



# Scattered Seeds

June  
2021

“...everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”

— Matt. 7:24, 25b

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## IMAGINATION & FAITH FORMATION

### Finding and flexing our imaginative muscles

by Amanda Bleichty, Conference Minister for Christian Formation

When we got married, my husband and I moved into his childhood farmhouse. Built in 1910, it's an offset foursquare with beautiful dark wood trim and a big porch, but at 111 years old, it could use some work. I insisted that certain parts of the house be remodeled before our wedding, but I'm slowly coming to terms with the fact that this home will always be a "project." Every year or two, we embark on a new phase. This year, we've engaged a contractor to do a big project for us, adding on and turning a big back room into an apartment for my husband's parents. But long before the contractor showed up, this project lived in my imagination. Before demolition, before concrete foundations, before mountains of drywall dust, there were countless hours spent on "research," countless drawings and diagrams, countless sleepless nights designing, re-designing, re-re-designing the house for the life I hope that we'll lead, for the family I hope we'll become here.

As a child, my imagination took me on adventures. For an afternoon, I could become one of the Boxcar Children, a pioneer on the Oregon Trail, a school teacher, an astronaut, or an explorer. As an adult, my imagination is put to use pretending that my farmhouse is less drafty, more organized, and finally, "just the way I want it." My imagination is used mostly on things that are not *that* hard to imagine.

Don't get me wrong, I like imagining the way my house "could" be, but I can't shake the feeling that something important has been lost. While my imagination used to take me on adventures, or help me figure out who I wanted to be, or to imagine delightfully improbable futures for myself— now it's used to figure out how to be the most comfortable with the least amount of money or work. Yikes.

*continued on page 2*

I've been thinking about imagination a lot lately, along with my fellow Central Plains Mennonite Conference Ministers. What started out as musings about the changing church and world, turned into discussions about faith and the Bible and mission and formation and...imagination. Through our thinking and reading and prayers and discussions, I've come to the conclusion that a very real part of the work of the church, of being formed in communities of disciples of Jesus, of being conduits of God's love and peace in the world, is in developing, practicing, trusting, and using our God-given imaginations.

After all, in our scriptures when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, isn't he inviting us to imagine it, in all of its upside-down strangeness and complexity? When Jesus tells parables, isn't he asking those first hearers and us today, to use our imaginations: to enter the stories, inhabit them and make them ours in order to understand them more deeply than at face value? When we read and engage the scriptures, aren't we supposed to be imagining the possibilities of a different world, one in which the first are last and the last, first? Aren't we supposed to imagine what discipleship looks like? How our following Jesus could or should shape the world we live in? In the scriptures and in our experiences with God, aren't we constantly being invited to imagine the world as God sees it, the world as God created it to be?

If we're out of practice and have trouble imagining this different world, this strange kingdom, then how are we supposed to be citizens of it? How are we supposed to recognize and understand God's delightfully improbable work that is happening all around us? How can we be expected to join in what God is doing in our midst if we can't even see it, if we can't even imagine it, if we haven't practiced making room for God to do a new thing among us?

Though perhaps unexpected, I see this idea of helping one another and our congregations and conference enlarge our capacity for imagination as one of the backbones of much of our conference ministry work (especially much of my work in Christian formation) in this coming year and beyond. I believe, in these changing times, that a well-developed imagination is one of the most important spiritual tools that we can wield. I believe that part of our life-long Christian formation needs to be finding and flexing those God-given imaginative muscles, even when (maybe especially when) they've long been dormant. I believe that by using imaginative practices in our life together, we will be more likely to recognize and join in the future that God has in store for the church. *Imaginemos!* Let us imagine together!

## IMAGINATION & FAITH FORMATION

### The Lent Lego Challenge

*by Thom Bower, interim pastor, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Art is a valuable tool for teaching with imagination. We can encounter how others have expressed their imaginings through art, and we can create our own art to express our imaginings.

Each Sunday of Lent, Faith Mennonite issued a Lenten Lego Build Challenge. First we named an item from the following week's scripture lessons, then identified a focus verse, and also gave a larger passage "to learn more." We had two levels: the Lego Challenge and the Bigger Build Challenge. Both challenges had concrete connections to the scripture lesson, the first one more literal and the second one leaning toward conceptual.

For example, the second Sunday used two scriptures. From Mark 8:31, the Lego Challenge asked us to show Jesus teaching the disciples. For the Bigger Build, we were

asked to use Genesis 17:1 to show God and Abram talking—without using minifigs (Lego people)!

