In the church, we need not be afraid of this kind of change. We should not be surprised that as our society becomes more complex and our church becomes more diverse, the need to clarify our commitments to one another increases. We do well to recognize it and ask ourselves, “In this season of discontinuous change, what do we need to do to maintain our identity, tend to our relationships, and *practice* the things that bring us face-to-face with Jesus *together?*”

On April 11, leaders from our conference

congregations gathered in Des Moines to explore the possibility of a new covenant intended to help us navigate the challenges to unity that the church in many places and traditions is facing. This covenant, *Being God’s Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices for Central Plains Mennonite Conference*, attempts to help us maintain our unity around something more than uniformity of beliefs. Common beliefs are important and our Confession of Faith remains our guiding document. Member congregations of Central Plains “subscribe” to our Confession of Faith, and while our bylaws predict that there will be times when not all congregations will “agree on every significant matter of faith,” we have not described how we will tend to our relationships when we disagree.

*Being God’s Faithful Community* is an attempt

*continued on page 2*

*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.*

— *Philippians 1:9-10a*





to address this gap. The covenant opens with a statement of commitment to God and one another: ***In response to God's unqualified love for us, we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.***

At the Des Moines meeting, participants were introduced to six spiritual practices that conference staff have identified by listening to our congregations, our history, and our partners in South America. These practices are:

1. We will worship God as the central act of our common life whenever the church is gathered.
2. We will practice prayer, fasting and generous giving to separate ourselves from the influence of the principalities and powers of this age and to make us available to fully participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
3. We will prayerfully study the Bible together weekly in our congregations and whenever the conference gathers, guided by qualified teachers for the purpose of increasing our competence in reading, interpreting, and applying the scriptures from an Anabaptist perspective to our everyday lives and to the critical issues of faith we face in the world.
4. We will accept and offer hospitality, believing it creates the context for God's kingdom to appear in our midst, particularly as we minister to the poor, the hungry, the prisoner and the stranger.
5. We will study the Bible with neighbors and strangers, inviting them to become disciples of Jesus.
6. We will practice peacemaking by extending loving-kindness and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters as well as to our neighbors and enemies.

Even if we commit ourselves to this set of common prac-

tices, we will still find ourselves disagreeing about significant matters of faith from time to time. The covenant also outlines a five-step process of biblical discernment that takes our relationships with one another seriously.

Many congregational leaders expressed enthusiasm for the potential renewal and transformation these spiritual practices could bring to their congregations. Participants said they look forward to "the whole congregation involved in Bible study," "seeing people guided by these practices instead of other influences," and "more people serious about following Christ." Still, some expressed caution when considering the "unknowns" of how this model will work itself out. This is a common apprehension in a time of discontinuous change.

Executive Conference Minister David Boshart said, "This proposed covenant will only help us insofar as we also deepen our trust in the Holy Spirit's power to transform us into the likeness of Jesus. Whether we agree or disagree, this covenant assumes that when we are grounded in the spiritual practices that bring us all face-to-face with Jesus, the Holy Spirit will be at work among us, 'transforming us from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.'" (II Corinthians 3:18)

For now, the covenant is a study document for discussion. Member congregations should take time to study it and respond to it before we consider adopting it as a conference. At Annual

Meeting 2015, Central Plains churches will receive a four-session study guide for this purpose. Each congregation is encouraged to study the covenant and provide feedback on it to conference staff in the coming year.

Find the covenant document and four short teaching videos at [www.centralplainsmc.org/covenant-resources](http://www.centralplainsmc.org/covenant-resources).

**"...we covenant to common practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the purposes of God who longs to transform us into the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit."**

# Building a strong center for our common life

by David Boshart

Executive Conference Minister



How do God's people live in covenant with God and each other? This question seems to be at the heart of the church's challenges in all denominations in the western world today. During these first one and a half decades of Mennonite Church USA's formation we have spent a lot of time trying to chart a course for church unity. As I engage in these conversations, it has become clear to me that we have tried to chart this course by focusing on the edges rather than the center. As Yeats says in his poem, *The Second Coming*, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

At the Covenant Conference in Des Moines on April 11, it was so encouraging to have a conference-wide conversation that took us back to the things that stand at the center of our faith: *baptism, repentance, confession, reconciliation, spiritual transformation*. We build a strong center for our common life when our conversations start with this agenda. Things fall apart when we describe reality and label each other in ways that create polar divisions.

