



Scattered Seeds

Fall
2024

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

— John 3:16-17

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Photo by Jon Bleichty

Annual Meeting guided by the Gospel of John

by Nathan Luitjens, Executive Conference Minister

“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’” John 14:5

For years, we as Central Plains Mennonite Conference have wrestled together with the question of “where do we go from here?” This year, Thomas’ question and Jesus’ answer shaped our Annual Meeting gathering in June and helped us to see that the future is not going to be found in plans or programs, or in doctrinal statements or certainty. Rather, the future is going to be found in following Jesus, and our work together is to discern what it looks like to follow Jesus in the world in which we live.

During our Annual Meeting, our worship and work were focused on the Gospel of John. Our keynote speaker, Michele Hershberger from Hesston College, invited us into three stories. On Friday, we entered John 3 and the story of Nicodemus visiting Jesus. In this passage, Jesus references a story in Numbers where the people are saved when Moses lifts up a snake in the wilderness. So too, Jesus says, “the Son of Man must be lifted up.” In response to the story, Michele encouraged us to look hard at what is killing us, to write it on a piece of paper and to bring it forward to hang it on the cross.

On Saturday, Michele invited us into the story of the healing of the blind man in John 9 and she challenged us to hold on to our convictions, but not to give in to the idol of certainty. Certainty, she suggested, places limits on God and cuts off our ability to see where God is at work in the world around us.

On Sunday, Michele opened up for us the story of the feeding of the 5,000 from John 6. She told us about the God who is not just a God of enough, but the God of abundance—the God of leftovers. She asked us, “Can we learn to trust God who will give us what we need—and more—in the midst of these changing times?”

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John was the focus of our delegate work as well. In Bible study we engaged with stories from John 21, John 1, John 9 and John 4. As we worked with these stories, we allowed them to shape our discussions about the challenges and opportunities facing our congregations and conference. We talked about what congregations need from CPMC and what conference should prioritize, given the reality of finite resources like time and money. There is a need for some structural change, but it is not clear at this point what the best structure for CPMC would be in order to support congregations best as they seek to follow Jesus in their communities.

Following the close of delegate sessions on Saturday we gathered at Crooked Creek Christian Camp to enjoy fellowship and fun in the beauty of God's creation.

Photos by Tamara Zechin, Rachele Luitjens and Susan Janzen





Emerging from a difficult year, I came hungry for fresh soul food and new energy in ministry. I was offered a feast! Conversations and stories shared with old and new friends; deep worship and fellowship that challenged, encouraged, and brought cleansing tears; the gift of a loving, diverse community united in this adventure of following Jesus on the Way.... All these, along with hopeful anticipation as I witness a generation of gifted, energetic, and compassionate leaders guiding us forward in our journey together. My cup overflows; thanks be to God!

-Lewis Miller, Pastor of Beemer Mennonite Church, Beemer, NE



Annual Meeting felt like the perfect transition into my sabbatical time. For various reasons, I was able to be present and open to each conversation and worship service and table discussion, all the while knowing that I could carry everything from this year's gathering into my sabbatical time and allow these elements to percolate over the next three months as I prepared for whatever this next season of ministry holds for me, Hutterthal Mennonite, our conference, and our denomination. My sabbatical time is built upon a particular trust that God's sustaining and enduring love continues to hold all of us and our faith communities. May it be so, and may we witness to that love when we notice it.

-Randall Koehler, Pastor of Hutterthal Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD



I attend many conference and broader church gatherings. I cannot think of another setting where the scriptures were more central to the process of discernment. Central Plains is a model conference in this time of division across the church. Rooting the unity of the conference in a covenant of spiritual practices enables this conference to move the agenda beyond resolving issues of disagreement to a much higher plane where you are asking, "What is God's preferred future for the people of God?" I found this annual meeting utterly inspiring.

