



Scattered Seeds

January
2016

A particular people practicing a common way of life

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

—1 Peter 2:9

by David Boshart
Executive Conference Minister



The church in every place and all traditions is facing a challenging season. For all of our faith statements, resolutions, position papers, bylaws and guidelines, we are having a hard time knowing how to respond in faithfulness when we have deep disagreements.

We live in a world that is becoming more complex. The church is growing in complexity and diversity as well. The church is experiencing greater diversity in levels of age, ethnicity, education, and wealth. This growing diversity is not bad, but tending our relationships is growing more complex. As our world becomes more complex and our internal makeup becomes more diverse, we can make fewer assumptions about what it means to be the church. The single greatest challenge the church faces in this age is to be clear about who we are and what we are going to do about it.

Who are we? We are God's people. "We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's *own* people." What are we going to do about it? We will "proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9). Walking in this marvelous light makes us a *conspicuous* people.

There are two aspects to being this conspicuous people. First, we are in the light. Everything we do is intended to be seen. Second, everything we do should make clear to ourselves and anyone watching that we are the people of God.

If your image of the church comes from Facebook and other social media, it could lead you to despair. You'll find

"The single greatest challenge the church faces in this age is to be clear about who we are and what we are going to do about it."



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criticism directed toward the church, and people diagnosing the church as though it were fatally ill. The solutions are often spelled out in lists of “five easy steps,” or “seven mistakes we are making.” The idea is that if we would just work a little harder we could rehabilitate the church.

The problem with this version of the problem is that it makes *us* the subject of the church’s vitality. We quickly forget that *God* is the first mover, the source of life, the one who has the power to redeem, the power to bring life out of death. It is *God’s* mighty acts that we proclaim.

The covenant that we have proposed for Central Plains Mennonite Conference is an attempt to help our congregations to be *more* conspicuous before a watching world. That begins with knowing the difference between what is ours to do and what is God’s to do. So, this covenant begins with the clear statement that we understand that we are not manufacturing the church. We are responding to God’s mighty acts:

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.

If there is a future for the church in this complex world, it will be found in a conspicuous people who have become swept away by God’s boundless love. It will be made up of people who respond by walking in the light of that love. It will be made up of people who are practicing a common way of life where Jesus is Lord. Such people make themselves available to be transformed by the Holy Spirit in the power of that same love. These people will do particular things together that bring them face-to-face with Jesus, both when they are together and when they interact with the world.

Our covenant proposes particular things:

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 in 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.

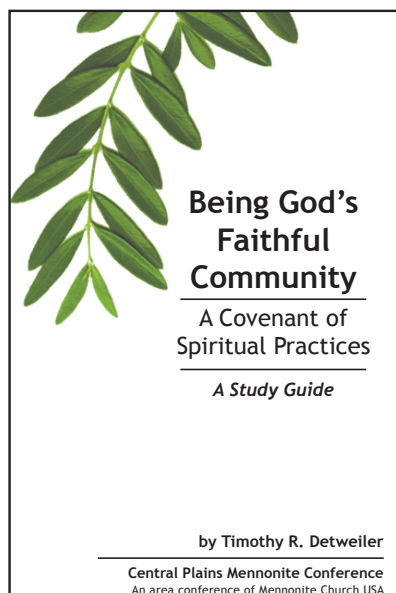
6. We will practice peacemaking by extending loving-kindness and forgiveness to our brothers and sisters as well as to our neighbors and enemies.

In addition, this covenant offers a process for churches to follow in times when we disagree so that our disagreements do not need to divide us. Our churches will walk together in biblical, communal discernment. The purpose of this process is not to police or legislate faithfulness over one another. The purpose of this process is to ensure that we are doing our discernment in ways that build trust in one another and trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth.

Does this sound like the church where you want to root your Christian faith? We are encouraged to see the eagerness with which congregations in our conference are exploring these practices.

When we do things that bring us face-to-face with Jesus—within the church and the world—we will be given new minds, our hearts will turn from stone to flesh, we will find abundant life, and we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another.

