



Scattered Seeds

October
2020

“See, I am doing
a new thing!
Now it springs
up; do you not
perceive it?

I am making
a way in the
wilderness

and streams in
the wasteland.”

— Isaiah 43:19

In this issue

3 Faith@Home

4 Hispanic
congregations cope

5 A New Normal

6 Internship insight



photo by Anna Geyer, Oxford, Iowa

CHANGING PATTERNS: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Being the Church in a changing world

by Susan Janzen, Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

On March 12, which was a Thursday, the Pastoral Leadership Committee met at First Mennonite Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. We sat around a table in the boardroom, side-by-side and face-to-face. Larry Nail, pastor at Julesburg Mennonite Church, joined us in the morning for his ordination interview. At lunchtime, we piled into two cars and went out to eat. When the meeting was over, three of us rode together four hours back to our homes in eastern Iowa.

When we gathered that day, the novel coronavirus was still an abstract idea for most of us. Yes, there were outbreaks on the coasts, but a pandemic seemed far removed from our reality in the middle of the country. That morning, we had no clue how deeply it was about to affect our lives. I remember talking about it twice — once at the restaurant when we mused about leaving empty chairs between us at the table and again when we wondered aloud if we might need a back-up plan

for the Annual Leaders Retreat, then about six weeks away.

As it turns out, that day was a turning point. By evening, it was clear that COVID-19 was closing in on us. Cases had been reported closer to home; public health officials were recommending restrictions on travel and human interaction. We were being advised to stay home and stay away from anyone not in our households. Stores, businesses, restaurants, schools — even churches — were starting to close.

The previous Sunday most of us had worshipped in person. We sang hymns, passed the peace and the offering plate, shared coffee and cookies in the fellowship hall, and gathered for Sunday School. By the next Sunday everything had changed. Many churches cancelled services and scrambled to go online. Fellowship meals and committee meetings were put on hold as people prepared to shelter at

continued on page 2

continued from page 1

home. Coronavirus had begun to change our lives.

No one invited the pandemic's disruption, and it has been devastating in so many ways. Yet from the onset, I have been amazed by the resilience of our pastors and other church leaders, some of whom have struggled with COVID-19 themselves. The speed and the creativity with which they came up with alternative ways to worship and offer pastoral care continues to inspire and encourage me. Truly, the Holy Spirit is at work among us.

Our congregations have learned to worship in so many imaginative ways: live via Zoom or Facebook, recorded on YouTube, printed sermons distributed by email or by literally driving around and dropping them on doorsteps, sitting on lawn chairs in the church yard, drive-in broadcasts through an FM receiver, in the sanctuary with every other pew taped off, and so many more. Pastors have visited people by phone, on their decks or porches, via cell phone through the retirement center window, and on Zoom.

Of course, it hasn't been easy. Not everyone has a computer or other device to connect to the internet, and Wi-Fi isn't always reliable. The intimacy of fellowship and communion aren't the same when we gather online or in physically-distanced ways. We miss singing. And hugging. And potlucks. The act of preaching is entirely different when you're looking at yourself on the screen rather than at a sanctuary full of people. Ministry in our communities, service projects, and fund raisers have been put on hold. Weddings and funerals and baptisms look different; joy and grief have been delayed. Sunday school, youth group, and midweek services have been modified or moved online and we worry about the consequences.

Since mid-March, it's been my privilege to host weekly Zoom meetings for pastors. We've sought to create a safe space for voicing concerns and asking questions, for praying together and supporting one another, and for sharing resources for ministry in this time of pandemic. We've prayed for pastors and their families who have suffered the effects of the virus, along with people in our churches who've been afflicted.

