CANADIAN MENNONITE

JUNE 2024

Beyond Ethics

Transcendence, Prayer and Spirit

My faith lies not in social justice

Will Braun

It's easier to write about wars, emissions and events than the Holy Spirit. It's simpler to share news about identity-related issues than reflections on our identity in Christ.

Last summer around a bonfire, a friend steeped in contemplative spirituality paraphrased Alan Rudy-Froese saying that Mennonites tend to boil everything down to ethics. The comment stuck (and led to the interview on page 12).

I love ethics. My parents raised me to think rigorously about right and wrong. As a teen, I preached against material excess.

One of the more formative experiences of my life was a month spent in Little Buffalo, Alberta, in my mid-20s. The Cree community had been devastated by oil development. I was at the other end of the pipeline, witnessing the effect of my oil consumption on Joe Teapot, Midnight Pete and those laughing suffering kids I played with.

A few years later I worked with, and then lived with, the Pimicikamak Cree of northern Manitoba. There, I was at the other end of the transmission line, witnessing the effects of a hydroelectric megaproject on some of the most valiant and savvy justice advocates I've known.

During those years of ethical striving, I stole chunks of time at a spiritual retreat centre in Michigan—a place of quiet, rest and prayer. It was not a place of ethical striving, but it became a spiritual home.

Since then, I have sought the rare points where these realities intersect—where contemplative depths touch the gritty margins.

Two of the Cree leaders I knew well would occasionally say their real work, their deeper calling, lay not in politics but in the woods, around the fire, nurturing spiritual teachings.

They would have fit in just as well at the spiritual retreat centre as they did in meetings with politicians or lawyers.

They spoke as though the political struggle was something to transcend, or perhaps infuse with transcendence, but its pull held them.

I feel that pull, too. I have leaned too far, too exclusively toward ethics.

Large chunks of our church do, too. Climate, reconciliation and inclusion are as likely to be on the agenda as inner renewal. All around us, reason, science and high tech ascend, as faith and transcendence seem evermore out of step, almost embarrassing.

During a livestream conversation with an Ethiopian church leader, Doug Klassen, executive minister of Mennonite Church Canada, lamented that in some parts of our denomination, people fear that delving deeply into prayer may be viewed as "weird."

The ravages of rationality are real. I feel it myself.

Social justice concerns sometimes seem to serve as an alternative when overt faith feels too awkward. Often our ways and words mimic secular organizations, rather than drawing on a sense that God brings transformation.

On page 20, Klassen quotes a justice advocate who heard God say: "The world is not yours to save or condemn; only serve the one who is saving it."

Do we believe God works in the world? Do we believe in prayer, spirit and that which might set a soul aflame?

What can we do with whatever discomfort we feel around such matters? Can we turn our hearts toward God in faith, believing in that which passes understanding and is infinitely more than all we ask or imagine?

Ethics most certainly matter. As does abiding in Christ. Our feature section (pages 12-18) points to a way that encompasses both.

We welcome Katie Doke Sawatzky of Regina who is serving as Alberta-Saskatchewan correspondent until the end of August. Katie has a masters degree in journalism from the University of Regina and attends Grace Mennonite Church.

Finally, with the call for applications on the back cover, we launch MennoCreative. We're offering flexible residencies of six to 18 months, either part-time or full, for people who feel called to investigative journalism, photo journalism, podcasting, documentary filmmaking or graphic design.

These opportunities are available to young or old, experienced or not. Apply yourself or nudge someone you know.

We have no idea what will come of this, but we're excited to find out. We want to nurture the gifts and passions God is giving our community.

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What in the World

Voter intent, by religion

Just over half of Canadian Christians, Hindus and Sikhs favour the federal Conservatives over other parties. Muslims were least likely to prefer the Conservatives (15 percent) and most likely to lean NDP (41 percent). Among Jews, 42 percent favour the Conservatives, similar to the overall national average of 43 percent. Source: Angus Reid

Photo: Marek Piwnicki/Pexels

Billy in bronze

A statue of Billy Graham was unveiled at the U.S. Capitol on May 16. Senator Ted Budd noted Graham's "simple message of forgiveness" and his commitments to preaching the Gospel, fighting for civil rights, opposing communism and offering spiritual guidance. Graham died in 2018 at 99. The bronze statue replaces one of a segregationist leader. Source: Christian Broadcasting Network

Buddhist more-with-less

In a column about climate change for *The Guardian*, Buddhist writers Bhikkhu Sujato and Nadine Levy say, "we must ask ourselves what it is that we really need. Only then can we stop our endless consumption and save the planet." Citing Buddhist teachings, they say "the cause of the problem is greed, and its solution is contentment." Source: The Guardian

Photo: Sasana.pl

50 YEARS AGO

MENNONITE REPORTER, MAY 13, 1974

Food for the hungry, gravy for the rich

The world-wide food shortage deepens daily. The haves are paying more and more for what is still abundantly available to them while the have-nots are starving because they have no resources with which to purchase what they need.

New organizations to combat starvation and malnutrition are being established constantly and books on the famine to come (experts almost universally agree there is no doubt it is coming and on a large scale) are appearing in scores.

Mennonite Central Committee earlier this year resolved to give priority to the world food problem in the next five to ten years, and to expand rural development and family planning programs in overseas and North American poverty pockets. Mennonite and Brethren in Christ households have been encouraged to reduce their expenditures by ten percent and to contribute this amount to meet the food needs of others.

This suggestion, if taken seriously, might do at least some good. But we doubt if people will take it seriously.

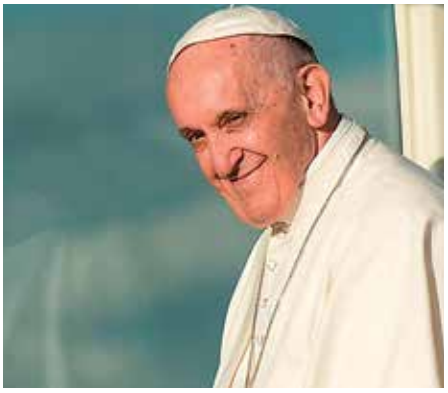
Benny Hinn's regrets

Speaking on the Strang Report in May, 71-year-old evangelist Benny Hinn, known for healings and prophecy, said he regrets two things: some of his prophecies were not from God and some of the prosperity preaching and fundraising he participated in were "gimmickry."

"I ask people to forgive me," said Hinn.

Source: Strang Report

Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Go forth and . . .

"The number of births is the first indicator of the hope of a people," Pope Francis told a gathering of Italian pro-family groups in May. He is urging couples throughout the industrialized world to have children. "Without children and young people, a country loses its desire for the future," he said. Source: AP

Photo: Juantenaphoto

Prayer and politics

At the May 7 National Prayer Breakfast, National Chief Cindy Woodhouse called her mom up, impromptu, to recite the Lord's Prayer in Anishinaabe.

Then Justin Trudeau spoke, off script, saying: "My faith grounds me in a way that is real but quiet." He concluded by reading the Beatitudes.

Pierre Poilievre later explained that the reason political leaders were at the head table was because, as he said with a chuckle, "we're the ones in the room most in need of redemption." Source: CPAC

Photo: Loretta Woodhouse, CPAC screengrab

Like other news sources, we present information because we deem it worthy of consideration, not because we necessarily agree with it. – Eds.

A moment from yesterday

A woman, probably a member of the Bechtel family near Cambridge, Ontario, peers at us from a 19th-century photo album. Her portrait is not as formal as the others. Her hair hangs down, and she has assembled for the camera what appear to be meaningful personal items: a book, an elaborate hat, a small picture. If the chance to have a photograph taken were as rare today as it was then, what meaningful items would you assemble?

Text: Laureen Harder-Gissing

Photo: Mennonite Archives of Ontario

READERS WRITE

Does *CM* support Trump?

I was dismayed to see you giving free advertising to Donald Trump and the *God Bless the USA Bible* ("What in the world," May 2024). There are a few reasons for my concern.

First, this is a commercial venture. The Bibles are sold for US$60 each. Contrast that with the Gideons International, which my father belonged to for more than 70 years; their mission is to give Bibles away for free.

Second, the Trump-endorsed Bible is made into an American book with the implication that God is on the side of Americans. In fact, the Bible is a universal book. Translators like those at Wycliffe Bible Translators have given of themselves to make the Bible available to peoples around the world in their own languages.

Third, I draw your attention to the distinction Thomas Reynolds makes in the book *René Girard and Creative Mimesis* between monotheism and monolatry. The former is a belief in a transcendent universal creator; the second posits that the one God is the god of one's own tribe, nation or religion. Trump's framing of his Bible, in the clip one gets by clicking on the website, is clearly suggesting monolatry, which is a form of idolatry.

Fourth, Trump uses the marketing of this Bible to advance his political agenda, suggesting that reading this particular Bible and adopting his values will advance the greatness of America.

By uncritically printing a picture of Trump with the *God Bless the USA Bible*, you are helping him make money and, more perniciously, spreading an idolatrous message of Christian nationalism.

Vern Neufeld Redekop, Ottawa
(Ottawa Mennonite Church)

ONLINE COMMENTS

Re: "Am I Mennonite?" (May 2024)

Over the past five years, I have gotten to know the folks in Evangelical Mennonite Church Vietnam. Some of them have been Mennonite since the 1970s. They are proud to be Mennonite in Vietnam, especially as they have taken stands for justice that have brought on persecution and imprisonment. I have learned that being Anabaptist is a foreign concept to them and even the meaning behind the word does not represent their story, as many come from Buddhist backgrounds.

As we respond to their requests for leadership development and we provide them with Anabaptist resources, we have to explain that Anabaptist is another word for what Mennonites believe and practice. Then they understand.

Garry Janzen

Re: "Am I Mennonite?" (May 2024)

I appreciate your response, Garry. You raise important points. Thank you.

I wrote this from my perspective and experience in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Perceptions on Mennonite identity around here are complicated. (Paradoxically, they are often not as complicated as they ought to be. Stereotypes abound.) I wholeheartedly acknowledge that my limited perspective on Mennonite identity is incomplete, flawed and likely unhelpful for many.

I don't think using the term Anabaptist instead of Mennonite is a solution. As I wrote, I don't think there is a clear problem to be solved. In fact, "Anabaptist" might be more confusing than the term Mennonite. Twenty-five years ago, I told my ex-Christian friend I was joining the Anabaptists. He responded, "Hmm. Tell me more about these anti-Baptists. I might be interested."

I don't think the label Mennonite is more problematic than other labels in our 21st century Canadian context, but I don't find it any less problematic, either.

The quest for identity in 21st century Canada has become increasingly complex. For me, my Mennonite identity is complicated. I realize many first-, second-, third-, fourth-generation Mennonites from various cultures and ethnicities do not feel the same hesitation/conflict/complexity about their Mennonite identity as I do. I appreciate and celebrate this as good news. They are a profound blessing to the Mennonite church.

I'm grateful for the diversity of the Mennonite community and I'm thankful for all Mennonites with whom I'm journeying through life. The real issue for me is the concept of identity in general. I hope this brings a bit more clarity to my perspective.

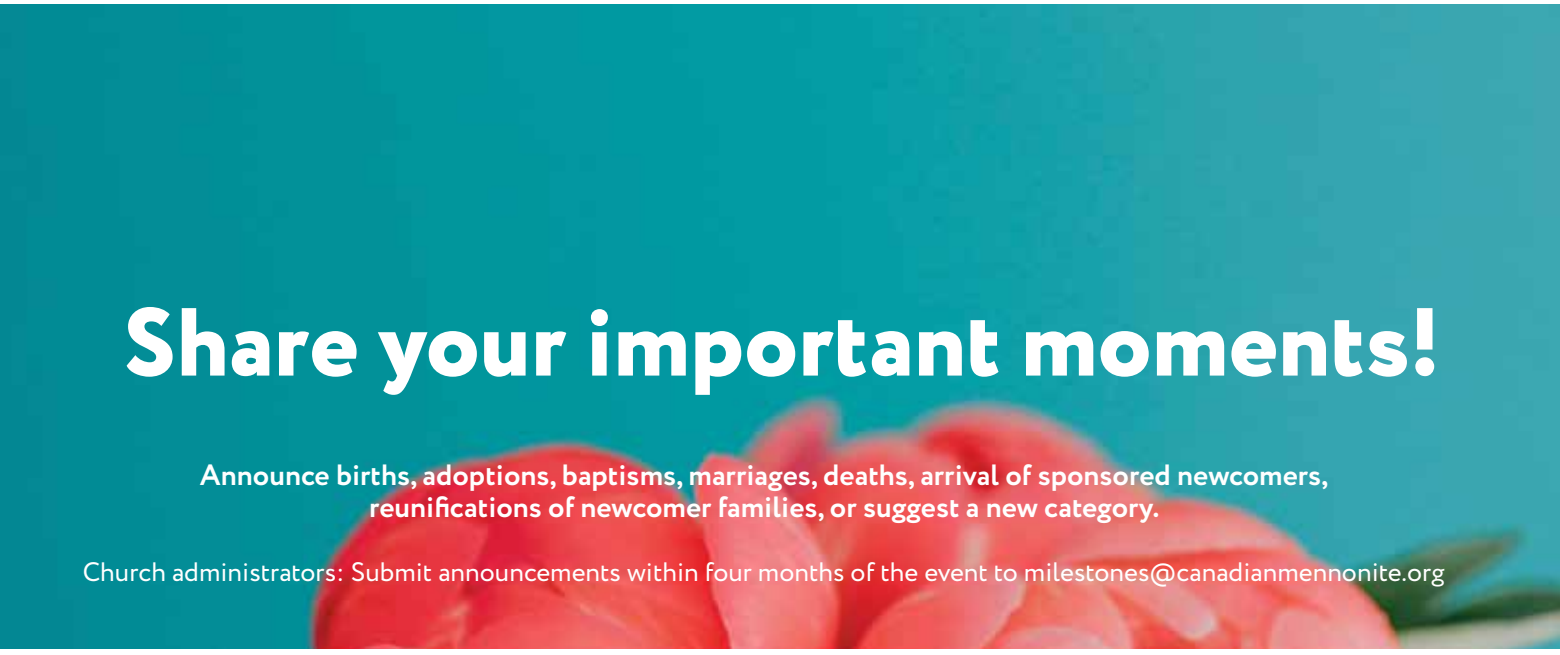
Troy Watson

Be in Touch
• Send letters to letters@canadianmennonite.org. Our mailing address is on page 3.

