

Sister church friendship brings healing and hope

by Randall L. Nelson, First Mennonite Church, Champaign-Urbana

Colombia has been in the news again. Although a negotiated peace accord with the largest rebel group was rejected in a national vote, the country is still making progress in ending over a half century of civil war. This conflict provided the stimulus for First Mennonite Church (FMC) of Champaign-Urbana and El Divino Redentor (EDR), a Lutheran congregation in Bucaramanga, Colombia, to form a sister church relationship more than 16 years ago.

In 2000, we received a letter from the Colombian Mennonite Church, addressed to the Churches of the North, that presented “an urgent call for reflection and action for life.” The U.S. government had initiated Plan Colombia with an “aid” package of \$1.3 billion with 90 percent going to the military. We were asked to provide an alternative message of peace from the North to counter the fuel for the war that our government was providing.

Although Bucaramanga is at some distance from the most intense warfare in southern Colombia, it is a city of refuge for many fleeing the violence. An important mission of EDR is to care for these people. We have joined in this work by helping provide a noon meal for children in one of the settlements on the edge of the city.

We sent three delegations from FMC to Colombia and have hosted three groups from Colombia. These exchanges help to strengthen the bond that we share. For a time we sang the same hymn on Sunday, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”; we share our prayer concerns; and each Sunday we light a lamp as a reminder of our connection. We continue to challenge ourselves to find creative ways to meaningfully build our relationship.

It is impossible to know all the ways this relationship has impacted people but the lives of two young individuals in particular were changed. Alejandro Mejia was the teenage music director at EDR. With assistance from a member at FMC, he finished college and is now a highly regarded pastor and mission director in North Carolina. Andres Diaz, from an extremely poor family, was 17 when an FMC member visiting Bucaramanga met him. He subsequently was assisted by FMC to continue studying, go to Germany, and get an engineering degree. He is now married, with a young daughter, and employed as an engineer.

These are very visible effects but there are less obvious outcomes that are also important results from an intentional connection that links peoples from different cultures. For us at FMC, we have learned practical lessons of peacemaking from those who

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First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana lights this lamp each Sunday as a reminder of their connection with their sister church in Colombia.

Sister church friendship (continued)

live in the midst of conflict, we have gained understanding from those laboring under very difficult conditions, and we have learned firsthand the destructive effects that our government policies and that while we work to assist those affected, we also have an obligation

to work to change those policies. Each congregation brings gifts to our relationship and together we are learning how to accept these gifts and bring healing and hope to each other. ⑩

Sanctuary effort launched a long-term friendship

A friendship between Chicago (Ill.) Community Mennonite Church and William and Marina Valencia in Colombia began more than ten years ago and continues as a ministry of CMCC.

In 2006, the congregation was asked by the Chicago Religious Leaders Network (CRLN) if they might be a sanctuary church for human rights workers whose lives were endangered in Latin America. They agreed.

William Valencia was a Mennonite pastor in Girardot, Colombia, whose life was threatened because he was preaching peace. Through CRLN, William and Marina came to Chicago and spent six months worshipping with and supported by CCMC. When they returned to Colombia, they were not able to return to their home area, but instead ministered in Bogotá. During this time William was called to be president of the Mennonite Church in Colombia. Then in 2012, he and Marina began serving as Mennonite volunteers in Riobamba, Ecuador. By 2015, ten years had passed since they left

Girardot, and enough had changed that it was possible for William and Marina to return.

Through all this time, the congregation and pastoring couple have maintained a close, supportive friendship. Prayer requests are shared back and forth, and CCMC provides a small amount of financial support to help with assistance for the peace ministry in Colombia.

Sara Reschly, member of CCMC, writes, "William and Marina have deep faith and brought a lot of joy to us at CCMC while they were here. They have a natural gift for connecting with children and were able to connect with neighborhood children (despite the language barrier!) in ways that many of us could not."

In Colombia, "William and Marina have brought much love and healing to their congregation. They lead a strong youth ministry that focuses on supporting youth to use peaceful ways to resolve conflict, and they also provide an important ministry to couples in crisis."

CCMC and the couple have not seen each other since 2006. However, Sara writes, "We continue to be in relationship with William and Marina as an expression of our commitment to peace. The US provides massive military aid to Colombia each year to help 'fight the war on drugs.' This is our small gesture to help counter the damage done by the US military aid to Colombia."

Both the congregation and William and Marina are better equipped to carry out their own ministries because of this friendship over more than ten years. ⑩



Ministry with children is a significant part of the Colombian congregation where William and Marina Valencia are pastors.

