

Our Conference at Work

Agenda

Central Plains Mennonite Conference Annual Meeting
June 21-23, 2024 Sugar Creek Mennonite Church

Friday, June 21

10:00 am - Delegate Session 1

Welcome/Prayer
Review of Minutes and Board Action
Tablegroup Introductions
Executive Conference Minister's report
Moderators report
"Dwell with Scripture"---John 21
Delegate Work: How do we know the way?
Announcements
Lunch

1:30 pm - Delegate Session 2

Table Activity
Conference sharing-Leaders/Companions Table-Scott & Suzette Sheffler
Dwell with Scripture John 1
Delegate work: How do we know the way?
Introduction of the Financial Blueprint
Introduction of the Slate
Announcements
Closing

Saturday June 22

10:00 am - Delegate Session 3

Peace Mug Presentation
Conference sharing- Civil Rights Pilgrimage
Dwelling: John 9
Delegate Work: How do we know the way?
Changes: Litany of farewell for Salem Mennonite Church
Welcome to Shickley Mennonite Fellowship
Celebrate New Pastors and Leaders
Announcements
Lunch

1:30 pm - Delegate Session 4

Conference sharing - Pastor Seng
Dwelling: John 4
Delegate Work: How do we know the way?
Discussion and vote on Blueprint
Vote on Slate
Affirmation of Officers and Committee Members
Closing of the 2024 Delegate Session

Moderator's Report

For quite some time I have been interested in understanding how people think, process, and act. It's fascinating to consider the various ways information is absorbed, processed, and how different events and situations energize us. Our diverse capabilities and unique personalities are truly a gift. This was evident in our board work, observing some members being detail-oriented, others focused on procedure, some are visionary, some adept at asking the right questions, and some putting voice to what was shared. Conversations were intense at times but always helpful, thoughtful, and geared towards what's best for the Central Plains Mennonite Conference. Together, the board has done significant, challenging work.

When expanding this perspective to the wider conference, the church emerges as an amazing, living organism. Even more remarkable is our ability to maintain community amid challenges. Do we have everything figured out? No.

Last year, we asked, 'Where do we go from here?' This year, we're pondering, 'How do we know the way?'

I'm inherently an optimist—which is not superior to being a pessimist; it's just different. While I'll always see the glass as half full, others may perceive it as half empty, or they might argue the glass isn't the right size for its contents, calling themselves realists. Another analogy illustrates these perspectives: Three individuals peering down a tunnel—the optimist sees the light at the end, the pessimist only darkness, and the realist warns of an oncoming train. But here's my spin: When we gaze into that tunnel, we all see the light—the hope found in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our hope rests in Christ, who declares, 'I am the way, the truth, and the light,' (John 14:6) and in the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus says 'The wind blows wherever it pleases...' (John 3:8) The uncertainty excites the optimist in me, and is echoed in the sentiment of the song lyrics, 'Lead me, guide me along the way, for if you lead me, I cannot stray.'

Do I have the trust to surrender control and say, 'God, three in one, lead us'?

As my time as moderator draws to a close, I'm filled with hope. I trust that God's spirit is actively working in the Central Plains. May we continue to follow the light of Christ as God's Spirit leads us.

Pamela Gerig Unruh

Moderator

Ministry Staff Report to Annual Meeting, 2024

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." – John 14:5-9a

In June of 2023, the CPMC delegate body gathered in York, NE around the question, "Where do we go from here?" On one hand, this was a question about the challenge we face as a conference moving forward in light of the Resolution on Repentance and Transformation passed at the special delegate session in May of 2022. We are a conference of diverse theological views, particularly around human sexuality, and we were trying to discover a way forward together. In response to what was heard from the delegates, the CPMC board released a statement which said, "We recognize that there is diversity among congregations in how they choose to respond to human sexuality. Rather than ignore this reality or sever relationships, the executive board senses a greater desire for unity among the delegates and hopes that we will remain connected in shared ministry as followers of Jesus. Conference leadership is committed to walking and working with congregations as they discern whether to remain in relationship with one another despite fundamental disagreements regarding issues of theology, biblical interpretation, and practice. Toward this end, we affirm the Covenant of Spiritual Practices (2016) as our primary framework for discerning together. We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us forward." While this statement and the way of life it is calling us to will not satisfy everyone in CPMC, the board believes that this is the best way forward for our conference at this time.

This question was not just about the ways in which we are looking to discern the way forward around understandings of human sexuality. Much of our delegate time was spent inviting those gathered to think about the challenges that are facing their congregations in their communities. The COVID pandemic accelerated many of the societal trends that were already taking place. The loss of trust in our social institutions has extended to churches as well, and we see church attendance dropping across the broader society. At the same time, our programs and ways of being church are no longer as effective as they once were. While people continue to be interested in spirituality in general and Jesus in particular, many no longer see the church as the place to go to encounter Jesus. This has meant the church no longer holds the same place and power in society that it once did and many of us are feeling this marginalization.

These challenges have been the focus of much of Nathan's time this year. To address this Nathan has begun to lead a series of discussions called *Leaders Table*. Borrowing from the work of Al Roxburgh these are a series of four 90 minutes discussions around some key questions facing the church:

1. Where are we as a church and how did we get here?
2. What does the Bible have to say to God's people when they find themselves in a place they never expected to be?
3. What practices do we need to cultivate to live in these messy spaces?
4. What kind of leaders do we need to walk with God's people in this time?

This discussion does several different things for us as a conference. First, it gives language to our leaders to help them talk about what they are experiencing in ministry and the challenges they are facing. Second, it creates spaces for leaders in the conference to get to know one another more deeply so they have a broader source of support for the work they are engaged in. Finally, it begins to invite leaders to

think about ways in which we may be called to lead differently so we can begin to cultivate a culture of hope in our congregations. For leaders who are ready to begin making some changes we have companions' tables where we talk deeply about the particular challenges in individual congregations. Then we begin talking about small changes that can be implemented to cultivate a different way of engaging with our communities. As we begin to engage these challenges we do so with the understanding that God is already at work in us and the world around us, and we are called to learn to recognize what God is up to and to get involved in that.

Nathan continues to work with tending to international relationships. Over the past year our partners in Ecuador have been engaged in deeply meaningful work, helping many congregations think about how they can respond to the uptick in violence in that country. Seminars, workshops and ongoing classes on a theological understanding of resistance and Jesus' way of peace have given many Christians an Anabaptist response to the challenges they are facing. Our partners from Colombia have had opportunities to travel to Venezuela to encourage the churches there, and while they would like Nathan to accompany them on one of these trips he has been unable to reach anyone at a Venezuelan consulate to see about securing a visa.

A good bit of Susan's time as Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership is spent in both informal and focused conversations with pastors and other leaders credentialed by Central Plains. The focused conversations, often in the form of annual accountability visits, are a time to reflect on spiritual and emotional health, growth in ministry and nurturing of one's call, and for pastors, their relationships with congregational leaders and the conference. The informal conversations are far-ranging, from requests for information to requests for prayer and everything in between.

Walking with congregations in pastoral searches continues to bring Susan both joy and frustration. We currently have four congregations in active pastoral searches, some of which have been ongoing for a couple of years. The monthly update from MC USA continues to average 10-15 names of people seeking ministry positions, so we are relying more on word of mouth, shoulder-tapping, and the formation of lay leaders. If you know of someone who may have pastoral gifts or could serve as part of a lay-led ministry team, please let Susan know. Please pray that along with guiding pastors and congregations to one another, the Holy Spirit might inspire us to consider creative new models for pastoral leadership.

The First-Time Pastors Cohort met monthly by Zoom for about 2 years. This was a venue for new pastors to learn from one another and ask questions that arise from beginning to do the tasks of ministry. Through this cohort, these pastors developed close relationships and became friends. They have now all "graduated" from the cohort, so they no longer meet regularly. Susan still meets monthly with the Conflict Management Team. And as a response to requests for a venue for sharing and relationship building among women in ministry, Susan initiated a bi-monthly Zoom. Around a dozen women pastors and chaplains regularly participate.

