



# Scattered Seeds

Spring  
2022



"I have given  
them the glory  
that you gave me,  
that they may be  
one as we are  
one—I in them  
and you in me—"

— John 17:22-23

## SPECIAL ISSUE 2022: FAITH, LIFE AND PROCEDURES TASK GROUP Reclaiming our shared identity

*by John Murray, Moderator of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, Third Way, Saint Paul, MN*

Along with the crowds of other folks looking for new outdoor activities amidst the pandemic these last years, I have started playing disc golf. I love the outdoors, I can get my steps in and push my son in a stroller through the woods or across the fairways (let's be honest, I rarely play the fairways), and like many of us frugal Mennos - I appreciate that most of the courses are free!

One frustrating aspect of disc golf - similar to its more distinguished plaid pants-wearing older brother, is that courses often feature hazards like water, trees, and out-of-bounds areas to add difficulty. If you've ever played, you know that at least half of the danger these hazards play is mental. When you see one, a shot you know you can throw gets harder in your head. If there's a single tree in the middle of a football field, I will without a doubt hit it squarely.

It's interesting that whether in sport or life - when we see a hazard or a challenge, we tend to focus on that obstacle rather than on the path we want

to take. The same is true of difference.

There is a growing "difference" in our body - both broadly at the conference and national levels, just as well as locally in many of our home congregations. In the last few years especially, the differences between us have, for many reasons, been drawing more and more of our time, energy, and focus.

In reality, while these differences are gaining focus - difference in and of itself has always been present.

This is where my dad-level analogy starts to lose steam - because while I work to put that tree out of my mind before I throw, I believe that difference is something to be celebrated, not cast aside - even if it is uncomfortable at times. We talk openly about the ways our children are wildly different from one another. We celebrate the diversity of the fruits of the spirit and gifts in our communities that are each uniquely able to meet the diversity

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of need. And yes, sometimes we raise our eyebrows when something new or unexpected makes us stop and try to understand. In those moments, what will be the response we choose?

The thing is, a difference can only exist in a system where there is a more dominant similarity holding everything within.

When difference begins to draw more of our time, energy and focus, it can start to feel as if we are more different than we are alike. As that difference draws more energy and focus - it can shift how we identify. We become known for our identity within that particular difference, and the similarity(s) we share become less emphasized. There are very natural aspects of this human process of reorganization. I'm sure you can think of a few examples right away - friendships on the elementary school playground or our hobbies and interest groups as we grow and mature.

A few years ago, Palmer Becker suggested in a piece on Anabaptist-Mennonite Distinctives: "Our primary identity should be that of Jesus at the center of our faith, Community at the center of our lives, and Reconciliation at the center of our work."

This, in my mind, is where we as the Church are called to be [radically] different from the ways of the world in how we navigate our differences. If we proclaim Jesus at the center of our faith, and prioritize community as the center of our lives - then, I believe, we are called to choose the more difficult path of reconciliation amidst our differences.

This goes against the natural processes of the world that are so easy to fall into, especially in an ever-increasingly polarized environment.

An entirely separate article (or a sermon) would be required to discuss what that reconciliation might entail, but I assure you it involves work as a conference, congregation, family system, and as individuals. This work is a journey. For now, we are invited to prepare faithfully, remembering our shared identity, earnestly and prayerfully considering all who are gathered as the body of Christ.

This issue of Scattered Seeds has a lot of information in it to help your congregation prepare for the MC USA Special Delegate Session in May, which is the delegate session intended for Cincinnati last summer but delayed one year so we could meet in person. It was faithfully put together by the Faith, Life, and Procedures Task Group, our staff, and it includes resources from denominational leadership.

As with delegate sessions in the past, congregations are asked to faithfully discern the resolutions on the docket. All of us will either send or be sent to Kansas City. We must trust that each delegate is a valued and important part of the body of Christ. Reconciling with one another, we will faithfully and humbly listen, share, and discern together amidst our differences - not in spite of or driven by them.

