• Amish makeover of Christian fiction
• Heavenly citizenship
• Jesus and gun violence
• Documentaries take us to other worlds
• Welcome back
Interested in urban ministry?  
Want to connect with other Mennonites from urban settings? 
Check out these two great Phoenix 2013 programs for adults and youth interested in all things urban.

1. **Urban Youth Gathering**  
(for teens and young adults only)  
Wednesday, July 3 • 3:30–5 p.m.  

A time of fun, fellowship, powerful spoken word and dynamic ministry through music. Special guests will bring messages and music tailored to youth and young adults who operate in the theologically, racially and economically diverse context of the urban environment.

Come to celebrate God’s kingdom, network and meet new friends.

**Guest speaker:** John Valenzuela (Coach Val) is a San Antonio native and church planter who began his ministry as a teen. In 2011, he left the education field after 27 years of teaching and coaching and entered ministry full time. Currently he serves as men’s pastor at Community Bible Church in San Antonio.

**Special music:** Sean Slaughter—son of Integrity Music recording artist Alvin Slaughter—has traveled nationally and internationally for the last 12 years, bringing his brand of rap music and ministry to today’s youth.

2. **Successful Urban Churches:** 
Best practices seminars

- **Understanding your Identity**, Bishop L.W. Francisco III  
- **Missional Spirituality**, Bishop L.W. Francisco III  
- **Relating to a Diverse Christian Community**, Lon Hershey  
- **Stewardship and Church Management**, Nicole Francisco  
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ON THE COVER: “Last Beautiful Days of Autumn” by Ken Gingerich, art director, Mennonite Church USA Executive Board. Original: 6” x 6” acrylic on masonite.
This publication welcomes your letters, either about our content or about issues facing the Mennonite Church USA. Please keep your letter brief—one or two paragraphs—and about one subject only. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity. Publication is also subject to space limitations. Email to letters@themennonite.org or mail to Letters, The Mennonite, 3145 Benham Ave., Suite 4, Elkhart, IN 46517. Please include your name and address. We will not print letters sent anonymously, though we may withhold names at our discretion.—Editors

Jesus references Lamech?
Thanks to Everett Thomas for his editorial, “In with the Old” (February), noting that the New Testament can’t be understood apart from the Hebrew Bible. I was especially delighted to see the reference to Lamech of Genesis 4, who sought security by upping Cain’s sevenfold vengeance to 77 times. One New Testament connection not mentioned in the essay is the conversation between Peter and Jesus in Matthew 18, where Jesus extends Peter’s inquiry about forgiveness from seven times to 77 times.

Might Jesus have had Lamech in mind when he said this? Forgiveness then becomes a kind of reverse revenge, an active way of undoing the deadend path Cain and Lamech initiated that finds its logical conclusion in weapons of mass destruction. It seems that Jesus saw this style of forgiveness as the only way forward out of the mounds of grievances accumulated over the millennia.—Joel Miller, Cincinnati

Rule book or story?
I was privileged to have received a copy of The Mennonite from my neighbor. Even though I am not a Mennonite, I felt that I must congratulate you for printing J. Denny Weaver’s article “Rule Book or Story?” (March). The article is outstanding. Articles like this are valuable in this day when Christians are being divided due to a “literalistic rule book” reading of the Bible. The Bible is a gift to us—the church. If we claim to be the church of today, then we must continue to grow in our understanding and use of the biblical narrative. It does not mean the Bible will change. It means that we will grow. We will gain new insights. We will change.

As a retired Lutheran minister, I am excited to see that both our churches are moving forward and will have much to learn from each other in the future. With much appreciation—George E. Keck, Harlesville, Pa.

What is wealth creation?
The news story “Wealth, Capitalism Focus of AMBS’ Pastors Week” used the language of wealth creation and creating wealth. I confess to being perplexed in my effort to understand what is meant by the language and troubled when I think I do get the idea. Wealth, by most of the definitions I can find, means the value of things, or things with value. But the language of wealth creation does not seem to be used of manufacturing or creating things of
value. It is used rather of the process by which individuals amass, collect, accrue and gain wealth. But I would call this redistributing (toward oneself) wealth, not creating wealth. Why is it called “wealth creation”?—John Stoner, Akron, Pa.