MILESTONES

Deaths

Bartel—Mary Ann (Banman), 94 (b. Nov. 4, 1929; d. April 6, 2024), North Star Mennonite Church, Drake, Sask.
Bartel—Philip Samuel, 59 (b. Nov. 17, 1964; d. April 27, 2024), North Star Mennonite Church, Drake, Sask.
Brenneman—Ronald Wayne, 83 (b. Aug. 19, 1940; d. Dec. 18, 2023), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Dick—Walter R., 84 (b. Aug. 10, 1939; d. March 29, 2024), North Leamington United Mennonite Church, Leamington, Ont.
Dueck—Agnes, 92 (b. July 20, 1931; d. April 21, 2024), Rosthern Mennonite Church, Rosthern, Sask.
Dyck—Marie (nee Peters), 96 (b. June 26, 1927; d. April 28, 2024), Grace Mennonite Church, Steinbach, Man.
Ediger—Tina (nee Neufeld), 97 (b. Nov. 11, 1926; d. March 23, 2024), First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Ens—Adolf, 90 (b. Dec. 13, 1933; d. April 21, 2024), Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship, Winnipeg, Man.
Ens—Philipp R., 84 (b. Sept. 9, 1939; d. May 11, 2024), Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Fischer—Alfred John, 93 (b. July 12, 1930; d. April 30, 2024), North Leamington United Mennonite Church, Leamington, Ont.
Friesen—Anna (Janzen), 100 (b. Jan. 31, 1924; d. April 1, 2024), Warman Mennonite Church, Warman, Sask.
Friesen—Martha Alma (Dick), 92 (b. Aug. 23, 1931; d. May 7, 2024), North Star Mennonite Church, Drake, Sask.
Gascho—Christian Gerry, 89 (b. Dec. 13, 1934; d. Jan. 9, 2024), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Geeting—Elijah James, 21 months (b. March 15, 2022; d. Dec. 25, 2023), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Giesbrecht—Dora (nee Klassen), 98 (b. March 4, 1926; d. April 9, 2024), First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Goertzen—Judith (Judy) (nee Kliewer), 78 (b. July 6, 1945; d. March 3 2024), First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Hamm—Hilda, 82 (b. Oct. 7, 1941; d. April 7, 2024), Altona Bergthaler Mennonite, Alton, Man.
Harder—Gerhard John (Gary), 81 (b. June 4, 1942; d. March 18, 2024), St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, St. Jacobs, Ont.
Heese-Boutin—Alain Mischa, 39 (Nov. 23, 1984; April 3, 2024), Toronto United Mennonite Church, Toronto, Ont.
Janzen—Robert (Bob), 76 (b. Aug. 27, 1947; d. March 20, 2024), Rockway Mennonite Church, Kitchener, Ont.
Kinsie—Alice, 93 (b. Jan. 16, 1931; d. April 3, 2024), Breslau Mennonite Church, Breslau, Ont.
Lepp—Charlotte (nee Neufeld), 92 (b. Oct. 22, 1931; d. April 5, 2024), First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Lichti—Emmalien, 100 (b. Nov. 29, 1923; March 21 2024), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
McLaren—Corie Campbell, 36 (b. Feb. 16, 1987; d. Aug. 22, 2023), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Murdoch—Helen (Enns, nee Klassen), 90 (b. March 15, 2024; d. March 25, 2024), First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.
Plett—Marlene (nee Wall), 90 (b. April 28, 1934; d. May 2, 2024), Altona Mennonite Church, Altona, Man.
Schachowskoy—Kurt, 85 (b. Aug. 10, 1938; d. March 4, 2024), Leamington United Mennonite Church, Leamington, Ont.
Wallace—Joel Owen, 24 (b. July 10, 1999; d. March 6, 2024), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Winhold—Shelley Rose, 58 (b. April 11, 1965; d. Oct. 22, 2023), Tavistock Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Yantzi—Mary Jane, 85 (b. March 31, 1938; d. March 10, 2024), East Zorra Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.
Zehr—Katie, 92 (b. Dec. 18, 1931; d. April 28, 2024), East Zorra Mennonite Church, Tavistock, Ont.



Share your important moments!

Announce births, adoptions, baptisms, marriages, deaths, arrival of sponsored newcomers, reunifications of newcomer families, or suggest a new category.

Church administrators: Submit announcements within four months of the event to milestones@canadianmennonite.org

PHOTO: RICHARD BAGAN/UNSPLASH

Navigating pastoral transitions

Karen Schellenberg

My interview with the pastoral search committee was wrapping up when one of the members asked me if I had any questions. They were not expecting the one question I had: "When my ministry at the church is finished, how do I leave?"

By the surprised looks on their faces, I'm certain they were thinking, "You're not even hired yet and you're asking about leaving?"

At Mennonite Church Manitoba, we are experiencing another round of pastoral transitions. Some pastors are retiring and others are moving on to different assignments or study.

Leaving a congregation after any length of ministry is potentially one of the most challenging seasons in the entire pastoral experience. Pastors are wondering where they will worship, if it's appropriate to officiate a funeral in the church they once served and what will happen to the friendships they have made with people in the church.

In 2017, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA put together a polity manual called "A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership." The guidelines for exiting pastors are addressed in this document and it is clear: "When the pastoral assignment is finished and the pastor moves on to another role or retires, the pastor gives the former congregation and its new leader space to form a new pastor-congregation relationship. The reappearance of a former pastor at times of crisis or life-transition interferes with the normal development of that relationship."

The manual suggests 12 months as a suitable amount of time for the former pastor to remain absent from the congregation.

Sounds straightforward, doesn't it? So why isn't it? Because some pastor-congregant relationships are very strong, built up over time as they journey together through shared experiences steeped in a mutual desire to serve Christ and his church. Our hearts do not release those bonds easily.

This can be a very lonely time for the retired pastor. When the worship committee reaches out to ask the pastor to preach on a Sunday morning, the pastor might have a hard time declining the invitation. Invitations from families to officiate a funeral are even harder to decline.

Although the rationale and guidelines are clear, it is also clear that there are exceptions that need careful consideration. The manual suggests that one way of caring for both the new and former pastor is for the congregation to set up a support and accountability group whom both of the pastors can go to when navigating a particular invitation or situation.

This group should be formed prior to the pastor's exit and remain in place for the initial 12 months of the new pastor's start date. It would be important that members of this group are not the best friends of either pastor, but rather people who truly have the well-being of both pastors and the congregation at heart.

This is a discussion that I hope we keep having, both at the congregational and regional church levels. How we navigate the exit of our wise retiring pastors while giving new pastors space to flourish is critical to the health of the church.

Karen Schellenberg is a pastor who found leaving the congregations she served difficult. She is co-director of leadership ministries at Mennonite Church Manitoba and is increasingly interested in finding ways for pastors and congregations to transition well. She can be reached at kschellenberg@mennochurch.mb.ca.

PHOTO: MANTAS HESTHAVEN/UNSPLASH

Threads of unity

Diversity in faith and tradition

Tigist Tesfaye Gelagle

The *tilet* is a quintessential feature of Ethiopian traditional attire, deeply rooted in our religious, ethnic and identity symbolism. Crafting the *tilet* involves intricate weaving techniques, utilizing continuous extra weft threads of varying colours to achieve specific desired designs. This intricate process requires a diverse range of colours, thread types and patterns, demanding significant time and effort to create the embroidery for each cloth.

A revered traditional art form found throughout Ethiopia, the handcrafted nature of *tilet* weaving reflects the rich cultural heritage across the country. Each design is instilled with meaning, with variations in colour, pattern, and material providing insights into its origin or regional significance.

What captivates me most is the intricate process and diverse materials used in creating the stunning border embroidery of the *tilet*. From handmade to factory-produced materials, the range of materials reflects the complex nature of Ethiopian society.

I strongly believe that this serves as a poignant reflection of our society's coexistence, despite differences in background, language, environment, economy and culture, all united under the shared identity of Ethiopia. While some may disagree, I believe this unity was once a hallmark of our country, even if it may not be as prominent today.

As members of the body of Christ, from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, we are also intricately woven together to form a unique and meaningful tapestry, aimed at expanding the kingdom of God. Our collective embroidery is not simply a plain design; rather, it is a complex pattern crafted from diverse colours, materials and experiences. It symbolizes our ongoing journey of growth and transformation into the likeness of Christ. The way we are woven is our powerful message to the world, illustrating who we are and how we represent the kingdom of God.

However, when conflicts arise and we struggle to accept one another, our embroidery loses its significance. It becomes plain—a disjointed array without colour, beauty or meaning. As such it evokes feelings of mourning rather than celebration.

As the church in Ethiopia, we recognize the need to work on fostering acceptance and presenting ourselves to each other with simplicity and vulnerability, in order to weave a beautiful tapestry imbued with the deeper meanings of love, integrity and the sacrificial life exemplified by the cross.

As a nation and church, we lag behind in our efforts to embrace each other and foster unity and acceptance. It often feels like we're taking one step forward and two steps back, particularly concerning our ability to hold onto one another. The pervasive us-versus-them mentality is deeply ingrained, with ethnic, class and theological divisions becoming worse. This internal fragmentation of our churches mirrors the broader challenges facing our country.

I lament for my church! I lament for my country! I lament for unity!

We must continually strive to foster hope, re-hope and envision a future in which our diverse backgrounds, minor theological variances and evolving social dynamics are woven together into a magnificent tapestry. In this unified *tilet* every individual is valued and acknowledged, without any single entity overshadowing or dominating the rest.

Instead, each of us contributes our strengths and uniqueness to create something truly extraordinary. If such a tapestry can exist in the form of a *tilet*, then it is my unwavering hope, and re-hope, for both my church and country to embody this beautifully woven unity.

Tigist Tesfaye Gelagle lives in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and serves as secretary of the Mennonite World Conference Deacons Commission. She is also the founder and director of The Spark Valley, an educational NGO.

DEEPER COMMUNION

RYAN DUECK

A place for hate

"My cellmate said a wild thing the other day; he told me that the word 'hate' is in the Bible, somewhere in the Old Testament. I told him he was full of s---, that God doesn't hate, he only loves."

This was the first comment that emerged around the circle at the jail recently when I opened the space up for anyone to share what was on their mind.

How to respond? "Well," I said, "your cellmate is right, the word 'hate' is in the Bible." (Approximately 200 times, depending on the translation). "It's often even used in connection with God."

He looked at me suspiciously before exhaling through his teeth. "Really? Man, that's f---ed up!"

The conversation that followed was lively. My interlocutor was quite insistent that God wasn't the sort of being that was allowed to hate. God's job was to love, and hate was decidedly beneath him.

I could understand his desire for the separation. Hate, after all, is the sort of thing that lands people in prisons. He wanted God to be free of all moral contaminants. He needed things to stay in their proper place.

I tried to make the distinction between hating people and hating behaviours. "God doesn't hate people," I said, "only the things they do that either harm others, thwart the flourishing they were made for or render worship in improper and destructive directions."

He nodded warily. I could tell he was either getting bored or not really buying it. In his world, God and hate still didn't belong together.

I tried a different approach. "Well, you're a dad, right? What if your kid was getting mixed up in all kinds of things you knew were going to lead them down a terrible path? You wouldn't hate your kid, but wouldn't you hate what they were doing, or some of the things that were influencing them? Would not this hatred be an expression of your love for them and your desire for their best?"

This seemed to resonate a bit more. At least I thought it did. He grew quieter. Nodded his head. "Yeah, I guess." He grinned. "But I still don't like it."

I thought back to a few weeks prior. This guy had shared with the group that he had recently been close to ending it all. He was off his head on drugs, shotgun loaded, barrel in his mouth, finger on the trigger. His phone rang. His young son was on the other end of the line. The son he had been missing terribly. The son he had felt he had failed. The son who ended up saving his life.

This was, we all agreed, a "God moment." A moment where God reached into the pain and sorrow and helplessness and rage of a human life and said, "Let's try this again, shall we?"

As he told this story, I remember feeling a deep sadness. But not just sadness; also anger. It enraged me that human lives can be so riven with pain. It seemed so unfair, so arbitrary, so common. The writer of Psalm 139 claimed to hate the enemies of God with "perfect hatred." I can't claim that there's anything "perfect" about what goes through my mind when I hear awful stories like the one above, but hatred doesn't seem like too strong a word.

I hate the things that make life so hard for so many. I hate the things within us that make us our own worst enemies. I hate the enemy that comes to steal, kill and destroy. I hate it that so many people feel so small and useless, so forgotten and disdained.