If you have questions, please reach out to the FLP task group via our website, or contact our ministry staff or me. I ask that you join me in prayer as we faithfully navigate the differences and hazards amidst us - all the while keeping our focus on the blessed tie that binds.





# Mennonite Church USA Special Delegate Session Resolutions

## CLARIFICATION OF MENNONITE CHURCH USA POLITY AND THE ROLE OF THE MEMBERSHIP GUIDELINES OF MENNONITE CHURCH USA

This resolution clarifies authority in MC USA and aligns our practice with our stated policy. The retirement of the Membership Guidelines does not change where authority lies within our system. This organizational resolution does not speak to the merits of LGBTQ inclusion in MC USA nor address concerns about same-sex unions.

**Type of Resolution:** This resolution is designated an Organizational Resolution. Organizational Resolutions are taken to approve bylaws or deal with other legal matters.

**Process:** This resolution will be voted on by delegates in Kansas City.

## FOR JUSTICE IN THE U.S. CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

“We, as a church body, commit to confronting the injustice within the current U.S. criminal legal system. There are many ways individual congregations, conferences, institutions and agencies of the denomination can participate. We will call on them to report back to the delegate body at the next biennial convention.”

**Type of Resolution:** This resolution is designated a Church Statement resolution. A Church Statement resolution gives direction to the church on matters of Christian faithfulness, often concerning current issues or issues where current church documents or previous statements fail to adequately address current questions/challenges. *Church statements should be developed to further God’s mission, as defined by our statement of vision and purpose as well as our Renewed Commitments.*

**Process:** This resolution is not scheduled for a vote. It has been designated as a study resolution.

## MENNONITE CHURCH USA ACCESSIBILITY RESOLUTION

“The purpose of this resolution is to help all members of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), including congregations, area conferences, agencies and constituency groups, recognize and seek to remove the barriers to belonging in architecture, communications and attitudes that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in church life, and to bring wholeness to the body of Christ, as those barriers are removed and all

people are fully integrated in the community of faith.”

**Type of Resolution:** This resolution is designated a Church Statement Resolution. A Church Statement resolution gives direction to the church on matters of Christian faithfulness, often concerning current issues or issues where current church documents or previous statements fail to adequately address current questions/challenges. *Church statements should be developed to further God’s mission, as defined by our statement of vision and purpose as well as our Renewed Commitments.*

**Process:** This resolution will be voted on by delegates in Kansas City.

## A RESOLUTION FOR REPENTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION

“Our denomination’s policies, structures, practices and theologies have excluded LGBTQIA from fully-sanctioned participation in the denomination and have caused great harm to LGBTQIA Mennonites and their families.”

**Type:** This resolution is designated a Church Statement resolution. A Church Statement resolution gives direction to the church on matters of Christian faithfulness, often concerning current issues or issues where current church documents or previous statements fail to adequately address current questions/challenges. *Church statements should be developed to further God’s mission, as defined by our statement of vision and purpose as well as our Renewed Commitments.*

**Process:** When delegates gather in Kansas City, they will be able to decide together whether or not to discuss this resolution.

For the full text of these resolutions, impact statements written by MC USA staff, or other resources related to the Special Delegate Session in Kansas City or these resolutions, visit:

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/special-delegate-session-22/>  
<http://www.centralplainsmc.org/mc-usa-delegate-resources.html> or contact one of the members of the FLP.



**Mennonite  
Church  
USA**

# Life together with Jesus at the center

by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister  
Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA

I've been hearing a lot of questions lately. Some of them include: "Why are congregations allowed to have such different beliefs?" "Why does it seem like we can't make decisions?" and "How did we end up in this situation?" The answers to these questions come down to church *polity*, or how we organize our life together.

