

CANADIAN MENNONITE

April 7, 2023 Volume 27 Number 7

Aerial attack kills Mennonites in Myanmar

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Do we dare to succeed?

WILL BRAUN

editor@canadianmennonite.org



“I am convinced more so now than ever before that every neighbourhood deserves a Jesus-centred, disciple-making peace presence.” Norm Dyck starts the 2022 Church Planting Resource from Mennonite Church Eastern Canada with that conviction.

Dyck’s words strike me in their contrast to the discourse of decline that hangs over parts of the church. Dyck, who serves as mission minister for MC Eastern Canada, is not wringing his hands over dwindling numbers or COVID impacts; he’s proclaiming a vision.

He’s not alone. I see tremendous energy within MC Canada and the wider Anabaptist world. This is not false optimism (I don’t do that). I’m not glossing over the stress faced by some church treasurers and by those congregations with far more octogenarians than youth. I’m just noting that I hear and feel two different narratives—one about keeping the doors open and another about bursting out of the doors on a mission.

Starting on page 4, we share more material from the Church Planting Resource. Michel Monette shares the story of the work he and his wife, Lyne Renaud, have been doing in Montreal for years. They are church planters, called by God to the gritty core of the city. Their sanctuary doubles as sleeping quarters for those who need it. In his position with MC Eastern Canada, Monette also connects with new churches in Montreal and Ottawa. He’s upbeat.

It’s almost as if he missed the memo about the North American church being semi-doomed. He’s blunt about challenges and hardships, but I find it refreshing to read the story of someone who seems to fully expect that the church will care for the needy (up close, in-person), proclaim forgiveness and bring new people into the fold.

I’m reading *Radical Gratitude* by Mary Jo Leddy, a retired theology professor who lives and works with refugees at Romero House in Toronto. Writing about faith groups seeking social transformation, she says groups often court failure “because they [are] not really convinced of their own ability to make any change.” A lack of belief leads groups to essentially plan for mediocrity, or worse. “Powerlessness corrupts,” Leddy writes.

There is a place for holy weakness, and I’m leery of success-based lines of thinking, but Leddy’s comments have me examining my own involvements past and present, and considering the nature of different church narratives. What are we talking toward? What are we planning for? What do we believe and expect? What do we fund, or not?

When I read Monette, or Dyck, or Colin McCartney—who wrote about prayer-centred, buildingless churches on the fringes (page 27 of the March 24 issue)—I want to be part of church.

I recall visiting Southridge Community Church in St. Catharines, Ont., in 2016. Tim Arnold, one of the pastors at the time, spoke about how the church had been inspired by a book that asked something like: If your

church shut down, would people in the neighbourhood notice? They were not satisfied with their answer.

Southridge now runs a 40-bed facility “providing emergency shelter and transforming lives.” They also do fine work with seasonal agricultural workers, in addition to three other “anchor causes.” (Southridge is mentioned on page 18 in relation to its dismissal from the Mennonite Brethren conference.)

If all our church buildings burned down, and our memories of “church” got blurred, and we were left reading the New Testament and wondering how to be the people of God together, would we rebuild a model in which the centre-piece of church involved us sitting in neat rows inside facing one direction for an hour-and-a-half one morning a week?

I’m part of a congregation that meets for worship every other Sunday. I devote my other “church” time to collective efforts on Indigenous justice initiatives and the More-with-Less revival.

Right after Norm Dyck’s words about every neighbourhood deserving a Jesus-centred, disciple-making peace presence, he says the following. “I am also convinced of the truth and wisdom of Swiss theologian Emil Brunner, who wrote in 1931: ‘The church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church; and where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith.’”

May the fire of those Mennonites who burn with mission, spread among us all.

Finally, the Bible Missionary Church of Myanmar is a Mennonite church with plenty of belief and mission. It is also hurting, after a military attack brought death and destruction to a village that is home to numerous Mennonites (see page 15). May God have mercy. ☿



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One of the buildings destroyed in an aerial attack on a remote village in Myanmar. Four members of a Mennonite pastor's family were among those killed. Names and location withheld for security reasons.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BIBLE MISSIONARY CHURCH

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FEATURE

Crossing guard of hope

A gritty story of church planting in Montreal

By Michel Monette

Catalyzer Minister, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada

When I was first called to church planting work in 2004, I prayed and sought God's will. I also read Ray Bakke's book, *Hope for the City*. It invited me back to the city. The book extols God's love for the city and invites Christians to abandon the suburbs and come back to the city.

At that time, the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood of Montreal was recovering from the biggest gang war in the city in the 20th century. That is when God convinced me and my wife, Lyne Renaud, to move to Hochelaga. It is when the darkness is thickest that one small light, no matter how thin and weak, can make all the difference. Thus began my journey among the marginalized and the most destitute.

What I want to share with you is the approach Lyne and I used in this neighbourhood. We arrived with a firm conviction that God was calling us to plant a church. At that time, churches and church-planting movements focused on Sunday services and growth in baptism and membership.

A successful church was a large church. At a planters' boot camp, when I was already thinking about starting a non-traditional church, the teacher shared how to plant a non-traditional church, but gave examples of the traditional services in the church, such as Sunday worship, worship team, Sunday school, senior services, singles services and teen services.

My journal at the time—July 2005—reads as follows: "It would seem that planting a non-traditional church is a two-fold, counter-current exercise and a double-edged sword: the sword of society that has rejected God and the church, and the sword of the church that is looking for Sunday meetings that are bound to a tradition imported from the United States."

We needed to experiment with a new model. In doing so, I faced the misunderstanding of my call and the fear of the leaders around me.

Numbers game

In those days, I had to report to the denomination every three months on the number of baptisms, new members



Michel Monette and Lyne Renaud.



Michel Monette, right, and Lyne Renaud, left having supper at a crack house.

PHOTOS BY MICHEL MONETTE

and evangelism activities. It was an exercise in mental torture. My reports were not impressive. The model was wrong.

I was so fed up that one day I reported: "Here is the number of church members in Hochelaga: 50,000. They are all church members because they live in the neighbourhood. They simply have yet to know they belong to the Body of Christ. If you need an update, the government conducts a census every four years. That will give you an idea of how things are moving. I am not responsible for how God is convicting of sin and righteousness; I am just a crossing guard of hope."

We set about finding ways to help our neighbourhood emerge from the darkness. To do this, we had to get to know it. We got help from Christian Direction, an organization that hired students to do an exegesis of the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood. Our goal was to understand the neighborhood's history, where it came from and what was in it: the organizations, businesses, politics, residents, their income, and leisure and social conditions, etc. From this exegesis came findings on which we then based our actions.

It was inconceivable for us to plant a church without it having a positive impact on the neighbourhood. The church in an underprivileged neighbourhood cannot be content to simply offer a Sunday service. The Sunday model must be accompanied by concrete actions in the daily lives of the neighbourhood's people. Many churches have come and gone from this neighbourhood with locals barely noticing their arrival or departure.

Challenge

Planting a church in a poor neighbourhood requires surrender. You must give up your pride and look for what God is already doing there. God is at work before and after you arrive. Do not be so arrogant as to think that you have the solution. You are not a church planter. Christ is the planter. You are tools in his hands.



Sunday morning at Hochma Church, a non-traditional church plant in Montreal.

It is Christ who calls his church and establishes it. You are a catalyst for what Christ is already doing in the neighbourhood. The crossing guard directs, protects people and controls traffic so that all are safe. The chaplain teaches, instructs and coaches the individual on both the spiritual and personal aspects of life.

When working in a very poor and destitute area it is very important to understand and accept that the church will remain small and changing. It is very difficult for people to continue to witness poverty and human misery in a constant and ongoing way. Only a handful of people can do this. It took me a long time to accept this. People will come and go from the church, and leaders and members will be renewed. It is even possible that what you are doing will not last and will not pass the test of time.

Proclaiming forgiveness

A man used to come to church on Sunday mornings and enjoy breakfast there. He lived on the streets, used alcohol and drugs, and came to church drunk and drugged. He would visit us during the week as well, and take the time to call his mom from the church. He lived in a crack house, a boarding home

for destitute people and drug users.

He told us that he liked to cook, so my wife suggested that he invite us to his house. We gave him a gift card for the grocery store. We told him that we would go to his house for dinner with him and his friends the following Saturday.

When I got there, I prayed that God would protect my stomach because his hands, the table and the pots were unsanitary. But God knew what he was doing. We prayed before eating. During the meal, customers came and went as they bought drugs from one of the men at the table. A man came in who did not want to eat because he felt unworthy to be with us at the table. He told me about his nightmares and bad dreams, and that he did not know how to make them go away. He also shared that he did not know how to stop doing what he was doing.

I looked at him and said: "Today, I forgive you of all your sins. When you have another bad dream, just invite Jesus into your dream, and where you sleep, you will sleep in peace."

This man accepted that Christ gave his life for him, and he was baptized a year later. Today he is a street worker and helps others get off the streets. Does he relapse? Of course. Who

among us does not? Jesus has forgiven all his sins, past, present and future. Being a hope brigade sometimes means having the courage to give hope where it seems least likely to be received.

We returned home that night with the feeling that we could have left the neighbourhood then and there, and that Jesus had healed those with whom we had shared a meal. To be dignity chaplains is to bring dignity where it is absent.

Open house

Since we began the journey of being followers of Christ, my wife and I had always opened our home. When we arrived in Hochelaga, it was no different. The Lord gave us the house so that we could bring some light to a very dark and murky neighbourhood that had just come out of a bloody gang war where cars were exploding, and men and children were being killed in the street. The house was a hotel, a restaurant and a hospital. Everyone who knew us could come and go. In addition to our family, there were always guests at dinner. We ate and lived together.

Our life was open to everyone. One day, I was going out to work around 8 in the morning and someone was coming in at the same time. I prayed to God that day and asked him if I could have my house to myself. His answer was clear and instantaneous: "Your home is here with me. You are just passing through and this house belongs to the kingdom."

Making disciples means taking time, sharing your life and being vulnerable with those God sends to you. It requires self-denial and involvement: It is our mission.

Much has changed since our first summer in the neighbourhood, when we invited neighbours to a few barbecues and a corn roast for Labour Day. With God's help we have developed a small community that helps each other, warns each other, watches over each other, removes snow and invites each other over from time to time. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin and righteousness. It is up to us to love without expecting anything in return. It is God who calls the church



CM FILE PHOTO

Lyne Renaud and Michel Monette share their vision for a church in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve area of Montreal at the 2016 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada annual church gathering.

and establishes it. Our mission is to make disciples one person at a time, without an agenda or plan. Only love. ✎

Michel Monette works with new leaders and congregations in Quebec and Ottawa, in addition to his work in Hochelaga.

This article is adapted, with permission, from the MC Eastern Canada "Church Planting Resource" available at mcec.ca/res/pub/Documents/MCEC-Church-Planting-Resource-2022.pdf.



/// For discussion

1. To what extent are you and your congregation engaged with "the least of these?" Who in your church's neighbourhood would notice if your church closed or moved?
2. As a church planter, Michel Monette describes himself as "a crossing guard of hope," and "a catalyst for what Christ is already doing." What is unusual and/or hopeful about these images?
3. What is the role of hospitality in church planting, and in church life generally?
4. Monette says the mission of the church is to make disciples "without an agenda or plan." Do you agree? Why might it be hard to let go of agendas and plans?
5. Monette proclaims a hurting man's sins forgiven. To whom might you and/or your congregation offer forgiveness?