Doug's Mug

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

Our Lenten journey is always toward the cross, at the foot of the cross and through the cross. The cup/mug appears at least three times along this journey. At the Passover meal, which Jesus enjoys with his friends, Jesus takes a blessed cup and says, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

(Luke 22:20) A bit later we discover Jesus



praying alone on the Mt. of Olives. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done," he prays. (Luke 22:42) The third cup comes in the form of a sponge, offered to the dying Jesus on the cross, "... someone ran, filled a

sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." (Mark 15:37)

Oh, what a strange mixed drink we receive during Holy Week; a cup of love, a cup of sorrow, a cup of death.

Holy Week is filled with paradox: beloved disciples who abandon, fickle crowds that turn, powerful rulers swayed, crosses that save, death that brings new life. Holy Week is scandalous in its storyline. It makes no earthly sense ... from a privileged point of view. Yet, for 2000 years, it has been the hope of the enslaved: sinners, martyrs, the folks at the bottom, prophets, victims.

This paradox has been driven home to me powerfully this Lenten season as I've read *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by black theologian James Cone. (Orbis Books, 2011) Why didn't I learn the power of this haunting story in high school American History, in college sociology and ethics classes, in Sunday School?

Cone writes in his final chapter:

The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's

salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst. Faith that emerged out of the scandal of the cross is not a faith of intellectuals or elites or any sort. This is the faith of abused and scandalized people—the losers and the down and out.

Cone continues:

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, shameful events, instruments of punishment reserved for the most despised people in society. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching of the Christian gospel must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree. (Loc 4573ff in Kindle book)

When I heard another black theologian, Drew Hart*, speak in January, he told the familiar Good Samaritan story. He said the difference between the Samaritan and the Levite and Priest before him, was that the others "passed by on the other side" while the Samaritan "drew near." It is in "drawing near" that we discover our neighbor; drawing near to the pain, the suffering, the broken, the lost, the forsaken, the outsider, the other.

Lent is a season to "draw near." May it be so. 🙏

*Drew G.I. Hart, author of *Trouble I've Seen; Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, (Herald Press, 2016) will be the plenary speaker at our CDC Annual Meeting on June 23 in Bluffton, Ohio. See more on page 4.

CDC Annual Meeting

June 22-24, Bluffton (Ohio) University,

Hosted by the CDC West Ohio Region: First (Bluffton), Cincinnati, Grace, Lima, Emmaus Road, and Shalom Community

The May issue of *Reporter* will give details of the speakers, special events and schedule.

Please report who your congregation's delegates are at www.mcusacdc.org/delegate-report-form, or by email to office@mcusacdc.org

“The Big Read” brought to you by CDC

by Carrie A. Mast

Join others from across the expanse of CDC to peruse and ponder the pages of *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the way the church views racism* by theologian and activist Drew G. I. Hart.

This book, written for each member of the church, is an impassioned urging to consider new ways of seeing and discussing racism.

“Churches have often been the least helpful place to discuss racism and our white-dominated society. If racism is talked about at all, it is often addressed on isolated Sundays set apart for grieving some national event or engaging in sparse and limited pulpit swaps. None of those efforts is necessarily problematic. But when our actions are limited to such strategies, they reveal that we don’t really understand the full scope or nature of race and

racism in our society” (20).

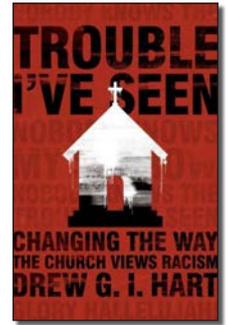
Consider participating in The Big Read as preparation for our Annual Meeting in June where Hart will lead us in a plenary session, as well as an afternoon seminar/book discussion.

Consider participating in The Big Read with your Sunday School class, small group or congregation. Consider participating in The Big Read because, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we are called to be committed to justice.

May the Spirit bend our ears and minds to really hear Hart’s voice as we read collectively.

Books and a free, downloadable study guide are available through the MennoMedia website:

www.heraldpress.com/titles/TroubleIveSeen/Praise/ 



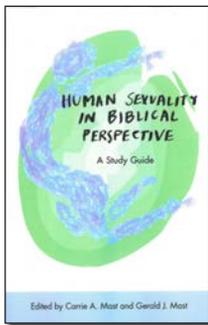
Study guide available

Human Sexuality in Biblical Perspective, the study guide prompted by CDC’s work over the last several years, is now available for congregations and groups to use.