Within Central Plains we have significant differences because we believe strongly in congregational autonomy, which is the freedom for congregations to adapt to who God is calling them to be in their community settings. Underlying this understanding is Palmer Becker's work on the foundations of an Anabaptist understanding for Christian faith. First, ***Jesus is the center of our faith***, which means that we are first and foremost followers of Jesus and everything we understand about who God is and how God operates in the world is understood by looking at Jesus. Second, ***community is the center of our life***. This foundational piece means that we gather with other people who have made Jesus the center of their faith, so that together we can figure out what it looks like to faithfully follow Jesus in our time. Third, ***reconciliation is the center of our work***. This reminds us that helping people become reconciled to God and each other is the central work of this community.

One of the most important things we see Jesus do in the Gospels is make space for those who were previously excluded from the people of God, those seen as the "sinners" in their day. This work of reconciling the excluded to God and to God's people should inform the work of Anabaptist communities today as we seek to bring God's healing and hope to our communities. The church exists for the sake of the world, and each congregation must discern what it means for them to reach out to those who are outside the people of God and make space for them to be brought into God's people.

Congregations in different places and social contexts discern differently what it means for them to be faithful followers of Jesus and to make space for those who had

been excluded to experience reconciliation with God and others. We may not agree with how other congregations seek to do the work of reconciliation, but we must recognize that for each congregation, the impetus for these differences in how we engage comes, not from wanting to be like our broader society, but rather from a place of seeking to faithfully follow Jesus as a Christian community.

So what happens when we disagree on the way forward? Why doesn't the denomination just step in and decide our direction? To answer these questions, we need to picture a pyramid. Unlike many Christian denominations (and some of the denominations MC USA was formed from), our structure does not place MC USA executive leadership at the pinnacle of a top-down pyramid, followed by conference leadership, then pastors, then lay members on the bottom. As Anabaptist-Mennonites, we believe that the power-structure found in a traditional pyramid has many serious drawbacks, including that it puts far too much power in the hands of one person and allows that person and their opinions to set the direction, even if that is not where others have discerned God is calling them.

Instead, the church-structure pyramid of MC USA is upside down. At our best, all church members function as the "top" of the pyramid, because we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We believe that all of us in the church are called to faithfully follow Jesus by bearing witness to him and his kingdom (1 Peter 2:9). Then, below church members, we have pastors, whose role is to equip, empower and encourage the members of their congregation to live into their God-given vocation as ministers of the Gospel. Conference leaders are below pastors, offering support, encouragement, coaching and resources for pastors and congregations who are seeking to live into who God is calling them to be in their local communities. Finally, the denomination is below the conferences, supporting, providing stability, accountability and pathways to unity to the conferences and congregations as they do their work.



Functionally, this means that church members discern and set direction for their local congregation. Conference delegates, who represent their congregations, gather together to set the direction for the work of the conference. And delegates from local congregations and conferences set the direction for MC USA. Delegates ask the conference and denomination to work on those things that will support and sustain God's work in each community, and the congregations, the conference, and the denomination hold together with Jesus at the center, to do more than any one person or one congregation can do on their own.

To some, this structure may seem cumbersome, and it often means that decisions are made much more slowly than they would be in a traditional top-down structure. But, it also means that no one voice can be given too much weight. It means we take seriously the vocation of discipleship for each member of a Mennonite church. It means that when we gather to discern and make decisions, we must trust that the Holy Spirit will be at work, granting a common vision, even in the midst of our diversity.

The direction of CPMC and MC USA will not be decided by a few people in a boardroom. It will be decided by the church who gathers and trusts (one another and God) and discerns together the way that God is calling us to move forward. With **Jesus** as our center, may we engage in the hard work of discerning together in **community** the ways that God is calling each of us to join in the work of **reconciliation** in our towns and cities, across our conference, and around the country.



## What is the Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group?

Central Plains Mennonite Conference bylaws empower the Conference Board, in cooperation with the Pastoral Leadership Committee, to appoint a Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group (FLP) to help identify, research, study, and shape the discernment of the issues that are before us.