**AMBS responds**

At Pastors Week, Kim Tan’s teaching in its full manifestation described a relationship to wealth that demonstrates the transformative power of God’s vision for Jubilee in our day: wealth used to alleviate poverty, release captives and restore the earth. Tan views business development (“wealth creation”) as a key to empowering the poor. Businesses that justly “create wealth” generate assets that can be invested in the community, education and infrastructure.

I encourage you to listen to Tan’s presentations, beginning perhaps with his personal story in Jubilee Today. After listening also to his biblical interpretation originally inspired by John Howard Yoder, take in his Experiments in Jubilee. His talks are available under Presentations at www.ambs.edu/news-events/iTunesU.cfm.—Sara Wenger Shenk, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary president

**Confession of faith and marriage**

Ted Grimsrud’s Opinion article (January) reminds me of the time I was asked by my mother if I hit my little sister. “No, I didn’t hit her,” was my reply. The truth was I kicked her.

Grimsrud is correct in saying, “The actual confession of faith does not in fact mention homosexuality.” What it does say is, “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. … According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship.”

This means that right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship of one man and one woman. This precludes all premarital, extramarital and homosexual sexual activity.—Gary Blosser, Blandon, Pa.

**MCC and the NRA**

The article by Everett Thomas about the National Rifle Association and Mennonite Central Committee (News Briefs, March) may have needed some fact checking. Unfortunately, the NRA has removed the cited list so it cannot be checked. My search of the NRA site found a 2004 list of “antigun lobbying organizations” did include MCC. The list seemed to be alphabetical, and MCC just was not able to get a top scary rating.

The “12 Most Threatening People (sic)” may exist, but it seems unlikely that MCC was in the top 12. (If they are, then that’s a lot of bang for the buck). If you can find the list, please send it or a link to the list to me. It might be helpful to check the facts before you hype.—Floyd M. Mast, Greenwood, Del.

In the March issue you refer to the article in *Mother Jones* that included MCC on a list of the “12 Most Threatening People” to the NRA. *Mother Jones* was actually satirizing the NRA. *Mother Jones* was indeed on a long list of enemies made by the NRA, but *Mother Jones* culled out some really innocuous names on the list and then published them with jokes under the title of “12 Most Threatening.” About MCC they said, “You know who else had a central committee?”—J. Denny Weaver, Madison, Wis.

**Bobby socks and nylons**

I was happy to see Marilyn Miller as our latest “cover girl” (March). To show us all how far we have come, I recount the following true story: (Continued on page 54)
Goshen College student dies in murder-suicide

GOSHEN, Ind.—Millicent Morros, a 48-year-old Goshen College student who had recently become a paralegal at a law firm, was gunned down in broad daylight March 4 while walking to work in downtown Goshen.

The gunman, who was the victim’s ex-boyfriend, then turned the gun on himself and committed suicide, according to Goshen police.

John Eric Haitsma, 51, a former police officer and Goshen business owner, shot and killed Morros after a brief discussion between the two.

The police investigation and witness statements at the scene confirmed that Haitsma and Morros, both of Goshen, were known to one another, having previously been in a relationship that reportedly ended earlier this year. Morros was originally from Niles, Mich.

According to Goshen College staff, Morros had been enrolled in Goshen’s adult degree program since fall 2011, where she had excelled and was named to the fall 2012 dean’s list.

Goshen president James Brenneman says Morros was due to graduate in May with a bachelor’s degree in organizational leadership through the adult education program.—adapted from a March 5 Goshen News article

Residents of four of the villages have been told they are excluded from the attempted eviction because the ammunition being used by soldiers training for war near their homes is not live. The 1,000 residents of the other eight villages, half of them children, could lose their homes, schools, crops and livestock, their mosques and their way of life within the year.

On Jan. 16, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel filed a petition on their behalf, and the Israeli court granted a temporary order preventing forcible transferring of the families pending a further decision.

Eight villages face expulsion in firing zone

SOUTH HEBRON HILLS, West Bank

Imagine your neighborhood was declared a firing range. You are threatened with forced evacuation. Demolition orders are issued for your home, your church and the school your children attend. Your land will cease to belong to you, and your livestock will be removed.

This is what 1,000 Palestinians living in Masafer Yatta face. Twelve villages lie within the area Israel claims as firing zone 918, according to Christian Peacemaker Teams workers.

