“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”
— Jer. 29:7

 If we were asked to pick a few words that would describe the main messages and the spirit of the Central Plains Annual Meeting 2020, a few would leap to mind: “Unexpected,” “Hope,” “Optimism,” “Adaptability,” “Creativity,” and “Enriching.” These themes were expressed and revealed over and over in the prayers, devotions, reports, and small group discussions. The enthusiastic attitudes of our conference leaders offer us a great deal of hope for the future!

This year’s Annual Meeting was (hopefully) a one-time experience, meeting via Zoom, since we were unable to gather in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We questioned whether we would have the opportunity to fellowship and connect with old and new friends since we would only be seeing and hearing each other “virtually.” However, it was heartening to see the faces of most of those who logged in to the meeting, and to be equipped to hold our “table-talk” small-group discussions. Kudos to the behind-the-scenes technical support people who figured out how to break the participants into small groups and smoothly transition us between the large and small group meetings! Getting to know the people at our assigned tables—a spirited mix of young and “seasoned” and geographically mingled—has always been a highlight of the annual meeting for us, so we were thrilled to still experience that, from a distance.

The theme for this year’s meeting was, “Finding God in places we never expected to be.” What an appropriate title! We all learned that God can orchestrate meaningful relationships and
ways to do God’s kingdom work, even when things don’t go according to our human plans. During our small group break-out session, we explored the passage from Jeremiah 29:5-7. Discussion centered on ways we could apply what the Lord was telling the Israelites in captivity in Babylon to the message God might be trying to communicate to us in our situations today. What did the passage teach us about navigating our partisan political divide, and how should we pray for the prosperity of our towns and cities in the midst of COVID-19 anxieties and unrest? How is Christ calling us to respond to the poverty of relationships in our times?

At last year’s Annual Meeting we said “good-bye” to our long-time conference ministers, Tim Detweiler and Dave Boshart. Although we held a light-hearted farewell party for them, there was a sense of grief that they were leaving. It was exciting this year to celebrate the gifts that our new conference ministers bring to Central Plains. Amanda Bleichty and Susan Janzen have been serving in their roles for the past 18 months and one year respectively, bringing an array of unique abilities and enthusiasm to their tasks, and finding new and innovative ways to connect with faith formation leaders and pastors in congregations throughout the conference. They expressed appreciation for Marcia Yoder Schrock and Firman Gingerich, who served as interim executive conference ministers. A highlight of this year’s annual meeting was the installation of Nathan Luitjens as our new executive conference minister. Following a prayer of blessing for Nathan by the moderator, Shawn Nolt, Nathan responded with some of his vision for CPMC. He is enthusiastic about our conference and working with his fellow staff members. All three conference ministers are looking forward to engaging with area congregations during the coming year. Nathan sees change as an opportunity for growth! The Holy Spirit is still working as we move into a post-Christian era in the United States. He challenged all of us to consider the future of the church, and to do more work on anti-racism and social justice. He ended his remarks by calling for prayer for the CPMC staff during the coming year. May we continue to joyfully lift up our staff and ministries!

Overall, the short time we invested together on our Zoom call was very uplifting and encouraging. It inspired us with a great deal of hope for the future of our conference! Thank you to everyone who was involved in planning and carrying out this year’s annual meeting! God is at work among us in Central Plains!
On June 19, the evening before the CPMC Annual Meeting delegate session, we had a meeting with youth delegates on Zoom. Our youth meeting opened with conference leaders introducing themselves and talking about their roles in the church. Learning more about what church and conference leaders do gave us more knowledge about what the church is up to, especially in the midst of COVID-19. It was nice to interact with people outside our home congregations, and to hear where everyone else was from. Having new people to connect with was a relief from the daily situation of isolation (in COVID-19), and being with people of faith made me more aware of and more grateful for God’s presence and God’s work in our lives and in the conference. Being together with others who believe in God gave me a first-hand experience of the love that we have for each other, and the love which God has for us.

After introductions, we talked about the Annual Meeting delegate session scheduled for Saturday, and were encouraged to bring our perspectives, points of view and voices as youth to the table. We asked conference leaders questions about the future of Central Plains annual meetings in light of COVID-19, about George Floyd, racism, and conference work, what opportunities we have to help, and what mission trips might look like and if they were still possible. After our questions, we played a few Zoom games.

One of the games we played had us find odd items in our homes and share them with a partner. Then our partner was asked to either describe the odd item so that others could draw it, or to answer “20 questions” about the item so others could guess what it was. With items ranging from a necklace to an oxygen can, it was quite difficult to figure out some of the odd items people had gathered. This game showed our creativity and how different we all are.

