



# Scattered Seeds

April  
2020



“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.”

— 1 Cor. 12:12

## Important Work: Stories from CPMC’s Committees

*In addition to the Conference Ministry staff, the work of the conference is done in large part by the Conference Board and three committees: Pastoral Leadership, Christian Formation, and Outreach and Service. As a glimpse into the work of our conference, these three committees and the Conference Board were each invited to share a short story of recent committee activity.*

### THE WORK OF THE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

*by Kelsey Guckenberger, pastor of Christ Community Church, Des Moines, IA*

Jeremiah 17:7-8

*Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in God.*

*They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.*

*It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.*

*It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.*

Becoming a pastor is a long process. There are late nights of studying for Church History exams in the library, early morning commutes to Field Education placements, cramming everything you have learned about yourself as a ministering person into 1,500 characters (including spaces) for your Mennonite Leadership Information form (MLI), waiting for churches to call you,

interviewing with a congregation, discerning with the congregation if God is calling you there, and interviewing with a group of experienced and wise people on the Pastoral Leadership Committee (PLC).

Amidst this process it is easy to get caught up in the small details and big questions. Where will I be called? Will my spouse be able to find a job there? How will we be welcomed into the community? In all of the uncertainty that comes with becoming a pastor, we are invited to do the same thing that we are called to do for our entire ministry: to trust in God.

The process of becoming a pastor calls us to trust, because trusting in God is more important than preaching the best sermon, or having a great

*continued on page 2*

### In this issue

2-4 Important Work

5-6 Meet your new Executive Conference Minister

6-7 Research Slam



*continued from page 1*

resume, or reading the latest book. In the end, no amount of achievement, or education, or personality will make us faithful. Pastors are called to put down deep roots and reach for the living water that only Christ can give. In times when things are going well or times such as these that are difficult and dry, we are called to root ourselves in that living water and guide others to trust as well. For when we are rooted in Christ, we will not fail to bear much fruit.

*Kelsey Guckenberger was installed and licensed for pastoral ministry at Christ Community Church in Des Moines, IA on June 30, 2019.*

*The Pastoral Leadership Committee is charged with developing and maintaining high quality pastoral leadership for Central Plains congregations. PLC works closely with Susan Janzen, the Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership. You can read more about the PLC on our website <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/pastoral-leadership.html>.*

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## THE WORK OF THE CHRISTIAN FORMATION COMMITTEE

*by Carol Eisenbeis, Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, member of Christian Formation Committee*

A cozy winter evening. Three good books. A time to gather with friends.

Combine those elements with the magic of the internet and that's the celebration our Christian Formation Committee envisioned as we planned to host an event to showcase some of the books in our conference's Shalom Readers Library. This would be a celebration of our love for stories that promote peaceful ways. And, a webinar format would allow us to create a virtual experience, erasing the miles between us and bringing together groups of children from multiple Central Plains Mennonite Conference churches.

The date was set for Wednesday evening, February 12, and plans were in place for our first attempt at such an event. Those plans, however, were met with a few challenges, most of which resulted from some less-than-favorable winter weather conditions. Rather than gathering in groups at a variety of churches, many of the participants logged in from their own homes; this was an evening to remain where it was warm and safe.

While weak internet signals and limitations of some of our devices impacted the streaming quality, we forged on with three readers taking turns reading the featured picture books: *Abuela's Weave* by Omar S. Castaneda, *An Angel for Solomon Singer* by Cynthia Rylant, and *The Rag Coat* by Lauren Mills. The messages of these texts focused on the relationship between a young girl and her grandmother, the

impact of a kind waiter on a man who had little in his life to give him hope, and a group of school children who realized the pain caused by making fun of a classmate.

Stories play a powerful role in helping people broaden their perspectives. Stories allow us to make emotional connections with the author's message and empower us to see things from a different point of view. The stories we share with our children have the power to plant seeds of change that can impact our world in positive ways.

Our committee plans to tweak our approach and try something like this again. By bringing together some good books and gathered groups of friends, we hope to plant seeds with stories that have the power to make the world a place where peaceful ways and kindness prevail.

