

gospel evangel

connecting the congregations of
indiana-michigan mennonite conference

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Photo Credit: Daria-Yakovleva, pixabay.com

Being the Salt and Yeast

A history and vision for Growing Our Intercultural Witness.

By: Joanne Gallardo, conference minister

Recently, when asked what I have been most excited about in accepting this position as Conference Minister, I have spoken of IMMC's goal of "Growing Our Intercultural Witness." While some reading this article may know exactly what this entails, I also understand that this may be a focus you've only heard about by name or may not know about at all.

To give a brief history, IMMC's work with growing its intercultural witness predates my time here. Bob Yoder has helped me understand the timeline that exists for conference and their goal of intercultural competency and witness. From September of 2019 to March 2020, the Missional Leadership Team (MLT) had conversations with Nekeisha Alayna Alexis, from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, who works with intercultural competence and undoing racism. In the fall of 2020, Nekeisha led 4 monthly webinars called "Built Together" around this topic for the conference. In February of 2021, "Growing our Intercultural Witness" (GOIW), which I'll share in a moment, was drafted. Conversations were had with Mosaic Mennonite Conference asking about their work with becoming more interculturally competent. In March of 2021 the MLT sought counsel at regional meetings concerning the GOIW document, and at Annual Sessions in June 2021 the document was presented. There was strong affirmation for this intercultural work throughout the process.

Currently, our document, rooted in Revelation 7:9-10, uses our mission statement to outline our purpose. To remind you of our mission statement: **We are a community of congregations, Centered on Jesus, Guided by the Holy Spirit, Acting through Grace, Love, and Peace, Engaging the world God loves.**

The Growing our Intercultural Witness document reads:

Therefore, as a *community of congregations* we commit to engage justly across cultural differences. This also means confronting white supremacy.

Because we are *centered on Jesus*, we seek to undo the walls of racial and cultural privilege.

As a community *guided by the Holy Spirit*, we let go of personal and collective passivity in the face of racialized violence and cultural exclusion.

Acting through grace, love and peace, we commit to being the salt of justice and the yeast of redemption as we *engage the world God loves*.

This final line, the heart of the message, resonates with me most. It is a tall order to commit to being the salt of justice and the yeast of redemption. As we reflect on the ongoing

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Being the Salt and Yeast

racial injustice that is so frequent in our news feeds, it is apparent that there are deep wounds. These wounds come from the actions and words put upon People of Color, as well as the wounds White people inflict as they also harm themselves in perpetuating White supremacy.

Getting salt in a wound is painful—it stings and our instinct is to move away. But during times of scarcity caused by war, exile, or migration, salt has been instrumental in helping clean and treat wounds. The salt of justice helps clean and restore healing. That doesn't mean it's easy, or that it's a comfortable experience for us. For White people, putting salt in the wounds caused by White supremacy can stir up feelings of defensiveness, hurt egos and pride, or feelings of losing something valuable. That something valuable is the tangible and intangible privilege that comes from a culture that says Whiteness is the norm.

I do not speak of this with a tone of blame. We often look at People of Color as the only people hurt by these deep gashes caused by racial injustice, and that is simply not true. White people do benefit from White supremacy but are also hurt and torn down by the weight of it by the actions of themselves, of others, and of the culture.

People of Color will also bear the pain of salt in these wounds, but this is nothing new. The sting caused by systemic racism cuts deep, and we know all too well that the healing is painful. In our efforts to bring justice to an unjust cultural paradigm, we run the risk of re-traumatizing People of Color, bringing pain to wounds that haven't yet healed. People of Color have confronted this pain before, and inevitably, the unlearning of internalized White supremacy can leave us feeling pain as well. This internalization of White supremacy, which isn't talked about enough in my experience, becomes the default for some People of Color. In that way, we are all working at healing the wounds caused by a cultural reality with nefarious intent.

There are other ways to clean wounds, but I would argue that it is like we are at war, in exile, or in a time of migration and salt is all we have. While salt is painful to use, it does prevent infection. White supremacy may be infectious, but the salt of justice ultimately helps us to heal.

The yeast of redemption is another aspect of this document that deserves a second look. Yeast is a single-cell organism that needs food, warmth, and moisture to thrive. The sugars and carbon dioxide released by yeast cause bread to rise. In thinking about redemption, this may seem like a place where the metaphor might break down. If redemption is being saved from something, what does that have to do with something that helps dough double in size?

One need not look far to see that redemption is scarce. We have a hard time extending grace to other people and, most of all, ourselves. I recently completed a course learning how to give the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), an assessment tool of intercultural competence. Our instructor spoke of a time when he was called in to help in a situation at an elementary school. A teacher had referred to students of color as something that has, in our modern cultural parlance, become derogatory. The principal was offended and was ready to fire this teacher. My instructor, the intercultural expert, learned that after talking to this teacher that she had no idea that her words were derogatory. She simply had never heard of them being used in a negative way before. When her eyes were opened, she

immediately felt remorse. She apologized and thanked those who had confronted her. Though this teacher was relatively interculturally competent, she had simply not realized the history of the words she used and how they've been used against People of Color.