In the Foreword, Lois Johns Kaufmann, who was conference minister when the book was developed, emphasized that discernment about issues of human sexuality belongs in the congregation and is fostered when there is commitment to listening and counsel. This guide, with its emphasis on study of Scripture, is a tool for congregations in this kind of discernment.

Carrie A. Mast and Gerald J. Mast developed this guide, drawing on an in-depth study and a more academic document prepared by the Human Sexuality Task Group of CDC. Members of that group were Loren Johns, chair; Ron Guengerich; Michael Miller; Kiva Nice-Webb; J. Alexander Sider; and Regina Shands Stoltzfus.

Human Sexuality in Biblical Perspective is available for order through Amazon or Cascadia Publishing. The book sells for \$12.95. For bulk orders, contact Cascadia Publishing: contact@CascadiaPublishingHouse.com 



Financial report

February 28, 2017

Year-to-date giving	
from congregations	\$140,097
Year-to-date plan	\$143,667
Difference between giving and plan . .	-\$3,570

Year-to-date giving	
from individuals and families	\$17,375
Year-to-date plan	\$20,333
Difference between giving and plan . .	-\$2,958

Year-to-date expenses	\$138,832
Year-to-date spending plan	\$148,344

In February, giving to Central District Conference both from congregations and from other supporters typically is lower than in most other months. This year was no exception. On the expense side, we continue to run lower than the spending plan. Thanks to all for the strong financial support.

Report provided by Roger Nafziger, conference treasurer

Getting acquainted with CDC congregations*

Saint Paul Mennonite Fellowship

How old is your congregation?

We were founded in 1984, making us 33 years old.

How would you describe your congregation's worship?

We are a lay-led group. Our worship is traditional in that we have prayers, sermons, Bible readings and hymns. But our worship is un-traditional in that we encourage personal sharing, asking questions and discussion.

What are the primary ministries of your congregation?

Primarily we care for each other in our daily concerns with children, grandchildren, aging parents and our spiritual lives. Because we are very small (between 6 and 12 gather for worship), our outward community service is limited. We have a long-term commitment to support the food shelf at a neighborhood facility. We stock a Little Free Library and we send volunteers to help with cleaning and maintenance at a religious retreat center.

What characteristics make your congregation a unique part of the body of Christ?

We successfully made the difficult transition from having a paid pastor to having no paid staff many years ago. This requires a high level of commitment to volunteer our time and communicate often. We are proud that we have maintained a strong identity and steady presence for years with this lay model. We have welcomed LGBTQ members from early in our history, and for that welcome we received many positive and negative attentions, but it is something we're known for and proud of. We also seek to affirm the equality of men and women in the church and male and female in God. — David E. Edminster 

*This is the first in what is intended as an ongoing series of profiles of CDC congregations.



The worship table at St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship is dressed up as an ofrenda, a Mexican-style tribute to loved ones who have died—an example of the kind of variety and creativity that characterizes much of their worship.

Invitation from Columbus Mennonite Church

Columbus Mennonite Church, previously Neil Avenue Mennonite Church, will celebrate 55+ years of service, worship and fellowship August 19–20. If you previously attended CMC or NAMC, we would like to hear your stories of your time in Columbus. We are looking forward to sharing memories and reconnecting with our friends. Sat, Aug. 19, 4 p.m.—Greet, Meet and Eat; 7 p.m.—Memories, Music and Magic. Sunday, Aug. 20, 9:30 a.m.—Worship emphasizing our ministries in Columbus and around the world. Please let us know if you will attend at cmc55@columbusmennonite.org. 

Transitions



Jon and Aimee Weishaupt (right) were installed as Pastors of Discipling and Youth at Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., on February 5. At left are Doug Luginbill, CDC conference minister, and Jeremy Shue, co-pastor.



Matthew Yoder was installed as pastor of Grace Mennonite Church, Pandora, Ohio, on January 29. Matthew most recently served as pastor at Menno Mennonite Church in Ritzville, Washington. He began at Grace on January 16.



Charles Bontrager (right) was ordained as a Minister of the Gospel on Sunday, March 12, at First Mennonite Church, Wadsworth, Ohio.

Mennonite Church USA Convention

July 4-8, Orlando, Fla.

Theme: Love is a verb

Register by April 30 to avoid higher fees.

Visit convention.mennoniteusa.org for details.

Central District Reporter
Volume 61, Number 2, March 2017
Editor: Mary E. Klassen
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Reporter is published six times a year. It is the official organ of communication among the churches of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA. It is distributed free to CDC congregations through the CDC spending plan.

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