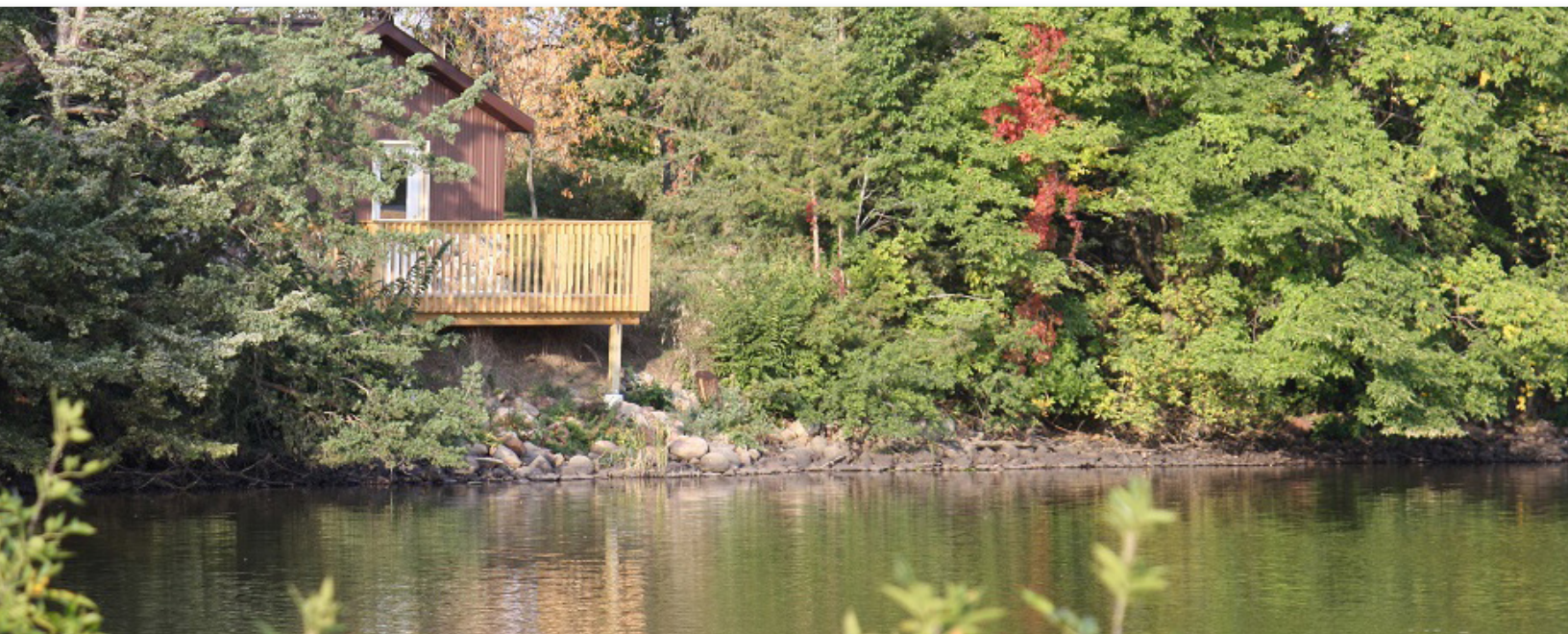
We've also talked about how other anxieties we're facing as a nation — racial injustice, economic disparities, and political tensions, to name a few — affect our response to COVID-19. We are all dealing with a lot these days; none of our congregations are immune. We wonder when this will be over and when life will feel normal again.

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros calls this the “odd reality of now” in the August 2020 issue of *Sojourners*. She notes that the phrase, “once we're past this,” has “become commonplace on social media and in virtual meetings,” but adds, “I'm not so sure it's right. Do we move past this, or somehow move with this odd reality that surrounds us?”

I think she's onto something. We may yearn to go back to the way things were in early March, but the reality is that life has not been on “pause.” We are changed people, and our churches have also changed. COVID-19 has closed some doors, but it has opened others. We've had to leave some things behind, but we have also gained so much as we've learned new ways to be welcoming, to be in mission, to do faith formation, and to live together as a community of believers.

This is my hope and my prayer. As we “move with this odd reality that surrounds us,” may we embrace the potential of this moment and re-imagine who God is calling us to be.

photo courtesy Swan Lake Christian Camp, South Dakota





CHANGING PATTERNS: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Faith@Home with Bethesda Mennonite Church

by Andrea Wall, Pastor of Faith Formation at Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson, Nebraska

I remember ~~sitting across the table from~~ (scratch that) looking at my VBS Committee on Zoom in the spring of 2020 after COVID-19 hit. “What will we do about Vacation Bible School?” we asked one another. None of us wanted to cancel, but we all agreed we couldn’t do what we had always done. We had to imagine something new. Thus began a journey that took us from planning a digital VBS to actually creating a potential new ministry.