I believe God is love. This is one of the deepest truths of the cosmos. It is what I have banked my life on. It is the only source of my hope.

I also believe this love is a purifying and clarifying agent. It does not and will not tolerate that which is false and destructive and degrading and dehumanizing. Even though I do not believe that there is anything that God cannot forgive, there are some things that I am very glad that God hates. Perfectly.

Ryan Dueck serves as pastor at Lethbridge Mennonite Church in Lethbridge, Alberta, and as chaplain at Lethbridge Correctional Centre one day per week.

CINDY WALLACE

Risk

Recently I came upon a scene of risky play involving bungee cords and a lamp post. I shouted for my child to stop, but they fell and started to cry.

I shifted to comfort mode: "Are you hurt or scared or both?" I asked.

"I'm sad," my child said. "Your voice was so angry."

I don't use an angry voice with my children often. When I do, it's because I need them to listen. I hate to see my children get hurt or hurt each other.

Is this what God's hatred is like?

Last month I wrote, "the world's burning core is love." I said "burning" because I understand this love as a purifying love. I think it is both more radically accepting and also more rigorously demanding than most of us can fathom.

To know myself beloved of God is to know that God hates when any of us hurts another. It is to be emboldened by the Spirit not to participate in harming any of God's children.

Participation in God's love can be painful, burning away complacency and excess. It demands that we care about things more easily ignored. It asks us to choose risky discipleship over risk management, as individuals and institutions.

God's love burns just as strong for my neighbour—down the street or in a Colombian village destroyed by a Canadian mining company—as it does for me. So sometimes God has to use an angry voice. And so do I.

– Cindy Wallace, professor of English at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan

JUSTIN SUN

Mirror

I am deeply fascinated by what people assert God is or isn't, can or cannot be, or does or does not do. After all, I think these conversations cut to the heart of God's very character and, I would argue, ours.

So often in these discussions, I think we find our words and thoughts mirror back to us something about ourselves and our contexts.

In this case, I love that Ryan and Cindy—both parents—make the connection to parenting.

I guess, when discussing God's capacity to hate, a beginning point is found when life, in all its risk, confronts us with the reality that the "objects" of our love are free. (Is this parenthood in a nutshell? I would not know.)

For me, a question coming out of this is: What is the material difference between hating a person and hating their behaviour? I do believe and want to insist that people are more than any behaviours, so I echo Ryan here to a point. At the same time, are the sum of behaviours not indicative of who a person is? If God—the noted Esau-hater (Romans 9:13)—hates harmful behaviours, at what point does that hate bleed into people?

– Justin Sun, youth pastor at Peace Mennonite Church, Richmond, B.C.

ANIKA REYNAR

Clarification

Reading Ryan's reflection, I recall Romans 12:9 : *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good."* In this passage, hate and embrace are held together. Genuine love, we're told, includes both, *needs both.*

Ryan's story reminds me that hate is powerful. On one hand, hate drives actions and structures that destroy life. On the other hand, hate can function as a "clarifying agent," summoning loud protest of death-dealing systems. The difference between these forms of hate is a matter of discernment. For hate to be clarifying, it needs to be held together with forms of embrace that continuously and relentlessly turn away from death and toward life. I see this embrace beginning in the life of Jesus. God's love embodied. Inviting us, over and over, to turn from death to life. To try again.

I keep thinking about the gun. I hate that humans have built a world where a death-dealing weapon becomes a way out of death-dealing systems. And yet, even in this space, there is embrace, and reminders to "hold fast to what is good." This is a call to engaged love, anchored in embrace and motivated by a refusal of the systems that destroy life.

– Anika Reynar recently graduated from Yale University with degrees in religion and environmental management.

Beyond Ethics

Transcendence, Prayer and Spirit

Recovering humanist

Seminary prof calls for transcendent pause

By Will Braun

Allan Rudy-Froese says he "got sick" of hearing sermons that spoke more about "what we should do" than the life of faith.

That included his own sermons. Ethics overshadowed God.

Rudy-Froese, who is now associate professor of Christian proclamation at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), recalls meeting with a young person who sometimes attended Rockway Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, where Rudy-Froese pastored from 1992 to 2000. She said, "Thanks for all those great sermons," he recalls. Her subsequent comment hit Rudy-Froese hard: "I don't really believe in God," she said, "but I really want to follow Jesus."

The fact that his sermons resonated with a person who did not believe in God underlined for Rudy-Froese

PHOTOS: COLLAGE OF IMAGES BY MAREK PIWNICKI/UNSPLASH, SUNGUK KIM/UNSPLASH, ANNE BOESE

his own unease with his preaching.

During that period, he was studying part-time at a Lutheran seminary. There, he heard much about grace. In that setting, it was "not what you are doing but what God or Jesus or the Spirit is doing," he says.

In contrast, he says of his own preaching at the time: "God's grace was really quite marginal." The theology in his Mennonite context was "pretty humanist."

Rudy-Froese uses a simple example to illustrate the distinction between a focus on ethics and divine grace. The story of the Good Samaritan can be read as a practical example to follow, or it can be read as a beautiful account of the grace God extends to all of us who, in various ways, lie wounded beside the road.

It can be morally instructive, or it can fill us with gratitude and awareness of God's work in the world.

Or both, but Rudy-Froese says Mennonites tend to be too quick to move past the grace to the moral imperative.

"Can we stay for a moment with what God has done for us . . . instead of this knee-jerk pragmatic response?" he asks.

Though he uses words like "transcendent" and "mystical," Rudy-Froese is no stranger to the flesh-and-blood realities of peace and justice. "I don't know if I'm an activist, but I'm involved," he says in relation to the work of his faith community.

How does an emphasis on grace alter the nature of his involvement?

"I might have burned out from trying to do good things in the world," he says.

"We see a lot of burnout from folks who just do, do, do, do. How can we do [the work] in the long term? How can we wait for God's grace to empower us, instead of doing it as functional atheists or good humanists?"

Rudy-Froese says one of the gifts AMBS offers action-oriented students is an invitation to slow down and be nurtured by the Spirit of God and by practices, including contemplative practices, "so they can be in it for the long haul."

Rudy-Froese says we Mennonites tend to be impatient and unsettled about grace. "It's hard to find a Mennonite theologian who can write more than two or three paragraphs on grace," he says.

Why the impatience?

In part, he links this impatience to a loss of a sense of the transcendent. Referring to the work of Charles Taylor—a preeminent Canadian Catholic thinker and author of *A Secular Age*—Rudy-Froese says we live in "such an immanent frame." In our age of reason, "it is really hard for us intellectually to conceive of God at all, and then to conceive of God as the giver of gifts."

Secondly, he says we have difficulty accepting gifts. "We don't know what to do with gifts." Including the gift of grace.

Rudy-Froese notes a study about random acts of kindness that found a significant percentage of recipients of random kindness became angry. They needed to pay back the favour to even out the ledger.

With the story of the Samaritan, Rudy-Froese says we might stop a while to consider what has been given—that someone has stooped down to pick up the man and put him on a donkey. We are being lifted up. Jesus is healing us.

After you "stay there for a little while," Rudy-Froese says, you can then consider the ethics. ●

'We don't know what to do with gifts.'

"What does it mean to pause longer on the grace, the gift?" What if a sermon just ended on the good news, with no moral of the story at the end?

What does a shift of focus from ethics to grace look like in Rudy-Froese's life?

"I walk around being exceedingly grateful for what I have been given. Our family—we have been given many gifts, and we appreciate those and that teaches us also to be generous with others," he says.

PHOTO: ALLAN RUDY-FROESE BY JASON BRYANT/AMBS

Intimate connection with God

A personal story

By Claire Ewert Fisher

God comes to us in many ways. Sometimes we are keenly aware of God's presence; at other times we just don't pay attention. I'd like to tell you about some of the extraordinary places God has met me and how, when my life became most difficult, God found me in a new way.

As a preteen, after hearing a missionary report on a Sunday service at Rosthern Mennonite Church, something remarkable happened to me. I don't remember where the missionaries were from or what they said, but I had a clear sense that God was preparing me for international service.

What makes this remarkable is that up to that point in my life I was not able to stay away from home for even a single night because of loneliness.

I remember sitting in the family car later that day, with warmth and sunlight all around, when a verse I had memorized came to mind: "*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life*" (Matthew 19:29). I figured I'd be looked after, but I couldn't have imagined how great that caring would be.

The second time I felt God meet me with a particularly vivid presence, I was 16 and studying the church's catechism. Early in the class, we had memorized answers to prescribed questions. That did not work for me. Later, as we discussed the content of questions and answers, the experience became more life-giving.

At some point during the catechism, I had a sense that God was inviting me to become a pastor. My father had studied scripture with me the winter before, and I felt affirmed in my interests and desire to care for people. But when I shared this vision with the pastor leading the class, his response was swift: "Women don't do that!" It was 1966.

That was all I needed to set my resolve to be open to God's promptings, whatever the outcome. I also waited another year to receive baptism with a pastor who affirmed the gifts God had given me.

I did eventually become a pastor, but by a circuitous route. International service came first.

Wally Ewert and I served with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Vietnam from 1973 to 1975, during the final years of the war. During our second year, we decided to start our family. Little did we know that as we were taking this decision, our first child was being born.

The next afternoon, missionary friends drove onto our compound. Moments later, Wally called out from the front room, "Claire, do we want a baby?"

My immediate response was, "Yes!" And then, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

As we unwrapped the long cloth smelling of wood fire, we met our first-born child; a boy.

We learned that his mother died giving birth. This child was the third son in the family. It was the custom in his tribe to bury a motherless child with their mother.

When his father was asked if he would like our friends to find a family to care for his infant, he chose life for his son. His son would have a future that he could never imagine in a place he would never visit. Additionally, if some military activity or measles epidemic were to come to this village

PHOTO: CLAIRE WITH HER SON IN VIETNAM. SUPPLIED PHOTO.

after this decision, villagers would hold him responsible because he had gone against the mores of the tribe.

What amazing love this father demonstrated—God's agape-like love. That father's act of love and risk—to entrust his son to strangers at the risk of censure from his tribe—humbles me still.

God's love is unearned, gracious and constantly seeking the benefit of the other.

Wally and I had stepped into a life larger than our own, committed to experiences and demands we could not anticipate.

In April 1975, the war was ending, and we were advised by Canadian Consular staff to leave Vietnam as soon as possible. That night, I was tempted by panic. I feared we might have to leave our son behind or stay and live a life we were not prepared to navigate.

I turned to the scriptures for comfort. The index of my study Bible suggested reading Hebrews 11 when in trouble. "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the confidence in things not seen,*" I read. I begged God for such faith.

That night, I dreamt we were evacuated from Vietnam. I had little idea what that meant, but it gave us the confidence to visit Vietnamese government offices in search of a travel document for our child. To no avail.

In desperation, we turned to our last resort. We visited the Canadian Consulate and learned a Canadian Forces cargo plane would airlift Canadians from the country the next day.

At the airport the next afternoon, we waited as Canadian diplomats tried to secure permission for dependents of Canadian citizens to leave. The sun was getting low, and the flight crew were anxious because they had seen gunfire at ground level as they flew in. The flight was now considered a combat mission.

Finally, we learned that only Canadian citizens and 63 orphans from Cambodia had permission to leave. We stood in the departure lounge holding our son, feeling desperately helpless. Then a member of the flight crew came to us and said he would get our son on board. He took our boy and, like a man on a mission, walked out through the gate. Despite the Vietnamese airport staff calling after him, he disappeared into the C-130 Hercules with our son.

I thought of our son's birth father; is this how it felt to love another so much that you are willing to give them up to the unknown? Is this how God feels each time we humans make frightening decisions?

As the aircraft lumbered off to Hong Kong, we knew such relief and joy!

Back in Canada we had to figure out how to dress a toddler for a Canadian winter. Most challenging, though, were the racially motivated comments and criticisms about international adoption. We believed we were living within the purposes God had for our lives, but that didn't always make life easy.

Eleven years later, we returned to Asia, this time the Philippines. Our family of four—we had a daughter in the interim—served five years with MCC there. Upon returning to Saskatoon in December of 1990, the most difficult and life-transforming time began.

Money was tight. We were able to sell our farmland before the bank foreclosed, and Wally secured work with the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. On the third Monday of his new career, a member of the cleaning staff found him slumped over his desk. His heart had stopped.

His mother had died of a heart condition at a similar age.

Our two teenagers and I would have to go it alone. Life was not turning out the way I had hoped.

I had stopped praying some time earlier. Our departure from the Philippines had been difficult. Our family's living arrangement there had become unsatisfactory. The attempts to find meaningful and appropriate assignments for us became increasingly difficult.

My personal spiritual life had become confused. I could no longer find an understanding of God that made sense to me, so I sought out a

PHOTOS: CLAIRE AND WALLY EWERT WITH THEIR SON IN VIETNAM. SUPPLIED PHOTOS.

spiritual director. She recommended I return to an earlier image of God as Father.

I had thought God would care for us as we worked with God's people, but it felt like God was not listening. With the complexities of our departure, I ceased to pray. And now with the unexpected death of Wally, I simply could not pray.

We made it through our primary grief with the support of family and a care group from church. The kids each selected a mentor who provided a safe place to process their losses.

