



Scattered Seeds

April
2021

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard... so the last will be first, and the first will be last.

— Matt. 20:1, 16

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IMAGINATION & LEADERSHIP

Imaginative leadership in changing times

by Susan Janzen, Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership; Central Plains Mennonite Conference

This morning I settled into my living room chair and turned on my laptop for Zoom worship — my usual Sunday practice when I have a weekend at home. I was comfortable and cozy, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cat on my lap; a low flame in my fireplace and quiet pre-service music added to my reflective mood.

But my reverie didn't last long. We weren't far into the service until the worship leader announced that this was the anniversary of the first Sunday our congregation had worshiped online because of COVID-19. We've gathered online ever since.

It's been a year. A whole year! It's jarring to think that something we knew so little about back in March 2020 — or maybe assumed we would be immune from — could change our lives so completely and so quickly. That first Sunday, most of us were in a kind of shock. We had no idea what we were in for. When I look back at email

exchanges and notes from conversations with pastors those first weeks, I have to admit we were pretty unprepared and naïve about what we were up against. And it's not only the pandemic. This past year also featured a tense, divisive political season, social turmoil and cries for justice, natural disasters — all of which continue to affect church life and the lives of our communities.

All this has demanded a lot of our pastors and other congregational leaders. They have shown remarkable creativity and ingenuity as they have met the challenges of ministry in a time of high anxiety, pervasive fear, and social distancing. Their ability to think outside the box — again and again and again — has been inspiring. Their willingness to venture into the unknown has shown both resilience in the face of adversity and a curiosity to imagine new things the Spirit may have in mind.

There are so many examples I could share. When

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pandemic restrictions cancelled Holy Week activities last year, Bethel Mennonite in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, organized a drive-by Good Friday service. With Sunday School out of the question, the Milford (Nebraska) Mennonite pastor and elders delivered weekly Advent care packages to every family in the congregation. Not meeting in person but eager to be together, Cedar Falls (Iowa) Mennonite has twice gathered for a pop-up communion liturgy in a local park. Corey Miller, pastor at Salem Mennonite near Freeman, South Dakota, drove around most of the year with a lawn chair in the back of his vehicle so he could sit outside retirement home windows and on patios for pastoral visits.

Through it all, our pastors have faithfully nurtured the worship, discipleship, fellowship, and service ministries of our congregations and the other settings in which they serve. Along with pivoting to online, livestream, or other out-of-the-ordinary ways of worshiping (and back again, some of them multiple times) pastors have had to re-imagine how to counsel parishioners and comfort the grieving. They've had to navigate anxiety around finances (the church's and their own) and around discerning when and how to return to in-person church life. At times, they've had to lay their own vulnerabilities aside and trust God in doing what seems best for the congregation.

As we take stock of all that has transpired over the past year and begin to imagine a time beyond pandemic, I trust we will take time to reflect on the losses we've experienced — the things we missed out on, the people who passed away, the opportunities we put on hold, the things we weren't able to do in the usual way. But I also hope we'll reflect on what we've



Orb of Humanity, Matthew 20

by Stan Harder, 6 inch orb, carved walnut, pedestal of spalted maple, 2021

Leadership is a bizarre concept in the Upside-Down-Kingdom. If everyone is equal, then we have no distinct leaders. Yet, the priesthood of all believers leads us to believe we are all to be leaders. But we do that by being servants. In Matthew 20 we are called to lower ourselves to be the servants of those we lead. I thought for a long time how to depict this kind of leadership. How could I show structure without hierarchy while also showing equality coinciding with service to each other? The result was this “Orb of Humanity” that manages to combine all these ideas into a cohesive structure.

Twelve unique humanish figures make up this sculpture. Each figure is being held up by the others around them. Each figure is simultaneously holding up those within their reach. The cycle is never-ending. Who is the leader? Who is the servant? Who is being served? All of them are. Yet, they form a solid structure that functions and holds its shape.

Carved from walnut, the six-inch diameter orb rests on a pedestal of spalted maple. I present this sculpture on a pedestal, not to counteract the lack of hierarchy inherent in the work but to hold it up as an appropriate example for congregational life. It is a structure where everyone serves each other in their own unique ways. It also invites the observer to pick up the orb and turn it over in their hands to explore its lack of hierarchy. When held, without the pedestal, the sculpture takes on an added meaning. It is a congregation held in the loving hands of the one it was created for.