The temporary order is all that is preventing the forced removal of the families living in Masafer Yatta.

During the past month, soldiers have repeatedly driven large vehicles across planted fields, confiscated residents’ cars, cameras, phones and livestock, landed helicopters next to dwellings and livestock, and threatened families with imminent eviction and destruction of their homes. Children in the region find unexploded ordnance as they walk to and from school, and families are awakened during the night by the sound of repeated firing and by military helicopters and jeeps driving near their homes.—CPT

IBA plans 25th anniversary event in September

ELKHART, Ind.—Instituto Bíblico Anabautista (Anabaptist Biblical Institute) is planning to celebrate 25 years of serving Spanish-language learners on Labor Day weekend. IBA participants will gather near Talladega, Ala., for their annual learning and fellowship retreat and will mark the 25-year milestone of the program. They will be joined by past directors, Marco Güete and Gilberto Flores. Currently Rafael Barahona is the director and Violeta Ajquejay the associate director.

Begun in 1988 by the Hispanic Ministries Department of the former General Conference Mennonite Church, IBA’s primary objective is to provide educational resources that promote Anabaptist theological and biblical training for Spanish-speaking leaders.

IBA participants study at teaching centers in a local church that has a volunteer tutor assigned to it. There are more than 50 teaching centers serving more than 300 students. More than 1,000 students have earned certificates or diplomas from the program, which takes about two and a half years to complete. IBA graduates serve as leaders primarily in local settings but are also active in church planting and area conference and churchwide leadership.

IBA functions under the umbrella of Mennonite Education Agency.—IBA
Goshen College radio station named best again

GOSHEN, Ind.—Goshen College’s student-operated radio station WGCS 91.1 The Globe (www.globeradio.org) has been named 2013 Best College Station in the Nation and Indiana’s Radio School of the Year.

This is the second time the college radio station has received the top national award in three years from the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System (IBS), making it the first college to be a repeat winner in the competition, which is against every college and university in the country of every size. Last year, the station was a runner-up for the top award.

The station’s general manager, Jason Samuel, and a group of his students who work at the station were on hand to win the award at the 73rd Annual Conference of the IBS in New York City on March 2. The Globe beat out two other finalists for the top award: William Patterson University (11,400 students) and DePaul University (25,000 students). In addition, students won six national awards and were finalists in 20 categories. IBS is the oldest college radio association in the country.

And on Feb. 15, for the second consecutive year, Goshen College earned the state titles of both Radio School of the Year and Television School of the Year in the 2013 Indiana Association of School Broadcasting’s college broadcasting competition.—Goshen College

New Master of Divinity with distance option will launch in the fall

ELKHART, Ind.—A new Master of Divinity program will begin at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in August, giving students options for study from a distance as well as on campus.

The new program has received accreditation approval from the Association of Theological Schools. Approval from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association is pending.

MDiv Connect, the distance option, includes online courses and hybrid courses, which involve both online and on-campus learning. Students entering the program will come to AMBS for orientation in August. Then over the course of five and a half years, they should plan to make two annual week-long visits to campus for classes, spiritual formation and vocational discernment.

MDiv Campus, the option for residential students, builds on long-standing strengths of AMBS.

The new MDiv, in both forms, will comprise 80 credit hours, a reduction of 10 from previous requirements. More interdisciplinary courses make this shift possible and allow students to better integrate understanding and skills for ministry. The program also requires cross-cultural studies and two internships.—AMBS

Jordanians welcome refugees from Syria

Omar, left, a Syrian refugee, met with J. Daryl Byler, Mennonite Central Committee representative, at the Za’atari refugee camp in early March. Omar and his brother brought their families, their father and their 88-year-old mother to the camp. (Omar’s real name was not used for security purposes). During the past two years, violent conflict in Syria has forced more than 400,000 refugees across their country’s border into Jordan.—MCC

Revised edition of The Amish released

HARRISONBURG, Va., and WATERLOO, Ont.—A newly updated edition of John Hostetler’s classic introduction, The Amish, has been released.

The late John Hostetler’s book on Amish customs, beliefs and practices has sold over 760,000 copies in earlier editions. The new edition, with all new photographs, was revised by recognized Amish scholar Steven M. Nolt and by John’s daughter, Ann E. Hostetler.