—CM Staff

See related Church Planting resources at www.commonword.ca/go/3406

CommonWord
Bookstore and Resource Centre

/// Readers write

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- Send letters to letters@canadianmennonite.org. Our mailing address is on page 3.
- Please keep it concise and respectful. Any substantial edits to letters will be done in consultation with the writer.
- If you have feedback not intended for publication, please contact editor@canadianmennonite.org or at 1-800-378-2524 ext 5.

✉ Adjusting to ‘no longer being dominant’

In his “Is the ban back?” editorial in the March 13 issue, Will Braun encourages readers to “ask Mennonite professors, pastors, students and magazine editors if progressive backlash keeps them from voicing questions they consider important.”

I thought I would go on the record stating that I have only ever received backlash for attempting to talk about issues regarded as “too progressive.”

Even in addressing relatively diverse groups, I still have to think very carefully, and cautiously, about articulating what I consider a biblical understanding of wealth, class and suffering.

I accept that cultural swings bring new or unanticipated challenges, and that harmful aspects of human nature are depressingly durable. There are real questions and ambiguities in the current landscape of “dialogue” and, of course, mistakes will be made. However, the idea that we should consider these new challenges as a greater, or even equal, harm than what are increasingly rose-coloured images of the past seems absurd.

With precious few exceptions the western church and world has effectively “cancelled” entire nations, religions and genders from official or institutional discourse. My own sense is that a great deal of the frustration over “cancel culture” is that previously dominant views are needing to adjust to no longer being dominant.

DAVID DRIEDGER (ONLINE COMMENT)

The writer is leading pastor of First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg.

✉ CM playing to the right-wing

It’s difficult to read through this article (“Is the ban back?” March 13) and not encounter any acknowledgment that opposition to cancel culture very often comes from reactive right-wing voices who weaponize the term against whatever they do not like.

The analogy between the ban and cancel culture seems pretty spurious in face of the use of the term “cancel culture” to deflect legitimate criticism and alleviate feelings of guilt and moral blame. Why not mention that for many political pundits being against “cancel culture” is a way of avoiding criticism?

It’s pretty concerning to see this kind of argument in *Canadian Mennonite* because it plays straight into the hands

of right-wing resentment and stalls critical thinking about how the term “cancel culture” is often used to dismiss critical interventions that actually reflect the virtues you affirm (engagement, justice, etc.).

MAX KENNEL, THUNDER BAY, ONT. (ONLINE COMMENT)

✉ Speak up you moderates

Let’s try to synthesize some of the claims made by Max (above) and Will (“Is the ban back?” March 13), as follows:

It is important for a reaction to not become an overreaction. This means one should not use the label “cancel culture” to dismiss a person for a complaint they are making or to avoid engaging with the complaint.

For example, if I get my back up about the wave of accusations of transphobia levelled against J. K. Rowling (author of *Harry Potter*), and then I am confronted with an actual complaint, I should resist the effort to dismiss or demonize the complainer as a product of cancel culture, and grant them the dignity of hearing them out.

Of course, this cuts both ways. In other words, if someone complains about being cancelled, be attentive to that, and consider that the complaint may have merit.

The irony is that the people who are most likely to be intimidated and silenced by cancel culture or the reaction to it are the moderate middle—the non-extreme types who are actually most likely to listen to both sides of an argument and less inclined to see the world as a battle between black and white.

These are the people who will be nervous about being criticized by their more doctrinaire friends for not aligning with a particular view and simply bite their tongue. However, I don’t think that unfortunate reality will change. So what we really need is for those moderates to be brave and speak out, while insisting on the inherent dignity of their opponents.

RUSS SNYDER-PENNER, WATERLOO, ONT.

(WATERLOO NORTH MENNONITE CHURCH)

✉ Progressivism or secularism, that is the question

Re: “To set a soul aflame,” Jan. 30.

I share Ryan Dueck’s lament for the lack of fire in church life.

However, I think he has misdiagnosed the problem. The Spirit-smothering problem is secularism, not progressivism. They often cohabit, but they aren’t the same.

Secularism is the editing out of God from our experience and interactions with the world. Progressivism refers to perspectives on LGBTQ+ identities, race, politics, etc. Secularism is not inherently progressive.

In my neck of the woods, there is a conservative secularism in which God has become irrelevant, and yet conservatism remains. As Christians, we must resist secular ways of thinking—not by crusading against the world, but by forming a God-infused view of the cosmos.

Secular assumptions, such as the notion that religious convictions are a private matter and nobody else's business, have subtly influenced us, and make it difficult to believe in a God who sets things on fire.

Sometimes progressive causes fill the void created by secularism, but this does not mean that progressivism is the problem. If a church becomes less progressive, would that in itself make the church more vibrant? If a conservative church became more progressive, would it lose its awareness of the Holy Spirit because of this?

MARK TIESSEN-DYCK (ONLINE COMMENT)

The writer is lead pastor of Altona (Man.) Bergthaler Mennonite Church.

✉ Music provides comfort for a tragic memory

Re: "Practising for tragedy," March 13.

Thanks for this tender, well-written column.

The line "And when your hope is gone and you can't hold on, then we will hold on to you" evoked powerful personal memories of when, as a 12-year-old, I attended the funeral of my infant sister, Esther Ann, who died from congenital heart disease at 10 days of age.

I have tears in my eyes as I recall the cold day in spring when we buried her in Vauxhall, Alta., and I remember my deep sadness as the congregation sang the hymn "Does Jesus care?"

Music has such profound power to stoke memory, but gratefully it also has the power to provide the comfort to cope with those memories.

PAUL THIESSEN, VANCOUVER, B.C.

(POINT GREY INTER-MENNONITE CHURCH)

✉ Pianos are made for playing

I read with mixed emotions Carol Ann Weaver's article, "The Piano Ban" (March 13). I was encouraged that the Brunk family apologized and reconciled with Carol's family and fellow Mennonites today, but I was pained that many people suffered by losing their pianos. The painful effects were far reaching and long lasting.

Pianos, like all musical instruments, are made for playing, for enjoyment, reflection and praise.

My great-grandparents were staunch Presbyterians in Prince Edward Island. It was the mid-1800s, and organs and pianos were frowned upon. Nonetheless, my grandmother, Olive (1888 to 1970) became an accomplished chorister and pianist. She brought these beautiful skills, as well as her Mendelssohn upright piano, to Edmonton when she came west in 1911 to teach elementary school.

My grandparents took their piano along when they went homesteading in northwestern Alberta's Peace River District. My grandmother was very generous with her piano. It was

played every Sunday at Wanham Presbyterian Church, but was also loaned out for various dances, weddings and community events throughout the region. Pianos were a rare commodity among poor farmers, so my grandmother's piano was transported by horse and wagon in summer, or sleigh in winter. It was well used, well loved!

After my mother acquired Grandma's piano, I learned how to play that same instrument, starting at age six.

I now own my grandmother's piano, which has brought music alive for 125 years.

And thank you to Carol Ann Weaver for sharing her story of the piano ban.

ROBERT PROUDFOOT, EDMONTON

(FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH)

✉ Thoughts from Easter week

I sit here in comfort, with my tea,
or maybe in a church worship service

How can I even begin to understand,
how can I try to imagine
this day, this coming week?

what was it like?
what might have been in the mind of Jesus?
yes, he was God, but also
the Word became flesh—
a person like you and me.

Now we come to the city,
approaching Jerusalem,
it will finish here.

My friends,
some excited, some afraid,
the crowds;
they talk of Son of David, in the Name of the Highest.
Do they know what they are saying?

Can you feel it—
something in the air.
Tourists, pilgrims, excitement seekers;
also those who are watching—
Some of what I have said and done
has broken some of their rules about holiness,
has disturbed their ideas about the Father in heaven.

The die has been cast,
the contest, the tension, will continue here.
Those with influence, power and comfort, have been
aroused;
they will come for me.
I AM,

I will go forward.
I hope it will be quick.

I have not bothered the Romans,
but there are other powerful people who are not happy.

So much,
so much to say and do.
Hardly any room or energy for fear or anxiety.

The tragedy and the sadness of what the temple has
become.

O Jerusalem, if only you had known the things that would
make for peace.
(Jerusalem today, if only you could see some of the steps
that would build peace)

RAY HAMM, NEUBERGTHAL, MAN.
(ALTONA MENNONITE CHURCH)

/// Milestones

Births/Adoptions

Bueckert—Aria (b. Jan. 9, 2023), to Frank and Stephanie Bueckert,
Douglas Mennonite, Winnipeg.

Ewert—Lily Aksah (b. Feb. 24, 2023), to Josh and Rhema Ewert,
Charleswood Mennonite, Winnipeg.

Penner—Theodore (Theo) Daniel (b. March 3, 2023), to Tobian and
Breanna Penner, Sterling Mennonite, Winnipeg.

Rogalsky—Gunnar Robert Paul (b. March 25, 2023), to Jen and Matt
Rogalsky, Grace Mennonite, Steinbach, Man.

Deaths

Bauman—Gordon, 94 (b. Aug. 13, 1928; d. March 23, 2023), Tavistock
Mennonite, Ont.

Epp—Carl Henry, 92 (b. Nov. 30, 1930; d. March 6, 2023), Fort Garry
Mennonite, Winnipeg.

Fast—Virginia May, 88 (b. April 24, 1934; d. March 23, 2023), Grace
Mennonite, Steinbach, Man.

Grove—Frances, 91 (b. Dec. 13, 1931; d. March 3, 2023), Wideman
Mennonite, Markham, Ont.

Hiebert—Elma Krueger, 80 (b. Feb. 15, 1942; d. Jan. 2, 2023), Fort Garry
Mennonite, Winnipeg.

Klassen—Roxanne Dawn Beryl, 67 (b. Feb. 19, 1956; d. March 17, 2023),
Grace Mennonite, Steinbach, Man.

Lemyre—Denis, 74 (b. Nov. 17, 1948; d. March 15, 2023), Toronto
United Mennonite.

MacBride—Richard, 78 (b. Aug. 17, 1944; d. Dec. 17, 2022), Erb Street
Mennonite, Waterloo, Ont.

A moment from yesterday

	Name	Alter	heirer angehörig	Adressen	Anmerkung
22	Hilrich	14	-	"	nach Waterloo geg.
23	Cornias Joh. Joh.	56	Hiehl.	best 68.	"
24	" Margareta	54	"	" "	" "
25	Kindler Margareta	21	"	" "	" "
26	" Luise	19	"	" "	" "
27	" Martha	17	"	" "	" "
28	Knoether Peter	67	"	4 Eine Pflanzhaus	"
29	" Agauska	57	"	" "	"
30	" Heinrich	27	"	" "	"
31	" Johann	32	"	" "	"
32	" Agauska	36	"	" "	"
33	Hiersch Bernhard	52	"	best 93.	nach Waterloo.