The covenant model that we are testing in our conference is an attempt to fill a vacuum that has been allowed to grow in the center of our common life. It is past time for us to yield ourselves to God's will--pouring our best work, our best energies, *our very selves* into the space where spiritual transformation happens.

In the proposed covenant model, we continue to be guided by our conference bylaws, our *Confession of Faith in a*

*Mennonite Perspective* and *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership*. But we do so by committing ourselves to a "rule of life," a common set of spiritual practices that bring us into the presence of Jesus and transform us into his likeness. As we fully engage in these spiritual practices and bear witness to God's reconciling work in the world, we know that *exceptional instances* will arise that will raise questions about the way we have always done things. The world is ever changing and we are constantly challenged to clarify how we live in God's reign in every situation. The covenant model defines the process whereby we can employ spiritual practices to discern God's will together with qualified teachers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

At the Covenant Conference, we received significant support for moving forward in developing and testing this model of covenant. Yet, many encouraged us to move forward with some measure of caution. Most of these cautions have to do with uncertainties about what the covenant really looks like when it is fully implemented and questions about whether all congregations will give themselves to this understanding. In short, the cautions have to do with our trust in one another and our willingness to present ourselves fully to the Holy Spirit's transforming power.

When we enter covenants, we are making a commitment to a way of being, a way of life, *in faith*. In covenants we make a commitment to a shared life *prior* to knowing all that will come thereafter. Covenant making is the ultimate faith-based initiative! Trust is at the center of all such initiatives.

So where do we go from here? Based on the feedback we received, we believe it is right to take the next steps in exploring this model of covenant. But to quote the title of Stephen Covey's book, we will move in this direction only at the *speed of trust*. At our annual meeting this summer, we will be explaining the covenant to our delegates. We will also be inviting them to consider how our congregations can best be equipped to increase our competence and capacity for the six spiritual practices proposed in our covenant. I am looking forward to working with our delegates to imagine specific ways we can give ourselves completely to that space where we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can discern the good, pleasing and perfect will of God -- *together*.



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# Sioux Falls MVS celebrates 18 successful years

## Anniversary celebration to be held August 14-16, 2015

*by Cheryl Lehmann, Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church and a former MVS volunteer at Hopi Mission School*

In celebration of the 18 years of hosting a Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) unit in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church (SMMC) is inviting all former volunteers to a reunion on August 14-16, 2015. Some events will be held at Swan Lake Christian Camp, and Sunday worship will be held in Sioux Falls at Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church.

The Sioux Falls MVS Unit has been in operation for 18 years and has had a total of 40 volunteers. Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church received final word in November 2014 that the Sioux Falls MVS Unit will be permanently closed along with some other MVS Units across the US. This came about after a discernment process and due to a number of reasons including fewer volunteers going into the program, lack of being a big-name drawing city, a revamping of the national program to include larger units and the setting of new goals for MVS.

Having a voluntary service unit in Sioux Falls had been a dream of SMMC for many years after its beginning in 1977. It wasn't until 1995 that God's Spirit sent a messenger that got the wheels turning. It was after a Sunday morning service that Nancy Wilson, who had attended the morning worship, said she was told to see the Mennonites when she talked about offering her house as a place for volunteers. She believed that service was one of the most enjoyable things people can do. She had offered her house as a hospitality house to people who had sick relatives in the hospital. She now wanted to make this a more organized program. She offered her house as a free residence to those serving in the unit.

This offer was the inspiration needed for SMMC to get a committee together and write up a proposal for a unit in Sioux Falls. Having housing taken care of was one of the biggest obstacles for SMMC in getting a unit started. The General Conference Mennonite Church MVS Program approved the unit, and in the fall of 1996 its first volunteers, Phil and Marla Schmidt, began their assignments. Marla worked for Lutheran Social Services (LSS) in the Refugee and Immigration program. Most of the Sioux Falls MVSer's worked in this program, filling a wide variety of positions over the years. Phil Schmidt worked with Volunteers of America and later with Southeast Behavior Health. Other programs for which volunteers have worked include Ten Thousand Villages, Habitat for Humanity, LSS After School Program, RESTORE (Victim-



Left to right: Kate Widmer, former volunteer; Cheryl Lehmann, former MVS committee member; Deb Worth, former volunteer; Vicki Biggerstaff, former volunteer. Not pictured: Ryan Troyer, former volunteer and present committee member.

Offender Reconciliation Program), and with SMMC's former weekly neighborhood meal.