Near the end of September, 20 pastors and other conference leaders came together in Council Bluffs, Iowa, to learn how to think, act, and lead like Jesus in the face of conflict. This WayFinder training was facilitated through The Colossian Forum, a non-profit that helps Christians productively engaging conflict in their lives and communities. TCF is headed by Michael Gulker, who previously served at Christ Community Church in Des Moines. Grounded in scripture and prayer, TCF trainers Jess Shults and John Sparks led the group through a process that reimagines conflict as an opportunity for discipleship and witness, rather than as something to be avoided out of fear or threat. Participants went home with practical tools for transforming conflict in their congregations and a keen interest in sharing what they learned about following in the way of Jesus with others.

Susan was on sabbatical from mid-November through mid-February. This was a time of rest and renewal. She spent several days on a spiritual retreat, read several books, walked on the beach, slept in, and spent time with family and friends.

During Susan's time away, Pastoral Leadership Committee members visited with many Central Plains pastors to hear about their ministries and ask how PLC can support and encourage them. These conversations were meaningful and deep, and contributed directly to the planning for our Annual Leaders Retreat, which was held April 17-19 at St. Benedict Center near Schuyler, Neb. Rather than an invited resource person, this year we included three directed conversations designed to deepen the relationships among our leaders and spouses. This format seemed to be well-received and may well become part of our retreat rhythm.

Finally, we look forward to seeing all of you this June in Wayland, IA. We are going to focus on the question that Thomas asked Jesus, "How can we know the way?" The future is murky, and the way forward is not clear, but Jesus' response to Thomas is the same for us today, "I am the way and the truth and the life." This year as we gather around the Gospel of John we will look for specific ways we can choose to follow Jesus today.

Pastoral Leadership Committee 2024 Annual Report Prepared by Sid Burkey

The Pastoral Leadership Committee (PLC) is charged with developing and maintaining high quality pastoral leadership for Central Plains Mennonite Conference congregations. We work closely with the Conference Minister for Ministerial Leadership, assisting her and a network of volunteers in offering counsel to search committees who are calling pastoral leadership, providing encouragement and support for pastors and congregational leaders, and offering ongoing personal and professional development. PLC also supports the training of elders, deacons and other lay leaders. Among the tasks of PLC are planning the Annual Leaders Retreat for pastors, chaplains and spouses; granting scholarships for leadership development; and overseeing the credentialing process for leaders within Central Plains Conference.

The PLC is typically made up of six elected members, (since Kim Becker's call outside of CPMC, we are grateful that Elisabeth Harder Schrock has been called to complete Kim's term) – Corey Miller, Elisabeth Harder Schrock, Ramiro Hernandez, Karen Martens Zimmerly, David Nickel, and Sid Burkey (serving as chair). It has been a privilege and joy to work together over the past year along with Susan Janzen.

Susan's many responsibilities relating to PLC's work include leadership development training, the credentialing of new pastors, and assisting congregations with pastoral evaluations and pastor searches. She is the staff person who meets monthly with the conflict management team, responding to pastoral misconduct charges, offering guidance on questions of polity and theological variance, relating to pastor clusters, annual accountability visits with congregational pastors and the organization of the Annual Leaders Retreat. We are grateful for Susan's presence and the life and energy that she brings, particularly within the areas of pastoral resourcing and leadership development.

We anticipate several scheduled credentialing interviews via ZOOM for May, and are considering other activities for pastors and congregations.

We are so thankful that we could hold our Annual Leaders Retreat at Saint Benedict's Center on April 19th - 21st. Reconnecting for worship, reflection, and having fun together has been a rich blessing. Building relationships was lifegiving for around 30 participants, with a good spirit and heart-warming closeness, plus there was a good group of spouses who joined in the times of refreshment. Worship times centered on the Anabaptist prayer book, with shared communion, and times of anointing and blessing. Special thanks to Susan and Nathan! Peg and Sid Burkey gave Susan a bit of a hand in shaping the retreat, but the most significant influence on planning was drawn from phone and one-on-one conversations with pastors around the conference. PLC members each visited with about 9 pastors, so the vast majority of our CPMC pastors were polled for their ideas and concerns. The conversations were far-ranging—about annual retreat, how we might better support their ministries, and individual preferences noted for that support. It was a real *JOY* to be in conversation with our pastors, whom we love dearly. PLC wants to share their load as they bear our congregations' burdens in their daily work and calling! Planning for next year is pending, with considerations being made for the wants and needs we learned from our pastors.

Finally, the Pastoral Leadership Committee is responsible to allocate funds from the Hochstetler Scholarship fund. Ministry Inquiry and Ministerial Leadership Scholarships are now funded through the Ministerial Leadership Fund (no longer from Spending Blueprint funds). Eligible programs for funds include Instituto Biblico Anabautista (IBA) and Seminario Bíblico Anabautista Hispano (SeBAH), programs of Mennonite Education Agency. Other programs include AMBS, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and the CALL program of Hesston College. Pastors, or potential pastors and missionaries are encouraged to apply for funds to help cover the cost of these programs. Any funding requests for leadership development, including other training events or continuing education, that are outside the parameters of the Hochstetler Fund will be channeled through the New Ministries Fund rather than the spending blueprint.

Our gracious God knows what kind of leadership CPMC congregations will need in the future. Please pray for PLC as we anticipate serving our pastors so they, in turn, can ably equip our congregations for works of service!

Pastor Transitions and Credentialing

May 2023 – April 2024

Credentials Granted

No Ordinations or Licensings

Credentials Withdrawn (Congregation withdrew from Central Plains)

Josh Lundberg, Pastor at Kalona Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA, on Oct. 1, 2023

Ben Schlegel, Pastor at Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley, NE, on Oct. 1, 2023

Pastor Transitions — Endings

Resignation

Kim Kliewer Becker, Pastor at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Lauderdale, MN, effective June 26, 2023

Bob Brown, Pastor at Cedar Falls Mennonite Church, Cedar Falls, IA, effective Jan. 7, 2024

Retirement

Robert Troyer retired from ministry as a Pastor and Therapist, Lincoln, NE, Oct. 31, 2023

Eugene Thieszen retired from ministry as a Pastor, Hanston, KS, Jan. 23, 2024

Deaths

Tim Detweiler, retired Pastor and Central Plains Conference Minister, Washington, IA, June 17, 2023

Don Headrick, retired Prison Minister, Lancaster, PA, July 24, 2023

Art Roth, retired Pastor, Julesburg, CO, June 26, 2023

Kelly Slagel, retired Pastor, Wayland, IA, Aug. 30, 2023

Gordon Scoville, retired Transitional Interim Pastor, Milford, NE, Oct. 3, 2023

Martha Corpus Hernandez, Pastor at Iglesia Menonita Centro Cristiana, Washington, IA, Mar. 11, 2024

Pastor Transitions — Beginnings

Installations

Rachelle Luitjens, Pastor at Zion Mennonite Church, Donnellson, IA, June 4, 2023

Caleb Yoder, Pastor at Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, MN, Sept. 10, 2023

Spencer Bradford, Pastor at Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD, Feb. 18, 2024

Interim Pastor Assignments

Current Interim Pastors

Pam Gerig Unruh began as Interim Pastor at Sugar Creek Mennonite, Wayland, IA on Oct. 15, 2023

Gene Miller began as Interim Pastor at Wood River Mennonite, Wood River, NE on Jan. 7, 2024

Jack Scandrett began as Transitional Pastor at Bethel Mennonite, Mountain Lake, MN on Feb. 1, 2023

Interim Completed

Thom Bower ended as Transitional Pastor at Faith Mennonite, Minneapolis, MN on June 26, 2023

Kent McDougal ended as Interim Pastor at Sugar Creek Mennonite, Wayland, IA on Sept. 24, 2023

Gene Miller ended as Interim Pastor at Salem Mennonite, Freeman, SD on Dec. 31, 2023

Congregations Seeking Pastoral Leadership

Congregations in Active Searches

Bethel Mennonite Church, Mountain Lake, MN – Solo Pastor

Milford Mennonite Church, Milford, NE – Solo Pastor

Sugar Creek Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA – Solo Pastor

Wood River Mennonite Church, Wood River, NE – Solo Pastor

Central Plains Mennonite Conference Outreach and Service Committee Annual Report 2024

We praise God for the many ways that our congregations within our conference are serving the Lord in their communities. We know that there are valuable ways that you are reaching out to others with the love of Jesus Christ. Our committee would appreciate hearing these stories so that we can pray for you and possibly share these ideas across our conference. Please contact our chairperson, Tamara Zechin, at tamarajg@gmail.com to share your stories.