One morning, several weeks after the funeral, I was cleaning the dining room floor in our big old farmhouse. The sunlight from the south windows danced with the dust particles. Unprompted, I heard the words: "*Underneath are the everlasting arms.*"

I couldn't quite place the phrase—it's from Deuteronomy 33:27—but the meaning of the words filled me with hope. I was not alone. I was still a person of value.

I heard this message in God's voice; I heard it as grace unbounded. Something new was happening. It must have been the prayers of others that sustained me.

It was safe to grieve because I was safely hidden in God's loving presence.

Four months later, I began my studies at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. I also signed up for workshops in spirituality at Queen's House of Retreats. There, I was introduced to contemplative spirituality.

Contemplative prayer is prayer which is not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts. It's an encounter. Whenever we are aware of God's presence, it's a prayer. It's a way of living in the presence of God, with awareness of God's presence. The contemplative secret is learning to live in the now.

Some of my well-used prayer blogs begin this way: "I pause to be still; to breathe slowly, to re-centre my scattered senses upon the presence of God." "Become aware of God's gaze of love upon you."

Prayer is a matter of waiting in love. Returning to love. Trusting that love is the deepest stream of reality. It's primarily an attitude, a stance. This attitude is about attention to details, of life around and within.

I was introduced to praying with scripture, sometimes imagining myself in the biblical story, sometimes hearing the text as a love letter from God. Intimacy with God grew.

By paying attention to the events of the day and my corresponding emotions, I became aware of God leading me, drawing me toward a particular path in life. But the most life-giving practice was meeting with my spiritual director. Speaking with

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever reached a point at which you, like Claire, could no longer find an understanding of God that made sense? If so, what did you do with that?

2. What are your feelings about a form of prayer that is "not primarily saying words or thinking thoughts"?

3. To what extent, if any, has an emphasis on ethics hampered your inner growth or the spiritual health of your church?

4. Do you find it difficult to rest in the gift of God's grace without needing to respond by doing something?

-Staff

PHOTOS: COLLAGE OF IMAGES BY MAREK PIWNICKI/UNSPLASH, SUNGUK KIM/UNSPLASH, ANNE BOESE

someone who practices listening for God taught me how to identify God's voice and see God at work in the ordinariness of life. My spiritual director introduced me to a language for speaking to and about God.

It wasn't long before I found myself falling in love with God. I'd probably been in a love relationship with God for many years already, but, increasingly, time spent with God took on a new dimension.

I thrilled at the time with God in prayer. I saw God in most every aspect of my life, not just in prayer and in scripture, not just in people but also in the natural world. I felt a sense of God's presence enfolding me.

A well-known Franciscan spiritual leader, Richard Rohr, suggests love is not something we do, but rather something that is done to us, and then we join in. It's something into which we fall. God first loves us, and when we get in touch with that love, we can choose to participate in it as well. Living in God's love expands our world, enlivening our holy imaginations.

God comes to us in many ways. My husband Garth (we married in 1993) and I live in a townhouse surrounded by trees a block from the South Saskatchewan River. On weekday mornings when our 4- and 5-year-old grandchildren bounce into our home at 6:30 a.m. for their hugs with a side order of oatmeal porridge, we give thanks for God who is love. God who loves unconditionally enables us to love and to know the joy in it.

Our story began with sensing God in our holy imaginations, prompting us to take risks for God's good news of love. We experienced this self-giving love most powerfully in a widowed father of three. We experience this love each day. There really is nothing that can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:38,39). Thanks be to God.

Claire Ewert Fisher is a part-time pastor at Rosthern Mennonite Church.

We are the beloved

By Betty Enns

"*This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17).

The scriptures tell us this loving, empowering presence of God is within us all. The heavens open and we are called beloved.

I have found that this reality must be chosen. It must be consciously received, recognized, honoured and drawn upon daily in order for the Holy Spirit to become a loving, living Christ-presence within us.

Cynthia Borgeault, an Episcopal priest and modern day mystic, says: "This inter-abiding is the primary quality of God's Kingdom that Jesus came to reveal at Christmas time." Each time we pray, we affirm that because of this inter-abiding there is no separation between God and us.

In John 15, Jesus says, "*I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me as I in you.*"

I clearly recall kneeling to receive baptism at age 17. As Reverend Letkeman poured water on my head, it trickled down my forehead onto the carpet and he said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." As he extended his hand and raised me to my feet, it seemed as if the heavens opened and I was engulfed by peace. I heard, "You are my beloved daughter."

That was my gift from God in that moment. Like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, I would have liked to build a tabernacle there that day.

In subsequent decades, I have found these same moments intermittently break through as I walk life's valleys, where God, as promised, restores my soul with the words, "you are my beloved," or calls me to "be still and know I am God."

Would words fail you if you tried to name your sacred mountaintop experiences—those moments in which you hesitated to even exhale for fear the overwhelming sense of presence, love, beauty and connectedness with God your Creator would end?

Such encounters, when we know deeply that something has occurred, leave us, like Mary, pondering these things in our hearts.

At all times, God desires for us to hear: "I have called you by name, I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palm of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness. I care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will not hide my face from you. Nothing, nothing, will ever separate us. We are one. You are my beloved, and I am yours. On you my favour rests."

That's the truth God longs for us to embrace.

Betty Enns is the author of Living Our Prayer: A Four-year African Adventure into Faith. *The above article is adapted from a sermon she preached at her home congregation, Covenant Mennonite Church in Winkler, Manitoba.*

PHOTOS: SUNGUK KIM/UNSPLASH, ANNE BOESE

Reflections on spiritual transfomation

By Doug Amstutz

"I think you are a contemplative." Spoken by my spiritual director, those words caught me off guard. I'm not . . . am I?

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. At least in terms of orientation.

A crisis in ministry had caused pain and anger for myself and my family. I felt betrayed and abandoned. In the midst of this, the writings of Richard Rohr—a Franciscan priest based in New Mexico—began to hold special meaning for me.

My sister had gifted me two of his books: *Breathing Under Water* and *Falling Upward*. I resisted reading them, but when I finally did, years later, I knew I had found a spiritual home.

During the height of the turmoil in my church at the time, I was looking through my book collection for some spiritual guidance when I came upon *Praying with the Anabaptists*, a small book edited by Marlene Kropf, who had been my professor in seminary. The book highlighted prayers and practices of early Anabaptists. But it was the endorsements in the back that struck me—particularly one: "How strange and wonderful for a Catholic to be touched by this book! Heart, head, conviction and joy come through these prayers and songs. – Richard Rohr, O.F.M."

I was rooted in the Anabaptist tradition and loved my spiritual heritage, and here was someone whose writings were inspiring me, transforming me, renewing my spiritual vision *and* endorsing my own tradition.

As I prayed for strength during my difficult time, Rohr's teaching about non dualistic contemplative posture helped me survive the attack on my ministry by a small group in the church. I tried to pray for them rather than see them as adversaries. I tried to see beyond a simple either-or dichotomy.

In Richard Rohr's words, "contemplation is a panoramic, receptive awareness whereby you take in all that the situation, the moment, the event offers, without judging, eliminating or labeling anything up or down, good or bad. It is a pure and positive gaze, unattached to outcome or critique."

He says this does not come naturally to people in our era. It takes work and practices. "Moments of great love and great suffering are often the first experiences of nondual thinking," he writes.

This was a gift to me in my hour of greatest need. Through great suffering, we can deepen our spiritual life. This gave me hope when there was darkness all around—to recognize I had a shadow side, just as I saw the shadow side in others. It gave me a new humility.

I embraced contemplative spirituality, even though I am still not very good at it. I have practiced centering prayer and walking contemplatively in the early morning. I have also been doing a variation of the Ignatian examen, a form of prayer that reflects on the day with gratitude by going through the highlights and lowlights of the day. I have picked up journaling again after a lapse of two-plus decades. Many of these practices I learned in college, church, seminary or elsewhere, prior to discovering the work of Richard Rohr.

I am grateful that Franciscan and Anabaptist spirituality share so many traits and practices. During the pandemic, I participated in the Center for Action and Contemplation's Living School at the behest of my sister who works at the Centre, which is Rohr's home base in Albuquerque.

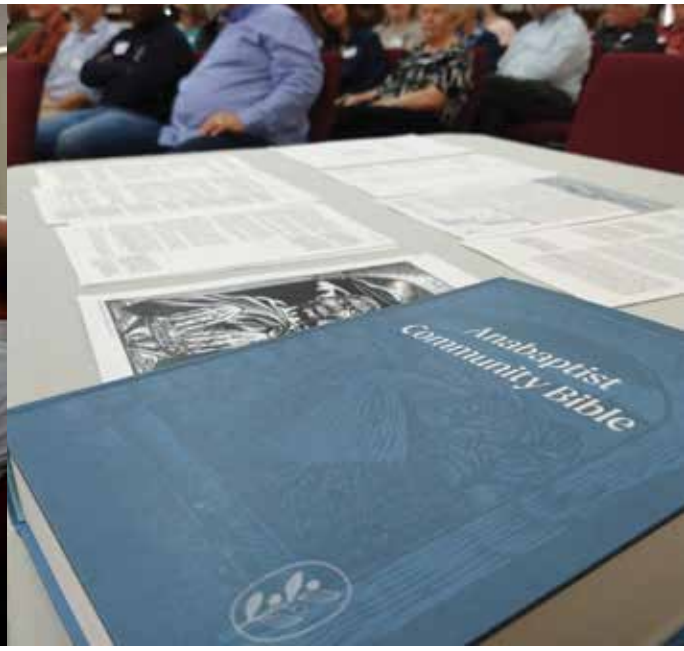
My cohort were unable to meet in person during the two-year course, but I read the prescribed readings and practiced contemplative prayer. I was gratified to learn that contemplative prayer and practice goes back 2,000 years, with deep roots in Christian tradition.

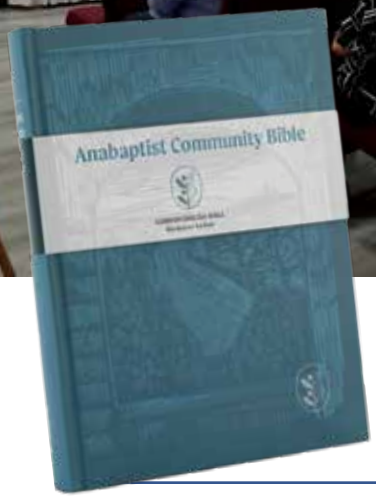
Just prior to the pandemic, my sister Anita arranged for my wife, Wanda, and me to meet Rohr while we were in Albuquerque visiting our daughter. On my birthday, we went to Friday morning prayers at the Center and afterward to Rohr's office, where he greeted us warmly. I wanted to talk about what his work and his books meant to me. Instead, I found myself talking about the recent crisis in my ministry. Rohr listened with great empathy and shared a few of his own struggles.

His personal care and prayer for me bonded with the words of his that I had read over the years. At that moment of crisis, I was being transformed. Instead of leaving the Christian faith, I was renewed. Instead of leaving ministry, I stayed. And I am grateful.

Doug Amstutz serves as pastor of Mannheim Mennonite Church near Kitchener, Ontario, and as Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary's development associate for Canada.

PHOTO: DOUG AMSTUTZ BY JASON BRYANT/AMBS





A pre-launch event was held for the **Anabaptist Community Bible** *at the Chin Christian Church in Kitchener, Ontario, on May 17. People directing the ambitious project spoke with contagious enthusiasm about the scope of the undertaking: 597 study groups across 17 countries shared 3,000 pages of reflection notes in six languages. Material from these reflections is included in the Bible, along with 40 original visual art pieces by five Anabaptist artists. Order at commonword.ca. Photos by A.S. Compton.*

Hawkesville closes with gratitude

By Barb Draper

A year ago, Hawkesville Mennonite Church made the difficult decision to close as a congregation as of June 2024. Their numbers had dwindled and there were no children.

Facing the future with courage, the congregation decided to express gratitude for 74 years of ministry and disperse.

Hawkesville is a village near Waterloo, Ontario and there are alternate Mennonite churches nearby. The charter members of 1950 who moved into a former Presbyterian church were from the St. Jacobs and Elmira Mennonite congregations.

On May 5, 2024, the congregation invited past members and friends to join them in a time of celebration to recognize and give thanks for the many years of Hawkesville Mennonite Church. The church was full once again as people shared memories of days gone by.

Sunday school classes were mentioned a few times as a safe place to discuss and struggle together with issues of faith. Sharing time was specifically remembered as a time of community building. There was great affirmation of how warm and gracious the congregation has been, especially to its young people.

Laverne Martin, who led the Bible quiz teams for 30 years, remembered those times with fondness. "I learned as much as they did," he said, about the teams of

Kathy Bauman and Lynne Martin serve cream buns at Hawkesville Mennonite Church.

teenagers who studied specific books of the Bible and competed with teams from other churches. During those 30 years, the Hawkesville team did well, winning the competition many times.

The congregation also had a history of serving others. As well as highlighting the many volunteer service workers of the past, Ray and Kathy Bauman listed the refugee families supported by the congregation. Since 2020, sewists at Hawkesville made 1,450 pillows for the cardiac unit of a local hospital. The church is known for quilt-making and blanket-making. Over the years, one older lady from the congregation made 1,000 comforters for Mennonite Central Committee.

For many years Hawkesville Mennonite Church has made and sold cream buns at the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale. To acknowledge this tradition, cream buns were provided for everyone after the service.