The new edition was expanded to 48 pages with full-color photos, taken by photographers respectful of Amish concerns about images. The original booklet published in 1952 has been popular in tourist locations and on Amazon.com. John Hostetler was also the author of Amish Society, published by Johns Hopkins Press. The book will sell for $8.99.

—MennoMedia
Church as prayer

When we get together for church, we pray. The worship leader invokes the Holy Spirit with an opening litany, another person offers a congregational prayer on our behalf, the preacher prays before the sermon, various people speak joys and concerns during an open time of sharing and, finally, the worship leader returns for a prayer of benediction before we depart.

We pray for the world, for the needs in our community, in our neighborhoods, in our homes. We ask for the peace of Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. We pray against oppression and violence, against sickness and depression, against the insidious powers of sin and death in all their manifestations.

There’s so much to pray against—and for.

“We pray for those who have lost hope and for those who have gained hope this week,” I remember a church member, Rebecca Buchanan, saying one week as she led our congregation in prayer.

Church is a corporeal prayer. The Spirit of God breathes through us as we pray, enlivening us, drawing us into the life of God as we become the body of Christ, “flesh of Christ’s flesh and bone of his bone,” as Menno Simons wrote.

In prayer, we yield ourselves to the Spirit, who weaves our lives into the identity of Jesus Christ, the one whose life is an embodied prayer, a ministry that calls upon God to redeem and restore, to inaugurate an era of healing and salvation, of peace.

Jesus lives out a prayer for heaven to fill the earth, a prayer against the demonic forces of hell that ravage creation. His preaching and healing, his walking and speaking—all that he says and does—comes together as a single prayer for God’s will to be done. “Thy will be done,” we hear Jesus say in the garden of Gethsemane as his hope for heavenly life on earth is threatened with crucifixion.

This is the moment of Jesus’ life I am drawn into during worship. Church, for me, is the body of Jesus in prayer, there in Gethsemane, staring with horror into the overwhelming violence yet refusing to escape from the suffering of the world. In the garden, Jesus invites his friends, he invites us, into his posture of vigilance: “I am deeply grieved, even to death,” Jesus says. “Remain here, and keep awake.”

Prayer is a summons to remain awake to the pain of others, to the pain from which I would shield myself if I could live as I wanted, caught up in routines of work and rest and pleasure. Worship draws me into the passion of Christ as the people at church pray us into the agony of the world, into the pain and sorrow of friends and strangers, into solidarity with the oppressed, into the presence of Jesus—the one whose afflictions, as the apostle Paul wrote, are completed in the suffering of human flesh.

Recently, during worship, someone shared how, when he opened the newspaper that morning, he saw a picture of children in Gaza, surrounded by gray smoke, surrounded by destruction, terrorized by adult war.

“My heart breaks for them,” he said as he cried, “Lord, have mercy.”

With this prayer, among others, we let Christ’s life flow through us, a life of protest against the forces of death. We let Christ’s agony become our agony, God’s pain our pain.

To be afflicted with God’s compassion arouses in us the power of hope. Not cheap hope. Not escapist hope. But hope engendered by the anguish of the world as it awakens us to God’s pain; as the theologian Dorothee Soelle writes, to experience God’s pain in the suffering world is to touch “the power of life within pain, which is the biological protest of life against sickness and death.”

In our prayers of protest, of pain, we feel the life of God flow through our church body, life that sustains our hope—that God will hear our prayers and answer by restoring life, reviving creation, redeeming our world.

This column is adapted from an article for the spring 2013 issue of Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, www.mennovision.org.
And when they shall ask

By all accounts the story of the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia is a remarkable success. Since its humble beginnings in 1951 with the baptism of 10 believers, MKC has become the largest national conference in the Mennonite World Conference family, numbering 225,000 baptized members.

During a recent visit to Ethiopia, I witnessed firsthand some of the reasons behind the church’s astonishing growth: gifted leadership, dynamic worship, investment in evangelism, active youth programs, a creative prison ministry, innovative relief and development projects, an extensive curriculum for discipling new believers, and a thriving Bible college dedicated to training future leaders. Today MKC enjoys a national reputation as a teaching church, committed to discipleship and reconciliation.

