



# Scattered Seeds

October  
2022

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

— John 1:14

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## IMAGINATION AND THE INCARNATION

### The manageable chaos of incarnational ministry: a snapshot

by Amanda Bleichty, Conference Minister of Christian Formation, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

*Based on an interview with Matt and Elizabeth Troyer-Miller and Michael and Laurel Swartzendruber*

Manageable chaos, rather than “balance”, is what Elizabeth Troyer-Miller is looking for in life. And chaos isn’t hard for Elizabeth to find. As the Director of Community Impact for the Heartland United Way, independent contractor for mediation, training and facilitation services, board member of several prominent community boards, AirBnB host and property manager, future coffee shop owner, and sometimes baby-holder at the local childcare center, not to mention wife and mother, Elizabeth thrives on finding and being a part of building up her community of Wood River, Nebraska. Like Elizabeth, her husband Matt, has taken a deep dive into the community as well. He is the full-time pastor at Wood River Mennonite

Church, the chaplain of the local Fire Department, also a member of several community boards and the co-owner (with Elizabeth) of a historical downtown building that they are working on remodeling. As transplants to Wood River, Matt and Elizabeth have embraced chaos in this season in order to better serve both their church and the broader community.

Living out a parallel commitment to their community about 400 miles due east of Wood River, Michael and Laurel Swartzendruber and their children are planting roots in Wayland, Iowa. Michael is the full-time pastor of Wayland Mennonite Church, an EMT fire-fighter with the Wayland Volunteer Fire Department, in school to become a paramedic, sometimes a drama-director at Hillcrest Academy, and along with Laurel and another local couple, part owners of an

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LLC that owns and is renovating an historical building in downtown Wayland for housing, an AirBnB, an ice cream shop, and hopefully, one day, a coffee shop and community space. Laurel is the Spiritual Care Provider and Volunteer Educator at Hospice of Washington County and on the board of the local camp. Like Matt and Elizabeth, Michael and Laurel's life is chaotic, but they too have a deep commitment to the place that they live, and they see community building as being a part of their whole incarnational lives-as-ministry.

Fifteen years ago Matt and Elizabeth proposed a plan to the conference to be traveling peace-educators, spreading seeds of shalom throughout the conference. When they moved to Wood River, they had conversations about how they would continue to live out and teach about God's shalom. What would it mean, they wondered together, if they weren't going out to scatter and spread seeds of peace, but were instead growing roots in one place? What would it look like to cultivate shalom in one community? Food security, community building, affordable housing: they made lists of things they cared about and could tackle, but once the lists were made, they were put away in a drawer for several years, the ideas fermenting. When Matt had a sabbatical, they spent some time again, thinking about how they could create a place to connect with people outside of the church. By then, they knew the community well and were involved. They decided to dig their roots even further and buy a building. Elizabeth says, "Our building renovations are taking forever, but [through them] we've connected

with people...We think of our space as an extension of sharing God's shalom in a way that's really tangible."

For Michael and Laurel, who met in seminary, their journey into incarnational ministry has also been a series of fits and starts and lots of planning and negotiation. While pastors often consider themselves transient (and many denominations mandate that transience), for Michael and Laurel this is a long-term calling. Laurel says, "We aren't transient, we've bought a house, we're planting trees, and we expect to see those trees grow. This is my hometown, my parents are here. We're invested in the community." When a building downtown became available for purchase, Michael, naturally more amenable to entrepreneurship and risk-taking, immediately saw the possibilities for community building, business, and ministry. Laurel took a bit more time to be convinced that buying property was a smart choice. Now, they both see the building as an extension of the ministries that they both do in and around Wayland. Michael says, "I always preach if the church is going to function and do the things that it needs to do, it has to go beyond the walls of the church." As in Wood River, renovations are slow, but eventually the downtown building will be a place for the community to gather.