Stan Harder does his wood carving in Omaha, Nebraska. He and his wife Jeanette are members of First Mennonite Church in Lincoln and are organizers (not leaders) of a small Mennonite group in Omaha.

gained, such as discovering new wells of creativity and compassion within ourselves, learning that buildings and walls don't define what a church is, and realizing that different can be wonderful and freeing.

In closing, I want to note that though they've led faithfully and imaginatively through this uncertain year, many pastors also admit to being overwhelmed at times and exhausted. Some have struggled with COVID-19. Depression, anxiety disorders, and burnout are real concerns. Pastors have all the same worries everyone else has, and often have few trusted people in whom they can confide. It's no wonder pastors are tired. Many have not had a break since the beginning of the pandemic. Pastors, too, have adjusted to working from home, with all that means; many report extra hours spent recording sermons, on the telephone, and in Zoom meetings. As with church services, most of their opportunities for respite and renewal (the Annual Leaders Retreat, pastor clusters, sabbaticals, vacations, conferences, spiritual direction, etc.) have been put on hold or moved online.

The past year has taken a toll on pastors and their families. So next time you have the chance, say thank you to your pastor for their faithful leadership this past year. Ask how they're doing and encourage them to seek help if needed. If it's in your power, you might even grant them an additional Sunday or two off. Pastor appreciation month is October, but you don't need to wait until then to show your support and care for those who serve as your leaders.



The Last Shall Be First

by Melinda Turnbull, framed 20x20, colored pencil, ink and gold leaf on vellum, 2021

It is a colored pencil, ink, and gold leaf on vellum drawing. I concentrated on the idea of opposites, of contrast: first / last, light / dark, wealth / poverty, simple / complex. While working it out, this phrase came to mind and it is written on the back: Our response to our generous God should not be greed, but gratitude.

The background in light blue and white is a traditional Mennonite quilt pattern. The foreground (lettering and border) is inspired by the extravagant and complex illumination of the *Book of Kells*, a collection of the Gospels written and illustrated around 800 AD in the British Isles. The "L, S, and F" are illuminated based on the harvest, but the "T" is more abstract, based on the cup Jesus must drink, the cross, and becoming a servant. The imagery comes from Jesus' parable combined with harvesters of grapes, rice, corn, wheat, and cotton. I wanted to focus on people who might be considered "the last," such as migrant laborers, indigenous peoples, and forced laborers.

Melinda Turnbull is a retired elementary school art teacher. Her joy will always be in helping young children find their own creative spirit, but she also enjoys drawing and painting at her home in Tiffin, Iowa. She and her husband Lee are members of First Mennonite Church in Iowa City, and they both enjoy volunteering at Crowded Closet MCC Thrift Store in Iowa City.



IMAGINATION & LEADERSHIP

Imagining leadership in changing times

by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

In Matthew chapter 20 Jesus upends the normal understanding of leadership in his day. Instead of the top-down authority where the person with the power dictates what is expected of the people who are lower on the scale, Jesus argues that those who want to be leaders should place themselves in the position of slaves/servants of those they seek to lead. Jesus demonstrated what he meant by this in John 13, where we are told the story of how Jesus washed his disciples' feet. This was a complete re-imagining of how power was supposed to be used and what it meant to be a leader. How can this radical reorientation of leadership inform and guide the radical reorientations in leadership that are happening today?

As Susan noted in her article, pastors and other church leaders have found themselves in uncharted territory this past year. While our leaders have pivoted and been extremely creative in working at gathering the church in numerous different ways over the course of the last year, it has also been extremely stressful. In addition to a global pandemic, we have also noted other trends like smaller church sizes and in some cases diminished giving which has caused churches to reconsider whether they can afford to hire a full-time pastor. And so while established pastors have had to be creative, congregations are also having to start thinking creatively about leadership in a changing congregational and societal landscape.