*The purpose of the Christian Formation Committee (CFC) is to assist the members of CPMC to grow continually in Christ-likeness. The CFC does this by promoting Christian formation resources and equipping formation leaders. The CFC works closely with Amanda Bleichty, Conference Minister for Christian Formation.*

*More information about Shalom Readers and an annotated book list can be found on the CPMC website, <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/shalom-readers.html>. Shalom Readers books "reflect core Christian values of peace and justice from an Anabaptist perspective."*

## THE WORK OF THE OUTREACH AND SERVICE COMMITTEE

by Chris Eisenbeis, Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, chair of Outreach and Service Committee

“Musings of a Recovering Racist.” That was the title of a webinar on racism presented by the Outreach and Service Committee on three successive Tuesdays—February 11, 18, and 25. Our presenter was Drick Boyd, professor emeritus of Eastern University (EU) in Philadelphia. Boyd’s classes at EU focused on urban theology, leadership, social justice, and race and ethnic relations. As evidenced in the webinar title, the hard truth exists that we all have some aspects of racism present in our lives. Even the most well-intentioned among us must deal with those aspects on an ongoing basis.

Boyd shared from his own personal experiences with racism, his insights gained in teaching and writing, and the thoughts of other experts in the field.

Our first session provided an overview by defining terms. We learned that in addition to people’s words and actions, racism is also present in our thoughts, social systems and institutions.

White fragility was addressed in our second session. Why is it so difficult for white people to talk about race? Guilt, fear, social taboos, and our own experiences with race all contribute to our discomfort in these discussions.

In our final session Boyd guided us in thinking about

disrupting these patterns and how white people might be empowered to talk about race effectively and with purpose.

We had between 8 and 13 church groups, other small groups, or individuals taking part in each webinar. Ample opportunities were provided for questions, discussions, and sharing of experiences from the participants. Boyd gave us a variety of additional resources we can use to become even more well-informed.

The webinars were recorded and are available for viewing on the CPMC website. We encourage people to access them for their own individual use, for Sunday School classes or Bible study groups. They are a valuable resource that can be used in any number of settings.

*The purpose of the Outreach and Service Committee is to assist member congregations in promoting all forms of Christian witness, including evangelism, peace, justice, and church planting efforts in both our geographical area and the global community. This primary purpose is carried out in part through three task groups: The Ecuador/Venezuela Partnership, the Peace and Justice Task Group, and the Church Planting Strategy Team. The Outreach and Service Committee works closely with Nathan Luitjens, the Executive Conference Minister.*

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## THE WORK OF THE CONFERENCE BOARD

by Mai Ying Yang, Saint Paul Hmong Mennonite Church, Saint Paul, MN

What does it look like to follow the Holy Spirit instead of trying to lead it? How do you know that your plans are God’s plans? How do you determine God’s calling for you? How do you follow Jesus Christ’s leadership model and put it into practice in today’s church?

On November 15-16, 2019, Saint Paul Hmong Mennonite Church held our first Leadership Retreat at Mt. Olivet Conference & Retreat Center in Minnesota. The retreat was held to bring leaders together to work on building strong relationships, and to develop leadership skills through trainings, worship, fellowship and activities.

The retreat began with worship and a sermon by Pastor Xeng about the importance of being a leader. Worship and prayer were an important part of the retreat.

The first workshop was led by Phil Stoltzfus. He reviewed and taught about Anabaptist history and important Anabaptist theological themes such as Salvation and Discipleship, The Lord’s Supper, Christian Community and Peacemaking. His passionate teaching was inspiring.

Later Seng Vang taught about being a disciple of Jesus and listening for God’s call. We were invited to ask ourselves questions like: Am I listening to God’s calling? Am I doing what God wants me to do rather than my own heart’s desire? Am I willing to fully commit my body to God and to follow God like Peter, Paul and many of the other disciples did?

The final teaching was from Shoua Thao. Shoua taught about “minding your focus,” or the importance of focusing on God by overcoming spiritual distractions.

Before the retreat ended, the congregational board members (overseers) met with their assigned ministry leadership group to talk about the roles people were invited to, and to answer questions. Each ministry group also had time to share their goals and plan for the coming year.

The church leaders enjoyed the retreat because everyone was able to learn something useful for their ministry. Many look forward to having a retreat like this again as it’s a great way to renew, reflect, and refresh oneself spiritually, mentally, and physically before serving the church.