We are grateful for our committee members, Rhonda Brubacher and Shirley Ries, who devoted time and effort to coordinating the first pilgrimage for Central Plains Mennonite Conference. This pilgrimage explored the Civil Rights Movement. We were excited that eleven members of Central Plains churches were able to attend this pilgrimage from March 4 until March 11, 2024. You can discover more about this journey by reading the current Scattered Seeds issue, visiting our table at the annual meeting or attending the seminar on Saturday at the annual meeting. Our committee wants to plan more opportunities to participate in the Just Peace Pilgrimages and we would appreciate hearing about your interest in attending these learning experiences – Christ at our Borders, Civil Rights, South Africa, Underground Railroad, West Africa or Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples.

We are glad that our committee member, Allison Krehbiel, has dedicated this year to updating the list of potential service opportunities. This list will soon be added to the Central Plains Mennonite Conference website. If a group in your church is considering a service project, please check out this list for ideas.

We are amazed at the hard work of our task groups. Joel Beachy is connected to the Ecuador Partnership and has an update in this annual report. Jane Yoder-Short coordinates a committed group of volunteers for the Peace and Justice Task Group. She has also included an update in this annual report. We do not currently have a leader for the Church Planting Task Group, but we would like to pursue the mission of this group if we have a passionate volunteer to give leadership to these efforts.

As we continue our work throughout 2024 and into 2025, we are hoping to discern the direction of the Outreach and Service Committee. This discernment process will include reviewing the structure of our committee, like job descriptions, term limits and number of members for our committee. We will probably discontinue some experiments, like the companion congregations, that have not taken root. We will also try some new experiments, like Join Us at the Table, which we hope will bring several churches throughout the conference together for planned activities that reach out to their communities. If you have ideas that relate to outreach or service that you would like us to explore further, please feel free to share them with anyone on our committee.

Respectfully submitted,
Tamara Zechin, chairperson

March 2024

² My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,
² making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding,
³ if you indeed cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding,
⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures—⁵ then you will understand the
fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth
come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, ⁸ guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

Proverbs 2:1-8 (NRSVUE)

The Ecuador Partnership continues to offer a trip each year for our Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC), Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia (IMCOL), and Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) partners to listen, to learn, and to encourage the ongoing ministries of our partners from across Ecuador. This work requires a level of listening for understanding that is important, as it encourages our partners in their work and helps us to report back to our constituents the many varied projects, vision, and ministry that is taking place throughout these churches.

Currently, the Ecuador Partnership supports the Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador (ICAME) which has a singular congregation, Quito Mennonite Church. The partnership also supports our indigenous siblings ministries from Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Ecuador (ICME), and we are reengaging our indigenous siblings from the nondenominational, but Anabaptist leaning, Consejo de Pueblos y Organizaciones Indigenas Evangélicos del Ecuador (FEINE). In addition to these three conferences of churches, our partnership has been invited to explore ways that we can engage and support our siblings in Christ from the Rosedale Network churches. Our MMN partners reached out to the Rosedale Missions and received a very supportive invitation to be in relationship with these churches, which primarily reside on the west coast of Ecuador. Relationships among the three conferences have grown through joint gatherings and learning opportunities.

Our February 2024 trip consisted of representatives from IMCOL, MMN, and CPMC. Oscar Herrera and Lilia Paola Aranguren Caballero participated from IMCOL partners in Bogotá, Colombia. Linda Shelly, Regional Director for Latin America at MMN, Nathan Luitjens, CPMC Executive Conference Minister, and Joel Beachy, pastor at East Union Mennonite Church and CPMC Ecuador Partnership coordinator, took part from their North American context. Delicia Bravo Aguilar and Peter Wigginton, in their Ecuador partnership coordination role, hosted us.

The first visit was to Riobamba, the capital of the Chimborazo Province in central Ecuador, about a three-and-half hour drive south of Quito. A portion of our group attended two churches on Sunday and received a welcomed site-seeing tour of the region, taking in the city from the mountains, visiting the first Catholic church in Ecuador, established in 1534, and eating traditional meal selections from a local restaurant. Later, our entire contingency met at Horeb Mennonite Church where we received reports from the ICME churches. In Riobamba Horeb is a Kichwa Indigenous church and Columna de Verdad is intercultural and mostly Mestizo. Representatives were also present from the Camino de Salvación Kichwa church in Quito. Some of the key concerns were centered around how to train young leaders for ministry with viable credentials. The hope would be to train young leaders who would return to their home communities and offer multiple years of service. The concern is that the local churches cannot afford to pay trained professional leaders, so there is sometimes an incentive for young leaders to move

away to seek other opportunities. These church communities also long for additional resources for teaching kids, youth, and adults. There are already plans to hold retreats for the youth and pastors and leaders this summer. A highlight of our time at Horeb Mennonite Church was to try cuy for the first time, a delicacy for the indigenous communities, which included the traditional guinea pig prepared in the oven, along with a mountain of potatoes, veggies, and a drink of Chicha.

The next day, after making our trip back to Quito, our group was able to visit the afternoon tutoring program that Delicia Bravo Aguilar and Alba Silva help to coordinate. Young students from the Jardines del Inca neighborhood gathered to receive support for math and literature homework. They also received a small snack of Caca de Perro, chocolate covered roasted corn, and juice. Delicia finished up the time with an illustration for how the power of prayer helps us when we are afraid. Finally, our group took a tour of the shipping container that has been transformed into a classroom near where the program currently meets. The hope is to transition the afterschool program to this new location, as the program directors do not have keys to their current location and are dependent on the community to unlock the space.

On Thursday, Nathan, Peter, Lilia, Linda, and I assisted the Quito Mennonite Church employees with preparing bags of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) supplies for distribution to refugee families who are receiving help from the church for the first time. Each bag consisted of a handmade comforter, a bag of rice, a bag of sugar, a bag of lentils or beans, and three cans of MCC chicken. Each family must apply to receive this aid. Distributions to 60 new families are made twice a month. Some of the families then receive an adjusted packet of food and supplies once a month for three more months. After these kits were assembled, Alexandra Meneses, Daniela Sanchez and Alba Silva gave an updated report about this ongoing work. MCC has reduced the amount of the grant for the program, and it is thought that this will be the last container of supplies that the church will receive at this time. In addition to the kits, these women also teach courses on empowering women in the home, to seek ways out of domestic violence, to encourage equality in the home, and to teach ways to start small businesses that can support the women and add income to the household.

Friday morning we took advantage of our time to visit with the president of FEINE, Edgar Sáez and the leader of kids, youth, and women, Nancy Pilatuña. We were impressed with the numerous and significant projects that FEINE hopes to address in the next year or so. One of the courses that they are excited to partner with MMN on is the topic of Faith and Business. This is a part of an ongoing series that also includes Faith and Politics and Church Planting. Like the Mennonite indigenous community, FEINE is also eager and ready for educational opportunities, including masters-level training for pastors and leaders. Although this is a tremendous undertaking, we are in the process of exploring what is possible through the partnership in response to the needs expressed by Indigenous partners for additional education and training.

During the weekend, our partnership helped to lead ICAME leaders during a retreat at Don Bosco. We used scripture from Ezekiel 37:1-14 to consider the dry and broken areas in our personal lives, the life of the community, and the life of the church. Participants contemplated on their personal gifts, the gifts of the community, and the gifts of Quito Mennonite Church. They also reflected on how the church can be an example, a place where all who are seeking God's presence may experience that same presence when they engage at Quito Mennonite Church. Finally, we reflected on our time together and participated in the Lord's Supper by offering the bread and juice to each other in pairs and eating and drinking together in an act of solidarity and true communion.

The Quito Mennonite Church was booming on Sunday morning. Nathan Luitjens shared a sermon focused on Acts 16:6-15 and invited those gathered to consider where they were surprised by the text. Those gathered, readily responded. Following the service, we took a quick 45-minute drive to the southern part of Quito to meet with the indigenous church leaders from Camino de Salvación. We were served a generous meal of cordero, papas, corn, and salad. Everyone introduced themselves and their roles in the church, and our group helped commission and pray for the young church leaders who were installed as elders for the church.