The Conference Board has called together an FLP Task Group to help inform and equip congregations and delegates in preparation for the Special Mennonite Church USA Delegate Session in Kansas City in May. This task group is chaired by Sharon Waltner, Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD. Members include Margie Mejia-Caraballo, Templo Alabanza, Moline, IL; Lewis Miller, Beemer (NE) Mennonite Church; John Tyson, Des Moines (IA) Mennonite Church; and Fernando Ramos, Casa de Oración Emanuel, Davenport, IA. Susan Janzen, Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership, provides staff support.

The diversity of CPMC is represented on the Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group. In this issue of *Scattered Seeds*, several members of the task group reflect on unity and diversity from their perspectives: Lewis Miller, pastor in a rural community, shares a model of biblical discernment; Fernando Ramos writes as the pastor of one of the six Spanish-speaking congregations in our conference; and John Tyson muses about embracing diversity in the urban setting in which he lives and pastors. As you read, we invite you to think about what unity and diversity mean within your own community and congregation. May the Holy Spirit guide our thoughts and actions as we seek to live faithfully as God's people.



# Three questions with Sharon Waltner, FLP Chair

*Sharon Waltner, Chair of Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group, 2022  
Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD*

*John Murry, Conference Moderator of Central Plains Mennonite Conference  
Third Way, Saint Paul, MN*

When the Central Plains Mennonite Conference Board decided to convene the Faith, Life, and Procedures Task Group (FLP) last year, we knew it was important that the group advise our conference on how to work towards reconciliation regarding the growing difference around the Church and issues surrounding human sexuality, while attending to the proposed resolutions. Being a sizeable task, the first step would be to collect reliable information and resources for congregations and delegates regarding the first resolution being put to vote, on retiring the Membership Guidelines. This issue of Scattered Seeds, along with the delegate preparation page on our website, are the fruits of that work.

To lead this group, we invited Sharon Waltner (SD), who has served our conference and the broader Mennonite Church in a number of capacities, from CPMC task groups and committees to MC USA Moderator. In each of these positions Sharon has continued to reveal her commitment to the Church and to our work of reconciliation in the world, and within our body. In preparation for this issue of Scattered Seeds, I asked Sharon to respond to a few questions. You can find her responses below.

**What has been your overall experience participating in the FLP task group, not only as representatives caring for the conference but also as five individuals with unique ideas and perspectives?**

I have been blessed to work with this FLP committee. Our committee represents varied perspectives and life experiences, and yet there was respect as we prayerfully shared our thoughts and concerns. The diversity represented on the committee reflects that of our conference: Latinx sisters and brothers, urban churches, rural churches and congregations in between.

**In your thorough review of the proposed resolutions regarding membership guidelines and reconciliation, what are your concerns for us? How do they relate in the context of your long history of leadership at the various levels of the church?**

I have significant concern for how our Anabaptist churches can agree to disagree and remain a unified church, which is so desperately needed in our nation at this time. Scriptures have been used to support various problematic positions at many different points in our history— we can identify Scriptures used to condone slavery, militarily vanquish enemies, dictate certain head coverings for women, bar women in leadership, and a whole host of other practices we now question. How do we learn to listen to Scriptural discernment from others as opposed to assuming our Scriptural discernment is the only correct one? And how do we follow Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, whose example supersedes the frailties of our human Scriptural interpretation?

I love the Mennonite Church. We are small in numbers, but mighty in our message of salvation, peace, and reconciliation. The world needs us. For too many years we have focused our debates on what Scriptures say or don't say regarding same-sex relationships. I am concerned this has come at the expense of recognizing the real people, not only in the world but within our communities and families, for whom our debates are a lived experience. Further, our inclination towards a top-down polity that dictates how congregations minister to their communities makes this even more difficult. Personally, I am now heartened that MCUSA is now considering a more lateral approach to polity, all while unified in our shared commitments and message of salvation, peace, and reconciliation that the world so desperately needs.

