



Scattered Seeds

Spring
2023

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

— John 14:25-26

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Annual Meeting 2019, Kalona, Iowa

Where do we go from here?

by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister

Where do we go from here? This question has been reverberating through my head over the last number of months. After the special delegate session in Kansas City it became clear that we are divided on our understanding of human sexuality. We have seen our congregations shrinking and wondering what comes next. This question became even louder during the recent Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) meeting in San Antonio. During the meeting a sociologist, Josh Packard, shared about some of the massive societal shifts that have affected the church over the last 80 years.

In 1944, 96% of people in this country said they believed in God, a number which rose to 98% by 1967. But since then, the number has begun to fall. In 2011, 92% of people in this country said they believed in God but by 2022

the number fell to 81%. The number of adults in the US who are members of churches has also been declining, peaking at 78% in 1945 and falling to 47% in 2020. With these shifts, fewer and fewer people say that religion is important in their lives, and fewer people are placing their trust in traditionally-trusted institutions like the president and congress, the medical system, news organizations, public schools, banks and organized religion. People are also choosing not to get involved in community volunteer organizations like the Lions and Rotary Clubs and other activities like recreational sports leagues. The church is caught up in the unraveling of societal structures that is taking place all around us.

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There are also ways that churches have failed to adapt, and the things that we have poured so

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much of our time and energy into (having great Sunday morning worship as well as other programs) also don't have the same impact. Pastors have been educated and trained to lead our churches in ways that worked very well for many years. And while our pastors are excellent at what they do, the skills they have learned and honed do not have the same impact they once did. So, if our way of being church is not having the impact it once did on society, where do we go from here? We are finding ourselves in a place that we have never been before and we don't know what to do or how to do it. As the presenter at CLC said, "You cannot get good enough at the things you are doing to reverse these trends."

Is this depressing? Maybe initially, but I don't think it has to be! The people of God have found themselves in places they never expected to be at many points throughout history and one of the things that we see in Scripture is that when God's people find themselves in these places the one thing they can count on is that God shows up. The truth that I hold on to in this time is that God has not given up, not on the church, and not on the world that God so desperately loves. The Holy Spirit is at work in us and in the lives of everyone around us, and the question we need to be asking and answering is not, "What should I be doing for God?" Rather we should be asking, "What is God doing, how do I recognize it and how is God inviting me to be a part of that?" I am firmly convinced that we as

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a church need to be building our capacity to hear and recognize the way God is at work around us. We need to engage in the practices that make space for us to hear God, first through dwelling in Scripture and noticing how God has worked at other times when God's people found themselves in places they didn't expect to be. Second, we need to learn how to listen to our neighbors and communities and the stories they are telling and recognizing where God is breaking into our lives.

I have spent the first months of 2023 sitting with the book of Acts. We have often referred to this book as the Acts of the Apostles as if they were the ones who were actively out spreading the Good News of Jesus to a world that needed to hear it. What I have noticed while dwelling with these stories is that the apostles rarely seem to know what is going on, and they are often surprised by what God is doing around them and they are having to try and catch up with God. Take, for example, the choosing of the seven deacons in Acts 6. In this story there is a problem of inequality in the church and some of the Greek-speaking widows are not receiving the same support as Aramaic-speaking widows. The twelve apostles feel they are stretched too thin to take this on, so they invite the church to pick some people to work at food distribution to make sure it is fair. The church chooses seven men from among the Greek-speaking portion of the church (we can tell because they have Greek rather than Hebrew names) and give them the task of correcting the inequality in food distribution. What they do not realize is that God has a much bigger role for these deacons to play, and they quickly become significant teachers in the church, so much so that Stephen is arrested, tried and executed for speaking about Jesus. These leaders are then scattered by persecution and bear witness to Jesus wherever they go, particularly Philip who will end up sharing a chariot and faith with a high-ranking Ethiopian government official.

Where do we go from here?

Join us in York, Nebraska on June 15-18 for **Annual Meeting 2023** where we will experience *Leaders Table* as a delegate body and worship and fellowship together!

