



Scattered Seeds

February
2021

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

— Acts 1:8 (NIV)

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LET US IMAGINE TOGETHER

Imaginemos!

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

Imaginemos is a word that Conference Ministry staff have been meditating on for the last few months as we've been trying to make sense of all the changes that have taken place--and are taking place around us. The world is changing. Our communities and our society do not look like they once did, and the pandemic that has so affected our lives has accelerated the changes that were already coming. Every generation needs to ask the question, "What does it mean to be a faithful follower of Jesus in our current situation?" Faithfulness builds on the legacy that has been left for us by our spiritual ancestors, but challenges us to continue looking around at the world and asking and experimenting with what it looks like to follow Jesus, here and now. Imaginemos is a Spanish word that means "let's imagine." Now is a perfect time for us to imagine together: ¡Imaginemos juntos!

I am firmly convinced that we need to develop our Biblical imagination if we are to discern

together what it looks like to faithfully follow Jesus in our current time. There was a time in the life of the church in North America when a majority of the population attended church in one form or another. A time when, in the words of the movie, *Field of Dreams*, "if you (the church) build it, they will come." But studies by church-planting experts have shown that this is no longer the case. Recent studies show that only about 30% of non-churchgoers are interested in attending a Sunday morning worship event. This means the church needs to get creative if we are to reach the other 70%. If the good news of the Gospel is going to reach our communities and the people who need to hear it, we are going to have to think of new ways of being church and bringing church to them. This will require imagination and creativity from us, as we seek to live the Gospel of Jesus faithfully in our communities.

In Acts 10 we find an interesting story of how God can and does use creativity and imagination to

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change the trajectory of the church. *If you have a few minutes, I recommend that you stop and read Acts 10 before reading on, but I will provide a brief synopsis of the story here.* Up until this point in the story of the early church, the followers of Jesus had been mostly Jews and a very few God-fearing Gentiles, people who were interested in the moral life of the Jewish people and were willing to become Jews themselves. But in this scripture story, God expanded the Kingdom in ways that people had never imagined.

This chapter introduces us to Cornelius, a Roman soldier who was also a devout, God-fearing man who prayed regularly. God reached out to Cornelius, and through an angel told him to send men to Joppa to bring Simon Peter back to his house. Immediately, Cornelius sent his men to find Peter. While they were on their way, God began to prepare Peter for what was to come. Peter had been a disciple of Jesus, he had traveled with Jesus throughout his ministry, and he was held in high regard by other members of the Jesus movement. As Cornelius' men approached the city, Peter was on the roof praying. He was hungry, and as he waited for his host to prepare a meal, he had a vision. In that vision he saw a sheet lowered from heaven that was full of animals that were ceremonially unclean and unfit for Jews to eat. A voice told him to kill and eat, and Peter responded that he couldn't because these animals were unclean. This vision was repeated three times before Peter woke up and began to wonder what it meant. While Peter was puzzled about his vision, Cornelius' men arrived, and the Spirit told Peter that he was to go with them. So Peter invited them in, gave them hospitality, and then went with them to visit Cornelius. When he heard the story of how God had spoken with Cornelius and commanded him to seek out Peter, Peter was amazed and realized that God was doing something that he could never have imagined. Peter

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Eat — Peter's Vision

by Michelle L. Hofer, 8in x 10in, mixed media on paper, 2021

I like a good metaphor. God's imaginative way of communicating who is eligible to receive the Good News of Christ is a wonderful example. My artwork centers on Peter's vision.

Egyptian style — an artistic style I've loved since I was a child. I am using the language and forms of the Egyptian culture/religion to convey how strange God's instructions sounded to Peter.

Three ravens carry a sheet from heaven — these are symbolic of the heavens opening and the vision repeating three times. Some translations use "rift" or "tear" to describe the sky opening. I recently learned ravens are not considered birds of prey because they tear and stab at their food with their beaks instead using their talons.

A menagerie of "unclean" animals — depicted in white and gold to illustrate God's declaration of "clean" and a connection to a strange dream I had recently featuring all-white animals. The arrangement is reminiscent of Edward Hicks' painting *Peaceable Kingdom* symbolizing God's intention for peoples of all nations to be unified in the hearing of the Gospel.