**As you prepared for this role, I wonder what, if any, were your hesitations in preparing to chair this task group? Why did you decide to do it?**

Yes, there were numerous hesitations. Talking about “sex” makes people uncomfortable. Taking on this work is assuredly a ticket to becoming a social pariah, especially when we are working to interpret scripture and the associated emotions. Discussing sexuality and gender has been traumatic for our body of believers. I’ve worked with this discord for decades and I felt committed to help facilitate this process and bring about progress, so that we can move forward to embody the church Christ is calling us to be.

*I am so grateful for Sharon’s commitment to this process, as well as that of Margie Mejia-Caraballo (IL), Lewis Miller (NE), Fernando Ramos (IL), John Tyson (IA), and Susan Janzen as Staff representative. In a relatively short time, this group has put much time, discernment, and prayer into the gathering of resources and preparation of materials for us. Please join me in expressing our gratitude.*

## For group discussion

*by Lewis Miller; Pastor of Beemer Mennonite Church, Beemer; NE  
Member of the Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group, 2022*

**Discernment** (*dis-cern-ment*): showing insight and understanding; the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure (not clearly seen or easily distinguished).

A central belief in Anabaptism is that interpretation and discernment are best practiced in community, where varying perspectives can reveal what may not be observed otherwise. Discovering common goals and passions can build appreciation for gifts, creativity and newness. Our hope is that we come to conversations with an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, a willingness to grow in learning more about ourselves and others, and a desire to walk together in discipleship.

*\*Settings for discussion can include small groups, Sunday School, or congregational meetings. It is often helpful to use several sessions in order to allow for deeper reflection, study and prayer.*

Read and reflect on John 17:20-24 (25-26). Think about the distinctive roles and characteristics of the Father and Son, as well as the diversity of the disciples. Does this affect/modify how we understand what Jesus may have meant by “one”? Consider also 1 Corinthians 12 (spiritual gifts in the body of Christ) alongside 1 Corinthians 13.

Possible entry questions for congregational/group discussion, hopefully opening to further ideas for conversation.

- a. What might be the benefits and/or challenges in pursuing the practice of “unity in diversity”?
- b. Are there ways your congregation is currently practicing unity in diversity?
- c. Reflect on how these practices affect relationships within and beyond the congregation.

Considerations:

- \*Leadership
- \*Ethnic/racial/cultural
- \*Gender
- \*Generational
- \*Theological/biblical
- \*Political
- \*Economic/Financial
- \*Geographical

**\*\*Other helpful and recommended resources:**

Seeking God’s Will Together: A congregational study on communal biblical discernment. CPMC (2014) Available for downloading, with corresponding videos accessible at <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/discernment-study.html>

MennoCon 21 Virtual Seminar “Tackling Tough Conversations” (Dr. Betty Pries)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4iestbhbb6FsU&list=PLHBjEtD1xPkM3dp0XHPPyX7Nq9Esl\\_rOX&i](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4iestbhbb6FsU&list=PLHBjEtD1xPkM3dp0XHPPyX7Nq9Esl_rOX&i)

# Pursuing unity within diversity

*by Fernando Ramos, Pastor of Casa de Oración Emanuel, Davenport, IA  
Member of the Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group, 2022*

When asked to share on unity from the perspective of the Hispanic Mennonite churches of CPMC, I understood that it would be a formidable subject to address.

You might ask, why a perspective from the Hispanic churches? Are they separate from the rest of CPMC or MC USA? No, there has been an Hispanic Mennonite Church in this conference and its predecessors for about 60 years now and I accepted this assignment because I thought it was important that our voices be heard as part of this discussion.

As I deliberated on how exactly to articulate our voice, I was led to a conference document titled “Becoming a United Church in a World of Division”, authored by David Boshart in 2011. This document can be found on our conference website (<http://www.centralplainsmc.org/conference-documents.html>).

Our Hispanic churches are in agreement with the following points made in the “Becoming a United Church” document.