As conference ministry staff we have been thinking a great deal about what leadership in the church is going to look like in the future. We have tried to imagine what some new ways of being in ministry might look like and how we can help prepare leaders for that future. One idea from many years ago at West Union Mennonite Church was a focused process of discernment by the elders about who in the congregation might be called to ministry of some kind. When individuals were identified, the elders worked with them to continue that process of discernment. Out of that commitment to identify and discern future leaders, many pastors emerged, serving both the local community and the wider church. This kind of congregational process could be a way to call people who are involved in other careers and vocations outside of the church into part-time church leadership. With new online opportunities through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and other seminaries, the possibility of gaining leadership and biblical training while already serving in leadership is possible.

Another idea that conference ministry staff has talked about is the possibility of providing trade scholarships for people who are graduating from seminary so that they can learn a skilled trade like plumbing, electrical work, mechanics, programming, etc. which could allow them to work at these potentially flexible jobs while also engaging in ministerial leadership in the church.

Another interesting idea for healthy leadership that is proposed by David Fitch, our speaker for this year's Annual Meeting, is that instead of one lead pastor, congregations could hire a team of part-time pastors that represents a diversity of ethnicities and genders so that no one voice dominates the conversation. This idea of mutuality in leadership would require smaller churches to re-imagine what leadership in their congregation might look like and how to call people out of the congregation for that leadership position. At the same time, these leaders would have to work at submitting to one another and to the church. This would require leaders to set aside the need to be right and to be open to the imaginative ways the Holy Spirit can speak through all of us. In this model a Spirit-led healthy consensus can take root and grow, bringing healing and wholeness to everyone in the congregation.

It seems clear that future leadership for the church is going to require flexibility and resiliency. The way things have always been done may not work moving forward. There may be no ready template for pastors or congregations to follow as they lead into these changes. As conference ministry staff we have begun to reimagine our roles, thinking of ourselves as coaches for these changing times. Each situation is different, but perhaps as coaches, we can help pastors and leaders voice the unique needs and goals of their ministry contexts, identify imaginative ways of seeing the possibilities beyond "what has always been done," and provide assistance and encouragement as they work towards their goals. At the same time, we also want to provide the structure and support that leaders need as they seek to work out these imaginative changes in their ministry contexts. We recognize that imagination and change will challenge the status quo and put stress on church leaders. But we also believe that if our imaginative God is leading us into new ways of being the church then the church and its leaders will reap the benefits if we can stick it out.



Read Matthew 20:1-16, then take a minute to prayerfully imagine what radical reorientations God might be calling churches and leaders to in our day. What role might you play in those reorientations?

Annual Meeting 2021

In conversation with the Board and Staff, Central Plains Mennonite Conference Annual Meeting Task Group has decided that this year's CPMC Annual Meeting will take place in a virtual format on June 18 & 19, culminating in a conference-wide worship service on June 20.

At our virtual gathering, we will worship, learn and fellowship as God's people in CPMC! Our theme for this year's gathering will be "Together in God's Space: The Church as a Reconciling Presence." Our speaker will be David Fitch, professor at Northern Seminary near Chicago, church planter at Peace of Christ Church, Westmont, Illinois, pastor, and author. You can find out more about David, our schedule, and how to choose delegates, as well as more information about registration, etc. as it becomes available on our website at centralplainsmc.org/annual-meeting-2021.



Restorative Church Project Receives MCUSA Justice Grant

This past January the Agapé Peace Center, a Central Plains ministry initiative in Duluth, Minnesota, received one of ten grants given through Mennonite Church USA's Justice Grant program. Learn more about this first-time grant, and also about the other recipients at www.mennoniteusa.org/news/first-justice-fund-grants/.

One of the most recent projects of the peace center, run by Ted Lewis, is the Restorative Church website (<https://restorativechurch.org>) which provides a new platform of resources that integrate restorative justice with restorative practices for communities of faith. The new funding will allow this site to expand its resources with respect to racial reconciliation and congregational “cultures of peace” as applied to restorative dialogue.

Stay tuned for a new set of zoom-based events this spring, hosted by Restorative Church, which will include “Restorative Bible” (revisiting biblical narratives in light of restorative themes); “Restorative Justice 101” (for church members wanting to learn the basics); and “Restorative Responses” (confidential discussions for church leaders on how to respond to church-related conflicts). For more information, email tedlewis76@gmail.com

Other projects that are part of the Agapé Peace Center include the “Strength to Love” men’s group that discusses racial topics in the context of faith, hope and love. The “Heart Balm Healing Service”, a quieting service with instrumental music, has been extended to the Steve O’Neil Apartments in Duluth for women in transition. Ted Lewis also provides facilitation services and workshops for church groups that are wanting to strengthen relationships and improve interpersonal communication skills for responding to conflicts and divisive topics.