The entire congregation was invited to build using Lego or whatever materials they wanted. Worshipping online, we asked for photos of creations that could be used as the opening of Children's Time on Sunday.

Some families built together with Lego. One child preferred MagneBlocks. Adults submitted photography, paper cuttings and drawings. Feedback expressed delight in seeing kids' (and adults') art in worship and for connecting scripture with playfulness.

This idea could easily be expanded into home Bible study. Providing a few reflective questions would amplify the play and generate household conversations. This could assist

parents with young children transitioning from literal concrete images to more symbolic metaphors found throughout scripture.

When returning to in-person worship, the artists could be asked to bring their creations to worship. Perhaps a display table could keep art safe during the worship. Children's Time could ask about the artistic choices made, helping children and adults to interpret both art and scripture.

Another variation could be to ask for a single artwork for a specific week. Families or groups could be invited to choose specific scripture lessons and dates. That day, their artwork could be used as a worship focus during Children's Time, the sermon, and/or prayer.



Left: Jesus entering Jerusalem gate; Right: God speaks with Abram. Photos by Thom Bower

### **Central Plains Lego Build Challenge, Matthew 7:24-27**

*Jesus was a story-teller. He often used metaphors and word pictures to invite people to enter the stories he told, and to be shaped by them. In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus tells the story of two builders, one wise, and one foolish. The wise builder built a house using rock as the foundation. The foolish builder built a house on shifting sand. Soon the rains came down, the floodwaters came up, and the winds of a great storm blew against the houses. The house built on the rock stood firm, while the house built on sand collapsed with a crash.*

*Read Matthew 7:24-27 and choose your challenge!*

**Lego Challenge:** Use Lego or other materials to show the two different houses after the storm.

**Bigger Build Challenge:** Use Lego or other materials to show 1) how bedrock is prepared for building—and the status of a house built on bedrock after the storm, and 2) how sand is prepared for building—and the status of a house built on sand after the storm.

**Follow-up questions:** How does Jesus connect “house” and “faith” in this story?

*Why would Jesus use a house to describe faith?*

*Why is a storm part of the story?*

*What kinds of storms has your faith been through?*

*Name parts of the bedrock your faith is built on.*

*How has entering this story with art helped to enlarge your understanding of it?*



## Teaching religious imagination

*by Thom Bower, interim pastor, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

We draw upon religious imagination as we start a new prayer, seek to understand biblical history or stretch to interpret the Bible. Discerning God's invitation to join with God is an act of imagination. Visioning steps to justice and peace gestate through imagination. Strategizing neighborhood outreach, praying for healing, planning a youth event, preparing a worship service—all of these use imagination.

What makes imagination “religious”? That is similar to asking what makes a painting, a song, a poem, a statue, a film “religious.” Intent of the creator, experience of the viewer, use of traditional symbols or contemporary imagery, new combinations that interpret the present or represent an historic connection, the invocation of contemplation or incited action, personal experience, communal identity....there isn't one answer for what is “religious imagination,” because there is not one answer for “what is religious.”

Imagination, like art, holds a powerful role in our growing faith. How can we teach toward the imagination? Here are six guiding principles.

**Teach to the senses** Our earliest learnings are direct experiences of touch, taste, smell, sound, sight and movement. Our lifelong learning continues to use the experiences that we sense. The more senses we can involve, the more a lesson will connect with other learnings, become a memory, and the ability to identify interconnectedness will grow. Our sense memory is also deeply connected to our emotional memory. Appealing to the senses draws on a wide array of experiences.

Stories invite sensory props like a piece of slate, a bowl of sand, hammer and nail, rainstick and misting bottle or a strong fan. Some stories invite contrasts. Cinder blocks and slime, peacock feathers and wooden dowels, wood blocks and plastic eggs. There's an old adage: “Don't tell, show.” Take this one step farther: “Don't show, invite an experience.” Teaching religious imagination is about the process, not the product.

**Teach to the details** As we age and incorporate more learning styles, we tend to emphasize words more than

experiences. We often allow sensory experiences to merge together, to be dulled or muted. Interrupt these habits by giving attention to the details. Each experience is made meaningful by attentiveness. Taste this bread. Hear this melody. Follow your breathing as you pray. Compare the colors of your peacock feather to your neighbor's.

Changing pace draws attention. Think about adding a prolonged silence during a hymn, slowly walking down a path, or using staccato while preaching. Swing a peacock feather like a sickle, then see how long you can balance it on your palm (Hint: move slowly).