Our church and leadership team are so grateful for the

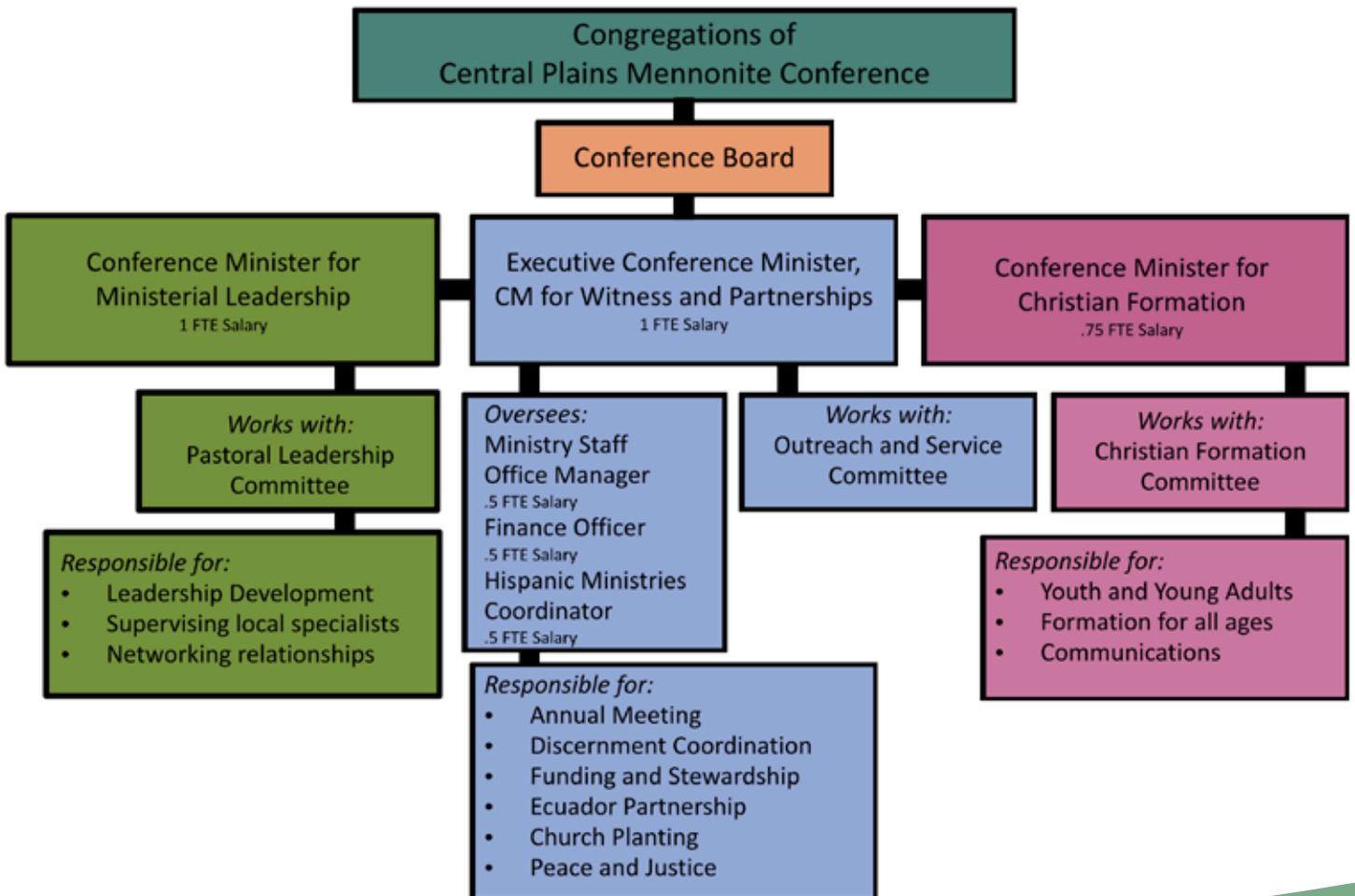
love, support, and help that CPMC and local churches give to us. May the Lord our God continue to bless each one of you abundantly.

*Mai Ying Yang and the leadership team received money from the New Ministries Fund, administered by the CPMC Conference Board for their leadership retreat.*

*The New Ministries Fund is distributed for programs or events that facilitate relationships, assist witness, aid in leadership development, or nurture Christian formation. Applications to receive New Ministries Fund money are available by contacting the Executive Conference Minister.*

*The CPMC Conference Board meets four times a year, rotating meeting locations among the communities of our conference. Meeting dates and times are published in The Sower.*

## Central Plains Mennonite Conference Organizational Chart



# Meet Your New Executive Conference Minister

by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister



Hi, my name is Nathan Luitjens and I have the privilege of being the new Executive Conference Minister for Central Plains. As I sit here in my office in Kalona, Iowa, it seems strange to think about how my journey has brought me to this place.