One of the significant challenges that the leadership of ICAME face is the legal requirements demanded of the church board. Per the church's constitution and their registration with the government, the church board must maintain 10 members that have a number of legal requirements for how they function. This has continued to demand a large amount time and mental and emotional energy to meet the requirements. This competes with the visioning and implementation of new projects within the congregation. Our partnership struggles to know how to both encourage the church board and assist them with finding new ways to do their work moving forward.

The church's general leadership team, however, is full of energy. To a person, they have ideas for new projects and hopes for how the church will expand in both membership and ministry outreach. The hope for our partnership is to motivate this type of visioning while supporting the required work to satisfy the legal requirements needed for the church board.

The final leg of our partnership trip was to visit churches that were originally planted by the Rosedale Mennonite Missions. These churches primarily reside along the west coast of Ecuador. Our visit took us to Manta and to the small coastal town of Puerto Cayo. Visiting the pastors and church leaders from these churches revealed a deep desire for the people to live and to engage in their local contexts. Some of the pastors have secondary residents in these locations to better work to those ends. The need is great for resources in Spanish that can assist with hard topics like discipleship, formation, church planting, faith and politics, and more. What was very evident is that these leaders are highly motivated and working very hard to engage with their members and communities. As we traveled to and from locations, our driver would frequently yell out greetings to people walking the streets, and there were eager salutations returned.

Despite the recent violence and unrest in Ecuador due to the government's crackdown on the drug cartels in the country, the Mennonite and Anabaptist-minded churches of Ecuador appear to be highly engaged and motivated. It is an encouragement to me to see these conferences and congregations so eager to take on the challenge of planting churches and sharing the Good News to their neighbors throughout their communities. This is something that our Central Plains Mennonite Conference would love to see our North American churches engage in more, and I believe we can and will continue to learn from our Ecuadorian partners.

May we continue to support the important work of our siblings in Christ throughout Ecuador. May we learn from them even as we provide resources and financial support to their efforts, and may we continue to notice and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in all that we do. May it be so.

Peace and blessings,
Pastor Joel Beachy

Report for Peace and Justice Task Group – 2023-2024

Peace Mug Nominations

We decided to switch it up a little this year and ask for someone involved in immigration and welcoming the stranger. This year's peace mug goes to Roger Farmer, Washington, Iowa. Roger has been involved with various families. He has been and is a voice for immigration justice. Thanks and congratulations to Roger

Table resources

We are again giving a book away at our resource table. **We are happy to offer a chance to win** *Beyond Welcome: Centering Immigrants in Our Christian Response to Immigration*, by Karen Gonzalez. This choice fit with our peace mug theme of immigration.

Along with the book, we will have a variety of resources available.

Workshops

Margie did the workshop *Immigration Injustice, What Can I Do?*

Suzette did the workshop *Grief How do I know I'm healing?*

In process

With the help of a New Ministries Grant and other donations, The Voices of Conscience: Peace Witness in the Great War, from Kauffman Museum in Kansas is coming to Hillcrest Gallery in September and October. In November and December, a student-created exhibit about CO stories from the local community will be created.

Environmental Concerns

We met with Karla Detweiler Stolfus to learn what we could do.

We encouraged her to do a workshop at the annual meeting which she did.

We want to hear your ideas. What would be helpful for peace and justice to grow in your congregations? Let us know. Contact The Peace and Justice Task Group via email:

wilmajane17@gmail.com

Members: Margie Caraballo, Rachel Geissinger, Jane Yoder-Short (chair),

Tamara Gill (Chair of Outreach and Service), Nathan Luitjens (Staff)

Christian Formation Committee
2024 Annual Report
Prepared by Dylan C. Keller, Chair

The purpose of the Christian Formation Committee (CFC) is to assist the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference to grow continually in Christ-likeness in order to embody a holistic witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We do this by promoting Christian formation resources and equipping formation leaders. The CFC met four times over this past year to discern and engage in conversation on the future of the committee. These conversations led to opportunities for collaboration, new ideas to experience formation, and contemplation on challenges ahead.

One highlight from this past year is our budding relationship with the Outreach and Service Committee. We joined them during the fall Council of Committees meeting to collaborate on experiments and ways we can utilize each of our committees' talents to better the other's goals. One idea was to create table questions for church gatherings that are intergenerational focus, but contain elements of christian formation based on the questions being asked. Another is to develop a conference traveling casserole dish that highlights the formative experience in cooking a meal and eating together around the table. The vision is to share a treasured recipe from your church's potluck to send to another church for them to make at their next gathering. Along with the recipe will be a casserole dish that each of these meals would be prepared in, prayed over, and served to a new community. Both of these ideas are being finalized logistically for implementation later this year.

Where we contemplated challenges came in discerning the future of our committee. We know the commitment Central Plains Mennonite Conference has in creating formative experiences, reading and studying the bible together, and following the way of Jesus. The questions raised were, does this come from a stand-alone committee? How is formation experienced in 2023? and what are the expectations going forward? These are not easily answered and cannot be limited to a five-member committee. We are yearning for clarity from the conference on how this committee can be a vital tool in your formative experiences throughout your communities. We hope to hear from delegates during the Annual Meeting and throughout the year in developing the way for christian formation.

Shalom Readers - <http://www.centralplainsmc.org/shalom-readers.html>

A big thank you to Marlinda Beachy, Joan Friesen, and Ellen Miller, for their continued time and investment in the Shalom Readers program. They are responsible for selecting book titles for the "Shalom" collection, making book purchases, and mailing books to those who've earned them.

The following churches were awarded free books in 2023: In the East Region - 17 books to children from Cedar Falls Mennonite Church, First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, and Sugar Creek Mennonite Church. In the West Region - 23 books to children from Hutterthal Church in Freeman and Bethesda Church in Henderson.

We encourage you to check out the conference website for the updated reading list, activities, and ways to encourage engagement with your youth and adults. Many of the books are readily available in public libraries or by borrowing from the Central Plains office in Freeman; arrangements can be made by contacting Monica Clem at office@centralplainsmc.org.

2024 Shalom Book Selections

Preschool-Grade 2

Hike by Pete Oswald, Candlewick Press, 2020. In this wordless picture book a dad and child wake early to hike in the mountains, where they become closer while experiencing the joys and challenges of nature and help preserve its wonders.

How to Apologize by David LaRochelle, Ill. by Mike Wohanoutka, Candlewick Press, 2021. A humorous guidebook to when, where, why, how, and how not to apologize.

Room for Everyone by Naaz Khan, Ill. Merce Lopez, Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2021. In this rhyming counting book set in Zanzibar, the driver of the daladala (bus) extends kindness to everyone he meets.

Grades 3-5

Freewater by Amina Luqman-Dawson, Jimmy Patterson, 2022. Twelve year old Homer and his sister Ada flee the plantation where they were enslaved and find a home with other escaped slaves in the swamp at Freewater.

How to Find What You're Not Looking For by Veera Hiranandani, Kokila, 2022. As the only Jewish girl in her class, Ariel faces antisemitism on a daily basis and sees how it affects her parent's bakery but when Ariel's older sister elopes with an Indian man named Raj, it opens up Ariel's eyes to her parent's racist beliefs.

Nour's Secret Library by Vali Mintzi, Barefoot Books, 2022. When their neighborhood in Damascus, Syria is bombed Nour and Amir begin collecting books for a secret underground library. The library and their brave spirits show hope and resilience in the worst of situations. Based on the author's life experience and inspired by a true story.

Grades 6-8

Dinged by Tommy Greenwald, Amulet Books, 2022. A high school star football player deals with his former star football player dad's erratic behavior and weighs the value of sports hero glory over permanent physical damage.

Everything Sad is Untrue: (A True Story) by Daniel Nayeri, Levine Querido, 2020. Khosrou, whom his Oklahoman classmates call Daniel, stands before his class to tell stories of his former life in Iran, of fleeing in the middle of the night, of life in an Italian refugee camp and of adjusting to his new life in the United States. The reader is left with hope and the knowledge that there is a God who loves us.