But amid this remarkable vitality, almost no one in leadership seemed interested in MKC history. “It’s just not a priority for us,” one church leader told me. On the surface, I can understand why. Though this is changing, Ethiopia is still largely an oral culture: memory is woven into the stories of ordinary conversation, not something to be fixed in print. Moreover, the Orthodox Church—whose culture and rituals continue to dominate Ethiopian life—is closely associated with tradition. For an evangelical, charismatic church like MKC, what matters most is the urgency of sharing the gospel in the present moment. History suggests the dead weight of the past.

I understand the arguments, but I’m not convinced. First, as I learned to know more about the MKC, it occurred to me that a significant group of church leaders is now passing from the scene. The generation who knew the missionaries in the 1950s and 1960s assumed key positions of leadership during the era of persecution (1977-1991), then oversaw the dynamic transformation of the church during the past 20 years, are now dying. When an elderly person dies in an oral culture, it is as if an entire library has burned. Their stories need to be honored and preserved.

Second, newcomers who join the MKC need training in biblical literacy and discipleship. But they also need to know something about the character and identity of the group they are joining. Since most converts to MKC come out of Orthodox or Muslim contexts, they bring with them a deep sense of history. When they join the MKC, they need to find their anchoring in a new historical identity.

But most fundamentally, attentiveness to history is evangelical. The God we worship is known to us not only as a personal Savior but as the Lord of history. The stories of the Bible—along with the account of Pentecost and the apostles; the emergence of the Catholic Church, the Orthodox tradition, the Reformation and Anabaptism; and the witness of many other renewal movements since then, including the MKC—are all part of a grand story of God’s revelation to humanity. The MKC story matters because it bears witness to the larger drama of God’s faithfulness in history.

While browsing in a bookstore on the last day of my visit, I had a conversation with a friendly young man behind the counter. As we talked, Wondosson casually mentioned that he and his youth group at the Debub MKC in Addis had just completed a video project honoring the life of Beyene Mulatu, an elderly leader in their congregation. One of the first Ethiopians to earn a doctorate, Beyene returned from a promising career in the West to devote his entire life in service to the MKC. Wondosson’s youth group had saved money to rent a digital camera. Then they conducted a series of intensive interviews and spent nearly a year editing the footage to create a 90-minute documentary telling Beyene’s story. When the video was first screened to the congregation last December, Wondosson said, the entire congregation was in tears. Even now, though he had worked on the project for months and seen the movie many times, Wondosson said he could not help crying when he watched the movie and was reminded of Beyene’s faithful witness.

I thank God for young people like Wondosson who are hungry for their history.

In Joshua, we read that when the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River, God commanded them to build a stone pyre. Why? So that generations later, when the children asked about the meaning of the stones, the story of God’s faithfulness would be remembered (Joshua 4:21-24).

What stories are you telling your children? What stone pyres has your congregation erected? Could history be a source of evangelism?
Are machines taking over our work?

This may sound like the question a Luddite might ask. But several articles recently have addressed the fact that machines are doing more and more work that humans have done, and these articles ask, Is this good or bad—or a mixture?

I read a novel not long ago that mentioned “the Singularity,” the moment when a computer “wakes up, becomes self-aware, gains consciousness.” This is also the premise behind the Terminator movies. But I’m not addressing that—not yet.

In a Jan. 24 Associated Press story, “Imagining a Future When Machines Have All the Jobs,” Paul Wiseman refers to the book The Lights in the Tunnel by Martin Ford. Ford describes a nightmare scenario, Wiseman writes: “Machines leave 75 percent of American workers unemployed by 2089. Consumer spending collapses. Even those who are still working slash spending and save everything they can; they fear their jobs are doomed, too. As people lose work, they stop contributing to Social Security, potentially bankrupting the retirement system.”

“Smarter machines will make life better and increase wealth in the economy,” Ford says. The challenge “is to make sure the benefits are shared when most workers have been supplanted by machines.” He recommends “imposing massive taxes on companies, which would be paying far less in wages thanks to automation, and distributing the proceeds to those left unemployed by technology.”

In a Feb. 2 New York Times article, “Raging (Again) Against the Robots,” Catherine Rampell cautions against alarmist views of new technology. She recounts some of the dire warnings over the centuries against automation that takes over human labor and notes how laborers welfare has improved in the past 200 years, due largely to new technology, something Ford does not deny.

She goes on to quote economists who range from an optimistic Joel Mokyr, an economic historian at Northwestern University, to a more pessimistic Erik Brynjolfsson, an economics professor at M.I.T. and co-author of the book Race Against the Machine.