Although there were undertones of great sadness, the theme of the worship time was gratitude. Julene Fast expressed great thankfulness that David T. Martin agreed to come as an interim pastor in 2022 to help the congregation as it decided its future. Everyone who spoke expressed great appreciation for the past but also a sense that God would continue to lead. The congregation will hold a final service in June 2024.

PHOTO: BY BARB DRAPER.

MCEC welcomes five churches at annual gathering

By CM Staff

Over 200 people from 75 of the 110 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada congregations attended the MCEC annual gathering at the UMEI high school in Leamington, Ontario on April 26 and 27.

During the sessions, MCEC welcome fived congregations as provisional members (see sidebar), marked the 200th anniversary of two churches (sidebar), discussed a major new study on youth engagement and grappled with a deficit.

Worship was led by Ingrid Loepp-Thiessen and Ruth Boehm, while the two keynote addresses were delivered by Doug Klassen, executive minister for Mennonite Church Canada.

On Friday night, Klassen told the story of how belonging to a faith community of trusted, faithful people was vital to his own discovery of God's calling for his life. Referencing the first chapter of 1 Thessalonias, and a pivotal moment in a Vineland feed mill, Klassen said "the path forward was prepared by the community."

On Saturday, he tied into the story of Tyler Wiggins-Stevenson, who, at the moment his human efforts to create change shattered, heard God say, "The world is not yours to save or condemn; only serve the one who is saving it."

Down to business

The MCEC executive team presented its "Growing into the Future" strategic plan, founded on four priorities: relevant resources, strong evidence, intentional growth and sustainable organization.

"Youth Engagement in the Church," a major study commissioned by MCEC, was discussed. See pages 22-23 for details.

Considerable time was spent discussing finances. With both revenue and expenses below budget in the year ending January 31, 2024, MCEC reported a deficit of $420,000. The result was $86,000 better than had been expected and "something to be celebrated," said Laurie Castello, MCEC's new Operations and Finance Director. Revenue of $2.03 million was $87,000 lower than expected but expenses were $183,000 under budget.

Of MCEC's $2.43 million in expenditures last year, 55 percent was passed to partner ministries such as Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite schools and camps and *Canadian Mennonite* for subscriptions to this magazine. The remaining 45 percent of expenses, or $900,000, was used directly by MCEC.

MCEC covers operating deficits by drawing from its Faithful Steward Fund (FSF), a fund created out of bequests and estate gifts. By policy, the annual transfer was pegged at a maximum of 10 percent of the fund balance, but last year delegates approved a change that allowed for $204,000 to be drawn from the fund, an extra $41,000 above the 10 percent previously allowed.

In 2023-24, the draw was $420,000, bringing the fund to a balance of $668,000.

In his report to delegates, moderator Ben Cassels wrote that, "MCEC's financial situation raises concerns despite ongoing generous donations. Decreasing congregational budgets pose challenges, emphasizing the need for MCEC to strike a balance between maintaining reserves, wisely utilizing bequests, and funding staff and programs to implement the new strategic plan for a sustainable future."

During discussion about the strategic plan, some delegates expressed concern. Victor Klassen of Stirling Mennonite Church in Kitchener noted: "The strategic plan talks about new things but should also talk about old things we will not do."

In discussion about the 2024-25 spending plan, which called for another $394,000 draw from the FTF, several delegates expressed concern about the size of the deficit and the rapid drawdown of reserves. Richard Steinmann, chair of the Finance & Audit Committee, said the committee "had the exact same concerns" but believes the proposal for 2024-2025 is reasonable.

Shalom Worship & Healing Centre, Windsor has joined MCEC.

In closing discussion, Cassels reiterated that the Executive Council had heard the concerns and that MCEC would "reduce costs even further in the coming year."

Delegates also passed a motion to merge the FSF with another bequest fund called the Legacy Initiatives Fund (LIF), and create a new policy surrounding its use.

The LIF was formed in 2013 from proceeds of a large bequest consisting of property that had to be sold. Initial estimates valued the bequest at a few million dollars. A volunteer advisory board recommended spending the bequest over 10 years; tithing to the larger church through Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite World Conference and funding entrepreneurial or experimental church endeavours proposed by congregations across MCEC.

A decade later, the bequest has yielded

revenue of $12 million. Just over $9 million has been disbursed, leaving a current balance of $2.3 million. More properties remain to be sold, with the next instalment expected in three to five years.

With the original timeline of 10 years having past and with more revenue yet to come, MCEC will close the LIF program and merge remaining funds with the FSF to create a regular income stream for MCEC. Income from the new fund is not expected to exceed 20 percent of MCEC revenue.

Tithing to the larger church will continue as revenue comes in. An investment committee was formed to oversee the transition and establish policies for the fund. Delegates approved the proposal.

MCEC Spending Plan snapshot	2024-25 BUDGET	2023-24 ACTUAL
REVENUE	$2,055,000	$2,031,326
EXPENSES		
MINISTRY PARTNERS	$1,082,782	$1,126,967
OPERATING EXPENSES	$1,366,479	$1,324,500
OPERATING DEFICIT	($394,261)	($420,142)
TRANSFER FROM FAITHFUL STEWARD FUND	$394,261	$420,142
NET OPERATING SURPLUS/(DEFICIT)	-	-

New provisional members:

- FreeChurch, Toronto
- Mennonite Disciples Swahili Church, Ottawa
- Shalom Worship & Healing Centre, Guelph
- Shalom Worship & Healing Centre, Windsor
- Rehoboth Inner Healing Church, Toronto

Church anniversaries:

200 years
St. Agatha Mennonite Church, Baden
Steinmann Mennonite Church, Baden

150 years
Poole Mennonite Church, Poole

100 years
Elmira MC, Elmira
Waterloo-Kitchener United MC, Waterloo

75 years
Crosshill Mennonite Church, Millbank
Toronto United Mennonite Church

10 years
Hiyaw Amalack Evangelical Church, Ottawa
SoulHouse Church, Toronto

NEWS BRIEFS

CPT releases film

Community Peacemaker Teams' Palestine team released a film called ***Light*** on May 18. Two years in production, the film is to "shed light on the stories of the people of Hebron." CPT says the documentary "exposes Israeli occupation violations in Al-Khalil/Hebron, from settler aggression to daily injustices faced by Palestinians." The film is available at cpt.org, with options for individual ticketing and group screenings.

Delegation to Bethlehem postponed

Mennonite Church Canada planned to send a delegation of three people—executive minister Doug Klassen, incoming MC Sask executive minister Len Rempel and Kathy Bergen—to the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference hosted by Bethlehem Bible College, a partner of MC Canada. Canadian Mennonite University also planned to send a student to the May conference. At the point when tensions escalated between Israel and Iran, Air Canada cancelled the flights the group had booked. Klassen says the trip has been postponed until fall.

Canadian Mennonite had hoped to send a reporter with the delegation but was unable to find someone to send.

Gaza-tested weapons on display at DND showcase

The "Smash Hopper," an anti-drone weapon advertised as "battle tested" in Gaza, will be showcased at the Department of National Defence's "sandbox" in Suffield, Alberta, from May 27 to June 21. The event showcases equipment from military suppliers in Australia, the U.S., Britain, Canada and Israel. According to ***Ynet News***, every Israeli military unit has at least one soldier equipped with the "Smash" rifle optics system produced by the Israeli company Smart Shooter, with thousands of troops reportedly using them in Gaza. Smart Shooter's social media calls the Smash Hopper "one of the most useful new items being demonstrated on the battlefield." The sandbox will give companies opportunity to demonstrate their latest technology. ***Sources: The Maple, DND***

AMBS grad

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary held their commencement service on April 27 for the 22 members of the graduating class of 2024. The keynote address was given by Nelson Okanya, president of World Serving Leaders. Okanya spoke on, "How does the serving leader lead?" ***Source: AMBS***

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada

Youth engagement in MCEC churches

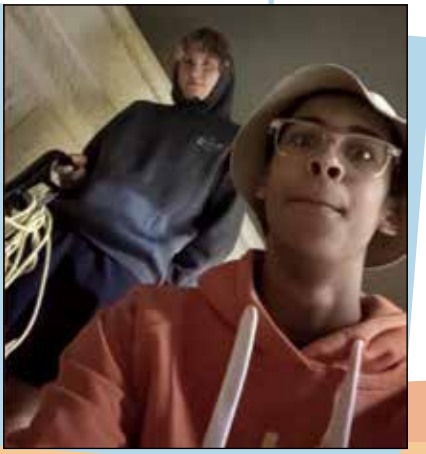
MCEC has been on a journey over the past year related to youth faith formation and the role of the regional church. Using the newly developed strategic plan entitled "Growing into the Future," MCEC partnered with the Centre for Community Based Research to explore how best MCEC can be a resource to its congregations and pastors regarding engaging high school youth in faith formation to address the current needs of congregants, and to recognize the emerging solutions for engaging youth.

Through a literature review, online discussion board, photovoice scavenger hunt, focus groups and an open forum, the Centre for Community Based Research gave invaluable guidance at each step of the process that engaged high school youth, parents of youth and youth pastors and leaders in helping us interpret the findings.

The findings and the strategies are linked to MCEC's strategic priorities of navigating change, developing leaders and intergenerational discipleship.

3 questions asked...

1. **What do MCEC congregations currently need to help them better engage youth in faith formation?**
2. **What efforts at engaging youth in faith formation seem to be working well within MCEC churches and why?**
3. **What do the learnings mean for how MCEC can best direct its limited resources in resourcing congregations and pastors in the faith formation of youth?**



Something we brought to our youth program is love.

From Jessica

Youth has allowed for so many strong friendships **that I can rely on, but also just goof around with.**

From Dante

CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH

Research Findings...

- Youth have increasingly busy schedules, creating low turn out.
- Congregations sometimes struggle to foster relationships between youth and adults.
- The content and style of engagement is sometimes not appealing to youth.
- How do congregations balance differing expectations of what successful youth engagement looks like?
- In an increasingly pluralistic world, how do our churches, camps and schools articulate the relevance of Christianity while recognizing that youth are surrounded by a diversity of faith and non-religious traditions?
- A relational, individualized approach that envisions church as a relationship is important.
- Youth talents and ideas are put into action in a supportive church.
- An informal atmosphere provides faith formation and fun.
- A dialogue style of learning explores difficult real-world topics without judgment.
- Intergenerational relationship building, inter-church youth events, or combining senior youth with junior youth are approaches that work.
- Include youth in all aspects of church life.
- The quality of the space matters to youth and ascribes value to youth.
- Exploring faith in nature is important for youth - camps are especially enriching in this way.
- Incorporating movement and activities helps to engage youth.

Next Steps...

MCEC is energized by this project and over the coming months will:

Further the Research

- Dialogue further with stakeholders about how to implement research suggestions.

Integrate the Findings

- Reflect on MCEC structure in resourcing youth faith formation.
- Connect with congregational and regional initiatives.
- Clarify roles of MCEC and congregation.
- Review and define MCEC's partnerships in relation to youth faith formation.

I was finally ready to dedicate my life to Christ and I'm thankful to my father helping me with the very last step,

baptism.

From Jonathan

Full report @ www.mcec.ca

MCEC is grateful for the participants, findings and strategies that have been identified.

We are excited to Grow into the Future together!

Church at the Ripple

By Emily T. Wierenga

An excerpt from God Who Became Bread: A True Story of Starving, Feasting, and Feeding Others*, 2024, Whitaker House.*

The Ripple Connection reminds me of heaven. It's home for the ones who sing off-key and play harmonica and knit throw-rugs and try to get off drugs.

Carl brings his dog in on a leash, a big dog that barks in your face then licks your hand. Carl looks strung out. He always smiles a slow smile. He shows me all his tattoos, even the ones I don't want to see. Carl is the one with the shattered heels, from jumping off a balcony two stories up. Shrooms make you think you can fly. Carl's trying to fly away from a car accident that stole his best friend.

When I give him a Bible, he sticks it in his boot, says he'll read it later. Then he stops coming to Ripple for a while and I get worried. When he finally shows up again, he joins my Bible study but says the guy's voice on the video is weird. It freaks him out. After that he stops coming for a long time. When he finally returns, he looks more strung out than ever and doesn't want to talk anymore.

The Ripple hides in a store called Flower Main. I always thought it was a flower shop until one day God told me to go in and start a Bible study. So I went in and introduced myself. The flowers turned out to be people. They slapped me on the back and told me I'd dropped something. "Your shadow!" they said with a laugh. They were noisy flowers who swore and cried and said the same thing over and over until someone assured them they'd been heard. Some call it mental illness. I call it humanity.

We always eat together at the Ripple. There's a big rectangular table. Every lunch, people come and grab heaping plates of macaroni and cheese or lasagna.

One lady colours while she eats. Brandon constantly talks about his piano, how it's too big. My friend Geoff tells people they need to buy a leprechaun, and "Wouldn't you like to be an alien?" he says. When my daughter comes to visit, he asks her if I water her, because she's growing like a plant.

Then there's Dan, who wears a Calgary Flames hat. He never remembers my name but holds my hand and says, "Halloween?" or whatever the upcoming holiday is, because he loves holidays. And he loves Jesus, too, so when I play guitar for Bible study, he sings loud.

I read *The Jesus Storybook Bible* to them. They gather on couches and some of them get up and leave in the middle of the story, but most of them listen real quiet. Sometimes at the end they'll say, "Wow, God did that?" or, "That's so sad, hey? That's so sad," like Brenda at the end of the crucifixion story.