**"I always preach if the church is going to function and do the things that it needs to do, it has to go beyond the walls of the church."**

Everywhere Matt and Michael go in their communities, they are known as pastors. They both see their work outside the church as an extension of their work inside the church. For Matt, whose longevity in Wood River makes him one of the longest-serving pastors in town, his work outside the church



*Left: Matt, Ezra, Elizabeth, Fritz and Loretta Troyer-Miller. Right: Downtown Wood River, Nebraska*





*Left: Laurel, Cyrus, Nora and Michael Swartzendruber.  
Right: Downtown Wayland, Iowa*



building often brings with it unexpected opportunities for ministry. Trust built over time provides pathways to pastoral care, even to those who would not normally seek out help from a pastor. Matt says, “Ministering, living, being present in the community, using [Jesus and the] Incarnation as the example. That’s what we tried to do. Ever since I started as a pastor, that’s what I hoped for. That [ministry] wouldn’t just get limited to the walls of the church. I needed to do that part well, but slowly over time as trust was built, then I could start to expand outward.” Matt credits the flexibility of pastoral ministry and of his congregation with his ability to be as involved as he has been in projects in and around Wood River. He also credits his “generally pleasant” nature with whatever successes he’s found in being a productive part of community building organizations.

While there are many ways in which community building and pastoral and para-church ministries fit together well and enhance one another in Wayland and Wood River, both couples could point to places in which the various aspects of their lives create uncomfortable rubs. For Michael and Laurel, the busyness of life and the ages of their children lead to a kind of chaos that sometimes does not feel manageable. Michael’s days are often scheduled to the minute, and then when an EMT or fire-rescue call comes in, the whole schedule explodes and Laurel is left trying to hold things together. Michael also finds that sometimes there is concern when his way of being a pastor/community builder doesn’t align with the traditional role of the pastor. Sometimes it feels as though his work is, very literally, building the kingdom, which not everyone understands.

In Wood River, Matt and Elizabeth compare incarnational ministry scars. Some scars are physical, like Matt’s knee that began hurting as he hauled a dead refrigerator down the stairs out of one of the apartments in their downtown building, which led to a surgery and now, to a knee that sometimes hurts without provocation. He says, “It hurts because I was here.” Doing this kingdom work has left him with a literal scar. Other scars come from the broken relationships that sometimes happen when many people who are invested in a place try to work together. Matt says, “Sometimes people get mad, especially when you are involved in certain controversial things in the community... When you are involved, you can get in the cross-hairs of small town relationships that you don’t always completely understand as an outsider.” Elizabeth adds, “[through our work in the community] we are changed and it can be painful, but also good.”

Michael and Laurel and Matt and Elizabeth would be the first to point out that, though their list of involvements is long, they are certainly not saints (this narrator/friend concurs). Nor is their way of living incarnationally the only way. The things they are each doing in their communities, their churches and their para-church ministries are born out of their own unique gifts/talents/passions and the places in which they see God’s shalom being enacted in their towns. This will look different for different people in different places. But for the Swartzendruber and the Troyer-Millers, just two of many examples of incarnational ministry happening in Central Plains, God’s shalom is found and shared in the Kingdom work of building up and being deeply rooted in their rural communities.

# IMAGINATION AND THE INCARNATION

Since 2021, we've invited visual artists in Central Plains to help us increase our capacity for imagination. Each issue features two artists interpreting one set of scriptures in order to help us see our scriptures in more imaginative ways. In this issue of Scattered Seeds, we are expanding from visual arts into poetry. We hope that this can help to increase our understanding of the scriptures and enlarge our imaginations to include more of what God is doing in our world. *If you or someone you know would be willing to share their talents and gifts with Central Plains Mennonite Conference, please reach out to Amanda Bleichy at [amandableichy@centralplainsmc.org](mailto:amandableichy@centralplainsmc.org).*

## Tryptic poetry, John 1

by Luke Hertzler

### 1. What is The Word?

Is it Wisdom, Logos, Prophecy?  
Is it Story, a Personification, Divinity?  
It is not a single one, but each and every.  
If we tried to define it, we'd be lost in reverie.  
Overall, it is the embodiment of all God's revelations thus far, yet  
also, The Future, The Idea, The Character, The Essence incarnate:  
Truth, Grace, Restoration, Love. What else my dreamer?  
Justice, Hope, and ultimately: the enfleshed Redeemer.

### 2. Sojourner God

We have lived in tribes, been enslaved by the Nile  
We were liberated, and lived, only to end up back in exile  
Felt bound by shackles, desolated, overrun by the jackal  
Midst the wilderness, a sojourner God comes to tabernacle  
Home brought to us by a tangible deity, covenant love  
Not a firework display, not just a lofty being above  
A higher power concerned about the physical needs of the marginalized on earth  
So much so, Yahweh vulnerably came to us in the flesh through birth  
So focused on making sure no person became god, a huge sin  
That we never fathomed Creator would want to be one of us, human

### 3. Overheard Poem Inspired from the School Bathroom

I heard a kid say the other day,  
in a very matter of fact way:  
"If you know her, you know me,"  
referring to his best friend, you see.