The unit was only able to stay in Nancy Wilson's house for a year as it was in the historic district and a city council member was concerned about having too many single people and not having a family living in the house. SMMC chose not to fight city hall. However, SMMC now had a committee established, knew how to run the MVS program, and was able to find other housing for the unit. The unit has been housed at five different locations in its 18 years of existence. And just as the unit was closing, the apartment housing MVSer's was demolished by Sanford Health for its building expansion program.

Of the 40 volunteers that came to Sioux Falls, from as close as here in South Dakota, from across the United States, from Canada and as far away as Germany, eight stayed longer than their term and got jobs. Presently, four are still involved with SMMC in some way. Kate Widmer, our last volunteer, is from our own Central Plains Mennonite Conference and is one of the four that is choosing to live here and be involved in the church. SMMC has appreciated every volunteer that has been involved in the MVS program and for the many ways they all took part in the worship, fellowship, and mission of the church. They were a help and an encouragement that will be missed very much.

I would like to encourage people of all ages to consider doing a year or two of voluntary service in a location other than their present community. It is character building, gives new insights into how another part of the country lives, will give the participant as much or more than that which is given, and will help develop the growth of the participant's spiritual journey. It's a way in which we can carry out Christ's teaching to love one another and be a servant for others.



## Sister Care Seminar

# Body, Soul and Sanity

by Tamara Gill, pastor,  
Wayland Mennonite Church, Wayland, Iowa

Two years ago, Lauralee Kauffman, Diane Funk, Marcia Miller and I took an amazing leap of faith when we began planning for Iowa's Sister Care Seminar. God answered every prayer as over 60 women from at least 12 different congregations gathered together at Kalona Mennonite on April 17 and 18.

Carolyn Heggen and Rhoda Keener equipped and empowered us with skills to care for others and ourselves. Friday's session focused on recording our own stories and recognizing God's beautiful design in each of our lives. During Saturday's workshops we discussed important tips for self-care, compassionate listening and grief transformation. We witnessed beautiful Biblical monologues from Beth Swantz and Lynette Gingerich. We also embraced the powerful personal stories of Dorothy Miller and Liz Miller. While all that happened up front was incredibly meaningful, perhaps the biggest impact actually came from what happened around the small group tables.

On Friday evening, the women entered Kalona Menno-

nite fellowship hall and carefully, sometimes timidly, chose a table. Many people sat with at least one other person whom they did not know. As we answered questions, read Scripture, discussed topics and told our stories, the walls of the unknown that can divide us came down. In less than 24 hours, the women around our tables became our friends instead of strangers. We realized the strength, courage, perseverance, love and grace that every woman holds in her journey. As the seminar approached the end, an inspirational invitation was given – find another woman to come with you to the table at the front of the room, dip your hands in the cold water and place your hands on your face as you remember your past tears. Then, cup your hands in the warm water and anoint your friend as you pray for her future joys, and hug your friend. In this final blessing, we acknowledged the sacred space that we had shared together for a couple of days – a space where we were authentically real with ourselves, others and God about our hurts and healing.



Left to right: Carolyn Heggen leads in prayer; Marcia Miller, Lauralee Kauffman and Diane Funk; Rosemary Pacha and Nici Bontrager.

## East Union “Seeks God’s Will Together”

East Union spent six Sundays in January and February focusing on the discernment study, *Seeking God’s Will Together*, written by Central Plains Mennonite Conference. The Sunday morning worship was based on I Corinthians 3:11, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” Using the theme “Many Stones, One Foundation” one congregational member shared during each Sunday morning service how Jesus has been the foundation of their faith. After the sharing, they laid a rock onto the foundation stone, building the “Ebenezer.”

The second hour of the morning was spent studying the lessons from *Seeking God’s Will Together*. Each session was led by the pastor or lay members who utilized the teaching videos and written material, giving the congregation time to share and discuss in small groups around tables. The use of stones was used symbolically at the round tables and at the culmination of the entire series. The last Sunday morning each person had a stone they added to the Ebenezer in the front of the sanctuary. —Janet Geyer, East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa

## Leader Credentialed

**Rachelle Luitjens** was installed as pastor of mission & faith formation and licensed toward ordination on Sunday, May 3, 2015 at Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, Wayland, Iowa.

## Leader Transitions

**Robert and Luann Yutzy** began as transitional pastors at Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, Freeman, South Dakota, on April 12, 2015.