For the past couple of years, Ted has served on the Central Plains “Conflict Management Support Team”, and has advocated for strengthening prevention-based resources to sustain healthy congregations. He is available to provide workshops for any Central Plains church group.

Transitions

Pam Gerig Unruh began as transitional minister at Zion Mennonite, Donnellson, IA on Feb. 1, 2021

Chelsea Vaught was licensed toward ordination and installed as pastor for worship and congregational care at Bethesda, Henderson, NE on March 7, 2021



“Strength to Love” mens group at the Duluth Clayton-Jackson-McGhie Lynching Memorial, June, 2020.

COVID Relief Fund

It has been almost a year since the COVID-19 pandemic began to have a major impact on life for many of us within Central Plains Mennonite Conference. When the pandemic began, none of us knew how this was going to affect our lives, and individuals, congregations and CPMC worried about how we would weather this situation financially.

CPMC, along with other Mennonite organizations like Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mission Network applied for and received a Payroll Protection Plan forgivable loan, and that money was used to pay salaries and expenses. The CPMC board committed to passing money along to congregations and individuals within CPMC who need it, if we raised more money than we needed to meet our financial obligations this year. Given the healthy financial picture of CPMC as of January 31st, we are committing \$10,000 to the relief fund with more to come if we finish our fiscal year well. We are deeply grateful for the support we have received that has allowed us to be in this position.

In addition, we received an inquiry from someone who did not need their government stimulus check. They wondered whether there are congregations or individuals in our conference who might need additional support. In response, the Conference Board gave the Stewardship Task group the job of setting up a fund where people can donate excess stimulus funds. These funds would then be made available to CPMC churches to use as congregations or to disperse for individuals within congregations who are struggling because of the pandemic.

If you would like to donate to the COVID Relief Fund you can earmark a check, COVID Relief Fund, and mail it to the CPMC office (PO Box 101, Freeman, SD 57029-0101) or you can donate online using the DONATE button on the bottom right of our webpage: www.centralplainsmc.org. (Be sure to include a special instruction on the PayPal page that directs the money to the COVID Relief Fund).

Congregations who are interested in accessing this money can fill out the COVID Relief application form. A quick link to that form is on the CPMC website homepage at www.centralplainsmc.org.

Your Conference Ministers are open to traveling and being present with congregations this spring and summer (in a socially-distanced way), while allowing time off between visits with congregations to ensure that we do not have the virus and are not carrying it to other congregations. We are also open to being present in congregations via Zoom in the weeks between. Please contact one of your conference ministers to schedule an in-person or online Sunday visit.

-Conference Ministers Nathan Luitjens, Susan Janzen, and Amanda Bleichty

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FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for the 20-21 year is again operating with a negative balance in February. Total income for the first ten months of the fiscal year came in at \$306,980.18 while expenses for the same period came in at \$310,068.29. As a result this leaves us with a negative balance of \$3,088.11. We are hopeful that giving during March and April will help us to end the year with a positive balance. The conference has received Payroll Protection Funds through COVID 19 funding that will help offset some of our payroll and benefits expenses for 20-21. We continue to be thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

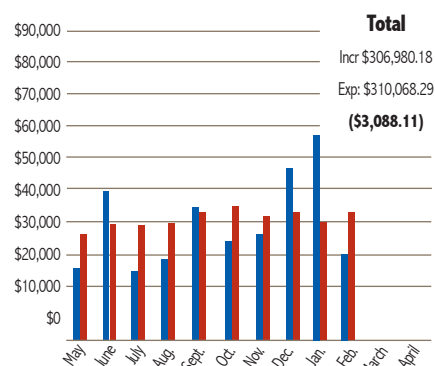
— Stewardship Task Group

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Meeting 2021 will be held virtually via Zoom on June 18 & 19 and in each local congregation on June 20. More details can be found on our website, www.centralplainsmc.org.

Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)
Fiscal Year 2020-2021



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