How much can we learn from a list? This image is from a list of Mennonite immigrants from the Soviet Union (Russlaender) living in Vineland, Ont., in 1924. We can see family groupings along with church affiliations. In these early years, Mennonite Brethren and United Mennonites worshipped together. We can also note their housing situation, with many living on the farms of their employer. The final column shows the instability of immigrant life; all of the families on this page departed at some point, possibly hoping for better prospects in Waterloo or Reesor. More Russlaender immigrant lists are posted on the Mennonite Archives of Ontario website, with more tales to tell.

Text: Lauren Harder-Gissing

Photo: Vineland United Mennonite Church / Mennonite Archives of Ontario



archives.mhsc.ca

FROM OUR LEADERS

Book recommendations from leaders

Arlyn Friesen Epp

The regional churches have identified several key ministry areas which receive nationwide coordination and support from Mennonite Church Canada: International Witness, Indigenous Relations and Climate Action. Most regional churches have volunteer working groups in each of these areas.

CommonWord, in turn, provides resources for these important conversations. Our novels and biographies, introductory references and group studies, histories and personal theses, are available to buy, borrow or access online, and are here to inspire, equip and engage you and your congregation in this work.

I have asked our ministry leaders to offer a title that is important to them and that has helped shaped their work. Perhaps you might want to also check out these resources!

**Jeanette Hanson,
International Witness director**

Alan Kreider's book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* has opened my eyes to see what has been in front of me the

whole time while working the last 30 years in Asia: reliance on relationships, prayer and patiently following Jesus in daily life despite the circumstances.

Kreider writes, "[T]he early church grew despite disincentives, harassment and occasional persecution . . . it grew not by plan but by ferment."

We have much to learn about a church on the margins without political power or influence! I also recommend viewing Kreider's *Resident but Alien* videos for more on this topic.

**Jonathan Neufeld,
Indigenous Relations coordinator**

Randy Woodley invites people to decolonize and indigenize their worldview and practices so they can learn to walk on this earth in a good way. *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth* is a book in the format of a daily devotional, inviting people to embrace a sustainable, cooperative, responsible, respectful and honouring relationship with creation.

As I have been absorbing the worldview and invitations from his

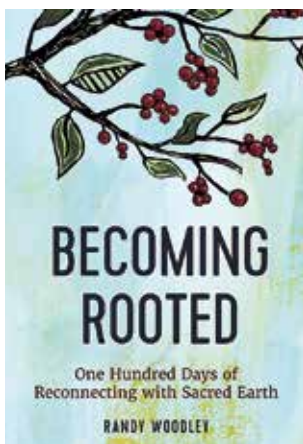
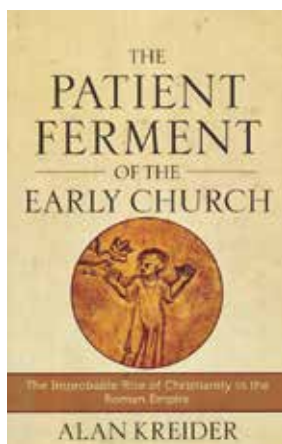
writings, I am catching the wonder and hope of becoming enculturated into a deep connection and love of people and place—and the long road of shedding the values and priorities of dominant culture.

**Sandy Plett,
Climate Action coordinator**

I think of conversation as the "welcome mat" for those wishing to get involved in responding to the climate crisis. By creating space and learning how to talk about climate issues—and our feelings about them—we have a chance to move from anxiety to action, from feeling overwhelmed to being empowered.

Conversation happens in community, and community is our gateway to collective action. So let's get talking. A good primer is Katherine Hayhoe's book *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*. Or ask me or your regional working group to lead a "Faithful Climate Conversation" in your church or community.

Please be in touch with CommonWord about these resources and with these staff persons or your regional church working group for ways to engage. We're on these journeys together. ☸



Arlyn Friesen Epp is the director of CommonWord. The CommonWord team can be reached at info@commonword.ca.

Patient Ferment of the Early Church, left, is available to borrow or special order at www.commonword.ca/go/3403. *Becoming Rooted*, centre, is available to buy or borrow at www.commonword.ca/go/2741. *Saving Us*, right, is available to buy or borrow online at www.commonword.ca/go/2778.



THE CHURCH HERE AND THERE

The limits of control

Arli Klassen

I am always interested in the impact of culture on faith, and vice versa.

Western culture places a high value on personal agency, the ability to make individual decisions that impact one's future. Other cultures understand that there are many forces beyond one's control that limit autonomy, such as extended family needs or unjust political and economic contexts. Of course, both are true.

In a context of faith, some cultures place more emphasis on individual action, while others put more emphasis on God in control. I have a couple of examples about differences in how people react to situations beyond their control.

I've been testing positive for COVID-19 for the last two-and-a-half weeks, resulting in many missed commitments, some of them very hard for me to miss. My international colleagues have been "praying for a miracle," while a friend in my local congregation writes, "May your God-given recovery processes benefit you quickly."

One of the meetings that I may miss is the Mennonite World Conference annual board and staff gathering, held this year in British Columbia.

But I would not be the only one missing it due to events beyond my control. A number of international participants have not received their visas. Again, there has been much prayer, because "anything is possible with God." There was also much hard work behind the scenes to try to get help from Ottawa connections.

And yet it appears that more than a handful of people will not be able to come to Canada. I am amazed at their level of acceptance. "It is the reality of the moment, we have to accept it."

My husband Keith taught adults in the Middle East. He likes to use "Insha'Allah"—Arabic for "if God wills"—when it is clear that circumstances are beyond our control. It is easier for him to use the Arabic phrase than to say it in English, which says something about the worldview that works in Arabic.

It is a well-known phrase, a commandment from the Qur'an, to be used when talking about future hopes, plans and promises. If used well, it implies that the person will do their utmost to bring forth those plans, and it is in God's hands.

I heard some friends report that "God willing" used to be a common

expression in older times in Canada. It is not a phrase that I grew up with, at home or at church. My Baptist upbringing had an intriguing balance of emphasis on individual responsibility, while God is in complete control of everything.

Living outside of North America in my younger adult years, I learned about different worldviews. I learned to pray kneeling beside others, "Give us this day our daily bread," knowing that daily food was not to be taken for granted. I learned that the Sesotho language has a word for a body part that doesn't heal properly after an injury. English doesn't name that. I experienced a worldview and a faith based on much more hardship than my life experience gave me, leading to dependence on God, because individual agency is not enough.

In Canada, many of us have more than enough to meet our basic needs. We rarely confront the limits of our abilities on a daily basis, until illness or another unpredictable factor get in the way. Our western worldview too often turns to God only after individual agency fails. I continue to learn from churches in other parts of the world that dependence on God is a daily part of faith, just like I learned in my childhood. ☞



Arli Klassen is a staff member of Mennonite World Conference, living in Kitchener, Ont., and reachable at klassenarli@gmail.com.

Et cetera

Anabaptist Chia Pet

Mennonite Mission Network has announced the first entry in a new line of commemorative Anabaptist planters: the Menno Simons Chia Pet.

"True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant . . . and neither can Menno's chia beard," read the April 1 announcement. "Simply spread the seeds of peace, baptize in water and watch it grow!"

Source and photo credit: Mennonite Mission Network



VOICES AND STORIES

Song inspired by peace chief

Anneli Loepp Thiessen

In Canada, conversations about reconciliation with Indigenous peoples are often at the forefront of community and public life. These discussions extend to our worship practices as we consider how our corporate expressions of praise and community can emulate Jesus by being more just.

Voices Together features about 13 songs and five worship resources with connections to North American Indigenous Peoples. These resources materially and metaphorically represent the voices of Indigenous people in worship, and let worshippers more fully live into a vision of God's just and diverse reign.

One song with close connections to Mennonite communities is "Creation is a Song / *Hoë enemeohe*" (VT No. 181). The song is inspired by the peace teachings of the late Lawrence Hart, a Mennonite pastor and Cheyenne peace chief. In particular, his interpretation of Psalm 19 from the book *Creation and the Environment* (2000) was inspiring to Doug Krehbiel, who was working on the Mennonite Environmental Task Force that compiled and edited this book.

Krehbiel and his spouse Jude engaged in a cultural-exchange event with Hart

at the Cheyenne Cultural Center in Clinton, Okla., around this time. They established a strong relationship, which allowed Doug and Jude to create the song in close connection to Cheyenne teachings.

Keshia Littlebear Citrone is a Cheyenne Mennonite with close connections to the song. In a *Voices Together* launch webinar on anti-racist worship and song in 2021, Littlebear Citrone commented on the song and its reception: "It's been long thought that it is disrespectful to sing this song or to honour this song as a Cheyenne song because it was written by white folks, but the way that Cheyennes have come to view this is through relationships. So Doug and Jude received this song from Creator, the way Cheyennes receive songs, after building a relationship with Cheyenne both in Oklahoma and in Montana [where I'm from], including with myself. Doug and Jude are very dear friends of mine."

She continues: "To me, that basis of relationship—because Cheyennes are extremely relational . . . the relationship opened up their ability to receive this song from Creator, and put it to a tune that was received by an elder from our community that has long passed, named

Maude Fighting Bear. So the tune comes from that, and then [they received] help with translation. They didn't just try to figure it out on their own using Google; they went to the sources for the translation. And so with that relationship, and that back and forth, that makes it a very respectful song, and I absolutely enjoy this song"

The Accompaniment Edition of *Voices Together* suggests that the song can be accompanied with a low drum and a shaker played on each quarter note. The Krehbiels created a recording of the song (available on MennoMedia's YouTube channel), in which they used a drum after consultation with Hart, who supported them in producing a more traditional Cheyenne sound.

As Mennonites seek to live into right relations with Indigenous neighbours, songs like "Creation is a Song" can be a resource, allowing us to worship together with Cheyenne siblings in Christ.

For more information on leading intercultural resources, view recordings of the "Anti-Racist Worship and Song webinar" on MennoMedia's YouTube channel, and read "Worship in Multiple Languages" in the Worship Leader Edition. ☞



Anneli Loepp Thiessen is a PhD candidate, co-director of the Anabaptist Worship Network and was a committee member for *Voices Together*.

Et cetera

Death trends in colonies

David Peters of Steinbach, Man., tallied the deaths listed in *Die Mennonitische Post* from 2018 to 2022. The German newspaper is widely read among colony Mennonites in Latin America. COVID-19 is probably a significant factor contributing to the increase in deaths reported to the *Post* in 2020 and the drop in 2022. Kennert Giesbrecht, editor of the *Post*, speculates that part of the increase is also due to more reliable reporting.

Source: *Die Mennonitische Post*

Deaths reported to the Post

2018	556
2019	738
2020	1028
2021	1321
2022	1050

LIFE IN THE POSTMODERN SHIFT

Many Christians do not believe the Holy Spirit is real

Troy Watson

In my eyes, Pauline (a pseudonym) is a more faithful and mature Christian than I am. She embodies the servant-hearted love of Christ. Her life and faith inspire me.

Imagine my surprise when Pauline told me she has never experienced the Holy Spirit. She has prayed and asked God for Spirit baptism for many years, but nothing has happened. She doesn't understand why. She is beginning to wonder if the Holy Spirit is real.