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Ideas for your covenant study

Being God's Faithful Community: A Covenant of Spiritual Practices is a four-session study guide written by Conference Minister Tim Detweiler. It is designed to give Central Plains congregations a thorough understanding of the covenant and what we hope it will do for us as a conference. It is available in both English and Spanish; the title of the Spanish version is *Ser una comunidad de Dios*.

Here are the session topics:

1. What does it mean to be a covenant people?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in forming God's people?
3. How do spiritual practices empower us to maintain the unity of the body?
4. How do we trust the Holy Spirit to be at work as we face difficult issues?

The covenant document is included in the study booklet. The booklets are available only from Amazon.com (tiny.cc/CovStudy) and cost \$3.59 each.

Here's how three churches have used the study

At Wellman Mennonite, we did the four sessions of the covenant study on four consecutive Wednesday nights. We decided to purchase one of the books for each household so we wouldn't have to run so many copies each week and keep re-printing the covenant document if people forgot to bring it. Plus, it was nice to have all the information right there at once. They could look at the coming session ahead of time and refer to the documents in the back any time they needed to. —*Nathan Ramer, pastor*

At Beemer Mennonite, we are working through *Being God's Faithful Community* in our Sunday School time. We watched the videos, did the scripture studies in smaller groups and then discussed further in our gathered group, using the questions and comments from the study guide. The format seemed to work well, and we enjoyed learning together. —*Lewis Miller, pastor*

At West Union, the pastors created a sermon series covering one of the six practices each Sunday. An outline of their series with scripture texts for each week can be found on the Covenant Resources web page. During the same time frame, adults did the actual covenant study on four Wednesday evenings. Following up the Sunday sermons with the study on Wednesdays was an effective way of engaging the material. —*Corey Miller, pastor*

Complementary Resources

All these resources are available as free downloads on the Covenant Resources page, www.centralplainsmc.org/covenant-resources.

The covenant is available for download in both English and Spanish, as is the Spanish version of the four-session study.

Teaching videos

David Boshart gives a talk with helpful background topics—one for each of the four study sessions. You can show one at each session or save time by asking people to watch a video before they come to the session.

Powerpoint and teaching notes

On April 11, 2015, leaders from Central Plains congregations gathered in Des Moines to be introduced to the covenant. David Boshart presented this Powerpoint using the accompanying teaching notes. Those who plan to teach the covenant study may find it helpful to review these before they lead the study.

Worship resources

Background explanation of the covenant
A litany using the covenant language
Ideas for a children's story
A list of sermon texts on covenant
An outline of West Union's sermon series on the six practices

Related worship resources

Robert Yutzy's sermon on Covenant vs. Contract, both audio and sermon text

How we are doing the covenant practices

St. Paul Hmong Mennonite Church, St. Paul, Minnesota



Some of the ways that our congregation is currently living out the covenant practices are prayers, fasting, weekly Bible study, inviting others to become disciples of Jesus, and ministering to the poor and the hungry.

Our congregation fasts on the first Saturday of every month from 8am to 6pm. Every three hours we come together and pray for each other, our church and people around the world. In between those time frames, we study the Bible and sing hymns.

Every second, fourth and fifth Friday of the month we have Bible study and once every month the women meet together for fellowship and Bible study.

Every three months our men, women and youth volunteer at Feed My Starving Children as a way to minister to the poor and hungry.

We are currently trying to find out some more ways of how we can live out this practice more than just volunteering our time. We have been visiting families that we hear are in need of help (spiritually and physically) and sharing the Gospel with them. Afterwards, we invite them to join us for services and that is how our church is growing. I think that if our congregation can live out more of the covenant practices and practice them daily, it will definitely help our church grow. —*Seng Vang, chair*

Beemer Mennonite Church, Beemer, Nebraska



Spiritual Practice #1 Worship: Worship is important and we are currently exploring ways to make our time of worship more meaningful. We are testing some changes in order of service, as well as adding a few elements to enhance the worship experience.

Spiritual Practice #3 Bible Study: A sermon series on the “Heilsgeschichte” is underway, connecting the biblical stories and history to the larger story of God’s formation of a faithful covenant community. We are attempting to embrace this as our story, applying it to our lives and the critical issues of faith.

