

gospel evangel

connecting the congregations of
indiana-michigan mennonite conference

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Photo Credit: <https://www.tolson.org/building-update-fundraising/>

Faith Fuels Community Partnerships

By: Joanne Gallardo, Conference Co-minister

I was able to meet via Zoom with Cyneatha Millsaps, pastor at Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart and chair of the board for Tolson Center for Community Excellence, Anna Ruth Hershberger, member of Prairie Street Mennonite Church, and Ben Bouwman, pastor of Walnut Hill Mennonite Church to discuss Elkhart's Tolson Center for Community Excellence. I met with these invested community members to discuss their hopes, dreams, and how their faith connects with Tolson's mission following an event hosted at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) to discuss ways in which the Mennonite community might help.

According to Millsaps, the Tolson Center started in the 1990s as a call from the community for a youth center. Elkhart wanted a safe place for involving young people in constructive activities, located in a group of neighborhoods in Elkhart known as South Central. The Tolson Center was created as a connection to the former Booker T. Washington Center, once located in South Central, which was used as a central hub for the Black community at that time. Herbert and Ruth Tolson were youth community leaders at that time, so the name of the Tolson Center holds special meaning. The New Tolson Center for Community Excellence seeks to become a new community hub like the former Booker T. Washington Center, serving the entire county.

The population of South Central is 1/3 Black, 1/3 Hispanic, and 1/3 Caucasian. South Central has been divested by the city over the past 50 years. Now, attention is being drawn back to this area, or at least, that is the hope. The desire is that this center revitalizes South Central, brings together diversity, and provides a place to gather once again for all of Elkhart County.

For Millsaps, this is personal. "I was born here. My whole entire life has involved South Central. The reason I know who I am and why I am came from South Central, the community that raised and launched me. Many young people haven't been blessed with the community I had. I want them to have that kind of environment again and the Tolson Center can help the community be an anchor."

Millsaps was invited by the mayor of Elkhart to join the Tolson Center board. The city voted to reinvest in Tolson after community unrest in South Central. After a task force was formed and the city council heard from the community, a board was formed. "It was evident that the community felt like the city shouldn't be running it," Millsaps said, who chairs the 15-member board. The hope is that this is led by the community for the community.

Ben Bouwman and Anna Ruth Hershberger have been drawn to the mission of the Tolson Center. For Bouwman, this connected with personal reflection on race and wealth. "The Christian church is called to pay attention to those who have been harmed as well as those who benefit from the harm done," Bouwman stated. One area he's been looking at more closely is how systemic racism and white supremacy have caused harm, especially for BIPOC folks. "I'm interested in how, here in Elkhart County, we can make steps in the right direction towards healing and toward addressing harm." He spoke about how the communities of Goshen and Elkhart are connected, including being tethered by racist histories. "Tolson is one piece of the pie in addressing that."

For Hershberger, her connection to the Tolson Center has been spiritual. She tells the story of how she was first introduced to its mission. Nekeisha Alayna Alexis from AMBS asked her to take fliers to the Tolson Center one day. "I walked in and felt this really amazing energy." Her congregation, Prairie Street Mennonite, makes it an intentional focus to love their neighbors. The Tolson is right across from a church that has related to Prairie Street, so the connection felt both right and natural. Hershberger stated that she's had some memorable and beautiful interactions with children from South Central and knows "it's an incredible place."

"When the Elkhart city council members were trying to get rid of the Center, at that point I was living alone. I kept thinking about the children (continued on page 2)

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Faith Fuels Community Partnerships

that I would pass on the streets. I started praying for them and for Tolson. I didn't have my own children at that point, but I considered the children in the neighborhood to be my children. They're all our children." Hershberger said that all of that contributed to her wanting to see Tolson thrive.

For each, faith is at the center of their passion. Said Bouwman, "American culture is focused on the individual, as in, 'How does this affect me?'" He stated that in Goshen it's easy to think of this as an "Elkhart project." "Regardless of whether I use it or not, my faith calls me to consider the wellbeing of that neighborhood being tied up with the wellbeing of my neighborhood. I pay tax dollars that pay for roads in Goshen I never go on, but I'm ok paying it because I want everyone to have good roads. We're all in this together. If some parts of Elkhart County aren't flourishing, we all aren't flourishing. Let's flourish."