Pauline is from a church I used to pastor, but she is also a composite of others I have met since. She is not alone. According to a recent study by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, 58 percent of Christians in the United States don't believe the Holy Spirit is real. Surprisingly, this number jumps to 62 percent for people who identify as born-again Christians. This puzzles me.

I've had a number of powerful experiences with the Spirit. A few of these divine encounters have been sea-change moments for me. However, most of the time, my connection with the Spirit is a subtle awareness of Divine Presence around me and within me.

I've endured two periods I've labelled as "dark nights," where I experienced the absence of God, but that's another subject for another time. My point is, the Divine Spirit is a very real presence in my life. However, after 25 years of pastoral ministry, I realize this is not the case for many Christians.

Earlier in my ministry, this bothered me. I assumed every Christian should

experience a personal Pentecost. Yet after meeting so many sincere and devout Christians, who have never sensed or experienced the Holy Spirit, I've started to wonder, is Pentecost for all? Or just some?

A part of me suspects people like Pauline do experience Divine Spirit; it just doesn't fit their assumptions or expectations of what it should look or feel like. Many Christians like Pauline have told me they've had moments of feeling God's peace, hope, comfort or joy. I believe these moments are Spirit encounters. The Spirit is often subtle. The Divine relates to us in different ways. We are all unique children of God. It shouldn't be surprising we experience the Divine differently.

One of the so-called Big Five personality traits is openness. I'm extremely high on the openness spectrum. It makes sense that I would be more open and spiritually sensitive than someone who is much lower in the trait of openness.

This doesn't mean I'm more spiritual or mature in my faith than that person. In fact, the opposite is often true. Most of the Christians I know, who say they've never experienced the Holy Spirit, are like Pauline—faithful, devout and Christ-like. The truth is, we all have different gifts and roles in the Body of Christ. It would be counterproductive if we were all spiritually sensitive "mystics" who are often "so heavenly minded we are no earthly good."

Regardless, I'm still puzzled by how many Christians have told me they've asked God for Spirit baptism and have

never experienced a Divine encounter or Spirit awakening. Jesus' primary mission was to baptize people with the Holy Spirit. But most Christians assume that Jesus' primary mission was to die on that cross and rise again.

This is why Christians tend to celebrate Easter as if it's the triumphant end of the Gospel, and hardly even notice Pentecost. Yet all four Gospels introduce Jesus as the one who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit. His mission is not completed until Pentecost. See Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16, and John 1:26-27, 30-34.

I realize we all experience God's presence in our own ways. We are awakened by, and to, the Spirit differently. Yet I struggle to understand why many Christians have no sense or awareness of the Divine around them or within them. Do us "weaker" Christians receive more tangible experiences of Divine Spirit because our faith needs it? I don't have answers. What I have are questions.

Have you experienced the Spirit in some way, at some point in your life? Do you have an awareness of the Divine around you and within you? Have you asked for the gift of the Holy Spirit, to no avail? Is the Spirit real to you?

I invite you to share your stories with me. I will hold everything you share in confidence. I'm genuinely curious to hear how you have or haven't experienced Pentecost in your life. Note: I may not be able to respond to everyone who shares. ☞



Troy Watson is looking forward to hearing from you at troy@avonchurch.ca.

I struggle to understand why many Christians have no sense or awareness of the Divine . . .

RIDING THE WAVES OF INTERCULTURAL CHURCH

Three kinds of grace in the formation of intercultural church

Joon Park

If you are a student learning early Anabaptist spirituality, Leonhard Schiemer's treatise, *Three Kinds of Grace Found in the Scriptures* cannot be missed. In his short writing, he displays the profundity of the Anabaptist way of salvation which brings a transformative and comprehensive effect on new converts.

"The first grace is the general light that comes from the Father to every human being through the law," writes Schiemer in Malcolm Yarnell's *Anabaptist Spirituality*. "The second grace is the righteousness that comes through the cross of the Son of God. The third grace is the joy that sustains the disciple as he or she carries the cross of suffering. The 'oil of joy' is the Holy Spirit who anoints the church in the name of the Son from the Father."

If there were three kinds of grace in the formation of early Anabaptist spirituality in the 16th century, there are also three kinds of contextualized, contemporary grace in the formation of the intercultural church in the 21st century. They come as a gift, not a barrier, from God for us to enter God's reconciling mission in the world.

Grace No. 1: Unfamiliarity

No one is born to naturally adopt a new culture without bias or friction. It is not strange to respond allergically to the unfamiliarity of others; all humans by nature are ethnocentric and xenophobic. As noted by researchers James Neuliep and James McCroskey, when we interact with people from different cultures, the following sentiments can surface, either consciously or unconsciously: "I dislike interacting with people from different cultures." "I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from different

cultures." "My thoughts become confused and jumbled when interacting with people from different cultures."

Biblical perspective: Faith is a journey to the unknown, the unfamiliar. "No one has ever seen God," writes John. Human history would not have unfolded if Adam and Eve had refused to leave familiar Paradise. Many ancestors of faith in the Old Testament—Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David—followed the journey to cross a threshold into the realm of the unknown. Even more profound in the New Testament is God's act of becoming human, something totally unfamiliar.

Grace No. 2. Uncertainty

Once people courageously cross the threshold of unfamiliarity, they run into the ambushed booby trap of uncertainties that affect the way they think and behave, now that no one can fully predict, explain or understand the other's behaviour.

All relationships accompany some degree of uncertainty, but when people interact with people from other cultures, the level of uncertainty heightens. Here we have two options: avoid or accept.

Culturally, westerners have lower tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. They gravitate toward the establishment of formal and predictable rules and structures. This tendency of avoiding uncertainty begets an unfortunate myth: "What is different is dangerous!"

Biblical perspective: Where there is uncertainty, God is there. We call this *Mystery*. If our God is one who wants us to grow, he will test us whether we put limits on our future and stifle our potential by resisting to embark on a journey of uncertainty. Therefore, the

goal of our life in faith is not to crave certainty and abide in the cradle of it, but to learn how to live under, and with, uncertainty, believing what Paul said, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12).

Grace No. 3. Fear

Once uncertainty overwhelms our level of predictability, fear assails. Fear is a strong and natural biological response associated with real or anticipated interaction with people from different cultures. Fear puts people on high alert so they can prevent real danger and "mindfully" care for what will happen. (Consider how Maria would respond to the appearance of God's angel Gabriel from out of nowhere.)

Biblical perspective: While the Bible consistently warns us not to be anxious of the things that might or might not happen—"Banish anxiety from your mind" (Ecclesiastes 11:10)—fear is often a precursor to the revelation and reception of God's word or presence. "Fear not, for I am with you" (Isaiah 41:10). "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27).

Thus, fear in the Christian heart is not something to avoid, but to embrace, because it signals that God's revelation is at hand. ☺



Joon Park is intentional interim co-paster of Holyrood Mennonite Church in Edmonton.

Myanmar Mennonites killed in aerial attack

CM Staff, with files from Mennonite Church Canada

Late last month, an aerial bombardment hit the home of a Mennonite pastor in rural Myanmar, killing his two daughters and two grandchildren. Six other people in the village were killed in the same attack. Names and locations are being withheld due to security concerns.

According to an early report, 29 Mennonite church members—including the pastor—and 37 other villagers were injured.

Amos Chin, a church leader in Myanmar and a member of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Executive Committee, told *Canadian Mennonite* that 12 homes were burned down and that surviving villagers had retreated to the surrounding jungle and nearby villages.

Our faith siblings in Myanmar sent an urgent request for prayer. Significant ties exist between Mennonite Church Canada and churches in Myanmar.

MC Canada sent an emergency relief gift of \$5,000 to provide immediate assistance to people in the area, which is home to a significant number of Mennonites. Donations toward this cost are welcome. Funds received in excess of this amount will be used for ongoing support of these siblings in faith, including a planned Youth Peace Conference in April. MWC has also provided assistance. ☞

To contribute, visit mennonitechurch.ca/myanmar and designate your gift to “Myanmar emergency support.”



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BIBLE MISSIONARY CHURCH

Graves dug for victims of a recent military attack in Myanmar.



The home of a Mennonite pastor following an attack in late March that killed four of the pastor's family members.

Bright and bold storybook Bible released

CM Staff, with files from MennoMedia

MennoMedia has released *The Peace Table*, the most ambitious children's Bible project in its history. Within the book's 384 pages, readers will find 140 Bible stories and an abundance of full-colour artwork by 30 different illustrators.

Alongside each Bible story, authors Chrissie Muecke, Jasmin Pittman Morrell and Teresa Kim Pecinovsky include prayer prompts, questions and action ideas to guide family reflection and conversation.

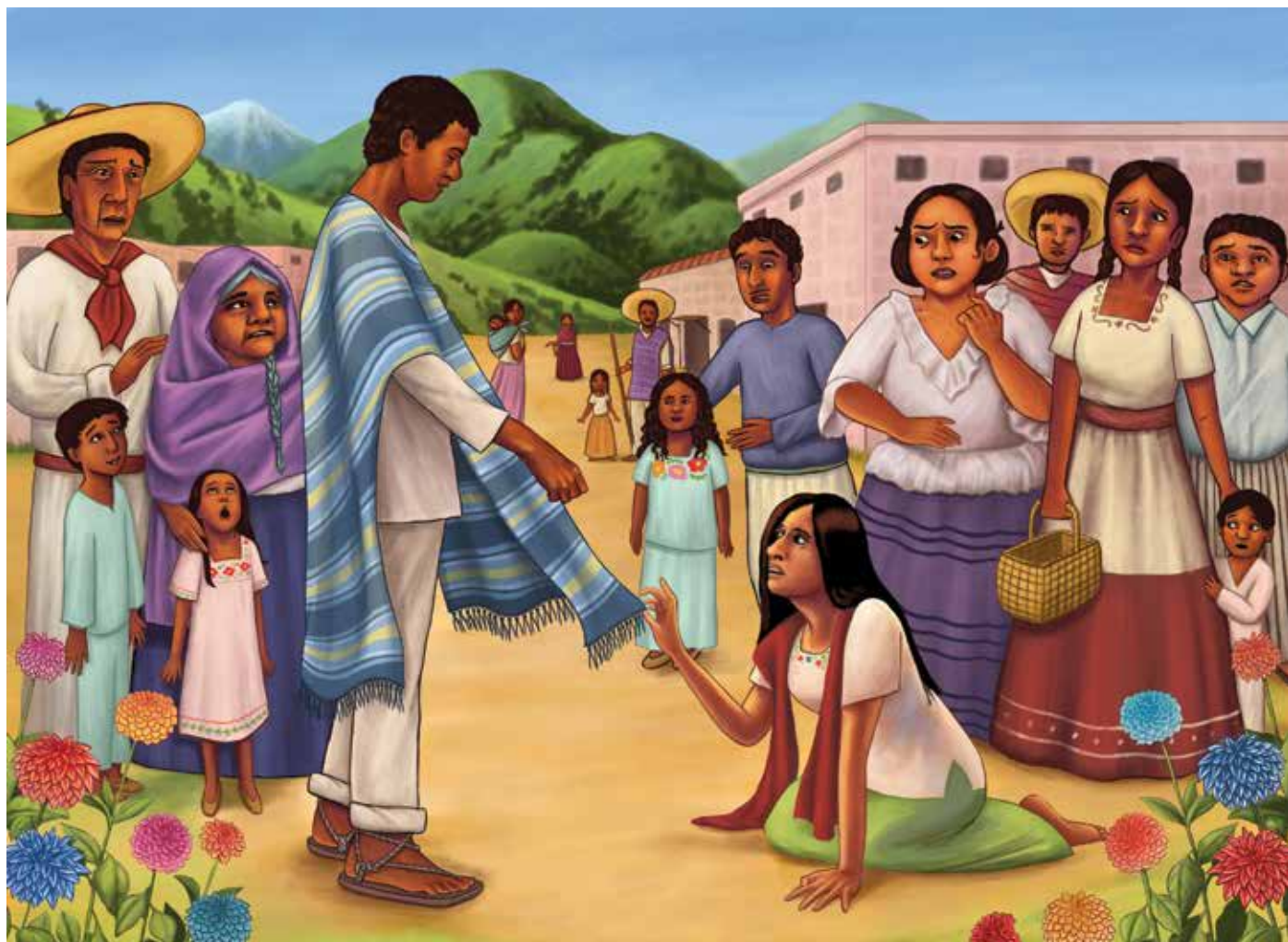
Twelve "peace paths" encourage

children to explore the ways that peace themes are woven throughout the Old and New Testaments. A resource section includes ideas for how to experience peace with God, self, others and creation, as well as maps, background information on the Bible, interactive ways to pray and prayers for many occasions.