What if this is also what God proclaims,  
whispering it when calling our names:  
"If you know him, you know Me."  
referring to Jesus, Word in flesh, you see.

My first two poems represent the two main aspects of John 1:14 that stuck out to me: "the Word" and "dwelling." I cracked open some commentaries to gain a better understanding about the context of the passage. So many different scholars have so many different interpretations of how to define "the Word," so I ended up just compiling all my various trains of thought I had while processing the content and chose to elaborate on the one that fit best to me. I found out that a better translation of the term "dwelling" is "tabernacling," so it made me think about what it would be like to hear the good news that a god was going to physically show up to a hopeless and exhausted people and camp out with them in their time of need.

The title of the third poem pretty much speaks for itself. Kids continue to amaze me in the phrases they say, and I knew right away when I overheard the conversation between the two kids mentioned in my poem that I was going to use it as a metaphor in my work somehow. It brought a smile to me that day at school, and I hope the anecdotal poem does the same for you as well.

Luke Hertzler is a member of Washington Mennonite Church in Washington, IA. Luke currently lives in Wellman and works at a local elementary school as the librarian. During the pandemic and his move to Iowa, Luke began writing poetry to help process the changes he was experiencing and recall fond memories from the past. Along with writing, Luke appreciates reading, listening to music and podcasts, cooking, walking, biking and watching soccer.



## Camping with wild geese

*by Amanda Bleichty, 18x18in, digital, 2022*

I created this piece with the verse John 1:14 in mind. When I consulted the original Greek, I was particularly inspired by the word we translate “dwell,” which has connotations of tents and encampments and tabernacles. In this piece, I’ve envisioned the incarnation (the God-with-us) joining the encampment of humanity.

I’ve also long been drawn to the Flying Geese quilt pattern, particularly as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. In early church history, the Holy Spirit was sometimes symbolized as a wild goose. In this piece, the triangles from the Flying Geese pattern flow in and around the tents, encircling the encampment with the creativity, the incarnation and the guidance of God.

Amanda Bleichty is the Conference Minister for Christian Formation in CPMC. Amanda attends Washington Mennonite Church in Washington, IA and lives on a farm outside of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa with her husband, Jon and two boys, Henry and Menno.







## Leaders credentialed

**Pratoomporn (Noi) Harder**, license toward ordination on August 14, 2022 at Lao Christian Fellowship, Mountain Lake, MN.

**John David Kenney**, ordained on September 18, 2022 at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA.

## Transitions

**Kent McDougal** began August 22 as interim pastor at Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA.

**Willis Busenitz** retired August 31 after more than 50 years of ministry at White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church, Busby, MT. He also served for 5 years at Lame Deer (MT) Mennonite Church.

**Tim Detweiler** began September 18 as interim pastor at White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church, Busby, MT.

# IMAGINATION AND THE INCARNATION

## Living incarnationlly

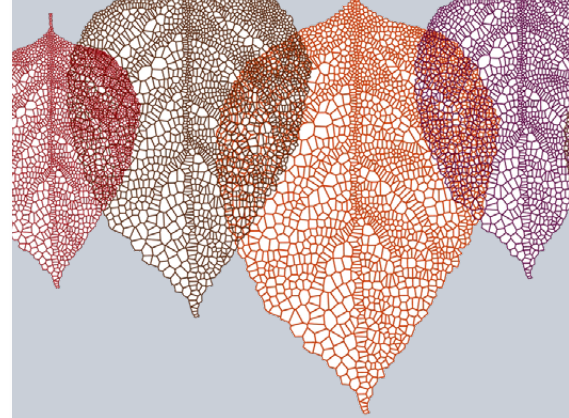
by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

*"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen in glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."  
John 1:14*

Growing up, the Gospel of John was probably my least favorite account of the life of Jesus. Matthew has the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commission, both of which have been influential in my life. Luke has the beautiful moment in chapter 4 where Jesus goes to the synagogue and reads from Isaiah, announcing his mission, "to preach good news to the poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (vs. 18-19). And Mark is one of the underlying texts for both Matthew and Luke and his frenetic pace leaves one feeling that Jesus may have completed his ministry in about three and a half weeks. While Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem pretty straightforward, John is anything but. John uses metaphor and rearranges the stories of Jesus' life to draw out his own theological emphases. John also seems to be the gospel that is most often quoted out of context and misused to make unsubstantiated theological claims. I didn't used to like John. But over the last year or so, I have come to appreciate the Gospel of John a great deal more. The metaphorical language John employs gives us space to explore who Jesus is and what Jesus was doing in the world in interesting ways.