Our speaker for the weekend will be Michael Danner, the associate executive director for Church Vitality in Mennonite Church USA, supporting area conferences, congregations and pastors in their ministry.



Registration ends June 5.



While the twelve apostles didn't see the potential in these deacons for anything beyond food distribution, God had a much bigger plan for them and they became significant teachers in the church, much like the twelve.

Where do we go from here and what does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this space?

As I have been working my way through my Doctoral program I am constantly thinking about one central question. If the church exists for the sake of the world, what does that look like today? This suggests that the way before us is not clear, and since we do not know where the Spirit is taking us, then there is no program or five-step process that will get us to our "desired outcome." As Alan Roxburgh stated during my January class, "the way is made by walking" and so we will not know where we are going until we get there. This means that we need to develop our ability to notice and respond to what the Spirit is doing and in order to learn to do this I am proposing that we engage in a process called Leaders Table.

What is the Leaders Table? In its initial stage, the leaders table is a series of four conversations around four questions.

1. What is this new space where we find ourselves and how did we get here?
2. How does the Bible guide us when we find ourselves in spaces we've never been before?
3. What are the skills and practices for leaders in this new space?
4. How can you begin to step into these skills and practices in your context?

These conversations are important for several reasons. First, they make space for pastors (and eventually other leaders) to talk about the very real challenges their congregations are facing and the ways in which they have not been prepared to meet those challenges. Second, this is not yet another program or curriculum that pastors are called to implement. Instead these conversations recognize that different congregations are unique and their challenges will need to be addressed in different ways. Third, we all need companions on this journey and the table will begin to build bridges among leaders from across the conference as they think together about what it looks like to address the challenges we are experiencing.

Once we have had a few groups of leaders engage in the

early discussion, those who are interested in continuing the conversation will be invited to continue to gather. As these leaders continue to meet and build relationships with one another they will be invited to think about specific challenges their congregations are facing. Each leader will focus on one specific issue and design a small experiment to address that issue. The group will come up with "experiments" as they talk together. Alan Roxburgh tells the story of a simple experiment with a large impact. Together, a small parish committed to do their laundry at the laundromat, instead of at home. As a result, they began to know their neighbors, some of the challenges of their community were revealed to them and they began to think about better ways to engage with the community. As our leaders

and congregations engage in their own experiment(s), they will enter a season of action and reflection where they will tell the stories of these experiences and have others help them notice where the Spirit seems to be at work. These companions will continue to be important as a sounding board, helping to refine the experiments in response to where the Spirit seems to be at work.

The first Leaders Table is made up of leaders from across the conference and has already begun meeting. A second group of leaders is slated to start soon. It's important to the conference board that this not just be a conversation among pastors. Soon, other leaders will be invited to engage in this process as well.

We will also be bringing some aspects of Leaders Table to our table discussions at Annual Meeting this year. Together, we will work at building a culture of discernment so that we can better recognize the work of the Holy Spirit around us in our communities, gain courage for experimentation, and begin to reflect on our lives together to better see what God is doing. We will be companions for one another across the conference, so that we can help one another see more clearly and refine our ideas as we engage with the Spirit.

I firmly believe that God is not done, and God has not abandoned the church, or the world. By God's grace may we grow in the practices we need to be part of the amazing things God is doing, trusting that God shows up in these places where we never expected to be. May our imaginations be shaped by the God who came among us, becoming part of our human community and sharing in our experiences.

Where do we go from here and what does it mean to be followers of Jesus in this space?

My first experience of the Ecuador/Venezuela Partnership

by Joel Beachy, pastor of East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA

Excerpted from the East Union Mennonite Church Newsletter:

Quito, Ecuador is a sprawling city of about 4 million people that stretches from one end of a valley to the other between several volcanos in the Andes mountains. This is where my adventure in Ecuador began on Tuesday, February 14. The purpose of the trip was to learn more about the Ecuador Partnership that exists between Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC), East Union (and other conference and supporting churches), Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia (IMCOL-Mennonite Christian Church of Colombia), Iglesia Christiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador (ICAME-Anabaptist Mennonite Christian Church of Ecuador), and Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Ecuador (ICME-Mennonite Christian Church of Ecuador).