We model attentiveness by providing detailed experiences. “Turquoise and emerald flashed around a blinking eye at the end of the arm-length fan” invites more than “a shiny peacock feather.” With words, be poetic to invoke senses, memories and experiences. “As the cloth-wrapped loaf was passed, I saw steam rise and the scent from this fresh-baked loaf of whole wheat bread reminded me of a summer afternoon with my grandmother, a basket of peacock feathers sitting behind her.”

**Teach by asking for connections** Identifying details directs the imagination both to remember this specific experience and also to connect to other similar experiences. This whole wheat bread is like another wheat bread consumed a year ago, and they are connected to the communion pita bread three years ago. Our minds are prepared for many kinds of patterns.

As we invite interconnectivity, we must accept—and even invite and welcome—the absurd. We cannot ask for imagination to remain rational. The Bible asks us to accept a lot that seems absurd. God speaking through a burning bush, then dividing a sea to help escaping slaves. God giving messages to poetic, dramatic, and often weird prophets. God moving international armies to end exile. God becoming human. Water becoming wine. Whirlwinds and tongues of fire imbuing gifts for serving others.

**Teach asking “What if?”** What if the bedrock and sand builders were neighbors? Business competitors? What if both builders had soundtracks? What if they were building outhouses?

What if we understand God's direction? What if we don't? What if we pray for healing? What if there were a nonviolent option? What if people did not have to be poor? Hungry? Turned away? Segregated by skin tone? What if God is present with us in this place and time?

What if the voice of God were the sound of a peacock feather moving through the air by a child dancing to hymns? What if we use peacock feathers to represent the flames at Pentecost? (While we often use flame-surrounded doves to signify Pentecost, parts of the early church used the phoenix—and the phoenix was modeled on a peacock.) What if we carry peacock feathers while protesting police shootings? What if we danced at the same protest?

**Create spaces for sharing expressions** Prepare for imaginative expression with times and places designed for it. Sing new songs in worship. Hang art on the walls from Sunday School classes. Present poetic proclamations from the pulpit - perhaps with peacocks.

**Finally, learn alongside** We are lifelong learners. When we teach, we are deliberate in shaping the experiences of learners. But we are learning as we prepare that experience, while we experience it with them, and when we reflect on what we have done together. We too come with questions to ponder, memories to connect, prayers to ask. Authentically identifying where you continue to grow helps others begin to imagine how this experience extends into their own lifetimes of learning. To teach others to imagine we must also imagine.

Imagination, like wisdom, is a communal application of faith. Although for some it may seem more innate, all of us possess the gift. When we share this practice of imagination, when we communally wrestle with this part of being made and living in the image of God, our communities deepen.

*Dr. Thom Bower serves as Transitional Pastor with Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis. He is ordained in the United Church of Christ and is the vice-chair of the Association of United Church Educators ([auce-ucc.org](http://auce-ucc.org)). Perpetual student, Thom holds five theological degrees, three in education. He loves building with Lego and finds peacocks wonderful but strange.*





## Transitions

**Galen Kaufman** ended as pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church in Mountain Lake, MN on May 31.

Congratulations to **Matt Troyer-Miller**, pastor at Wood River Mennonite Church, Wood River, NE, who graduated from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, on May 1, 2021 with a Master of Divinity, with a major in Pastoral Ministry.

## New Ministries Grants

Since 2012, Central Plains Mennonite Conference has maintained a “New Ministries Fund” outside of our operating budget. Through this fund, the Stewardship Task Group and Conference Board joyfully give grants to congregations and individuals in order to pursue new projects that facilitate relationships, assist witness, develop leadership or nurture Christian formation. In the last year, three projects have applied for and been approved for New Ministries Grants.

## Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) Training

Amanda Bleichty applied for a New Ministries Grant to jump-start some of the staff and board plans for intercultural development and anti-racism work. The New Ministries Grant allowed Amanda to become a Qualified Administrator of the IDI. Sue Park-Hur, Denominational Minister for Leadership Development of MC USA describes the IDI: “It is an effective tool to empower our congregations, area conferences and institutions to see our commonalities and differences. If we want to show the world a different way of being—working with and even celebrating our differences—the IDI can give us the skills to be able to do that.”

In addition to training Amanda as an administrator of the tool, the grant also provided funds for the first phase of a three-step process. In year 1 (2020-21), Amanda administered the IDI to staff, board, and committee chairs, debriefed individuals and groups, and she and Nathan began to coordinate cohorts who will work at intercultural development together in the coming years. In year 2 (2021-2022), Amanda will administer the IDI to any new staff, board, and committee chairs, to committee members and to a small group of pastors who will also become part of a learning cohort. In year 3 (2022-2023), Amanda will administer the IDI to CPMC pastors, who will also join learning cohorts.