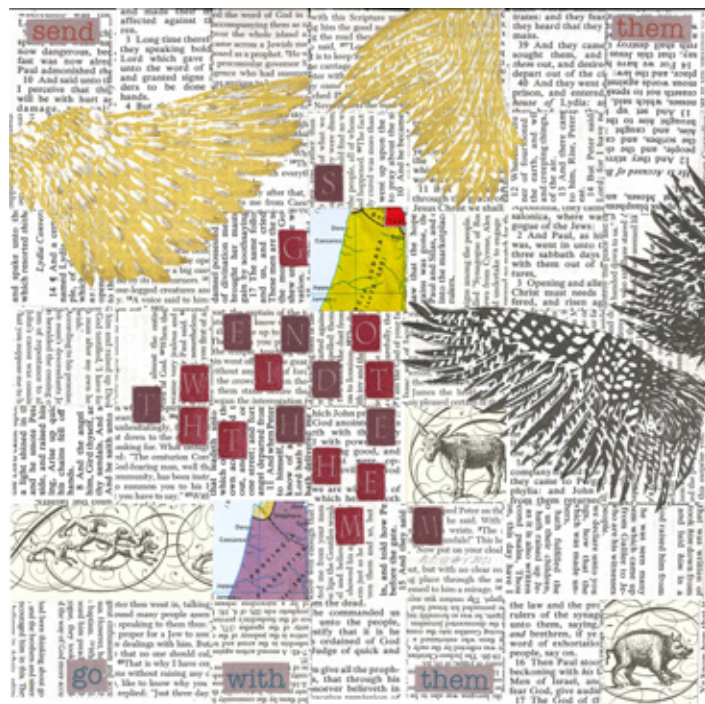
The word "eat" — written in Egyptian hieroglyphics. In Peter's vision, "eat" meant "accept". Other instances in Scripture where "eat" is symbolic come to mind — Ezekiel receiving a scroll and Christ offering bread.

Perhaps you were struck with a sense of confusion in viewing this piece. That is intentional. I wish to incite an initial reaction similar to Peter's. Finding the meaning and messages hidden within requires careful and imaginative effort. What other messages might this visual interpretation bring to us?

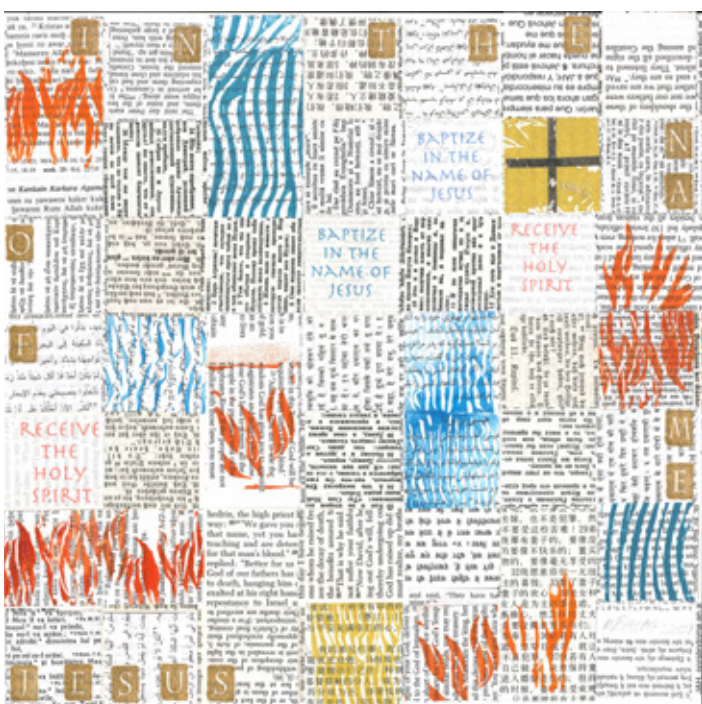
Michelle L. Hofer is an artist from Freeman, South Dakota. Her work is an exploration of the spiritual realm and an effort to share Divine hope and strength in the face of life's challenges. Visit www.mlhofer.com to learn more.



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Didactics for Acts 10 triptych

by Martha Yoder, Triptych. Each piece is 11"x11", woven paper, collage, and printed text

The story of Cornelius and Peter is shown here in three parts. The first piece speaks to the habit of prayer practiced by both Cornelius and Peter. God noticed their prayers and came to them while they were praying. This piece is woven from pages of Psalms, the Lord's Prayer and Jesus' prayer in John 17. The words woven into the piece are "Constantly Praying". The superimposed letters of those words remind us of the layers and depth of constant prayer. As shown in the Psalms, constant prayer contains belief and doubt, confusion and clarity, confession and thankfulness.