I was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and spent most of my growing up years in Nipawin, a town of 4,500 people. In Nipawin, winter began by the end of October and usually didn't end until sometime in early April. The town had a total of four ice rinks, two indoor and two outdoor. Each year, Nipawin hosted a curling bonspiel where the prize for the winning team was four new cars. Olds, Iowa is (in many ways) a long way from home.

I didn't grow up in a Mennonite church. Both of my parents had grown up Mennonite, but there was not a Mennonite church in Nipawin, so we attended a Christian and Missionary Alliance church during my formative years. While there is a great deal about my faith development that I credit to this church, I also had many questions about faith that were raised during those years.

During my senior year, I was privileged to attend and live in the dorm at Rosthern Junior College, a Mennonite high school. This was, in many ways, my introduction to Anabaptist theology. While it didn't answer all of my faith questions, that year certainly caused me to continue to ask healthy and challenging questions about the theology I had grown up with. Following high school, I spent two years studying computer science at the University of British Columbia before finishing my undergraduate degree at Canadian Bible College (now Ambrose University).

I spent two of my undergraduate years in Mexico City doing an internship. These were formative years as I worked in churches under local leadership while living with a host family from the church. I deeply enjoyed the experience of living and working in churches in Mexico, and I was challenged by the ways in which these congregations were using the Gospel to impact their local communities.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I moved to Vancouver, BC where I attended Regent College, a seminary on the campus of the University of British Columbia. While there, I took a half-time position as the youth pastor at First United Mennonite Church (FUMC). I found working with youth and seeing them grow very rewarding. I was especially interested in the decisions they made about life and work and school. I also appreciated being able to apply what I was learning in school directly into my ministry context.

During those years in Vancouver, I was very fortunate to marry Rachele, whom I had met in Mexico City. When my three year term at FUMC was up, I began to look for other opportunities in the Mennonite Church. One day I got a call from the search committee at Sugar Creek Mennonite Church in Wayland, Iowa. I am a little embarrassed to admit that I had to look up Iowa on a map (in my mind it was much further west), but after a couple of visits and a lack of understanding about just how frustrating the immigration system can be, Rachele and I moved to Iowa and I began to pastor at Sugar Creek, a place that I have called home for the last sixteen years.

When I think about what I bring to this role in CPMC, I think about what Sugar Creek asked me to do when I arrived there in 2004. My work was to help them become more missional, and over the years as I have taught and encouraged, I have been a witness to this remarkable congregation as they have taken deeper and deeper interest in the community around them. Not everything has gone perfectly and we've had many fits and starts along the way, but I see Sugar Creek today as a group of disciples of Jesus who are seeking to engage with the folks they meet in their community in new and exciting ways.

I have also thought often about the societal changes that we are facing here in North America (and particularly here in the midwest). The world is changing around us. The church used to have more prominence and influence over the communities in which we live. We can mourn that loss of influence or power or we can begin to see the opportunities

*continued on page 6*



*continued from page 5*

that a post-Christian society presents. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't just mean being like everyone else, but maybe a little nicer. Today we have the opportunity to differentiate ourselves from the world around us and to demonstrate what a life lived in service to Jesus could look like. As Anabaptist Christians we have a unique theology that should position us to show the world a different way of living and being that challenges the polarity and angry rhetoric of our society.

I am looking forward to walking alongside congregations as we seek to discern who God is calling each of us to be, and how God is calling us to engage with our communities. I look forward to meeting with churches and to hearing the stories of what God is doing in our midst. When I begin full-time work with CPMC in September, I will be available to assist congregations in thinking through your mission and vision as you engage with the world. I pray that God's kingdom would come and God's will would be done in our churches and communities as it is in heaven.

*Nathan lives in Olds, Iowa with his wife, Rachelle, and their three boys, Mattias, Tristan and Kieran. Nathan is working for CPMC .25 FTE, and will begin full-time in September.*

## Research Slam

*by Jane Yoder-Short, West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA*

"Welcome to the first annual *Research Slam*." Randall Nye of West Union Mennonite Church, the hosting congregation, launched the evening with style.

Wait, what is a *research slam*? If you've heard of a poetry slam, a research slam is related. Instead of poems, one hears spoken insights gained from research papers. Every year juniors at Hillcrest Academy (formerly IMS) are required to write research papers. They put in long hours researching. They add their thoughts and passion. If this sounds boring, you weren't at West Union Mennonite's Research Slam.