We started by going back to the basics and asking ourselves – why do we do VBS anyway and why is it so well-loved? Once we were able to articulate the *why*, we could begin reimagining the *how*. Our first question was: where are the children and how do we connect with them when we can’t gather together at church? The answer was: children are at home with their families, which is actually the ideal place for faith formation, since parents are the number one factor in their children having “sticky faith”. For the first time in recent history families were at home with not a single thing on the calendar. I even had a parent jokingly beg me to put something, anything on their calendar because the absence of activity was so disorienting. The answer was staring me in the face – facilitate an activity for families at home.

So we did. I started by experimenting with our Catechism class. I scheduled Zoom Catechism and I invited the parents to join us. This experience offered insight for how we might adapt VBS for families at home. I met with the high school youth and their parents every Sunday after worship online and we spent time talking about what spiritual practices have nurtured our lives. Then I helped facilitate conversations and practices and invited them to find a time to simply gather around the Bible together during the week.

What I learned from this experience is that faith at home can be simple and needs to emerge out of existing activities. It is not a “program” that you do at home. It is more like a conversation. These insights lead us to create something completely different than VBS. We moved away from the five days in a row schedule with lots of activities to a simplified experience that spanned six weeks. We created videos for families to do once a week, at a time of their choosing. We created an online hub for optional activities, games and resources. We also offered a themed snack pack. We encouraged families to do three simple things – eat together, watch the video together and talk together. Within the videos there were times to pause to open the Bible together and read the story and times to have a caring conversation with the prompted questions. The goal each week was to get to know Jesus better by meeting the Bible characters who knew Jesus best - but via Zoom. It was fun because we were able to invite people beyond our church (even people from CPMC) to be the characters.

While the number of families participating was small, the families engaged deeply. It became something the children looked forward to. For those creating the resources it was a transformative experience, not to mention fun. The Holy Spirit guided us and used this time to develop within us a fresh imagination for the church.

If you would like to view or use the resources created for Faith@Home visit <http://www.bmcfaithformation.com/faithhome.html>



CHANGING PATTERNS: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Hispanic cluster congregations adjust in challenging times

by Amanda Bleichty, Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Communications Director, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Like most of the congregations in our conference (and around the country), the Hispanic congregations in Southeastern Iowa and Western Illinois found themselves in chaos when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March. According to Ramiro Hernandez, the Hispanic Ministries Coordinator of CPMC, these congregations were especially cautious at the beginning of the pandemic because many of their congregants work in, or in proximity to, meat-packing plants, the location of many of the early outbreaks of COVID. For those first few months, congregations utilized online programs such as Google Duo, Zoom or Facebook for communication and worship. Initially there was a steep learning curve as congregants and pastors alike needed to learn how to utilize the technology, but soon things were up and running well.

As the months went on most of the congregations made their way back into the sanctuaries they vacated in mid-March, using masks and social distancing guidelines. Through it all, pastors report using their cell phones even more than usual to keep in contact with their congregations and checking in with people, often. Especially in congregations where pastors or congregants have been sick with COVID-19, the cell phone has been an invaluable part of ministry.

Three congregations have been meeting outdoors on Sundays; Torre Fuerte in Iowa City meets in a nearby park, while Centro Cristiano in Washington meets under the church building's shade and El Buen Pastor, a church plant in Muscatine, meets under a tent. Pastor of El Buen Pastor, Ramiro Hernandez, reports that he enjoys meeting outside,

but that they are already on their second tent, after the first one suffered wind damage. He also notes that because El Buen Pastor usually meets at a Lutheran Church, which is not yet meeting in person, there are questions about what the winter will look like for them.