The Peace Table will be incorporated into MennoMedia's *Shine* elementary curriculum for the next three years, starting in Fall 2023.

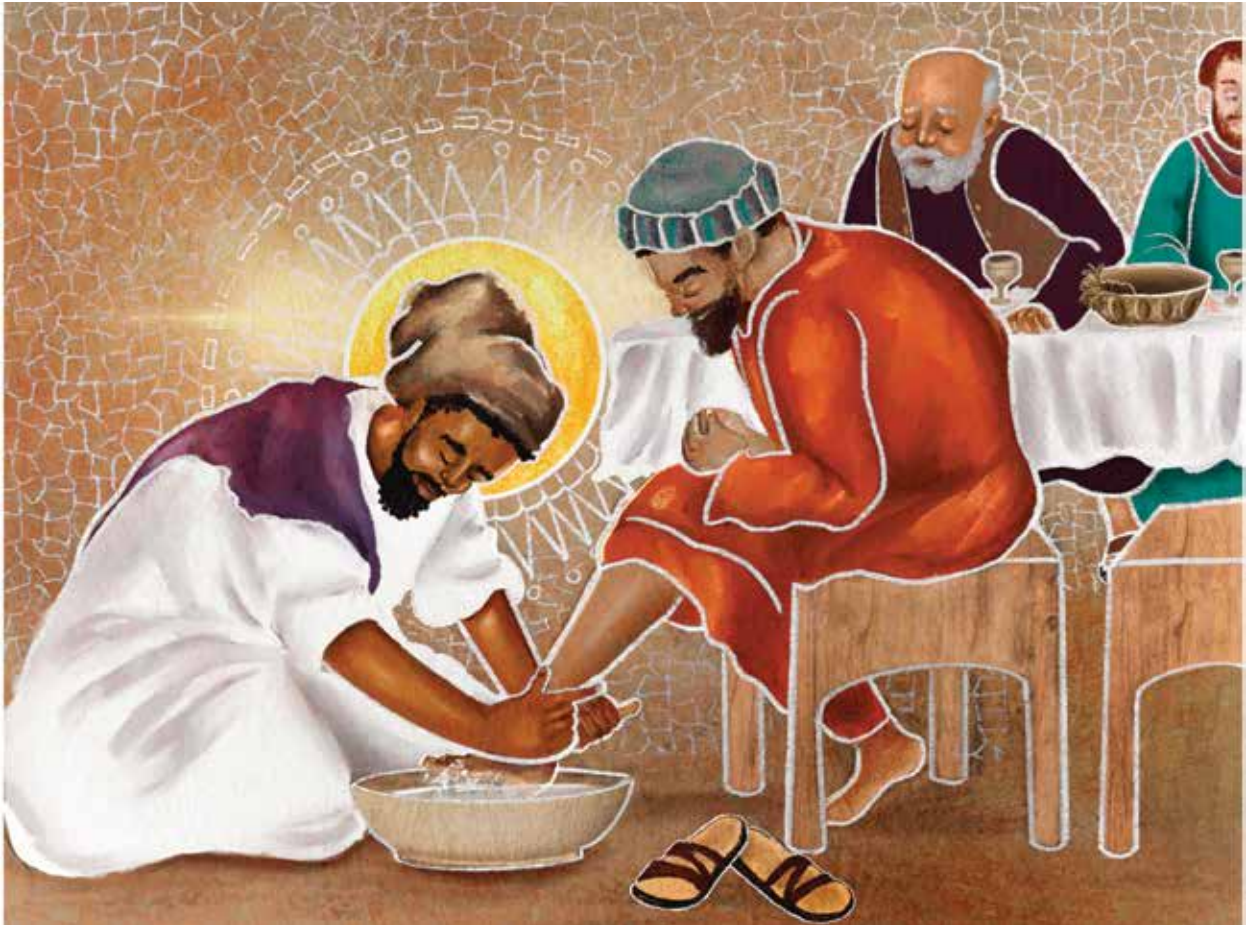
The Peace Table is available for pre-order in Canada from CommonWord (commonword.ca) at a discounted price of \$34.49 until June 1. Orders are expected to ship in late June. ☸

MennoMedia is an agency of Mennonite Church Canada and MC U.S.A. Both Herald Press, which published The Peace Table, and Shine fall under its umbrella.



ART BY CLARISSA MARTINEZ / REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

A Latin American depiction of a woman touching the edge of Jesus' robe, from The Peace Table.



ART BY LATONYA R. JACKSON / REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, from The Peace Table.

An excerpt from the introduction to *The Peace Table*

What happens at *The Peace Table*? Here we retell ancient stories of people seeking to follow God, and often messing up. We sing songs, read poetry and prophecies, explore history, learn about laws and commandments, and even read other peoples' mail.

But it is not just God's story from the Bible that we share here. We offer our own stories as well—our joys and struggles, our wisdom and mistakes, our favourite memories and our desires for a better world. As we hold our stories in the light of God's story, we better understand who we are as individuals, families and communities of faith.

Conversations around *The Peace Table* are not always easy. We come from many different places. We understand God's story in unique ways. We have different ideas, beliefs, values and experiences. Yet, when we come together at this table, we discover anew that we are all beloved children of God, made in God's image. We learn from each other and grow together as peacemakers.

So, pull up a seat. Bring a friend and an enemy. Enjoy the compelling stories from *The Peace Table* and find inspiration in the beautiful artwork. Speak from the heart, ask hard questions, be curious, listen well, share your doubts and pray together often.

Be ready to eat, dance, sing, create, imagine and wonder together. Consider how these ancient stories connect to the life of your family and community today. Then use your unique God-given gifts to help make a more peaceful, just and beautiful world.

Reprinted with permission.

Three churches follow distinct paths as sexuality tensions shift the landscape

Story and Photo by Madalene Arias
Eastern Canada Correspondent

March 19 was “PIE Day” at Toronto United Mennonite Church. Just before noon, attendants gradually moved out of the worship hall into the lobby for coffee and tea.

Two long tables soon filled with tarts and custards. Some people gawked at a mud pie with gummy worms and crumbled chocolate.

Children emerged from Sunday school rooms carrying a colourful “Happy PIE Day” banner, decorated with rainbows, blue crosses and stickers that read “more pie please.”

PIE stands for “public,” “intentional” and “explicit” in relation to LGBTQ+ affirmation within faith communities. The annual March event has roots in the United Church of Canada.

After helping themselves to dessert, congregants sat down to a table set with a stack of multicoloured cards and pens. They had previously been informed that several Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches

across Canada had faced disciplinary measures for practising LGBTQ+-affirming theology. They arrived that Sunday prepared to write letters of support and thanks to these congregations.

Marieke Meyer serves as the church’s administrator. She recalls a very different chapter in the congregation’s life more than 20 years ago: “Our church went through a very difficult process that drove me away from this congregation for quite a few years.”

In April 2002, the church’s associate pastor for youth informed the community she was queer. After an extensive process of education, meetings and discussions, the church dismissed the youth pastor in June 2003.

It was not until November 2016 that the church would formally amend its policies, the result of other events and lengthy processes. The former youth pastor has since returned.

The change of policy also brought Meyer

back. “Now that [the church] is affirming, I am so happily back and willing to be here and willing to celebrate with everyone who is welcome to be at God’s table,” she says.

At the letter-writing table, the church had displayed a page containing the names of affirming MB churches, including Southridge Community Church in St. Catharines, Ont., River East in Winnipeg, and FreeChurch in Toronto’s Annex neighbourhood.

FreeChurch and Southridge were suspended by the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches last October due to a lack of alignment with the MB Confession of Faith. The conference dismissed them on Feb. 25 of this year. River East remains part of the Mennonite Brethren conference in Manitoba although it has received a notice of suspension.

FreeChurch

Jon Osmond serves as senior pastor of FreeChurch. When he and his wife first joined in 2013, the church had what he described as the typical posture that other churches would have toward LGBTQ+ people. “We love you. We welcome you here, and then there was always this ‘but,’” he says.

He and the elders of the church had sensed that there were people who identified as LGBTQ+ although none of them were “out.” He also gathered a sense about them that they felt they could only go so far within the faith community.

Osmond says that elders of FreeChurch were at first unsure how to open discussions about LGBTQ+ members and same-sex marriage because of the subject’s potential to become divisive.

The elders carried on in their discussions, acknowledging that they would need to work as a team and listen to one another if they were to lead the community in this area.



On March 19, members of Toronto United Mennonite Church wrote letters of support to MB churches that have been disciplined for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

“We would always say things like ‘the point is not to be right. The point is to love and understand the other,’” Osmond recalls.

Earlier in the process, the elders consulted literature from Justin Lee, author of *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, as well as other material to ensure queer voices were included. They also formed a working group of elders and seniors who met for discussions and discernment for several months.

By April 2019, the congregation formally defined its stance in its Living Document, (bit.ly/3U1tqR), although it did not make it public immediately.

Through this document, FreeChurch states that “LGBTQ+ people are deeply and dearly loved by God, and made in the image of God, and therefore have intrinsic value and are worthy of full inclusion into God’s spiritual family called the church.”

FreeChurch welcomes same-sex married persons to all levels of leadership and it calls for active repentance for the ways the church as an institution has oppressed, discriminated and isolated LGBTQ+ people.

Maple View Mennonite

Maple View Mennonite Church in Wellesley, Ont., also engaged in a thorough discernment process. It led to a different outcome.

When Mennonite Church Canada decided in 2016 to allow space for congregations to test LGBTQ+-related understandings other than that in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Maple View felt the need to re-examine its denominational affiliation with Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

Brent Kipfer, Maple View’s pastor, says that after revisiting biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality, and participating in a multi-year study process with the regional church, the congregation voted overwhelmingly in favour of leaving MC Eastern Canada. The church later joined the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.

