

# gospel evangel

connecting the congregations of  
indiana-michigan mennonite conference

january/february/march 2023



Photo Credit: Wildwood Mennonite Church

## Small Communities Sharing Big Love

Cooperation between churches spans distance, denomination in the Upper Peninsula

By: Joanne Gallardo, Conference Co-minister

Many of us attend churches that occasionally partner with other area churches. Be it Mennonite or interdenominational, congregations attempt not to be an institution until itself. If you live in a populous area like Indianapolis or Elkhart, gathering all the area churches would quickly turn into a huge event. It's not lost on me that if you're a Mennonite pastor in Goshen, you only gather as a whole body every other month. Otherwise, you're separated by conference affiliation. When we all meet together, we need a large space to hold everyone.

If you live in a more remote area, such as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, inter-church events bring energy, solidarity, and camaraderie when small congregations unite to fellowship, serve the community, and worship God together.

I had a Zoom conversation with Meredith Sommers and Diane Miller, both members of the Wildwood congregation of IMMC. The other congregation from IMMC in the UP is Grand Marais Mennonite Church. Maple River Mennonite is in Northern Michigan. I found out, after I visited the UP, they really enjoy connecting with each other even though there is significant distance between them.

I asked Meredith and Diane about what the "small church" experience is like for them. Meredith said that it's very intimate as well as very

active, and without everyone's participation, church wouldn't happen. "Someone teaches Sunday school, leads worship, is the liaison with Everence. We do most of the things that a bigger church does without staff." Diane commented on how this allows everyone's gifts to shine. It also stretches people. "Even if we don't feel called to a certain thing, we know we need to do it." When this happens, the congregation affirms and supports those who may be trying something out of their comfort zone. Meredith remarked that a new calling can happen in those times.

Diane, a longtime member of the community, said that the inter-church activity idea has been going on for many years. Their bigger events include Baccalaureate (an honoring of High School graduates) where the hosting congregation does so in a rotation, a Thanksgiving service, and a Christmas service. They both noted that some of these events are done in conjunction with 1 or 2 other churches, depending on the event.

The denominations include Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, and a Bible Church spanning the 9 miles between Engadine and Naubinway.

### inside

- 2 Small Communities Sharing Big Love
- 3 Introducing Outdoor Sanctuary
- 4 Journeying with our pastors

(continued on page 2)



# Small Communities Sharing Big Love



Intergenerational activities were a popular part of the Fall Fest event.

Partnering with other local churches helps all these congregations pull off large events.

While Diane is a leader when it comes to spearheading some of the community events, she is quick to say that it is very much a group effort. For instance, Meredith is more gifted in speaking and worship leading roles, while Diane would much prefer working with hosting or arranging the logistics of an event. When asking them what “makes it all work,” Diane replied that even though Wildwood isn’t perfect and differences exist, everyone is able to put conflicts aside and work together for the good of the group. Their purpose is serving the community and loving God. “We can rise above differences to work together to complete a goal.”

One of the events that’s specific to Wildwood, Meredith and Diane’s congregation, is the Back-to-School Backpack event. This concept was Diane’s idea from the area’s Project Backpack where children from underserved communities receive a backpack and school supplies for the coming school year. Diane brought to Wildwood the idea of getting involved and it was quickly picked up by the church. If a local child would want to participate in Project Backpack, they would have to drive to St. Ignace. That takes time, money, and a working car. Why

not have a similar event locally? Diane saw a need in the school she works in and wanted to bring it to the community around the church.

“It was small the first year, but then it really grew,” Diane said. They had food, games, and brought MCC storyteller Les Gustafson Zook who was an excellent addition to the day. Wildwood was grateful Everence was able to provide some financial help to pull off the event.