Spiritual Practice #4 Hospitality: Several times a year, Beemer Mennonite participates in Crossroads Connection, an ecumenical ministry in Omaha for inmates and former

inmates. The ministry is on Sunday evenings and includes worship, communion and a fellowship meal. We collaborate with another Central Plains congregation, Northside Christian Family Center in Omaha, to plan and implement the evening service and meal.

Also, this past year has presented opportunities to share in the work of Mennonite Disaster Service through clean-up, rebuilding, and supplying meals after devastating tornadoes in nearby Pilger, Wakefield, and Laurel. Many new friendships have developed with brothers and sisters near and far as our circles continue to expand.

Through our weekly children’s ministry, we have been able to build deeper relationships in the community. Our eyes and hearts have been opened in many ways, and we have had opportunities to minister to several families in times of need and loss. —*Lewis Miller, pastor*

Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley, Nebraska



Salem Mennonite Church near Shickley, Nebraska, has been stimulated to evaluate our participation in shared spiritual practices from being introduced to “Being God’s Faithful Community.”

For example, Spiritual Practice #1 encourages us to worship whenever we gather. Our worship teams have been encouraged to begin their practices with a devotional, with the emphasis that their practice is not just preparation but also is worship.

Spiritual Practice #2, Generous Giving: Our Board of Elders is intentionally planning special offerings on a regular basis to make opportunity to give to needs beyond ourselves.

Spiritual Practice #3, Studying the Bible together: A weekly men’s Bible Study has been started to help us grow deeper together in our understanding and application of scripture.

We look forward to more formally studying “Being God’s Faithful Community” and being led to further faithful spiritual practice. —*Shawn Nolt, pastor*

Nebraska Pastor Cluster

When the Nebraska Pastor Cluster met in May 2015, we considered our cluster meetings in light of the spiritual practices from “Being God’s Faithful Community.” It was encouraging to see that our cluster meetings can help us to reflect on our wider conference relationships and shared practices.

*In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we covenant to communion
purposes of God who longs to transform us into the*

Our monthly gatherings begin with being welcomed to the host church and having coffee or tea provided by the host pastor (Practice #4). Our formal gathering begins with either worship (Practice #1) or Bible study (Practice #3) led by the host. We also have two pastors as part of our cluster who are not from our conference, whom we welcome as neighbors and strangers (Practice #5) in our time together!

We then enjoy lunch together, giving and receiving hospitality (Practice #4) among ourselves and those who have prepared the food for us. Our afternoons consist of conversations of support, prayer (Practice #2), and sometimes difficult conversations in which we extend loving-kindness and forgiveness to each other (Practice #6). Our commitment to being together could reflect generous giving (Practice #2) of our time and resources to travel to be with one another.

We are glad for a conference-inspired study to assist us in “Being God’s Faithful Community” in each of our contexts. —*Shawn Nolt*

Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota



Spiritual Practice #4 Hospitality: This summer we began communicating with a man in federal prison who will be released to St. Paul at Thanksgiving. The referral came to us from Michael Gulker, formerly of Christ Community Church in Des Moines, who now is part of a Mennonite fellowship in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Several of us began corresponding with Paul and we plan to extend hospitality, support and accountability as he re-enters society after 19 years in prison for drug-related charges. —*Joetta Schlabach, pastor*

Wellman Mennonite Church, Wellman, Iowa



The “Summer Lunch Program” we have helped coordinate the last two summers for food insecure youth in our community is one thing that connects us to several of the covenant practices; particularly #2 in terms of generous giving, #4 in offering hospitality and #6 in terms of extending loving-kindness to our neighbors. We are also building relationships with the people we are serving and trying to learn to accept hospitality from them. —*Nathan Ramer, pastor*

West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa



Sometimes when we participate in spiritual practices the lines between one practice and another become blurred. A small group of people met on Saturday mornings this summer at West Union Mennonite Church to read through the Psalms. One morning, at the end of our study, a person shared that a woman was without housing for herself and her four children. Through a series of conversations and contacts, temporary housing was found for her, and within the next month she will have a permanent place to live.