Millsaps also feels that her faith is also connected to the mission of the Tolson Center. "I believe my faith to be intertwined with who I am as Cyneatha. God is working at all times through all of us at any given point, and the better we understand that the better we benefit the people of God. When I think only of myself, I hinder the process. When we work as a family of God, we'll see the kingdom of God. Our Anabaptist faith teaches us that."

Meetings regarding the Tolson Center played a large part in the beginning of Hershberger's relationship with her spouse. "Darren [my spouse] and I had just started dating, and we were trying to keep it under wraps until we felt more solid in the relationship. I had been bringing him along to city council meetings. These meetings were some of our first dates!" At one meeting they were photographed together and their picture made the front page of the local newspaper, The Elkhart Truth. "I just about flipped!" said Hershberger. "But I love that our relationship started with dates concerning the Tolson Center"

"The city of Elkhart voted to reinvest in Tolson after the community spoke out against the city council's initial decision to defund the Tolson Center. Upon the decision to reinvest a task force was formed and from multiple community conversations, a board was formed. It was evident that the community felt like the city shouldn't be running it," said Millsaps, who chairs the 15-member board. "The community wanted to ensure Tolson would not be subject to political changes. The hope is that The Tolson Center for Community Excellence will be led by the community for the community."

Both Hershberger and Millsaps have angering memories of the city council meetings being "toxic." Hershberger recounted that her spouse is soft spoken and doesn't get angry easily. At one meeting, council members were interrupting a community member trying to speak. "Darren got really angry and raised his voice; I would say he yelled. Since we had been quiet the whole time and because Darren is a white male, they listened." Hershberger recounts this as a time when their privilege was used for good. Hershberger noted that these city council meetings seemed to get into the realm of spiritual warfare.

But, despite this, there was so much good that came out of a community coming together.

Millsaps recalled that her sons went to the Tolson Center in the 90s. "I coached basketball, and [the Tolson Center] had huge tournaments and leagues for all ages. We would also practice there before or after games." Neighborhood kids would watch Millsaps and her sons practice and ask if they could practice with them. "Before long, there were a whole bunch of kids learning the skills of the game," Millsaps said. Soon girls joined the mix. "By the end of the summer, we had 9 girls who wanted their own time to practice." Millsaps would meet with them to practice over the summer. At the end of the summer, one of the Tolson Center leaders said to her, "It's been wonderful watching you with those kids, especially those girls. You know, by the end of next year, one of those girls will be pregnant." What this person didn't know was that they were talking to a teen mom, as Millsaps had her first child at 16. "It hit me differently," Millsaps said. She asked the girls if they still wanted to get together outside of the basketball season, and all of them said, "Yes!" "Now I work with B.A.P.S., Black American Princesses, a group of girls aged 8-17." Millsaps recounted, "...and of those initial 9 middle school aged girls, only one became pregnant her senior year of high school. 4 went on to college and the others are thriving with families of their own today."

Bouwman's story comes from deep reflection on racial inequality. "Part of what got me on to this work is reflecting on, 'What history have I been taught? Who has been telling that history? Whose voices aren't being heard?' My journey had me take another look at U.S. history from perspectives of non-dominant culture." This led Bouwman to the book "The Color of Money." Bouwman stated it was a starting point for how society has not worked for BIPOC folks, and how it has worked well for white people. "Reading that history propelled me into the work."

This interview was a joy, and I think one of Hershberger's final thoughts sum up my own experience in conducting this interview. "Shalom comes to mind for me [in relation to the work of the Tolson Center]. This means everyone having what they need, good relationships, access to good food and education, along with friendship and mentorship. I think white people tend to think, 'Oh, that's just south central Elkhart.'" Hershberger explained that neighborhood kids having Shalom, and having a place to direct their energy, will help strengthen the community as a whole.