**Ernest Wiens Neufeld**, 82, former conference minister of Northern District Conference, died on April 13, 2015 in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. He is survived by his wife, Lila, four children and ten grandchildren. Funeral services were held Monday, April 20, at First Mennonite Church of Mountain Lake.

Ernie served Mennonite congregations in Summerfield, Ill.; Philadelphia, Pa.; Allentown, Pa.; Phoenix, Ariz.; Freeman, S.D.; Fargo, N.D. and Meridian, Miss. He served the Northern District for eight years as conference minister.

Ernie was an early visionary for the integration of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. In the mid-1980s, Ernie and Emery Hochstetler, then conference minister for Iowa-Nebraska Conference, met together to dream about the possible merger of their two conferences. Central Plains is the result of that merger and a testament to the vision of leaders like Ernie and Emery.



Youth sponsors, Sunday School teachers and other formation leaders, this new web site is just for you! Find helpful resources here for faith formation in an Anabaptist perspective.

[www.anabaptistfaithformation.org](http://www.anabaptistfaithformation.org)

## Twin Cities Mennonite churches host editorial board of *Leader* magazine

The editorial board of the *Leader* magazine met in Minneapolis April 14-16, 2015. Faith Mennonite Church provided a meeting space, hospitality for the meeting and an evening meal. The Mennonite Worker invited the group to their weekly Tuesday community meal, which was followed by a dessert reception and conversation at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, attended by persons from Emmanuel, Faith, and Woodland Hills churches. Thirdway Mennonite provided break-time pastries from Groundswell Cafe, and families from Emmanuel and Faith provided bed and breakfast for the 11 participants. Members of the editorial board expressed deep appreciation for the hospitality and the opportunity to become acquainted with the history of the Twin Cities Mennonite presence and current ministry opportunities as well as need for resources. —*Joetta Schlabach, pastor, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis*

## Dove's Nest reaches out to Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities



The State of New York has contracted with Dove's Nest to provide cultural competency training to child welfare workers on the faith and customs of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities in western New York. Dove's Nest Board Members Jeanette Harder and Carol Knieriem recently visited many of these communities and received a warm welcome. Jeanette will return to New York in July to provide the trainings. Dove's Nest hopes to continue to cultivate relationships with the Plain communities in order to help them keep their children and youth safe. —*Allison Lauritsen, Dove's Nest interim executive director*

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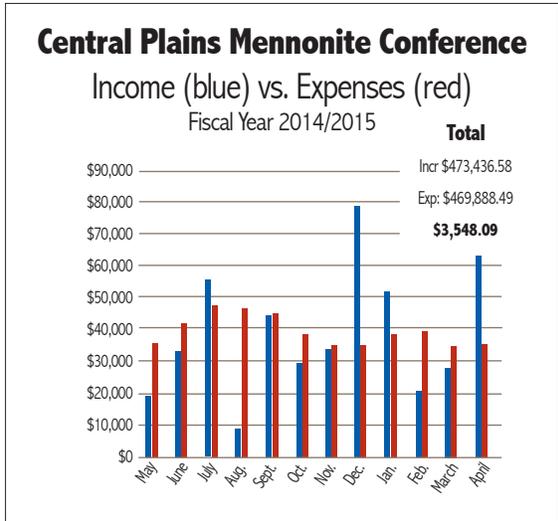
To receive this newsletter in Spanish, call Shana Peachey Boshart at 319-936-5905. Para recibir este boletín en español, llame a Shana Peachey Boshart al 319-936-5905.

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We come in celebration! Thanks be to God! Central Plains conference ended the fiscal year in the black for the fourth straight year. Thanks to all of you, congregations and individuals, who contributed to end the year with a positive balance. Special thanks to two very gracious anonymous donors for providing a matching fundraiser which created momentum for other individuals and congregations to financially support the work of the conference. —*Stewardship Task Group*



## UPCOMING EVENTS

- Central Plains Annual Meeting** will take place June 18-21, 2015, in the Twin Cities.
- Mennonite Church USA Convention and Delegate Assembly** will take place June 30 to July 5, 2015, in Kansas City.
- Mennonite World Conference Assembly Gathered** will take place July 21-26, 2015 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- Youth Escape 2016** will take place July 15-17, 2016 in central Iowa.

Growing in  
 holistic witness  
 to God's  
 reconciling mission  
 in the world through  
 fellowship,  
 discipleship  
 and leadership