I’ve pondered how to make a connection between studying the Psalms and the action that resulted from a need that was presented to the random group of 5 or 6 that met that particular morning around the Psalms. There is clearly a lot in the Psalms reinforcing the message that God is just and we are invited to be a part of carrying out that justice. Was the action of that group in response to those verses? I don’t know. I can’t say definitively. But I think that reading the Psalms week after week may have created fertile ground in which an idea could grow. Listen to some of the verses that were read on those Saturday mornings.

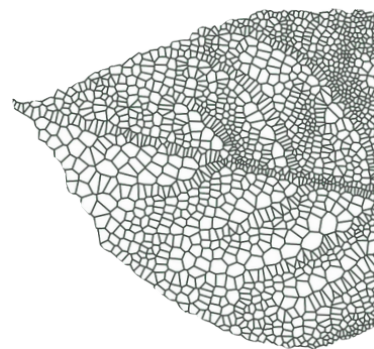
Be fair to the poor
and to orphans.
Defend the helpless
and everyone in need.
Rescue the weak and homeless.....

from Psalm 82

God always keeps his word.
He gives justice to the poor
and food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free
and heals blind eyes.
He gives a helping hand
to everyone who falls.

from Psalm 146

We don’t always know when studying the Bible will result in some kind of direct action or tangible result. But sometimes it does, even when we don’t know quite how it comes about. Even without action, study is never lost for there is a cumulative effect that miraculously takes place when we study scripture together. We are shaped into God’s people, ready to do God’s will whenever the time becomes right. —*Martha Yoder, associate pastor*



on practices through which we submit ourselves completely to the likeness of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.



Leader Transitions

Chris and Kimberly Becker were installed as pastors at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 11.

Martha Yoder, associate pastor at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa, is retired as of November 30.

Firman Gingerich, transitional pastor at East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa, is retired as of December 31.

Leaders Credentialed

Joel Beachy was installed as pastor and licensed toward ordination at East Union, Kalona, Iowa, on October 4.

Mark-Peter Lundquist's ordination in the Methodist Church was recognized and received into Central Plains at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, on Sunday, November 1.

Seth Miller was licensed toward ordination at Bethesda Mennonite in Henderson, Nebraska, on November 8.

Adam Nussbaum was ordained at Shalom Mennonite in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on November 15.

Youth Escape 2016 is coming July 15-17— Don't miss out!

by *Carly Unruh*
Wayland Mennonite Church



As a former attendee and member of the planning committee for Youth Escape, I am more than excited knowing that the planning for 2016 is underway! The weekend retreat—designed for the youth of Central Plains to connect to Jesus, each other, and the church—is filled with worship gatherings, breakout sessions, free time activities, good food, hotel-like lodging, and memorable experiences. This won't be one to miss!

Focusing on the theme of "Inside Out," we'll look at discovering and accepting who we are in Jesus. Worship sessions will feature Michele Hershberger, chair of the Bible and Ministry division at Hesston College and a passionate pastor, writer, speaker and instructor. Michele will encourage us to live inside out: living the paradox of becoming who you already are in Christ. There will also be two opportunities for youth to participate in smaller breakout sessions, looking deeper into "Inside Out" living.

Friday night mixers start the weekend off, but the numerous free time activities add to the camaraderie, building relationships across states and throughout the conference. Opportunities like tournaments, mini golf, dodgeball, swimming pool, zip line, horseback rides, and enjoying the lakefront are just a few of the activities open to teenagers looking to move around a little more and enjoy nature too!

I know I am looking forward to July 15-17, 2016, and I hope others are too. Grab your youth and join us for **Youth Escape 2016: Inside Out!** Guaranteed to be a weekend of fun fellowship, wonderful worship, and rejoicing renewal.



Partnership between Salem-Zion and Shalom Mennonite

Salem-Zion Mennonite Church at Freeman, South Dakota, has established a partnership with Shalom Mennonite Church at Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The past summer, Salem-Zion youth and a number of adults were hosted at Shalom Mennonite for a weekend in Eau Claire and then reported on their experiences at Salem-Zion. Shalom's pastor, Adam Harder Nussbaum, spoke at Salem-Zion on Sunday, November 8, 2015. Both congregations are being enriched by this partnership.