In the second piece the fertile ground of prayer has been laid for visions to unfold. The piece is woven from the pages of the book of Acts. The gold wings represent the angel in the vision Cornelius received. The black wings represent the wings of wild birds, shown here with other unclean animals that appeared in Peter's vision. The obedience to the instructions "send them" and "go with them" brought Jew and Gentile together as is shown in the intermingled messages in the center of the piece.

The story ends with Peter in Caesarea understanding the reason for his puzzling vision and preaching the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. This piece is woven from the pages of eleven different language bibles to indicate the spread of the gospel into new and unknown places. The image of gold water and the cross superimposed on gold speak the comprehensive story of Jesus from baptism to death and resurrection that Peter preached.

The orange flames and blue water symbolize the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentiles and the agreement that they should be baptized in the name of Jesus.

Martha Yoder is an artist from Parnell, Iowa. Her favorite way of looking at scripture is to ask of the text the same questions she asks when creating a piece of artwork. Example: "How is it composed", "Where is the color", "Where and how is the message revealed?"

told them the story of Jesus and while he was talking, the Holy Spirit descended on those who were listening and Peter knew that if they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit, then they should be baptized with water, also.

When I read this story I notice what I think is God's incredible creativity in opening up the Kingdom of God to those who had previously been excluded. The Jewish people had an identity; they were the people of God and if you wanted to become part of that people then you had to become a Jew. Becoming a Jew did not mean a few lifestyle tweaks, rather it was a complete change in culture (and circumcision if you were male). But, beginning in Luke 4, we begin to see hints that what God wants to do is much bigger than just redeem the Jewish people and get rid of the Roman forces who were occupying the Jewish homeland. We begin to see that God's vision is for an expansion of God's people that would not be based on becoming a Jew first. In Luke 4 Jesus announces his ministry and then reminds the listeners of two Old Testament stories where God's grace was extended to non-Jews. There were other hints throughout Jesus' ministry that he was moving his followers toward a much bigger vision of the Kingdom of God. In Acts 1:8, just before his ascension, he makes his most direct statement about the change that is to come when he tells his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In Acts 10, God makes explicit God's desire for the Kingdom to be expanded to the ends of the earth.

The second thing I notice in this story is that God didn't just appear to Peter and tell him that things were going to be different now. Instead, God shared a vision of who God's people were going to be. This imaginative vision helped to open Peter's mind to new possibilities. God wanted Peter to know that the doors of the kingdom were being thrown wide open and God wanted Peter to see, to experience, to feel, and to imagine the immensity of what that meant. We often see the same encouragement to imagine the possibilities in the way that Jesus taught his followers. Jesus told stories that challenged people to think more deeply, causing them to use their imaginations and to become seekers of truth. For example, when Jesus was talking with people about loving their neighbors he challenged them to think more deeply about who their neighbors were by telling them the story of the good Samaritan. When Jesus was criticized because he was eating with tax collectors and sinners he told three stories: one about a lost sheep, one about a lost coin and one about a lost son. Many times

Jesus used parables to force people to think and in doing so, he expanded their ideas of the way the world was, and should be. God's vision for the world was and is expansive, and God wanted Peter and the early followers of Jesus to learn to see the world as God does.

The last thing I invite us to notice in this story is Peter's response. Peter had to take a risk and step out in faith even though he didn't have all the answers or know for sure where this journey was going to take him. The Spirit told Peter to go with these men, and I think it is because Peter's imagination had been fired up by the vision God sent that Peter is willing to take that leap. We know that Peter wasn't sure about any of this because it is only after he heard Cornelius' story about the visitation from an angel that he finally put everything together and realized that God was throwing open the doors to the kingdom and making space for those who were previously outsiders. Peter said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." (Acts 10:34-35, NIV) Peter had been prepared for this kind of thing because he had spent a great deal of time with Jesus as a disciple and so had developed, over time, the imagination to see that God might be doing something that had never been done before. His imagination and view of the world had been shaped by all of the stories that Jesus had told and the way in which Jesus had expanded his followers' understanding of the kingdom of God and who could be a part of it. Peter's imagination was primed and ready for God's strange vision that day in Joppa.