-David Boshart, President of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN



At CPMC's Annual Meeting, we were invited to lean into spiritual practices, individually and collectively, that open us to God's voice. I found time studying scripture with my table group to be especially meaningful and inspiring. There was a real sense of curiosity and care for each other.

Additionally, we were invited to examine the structure and roles of the conference and staff and to creatively consider how CPMC can continue to bring together our diverse congregations for support, collaboration and resourcing. I appreciated that CPMC leadership was asking us to speak to needs in a changing context. I felt very hopeful that there is openness to where God is leading, so that old structures don't become something that holds back the work of God's Spirit among us now.

-Heidi Gingerich Detweiler, East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA

2024 Peace Mug Recipient: Roger Farmer

“Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14)



Each year at CPMC’s Annual Meeting there is a tradition of honoring someone from among our congregations who has pursued peace and exemplified Jesus’ way of peacemaking. The Peace and Justice Task group of the Outreach and Service Committee collects nominations, then presents a

handcrafted peace mug to honor the work and witness of one of these people. This year there was particular emphasis on those who had practiced Christ’s peace in their relationship to migrant neighbors and the immigration system.

Roger Farmer of Washington, Iowa received the 2024 Peace Mug as someone who has had an eye and a heart for vulnerable people and downtrodden neighbors over many years. Roger, a former pastor, has been a member or leader of various local, congregational, conference and denominational peace and justice groups and Outreach and Service Committees over many years.

Roger Farmer’s many years of involvement and leadership serving on the Villatoro Support Team was particularly noted in the nominations. In addition to his steady commitment of time, energy and resources to pastors Max and Gloria Villatoro and their family following Max’s 2015 deportation, their move together to Mexico, and their opportunity to return to Iowa in

2021, Roger is also noticed for keeping an eye out for others close by in his own neighborhood who may be struggling because of language barriers, documentation issues, employment challenges or deportation fears.

One local undocumented family in particular caught Roger’s attention while needing help with some basic paperwork at the public library. Roger’s small offer of help with this struggling Central American migrant family soon grew into a regular relationship of care and assistance. One person nominating Roger was particularly struck by his years of generosity and steady presence for this family. Whether selling the family his own dependable, efficient car at a good deal, or arranging with acquaintances to help with home repairs, or encouraging others to offer financial aid for utility bills or supplies, or assisting the parents in exploring schooling options for their three children, Roger stands with them with great dependability and dignity.

Nominations also noted Roger’s sensitivity and respect for cultural differences, persistence across the language barrier, and kind attention to their young children. One person wrote, “Over the years Roger has helped this family in many ways that I don’t even know about, and is not shouting about it from the rooftops, just quietly helping a family of five have a better life.” For this example, and many others like it, this year we celebrate the Christlike example of peacemaking seen in Roger Farmer!

Meet your new moderator!

Michelle Hofer is the new moderator for Central Plains Mennonite Conference. Michelle is from Freeman, South Dakota. She and her husband Colin have two daughters and attend House Church of Freeman.

I work from my home studio as a visual artist in acrylic paint and ceramics. I also enjoy writing and speaking about the intersection of art and faith. I seek to reconnect those who follow Christ today with Christianity’s rich visual heritage. I often lend my talents to various projects in the Freeman community including designing sets and lighting for Schmeckfest musical theater productions. In my down time I love to travel, visit art museums, craft or bake, garden indoors or out (especially flowers), read, and practice solitude. A few fun facts about me include:

1. My parents let me skip a week of school in 8th grade to take a painting class from Steve Ross, son of the popular television landscape painter, Bob Ross.

2. Taxidermy is the latest art form I hope to master.

3. My current kitchen mission is to make the perfect lemon meringue pie.

4. I am banking on art supplies being available in heaven... I don’t know that I’ll be able to complete all the ideas I have in this lifetime.



Reflections on the Ecuador Partnership trip, February 2024

By Joel Beachy, Pastor of East Union Mennonite Church, Kalona, IA

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 are 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 work with these churches, which primarily reside on the west coast of Ecuador.