The group encourages Mennonite churches in the area to get involved. Hershberger notes, "If we're [Mennonites] going to work with peace and justice issues, if it's going to be life giving to us and the world, the Holy Spirit needs to be a part of this and you work out of this spirit. I want to hold white Mennonites in this area accountable without saying 'You have to do more! You're not good enough!'" This is one avenue by which IMMC churches can contribute to the Shalom of a community. Time and resources are also needed, in addition to funding.



Cyneatha Millsaps, Co-Pastor at Prairie Street Mennonite Church



Ben Bouwman, Co-Pastor at Walnut Hill Mennonite Church



Anna Ruth Hershberger member at Prairie Street Mennonite Church

Millsaps stated, "As an Anabaptist Mennonite, I believe when we work together, we are a powerful force. I've seen it in Elkhart all my life, and my hope is that collectively the Mennonite Church might come together with reconciliation and support."

If you want to donate to the Tolson Center monetarily, go to tolson.org and designate giving as "Mennonite fund." On the website you can also find other ways to contribute, but you are also encouraged to have a conversation with Cyneatha Millsaps, Ben Bouwman, or Anna Ruth Hershberger. Their passion is evident, and I hope that this look into the Tolson Center encourages us all to "seek the peace of the city."

Spiritual Growth & Social Justice

Sunnyside Group Joins Poor People's Campaign

By: Clayton Gladish, Administrative Coordinator



Mary Kauffmann-Kennel, Sandi Hostetler, Don Jantzi, and Joe Schrock (not pictured: Charles Geiser) at the Poor People's Campaign March in Washington, DC.

Joining thousands of people on June 18, 2022, a small group from Sunnyside Mennonite Church (Elkhart, IN) participated in a march organized by the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) in Washington, DC. I caught up with two from this group, Sandi Hostetler and Mary Kauffmann-Kennel, who shared about their experience and their reflections following the event. While they are relatively new to the PPC, both Hostetler and Kauffmann-Kennel took this opportunity to put their faith to work and join with those who nonviolently protest and advocate for people experiencing poverty, inequality, discrimination, and systemic racism.

It was during early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, when many organizations took to the internet with webinars and virtual story-telling videos, that Hostetler first started to learn about the PPC. Noting the cross-over between the PPC and the work of their Anti-Racism Team at Sunnyside, she invited others to join her. This is how Kauffmann-Kennel got involved, along with three others from the congregation.

Both women shared about the way that the PPC uplifts voices from those who are victims of poverty from around the country. It was particularly meaningful to hear their stories and to see the leaders surround them in solidarity as they spoke. This was a powerful way of, "Claiming humanity when we tend to dehumanize and blame poor people," said Kauffmann-Kennel. It was also eye-



Mary Kauffmann-Kennel and Sandi Hostetler among the diverse crowd at the march.

opening to recognize how often the stories seemed connected to the same systemic issues in the United States.

"This is spiritual formation," was a common refrain throughout the interview. On several occasions they spoke to the importance of being aware of people who are outside of our immediate church community and engaging in learning what people are experiencing in their own spiritual growth. "Spiritual growth doesn't stop when we're older, it has to keep being a part of our life," Hostetler proclaimed. "Social justice is and should remain part of our spiritual focus."

Kauffman-Kennel noted the ways in which the work of the PPC is in line with the teachings of Jesus and Anabaptist teaching. She recalled the people that Jesus spent time with and the ways in which Jesus sided with those who were being oppressed as important precedent for this kind of work. In a time when she was beginning to feel cynical about faith, the work of the Anti-Racism Team at Sunnyside and of the PPC helped to strengthen her faith. Rather than slipping into complacency as many have, she heard an important challenge to "Show up, speak up, and never shut up."

Upon returning home, they have been working to integrate what they experienced with the PPC into congregational life of Sunnyside. While people from within the congregation connect with a variety of organizations in the area, this experience has certainly added to their congregational story. Peace and justice issues continue to be a part of their worship services in the form of litanies and words connected to the lighting of their peace lamp.