I asked both women where they met God in all this. Meredith said, “We know from looking around us that getting people to come to church on a Sunday morning is a big ask these days. Church is not a part of lots of peoples’ weeks.” She talked about her church having around 40-50 people attend on a regular basis, and sometimes new folks come after a community event. “They may or may not come to church regularly, but when they think about church, I hope they have positive associations with it. When they think about our church, I hope they think about fun and caring. If they’re in a place where they need something, I hope they think about Wildwood.”

Diane added that when they entered the world of community church event planning, they wondered, “What if nobody comes?” There was a real fear surrounding that question. She then asked, “Well, do we feel that we are doing what God has called us to do? Does it matter how many come if only one person comes? Introducing us to 1 new family or person gets us out there in the community. Anytime we do an event, having 1 new person come to our church is one more time that we have to make a difference.”

Input has been given about the possibility of putting out more literature in the community with Wildwood’s name and information. “If they remember, ‘When I went to that church, I got a backpack’ or ‘We went caroling with that church,’ it makes an impact on these kids.” Diane described this as a “steppingstone” in building more relationships.

When I asked them what they wanted the people of IMMC to know, they said to say that they’re still going, and that they’re still going strong! And if you are considering moving to a new location to work remotely, the UP welcomes you with open arms, and you would have multiple churches there to greet you.



Learn more and  
get updates



point your  
phone or tablet  
camera here  
for more info



Or type this address into your browser:  
[im.mennonite.net/events/annualsessions](http://im.mennonite.net/events/annualsessions)



# Introducing Outdoor Sanctuary

## Worshiping With God's Creation in Goshen

By: Clayton Gladish, Administrative Coordinator

When asked, "How do you experience God?" many think of times when they were surrounded by nature, God's creation. "There's something about the awe and wonder of God that is accessible in nature," says Sharon Norton, pastor of Outdoor Sanctuary - Wild Church of Goshen, as she tells the story of a one-year-old worshiping community that does church a little differently.

While Outdoor Sanctuary has elements of worship that participants would be familiar with, the setting lends itself to a much more participatory service. Regardless of the time of year, they gather outdoors at Oxbow State Park or in a wooded area near the Goshen Dam. Following a brief scripture reading and an introduction of a theme for reflection, participants are sent on a 20- to 30-minute silent hike. Upon their return, they gather to share their reflections with one another. A land acknowledgment and a simple acapella song are also part of the service at some point.

One of the advantages to this kind of worship is that there is less need for intense preparation and professional training for all the leaders and participants. "Nature is the text... and we show up, gather together, and trust that God will speak to us somehow," Norton reflects. She is



Sharon Norton (center) leads participants in a time of worship and reflection.

one of a team of three who help to give leadership within the group, taking turns to facilitate the gatherings. The shared leadership and participatory nature of the gathering allow for a different experience even for the leaders who leave feeling energized by their experience of God, nature, and fellowship.

Norton speaks of the variety of reasons that people seem to be attracted to this kind of worship. For some, it is their awareness of the precarious ecological state of the earth—this community becomes a place to lament the harm done to the earth alongside a shared desire to care for creation. For others, it may be a welcomed reprieve from the more traditional forms of church. It can also be a place to find people who have a similar experience of God through nature.

The dream behind starting Outdoor Sanctuary came to fruition after a six-month testing period for Norton. During her time at Mission Network, she met Katerina Friesen who shared about her experience of a Wild Church in California. She waited six months to see if it was just a passing fantasy, but when it didn't go away, she knew this was a new calling.

Norton also recalled growing up in nature. "I grew up being outdoors, but I didn't connect that with church." Hiking, foraging, and campfires were all part of her formative experiences. Another personally motivating factor for her is the worldview of many Indigenous Peoples of not just living on the land but living with the land. It is meaningful to also find the outdoors as a worshipful space and to engage with others who feel the same.

Anyone is welcome to participate in Outdoor Sanctuary. The best way to stay informed of meeting locations and times is to visit their Facebook or Instagram pages—searching for Outdoor Sanctuary Wild Church of Goshen will take you to their pages.



A familiar location for participants of Outdoor Sanctuary, with changing colors of Fall.