Our February 2024 trip consisted of representatives from IMCOL, MMN, and CPMC. Oscar Herrera and Lilia Paola Aranguren Caballero participated from IMCOL partners in Bogota, 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.

The first visit was to Riobamba, the capital of the Chimborazo Province in central Ecuador, about a three-and-a-half hour drive south of Quito. A portion of our group received a welcome 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 all three indigenous churches in Riobamba. 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 in summer of 2024. 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

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Leaders credentialed

Pratoomporn Harder, pastor at Lao Christian Fellowship, Mountain Lake, MN, was ordained on June 16, 2024

Margie Mejia-Caraballo, associate pastor at Templo Alabanza in Moline, IL, was licensed toward ordination on July 21, 2024

Laurel Mast Swartzendruber, hospice chaplain, was ordained on Aug. 4, 2024, at Wayland Mennonite Church, Wayland, IA

Transitions

Gene Miller ended as interim pastor at Wood River Mennonite Church, Wood River, NE, on July 31, 2024

Seth Miller ended as pastor at Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson, NE, on July 31, 2024

John Tyson ended as pastor at Des Moines Mennonite Church, Des Moines, IA, on Aug. 31, 2024

Libby Conley began as interim pastor at Cedar Falls Mennonite Church, Cedar Falls, IA on Aug. 1, 2024

Retirements

Ben Waddington, retired from ministry as a pastor, Forsyth, MT, Jan. 1, 2024

Philip Friesen, retired from ministry with university students, Minneapolis, MN, May 31, 2024

Dan Johnston, retired from ministry as a pastor and chaplain, Bella Vista, AR, May 31, 2024

Donnita Stutzman, retired from ministry as a pastor and chaplain, Oxford, IA, May 31, 2024

Jack Scandrett, retired from ministry as a pastor, Sioux Falls, SD, Aug. 31, 2024

Karen Martens Zimmerly, retired from ministry as a pastor, Iowa City, IA, Aug. 31, 2024

Terry Zimmerly, retired from ministry as a pastor, Iowa City, IA, Aug. 31, 2024

Deaths

Martha Becker Yoder, retired pastor, Iowa City, IA, died July 13, 2024

Cruz Rada, former pastor, Muscatine, IA, July 29, 2024

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to refugee families. 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 and the food and supplies are distributed twice a month. 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 compensation 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 for 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 to meet both of these conferences' needs 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 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

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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 faces 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 of 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. Pastors have secondary residences 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.

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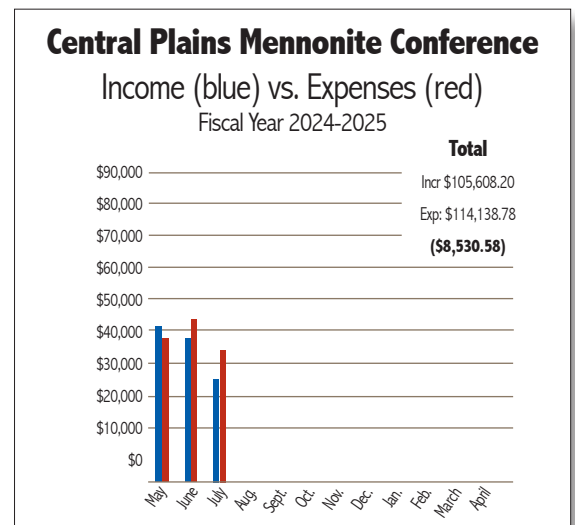
FINANCES

The Central Plains budget for '24-'25 currently has a negative balance. Total Income for the first three months of the new fiscal year was \$105,608.20, while expenses were \$114,138.78. As a result this leaves us with a negative balance of \$8,530.58 for our '24-'25 budget. We are hopeful that giving will increase as we enter the fall months. We are extremely thankful for the support of the members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

— *Stewardship Task Group*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Council of Committees, November 1-2, 2024, Bellwood Mennonite Church, Milford, NE



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