An example of the signs that conveyed the message of the Poor People's Campaign.

For those who might want to learn more about the PPC, they suggested visiting their website (<https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/>), which contains information about their priorities and resources from the PPC and similar organizations. Connecting with a local PPC group is also a good way to hear more local stories and ways to be involved in efforts to uplift the voices of others and work to overcome systemic injustices.

As a final thought, Hostetler reflected on how there was not as much of a police or military presence at the march as she expected. When considering why this might be, she wondered if this is because the government is not afraid of the poor and the media does not give this kind of event much coverage. She wondered what might happen if more people were to join the cause and take on nonviolent actions of protest. She admires the leaders who have been willing to do this and risk arrest. "Would I be willing to do this?" she asked. "Would I be willing to take my civil disobedience to the streets and be more visual?" These questions push her faith and model the kinds of questions many of us might ask in relation to social and systemic injustice.

journeying with our pastors



Sharon Yoder,
IMMC Conference
Co-Minister, reflects
on the input material
at All Teams Retreat in
September 2022.

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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We've talked a lot about love at conference gatherings over the past year. God's lavish love for us. Our love for God. Loving one another. 1 John 4 gave much to chew on. In the coming year, we want to go a step deeper. If we're serious about being centered on Jesus and guided by the Spirit and if God's love makes a difference in our lives, let's act on it!

Our scripture for the coming year, Philippians 2:1-5, fleshes out this invitation: "If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if Christ's love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you... Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage... Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself." (The Message).

Zenebe Abebe, a member of IMMC's Intercultural Working Group (IWG) and of Shalom Mennonite Church in Indianapolis, gave a stirring challenge to our conference leadership teams. Referencing Growing Our Intercultural Witness, the document affirmed by conference delegates in 2021, he noted, "As Mennonites, we're good at making statements. Can we also act on them? Do we really want to engage cultural diversity? Or are we just saying

that's what we want?"

On behalf of IWG, Zenebe urged us to wrestle deeply with questions that were shared with the Missional Leadership Team by Mosaic Conference: What are we prepared to lose? What do we think we'll gain? How are we making space for new leaders, especially leaders of color? How well are new people included? Do they have power or is it only symbolic? How do you move from symbolic change to structural change? Are we willing to let go and step aside to be transformed by other cultures? Are we willing, as white people especially, to educate ourselves and do some work around identities and around our history and the things that are happening now in our world?

Yes, Zenebe. We do want to engage cultural diversity. Centered on Jesus and guided by the Spirit, we will grapple with difficult questions, pondering Philippians 2:1-5 along the way. We will continue working at recognizing and responding to white privilege and systemic racism. Our dream is to be more than passively non-racist; we want to become blatantly anti-racist. Our dream is to grow our capacity to think of ourselves in the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. Our dream is to be so transformed by God's love that we will stop sweet talking our way to the top and make room for others. May it be so.

ministry transitions

Beginnings



Becky Helmuth was credentialed for ministry on June 5 and installed at Hudson Lake as transitional pastor on July 24.



Steph Wieand was installed on August 7 as a pastoral team member at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship.



Billy Funk was installed on September 11 as a pastoral team member at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship.



Richard Kauffman ended as interim pastoral team member at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship on July 31.

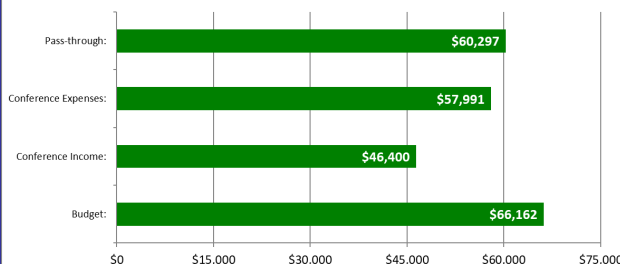


Frances Ringenberg ended as interim pastoral team member at Waterford Mennonite Church on August 30.

Endings

financial report

Fiscal Year to Date 7/1/2022 - 9/30/2022



 **Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference**
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