The Gospel of John opens with a retelling of the creation story, with the Word (one of the ways John describes Jesus in this text) at the center of that story. John goes on to describe the way in which Jesus came into the world as a revealing light and the way that Jesus made space for people to become part of God's family. In verse 14 we see John describe the incarnation (Jesus becoming human) with a metaphor based on the Exodus story. What the NIV has translated "made his dwelling among us" is actually the word "tabernacled." This word should conger up for us an image of the Israelites in the desert, where they were arranged around a tent (the tabernacle) that represented the very presence of God in their midst. In the person of Jesus, we see God again coming to be present in the midst of humanity, only this time God does that by becoming one of us.

This image of God present in the midst of humanity has become a significant way of talking about how the church can and should be engaged with God's mission in the world today. Jesus spent his life in one relatively small geographic area, where he became deeply engaged with the people who lived there. One of the reasons that the Gospels seem very Jewish is that Jesus was a Jew who was engaged in bringing God's kingdom to the Jews, so he spoke into that context in a very particular way.



Our churches are located in particular communities and neighborhoods and it is into these different contexts that God invites us to bear witness to the good news of Jesus. We are invited to get to know the people around us deeply, to hear their stories and share their lives. It is in these relationships that we come to understand the complexity of humanity, both the beauty and the brokenness that exist in our neighbors' and our lives. It is here that we come to see how God is at work in the people around us and the ways that God might be inviting us to be part of bringing healing and hope to a world that desperately needs it. This will look different in every community, because we and the people around us are different. How God calls us to respond to pain, brokenness and injustice will always look different, because it will be where our greatest passions meet the deepest needs in our communities.

The stories of Matt and Elizabeth and Michael and Laurel that were told in this issue of Scattered Seeds aren't the stories that each of us could tell. In fact, these couples are each engaged in different things, based on their particular skills and interests and the needs that they have discovered and discerned in their communities. While their ways of engaging in their neighborhoods might be unique, that they are engaged is not. We know that so many individuals and churches across Central Plains have put down roots and are building relationships and sharing life with those in their communities and neighborhoods in exciting ways. In the coming months, we want to hear more stories of how the people of CPMC are working alongside God to bring healing and hope to their neighborhoods. Tell us your stories!

May we all be salt and light as we bring the good news of Jesus into each community where God has placed us.

# Scattered Seeds

Scattered Seeds October 2022

The newsletter of Central Plains Mennonite Conference is published five times a year at Kalona, Iowa. Editor: Amanda Bleichty. Copy Editor: Erin Ramer. Thanks to Peg Burkey, Mary Lou Farmer, and Verna Zook for proofreading.  
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## FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for '22-'23 ends the first four months with a negative balance. Total income for the four months was \$115,361.16, while expenses were \$157,256.18. As a result this leaves us with a negative balance of \$41,895.02 for our '22-'23 budget. We anticipate increased giving over the next several months will help us balance the budget. We are extremely thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

— Stewardship Task Group

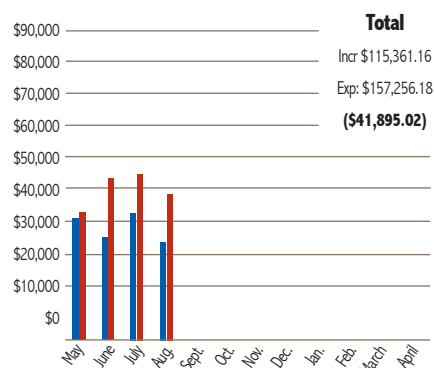
## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Council of Committees**, November 11-12, 2022, East Union MC, Kalona, IA  
**Pastor/elder/deacon regional meeting**, November 19, 2022, Iowa, *tentative*  
**Spanish language Pastor/elder/deacon regional meeting**, TBD, Quad Cities  
**Annual Leaders Retreat**, April 30-May 2, 2023, St. Benedict Center, Schuyler, NE  
**CPMC Annual Meeting**, June 15-18, 2023, York, NE  
**MennoCon23**, July 3-7, 2023, Kansas City, MO

### Central Plains Mennonite Conference

#### Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)

Fiscal Year 2022-2023



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