We agree that we seek unity because it was Jesus’ prayer that we be one as the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are one.

We agree with the description of the condition of our cultural context, specifically:

“We live in a context marked by pluralism and ambiguity. North American culture in the 21st century poses unprecedented challenges to unity...The cultural context in which we find ourselves is marked by increasing polarization, radical individualism, rights entitlement, and profound mistrust of the ‘other.’ In short, we live in a culture of deteriorating unity. These trends in our society also influence the church. The unity of our church is being challenged as we disagree about issues such as homosexuality, women in leadership, immigration, national allegiance, military enlistment, stewardship of creation, and the claims we make about Jesus as Savior and Lord in an increasingly pluralistic religious context. This emerging cultural reality is not surprising.”

“The conventional wisdom in our society suggests four foundations on which unity might be built:

**Sameness.** Sameness implies that conformity is the path to unity. The church in many places mirrors the broader culture in which people are becoming less loyal to historic roots and, instead, gather into like-minded communities defined by common taste in music and worship arts, political party, race, and class. Seeking unity on the basis of sameness places unity in opposition to diversity.

**Niceness.** In an attempt to hold people together, it is believed that unity will be the outcome of our niceness. We see this tendency when we cut off important conversations because we ‘agree to disagree,’ when we pretend that differences do not exist, and when we avoid topics because someone’s feelings might get hurt.

**Tolerance.** Some in our culture suggest that unity is found in our ability to tolerate ‘the other’ as long as ‘the other’ doesn’t limit our own rights and freedoms. Setting the bar for unity at the level of ‘tolerance,’ however, implies that mere tolerance results in a whole relationship. But there is a power issue in this view that undermines unity. For example, if I ‘tolerate’ you, you are present in my circle because I allow you to be. This basis for unity presumes that the one who is tolerated is ‘less than’ the one who tolerates.

**Coercion.** ‘Unity’ in our culture is built on a belief that if I can force you to act like me, we will get along. When one group wins the culture or international war, we will have peace and can live as one people. This leads to a world where people believe that the ends justify the means.

While all these foundations for unity operate in our culture today, they do not equal the unity reflected in the prayer of Jesus; that is, they are not the foundations of Christian unity. As Christians, we are concerned with unity because this was the hope of Jesus for the church.”

We agree with the section of this document titled, “Unity in the Biblical Story: The Basis for the Making of a People,” particularly in the subsections that lay out the Old Testament and New Testament basis for unity. In the Old Testament, “unity is born of a Covenant that God initiates.”



In the New, “unity is born of discipleship.”

In the New Testament, the importance of basic discipleship fundamentals such as “repentance, baptism, discernment of sin, following and obedience to Jesus’ teachings” are “the pathway to unity and central to the church’s work.”

We may want easy answers or short cuts on how to pursue that unity in diversity but we are required to wrestle with our own desires and God’s perfect will for us, much like Jacob did. We may have our way today, but tomorrow we may have a notable limp in our walk with God.

I invite you to consider also, Amos 3:3 in which God directs a question to His covenant people. “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” In the book of Amos we find a divided kingdom, Israel and Judah, and judgments that the prophet declared to them on behalf of God. In chapter 2, verse 4, God tells Judah the reason for His judgments is “because they have despised the instruction of the Lord” (NLT). In chapter 3:1-2 God addresses Himself directly to Israel and indirectly to Judah, “Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: ‘Only you have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.’” God speaks to the whole family of their deliverance from Egypt then of His relationship with them. God sees one whole family (unity) whom He directs a few questions to in verses 3-6, 8. Questions that cause reflection and promote the discernment of their circumstances.

However, in verse 7, God reminds them that He reveals His secrets first to the prophets before He moves. Is not the church the prophetic voice of God today? Most certainly, we are to address peace and injustice issues. We are the salt and the light in these times as witnesses and messengers of the Gospel. The salt must not lose its flavor nor the light grow dim.