Like several of the other Hispanic congregations in the cluster, Centro Cristiano meets online during the week. Early in the week they meet for learning and prayer with Hispanic women from all across the denomination and later they meet for teaching by three Instituto Bíblico Anabautista (IBA) students who rotate leadership weekly, each choosing a theme that interests them. During this second weekly meeting, they've not only had local participants, but they've also had people join from as far away as Chicago and Arkansas. During this time of uncertainty, they are using technology to connect to a much wider audience than ever before.

This year, long before the pandemic began, Ramiro set a theme for El Buen Pastor, "Missionaries in our neighborhoods/sharing our faith." Each week, he asks the congregation, "How have you been a missionary this week? Who have you visited? Who are you inviting?" Those visits and invitations probably don't look today like Ramiro expected back in January, but the question remains. "How are you being a missionary in your neighborhood during this strange and confusing time?"

This article is based on an interview with Ramiro Hernandez, Hispanic Ministries Coordinator for CPMC and Church Planter at El Buen Pastor in Muscatine.



CHANGING PATTERNS: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Emmanuel Mennonite Church—fully engaging the “New Normal”

by Chris Becker, co-pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Lauderdale, Minnesota

Emmanuel Mennonite Church was humming along and doing fine in the Twin Cities of Minnesota when rumors of a new virus began to circle. I can remember talking to folks about hand-washing and flattening the curve before any of us really knew what was going on. And then it got real.

For EMC, COVID-19 meant that everything stopped. We have quite a few folks at high risk for complications were they to contract the virus—so we took things very seriously. We ceased all in-person meetings on March 15. That Sunday was a bit of a whirlwind. My wife and co-pastor Kim and I had to travel to California for a family emergency at the very beginning of this global pandemic, so I recorded the sermon I had prepared, emailed it to the congregation, and we hopped on a plane.

I returned to the Cities midweek (Kim remained in CA for several months) and began planning what to do next. Folks wanted more than a sermon. The next Sunday I prepared a video of myself leading a short worship service with a sermon and some music. Folks liked that too, but wanted more.

Speaking with our leadership team led me to become a filmmaker. While I'm from California, I'm not from Hollywood. The first couple of tries were pretty good, and I've gotten better, but I'm no professional.

EMC has been recording “virtual gatherings” for six

months now, asking various individuals to record themselves leading worship or singing a song or telling a children's story. I collect the videos and compile them into a (mostly) cohesive service including the things we normally do. I post them to YouTube and email the link. It works for us.

But wait, there's more. Folks wanted to see each other in real time. We actually like each other. So we began a fellowship time on Sundays at 11am—via Zoom. We often have a few people coming in and out due to technological issues (the reason we don't livestream our services), but overall we have a nice talk. And there are times when a few of us get together outside, at a distance, wearing masks.

This is our new normal. We're hoping it isn't so normal for much longer, but we're okay. We haven't stopped being the church. Social justice issues don't stop just because we can't be as social as before. We're still engaged in important issues like racism and poverty. We're still working to make God's kingdom real in this place—it just looks a little different than before. And we're looking forward to a time when we can meet together again. Until then, we're letting our creativity out to play—and learning new ways to be Emmanuel Mennonite Church. Not everything we do is perfect and not everything we do pleases everyone, but that's actually normal, right? And so we keep doing what we're doing, learning how to follow Jesus in new ways, fully engaging our new normal.



Transitions

David Erdman began August 17 as interim pastor at Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD.

Scott Roser ended as interim pastor at Cedar Falls Mennonite Church, Cedar Falls, IA on October 11.

Robert Brown began October 15 as pastor at Cedar Falls (IA) Mennonite Church.

Leaders credentialed

John David Kenney was licensed toward ordination on August 16 at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA.

Jacob Guckenberger was licensed toward ordination on September 20 at Christ Community Church, Des Moines, IA.

Scott Roser's ordination in the ELCA was formally recognized by Central Plains Mennonite Conference on October 4 at Cedar Falls (IA) Mennonite Church.

Libby Conley was licensed toward ordination on October 11 at First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, IA.