My instructor said from the beginning that he wanted to be a part of a process that was restorative, not merely punitive. In the end, this woman ended up keeping her job and received education in terms of sensitivity with cultural groups she was less familiar with. In this case, there was redemption for this teacher. Wrongs were pointed out and addressed with some grace and education.

Clearly, not every case of transgression/education/transformation is this clean cut. People must be held accountable for their words and actions. Sometimes this involves the changing or ending of relationships. However, in other cases, it is in our transgressions that we learn and grow. I think of the times in cross-cultural experiences when I unknowingly said or did the wrong thing, causing harm. Fortunately, people were kind and gracious enough with me to offer forgiveness and educate me to be better understood and more fully informed.

I see this as the heart of the phrase, "the yeast of redemption." When fed, tended to, and allowed room to grow, redemption can spill over from the confines we place it in. When yeast is added to the redemption that we have been offered through Christ, we cannot help but continue to find room for it to keep expanding.

I understand that for a lot of people talk of becoming more interculturally competent is loaded. However, I would like us all to remember the scripture, Revelation 7:9-10, behind our document. It speaks of a great immeasurable multitude from lands far and wide, from every language, saying that salvation comes from God and the Lamb. We are a witness to this great gathering and our own gatherings around the world are a witnesses to others. This is one passage of many that urges us to be in right relationship with others, not giving thought to borders, barriers, or whatever person-made entity that separates us. Our love as Christians is to be unconditional, for all people we encounter (not just people "like us"), and full of truth.

During a recent team meeting in our office, Administrative Coordinator Clayton Gladish shared a devotional from Jared Byas' *Love Matters More* before the meeting that said, "...if it doesn't set people free, it isn't the truth." Loving only what we understand is conditional, does not set people free and, therefore, it isn't the truth. If our love is for all people and is full of truth, then it *sets people free*. This love allows others to be who they are and thanks them for the gift that they offer by simply showing up. Love that's full of truth helps us move our view of *us* from myopic to panoramic. Love that's full of truth, as the third paragraph of our Growing our Intercultural Witness says, is guided by the Holy Spirit and has us standing up to passivity. Love and Truth are sisters and together they sit on either side of the Great Liberator.

I hope that this overview of our desire to grow our intercultural witness excites you as it excites me. Conference sees this as a priority for our life together, and given that our demographic is ever-changing, it is most timely. May we seek God's help in becoming, "...a community of congregations, centered on Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, acting through grace, love and peace, engaging the world God loves."

Becoming a Hybrid Church

Hudson Lake Mennonite Church

Embracing New Opportunities for the Twenty-First Century Church.

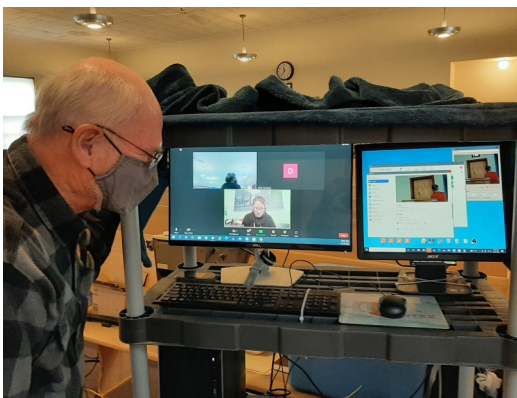
By: Clayton Gladish, administrative coordinator

In every century since the beginning of the church, congregations have faced unique challenges and opportunities. We can all agree that there has been no shortage of these in the twenty-first century. The ubiquity of cell phones and WiFi in many places has made space for social media and video communication to dominate the way we connect with others both near and far. When the Covid-19 pandemic came along, we were fortunate to have such technology but could any of us have predicted what this would mean for our churches?

Hudson Lake Mennonite Church (New Carlisle, IN) has taken advantage of this opportunity and has intentionally embraced what it means a hybrid congregation. Recognizing that hybrid can mean a variety of things these days, I connected with their pastor, Esther Lanting, and a volunteer technician, Don Carpenter, so that we could share how this congregation is joining God at work in New Carlisle and beyond.

For Hudson Lake, being a hybrid church is more than just broadcasting a worship service. They have chosen to create space for their faith community to gather on Sunday mornings and throughout the week. They are also in the habit of gathering online for fellowship up to a half hour in advance of the worship service. This has provided the unexpected but encouraging experience of more open interactions on Zoom that go beyond one's typical social group.

On the first and third Sundays of the month they meet by Zoom only, and on the second and fourth Sundays they invite people to worship in the building and via Zoom. When they meet in this hybrid form, they project the Zoom participants onto the screen and have a camera pointed toward the congregation to create a feeling of all being in a room together. This includes those who were a part of the congregation before the pandemic as well as those from across the country who have more recently joined.



Don Carpenter at Hudson Lake's Zoom streaming station.