Louder than Hunger by John Schu, Candlewick Press, 2024. In this novel in verse, 13 year old Jake is bullied at school which triggers an eating disorder. The book is based on the author's experiences and emotions living in residential treatment facilities as a young teen with an eating disorder.

Bios for the Slate of Affirmation 2024

For Moderator Elect -

Michael Swartzendruber, Wayland, IA

Pastor, Wayland Mennonite Church

Michael hopes to bring creativity in administration to his role. He enjoys organization and values the processes by which discernment happens. Michael looks forward to getting to know the conference better and participating in the creation of a future together.

For Conference Board Member-at-Large -

Suzette Shreffler is a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe and a Co-Pastor, along with her husband Scott, at the White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church in Busby, MT. on the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation since November 2022.

She would like to be part of building a community of hope and support within her own community but also part of the Central Plains Conference as a whole.

She is doing this now in her own community on the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation by supporting those in their grief, by having Grief Support Groups and walking along parents as a Parent Coach sharing tools about parenting in the 21st century.

Scott and Suzette enjoy traveling/camping in their 5th wheel camper, when possible, for relaxation.

For Conference Board Member-at-Large -

Hi, I'm Duane Franz, husband of Shella (Ortman) Franz in Mountain Lake, MN. We are parents of 5 adult children and enjoy our 12 grandchildren. I farm some land and am phasing out of cattle. I am a member of Bethel Mennonite in Mountain Lake, where I have been a Sunday school teacher and serve on the Leadership Selection Committee and Relief Committee.

For Discernment Committee -

Cassidy Hertzler attends Washington Mennonite Church in Washington Iowa. Growing up, she lived in Wellman attending Wellman Mennonite Church. Cassidy attended Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite University and continued to live in Harrisonburg after graduation.

Cassidy and her husband Luke moved back to Iowa 4 years ago and have been attending Washington Mennonite Church while living and working in Wellman. She works as a special education paraprofessional at an elementary school and enjoys reading and being outdoors in her free time.

For the Pastoral Leadership Committee -

Elisabeth Harder Schrock, Mountain Lake (MN), is church administrator for First Mennonite Church, business manager for the local MCC Thrift and Ten Thousand Villages store, and farms with her husband, Ramont, and their two pre/teen children, Jonathan and Anna. A graduate of Bethel College (KS) and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, she has also worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Washington D.C., Ukraine, and Bolivia. She joins the Pastor Leadership Committee out of a deep appreciation for the church and a desire to support and encourage its leaders.

Ballot of Election/Affirmation
Central Plains Mennonite Conference
Annual Meeting 2024

The following slate has been developed through the work of the Discernment Committee and is recommended by Conference Board. Additional nominations may be made when this ballot is presented at the Annual Meeting provided such nominees meet the requirements of the CPMC Bylaws for serving in the position for which they are nominated. Please contact potential nominees prior to the election to assure that they will serve if elected. As a matter of courtesy, the Moderator should be given prior notice of the intent to make a nomination from the floor.

Conference Moderator Elect becomes Moderator at 2026 Annual Meeting vote for 1
_____ (2026) Michael Swartzendruber – Wayland Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA
_____ (write in) _____

Conference Board Member-at-Large (2-year term) vote for 2
_____ (2026) Ramont Harder Schrock - 2nd term- First Menn. Church, Mountain Lake, MN
_____ (2026) Suzette Shreffler – 1st term - White River Cheyenne Menn. Church, Busby, MT
_____ (2026) (write in) _____

Discernment Committee (2-year term) vote for 3
_____ (2026) Duane Franz – 1st term - Bethel Mennonite Church, Mountain Lake, MN
_____ (2026) Cassidy Bontrager – 1st term - Washington Mennonite Church, Washington, IA
_____ (2025) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2026) (write in) _____

Christian Formation Committee (3-year term) vote for 3
_____ (2027) Bethany Shetler – 2nd term - Wellman Mennonite Church, Wellman, IA
_____ (2026) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2027) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2027) (write in) _____

Outreach and Service Committee (3-year term) vote for 4
_____ (2025) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2026) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2027) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2027) *(candidate needed to fill out the committee)*
_____ (2027) (write in) _____

Pastoral Leadership Committee (3-year term) vote for 2
_____ (2027) Corey Miller – 2nd term - Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD
_____ (2027) Elisabeth Harder Schrock – 1st term – First Menn. Church, Mountain Lake, MN
_____ (2027) (write in) _____

CPMC Report – Freeman Academy

Operating the longest-running Mennonite high school in the United States, Freeman Academy celebrated its 120th Anniversary during the 2023-2024 academic year. We celebrated at multiple points throughout the year, and in conjunction with a major push to match budget to mission, conducted a \$900,000 fundraising drive called Cultivate 120. This was part of an overall budget reconfiguration effort to ensure we could hire and retain talented staff, ensure quality of curriculum and technology, and manage our facilities well.

As with many Mennonite schools, we continue to fight downward enrollment trends. We have an active dorm with both international and domestic boarding students, and we are engaging in new digital marketing efforts to engage students in southeast South Dakota. We are looking forward to growing our student body in the 2024-2025 school year and beyond.

This year, we hosted an accreditation visit by Mennonite School Council in partnership with Cognia, the largest K-12 accrediting agency in the world. The visiting team – consisting of staff from other Mennonite schools – was deeply impressed with our intimate school community, citing FA’s commitment to maintaining a faith-based community rooted in positive relationships, and a “commendable, significant” commitment to teaching the whole child. The team leader commented, “We’re a little amazed and exhausted by seeing what you all you do here.” We now move forward with a renewed focus on 7-12 curriculum improvement, including more robust incorporation of inquiry- and project-based learning.

The arts continue to thrive at Freeman Academy, with strong band and vocal performances at state contests and in campus concerts. This year, our chamber choir was one of four high school and college choirs around the state invited to perform at the South Dakota American Choral Directors Association conference. In addition, as part of our Cultivate 120 campaign, the school recently hosted a dual piano performance featuring two alumni – now residing in New York and Denver – who wowed the physical and virtual audiences alike with a combination of classical and modern music.

Our students enjoy many other opportunities at Freeman Academy, including electives in theater, music theory, Information Technology, and art. Student athletes are able to participate in nine different sports throughout the year as well. Theater productions feature students active both on state and backstage, and the school’s annual Schmeckfest festival and musical continue to flourish with sell-out crowds.

From a faith perspective, Freeman Academy continues to be a committed Mennonite school with an ecumenical staff and student body. While we emphasize Jesus as the center of our faith, community as the center of our life, and reconciliation as the center of our work, we are enriched with many families from other traditions – or no faith tradition at all – who come and enjoy the nurturing community and personal transformation experienced here every year. We welcome your prayers and support as we continue living into our Four Pillars: Love of God, Love of Learning, and Loving our Neighbor...as we Love Ourselves.

Sincerely,

Dr. Brad Anderson
Head of School

A warm greeting from the staff at Swan Lake Christian Camp

This has been an exciting year as well as a year of changes. Mary Anderson, who has cooked at SLCC for the past 26 years, retired in March. Previously, she cooked at Byron Bible camp for another 20 years. She devoted her life's work to feeding the bodies of children and adults so that others might feed their souls. Well done! We wish her continued health as she finds new ways to honor God. We also welcomed Kenna Gilles to the camp family. She was born to Kianne and Kenny Gilles on January 8th. Kianne is our program director.

The summer youth camps have been exploding recently. 700 youth attended camp this past summer. This is an increase of nearly 200 kids in the past three years. Since the pandemic, we have experienced such growth that we have adjusted our schedule to add another week of camp. We have added two more cabins and renovated others. We are offering two sessions for each camp to deal better with a new phenomenon, the wait list. We have never needed to turn any child away because of space limitations and we don't like that prospect. So, we are doing everything that we can to accommodate the kids who want to come to camp. We also offered the most scholarships this past year, all with the goal that money should not be the factor that prevents anyone from hearing about the love of Jesus Christ.

This summer, we will be exploring the scriptures with an eye towards God making all things new. By week's end, the campers will recognize God as creator on a global and individual level. We want to invite the kids to step into a relationship with the only one who can remake their lives in his own image. We are excited by the list of individuals who are accepting the challenge of leading our bible lessons and are in the process of putting together the group of cabin counselors and program staff who will each likely grow more than the kids that they will serve. As a praying conference of Mennonite believers in Jesus Christ, I ask you to pray for the kids, pray for the leadership and pray for the families that will receive these young people back. We need and rely on those prayers. (By the way, one of our adult crafters commented on the peace that she felt as soon as she turned on to the driveway at the camp. I replied that this is due to the generations of prayers which have been poured out over the years for this camp.)