If you are interested in learning more about the IDI, or in using the tool as an individual, as part of a small group, or in a congregation, feel free to contact Amanda ([amandableichty@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:amandableichty@centralplainsmc.org)). You can find more information about the IDI at <https://idiinventory.com/>.



## Vibrant Faith Coaching School

In response to our changing world, Nathan Luitjens applied for and received a New Ministries Grant to pursue training as a ministry coach. In his application, Nathan noted, “The world around us is changing quickly and I believe the church is finding itself in a place it never expected to be. Many of the ‘best practices’ from the past in church work are simply not effective in the new space in which we find ourselves. As a conference ministry staff...we believe that what pastors and churches need in this time of change is coaches.” This grant will enable Nathan to become trained as a coach who can walk alongside congregations and pastors and help them think imaginatively through their strengths, challenges and opportunities. He envisions his role being one of asking questions that will help congregations to clarify their direction, including what things to keep, what to pick up, and what to leave behind. You can find more information about coaching at Vibrant Faith at <https://vibrantfaith.org/coaching/>.

## Cross-Generation Peace Talks

CPMC Conference Staff and Board are so excited about the third New Ministries Grant recipient! The Peace and Justice Task Group (made up of Margie Mejia Caraballo, Tom Kessler and Jane Yoder-Short) has received a grant to incentivize youth (middle school-college age) to videotape interviews with older folks who have served in PAX, TAP, 1-W, VS or other service, those who have had their Jesus-centered peace position questioned, or those who have stories of simple acts of kindness. The grant proposes that each student who produces a 5–15-minute video interview will receive at least \$100, and the videos will be featured on the conference website and at Annual Meeting 2022. The CPMC Conference Board was so excited by this New Ministries application that they insisted on an amendment to the original proposal—The Peace and Justice Task Group needed to ask for more money! We hope to receive MANY videos that will tell the stories of CPMC’s courageous workers for peace!

For more information see your Youth Group Sponsor, or email Jane Yoder-Short at [wilmajane17@gmail.com](mailto:wilmajane17@gmail.com).

## Contact information

### Moderator

John Murray 620-951-0176  
[John.murray951@gmail.com](mailto:John.murray951@gmail.com)

### Assistant Moderator

Pam Gerig Unruh 319-256-7294  
[pgunruh@gmail.com](mailto:pgunruh@gmail.com)

### Office

P.O. Box 101, Freeman, SD 57029

Monica Clem, Office Manager  
605-929-3325  
[office@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:office@centralplainsmc.org)

### Hispanic Ministries Coordinator

Ramiro Hernandez 319-621-3725  
[rmherns@yahoo.com](mailto:rmherns@yahoo.com)

### Conference Ministers

P.O. Box 352, Kalona, IA 52247

Nathan Luitjens 319-461-6505,  
[nathanluitjens@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:nathanluitjens@centralplainsmc.org)

Amanda Bleichty 319-325-4522  
[amandableichty@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:amandableichty@centralplainsmc.org)

Susan Janzen 319-610-1007  
[susanjanzen@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:susanjanzen@centralplainsmc.org)

# Scattered Seeds

Scattered Seeds June 2021

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E-mail: [scatteredseeds@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:scatteredseeds@centralplainsmc.org). Telephone: 319-325-4522.  
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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.

Central Plains Mennonite Conference  
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## FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for the 20-21 year is now complete. Total income for the fiscal year came in at \$365,937.65, while expenses for the same period came in at \$371,632.29. As a result this leaves us with a negative balance of \$5,694.64 for our 20-21 adopted budget. Fortunately the conference received Payroll Protection Funds through COVID-19 funding to help offset some of our payroll and benefits expenses and ended with a positive balance of \$29,107.36. In addition to our regular budget giving, we are grateful for additional donations of \$18,784.75 for churches and individuals who have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; \$15,250.00 of these funds have already been paid out in grants. We continue to be thankful for the support of the members of CPMC. Thank you.

— Stewardship Task Group

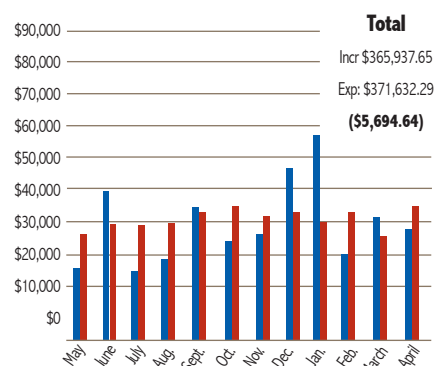
## UPCOMING EVENTS

**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](http://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.*