There are a couple of things that I want to take from this story as we think about what it means to be people who imagine with God what the future of the church might look like. First, we serve an incredibly creative God who is present with us through the Holy Spirit. In the midst of difficult circumstances we can become disheartened and wonder where God is and what God is doing. A thorough read of the Bible reveals to us that God has been present with God's people and promises to continue to be present. God has not abandoned us, and our creative God will continue to be at work, opening up new avenues to share the good news of Jesus with a world that desperately needs to hear it. God has an incredibly big vision for the world; God sees the world as it could be and not just as it is. I am often reminded of the incredible vision of the kingdom we find in Revelation 7:9, "After this I looked, and there before me was a multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the lamb." We do not decide who gets to be a part of

the people of God and it is not our responsibility to defend God's kingdom. Rather, God wants us to imagine and step into this incredible vision of a kingdom that knows no boundaries and that is made up of people from every corner of the world.

The second thing that I hope we take from the story is the need for us to develop the sort of Biblical imagination that allows us to step into the unknown future that our creative God is inviting us to join. Peter had been deeply steeped in the way of Jesus, and so when these new things began to happen he was open to see where they might lead. I believe God is inviting people to continually pursue truth, continually think about what it means to be followers of Jesus, continually use their imagination to enter into God's creative vision for the world. We need to study the Scriptures deeply, not so that we can find all the answers to life's questions, as if the Bible were some sort of instruction manual, but rather, to borrow an image from Eugene Petersen, we need to understand the Bible as a window through which we are able to see and understand God a little bit more clearly. Developing our biblical imagination means we delve deeply and openly into God's story, allowing it to re-shape us so that we can see everything around us from God's perspective.

The third thing we should take from this story is the courage to step out in faith even when we aren't completely sure where God is taking us. It is not up to us to decide who is in and who is out of God's Kingdom. We are not the judges, and one thing that is clear from Jesus' life is that he will make space for all kinds of people that most of us would probably reject. At MennoCon19 Tom Yoder Neufeld shared three Bible study sessions with the delegates and one of the refrains from those studies was, "The church is a mess, thanks be to God!" He was referring to the fact that when God invites people into God's kingdom they come as they are and then it is the work of the Holy Spirit to re-shape them. Tom invited us into God's compelling vision for the world. (Those studies can be found here <https://convention.mennoniteusa.org/post-convention-resources/>). God's creative and compelling vision for the world invites us to step out in faith, to step out into the messiness of life and into the messiness of a world that still cannot imagine a different way of doing things. An earlier story of Peter can also be an example

of this to us. When Jesus walks out on the water to the disciples who are in a boat in the middle of the storm, Peter asks Jesus if he can walk out and join him. Jesus says yes and Peter hops out of the boat and begins to walk on the water. We know from the story that eventually he loses his focus and begins to sink, but when he had his eyes fixed on Jesus he was able to walk on water (Matthew 14:22-33). Jesus invites us to step out of our comfort zones to live into God's incredible vision, into a life and a world that will probably be messy.

We live in a world that is changing and we can be overwhelmed by those changes or we can see them as new opportunities to engage our communities with the Gospel of Jesus. The ways in which we did church in the past may not serve us moving forward, but that does not mean that the church is finished or that God is finished with the church. Rather, it means that we need to pursue God and the creative things that God is doing in and around us. We need to be open to the ways in which God continues to throw open the doors of the kingdom with an invitation to all people. We need to pay attention to the new opportunities we have to creatively engage with the world and tell the story of Jesus afresh. We need to have the sort of creative imagination that allows us to see God and the ways that God is at work. We need to develop the sensitivity to hear the Spirit calling us into new and different situations. Then we need to have the courage to step into those places where we have never gone before to see what God is doing there, and to join in. We can see the changes and challenges of our world as negatives, or we can see them as opportunities to work with God in creative ways that allow for the good news of Jesus to be seen, heard, and known in our time.

¡Imaginemos juntos! (Let's imagine together)



To work on our collective imaginative capacity, from time to time we'll be posting imaginative exercises on Facebook called "Imaginemos: Let us imagine together" that invite us to imagine together the world as God intends it to be. Stay tuned!