I believe that God has given the camp a new vision to build a worship center and dining hall. This project has begun and will connect to the main building through the current office space. This 3 million dollar vision tests my faith daily. However, I see God's hand in the planning, the finances and the list of people offering to be involved. Our goal is to complete the new addition and then to connect the two buildings so that there are only minimal disruptions in usage. As a partnering ministry, we invite your financial support as we strive to keep a facility that invites people to go deeper in their relationship with Jesus. Our goal is to build a space that removes any hindrances to our guests experiencing the love, the mercy, the grace and the forgiveness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. I invite you to come, see and share in this vision.

Again, I thank you for being our partner in advancing the kingdom of God through connection and prayer. May I pray a special blessing over your gathering as you make important decisions and foster even more important relationships. Praise God.

Jerry Kroeker
Executive Director
Swan Lake Christian Camp
(605) 351 - 6338

May 2024

Dear Friends of the **Agapé Peace Center** in Duluth, MN,

‘There is no shortage of harms, conflicts and divisions these days,’ I often tell people. ‘And the church world is not immune from this trend.’ Perhaps that is why the interest is still strong for people to gain skills in facilitating hard but healing conversations. It’s been an honor to serve people who are eager to learn about restorative frameworks for making relational peace.

In this last year I was able to host two 10-hour trainings at Des Moines Mennonite Church: **“Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Foundations for Facilitating Harms, Conflicts and Divisive Issues in Church Communities.”** This is the start of a vision I have had for many years to equip church members with facilitator skills so they can support hard conversations in their own churches. Maybe ‘facilitator’ can be added as a role gift in 1 Corinthians 12! A third training is planned for next November.

This training work is supported by the **Conflict Management Support Team** that I still chair for **Central Plains Mennonite Church**. I’ll be at the annual meeting this June to do an introductory workshop on restorative conversations as a way to boost interest in the Des Moines training. Last July I was able to give a well-attended workshop at the national conference for Mennonite USA which was held in Kansas City. 90 people filled the room!

My partnership with **Bethany Community Church** in Seattle continued this year where a team has initiated both learning and resolution frameworks for strengthening **racial reconciliation** in their church communities. As a result of this, last September and February I was asked by Seattle Pacific University Seminary to do a series of learning videos for restorative practices. Over two dozen of them will be posted online this summer for a wider audience to access them.

This opened up another new door. In January the **Restorative Church** project received a grant award to do a more formal set of videos with facilitator **Betty Pries** from Ontario. She and I will cover six biblical stories and six themes to help church members explore peacemaking dialogue. **“Restorative Conversations: Wrestling with Ourselves, Reconciling with Others.”** A study guide will also accompany the video series.

Locally I have been able to partner with the local Benedictine Sisters who have a spirituality center that allows me to do workshops. Last year I did Advent and Lenten mini-retreats that related biblical themes to navigating our lives in anxious and divisive times. **New College Berkeley** also invited me to lead two zoom-series this year on ‘Truth and Trust’ and ‘Depolarization’. Common to all these workshops is the power of shifting out of our protective Head-zones and into our empathetic Heart-zones.

Thanks to my local blind friend, Treasure, I’ve had rich experiences this year in the county jail to talk about restorative justice and bridge-building communication. I love it when people can speak out of their lived experiences with honesty and hope!

Please pray with me that new opportunities will arise in this next year for the right people to be served, and that I, in partnership with co-leaders, will be “instruments of peace” in the hands of God.

This year I am transitioning the **Restorative Church** project from a solo-platform to a team-led venture. May the best people suited for this next chapter become partners. New connections have been made with church leaders in Washington DC where we will hold the next [Restorative Church Gathering](#) on Aug. 3.

If your church would like to help sustain the center with an annual donation, that can be done through the Central Plains Mennonite Conference main office.

Peace and strength, Ted tedlewis76@gmail.com 715-205-5945

Wanted: An assistant with WordPress/PayPal web-knowledge to assist with strengthening interactions with Restorative Church subscribers.

Note re: Financial Support: if you would like your donation to have a tax benefit, it can be directed through the main office of *Central Plains Mennonite Conference*, designated to New Ministries Fund. Checks can be sent to: CPMF, P.O. Box 101, Freeman, SD 57029, with *Agape Peace Center* in the note line.

Closing Verse

(Jacob to Esau)

“For to see your face is like seeing the face of God,
now that you have received me favorably.”

- Genesis 33:10

Administering the Work of Our Conference

Central Plains Mennonite Conference Annual Meeting

June 15-18, 2023

Hosted by the Nebraska Area Mennonite Churches
Holthus Convention Center in York, Nebraska

FRIDAY MORNING DELEGATE SESSION

Welcome and Introductions We were welcomed by our moderator, Pam Gerig Unruh, and invited to think of a time in the past when we may have declared that we never would do a certain thing. Then we were to consider how God may have called us beyond our “never” and worked with us on our journey. She led in prayer, using the Voices Together worship resource number 953, inviting God to come among us and guide us in our work and worship.

Secretary Report The minutes of the last annual meeting and the actions of the Central Plains Conference Board were summarized by Shirley Kempf, the current board secretary. It was moved by Dylan Keller of Zion Mennonite Church in Donnellson, Iowa to accept the minutes as written. It was seconded by Brad Carlson of Salem Mennonite in Freeman, South Dakota. Motion passed.

Delegate Table introductions Table groups are an important way for members of our conference to connect to each other and talk over the issues before the delegate body. Our youth delegates were recognized and welcomed into this process. In order to get acquainted, the delegates were given time to introduce themselves to the others in their table groups. Along with their name, location, and church, they were invited to share a time in their lives when they declared they would never do something, and how that turned out.

Executive Conference Minister Report Our executive conference minister, Nathan Luitjens, introduced the topic at hand with the question, “How do we respond to the MCUSA resolution made in Kansas City last summer?” Our conference includes 46 churches that are across the spectrum from very welcoming to very conservative in our understanding of human sexuality. Nathan cited three approaches that can be taken.

We can do nothing. The advantage of this approach is that it requires nothing. The disadvantage is that it sets a precedent of never talking about anything.

The second option is to take a vote. The advantage is that it is the cleanest option. The disadvantages of this approach are that it splits up our conference and leads to splits in our churches. It creates an “us versus them” mentality. It gives no other option other than winners and losers.

The third option is to focus on our covenant of spiritual practices adopted by our conference in 2016. In response to God’s unqualified love for us, we commit to practices which transform us toward Christlikeness and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Through this process, we strive to be consistent with God’s intended purpose for the world. We try to sense the Spirit and notice where He wants us to go. We engage with one another, even when we don’t agree. We give up control. The implications are that churches with differing interpretations of scripture remain committed to our covenant practices, and the spirit of Gamaliel in Acts 5:38-39 will be applied. The advantage of this option is unity around our common goals despite differing understandings of scripture. The disadvantage is the danger of reverting to the first option and doing nothing.

Table Group Discussion Pam introduced our table discussion questions by asking if we can make a place in this room where we all fit and where we can welcome the Holy Spirit into our midst. With the help of Lego pieces, each person was to describe his or her church group. The questions for discussion were:

If you were describing your congregation with a list of words as identity markers, what would you write down? In that list, what is the primary identity marker?

How does your church identity shape your reading of the Resolution of Transformation and Reconciliation?

To what extent can we practice a spirit of forbearance with congregations who respond to diversity in human sexuality differently than we do?

Pam invited us to have a conversation with our table groups, considering the three options for moving forward put forth by Nathan, in light of what we personally would like to see happen and what our congregations would like to see happen. What hopes and fears do we have regarding the three ways to move forward?

Verbal sharing from table groups tended to lean toward option 3. Reservations mentioned were that it would be time consuming. Working at discernment is hard. According to our spiritual practice covenant guidelines (page 2), this involves pairing with another church in order to discern together. The process would need direction and assistance from conference leaders. The temptation is to fall back to doing nothing when we choose option 3. Are there tools to use for discernment without becoming another program and piling on more work?