Referring back to the “Becoming a United Church” document, we are God’s covenant people by His initiative and not our own. We keep covenant by His instruction (Amos 2:4). Let us consider the whole counsel of God’s word in the work commissioned to us by our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28).

I invite everyone to read or reread “Becoming a United Church in a Word of Division” found on our website. Shalom always!





## Leaders credentialed

**Steve Griffin's** prior ordination was recognized in a ceremony at Bellwood Mennonite Church, Milford, NE on January 2, 2022.

## Transitions

**Beth Peachey Miller** ended as pastor at Pleasant View Mennonite Church, Mt. Pleasant, IA on November 21, 2021.

**David Heusinkveld** ended as interim pastor at Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA on November 21, 2021, and began as pastor at Wellman (IA) Mennonite Church on December 12, 2021.

**Jack Scandrett** began as intentional interim pastor at Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, on January 2, 2022.

**Joshua Wenger** began as pastor at Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church on January 9, 2022.

# Embracing diversity

*by John Tyson, Pastor of Des Moines Mennonite Church, Des Moines, IA  
Member of the Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group, 2022*

I was recently struck by a scene in the premier episode of HBO's new comedy *Somebody, Somewhere*. Joel, a middle-aged gay Christian, is about to begin choir practice at a Presbyterian church that meets in a dying strip mall in Manhattan, Kansas. Before they take stage, he confides in a small group of friends: *"For all the times I've been excluded, this is still where I find comfort."*

Though not my own, these words capture an experience that rings true to me. I feel like I've met Joel many times in my years of church leadership—whether in the Philadelphia suburbs, rural Kansas, or now in urban Iowa. My work has connected me with queer Mennonites who have felt excluded by the church, and yet still display an abiding love for it—even when the church cannot yet fully embrace them. No matter what church you attend, and no matter where it is located, you worship beside someone like Joel.

Loving the church is not easy these days. Broadly speaking, the church's mission is to love God and love others, but our energy is increasingly zapped by culture wars that pit people against one another. Many of us are exhausted, if not hurt, from the last several years—pastors included. To sustain my love for the church in this painful season, I am seeking out signs of hope. I currently find hope in the fact that the delegate body of MC USA will vote on a resolution to retire the Membership Guidelines at a Special Session this May.

Retiring the Membership Guidelines would not mean MC USA automatically becomes a queer-affirming denomination. However, retiring section III of the Membership Guidelines would remove several statements from the official teaching position of MC USA that have caused serious harm to the queer Mennonite community. I have hope that turning the page on this part of our exclusive past will open the door to a future where we can embrace our diversity with open arms. Giving local congregations more space to explore what this future looks like *in their context* is an implication of retiring the Membership Guidelines.

The scriptures show us that the gift of God's salvation gradually expands to include more people. The first followers of Jesus witnessed the horizons of the early church grow in ways they did not anticipate. With the Spirit's guidance, their work was to seek unity in Christ while embracing the vibrant diversity of the ever-expanding church. I wonder if we can mine the rich resources of our biblical imagination to do the same work for such a time as this?

Not every church is called to be a space of welcome for queer Christians, but some congregations do find themselves happy to affirm the experience of someone like Joel and offer them the comfort of a church home. Every church is vital to the body of Christ. Local congregations should discern for themselves what it means to embrace diversity in relationship to their unique context without fear of judgment. Unity does not mean uniformity, but does diversity have to put us against one another? I pray that we might seek unity in Christ, while seeing our diversity and differences as a strength to cultivate, not an obstacle to overcome. In a world fracturing further by the second, I hope the church can show that a better way is possible.



# Following Jesus in a partisan world

by Sarah Schlegel, Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley, NE

On October 22-23, 25 pastors, spouses and conference staff representing 15 churches from Central Plains Mennonite Conference met in Omaha, NE, for an event titled, "Following Jesus in a Partisan World." Scott Peterson, Leadership Pastor from Trinity Mennonite Church in Glendale, AZ, was the keynote speaker for this event, which was made possible with the help of a New Ministries Grant. The three sessions of content helped church leaders think theologically and practically about the tricky business of living faithfully as followers of Jesus in a politically polarized world.