CHANGING PATTERNS: COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Pastoral internship in the midst of a global pandemic

by Emma Beachy, summer 2020 Ministry Inquiry Program intern at Wayland Mennonite Church, Wayland, Iowa

This summer, I served as a ministry intern at Wayland Mennonite Church through the Ministry Inquiry Program. This program is a way for students attending Mennonite colleges to explore pastoral ministry and experience working with a congregation firsthand. The idea of becoming a pastor has been in my mind for several years, and as I try to discern if I feel God leading me down this path, this was a really helpful experience. Of course, the coronavirus pandemic made this a very unique summer for churches everywhere, and it meant my internship was pretty unique too.

It was clear to me early on that congregational ministry is much more than just preaching on Sunday mornings. This summer in particular involved a lot of technological experimentation and troubleshooting, which could be somewhat frustrating, but also rewarding as we made our virtual services better each week. I had the chance to prepare sermons, lead Bible studies, and plan weekly movie nights and discussions that focused on racism in America. I was also in charge of overseeing a new community food pantry which evolved out of a summer lunch program for kids in the community and will be run by Wayland Mennonite starting this fall. Coordinating volunteers, managing food delivery, and preparing for the transition were valuable experiences that gave me a picture of some parts of church ministry I hadn't thought much about before.

Of course, because of the unique situation, I wasn't able to spend time with church members the way I would have during a normal summer. Without COVID, I would have lived in Wayland, which would have made me a more immediate part of the community, and that's definitely something I missed. I think preserving and building relationships is one of the most difficult parts of this situation where showing love for our neighbor means avoiding in-person contact with each other. However, through my work there, I was able to connect with a new group of people and plug into a new community, even if those connections were mostly made through emails and Zoom meetings. In the midst of uncertainty, this was a great opportunity to see the ways God is at work and what it might mean for me to join in that work as a congregational minister in the future. I'm really grateful for this experience and the fact that it was possible even in a very unprecedented time.

Emma Beachy is a member of Kalona Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa and a junior at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas.

Three students connected with Central Plains Mennonite Conference congregations participated in the August 22 commencement service of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

Joel Beachy of Kalona, IA graduated with a Master of Divinity with a major in Pastoral Ministry. He is a Pastor at East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, Iowa.

Jill Hofer of Sioux Falls, SD completed a Graduate Certificate in Theological Studies. She is currently pursuing a Certificate of Spiritual Direction from Sioux Falls (South Dakota) Seminary. Jill participates in a small rural house church that is seeking affiliation with CPMC.

Patrick James Obonde, from Siaya and Nairobi counties of Kenya; Goshen, IN, and Minneapolis, MN graduated with a Master of Arts: Theology and Peace Studies. He was also selected to receive a Commendation in Peace Studies from the seminary's History, Theology and Ethics Department. Patrick has been involved at Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota.



Starting now, adults are invited to participate (alongside children) in Shalom Readers!

1. Read 7 books from the book list (new adult titles will be added each month in our Sower newsletter), subscribe at <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/subscribe-to-the-sower.html>.
2. Keep a list of each book you have read.
3. Engage more deeply with three of the books.
4. Report your reading and request a free book.

Learn more on our website, <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/shalom-readers>.

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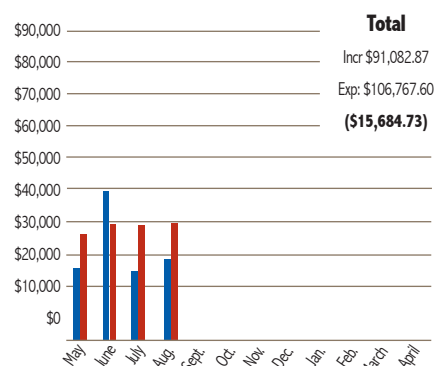
The Central Plains budget year for 2020-2021 is off to a slow start. Total income for the first four months of the fiscal year came in at \$91,082.87 while expenses for the same period came in at \$106,767.60. As a result, this leads to a deficit of \$15,684.73. We are hopeful that as some churches begin to meet in person again that we will be able to catch up with the income portion of our budget. We are thankful for your support. 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.*