Kipfer says he recognizes the harm done by the church to LGBTQ+ people. “We recognize that we have ongoing learning to do on how to love LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters,” he says, “but we want to do that within a traditional framework of marriage and sexuality.”

Kipfer also says that he and others at Maple View have ongoing contact with MC Canada people through family, friends and community, and that they genuinely value this. He also says they did not want their decision about leaving MC Eastern Canada to be seen as “a judgment about who’s more solidly in the Kingdom of God.”

In addition to Maple View, Kingsfield-Zurich Mennonite Church also switched its affiliation from MC Eastern Canada to

MB. Some churches that left MC Canada have remained unaffiliated or have joined non-Mennonite denominations.

On the flip side, *Canadian Mennonite* is aware of two MB churches elsewhere in Canada that have talked to MC Canada regional churches about the possibility of affiliation. Earlier this year, a church from the Evangelical Mennonite Conference joined MC Manitoba, though for different reasons.

Jon Osmond says that his congregation did not want to leave the MB denomination. They felt it was a greater witness to express a love of unity instead of a divide.

Currently, FreeChurch is “in a season of discernment regarding joining a denomination,” he says. “We are considering ones with an Anabaptist theology, and obviously those who are open to churches including LGBTQ+ folk into full membership and leadership.”

After years of wrestling and discussion, FreeChurch went public with its Living Document when COVID restrictions were still in place. MB churches across Canada began to express their disappointment and demands that FreeChurch change its views. At the same time, the congregation noticed more LGBTQ+ folks connecting via video conference for Sunday sermons.

“Still, we didn’t expect the floodgates of folks who have come. It’s been a really beautiful thing,” Osmond says. ❧



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Alberta delegates meet in Pincher Creek

By Donita Wiebe-Neufeld
PINCHER CREEK, ALTA.

The most overheard phrase at the 2023 Mennonite Church Alberta annual delegate sessions in Pincher Creek was, “It’s so good to be together again!”

After three years of video meetings, the joy of the gathered church at Springridge Mennonite in Pincher Creek on March 17-18 was palpable. The smell of coffee, the crowd’s babble punctuated by laughter, and colourful displays of related organizations warmed the space, reminding all those present of the importance of the larger church for fellowship, support and mission.

Keynote speaker Joe Heikman, pastor of Wildwood Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, spoke on the theme of “Hope and trust in a time of transition.” He acknowledged darkness in the world, and in the life cycle of the church, as the reality of both the tomb and the womb. Christians are not immune to the difficulties of either kind of darkness. The church is coming out of COVID, dealing with losses and feeling anxious about the future, he said, encouraging those gathered to lean into those feelings, and to trust God who raised Christ from the tomb.

This message of hope and trust threaded its way through the committee reports

as both difficulties and strengths were highlighted.

For the second year in a row, delegates passed a deficit budget. In 2022, the planned deficit of \$79,000 was exceeded due to higher-than-expected costs, inflation, computer system improvements and an increased need for camper-fee assistance. The biggest surprise, however, was that the usual \$30,000 from the Canada Summer Jobs Program for camp staff was not granted. The federal government offered no explanation.

While MC Alberta expenses had exceeded the budget by \$20,000 at the end of 2022, income also exceeded expectations. Congregational giving was up by \$10,700, and individual donations to Camp Valaqua and for the International Witness program were significant. All told, the deficit was only \$7,500.

A proposed deficit budget of \$49,000 was passed, for 2023, with only one vote against.

Finance chair Wayne Janz, explained that two years of surpluses during COVID, and healthy reserves, mean that the regional church is in good financial shape. The executive committee looks toward a balanced budget for either 2024 or 2025.

Janz is finished his term as finance chair, having served three consecutive two-year terms, and graciously staying on for an extra year. The position is currently vacant despite protracted efforts by the nominating committee.

Camp Valaqua returned to near-normal programming in 2022, and gratefully welcomed the efforts of more than 60 volunteers. Staffing shortages, however, meant that overall summer camper capacity had to be limited. The shortage highlighted the need to raise wages for summer employees by a minimum of five percent. This was approved by delegates. Facility rentals and camper registrations for 2023 are strong.

In his report, camp director Jon Olfert

wrote, “There is clearly significant enthusiasm for our camp and its impactful programs.”

Despite having only 12 member churches, MC Alberta’s contribution to the work of International Witness is significant. Albertans Tom and Christine Poovong are supporting churches in Thailand, and Werner and Joanne De Jong, also Albertans, are teaching at Meserete Kristos Seminary in Ethiopia.

Doug Klassen, MC Canada’s executive minister, spoke about his recent visit to Thailand, enthusiastically commenting on the vibrant faith and growth in the global church. As the church in Canada struggles with shrinking membership, he said, “[Christians abroad] are willing to hold the lantern for us in our struggle.”

Locally, the regional church provides support for pastors, congregations and intercultural bridge-building work in Edmonton. Financial aid, in the form of a loan to Holyrood Mennonite Church and a grant to the Bethel International Church Edmonton Oromo Congregation support transitional leadership as these congregations work to discern their future directions.

In a powerful moment near the end of the assembly, Rueben Tut, pastor of Edmonton South Sudanese Mennonite Church, shared the deep pain he and his congregation feel for the people of South Sudan and the terrible situations they hear about from their loved ones there. Tim Wiebe-Neufeld, MC Alberta’s executive minister, stood with Tut and led in prayer for the South Sudanese Mennonite Church and the people struggling in Sudan.

Tut and others from his church also sang at the March 19 worship service, which included prayers for peace in South Sudan.

In line with the Springridge tradition of abundant potlucks, the service was followed by a hearty meal. ❧

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**CANADIAN
MENNONITE**

PHOTOS BY RUTH BERGEN BRAUN



Prayer for South Sudan

The Edmonton South Sudanese Mennonite Church is a community of Nuer-speaking newcomers who joined MC Alberta because they wanted to be a church that “helps people and believes in peace.” At the recent Annual Delegate Sessions their pastor, Reuben Tut, shared deeply about the suffering of friends and family members in South Sudan. Half the population is facing extreme hunger after years of civil war. Together, the delegate gathering prayed for food, peace and relief.

—TIM WIEBE-NEUFELD, MC ALBERTA EXECUTIVE MINISTER



48 climate stories from around the Mennonite world

By Sierra Ross Richer
Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, reprinted with permission

In her work with the U.S.-based Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, Sierra Ross Richer has written 48 lively short articles about Anabaptists addressing climate issues around the world. On the right are two. For more, visit sustainableclimatesolutions.org/climate-pollinator-series/.



PHOTO RETRIEVED FROM FACEBOOK

Members of Iglesia Menonita de Ibague march in the streets of their city last August.

Heat and LEDs in India

Earth today is 1.1 degrees Celsius warmer than it was 150 years ago, NASA reports. That doesn't sound like a lot, but where Emmanuel Mahendra lives in central India, the difference is enough to make one pause, literally.

"A lot of things have changed, not just temperature, but human behaviour also," said Emmanuel, who works in the office for the Indian Mennonite Church conference in Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh. He has noticed that, when it's hot, people are more irritable, more aggressive and less likely to go out, including to church.

In Dhamtari, located in the tropical Chhattisgarh plain, temperatures during the summer months (March to May), reach 110 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes 115.

"Even in the church," Emmanuel said, "people are not interested in coming in the summertime, [and] not because people don't want to come."

The effects of heat on the human body are serious. High ambient temperatures

put the body at risk for heat exhaustion and heat stroke. As a person's core temperature rises, internal organs can fail, the brain can suffer damage and the heart can stop.

Last summer, at least 90 people in India and Pakistan died in a heat wave that raised average temperatures by eight to 15 degrees Fahrenheit. The book *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells, published in 2019, predicts that by 2050, 255,000 people will die each year from the effects of heat worldwide.

What are Mennonite churches in India doing to slow the warming of the climate? Not as much as Emmanuel would like.

"I don't see any churches responding to climate change actually," he said. "We have to, but we don't."

The way Emmanuel sees it, every human should be working to reduce their impact on the Earth. "We need to do our responsibility, like using less electricity," he said.

Thanks to Emmanuel, those at the Mennonite Church in India conference

office are doing just that, without knowing it.

A few months ago, Emmanuel replaced the office's compact fluorescent light bulbs with LEDs.

"Nothing changed," he said. "Even my boss doesn't know that I changed it. [But] every single second, I save 20 watts."

Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming, published in 2017, ranks residential LED lighting as the 33rd most effective solution for lowering greenhouse gas emissions. LEDs use 90 percent less energy than incandescent light bulbs and 50 percent less than compact fluorescents. Used for five hours a day, they last for 27 years.

Emmanuel didn't just make the switch at the office; his home uses 100 percent LEDs as well.

If you want people to take you seriously, he said, "You have to teach yourself first, and then teach other people." ❧

March against a mine in Colombia

Every year, the congregation from Iglesia Menonita de Ibague in Colombia dresses up in colourful costumes, grabs banners printed with verses from the Bible, and joins thousands from the city in a march for the environment.

The Carnival March has taken place in Ibague every year for more than a decade. The Mennonite congregation has participated since the inaugural march in 2011, which was used as a platform for protesting the construction of a massive open-pit gold mine outside the city.

In 2006, the AngloGold Ashanti company discovered what is likely the country's largest gold deposit beneath a forest reserve in Cajamarca, Tolima, the municipality neighbouring Ibague.

"They started to talk about the installation of an immense open-pit gold mine," said Jose Antonio Vaca Bello, a leader in the Ibague congregation, who also serves

in roles with the regional and national Mennonite church.

The operation would require a lot of water and create pollution and waste, Jose said. Plus, the mine would be in a seismic risk zone, built on an inactive volcano with an active volcano, Machin, nearby.

"A great social movement lifted up," Jose said. Universities, cultural organizations, government entities and churches joined together to protest the project.

They applied pressure to stop the construction of the mine and pushed to create a legal process that would allow the people living in an area to vote on mining projects that would impact their livelihoods.

The efforts worked. The Constitutional Court agreed to instate a mechanism for local governments and citizens to challenge mining permits. And, in 2017, a vote by the residents of Cajamarca led to

the suspension of the gold-mine project.

Construction has been suspended, but Jose said the title is still in the hands of the mining company, so the project could start up again any time.

In the meantime, the carnival marches continue to serve as a call for environmental justice.

In the most recent parade last summer, church members carried a banner with words from Romans 8:22-23A: "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves."

The Earth is in pain, Jose said. Humans need to help it heal. ❧

Passion for environment, humans, creativity motivates fashion revolution

By Nicolien Klassen-Wiebe
Manitoba Correspondent

“An estimated 92 million tons of textile waste is created annually from the fashion industry,” Fashion Revolution reported in 2020, citing Global Fashion Agenda. “Every second, the equivalent of one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or burned globally.”

In 2022, *Bloomberg* published that “fashion accounts for up to 10 percent of global carbon-dioxide output—more than international flights and shipping combined, according to the United Nations Environment Programme.” It also reported the clothing industry’s most-used textile is now polyester, a plastic fibre derived mainly from petroleum.

Much of the fashion industry exploits the Earth and its people, and the problem is increasing, despite years of growing awareness around it.