Bonding with fellow youth delegates over Zoom was the highlight of the meeting for me. Conference this year was a rejuvenating experience. With quarantining, it has been hard to connect and talk with people around me in a meaningful way, and with so many stresses in life it can be hard to acknowledge God, even more now than normally. But during our meeting, it was easier to find God in more of life and in the people God gave us to talk to. Although we were limited because of technology, it was still very fun this year. Annual Meeting has always been a great experience, and I can’t wait to come back next year!

ON ASSIGNMENT IN FRANCE

CPMC’s Kate Widmer, on assignment with Mennonite Mission Network in France, has found herself in a place she never expected to be—in an unfamiliar country in the midst of a pandemic. Learn how planting a garden has helped her to become a part of God’s shalom in the city in which she lives.

Read about it on the Mennonite Mission Network blog here: https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/the-hope-series/The-journey-is-the-mission

Or watch an interview with Kate here: https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/the-hope-series/A-conversation-with-Kate-Widmer
Finding God in the places we never expected to be

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

Jeremiah 29 contains a letter that was written by Jeremiah, who was in Jerusalem, to the first wave of exiles who had been taken to Babylon. Jeremiah knew that none of those folks wanted to be in Babylon, they had been ripped from their homes, their jobs, their center of worship, and had even been separated from parts of their families. They found themselves in a place they never expected or wanted to be.

While Christians in North America are not in exile, I think people and the church are finding themselves in places they never expected to be. The COVID-19 pandemic has left people feeling physically and financially insecure, something that many folks never expected. It has also left some feeling isolated, cut off from the communities where they experience friendship and support. The protests that have arisen in the wake of George Floyd’s killing at the hands of Minneapolis police officers have shown us that many in the African American community still find themselves physically and financially vulnerable, a place where they do not want to be. Many within the white community in the United States are asking themselves what is going on. Slavery ended more than 150 years ago and the civil rights movement was more than 50 years ago. Hasn’t all of this been settled? Why is this still a thing? Didn’t we already solve this problem? Many folks are just realizing that the injustice has continued even though there have been laws in place to stop this, and now they wonder where we go from here.

There is another way that many of us find ourselves in places we did not expect and do not want to be. While some of us have not moved, the communities around us have changed dramatically. I often hear people talk about how they used to know everyone in town and they identify houses by who used to live there, not by who lives there now. The new neighbors think, talk and act differently; they do not see the world the way we do. Communities that used to be similar in nature are now more diverse racially and socio-economically, meaning that we do not immediately have as much in common with these new folks. Some of us have found these changes difficult and painful.

The church also finds itself in a new position in American culture. For years, the church enjoyed status and privilege...
within society with Sundays and Wednesday evenings being sacred times that others would not violate. But now the church is increasingly marginalized. The church is not held in the regard it once was and being a Christian is not the asset it once was in society. Being a follower of Jesus makes us strange and puts us at odds with the world. Increasingly we cannot find a comfortable place politically or even socially to land because no groups share all our values.

God has several things to tell the exiles through the prophet. First, this is not short term. While there are prophets telling people that this is temporary, it will soon be over and God will quickly restore everything, God wants to make clear that this is not the case. They are going to be in exile for 70 years, a number that signifies a long, full life, so those who went into exile will die in exile. Therefore, God tells them to plant roots in the places they find themselves, to build homes and plant gardens, to marry and have children and to marry their children off so they have grandchildren. God challenges them to multiply during their time in exile. God also calls them to work and pray for the shalom of the places where they find themselves, because if the cities they are living in experience shalom then they too will experience shalom. Finally, God promises if they seek after God while in exile, God will be found by them. God is still present with them in this place they never expected to be; they have not been abandoned. God challenged the exiles to look around them and to see the opportunities that would present themselves in that place.

We may be finding ourselves in places we never expected to be, and yet the words of promise from Jeremiah continue to be true for us today. God is not promising us a quick revival or the return of the church to a place of prominence in society. But as society looks less and less “Christian” the opportunities for us to distinguish ourselves as followers of Jesus become greater. God has not abandoned us; God is present with us in whatever uncomfortable circumstance we may find ourselves. God has a big vision for the future and for our world and God will empower us through the Holy Spirit to live into that vision. Therefore, God invites us to put down roots, to become deeply enmeshed in the towns, communities, and neighborhoods where we find ourselves. God invites us to work for the shalom of our communities, because when there is shalom in our communities, we will experience shalom. It would be easy for us to wish we could go back to an earlier, “better” time. Or we can embrace the new situation where we find ourselves and, together with God, begin to live into God’s vision of shalom for our world.
Transitions

Jack Scandrett ended as interim pastor at Hutterthal Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, on June 30.

Nathan Luitjens ended as pastor at Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA, on June 30. In March, he began part-time as Central Plains Executive Conference Minister; he will move to full-time on September 1.