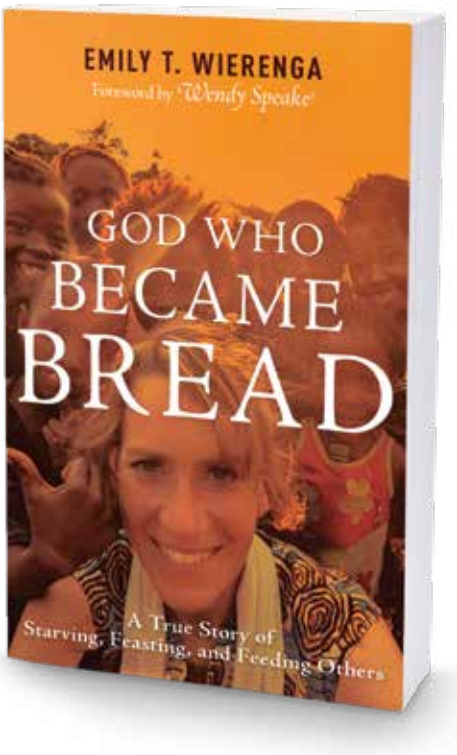
The Truth is chewed up here and made palatable.

My friends and I start doing evening church there once a month, and we bring potluck and Geoff brings his harmonica. But even as we try to do church, it feels like things are a bit backwards. Because church is already happening at Ripple. And we're just there to notice it. Love is already happening, and it's not neatly outlined in a bulletin. It's unfiltered and messy.

Church has a table at its center. A big rectangular one.

And salvation is wrestled out in this place where people are so openly sinners and so ready to be forgiven. They teach me how to repent.

Conner says over and over how much he's messed up his life. He knows about Jesus but doesn't quite get how salvation works. When I ask him if he wants Jesus to forgive his sins, however, he yells, "Yes, oh yes please," and he starts the sinner's prayer with me and finishes it by stuffing chips in his mouth.



And even as I drop him off at his house, he starts beating his head, saying, "I shouldn't have gone out today, I shouldn't have." I tell him not to listen to the bad voices. I remind him he is forgiven. And he nods his head and I tell him we love him and he says, "I love you too," and then he walks alone to his house.

Tyler is over six feet tall and maybe 300 pounds. His T-shirts are often too small and his glasses are broken. We tape them up. Tyler is a recovering addict. During supper he gives me his pipe and his weed and asks me to dispose of them. Then during the church service, Tyler pulls me aside. We go sit on the couches behind the billiards table.

"How do I worship a God I can't see?" Tyler asks. "I want to worship Him, but it's hard."

"I know," I say.

He pushes up his glasses.

"I did see God though, once," he says. "I saw him at Bible camp when I was young. I entered that camp and I heard someone laughing behind me. And then all of a sudden, I started laughing, and I didn't stop laughing the whole night. Like, I felt so much joy. It just filled me, you know?"

He stops. "I want that again, you know? I want to laugh again."

I pray for him, right then and there, that he will.

Later I'll find out that he does. A few days after I pray for him, Tyler opens his Bible. He begins reading the book of John. As he reads, he starts to laugh. He laughs for three hours straight.

The Bible is powerful like that. It's a love letter. It sneaks up on you like a bear hug. And this love, it holds you until you can't resist anymore, and you just have to laugh.

This love that sings over us. This love that holds the world. ●

Emily Wierenga is a writer who lives in northern Alberta, where she is part of a Christian Reformed Church. The above is an excerpt from God Who Became Bread, *© 2024 by Emily T. Wierenga, published by Whitaker House. Used with permission.*

Winnipeg churches hold Nakba Day service

By John Longhurst

A call from Christians in Palestine to lament and pray for people suffering in Gaza prompted Mennonites in Winnipeg to organize a service.

The May 15 service took place on Nakba Day, the day when Palestinians commemorate what they call The Nakba, or catastrophe. That's when over 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes during the founding of the state of Israel 76 years ago.

Dan Epp-Tiessen lights a candle.

The call for prayer and lament came from Kairos Palestine, an organization made up of Christian Palestinians.

Karla Braun, who is part of Hope Mennonite Church, was one of the organizers of the service in Winnipeg. For her, it was a way to pray, grieve and call for an end to the fighting.

"My heart is heavy with what we are hearing out of Gaza," she said, adding what also breaks her heart is hearing from Palestinian Christians in the region who feel abandoned by the church in the rest of the world.

"We have a responsibility to Palestinian Christians," Braun said, adding, "we will be held to account by God for what we did during these days . . . I can't do nothing."

Also working with Braun to organize the event was Donna Entz, who attends Home Street Mennonite Church.

Entz, who worked with Mennonite Church Alberta to build interfaith and cross-cultural relationships with Muslims, also saw the service as a way to remember Palestinian children killed in the fighting.

"As a grandmother, I see the world has really let them down, just as the world let down the children who were murdered during the Holocaust," she said, adding the service is a chance for her "to ask for forgiveness from the children of Gaza."

The service itself featured singing, prayers and sharing by Mennonites, Catholics, Muslims and Jews. It was opened by Home Street Mennonite Church co-pastor Judith Friesen Epp, who explained the event was a time to express "lament, rage, solidarity, protest, resistance and hope . . . over the tremendous loss of life and land."

Esther Epp-Tiessen added that she grieves for both the suffering in Gaza and "for the victims of October 7, the hostages not returned, all the killed and wounded."

Also on May 15, Mennonite Church Manitoba executive minister Michael Pahl issued a letter urging church members to view the events in Israel and Gaza not through "the lens of partisan political interests or lobby groups," but "through the eyes of Jesus."

Like Jesus, Christians should love our neighbours and our enemies, Pahl said.

We should stand with Palestinians around the world, Pahl said, "even as we also stand with Israeli families grieving loved ones killed by Hamas and awaiting news of those still held hostage."

Pahl went on to call for an immediate ceasefire and the immediate and safe return of all remaining hostages, "and for Israeli and Palestinian leaders to come together again in pursuit of a lasting, just peace for both Palestine and Israel." ●

PHOTO: BY JOHN LONGHURST

Why we asked MCM to sign a call for a fossil fuel treaty

By Josiah Neufeld, for the MCM Climate Action Working Group

Our society is in the middle of a painful, promising and complicated shift. We know we need to stop burning fossil fuels. We need to transition to energy systems that are less polluting and less extractive while also learning to use less energy and consume less altogether.

It's a challenging time, but not one without precedent.

Near the end of the 1700s, three-quarters of the global population was living under some kind of slavery or serfdom. Each year, 80,000 chained humans were transported across the Atlantic to work on plantations. Much of the economy of western Europe and the Americas depended on slave labour.

On May 22, 1778, 12 men met in a print shop in England to hatch a plan. All but one were Quakers, a persecuted sect who numbered fewer than 20,000 in England. They were pacifist, non-hierarchical and committed to consensus-based decision making. And they believed slavery was a sin.

For years they had been writing letters to newspapers, distributing pamphlets and using guerrilla theatre to make their point. No one listened.

The meeting in the print shop marked a pivotal point. The Quakers began collaborating with a non-Quaker activist named Thomas Clarkson, an Anglican who criss-crossed England on horseback spreading the message about the evils of slavery.

The Quakers' moral vision, sharpened by their experience as a persecuted minority and coupled with their advocacy skills, allowed them to play a key role in the anti-slavery movement. Rooted in faith, they worked tirelessly for a seemingly impossible cause.

As members of Mennonite Church Manitoba's (MCM) Climate Action Working Group (CAWG)—a volunteer group that helps congregations respond to the climate crisis with personally and societally transformative actions—we draw inspiration from current and historical liberation struggles.

The work of climate justice is the work of our time. It will require the transformation of hearts, habits, churches and society.

The burning of fossil fuels is the principal driver of climate change and is the cause of great ecological and human injustice. How can we extricate ourselves from this unjust system?

How can we replace it with more just, equitable and life-sustaining systems?

We can't. Not alone. Quakers were ineffectual until they joined others.

At the MCM annual gathering in March, delegates voted for MCM to join hundreds of other faith groups, non-profits, cities and island nations around the world in calling for an international treaty to end the extraction and burning of fossil fuels and transition fairly to clean energy.

This is a small and symbolic step, but it represents months of study, conversation and organizing in congregations. This step helped us situate our work within the broader global struggle and gave us opportunity to educate ourselves, talk with congregations, gather feedback, field questions and practise moving a disparate body toward collective action.

Leading up to the vote, we visited 11 congregations, preached sermons, led Sunday school discussions and hosted information sessions. We worshipped, ate and discerned scripture together. We experienced the good of being church together.

We were challenged by people who questioned this step and those who wanted us to do more.

A century after the meeting in the Quaker print shop, slavery had been formally outlawed—at least on paper—nearly everywhere. It took massive education campaigns, pressure tactics like sugar boycotts and even bloody revolts led by enslaved people. Throughout the struggle, Quakers played a faithful role.

Then and now, two responses are required: individual change and structural change. While Quakers freed those they had enslaved and paid them compensation, the Quakers remained entangled in an economy dependent on slavery. Slavery itself needed to end.

Neither individual nor systemic change can happen alone.

Signing the call for a fossil fuel treaty was an opportunity to study the ways in which we are entangled in an unjust global energy system. But it is only one step. We intend to draw on the relationships we've built during this process in order to help congregations take further steps, such as:

Advocacy.

Organizing with local and national climate groups.

Reducing our energy use.

Working with Indigenous communities affected by climate change.

Reorienting growth-addicted economic systems.

Promoting incentives that help communities transition.

Each congregation must find its own place in this movement. To learn more about what your regional working group is doing, see mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action.

Josiah Neufeld lives in Winnipeg and is a member of the Climate Action Working Group.

Author imagines the way forward amid environmental upheaval

By Aaron Epp

A new book offers practices for leaders and communities to foster healthier cultures during a time of ecological devastation.

In *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet*, Leah Reesor-Keller shares her own journey of meaning-making amid environmental and social upheaval with the hope that readers will use it to make sense of their own experiences, values and beliefs.

'This is a book about how to be people of hope,' says Leah Reesor-Keller. Supplied photo.

"It's kind of about climate change, but it's actually a book about leadership, community-building, organizations and culture shift," the Kitchener, Ontario-based author said by video call last month.

Reesor-Keller was the executive minister for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada from 2020-22, and is currently the interim executive director at KAIROS Canada, an ecumenical organization that works toward ecological justice and human rights.

Over the last 18 years, she has worked with churches and nonprofits in Canada, Haiti, Jamaica and Nepal.

She draws on those experiences throughout *Tending Tomorrow*.

A book by U.S. activist adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, influenced Reesor-Keller. It got her thinking about how the components of different organizations, including churches and charities, come together to create change.

"I started looking back at my own life and culture and faith tradition and trying to go back to the roots and imagine a different way forward," she said.

"So [the book is] less what should we do and more [about exploring] what are the pieces that are leading us to make the decisions that we do, and act and value the way that we do, and what might need to be different."

The idea that the climate crisis is a leadership crisis resonates with Reesor-Keller.

"We have a lot of solutions. We have a lot of technical fixes," she said. "We know we have to move away from fossil fuels. We know we need to live a lifestyle of less consumption. So, to me the interesting thing is how are we going to construct culture, societies [and] a world where that is possible. I think churches, faith communities, theology can play such an important part in setting up the foundations."

An early potential title for the book, which Reesor-Keller dedicated to her two children, was *Gritty Hope*.

"This is a book about how to be people of hope, even as there are many challenges around us," she said. "My biggest hope is that this book helps people hold on to hope and move out of despair or apathy into looking to make the changes that they can that are in front of them."

Reesor-Keller is eager for people read the book with others and talk about it using the study guide that's included.

"Because the themes of the book are interconnection, resilience [and] interdependence, that means it's not about what one person does by themselves," she said. "It's about what people do together."

Tending Tomorrow *will be in bookstores on June 25. For details, visit leahreesorkeller.com.*

The long road to freedom

By Miles Wiederkehr

As I write this, we are in the midst of planting our garden. But don't get the wrong image; when I say garden, I mean a field worked by hand to grow our own food.

We grow not just vegetables, but also dietary staples that provide our carbohydrates and proteins, as well as some non-food crops. Over the years, we've grown and raised an increasing amount of our staples—including spelt, poultry and livestock—but in ways that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels, both for our tractor and for the production of livestock feed we buy.

You could call this food local and organic, but it isn't sustainable.

The changes we've made are a good start but aren't enough. We are still very much in process.

As we reduce tractor reliance, we're trying to go from a 0.8-acre garden to a full acre this spring using only human power and spades. That will take about 120 person-hours of digging.

Another part of the work is altering our diet—toward more dry legumes, maize and potatoes—measuring what we use, working out yields from last year, projecting crop budgets and planning garden areas and rotation to move toward meeting that budget. It's a long road because it's a big project.

Turning sod into garden with human power on the Wiederkehr farm.

From personal to systemic

This is action on a personal level to address the environmental problems and injustices in the world. Individual action is often criticized as an insufficient response. If, by "individual action," we mean a few symbolic tweaks to our consumption patterns, it definitely is insufficient, but I want to reframe the conversation from individual versus political action to old systems versus reimagined systems, and to make a case for how personal action helps make that shift to new systems.

Our lives are so dependent on fossil fuels that it might be said that everything we have is made from oil. Many of us agree this is not sustainable.

Fewer people would accept that this means our personal lives need to change significantly. Instead, we may focus on demanding that governments and corporations limit or ban fossil-fuel-based products.