FRIDAY AFTERNOON DELEGATE SESSION

Galilean Fellows Phil Friesen reported on his work with the Galilean Fellows, which is a group of authors who gather online for an hour a week. There is an opportunity to share with others, both in this country and abroad, and a chance to share Christ. He invited all interested people to join this online conversation.

Introduction to the blueprint We viewed a video prepared by the stewardship committee to introduce the blueprint. Further consideration will be given to this in a later delegate session.

Introduction to the slate The discernment committee prepared a ballot for the election of people to fill the positions for our conference committees. It was noted that more names are needed. Delegates are encouraged to prayerfully consider who might be added to the ballot. The vote will be in Saturday's afternoon session.

Introduction to Leader's Table Nathan asked us to consider what it might look like to deeply engage within our communities in what God is already doing there. How do we lead in a place we have never been before? How does scripture frame our efforts? What skills are needed? How do we become what is needed? We will consider this more deeply in a later session.

Table Group Guided Bible Study (Dwell with Scripture) We listened to the reading of Luke 10: 1-11. It was read for us slowly by our conference ministers, Susan Janzen and Nathan Luitjens, from two different versions. We were invited to look for what really stuck out to us.

What grabbed our attention? What is the Spirit trying to say to us by what we are starting to hear? Are we missing what is happening in the chaos and confusion?

Each person was invited to share what was heard from the reading of the scripture with another person in his or her table group. Following this, table mates were to describe to each other what they heard the other participants saying. And finally, each group shared with the rest what was heard in their table group discussion.

Finally, groups were asked to analyze why discussion was guided by this method. What was experienced? Some thoughts expressed were: Studying scripture together is one of our spiritual practices. It was necessary to listen carefully and not be formulating one's own response. Some contemplated why the Spirit would highlight different things to people at the same table. Trust was gained with each other as scripture was studied together. Most thought it was a helpful exercise and didn't feel directed, coerced, or twisted.

SATURDAY MORNING DELEGATE SESSION

Pam opened the morning session with a welcome and a prayer asking the Lord to let us walk this day with Him.

Peace Mug Presentations On behalf of the peace and justice committee, Jane Yoder-Short explained that this year, they chose to honor two young adults in our conference.

Aiden Yoder was interviewed and presented his mug by Lon Marshall. Aiden has attended Hillcrest Academy and is currently at Eastern Mennonite University. He is described as compassionate and living a life of peacemaking. He met with his state legislatures to discourage the use of solitary confinement in the prison system. And he is speaking with the federal lawmakers to encourage them to consider ways to mine critical metals in an environmentally friendly way.

Sydney Bontrager was introduced by Steve Griffin, who presented her mug to her. She is a Hesston student and has been especially interested in the plight of people from Myanmar. She has friends from that country. Along with Michelle Hershberger, she was able to help some immigrants with legal fees. She also was able to raise \$13,850 to help support some of the children in the city dump in Myanmar.

Celebrate new pastors and leaders Susan Janzen, the conference minister for ministerial leadership, presented the new pastors in our conference.

Scott and Suzette Schreffler at White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church in Busby MT

Rachelle Luitjens at Zion Mennonite Church in Donnellson IA

Caleb Yoder at Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, MN

She named those credentialed for ordination.

John David Kenney at West Union Mennonite Church in Parnell, IA

Fernando Ramos at Casa de Oracion Emanuel in Davenport IA

Jacob Guckenburger at Christ Community Church in Des Moines IA

Randall Koehler at Hutterthal Mennonite Church in Freeman, SD

Chelsea Vaught at Bethesda Mennonite Church in Henderson NE

She named those licensed toward ordination.

Laurel Swartzendruber as chaplain at Wayland Mennonite Church in Wayland IA

Pratoomporn Harder at Lao Christian Fellowship in Mountain Lake MN

Jill Hofer of House Church of Freeman in Freeman SD

Suzette Schreffler, co-pastor at White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church in Busby MT

She also asked for those in attendance in pastoral training programs to stand up to be recognized. She led in a prayer of blessing for all these pastors and leaders.

Nathan recognized our conference minister of Christian Formation, Amanda Bleichty. He remarked that in our changed world, church leaders are able to find most of their resources online and require less assistance from conference personnel. Recognizing the need to reevaluate our conference ministry needs, Amanda resigned and has become the director of Crooked Creek Camp where she will be involved in ministry to young campers. She remains quarter time with conference to continue her Intercultural Development and Communications work.

With sadness, we say goodbye to Kalona Mennonite Church and Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church, regretting that we have failed to be one body and one Spirit with them, as Paul describes in Ephesians 4:4-6.

Visio Divina Michelle Hofer, our assistant moderator, led us to contemplate an image of art and scripture that may have inspired the creation of the art work. What do you notice about the hand, in a gesture of blessing, emerging from the chaos? Whose hand is it? What scripture does it bring to mind? What emotions are felt? What is God saying to me? What should I say in response?

Delegate Work: Leader's Table Nathan introduced this portion of our table discussions by citing various statistics about church membership trends, lack of confidence in organized religions, and the public's general distrust of any institutions. Organized religion has the most public confidence of any public institutions, and that is only about 40%.

We watched a video featuring Alan Roxburgh. He stated that churches were successful as long as people came. Now, ministers and leaders are working harder than ever, and feeling like congregations are unraveling. This phenomenon is calling for a different approach. His proposal forms leader groups that work together to recognize challenges being faced by the leadership in today's churches, to design experiments together to address the challenges being faced, and to develop skills and practices needed in the midst of this unprecedented time.

Table groups were invited to respond. Some comments made were: As with an unraveling crocheted blanket, the pieces may need to be used to create something new. It is necessary to protect our pastors as they may be the ones hurt the most. Statistics may mislead. Maybe in the past, only a small percentage of attendees really wanted to be there. Today's participants may be that same number. Christianity will survive, but maybe not the church. Institutions left out some people when they formed. How can those be included into something new? Are institutions getting in the way of something new? More opportunities may be here to tell the story of Jesus without preconceived ideas.

Table Group Guided Bible Study (Dwell with Scripture)

We focused on Paul and Silas's second missionary journey in Acts 16: 6-15. As before, our scripture was read in two versions by Susan and by Nathan. Paul's journey didn't start as expected. His methodology of speaking in the synagogues first wasn't working. His plans on where to go were also changed.

Table groups were asked to talk together about what was noticed in the story. What spoke to the listener? Then delegates were asked to share with each other what they heard being said in their discussion. Lastly, table groups could share with the whole delegate body, if they so desired. Some thoughts shared were: God is the central theme. Paul and Silas went to meet people where they were already gathered. They discerned together the course of action after Paul's vision. What does the sense of the Spirit yield in us? Are we listening to what the Spirit is saying and where He is leading us in today's churches?

SATURDAY AFTERNOON DELEGATE SESSION

Welcome Pam welcomed us all back to the final delegate session for this CPMC annual conference. We were all saddened to hear from Nathan that Tim Detweiler, a former conference minister, passed away this afternoon. Nathan led us all in prayer for Tim's wife Carol and his family. And he thanked God for Tim's service among us and that God's presence would be with his family and with us.

Discussion and Vote on Blueprint The blueprint was introduced by Ted Widmer and Norm Yoder. It was drawn up, relative to last year's budget, but with a 5.4% decrease in spending. We will save \$50,000 because of Amanda Bleichty's retirement, but MCUSA salary guidelines have increased enough to take up most of this surplus. We have enough money to get through the year, but because of the uncertainty concerning the future of our conference, by next year, it may be necessary to reevaluate the budget. Norm Yoder moved to accept the blueprint. John David Kenney, from West Union, seconded it. Motion passed by show of hands.

Vote on the Slate We were advised of the added names to the printed ballot. John Epp from Salem Zion Mennonite Church was added to the Discernment committee nomination. Tamara Zechin from Sugar Creek Mennonite Church agreed to serve another term as chair of the Outreach and Service Committee. Rhonda Brubacher from First Mennonite in Lincoln NE was added for a second term on the Outreach and Service Committee. Michelle Hofer made a motion to accept the ballot. Margie Caraballo from Templo Alabanza seconded it. Motion carried.