Scott Swartzendruber retired as pastor at Kalona Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA on July 15.

Gene Miller ended as bridge pastor at Bellwood Mennonite Church, Milford, NE, on July 26 and began as transitional minister at Hutterthal Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, on August 1.

David Heusinkveld ended as interim pastor at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA, in July and will begin as interim pastor at Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA, on August 30.

Thom Bower began as transitional pastor at Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, MN, on August 1.

Jacob Guckenberger began as co-pastor at Christ Community Church, Des Moines, IA, on August 1.

Steve Griffin was installed as lead pastor at Bellwood Mennonite Church, Milford, NE, on August 9.

John David Kenney will be installed as pastor at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA, on August 16.

Ben Schlegel will begin as pastor at Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley, NE, on August 17.

Four stories of service from Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church

by Cheryl Lehman, Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Holiday Card Party—In December, prompted by my participation in a Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) Learning Trip to Arizona and hearing about Shalom Mennonite Church (Tucson, AZ) and Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC) involvement in the border issues in Tucson and Douglas, AZ, Sermon on the Mount Mennonite decided to have a Holiday Card Party. We joined a project organized by the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project. In it, churches and individuals were invited to send holiday cards to people in detention centers in Eloy and Florence, AZ. The project hoped to impact around 3,000 detainees, and send messages of support, peace and comfort. Sermon on the Mount held two sessions to write or create cards that included suggested comments in English and Spanish. All together, we contributed 81 cards to the project.

Reverse Advent Calendar Food Drive—In December, Sermon on the Mount also hosted a “Reverse Advent Calendar Food Drive.” Marilynn Penner organized an Advent calendar with a dry goods item listed for each day until the 24th of December. Those who participated brought the items to worship with them during the month. We donated what was collected in the drive to the elementary school located across from our church building. School staff distributed the food to families that live in our neighborhood.

The Great Winter Warm-Up—In January, Sermon on the Mount participated in “The Great Winter Warm-Up,” joining with hundreds of others across the nation who pieced, knotted, and donated comforters to celebrate MCC’s 100th Anniversary. The nationwide goal was 6,500 comforters. We contributed 7 comforters to the project. A blessing prayer was given during worship on Sunday for the comforters and the places and people where they will be distributed.

continued on next page
Masks for the Community—Faced with time indoors at the onset of COVID-19, I decided to learn to sew face masks. After a cousin in Minnesota emailed that she and others were making face masks and putting them in a box at her church for people to take, I had an idea. Our church building is located not far from the Sioux Falls Smithfield Meat Packing Plant, and many of the workers live in our neighborhood. What if we would make face masks and offer them to our community for free? Vicki Biggerstaff volunteered to help make masks and we were given the go-ahead from the church to place them in individual Ziplock bags in a plastic container outside the church door. A sign invited people to help themselves. Another sign told of God’s care for them and Christ’s love and peace.

At the end of the first week, 100 face masks were taken from the container. We continued, using up scrap fabric and leftover thread for the next two months. In that time, almost 650 masks were taken from the self-serve container.

One day, as she was walking by with her dog, a woman stopped to express appreciation for the idea, saying she hadn’t seen anything else like it in the city. While we were talking, a car drove by and someone from the neighborhood yelled “Bless you!” out the window. This project and others before it, have been an example of how God can nudge us with ideas that at the time seem uncertain. As we follow God’s nudging, we are becoming more and more known in our community as a congregation who shares God’s love.

EXPANDING OUR WITNESS

Central Plains Mennonite Conference, along with Everence and several other area conferences, sponsored MennoMedia’s recent Webinar, “Expanding Our Witness,” a conversation about racism and the church. This webinar is part of MennoMedia’s new Adaptive Church Webinar Series, and joins other relevant titles such as “Pastoring from a Distance” and “Preaching to the Screen.” You can find this webinar and others in the series by going to MennoMedia’s YouTube page, https://www.youtube.com/user/mennomedia/featured.

Leaders credentialed

Larry Nail was ordained at Julesburg Mennonite Church, Julesburg, CO, on June 28.

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To receive this newsletter in Spanish, call Amanda Bleichty at 319-325-4522. Para recibir este boletín en español, llame a Amanda Bleichty al 319-325-4522.
FINANCES
The summer drought has arrived. Church contributions often slow during the summer months, and this year is no exception. Through July, expenses totaled $84,472.80 while receipts came in at $71,542.39, leading to a deficit of $12,930.41 for the fiscal year (which starts in May). Despite this, we remain thankful for the passion and financial support we witnessed in June, during and after our unprecedented virtual Annual Meeting. We are very thankful for all your support for the work of CPMC!

— Stewardship Task Group

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change service requested