While the use of fossil fuels must end, the things we need still have to come from somewhere. The way of producing the things we need is what I mean by a system, a way of life.

It is possible that science will find some other resources to exploit, which will not be sustainable, but which, if we're privileged enough, will let us continue in the direction we are going for a while longer, though still at someone else's cost. Holding on to our lifestyle in this way is a refusal to care about what will happen in other times and places; it is basically sticking to the old system.

If we risk caring, we realize that what we need is not to tweak the old system but to change systems—to find a new way to live. This new system must be a way by which we all could live.

How do we change systems?

One system we are all familiar with is our own family system, in which each member has a role. While this system often keeps family members from changing, it is also true that if one member changes, that shifts the system.

When there is a problem, and we want our family system to change, often the best strategy is not to try to change someone else, but to change how we work in the system. It is not that we are to blame for the problem, but that because we are part of a problematic pattern, changing ourselves breaks the pattern.

Toward healthy systems

With respect to the environment and injustice, we are in the system which keeps us from changing, but the system is also made up of us. It is disingenuous

PHOTO BY ANDRE WIEDERKEHR.

The Wiederkehr garden.

to cast ourselves as helpless victims of the system. We can make personal changes. I think the issue is more that, for those of us who are privileged, change in the right direction will cost us something.

The system works for us; at the same time, there are many signs the system is sick. Climate change is just one of them.

If we want to replace that system with a healthy system, we must accept and expect a personal cost, and perhaps even see it as a sign that we're headed in the right direction. The great opportunity we have is that we can begin to act now.

By beginning to act on a personal level we can be imaginative. If, as Marcus Rempel suggested in a March 29 letter to the editor, we are addicted to fossil fuels, then asking governments and corporations to shut them down is to go the route of Prohibition, and that won't help if we don't find sobriety in our own lives.

Finding crops which work well to plant, harvest, store and prepare by hand takes a lot of creativity. The government imposing a carbon tax on farm inputs won't help us to do that creative work.

By beginning to act on a personal level we can adapt what we do to our local circumstances. Centralized approaches tend to standardize, to prescribe. The specifics of how we live in Southwestern Ontario will not always suit elsewhere.

By beginning to act on a personal level we can change based on choice, not coercion. This is not only more palatable for the changer, but produces the deeper change that is necessary: in our hearts and minds.

When we choose to change, we aren't just toeing someone else's line but are trying to satisfy ourselves that we are doing what we need to do. That's why we're taking on those 120 hours of digging rather than taking various problematic shortcuts.

By contrast, political solutions often settle for the lowest common denominator. A political compromise tries to get as many people as possible to commit to doing as little as possible, and that means we won't go deep enough in re-evaluating how we do things.

By beginning to act on a personal level, we can move in the right direction. When we begin to live in new ways we will know what would be helpful for the law to restrict or promote.

Our experience indicates we have much more land than we need for our family, but to have more people living on and from this land would mean very different land-use policies than those geared to urban intensification.

Our need for each other

While our action is personal, it is not individualistic. We are mutually dependent, both physically and socially. Creating a new culture is hard work. We need to do it together.

This comes with a change in the understanding of salvation. Salvation is not primarily about saving me from the consequences of my own folly so that I'll be okay, but about us being redeemed so that, with God's help, we can stop living in ways that got us into this mess in the first place, so that all things will be okay. Instead of calling on God or government to "fix" climate change with new technology that still exploits the earth and other people, salvation enables us to live into a new system, a new way of life.

In this understanding of salvation, our household is a means of grace for me. I find grace through physical enablement—sharing the work—through challenge, through accountability and through support. We are being saved with each other, by means of each other, into God's will for all. We are grateful for all who join us in this.

PHOTO BY ANDRE WIEDERKEHR

Circles of Support and Accountability closing in three locations

By A. S. Compton

Mennonite Central Committee Ontario (MCCO) has announced the June closure of the Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) programs in Hamilton, Toronto and Kitchener, as well as the Faith Community Reintegration Initiative. The programs supported people coming out of incarceration.

An MCCO release states that "sustainable funding from both federal and provincial governments has remained elusive." Other sources of funding have likewise been difficult to secure, making continuation of the program "untenable."

Thirty years ago, Mennonite pastor Harry Nigh of Hamilton was asked if he could find a place for a sex offender to reintegrate into society when released from prison. Out of that request CoSA began; a program where volunteers "circle" and support a "core member" following their release from prison. Most often these are sexual offenders.

Nigh, now retired but still connected with CoSA, called CoSA "true to our grassroots peacemaking" as Mennonites. Speaking by phone from his home, Nigh said, "it's intrinsic to the basis of MCC." He sees Mennonites "stepping into situations that are grey and chaotic," and "[seeing] the humanity of the people we work with."

CoSA Canada provides an umbrella for 15 CoSA programs across the country, including the three MCCO CoSA programs. In an interview, Eileen Henderson, who serves as chair of the CoSA Canada board, said the closure of the MCCO programs has been devastating for the roughly 40 core members concerned and people on the waiting lists.

"The people on the waiting list aren't even in limbo," said Henderson. "They've just been told what they thought they had, has been taken away."

Executive director of CoSA Canada Cliff Yumansky said CoSA needs a mix of government, private and church funding. To sustain circles across the country, community-based funding is needed. Ideally, he said, government would pay CoSA a sum for each core member, with church and community supplementing the rest. He suggested some pressure could be put on Members of Parliament to encourage Correctional Services to participate more sustainably.

The search for funding has been a significant focus for staff across CoSA programs, most of whom are part-time or volunteers. "It stretches us thin," Yumansky said. He says that time and energy should be spent on core members.

While CoSA began in Hamilton, it has been replicated across Canada, the U.S., Britain, Australia and South Korea. CoSA has shown a significant success rate. A 2018 study in Minnesota found that sex offenders who go through the CoSA program are 88 percent less likely to reoffend than those not in the program.

Canadian Mennonite asked Correctional Service Canada (CSC) how they plan to safely reintegrate sexual offenders into society without CoSA. In an email, a spokesperson said, "CSC remains committed to managing sexual offenders in an appropriate manner.... As a part of the consistent continuum of care throughout the correctional process from intake up until release into the community, CSC provides correctional follow-up services to offenders."

Canadian Mennonite also reached out

PHOTO: HASAN ALMASI/UNSPLASH

to Public Safety Canada regarding CoSA funding but did not receive a reply.

With the announcement of the closure, MCCO stated it "will work closely with community partners to support individuals in finding alternative support programs in the community." At the same time, MCCO acknowledges this "will present challenges, as these programs offer something unique and irreplaceable."

Henderson and Yumansky say there are no alternative programs in the community.

Sheryl Bruggeling, who speaks for MCCO, said that while the organization has explored many options, "there are no revenue options available through government grants and contributions programs for this work in Ontario at this time."

Bruggeling said MCCO's "overall revenue remains stable," and, other than CoSA, "no other MCCO programs are facing reductions."

The last government funding CoSA received was a five-year contract ending in 2022. During that time, Public Safety Canada funded approximately 53 percent of the overall program budget. Since that time, MCCO has shouldered the funding burden, while seeking other funding sources.

Three CoSA staff members will be laid off as a result of the closure.

When asked if they think MCC offices in other provinces will follow MCCO, Henderson and Yumansky weren't sure, but Henderson noted that MCC Alberta recently made "a definitive choice" to move ahead with their CoSA programming.

CoSA staff have been hearing words like "discarded," "betrayed" and "abandoned" from core members and folks on the waiting lists. These sentiments "escalate risk" of reoffending, said Henderson. She quoted one staff member who said, "it feels like things are just being thrown away."

Yumansky said the board of CoSA Canada is working hard to find ways to keep the work going in the areas where MCCO was operating. "We feel encouraged about some of the conversations we're having."

"Rebuilding of hope and trust with core members will be challenging. We have to convince them that what has just happened won't happen again," said Henderson.

All current CoSA programs outside of Ontario are continuing, as well as programs in Ottawa and Peterborough, Ontario, which operate independent of MCCO. A few circles across Canada are operated exclusively by volunteers.

David Byrne is a former chair of CoSA Canada and has recently completed his doctoral research on the theology and history of CoSA. Byrne said the importance of these particular CoSAs in central Ontario cannot be overstated. Many people being released from prison settle in the Toronto, Hamilton and Kitchener areas.

The number one predictor of reoffence in sexual offenders is relationships, said Byrne. Without these circles of support, community safety is at risk.

The process of offending and going through the justice system is dehumanizing. Offenders feel very disconnected from whatever community they re-enter. Byrne said "CoSA turns that on its head" with its "counter-intuitive response" of embracing the former offender. "In building that relationship there is a reinvestment in the community."

"I get why that's hard to fundraise for," said Byrne. "CoSA is a remarkable Canadian success story, but in a lot of Canada we haven't done a good job of creating CoSA practitioners in the next generation."

Very few sexual offenders are sentenced to life in prison, and almost all of them will be released at some point. CoSA's relationship-building positively affects the community in ways that aren't easy to notice.

"There are literally hundreds of kids and people who have not suffered trauma and abuse because of this program," Nigh said. "What about the kids? Who steps in there?"

Nigh said CoSA is a tough sell; very few people are excited about the idea of supporting sex offenders. But it's "essential that we look at some form of continuation."

He doesn't believe MCCO wanted to make this move; they were simply left with no choice. He has hope, though. Ottawa and Peterborough CoSAs remain open. "It was a very grassroots thing [in the beginning], so why can't that happen again?"

NEWS BRIEFS

Aid distribution in Myanmar

According to a Mennonite Central Committee release, the military in Myanmar has "outlawed distribution of humanitarian goods because they believe humanitarian workers are supporting the resistance." The military in Myanmar seized power in 2021 and has been in bloody conflict with rebel groups since. Conscription of men and women ages 18-35 has been enacted. The whole civilian population is at risk of food insecurity. According to an MCC partner in Myanmar, who is not named for security reasons, wherever there is fighting in the country, civilians are treated violently, with no rule of law. People are trying to flee the country in long lines to avoid conscription.

Ethiopia promises memorable global gathering

Mennonite World Conference (MWC) and Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) of Ethiopia have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that prepares the way for MKC to host the MWC global gathering in 2028. "It is an honour to host the 2028 MWC that coincides with the 500th anniversary of the Mennonite movement," said Desalegn Abebe, president of MKC. "MKC will do everything at its capacity to make the conference memorable and inspirational." MKC is the largest member church of MWC.

Kingdom windfall

How do Mennonite organizations handle multi-million-dollar donations? Canadian Mennonite *spoke with representatives from two organizations to find out.*

By Aaron Epp

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) B.C. made headlines across Canada when it announced last September that it had received a gift of property worth $229.6 million.

Henry Rempel of New Westminster, B.C., who died June 9, 2023, and his wife, Mary Rempel, who predeceased her husband in 2014, wanted to help "the poorest of the poor" with the gift.

The portfolio of rental and development properties that the Rempels gave MCC B.C. is held in subsidiary companies owned by the relief organization, and collectively referred to as HyLand Properties (formerly MCC Legacy Trust).

HyLand's purpose is to operate the portfolio of properties on an ongoing basis, with the goal of maintaining the value while also making annual donations to support MCC's work.

The Rempels made their first donation of property to MCC, an apartment in Prince George, B.C., in 2012. The $229.6 million property donation was another step in a relationship they built with MCC over more than 10 years.

Henry and Mary Rempel, pictured in Vancouver, B.C., circa 2010, donated property worth $229.6 million to Mennonite Central Committee B.C. Supplied photo.

According to Wayne Bremner, executive director of MCC B.C., the relief organization has a gift acceptance policy stipulating that any potential donation greater than $25,000 needs to be reviewed by a committee made up of MCC leadership staff.

The committee considers whether the giver has agency, if the gift fits within MCC's mission and whether there are any strings attached to the gift.

"MCC is very earnest about working from a principled point of view when receiving large donations of any kind," Bremner says, "and we have to report on that annually to the board."

MCC B.C. wholly owns Hyland and is the sole shareholder of the HyLand group of companies. It appoints the directors of the HyLand board and related subsidiaries as needed.

The board of MCC has five questions it asks when determining which projects HyLand takes on: How does it reflect on MCC and its values? Does it fit within the core business expertise of HyLand? Does it have a good return on investment that can eventually generate donations? What kind of financial risk is involved? What could go wrong that would reflect poorly on MCC and HyLand?

MCC B.C. is now a rich landowner in a province with a housing crisis. Bremner says the organization is mindful of how it can work to address the housing crisis while honouring Henry Rempel's desire to "help the poorest of the poor in the developing world" with the money that HyLand generates.

HyLand has partnered with the Pacific Centre for Discipleship Association, a Christian community for university and college students, to build Menno Hall—a four- to six-storey development near the University of British Columbia in Vancouver that will include 101 student housing units, academic space, common areas, a large meeting facility, a concert hall and outdoor courtyards.

Menno Hall will also include 86 rental residences that Bremner says meet the threshold of affordable housing.

According to its website, HyLand "is targeting a contribution [to MCC] of $20 million over the next five years, with aspirations for this figure to exponentially increase over time."

Bremner says that MCC remains an organization that depends on its constituency to have an impact around the world.

"We are still the same grassroots organization where every donation helps," he says. "[The Rempels' donation] is just another source of revenue that helps us achieve our purpose."

Shantz Mennonite Church

Mike Shantz was worried when he learned that his church was receiving a bequest worth millions of dollars.