Transitions

Suzanne Ford ended as pastor at Zion, Donnellson, IA, on Nov. 30, 2020

Terri Churchill ended as associate pastor at Third Way, St. Paul, MN, in December, 2020

Gene Miller ended as interim pastor at Hutterthal, Freeman, SD, on Dec. 31, 2020

Randall Koehler began as pastor at Hutterthal, Freeman, SD, on Jan. 1, 2021

Gene Thiesen will end as interim pastor at Bethesda, Henderson, NE, on Feb. 28, 2021

Leaders credentialed

Randall Koehler licensed toward ordination and installed as pastor at Hutterthal, Freeman, SD on Jan. 17, 2021

Deaths

Herb Yoder, retired pastor, on Jan. 5, 2021. Read his full obituary here: <https://www.powellfuneralhomes.com/obituary/532124/Herbert--Lee-Yoder/>

Noah Helmuth, former pastor at East Union, Kalona, IA, on Jan. 10, 2021

Long Cold Winter

Last fall, when the Christian Formation Committee started discussing how to fulfill our mandate this year, we knew that winter was coming. It would not only be a winter where weather confines people indoors, exaggerated by COVID-19, but also a winter that would challenge our hope for spring, exaggerated by the divisive culture that engulfs us. The spiritual health of so many would need encouragement.

The collection of webinars we called “Long Cold Winter” was conceived to help encourage the conference’s spirituality in the knowledge that many of us would be more alone this winter than usual. Opportunities for persons from throughout the conference to come together for practices such as liturgical worship, artistic creativity, remembrance, prayer, healing, and silence were planned.

There are a few more “Creating Together” evenings coming up, and I am excited to be leading a “Lenten Spiritual Practices” series during Lent. The Lent series will be a survey of various personal and communal spiritual practices for you to “try on” and see how well they fit.

This year, we have seen the rapid adoption of electronic means to gather together. My hope is that we have given examples of how our churches can provide programming for each other in ways that local congregations could not maintain independently. May the hope of spring include emerging from our homes as well as our congregations reaching outside their walls. Using the new technology we have mastered, we can now connect in a meaningful way to other churches in the conference and the world.

Stan Harder, Chair, Christian Formation Committee, CPMC



The Central Plains Mennonite Conference
Christian Formation Committee
presents:

Long Cold Winter

A series of warm webinars for a cold season

Creating Together: Imaginative Art as Spiritual Practice,

Thursday, February 18: *Bryn Hovde, Art teacher, Hillcrest Academy, Kalona, IA.*

Thursday, March 18: *Michelle Hofer, artist, Freeman, SD.*

Lenten Spiritual Practices

February 23, March 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

Additional information can be found on our website, www.centralplainsmc.org.

Conference Announcements:

Your **Conference Ministers** are open to traveling and being present in person with congregations this spring (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

The **Pastoral Leadership Committee** is very disappointed to announce that due to COVID-19, there will not be an in-person Annual Leaders Retreat in 2021. This is especially frustrating since we had to cancel last year's retreat as well. However, all is not lost! We are brainstorming ways to move the ALR online, so please keep April 18-20, 2021 blocked out on your calendar. Stay tuned!

-Susan Janzen, Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership



helping children and adults choose the Jesus-way of PEACE!

Shalom Readers is an excellent opportunity for adults and children in CPMC to read books that help them to choose the Jesus-way of peace! You can find lists of Shalom Readers books on our website, centralplainsmc.org/shalom-readers.

We also have a library full of Shalom Readers books (for children) available in our Freeman, SD office. **Monica Clem would be happy to pack up boxes to send to your congregation or family.** You can contact Monica at office@centralplainsmc.org to request a box of Shalom Readers books (for children)!

Scattered Seeds

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FINANCES

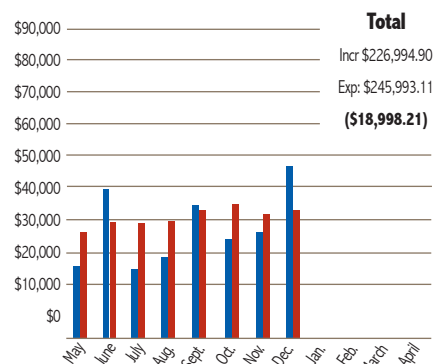
The Central Plains budget for the 2020-2021 year continues to operate with a deficit. Total income for the first eight months of the fiscal year came in at \$226,994.90 while expenses for the same period came in at \$245,993.11. As a result this leaves us with a deficit of \$18,998.21. We are thankful that giving at the end of the calendar year helped to reduce the deficit by \$14,858.16. We continue to be thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference. Thank you.

— Stewardship Task Group

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.*