Peter Wigginton and Delicia Bravo Wigginton are the MMN workers who serve in Quito lending support to ICAME, ICME and the local church Iglesia Menonita de Quito. CPMC continues to provide finances to this partnership to support the ongoing spread of the Good News of Jesus Christ, as well as supporting the church which aids refugees who enter Quito.

Ecuador receives any refugees from across the globe with a pretty broad open-border policy. This means that not only have refugees traditionally come from Colombia during their internal wars, but they also arrive from Venezuela (due to the financial crisis) and all parts of the globe including, but not limited to, the following: Iraq, Iran,

Ukraine, parts of Africa and Asia. Ecuador is often the first stopping point for refugees and asylum seekers in an effort to find safe haven in the United States, Canada, or Europe.

The Ecuador Partnership supports these efforts through financial aid to the ongoing projects of ICAME. The refugee program provides training for families to create, to use, and to care for cloth diapers and feminine hygiene products. The program also distributes food aid to hundreds of refugee families. Within the next month, the partnership will receive a massive shipping container of food and supplies from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to support these efforts.

In addition to the refugee programs, Delicia Bravo Wigginton, as an MMN worker, and other women who lead in ICAME, support afterschool programs to assist students who struggle in school. They also provide a monthly class on peace building for young students. Peter Wigginton has been teaching peace and politics workshops along with Mauricio Chenlo, an MMN training and resource specialist in church planting. These workshops have been directed towards the indigenous community from Quito and throughout Ecuador. The two workshops they have held so far this year had more than 400 participants each time. There is a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm from the indigenous community for an Anabaptist perspective on theology and faith.

On Friday, February 17 we moved to a camp called *Campamento Nueva Vida* (New Life Camp) in the



community of *La Mersed*. There we met with all of the conferences and groups throughout the Andean region that the Ecuador Partnership supports.

During this retreat, we met in the mornings for devotionals and singing followed by plenary and group sessions led by Cesar Garcia, the General Secretary for Mennonite World Conference, of which Mennonite Church USA is a member. Garcia spoke about the difficulties in divisions around politics, specifically between more conservative and more liberal factions. *"What Is God's Kingdom: and What Does Citizenship Look Like?"* printed by Herald Press, was the basis of his daily presentations. Garcia challenged us to consider: how we might move to assist and support the people on the margins, extract ourselves from the sins of mammon (divesting ourselves from a false sense of security in financial stability), and work towards just reconciliation. Garcia encouraged us to talk in small groups to bring our personal and local contexts into the conversations.

In the afternoons, workshops were offered on a host of topics. These smaller breakout sessions provided opportunities to engage even more with each other, experiencing and learning what it means to be an Anabaptist community in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. I was able to attend three workshops about Anabaptist Identity: How to be Anabaptist Today; Refuge, Migration, and Hospitality; and Called to Selfcare: Pastor and Leadership Selfcare. Although my ability to speak was lacking throughout the week, I could understand the majority of what was being said, and I found many similarities in the experiences between these South American Anabaptist communities and our North American context. The issues brought on by the pandemic and identity politics has plagued not only the United States

but much of Latin America as well. While this may make one feel despair, I find it hopeful because we are all working on similar efforts to find unity in the midst of our diversity. We must seek and sustain a new Anabaptist vision for the next 500 years.

It is clear that there is a great movement of the Spirit within the South American Anabaptist communities. Churches are growing and there is a great interest in Anabaptist theology and faith. The indigenous communities and other groups are clamoring for training for their leaders in order to create Anabaptist-minded teachers and professors. This would enable them to receive accreditation for their seminary programs and to offer masters-level degrees to their pastors and leaders. In essence, they are looking to train and educate future educators. The long-term rewards of these efforts are incalculable. Anabaptism and the Mennonite perspectives on faith could really transform this region, and I believe could greatly encourage the North American church.