Peace and Justice Book Presentation The Peace and Justice Task Group has made it a practice to give away a free book each year during conference to someone who has visited their display table. Jane Yoder Short presented this year's book to Paula Martin from Bellwood Mennonite Church. The book was "Stuck Together—The Hope of Christian Witness in a Polarized World" by J. Nelson Kraybill.

Conference Board's statement for Delegate Consideration Following the conference board's consideration of feedback from the delegates concerning MC USA's resolution, Pam read the following statement prepared by the board for delegate consideration.

"We recognize that there is diversity among congregations in how they choose to respond to human sexuality. Rather than ignore this reality or sever relationships, the executive board senses a greater desire for unity among delegates and hopes that we will remain connected in shared ministry as followers of Jesus. Conference leadership is committed to walking and working with congregations as they discern whether to remain in relationship with one another despite fundamental disagreements regarding issues of theology, biblical interpretation, and practice. Toward this end, we affirm the Covenant of Spiritual Practices (2016) as our primary framework for discerning together. We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us forward. "

Nathan encouraged the delegates to discuss this statement together at their tables and then invited their feedback. Some comments from table groups were: Affirmation of the board's attempt to make a statement, despite the fact that it detracts from other work we should be doing. Discernment is not around the rightness or wrongness of the issue, but the elasticity of our relationships to each other.

Some questions were: What is the purpose of discernment? Does conference leadership have resources to focus on this process? How does a congregation partner with another one for discernment? Nathan assured the delegates that we have the resources to address this and that conference leadership will help in pairing congregations together.

Delegate Work: Leader's Table A small group of Central Plains ministers have gathered together and begun some work along the Leader's Table model. They testified to finding many helpful things appropriate for our day. Instead of asking what we should do now, a different question is how has God shown up when His people find themselves in unraveling situations. What might God be up to in this place? The Leader's Table encourages experimenting and encouraging each other to see what God is already doing and join in. It is not only for pastors, but other leaders were also invited to consider forming Leader Groups.

Table Group Guided Bible Study (Dwell with Scripture) Once again, Susan and Nathan read a portion of scripture as we listened intently. We focused on Jeremiah 29: 1-11. Table groups were to talk with each other about the following questions. What is the prophet inviting them to do in a place they never expected to be? What does this story have to do with our situation? Some tablegroup comments were: Our first response is "Fight or Flight". God said to put down roots. They were encouraged to live faithfully in their situation. Be comfortable for a while. Do something to benefit others and future generations. Extend grace and blessing to enemies so that all will prosper.

Closing to the 2023 Delegate Session Elected leaders and those already holding offices were asked to stand while Pam asked God's blessing upon the conference servants. Joel Beachy of East Union Mennonite Church extended the invitation on behalf of the southeast Iowa pastor cluster to attend the annual meeting for 2024 in their region. The details will be forthcoming. Randall Koehler of Hutterthal Mennonite Church moved to adjourn the 2023 Central Plains Annual Meeting. It was seconded by Frank Steckley of Bellwood Mennonite Church. Motion passed by a show of hands.

Submitted by conference secretary, Shirley Kempf
June 27, 2023

Year-End Reports of Conference Board Meetings 2023-2024

Meeting Dates:

June 7, 2023 e-mail decision
June 17, 2023 Holthus Center in York, Nebraska
August 2, 2023 email decision
August 8, 2023 email decision
September 21, 2023 by ZOOM
October 17, 2023 email decision
November 3-4, 2023 Freeman, South Dakota
February 14, 2024 by ZOOM
May 2, 2024 by ZOOM

June 7, 2023 (email decision)

To review the ballot submitted by the discernment committee. Approved by email.

June 17, 2023 In person board meeting in York, NE

Discussion:

Minutes reviewed and approved. Additional names added to the slate of officers were reviewed. Finances discussed. Table group responses from conference annual meeting reviewed. Board statement drafted.

Actions:

Approval for the additions to the slate of officers was given by a show of hands. Norm Yoder moved to approve \$6,000 of additional money to pay for Seng Vang's trip to Thailand for the purpose of Anabaptist training there. Seconded by John Tyson and it passed. A statement was crafted for conference consideration and affirmed by the board for presentation in the afternoon session.

August 2, 2023 (email decision)

Request for \$4,650 from New Ministries fund and \$4,650 from an estate gift for Colossian Forum to provide Wayfarer training for pastors. Approved by email.

August 8, 2023 (email decision)

Request for \$2,000 from Faith Mennonite Church and Kristi Zabriskie for delegate training in Tucson AZ in order to participate in the CPT Oak Flat Accompaniment project. Approved by email.

September 21, 2023 First Quarter Board Meeting (ZOOM)

Discussion:

Minutes and finance reports reviewed and approved. New ministries grant requests discussed. Alan Roxburgh joined us by zoom to reflect on his interactions with Leader's Table and Companion Table groups within the conference. Letter from Salem Mennonite Church of Shickley NE stating its decision to withdraw from MCUSA, and consequently, no longer associate with CPMC was accepted with regrets. Committee reports were heard. Summary of some actions at MennoCon were explained by our delegates. Annual meeting followup comments were presented. The in person board meeting will be November 3 and 4 in Freeman, South Dakota.

Actions:

Approval for the request from Christ Community youth for \$4,000 to participate in the Central Plains Civil Rights Tour in the Spring was proposed by John Tyson and Seconded by Ramont Harder Schrock. It passed by a show of hands.

October 17, 2023 (email decision)

Discussion of a letter to congregations concerning the Covenant of Spiritual Practices. Information only.

November 3-4, 2023 Second Quarter Board Meeting in Freeman SD

Discussion:

Discussion of spiritual practices, how to teach them, and how to apply them in conference wide meetings. Minutes approved, as corrected. Financial report reviewed and discussion of options for better budget management in light of declining receipts. Application for membership from Shickley Mennonite Fellowship discussed. Review of Leaders Table and Companion Table groups and whether to retain the services of Alan Roxburgh for 2024. Discussion concerning publication of Scattered Seeds.

Actions:

Moved by Norm Yoder to grant Suzette Shreffler's request for \$700 for obtaining a state certification license to teach parenting classes. Seconded by Gregg Waltner and approved. Motion made by Gregg Waltner to retain the services of Alan Roxburgh for 2024. Seconded by Michelle Hofer and approved.

February 14, 2024 Third Quarter Board Meeting (ZOOM)

Discussion:

Minutes approved and Finance report was discussed. Housing allowance for conference ministers reviewed. Two New Ministries applications were discussed. Heard the conference ministers' reports. Discussed possibilities for moving forward as a conference in light of diminishing income.

Actions:

Ted Widmer moved to show housing allowances for conference ministers to be as follows: \$30,000 for Nathan Luitjens. \$25,000 for Susan Jansen. \$20,000 for Amanda Bleichty. Norm Yoder seconded it and the motion passed.

It was proposed by Gregg Waltner to approve \$3,000 for New Ministry Funds to be given to the Hmong Mennonite Church for a retreat weekend, and \$7,000 to be given to the West Union Mennonite Church in support of the "Voices of Conscience" display. Seconded by Norm Yoder, and passed by show of hands.

May 2, 2024 Fourth Quarter Board Meeting (ZOOM)

Discussion:

Minutes and finance report reviewed and approved. Conference ministers reported on their recent activities and upcoming engagements. Discussed the current conference structure in light of having less staff. Plans were made to provide table time at our annual meeting to hear from delegates and pastors on this issue. Accepted application of Shickley Mennonite Fellowship to be a part of CPMC. Criteria for new ministries grants discussed and advised of funds available for requests not falling into this category. Financial Blueprint for 2024-2025 presented. Slate of officers for ballot approved. Items for annual meeting agenda discussed.

Actions:

Anita Breckbill moved to recommend the application of Shickley Mennonite Fellowship to be a part of CPMC. This was seconded by Ramont Harder Schrock and passed.

Gregg Waltner moved to accept the financial blueprint for 2024-2025. Shirley Kempf seconded the motion and it carried.

Michelle Hofer presented and moved to accept the slate of officers for annual meeting approval. This was seconded by Gregg Waltner and passed by a show of hands.

Submitted by:
Shirley Kempf
Conference Board Secretary