Conflict Transformation Skills Workshop for church leaders

As Christians, Christ calls us to be peacemakers. What does that mean in real life? What skills can we learn? Come find out at the workshop being offered at Salem-Zion Mennonite Church near Freeman, South Dakota, January 15-16, 2016!

The Central Plains Conflict Management Support Team will present a workshop, **Conflict Transformation Skills for Churches**, from 7 - 9:30 pm Friday and 9 am - 4 pm Saturday. They will present on these topics:

- The Nature and Role of Conflict
- Conflict in the New Testament: Finding Renewal in Conflict
- Self-Assessment Exercise: Understanding and improving your own style of response to conflict
- Interpersonal Peacemaking Skills: How to be effective when people are angry
- Congregational Conflict: Understanding conflict in groups and how to manage it

This workshop is open to pastors, elders/deacons, congregational chairpersons, and all persons who want to improve their interpersonal peacemaking skills for managing conflict more effectively.

The cost is \$45 per person which covers the cost for the workbook and other programming expenses except lunch on Saturday. An additional lunch fee will be charged at the event. Bring your payment to the workshop.

Please register by January 8 by using the form on the Conflict Skills Workshop page under Events at www.centralplainsmc.org.

Christ Community to host seminar on sexuality

Christ Community Church in Des Moines invites sisters and brothers from Central Plains to join them for a seminar on Saturday, **February 6**, called *God's Bodies: Theology and Sexuality in an Age of Certainty*. Presented by Dr. Maurice Lee, the seminar runs from 9 am to 2:15 pm.

Dr. Lee is parish minister at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Santa Barbara, California and has taught theology at Westmont College.

Here is an abbreviated description: "Sex is important. But our disagreements concerning sexual practices and policies raise urgent questions about how our human sexuality can be understood in Christian perspective. Unspoken, often unexamined assumptions lead to bitter, seemingly intractable conflict over how we are to act and think sexually. There is no magical solution to the disputes afflicting and splitting so many churches. But we ought to get clear, and be candid, about how theology and sexuality are related at a level far deeper than quoting (or rejecting) individual verses."

The seminar will be held at Temple B'nai Jeshurun at 5101 Grand Ave., Des Moines, Iowa. Find a flyer with the full description on the Central Plains home page.

Scattered Seeds

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The Central Plains conference budget had experienced five straight months where income did not meet expenses—until November. Income totaled \$43,091.22 and expenses held steady at \$ 32,485.41 for the month of November. As a result, we were able to chip away at the large deficit which now is at \$49,185.43 for the fiscal year. We are thankful for your continued support. We continue to see God's work among us in many different ways, and we extend an invitation to you to help us lower this deficit in the coming months. —*Stewardship Task Group*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Meeting Task Group meets January 12, 2016 in Des Moines, Iowa.

Conflict Transformation Skills Workshop will be held January 15-16, 2016 in Freeman, South Dakota.

God's Bodies: Theology and Sexuality in an Age of Certainty

will be held February 6, 2016 in Des Moines, Iowa.

Annual Leaders Retreat will take place April 22-24, 2016, in Schuyler, Nebraska.

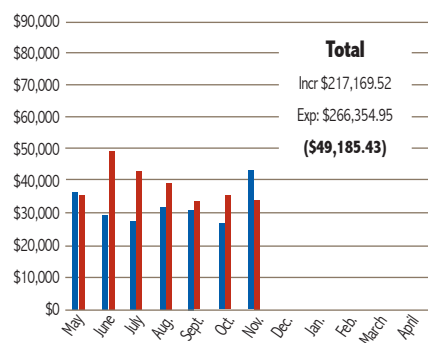
Central Plains Annual Meeting 2016 will take place June 16-19, 2016, in Des Moines, Iowa.

Youth Escape 2016 will take place July 15-17, 2016 in central Iowa.

Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)

Fiscal Year 2015/2016



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