So, whether you have a passion for fashion or barely think about what you put on each morning, every person makes choices that have impacts.

“Clothing is a fundamental way in which we interact with the world,” says Anna-Marie Janzen, founder and operator of Reclaim Mending, a textile repair and tailoring service based in Winnipeg. “It’s right up there with eating. These are things that impact the world at large, not just the world around us . . . globally, this is one of our biggest impacts.”

There is a stereotype, rooted in some truth, that Mennonites discourage paying too much attention to clothing and appearances, thinking it frivolous and vain. Yet no one is exempt from the fashion crisis.

“We all have to wear clothes. Very few of us in Canada live in climates where being a nudist is an option,” Janzen says wryly. “Especially for Mennonites throughout history, clothing has been a way we identify ourselves. It is a way we express who we are and it still is for a lot of communities.”

She patches jeans, hems dresses and



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Elise Epp is the country coordinator for Fashion Revolution Canada.

gives vintage sweaters new life. She started her business in 2015, and it’s now a full-time job that she does with another full-time employee. She has been mending things for people her whole life, since her

grandmother taught her to sew and repair clothing.

Extending the life of a garment is essential to sustainable fashion, because the most important action any individual



PHOTO BY ANNA-MARIE JANZEN

Anna-Marie Janzen is the founder and operator of Reclaim Mending.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Jennifer DeGroot and her family run Big Oak Farm near Morden, Man.

can take is actually the absence of one: to not buy more clothing.

“The most ethical wardrobe is the one that is already in your closet,” says Jennifer deGroot, a small farmer, homemaker and sewist. “It’s so simple, and yet people avoid it”

DeGroot and her family run Big Oak Farm near Morden, Man., and attend St. Julian’s Table, an affiliate congregation of Mennonite Church Manitoba. They raise sheep, laying hens, bees, and gardens of vegetables and flowers for themselves and members of their agriculture share, as well as to sell at markets.

Her passion for aligning her diet and closet with the well-being of other people and the environment started decades ago. “As a young feminist in my teens, I was keenly aware that the things I used in my everyday life were often connected in very negative ways to women in other parts of world,” she says.

Her clothing and groceries that came from the store contributed to inequality for women sewing in factories with dangerous working conditions or raising children alone while their husbands left for months at a time to earn money as migrant workers in the fields.

DeGroot began sewing her own clothes to mitigate this problem, but also because she loves fashion and its capacity for creativity and self-expression. She wanted her clothes to fit well, unlike mainstream clothes that are made to fit proportions few people actually have. In addition to raising sheep for wool, she is experimenting with growing flax to make linen and spinning her fibre into yarn.

“Our relationship with clothes is an incredible opportunity for being able to act justly in the world,” she says.

You don’t need to know how to sew in order to get involved. “There are so many ways to approach slow fashion, and it doesn’t all involve turning this into your [whole] life,” says Elise Epp, a graphic designer and sustainable fashion advocate.

She is the country coordinator for Fashion Revolution Canada, a global movement that began after the 2013

collapse of the Rana Plaza building of garment factories in Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,100 people. “The goal is through grassroots efforts to work towards a more safe and fair fashion industry,” Epp says of the initiative that has chapters in 75 countries.

This year’s edition of the organization’s annual Fashion Revolution Week is April 22–29. There are many ways to take action other than mending and making clothes, Epp says. Join the local Fashion Revolution chapter. Buy from thrift shops. Lobby governments for legislative changes. Demand transparency from fashion companies.

DeGroot says churches can organize clothing swaps, and host mending circles and repair workshops. Often older members of congregations have these skills that the younger generation hasn’t learned.

Epp emphasizes the importance of people putting money toward their values when they do go shopping, paying more for ethically made, higher-quality garments. Mennonites may be the royalty of reusing, but they are also known to be frugal, which can be a problem.

“Our frugality is at odds with our charity,” she says. “We will buy the products that push people into poverty and then feel good about ourselves for giving to charities that help people in poverty. . . . [M]any people could reassess their budgets and put more of their money towards paying people responsibly to begin with, so they aren’t put into situations that require charity.”

Frugality and charity offer more immediate rewards than investment in sustainable clothing systems.

Epp doesn’t believe that withholding her business from massive corporations like Amazon or Shein will topple their empires or cause widespread change. It’s more about living her life in a way that feels true to herself: “As much as I can, I want to live a life that’s in accordance with my values.”

Epp acknowledges many people struggle to do this because of barriers like limited finances and non-inclusive size offerings. Her advice: “Buy the best quality you can afford, and take care of it.” ☞

What good does it do to plant one tree?

MCC writer explores her skepticism about how to mitigate climate change

By Linda Espenshade
Mennonite Central Committee

What good does it do to plant one tree, I asked myself, as I visited with farmers in Mwenezi District, in south central Zimbabwe last September.

Everywhere our Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) communications team went, farmers were sure to tell us they planted a tree that year, most commonly a mango tree because it provides food as well as shade.

These farmers had come to understand that cutting down trees over the decades may have addressed a need for firewood, but it also has added to a bigger problem. Destroying forests contributes to climate change.

And they know that climate change is hurting their land, the crops they eat and their water supply. It even divides families by forcing them to migrate.

During an MCC-supported emergency food distribution, I spoke with Clemence Jawanda, a father of eight. He said that inconsistent rains during the last two planting seasons resulted in very poor harvests. The food he and his wife grew was gone six months before they could harvest again.

When he unloaded the emergency rations of beans, finely ground cornmeal, oil and salt from the donkey-powered cart, I saw the shelves in his storage shed were

indeed empty.

If the upcoming planting season isn't better, Jawanda said he may need to migrate to look for work, like other men in the community have done.

"Personally it is very painful, just to leave my family here because of a circumstance that is beyond my control," Jawanda said. "Somehow, I need to be close to my family all the time. So it's a difficult situation for us as men."

Women who are left behind are quite vulnerable, explained Caroline Pugeni, project coordinator for Score Against Poverty (SCORE), the grassroots organization and MCC partner that organized the food distribution. In the culture, women have little to no decision-making power, yet they need to feed, educate and parent their children alone.

Planting season for 2022-23 was supposed to start in October, so in early January, I sent an email to Pugeni to ask how crops were growing.

"Any delay in rains in the next few days will result in complete crop failure," she wrote back. If rain did come in those next few days, crops may survive, but the yield will be compromised. In March, she confirmed that 85 percent of crops in three districts of Mwenezi had failed because of too much rainfall variation.

My heart sank. What have we done? We, meaning those of us in the world who have ignored the warnings of our climate scientists for at least the last 20 years, probably longer.

I've sat in my perch in Pennsylvania, where my lifestyle hasn't been noticeably affected by climate change and read the headlines. I have watched powerful people who profit from oil and coal industries deny the existence of climate



MCC PHOTOS BY MEGHAN MAST

Clemence Jawanda, Nyaradzo Jawanda and Nyadzisai Jawanda unload food that came from a monthly food distribution from MCC partner Score Against Poverty.



Using corn husks and cobs, or sometimes a few branches, Ntombizodwa Mapfacha cooks beans on a fuel-efficient stove.

change. And I have watched environmentalists beg our legislators to act.

But now, when I think about the Zimbabwean farmers planting one tree in an effort to protect and feed their families, I am ashamed of my nonchalance. Here they are, doing something to pour water on the global forest fire.

Farmers are also changing the traditional way they have farmed to conservation agriculture, a farming method that is more productive in areas with little rain. SCORE has been teaching this method and encouraging families to use less wood by introducing fuel-efficient stoves, solar power and biodigesters.

They have also started the Women Coalition Against Climate Change (WCCC) to educate people about how to mitigate and cope with climate change.

At a WCCC meeting, I listened as one of the speakers explained climate

change to the group's members, who have committed to share what they learn with other people in the community.

"Climate change is caused by these countries, the western countries," said speaker Esnath Guvuriro as she looked in my direction. I nodded vigorously so she would know she was not offending me, and because I believe it to be true.

Guvuriro singled out gasses from industries, vehicles and nitrogen fertilizer as some of the top culprits of ozone layer destruction. But she didn't stop with blame.

"So what are we supposed to do as the Women Coalition on Climate Change?" she asked the group. She answered her own question: Don't cut down trees. Plant trees. Why? Because trees take in the carbon we produce.

When I was asked to say a few words to the WCCC participants, I heard myself

telling them that I was so inspired by their efforts to address climate change that the next car I buy would not use gasoline.

They clapped enthusiastically, but my gut churned with the economic disparities and injustice I had just named. I was promising people who walked to the meeting that I would buy a car that cost tens of thousands of dollars, so that I don't pollute the atmosphere I share with them.

I was embarrassed by unintentionally revealing that I can spend that much in front of people who are trying to figure out how to make food grow out of dry ground. On the other hand, I think the promise I made was appropriate.

I earn more. I cause more harm to the environment than they do. So I owe more to fix it. Perhaps this car is my tree?

What's your next tree? ☘

Mennonites celebrate their global church

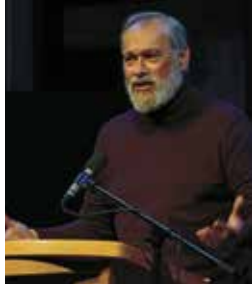
By Amy Rinner Waddell

B.C. Correspondent
ABBOTSFORD, B.C.

B.C. Mennonites enjoyed a global experience on March 25 while gathering for Renewal 2023, a Mennonite World Conference (MWC) event with the theme of “Jesus Christ, our hope.”

The event, held at South Abbotsford Church, was part of Renewal 2028, a decade-long series of local events organized by MWC to commemorate the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.

British Columbia was the site for this year’s event because MWC representatives and executive members were meeting together in the Fraser Valley that week.



MWC PHOTO

José Arrais of Portugal shares about European Mennonites’ response to the war in Ukraine.

“Why do we need something like Mennonite World Conference?” asked César García, MWC’s general secretary, who hails from Colombia, in his opening greetings. “In contexts of persecution or violence, reasons why we need a global church seem more evident to our members. A global communion offers support when local congregations cope with difficult circumstances. Our Anabaptist tradition must recover the idea of a visible global church.”

Hope was a recurring theme for the six speakers who shared stories from their respective continents:

- **José Arrais of Portugal** talked about how European churches are helping Ukrainian churches in the war with Russia;
- **Cynthia Duck of Paraguay** shared how churches are reforming themselves following the challenges of recovering from COVID;
- **Ashley Rempel of Canada** told how her church youth group is giving hope through service to its community;
- **Tigist Tesfaye of Ethiopia**, who spoke by video, asked people to continue praying for her country in the midst of chronic problems, such as drought, inflation and conflict;
- **Amos Chin of Myanmar**, whose testimony was read aloud because he could not be present, gave details of food shortages and terrorist killings in his country; and
- **Kkotip Bae of South Korea** told how Korean churches are standing with conscientious objectors in a country where military service is mandatory.

A music team led by Heidi Epp had hands clapping and toes tapping as her music team led songs from around the world.

“Mennonites can really sing in tongues,” Epp quipped, as the congregation attempted a variety of languages, including unfamiliar African ones.