# journeying with our pastors



**Joanne Gallardo**,  
IMMC Conference  
Co-Minister, reflects  
on resisting the role of  
“fixer” as a pastor.

“What do you do for a living?” I dislike this question a lot. I’m not ashamed of being a minister, but the term comes with a lot of baggage for some. Only working on Sundays, nagging for tithes, “But you’re a woman!” or “What does that even mean?” are some questions or insinuations that come back at me. Sometimes my answer is followed by someone trying to tell me how pious they are. Other times, it’s opening a door to someone who has a lot of grievances toward organized religion. Truth be told, I’d rather hear the latter in its authenticity than the often-performative former.

I have a difficult time describing what I do because it varies so much day to day, week to week. Pastors hold many job titles over the course of their careers, including janitor, counselor, mediator, punching bag, parent, bookkeeper, and author, just to name a few. While we can have the best boundaries in the world and stick to our job descriptions to the letter, at some point, we’re likely going to be called when something falls apart and needs fixing. “Fixing” isn’t in our memo of understanding, and yet it shows up in our lap.

Many of us learned in seminary that being the “fixer” isn’t wholly possible in people’s lives. Stopping a running toilet in the entryway bathroom? Sure, you can fix it. Fixing a congregation? No. People want to be heard or be helped in brainstorming solutions, not fixed, no matter what they might say.

We care about our people and want to take away their pain, solve their conflict, repair their spiritual life, and end their crisis. Ultimately, this is not our work to do. We are not fixers, we are shepherds. It can be difficult to communicate this to our people, but sometimes, it’s even more difficult to communicate this to ourselves.

In this season, I’m reflecting on what it would look like to not approach everything as something needing to be fixed. What would it look like to see listening as much of an action as “fixing?” I’m leaning into remembering that listening is a powerful verb. I hope I, and we, can remember that listening is a counter-cultural act in a world full of empty solutions.

**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.

**Mailing Address & Contact Info:**  
PO Box 702, Goshen, IN 46527  
(574) 534-4006  
Email: [imoffice@im.mennonite.net](mailto:imoffice@im.mennonite.net)

**Editor:** Clayton Gladish,  
administrative coordinator

**Missional Leadership Team:**  
Brenda Meyer, moderator,  
Goshen, IN; Steve Slagel  
moderator-elect, Traverse City, MI;  
Duane Yoder, treasurer, Ft.  
Wayne, IN; Naomi Yoder,  
secretary, Goshen, IN; Shawn  
Lange, Elkhart, IN; Rolando Sosa  
Granados, Elkhart, IN.

**Gospel Evangel** is published four times annually by Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (Jan/Feb/Mar, Apr/May/Jun, Jul/Aug/Sept, Oct/Nov/Dec). It is printed and mailed by Duley Press, 2906 N. Home Street, Mishawaka, IN 46545. Periodical postage is paid at Nappanee, IN 46550 (USPS 575-940). Postmaster: Send address changes to Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, PO Box 702, Goshen, IN 46527.

## ministry transitions

### Beginnings



**Sharon Norton** was ordained October 2 at Walnut Hill. She is the leader of Outdoor Sanctuary, Wild Church of Goshen and transitional pastor at Fellowship of Hope.



**Becky Helmuth** began as part-time interim pastor at Sunnyside January 1. She continues as transitional pastor at Hudson Lake.



**Denny Heath** retired October 1 from ministry at New Hope Community Church of Midland.



**Suella Gerber** retired December 18 from ministry at Fellowship of Hope.



**Charlie and Terri Geiser** retired December 31 from ministry at Sunnyside.



**Lee Pfahler** received a license toward ordination November 23, 2021 as a chaplain at Goshen Health Hospital.



**Rachel Nafziger Hartzler** began as part-time interim pastor at Sunnyside January 1.

This issue is available online:  
[im.mennonite.net/gospel-evangel](http://im.mennonite.net/gospel-evangel)



## financial report