The greatest need to support these efforts is financial assistance. The indigenous community is working to gain financial backing from their supporting churches. Other church groups within the region are also looking to raise money for this effort. Even so, the amount needed to sustain this project for the initial cohort of educators would be great, upwards of \$500,000. I am excited and interested to see how CPMC and East Union may also contribute financially towards this goal. How may we join with this exciting movement of the Spirit of God?

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to join in these meetings and learn more about the efforts of those serving in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. May we continue to seek and to respond to the movement of the Spirit in this place and wherever it leads. May it be so.



Left to right: Pastor Ramon from ICME addressing the meeting about theological education in the Andean region; praying together at the Encuentro; working with children at an after-school program in Quito neighborhood Jardines del Inca; Anabaptists from across Andean region worshipping together



Sister Care seminar to the Hmong women in Southeast Asia

by Memee Yang, Emmanuel Mennonite Church, St. Paul, MN

The Hmong are a small ethnicity living in Laos. Most of them are non-Christian; they believe in their ancestors. Family tradition is very strict, and women have no equal opportunity. Women are to serve their families and be loyal. Anyone who discusses her personal issues is considered to be a gossip and brings shame into the family.

As a Hmong woman, I have often been seen as one who is respectable and has met my in-laws' expectations. However, I realized as I was translating the Sister Care Manual, that I have often lacked peers to share more deeply with. I've kept so many things inside, and have felt that no one could understand me, feel my pain or love me for who I am.

In December 2022, I went to Southeast Asia to provide a Sister Care seminar to the Hmong women. Sister Care is like a river that draws everyone who is thirsty to come and drink. Sister Care is a place where women can come to care for their wounds and receive God's comfort and love. During this Sister Care seminar, women had the opportunity to discuss and share their stories.

One lady shared that she had never been able to leave town because of family restrictions. This was the first time she was able to cross her family line to attend the Sister Care seminar in Thailand. She said, "My eyes were opened to the fact that God not only loved the righteous but also sinners. Even though no one cares to listen to me, God always stands beside me and listens to me."

I am very pleased that Emmanuel Mennonite Church (EMC) has participated in this ministry, extending its love to reach the poor and the needy. EMC has done wonderful outreach locally and internationally. After this event, I received two requests for me and EMC to do additional training in Thailand and Laos, and another group asked me and my husband (Jonah Yang) to provide compassionate care. These classes are going to be held at the end of April and middle of May, 2023.

I am so grateful to have my church (EMC) in St. Paul, MN, CPMC, and many others standing behind me and praying for me so that I can continue to take this seminar to Southeast Asian Hmong women. Thank you!

Leaders credentialed

Chelsea Vaught, ordained on April 16, 2023 at Bethesda Mennonite Church in Henderson, NE.

Transitions

Pam Gerig Unruh ended Feb. 1, 2023 as interim pastor at Zion Mennonite Church in Donnellson, IA.

Matt Troyer-Miller ended Apr. 30, 2023 as pastor at Wood River Mennonite Church, Wood River, NE.

Rachelle Luitjens will begin June 1, 2023 as pastor at Zion Mennonite Church in Donnellson, IA.



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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.

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FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for '22-'23 ends the year with a positive balance. Total Income for the year was \$437,267.97 while expenses were \$433,688.32. As a result this leaves us with a positive balance of \$3,579.65 for our '22-'23 budget. We are grateful for all of the support that enabled us to end the current year with a positive balance. We are extremely thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

— *Stewardship Task Group*

UPCOMING EVENTS

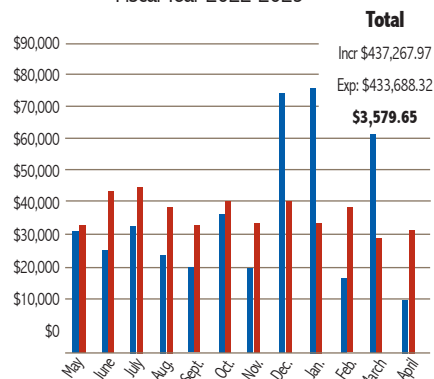
CPMC Annual Meeting, June 15-18, 2023, York, NE

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.*