While Hudson Lake did not have experience with streaming in the past, they were able to take advantage of grant funding and leverage local ingenuity to create a way of connecting those who would gather in the building and

those who gather online. Taking a 'do it yourself' approach, Don watched some YouTube videos, read some articles, and experimented until they were able to develop something that works for them.



Hudson Lake's "Zoomers" projected on the sanctuary screen.

Another important part of being a hybrid church for Hudson Lake are the weekly gatherings on Zoom that they have called "Chat on the Porch" and "Fireside Chat," depending on the season. Noticing that this was mostly appealing to women, there was a "Man Cave" option for 4-5 months. Also, one small group has continued to meet every other week on Zoom.

Ministry in a hybrid congregation looks differently, noted Pastor Esther, as you cannot make home visits to those who live in other parts of the country. Pastoral care in the way it has been done is a challenge. However, emailing, texting, and phone calls are becoming much more common and meaningful way of connecting.

One of the challenges they noted was that the amount of work that goes into a hybrid worship service is more than was expected. For instance, it takes time to find the right music videos from YouTube that feels like it suits the congregation. But they are encouraged to have so many who are willing to volunteer to make it work.

For congregations who are considering a hybrid approach, Esther and Don offered advice from their experience. Esther gave the encouragement to not get upset when things do not work perfectly. Glitches happen but it tends to work itself out. Don spoke to the need for people who are willing to experiment and try different things and who are willing give up on the idea that "we have never done it that way before."

As we all work to envision what the church will look like in the coming century, the model that Hudson Lake has adopted is a good option for congregations following God's call into new forms of doing ministry. May God continue to bless us with creativity to build community and engage the world God loves.

journeying with our pastors



Joanne Gallardo, IMMC Conference Minister, reflects on how we experience God's love through storytelling.

In November, I had the privilege of gathering with a group of IMMC pastors at our annual Pastor Gathering at Amigo Centre. During this time, we worshipped, prayed, learned, and shared. I was immensely grateful for this opportunity for authentic presence.

What I learned was that life is hard right now for leaders. Obviously, I knew this already but I must admit that I discovered that I had personally stuffed down a lot of my anger, uncertainty, sadness, and confusion to be a "good and effective leader."

Pastors at this gathering were real. Folks came with their hearts open. We dug deep to really get at what it's like to pastor during a global crisis. No one taught us this at seminary and there were no workshops on leading effectively during a pandemic. There has been no rulebook or guidepost for the last 2 years. We've had to make it up as we go, and for many of us, that was yet another rock added to an already heavy load.

There is a sense of relief when we realize that the burdens we carry are shared by others. But in this gathering, we didn't stay there. Not only was the gathering itself rejuvenating, we also shared ideas, what we've learned, and what has made us excited in congregational life. The cumulative pastoral experience

ranged from a few months to many, many years. It didn't seem to matter how "seasoned" a pastor was, many people found a kindred spirit in both that which has become a burden and become an unexpected joy.

We also learned that there are other things to talk about besides Covid! The world had not completely stopped since our last gathering. There was much to share and update, and many new transitions to celebrate.

What would it look like if we took the authentic vulnerability that happens during retreats and special gatherings and brought it to congregations? Would that be putting ourselves too out there? Or would it open up space for others to breathe a sigh of relief and say, "I'm so glad I'm not the only one who feels this way!" If we were open with one another about what we can and can't do, what we need from others, and how we would like others to work with us, I truly believe we would be a transformed church.

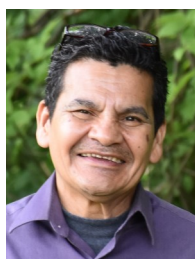
I would urge us all, pastors, leaders, and congregants alike, to allow space to say that we don't always know what we're doing, there is no road map, but with courage and vulnerability, we can figure out our way together.

ministry transitions

Beginnings



Monica Miller began as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Indianapolis, on November 1, 2021.



Rolando Sosa was installed to join the pastoral team at Piedre Viva on December 19, 2021.

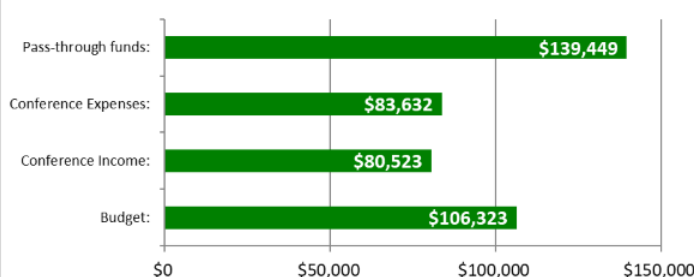


Frances Ringenberg ended her interim pastorate at First Mennonite Church, Indianapolis on October 31, 2021.

Ending

financial report

Fiscal Year to Date 7/1/2021 - 11/30/2021



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Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference

An area conference of Mennonite Church USA

Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference—a conference of **Mennonite Church USA**—is a community of congregations in Indiana and Michigan.

We are a community of congregations, centered on Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, acting through grace, love and peace, engaging the world God loves.

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