As followers of Jesus, Scott encouraged us to think about politics through the lens of Jesus. We need to be non-violent, non-coercive, and Jesus-centered. Following Jesus is about a way of life. We are focused on living faithfully, rather than on reaching some end goal. Governments, however, have to focus on the end goal. And yet, to reach the end goal, governments use whatever means necessary, which involves violence (or threat of violence) and coercion. This is not the way Anabaptists understand the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus.

Scott encouraged the participants at this event to make four commitments. First, commit to finding our truest identity in Christ alone, not in a political party. Next, commit to tearing down political dividing walls. We do this by assuming the best of others, even if their view or belief differs from our own. Third, commit to having a political response that is based in introspection, faithfulness, and conviction. Finally, commit to a posture of repentance and humility. There will be times we, and the political party we support, get it wrong. Force and violence will be used to reach an end goal, which is not in line with the teachings of Jesus.

Living out these commitments is not easy, so Scott gave four practical things to do when engaging others in politics. First, we have to get rid of the "us verses them" thinking. People are more than ideas, and it is easy to assume the worst of anyone who we deem an enemy. Second, we need to embrace humility. There will be times we will be wrong, and a helpful posture recognizes that we can learn from others, especially those who disagree with us. Third, we need to engage people with empathy and curiosity. Don't ask questions that are actually veiled arguments. Instead, ask questions to really get at the heart of why people believe what they believe. And finally, we cannot take a Christian truth and attach a political idea to it as if they are the same thing.

This was my first time attending a CPMC event, and it was wonderful to have an in-person gathering, the first conference event like this since COVID-19 shut many things down in March 2020. I enjoyed meeting pastors from various places and I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this event.

# Scattered Seeds

Scattered Seeds Spring 2022

The newsletter of Central Plains Mennonite Conference is published five times a year at Kalona, Iowa. Editor: Faith, Life and Procedures Task Group, Amanda Bleichty. Copy Editor: Erin Ramer. Thanks to Peg Burkey and Mary Lou Farmer for proofreading. E-mail: scatteredseeds@centralplainsmc.org. Telephone: 319-325-4522. For the June issue, please send stories, news and photos by **May 2, 2022** to the address above. Please send subscription requests and changes of addresses to office@centralplainsmc.org. Graphic Design by Erin Ramer. Printed by Kalona Graphics in USA



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## FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for the '21-'22 year through February continues with a surplus thanks to strong support from the CPMC constituents. Total income through February is \$358,407.98 while expenses for the same period came in at \$333,953.47. As a result this leaves us with a positive balance of \$24,454.51 for our '21-'22 budget. Although we had more expenses than income in February, we anticipate enough funds coming in during March and April to end the year with a positive balance. We continue to be thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

— Stewardship Task Group

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Conference Minister visits to each CPMC congregation, Spring 2022**

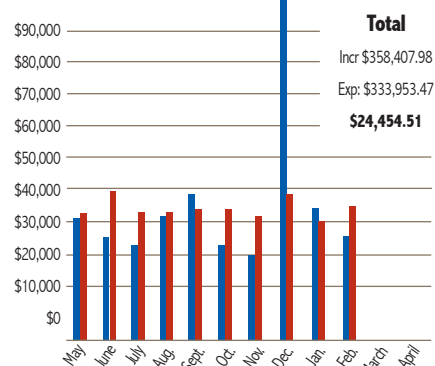
**Annual Leaders Retreat, May 1-3, 2022, St. Benedict Center, Schuyler, NE**

**Annual Meeting 2022, June 16-19, Freeman, SD**

### Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)

Fiscal Year 2021-2022



An area conference of  
**Mennonite  
Church  
USA**

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