The idea for a Research Slam started after Sunday School should have been over. Students energetically started sharing about their research papers. They raised questions related to vaccinations. How do we balance the good of the community with individual rights? They contemplated the darker side of the Olympics. They talked about the media tainting rape. They touched on mental health.

The conversation was fascinating. Why shouldn't others in the congregation have a chance to hear this energy-filled conversation? When the suggestion was made to invite others to hear their insights, some youth were ready to share. Others were more reluctant. "The church doesn't want to hear about rape culture."

After some discussion, enough students agreed to present. Posters went up inviting the congregation to the slam. Sing-along music was arranged as a way to relax in-between all the thinking. Cookies and coffee were made.

*continued on page 7*

## Transitions

**Eugene Thieszen** was installed at Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson, Nebraska, on Dec. 8, 2019, as interim minister for worship and pastoral care.

**Michael Loss** was installed as interim pastor at Wellman Mennonite Church, Wellman, Iowa on March 1, 2020.



Left to right:  
Aidan Yoder,  
Meredith Blossom  
and Sophie  
Marshall

*continued from page 6*

The evening featured three papers. First up, Aidan Yoder presented thoughts from “Mandatory Vaccination: Individual’s Right to Choose.” People responded with good questions. Why did you pick that topic? Can we trust what vaccine-producing companies say about safety? Aidan concluded, “It is in the world’s best interests to utilize a vaccination’s function, so we do not return to losing thousands of people annually to preventable diseases.”

Sophie Marshall shared about, “Saving the Olympics: The Potential for International Cooperation.” Sophie has always loved the Olympics. She shared the hope found in 2018 when North and South Korea merged their Table Tennis team. But all is not “peace and goodwill.” Host countries, especially developing ones, can go into debt. Besides problems for countries, what happens to stars that start out at a young age? What happens when their Olympic careers end? How do they transition to a regular life? Sophie was asked if she had a child who wanted to be an Olympic star, would she encourage her? It’s a hard question. Sophie reminded everyone that in our divided world having a joint venture can increase global cooperation.

After a fun song the audience became somber as Meredith Blossom shared on “Rape Culture in the Media: How Rape Myths Have Created a Toxic Environment for Victims of Sexual Assault.” She listed many myths surrounding rape; she’s lying, she’s asking for it, she was drunk, etc. People responded with good questions. “How has the MeToo movement influenced the culture surrounding rape?” “What can the church do?” A teenager got people talking about a subject we like to avoid. Hopefully we will all remember that “rape culture is a social construct that condones questioning a victim’s testimony and blames a victim...”

Leave it to our youth to bravely set the stage and willingly share their thoughts.

Will West Union do it again? Some of us are hoping it becomes an annual event. Others are asking what other flavored slams can we have? What if three different people shared insights from a particular scripture? What if three different people shared the great and the not-so-great happenings from Mennonite history? What if people shared what they learn from their job? Can the first ever Research Slam open the door to new ways of learning from each other?

# Scattered Seeds

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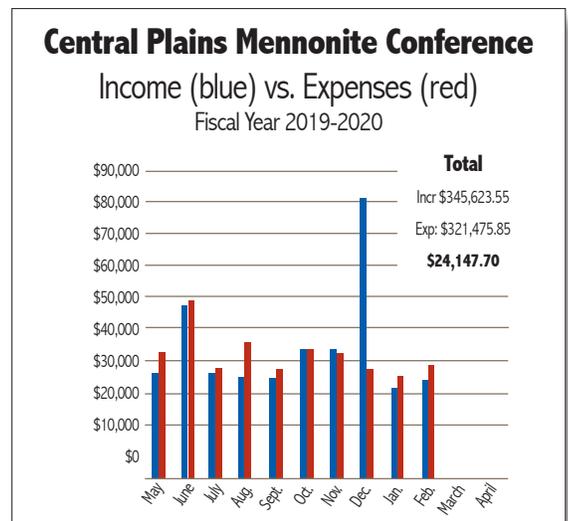
## FINANCES

Bend, don't break! After the Central Plains budget experienced quite the dramatic shift in the month of December, it was a bit back to normal in January and February falling short in both months, but holding steady on a surplus for the fiscal year-end coming up. Income through February is at \$345,623.55, while expenses are at \$321,475.85. As a result, this drops our overall surplus to \$24,147.70. We are so very thankful for all your support to help ignite our push towards the end of our fiscal year at the end of April.

— Stewardship Task Group

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Annual Meeting 2020** will take place in Arden Hills, Minnesota on June 18-21, 2020



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