Henk Stenvers of the Netherlands, MWC’s president, reflected on the global nature of the evening’s prayers, songs and messages: “That is the beauty of Mennonite World Conference. Although our context is different, we are one in Christ. We are one in our hope that it is Christ that reaches out and says, ‘Follow me.’ It is on us to grab that hand and live in hope.”

Stenvers extended an invitation to attend a celebration in 2025, in Zurich, Switzerland, where the Anabaptist movement began, and to the 2028 Mennonite World Conference assembly in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. ☸

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Windsor churches support downtown drug clinic

'Addiction is a symptom of trauma, not the cause of the problem itself:' Pastor Rielly McLaren

By Barry Bergen

Special to *Canadian Mennonite*

Rielly McLaren has seen first hand the effects of the opioid crisis in his community and his congregation.

The pastor of Windsor Mennonite Fellowship, a small urban church near the heart of Windsor, Ont., says, "Families in my congregation have lost loved ones to this crisis. All economic segments of society are affected."

Upwards of 500 people in Windsor have died of opioid/fentanyl-related deaths since 2018.

McLaren and many others in the community were happy to learn that Windsor City Council passed a motion to open a consumption and treatment site (CTS) in the city. Such sites provide supervised consumption of drugs such as opioids; distribution of sterile harm-reduction equipment and supplies, and naloxone kits that reverse an overdose by blocking the effects of opioids; checking to see if there is fentanyl present within street drugs; basic medical care; addiction support; and referrals to treatment and recovery programs.

To those who do not see the value of a CTS, or hold to the idea that these sites simply enable drug abusers to continue their illegal drug use, McLaren would argue that they save lives.

"Addiction is a symptom of trauma, not the cause of the problem itself," he says. "Recent studies are showing us this. Substance abuse is a way to try to cope."

After the CTS was approved and renovations were well underway, those who supported it were alarmed when a councillor began preparing a motion to delay the opening of the site, claiming that its proposed location would be harmful for businesses in the area.

McLaren, along with George Bozanich, the minister of Windsor's Emmanuel



GOOGLE MAPS PHOTO

The SafePoint consumption and treatment site in downtown Windsor, Ont., is set to open in the building on the corner.

United Church, drafted an open letter to council. The letter was quickly spread to other Windsor churches, and within a day more than 30 pastors had signed on with their support.

"We are writing to you to express our support for the consumption and treatment site set to open at 101 Wyandotte St. E.," the letter says. "We believe that this is a life-saving service and should not be delayed for any reason."

Further on, it states: "As Christians, we believe we are at our best when we are loving and supporting the most vulnerable among us. It's clear to us that people who use drugs are vulnerable during this opioid epidemic, and that harm reduction is love. Faith communities across denominations have been preparing to centre their efforts on helping people in proximity to this consumption and treatment site."

McLaren, Bozanich and many others in the community held a protest at city hall in late January, where they voiced their disagreement with the proposed motion

to delay the opening. As a result of their actions, the councillor did not bring his motion forward.

McLaren and others protested again, this time in late February, when another proposal that would have delayed the site's opening was being discussed. This motion was brought forward, but was defeated.

This prompted another motion by yet another councillor—this time to reaffirm the city's support of the CTS. This motion passed. The CTS, called SafePoint, was expected to open in late March.

McLaren feels this is a great location for the site, because it is right in the middle of the downtown area, where the opioid problem seems most visible.

"When the church stands in solidarity with the community, speaking truth to power, watch how God shows up—far more than I could have imagined," he says. "The church can stand with others—not as a power over others, but power together with others. To recover our witness in the community, we need to show up locally." ❧

Ukrainian conscientious objector jailed

By Felix Corley
© Forum 18 News Service

Vitaly Alekseenko, a 46-year-old Ukrainian Christian conscientious objector, was taken into custody by Ivano-Frankivsk Police on Feb. 23, to begin serving his one-year jail term for refusing the call-up to the military in a time of war.

Alekseenko, an internally-displaced person from Donetsk Region, is the first conscientious objector the Ukrainian authorities are known to have jailed. Since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, courts have given at least six other conscientious objectors suspended prison terms.

Alekseenko first fled to Ivano-Frankivsk in May 2022. The City Recruitment Office summoned him on June 2. He told them that he could not take up arms because of his religious beliefs as a Christian. "I told them I was ready to do an alternative service and wrote such a declaration," he told Forum 18. He also explained that he had refused military service in Uzbekistan on grounds of conscience.

He was summoned to the recruitment office in Ivano-Frankivsk in June 2022. He explained that, because of his religious belief, he cannot take up arms. He was refused alternative civilian service and his case was handed to prosecutors. On Sept. 15 2022, Ivano-Frankivsk City Court handed down the one-year jail term.

"They told me that there is no certainty that I'm a believer," Alekseenko told Forum 18 on Dec. 15, 2022. "They said that only members of registered faiths have the right to do alternative service." He said he believes in Jesus Christ and his command to resist evil without violence, and be peacemakers as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. "But I don't go to any church, as they don't observe what Christ said."

On Jan. 16, the Ivano-Frankivsk Appeal Court rejected Alekseenko's appeal against his one-year jail term.



PHOTO © VITALY ALEKSEENKO

Vitaly Alekseenko, 46-year-old Ukrainian Christian conscientious objector, was taken into custody by Ivano-Frankivsk Police on Feb. 23.

"I told the court I agree that I have broken the law of Ukraine," Alekseenko told Forum 18 after the appeal hearing, "but I am not guilty under the law of God. I want to be honest to myself." He added that, if he had repented of his "crime," both the lower and the appeal court would have given him a suspended sentence.

**'I told the court I agree that I have broken the law of Ukraine, but I am not guilty under the law of God. I want to be honest to myself.'
(Vitaly Alekseenko)**

Officers took Alekseenko to Ivano-Frankivsk's Investigation Prison on Feb. 23, Yuriy Sheliashenko, secretary of the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement, told Forum 18. "Vitaly told me that he will read the Gospels and New Testament in prison, and will pray for peace and justice, and changes in Ukraine for the better," he said.

"Conscientious objection to military service is not a crime, it is human right and this human right should not be denied

even in time of war," Sheliashenko said. "In fact, it is especially precious in times of war, and historically emerged exactly because of that, because challenges of modern militarized economies became unbearable to the conscience of a growing number of people."

"Unfortunately, the right to alternative service does not extend to martial law," Viktor Yelensky, head of the State Service for Ethnic Policies and Freedom of Conscience, told Forum 18. He said he is working to extend the right for exemption from mobilization, but "this requires the good will of Parliament"

In practise, conscientious objectors to military service have long faced obstacles to doing alternative civilian service. The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its Feb. 9, 2022 Concluding Observations on Ukraine report, stressed that "alternatives to military service should be available to all conscientious objectors without discrimination as to the nature of their beliefs justifying the objection (be they religious beliefs or non-religious beliefs grounded in conscience)."

Alekseenko is likely to be transferred to another prison to serve his sentence, although Forum 18 has been unable to find out when that will be and where he will be transferred. ❧

This article is adapted and excerpted from Forum 18 News Service. Reprinted with permission. Forum 18 is a Norwegian human rights organization.

Calendar

British Columbia

May 6: MC B.C. women's day, at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford. Theme: "Triumph over trials."

May 21: MC B.C. arts fundraiser for Indigenous relations, at Heritage Hall, Vancouver.

Alberta

June 10-11: Camp Valaqua hike-a-thon.

Manitoba

April 26: CMU virtual open house, online at 6:00 p.m. Register at cmu.ca/future/experience.

April 29: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society meeting, at the Commons Barn in Neuberghal, at 1 p.m. Speaker: Conrad Stoesz, and "Conform" documentary.

May 8-12: "Power, ethics, abuse and church leadership," a one-week course, at CMU. Speakers: Val Hiebert and Jaymie Friesen. To sign up or learn more, visit cmu.ca/extended.

June 2-4: 21st annual Manitoba birding retreat, at Camp Arnes. For more information, visit campswithmeaning.org/birding-retreat.

July 14-15: The Centre for

Transnational Mennonite Studies and the University of Manitoba present "The Russlaender Mennonites: War dislocation and new beginnings" centenary conference to mark the arrival of Russlaender from the Soviet Union to Canada.

July 15: "Singing our Journey: Sangerfest 2023," at the Manitoba Centennial Concert Hall. Sign up to sing in the mass choir celebrating the centenary of the Russlaender immigration to Canada. For more information, visit mhsc.ca/soj.

Ontario

April 14: New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale music and comedy night, at Waterloo North Mennonite Church, at 7 p.m. Musicians: Mike and Diana Erb. Entertainer: JP Magic. For more information, visit nhmrs.com.

April 18: MC Eastern Canada presents "Living the Gospel as a diverse group of believers," an online workshop on cultural integration, from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Learn more at mcec.ca/events.

April 18: Discover Rockway Grades 7 and 8 information night, at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, Kitchener, at 7 p.m. To learn more or register, visit www.rockway.ca.

April 23: Soli Deo Gloria Singers present a concert at Leamington United Mennonite Church, at 3 p.m.

April 24: New Hamburg Mennonite

Relief Sale promotion dinner, at Floradale Mennonite Church, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Reservations a must. Call 519-745-8458 x262.

April 28-29: MC Eastern Canada annual church gathering, at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, in English and French. Learn more at mcec.ca/events.

May 6: Menno Singers presents its "Spring Concert," at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit www.mennosingers.com.

May 5-7: Theatre of the Beat presents "I Love You and it Hurts," three short plays on elder abuse, healthy masculinity, and intimate-partner violence, at the Kitchener Public Library; (5,6) at 7 p.m., and (6,7) at 2 p.m. For more information about tickets, email cedric@theatreofthebeat.ca.

May 11: MC Eastern Canada presents "Becoming a restorative church: Embodying our safe church policy." A hybrid event, in English and French, at 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, and on Zoom, from 7 to 9 p.m. Learn more at mcec.ca/events.

June 3: MC Eastern Canada presents

"Being a restorative church: Creating brave and accessible space." A hybrid event, at Shantz Mennonite Church, Baden, with French on Zoom, from 8:30 a.m. to noon. Learn more at mcec.ca/events.

July 10: "The Place of Memory: Reflections on the Russlaender Centenary," at Knox Presbyterian Church, Waterloo; at 7:30 p.m. The program of music, singing, reading and reflection features the premiere of "The Place of Memory" composed by Leonard Enns and performed by the DaCapo Choir. For more information, visit uwaterloo.ca/grebel/place-of-memory.

To ensure timely publication of upcoming events, please send Calendar announcements eight weeks in advance of the event date by email to calendar@canadianmennonite.org.

For more Calendar listings visit, canadianmennonite.org/churchcalendar.



Upcoming Advertising Dates

Issue Date	Ads Due
May 5	April 26
May 19 <i>Focus on Mental Health</i>	May 10
June 2	May 24
June 16	June 7
June 30	June 21
July 14 <i>Digital Issue</i>	July 5
July 28	July 19
Aug. 11 <i>Digital Issue</i>	Aug. 2
Aug. 25	Aug. 16
Sept. 8 <i>Digital Issue</i>	Aug. 30
Sept. 22	Sept. 13
Oct. 6	Sept. 27
Oct. 20 <i>Focus on Education</i>	Oct. 11



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