"Money can create problems that didn't exist when you didn't have that money," he says. "How people think about it and what they want to do with it can vary greatly."

More than 10 years ago, Shantz Mennonite Church was given a bequest by the estate of Enid and Harold Schmidt, longtime members of the congregation.

The estate's legal representation and executor have been liquidating the Schmidts' assets, which included a dairy farm, a telecommunications company and several other properties, since then.

The majority of the proceeds have been divided between Mennonite Church Eastern Canada and Shantz Mennonite.

Shantz Mennonite has received several million dollars so far, says Mike, vice chair of the church's council.

"Our church was very fortunate," he says. "Prior to receiving the bequest, a few policies were put into place, laying out the

groundwork for how bequests should be handled when received by our church."

The church appointed a four-person bequest investment team to work with Abundance Canada and other investment platforms to invest the money in a diversified portfolio. The four-person team monitors the investments on an ongoing basis.

The church was led to give "a first fruits offering," giving 10 per cent of the principal away. The first offering went to support refugees in crisis.

Every time another property is sold, the church gives 10 per cent of what it receives to other charitable organizations.

The church also used some of the money to build a new facility, as it had outgrown its previous building. To adhere to the bequest policy, the congregation used no more than 50 per cent of the bequest principal for the new facility.

Additionally, the church formed a four-person bequest earnings disbursement team. The team receives applications from local, national and international charities.

Twice a year, the bequest earnings disbursement team brings the applications to the congregation, who decide how the earnings should be dispersed.

Shantz Mennonite has received applications from a variety of organizations, including other churches, a local hockey organization trying to make sports accessible to low-income families, and a nearby college that used the money for clean water projects in Indigenous communities.

"We want to be a good steward," Mike says. "These funds have not been generated by our efforts—they have been given to us."

The church votes on which applications should be accepted.

In a reflection published in *Canadian Mennonite* in June 2022, Don Penner, then the pastor at Shantz Mennonite, wrote that the congregation's participation in the decision-making about the money "has been huge and holy."

"It has required great amounts of time and energy to learn to discern the way," Penner wrote. "In the process, new talents and wisdom emerged, thanks to the Spirit providing the right people for the needs of the moment."

Mike said that working with the Schmidts' gift has "been an honour as well as a lot of work, but it has also been inspirational."

He adds that the church's bequest fund has relied on donations from many people, not just the Schmidts.

"We've made an effort to recognize that these things are made possible by the proceeds of others as well," Mike says.

Architectural renderings of Mennohall. Used with permission.

CALENDAR

British Columbia

June 7-9: Young Adult (18-35) Anabaptist Conference, "Faith, Activism, and Church: Building an Active Future" at Camp Squeah.
Oct. 18-20: MCBC Ladies Retreat at Camp Squeah. Linda Todd guest speaker, details to come.
Nov. 1-3: MCBC Pastor/Family Retreat at Camp Squeah. Details to come.

Alberta

June 8: Camp Valaqua Hike-a-thon.
June 9: Garden Party, Camp Valaqua.
June 7-9: Young Adult Anabaptist Conference hosted by MCBC.
June 15: MCC Alberta Relief Sale, 9 a.m. Bergthal Mennonite Church, Didsbury. Join us for food, fellowship and the opportunity to donate to MCC projects around the world.

Saskatchewan

June 15: MCC Sask's Relief Sale Festival, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. at Forest Grove Community Church, Saskatoon.
June 20-22: *Les Misérables* presented by RJC High School, 7 p.m. Tickets available at **rjc.sk.ca**
June 22: RJC Alumni & Friends BBQ, 5:30 p.m. at RJC High School in Rosthern, prior to the final performance of *Les Misérables*. RSVP to **development@rjc.sk.ca**
June 23: RJC Graduation. Please join us as we celebrate the class of 2024. Baccalaureate Service at 10:30 a.m., Rosthern Mennonite Church. Graduation Exercises at 2:30 p.m., RJC Auditorium, Rosthern.

Manitoba

June 21-23: 75…Already?! Save the date for Camp Assiniboia's 75th Anniversary.
July 4: MCC Manitoba's annual golf tournament fundraiser, 9 a.m., Bridges Golf Course, Starbuck.
July 6: MCC Manitoba's Cycle Clear Lake, 7:30 a.m., Wasagaming Campground, Wasagaming.

Ontario

June 11: Hidden Acres' Annual Chicken BBQ and Pie Auction, 5 p.m. at Hidden Acres, New Hamburg.
June 14-16: Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church celebrates 100 years with food, Low-German play excerpts, story-telling and a zwieback-making tutorial.
June 21: Lots of gray hair in your faith community? That's great! Find out why at Aging and Spirituality seminar at Conrad Grebel, 9 a.m. More at **uwaterloo/grebel/events**.
July 6: Strawberry Thanksgiving and Communion. A dialogue and celebration addressing the complexities of Haldimand Tract lands. 10 a.m.-1 p.m., Six Nations Polytechnic, Ohsweken.
Aug. 11-23: Ontario Mennonite Music Camp at Conrad Grebel. A two-week overnight camp for students who have finished grades 6-12 to enrich faith, musicality and leadership. Register at **uwaterloo.ca/grebel/ontario-mennonite-music-camp**.
Sept. 21: Toronto (GTA) Mennonite Festival at Willowgrove farm, Stouffville.
Oct. 21-25: MCC Learning Tour: Travelling Together Through Truth, engaging with First Nations communities and partners of MCC Ontario's Indigenous Neighbours program in Timmins.

Online Events

July 19: Mennonite World Conference Hour of Prayer, 14:00 UTC. See **mwc-cmm.org**

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.

CMPS reports small surplus at 2023 AGM

Staff

On May 8, Canadian Mennonite Publishing Service (CMPS), which publishes *Canadian Mennonite,* held its fifty-third annual general meeting via video conference.

The nonprofit, charitable organization recorded a surplus of $8,000 based on revenue of $757,000 against expenses of $749,000. A planned redevelopment of the website was moved to 2024.

Kathryn Lymburner of Stouffville, Ontario, was re-elected chairperson. In her report, Lymburner wrote, "As a board, we see *Canadian Mennonite* as the uniting voice for all; whether it was your ancestors who arrived in this country by steamboat or horseback, or you who have arrived recently by plane. A faith group has many intangibles and a physical magazine is one of the tangible ways a national church can remain connected. Each mailed copy [is] a reminder that we are more than our different histories or current circumstances."

Karen Heese of Markham, Ontario, and Aaron Penner of Winnipeg were re-elected as vice-chair and treasurer, respectively. Donna Schulz of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, was elected secretary.

Andrew Stoesz of Winnipeg

Elected for the first time was Andrew Stoesz of Winnipeg. Stoesz is a recent graduate of the Canadian Mennonite University Media and Communications program and a member at Sterling Mennonite Fellowship.

Retiring after nine years on the board was Lois Epp of Calgary. Epp, a member at Trinity Mennonite Church, served as CMPS treasurer for several years and also served on the nominations committee.

During the year, Mary Barg (Chilliwack, B.C.) was appointed to the board by Mennonite Church British Columbia and Tim Miller-Dyck (Baden, Ontario) was appointed by Mennonite Church Canada.

Four directors continue their terms: Annika Krause (Montreal), Art Koop (Edson, Alberta), Brenda Suderman (Winnipeg) and Alex Tiessen (Rosthern, Saskatchewan). There is one vacancy.

CMPS holds its annual meeting in May each year. Members of the public who donate $25 during the year may register to attend and vote on proceedings. Annual reports for CMPS are available at canadianmennonite.org.

‘CMU’s one of the best decisions I have ever made’

By Cloe Penner

Since Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) is a small university, I hadn’t heard about it until my mom’s friend mentioned that one of her daughters went there. At that point, I hadn’t decided whether to apply for post-secondary education or take a gap year. I knew that I wanted to go to university eventually, but I felt directionless.

Fast forward—I am now a second-year student at CMU, and I love it.

Making friends, settling into a whole new world, rising to a more challenging academic level and having my life so uprooted was hard, but living in residence brings the community right in front of you.

Eventually, I stepped out of my comfort zone and found a new life at CMU. That led to self-discovery, becoming an independent adult and figuring out who I am. CMU is a home away from home where I can be myself.

CMU has given me a new perspective and changed my life. The classes made me realize how much I love learning when the topic is something I care about. The courses are interesting, and the small classes keep me engaged.

Sometimes, when we aren’t sure of what we’re doing or what’s going to happen in life, the future has a way of surprising us. That unknown future could be one of the best things that helps you become you.

Cloe Penner is a second-year Bachelor of Arts student majoring in history.

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Faith Story

Off-brand Jesus

By Shelby Boese

"Mommy, why are those ladies wearing sheets?" I loudly asked my divorced mother.

I was a young boy, and a group of nuns were standing in the dairy corner of the Hinky Dinky grocery store.

My mother had married at a very young age and then started nursing school. She was a nominal Christian, to be charitable, and my biological father was a Mennonite (but probably not a Christian).

My sister was born shortly after I complicated these barely adult lives. Their marriage lasted a few years, then blew apart. My earliest family memories are full of shades.

This sent my mother, and by extension me, on a spiritual journey.

Thrust into shame and single-parenthood survival, it also opened the way to the kinds of questions pain invites. In those waters, my mother was found by Jesus.

Our little family was welcomed into a little Pentecostal congregation—the kind of church that less respectable folks in small-town early 1980s South Dakota could attend in their messiness.

Where I grew up, you could be atheist, Lutheran or Roman Catholic, but going to "off-brand" denominations was suspect. Yet, in that off-brand place, Jesus met me in the liturgy of Pentecostalism. At several points, I gave my allegiance to Jesus.

It was a church that had deep flaws and a flawed pastor, but it also had stories in spades.

Stories from visiting Pentecostal missionaries telling the wonders of the Spirit tearing down walls. Stories that you were invited into through engaged worship with word, body and fire.

We were told that every Christian should expect the Holy Spirit to empower you and give you physical proof, like a bodily sense of God's presence and speaking in tongues. It was radically postmodern, gritty, material and embodied.

The Holy Spirit would fill and baptize whoever humbled and yielded themselves in prayer and repentance. A lot of theatrics were involved, too. We were taught it's "dirt and divinity"—if you want divinity, you've got to humble yourself and discern through the dirty parts of

PHOTO: YANKTONRANGER/WIKIPEDIA

life, too.

When my mother was struggling to feed, clothe and shelter us, she worked the only shifts she could get.

It was during this extreme struggle of just keeping it together that she connected with the nuns of Sacred Heart Monastery in Yankton, South Dakota. They hired her as their nurse, which meant good hours and more time with her children. I will be forever grateful to those ladies wearing sheets.

In our little Pentecostal church, my mother met a man with a parallel story, and eventually they married. I gained a stepfather and two more siblings.

But the flaws of the church became more pronounced. Remarriage was questionable; my mother and stepfather were welcome to tithe and serve in some roles, but their remarriage made them less-than.

Imagine that: As Pentecostals in a small town, they were in the "cult," and then in the "cult," they were now second-class citizens. Yet, the Holy Spirit has ways of seeping through walls built by the false-holiness, identity-through-judgment crowd.

Through my childhood and youth, I did have some Christian light from my Mennonite grandparents. They served as missionaries with Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, the General Conference Mennonite Church and Habitat for Humanity.

When they were on furlough, they expressed love and care. They also sent letters from Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). I remember one with a crushed fried caterpillar!

Later I would learn of Grandpa's participation in Woodlawn Mennonite in Chicago, an inter-racial church in the civil rights era, and an early Freedom Ride he took into the Deep South. This work was done with his well-known friend, Vincent Harding.

Grandpa was active in supporting the civil rights movement in South Dakota, and he was lifelong friends with civil rights champion Theodore (Ted) Blakey. The rural thoroughfare outside my grandparents' farm was renamed "Equal Rights Road."

I have barely scratched the surface of my faith journey. This is just an account of its early stages.

What I can say is that along the way, it has been marked by encounters with the Holy Spirit, Jesus-y justice, the ancient church, a radical reorientation of my theology around the cross and a relationship theology of a God revealed as personal love in Jesus.

Crises have led me to deconstruct and reconstruct my faith at least three times. There were always churches there for me—gatherings of people that, in their imperfect ways, made space for my questioning.

The intention of the church folks was often secondary to the spirit at work on the edges of these gatherings.

The gatherings of the church were vital but not always in the ways an over-programmatic church-type would think. The act of creating sacred spaces was itself more important in my formation than any sermon or worship-crafted event.

Something else that was formational for me was experiencing childhood disease and being marginalized in a small town. This meant that I went deeper into the life of the spirit, and the spiritual friends and family of the local church, than someone of more "respectable" birth and practices.

As a child and tween, I sensed that my body was trying to end me. This contrasted the Pentecostal teaching that the Holy Spirit will speak through one's imagination and body.

I lived into that wild tension of being broken and yet blessed.

In the midst of this, I felt a tug, a call—a deep love for the local church, for it is where I encounter Jesus. For me, salvation has never been primarily about sin-management and atonement for guilt. Salvation has been about being called into the empowering, overwhelming love of God in Jesus.

Jesus, through the spirit in the church, has changed me over and over, and empowered me to empower others.

Shelby Boese is executive minister of Mennonite Church B.C.

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We are accepting applications until July 25.

See **canadianmennonite.org/creative** or email **creative@canadianmennonite.org**.

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