Mokyr says: “Every invention ever made caused some people to lose jobs. … In a good society, when this happens, they put you out to pasture and give you a golf club and a condo in Florida. In a bad society, they put you on the dole, so you have just enough not to starve, but that’s about it.”

Brynjolfsson argues that we have reached a sort of inflection point in productivity growth and that “any job that can be reduced to an algorithm will [lead] to the displacement of workers in industries as diverse as retail and radiology.”

In the March issue of The Atlantic, Jonathan Cohn’s article “The Robot Will See You Now” shows how technology is replacing human workers in health care.

Cohn writes: “IBM’s Watson—the same machine that beat Ken Jennings at Jeopardy—is now churning through case histories at Memorial Sloan-Kettering, learning to make diagnoses and treatment recommendations.”

This practice is becoming widespread. Cohn notes that “in Brazil and India, machines are already starting to do primary care, because there’s no labor to do it. They may be better than doctors. Mathematically, they will follow evidence—and they’re much more likely to be right.”

And one doctor says he doesn’t think physicians “will be seeing patients as much in the future. They’ll become “super-quality-control officers.”

These changes will likely be good for some and bad for others. Rampell writes: “Historically, the children of displaced workers have benefited from mechanization, but the displaced workers themselves have often been permanently passé.”

—Gordon Houser

Pontius’ Puddle

Times are tough. How tough are they?

Will work for eggs.

© Pontius.com

Joel Kauffmann

This Easter we might have to give up fancy outfits and holiday candy and actually celebrate Jesus’ resurrection!
The top 100 billionaires added $240 billion to their wealth in 2012—enough to end world poverty four times over. —statement from Oxfam International calling for the end of extreme global poverty by 2025

Eat like a Mennonite
In a piece with the above title, Florence Williams writes in the New York Times (Jan. 18) about the need to reduce “phthalates (found in some plastics and added to products like lotions to bind fragrances), triclosan (an antibacterial ingredient in many soaps, toothpastes and cutting boards) and bisphenol A (or BPA, a plastic-hardener and epoxy additive that may affect children’s brain development and that some believe may be linked to breast and prostate cancers).” She refers to a study published in 2010 that found that an “effective way to reduce urinary phthalate levels was to live meatless in a Buddhist temple for five days. A study recently published in the journal NeuroToxicology found that pregnant women in Old Order Mennonite communities, which eschew many modern conveniences, had urinary BPA levels one-fourth the national median. Those Mennonites eat more fresh food than the rest of us and make their own dairy products, but they also buy fewer consumer goods, which can be additional sources of BPA. The chemical is found in dental fillings, eyeglass lenses and CDs, among other products.” —New York Times

Capital punishments on the wane
Though the number of death-row inmates executed in 2012 remained unchanged from 2011 at 43, death penalty opponents said the year still showed capital punishment is on the wane. Some states that have had relatively high numbers of executions in the past executed no one last year, or issued no new death sentences.—Religion News Service

Guns and money
As late as the mid-1970s the National Rifle Association (founded in 1871) focused on hunting, conservation and marksmanship. But at its annual meeting in 1977 it was taken over by radical gun rights activists, who reshaped the group’s orientation. The old guard had plans to move headquarters to Colorado, but the new leaders decided that the real action was in Washington. Today the NRA is arguably the most powerful lobbying organization in the country. William J. Vizzard, a retired Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms official, says the NRA has no interest in compromise. “They’re not interested in fixing things. They want to stir things up; the more members they get, the more money they make.” —Christian Century

1% of all Medicaid patients account for 25 percent of all spending by Medicaid. —Pacific Standard

0.1% of the world’s population lives in Israel.

25% of world stories in the New York Times last year mentioned Israel.—Pacific Standard

Fewer children dying
According to United Nations statistics published last September, 700,000 fewer children died in 2011 than the year before. And in 2010, the toll was 200,000 lower than 2009. Since 1970, the children’s death count has dropped by more than half, while at the same time, the world’s population nearly doubled.

What has produced this happy news? A good deal can be traced to international efforts to improve health, nutrition and economic development. Child health is an important building block for long-term success, says Melinda Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “Children surviving and staying healthy means more children in school and able to learn, which in turn means productive workers who can drive sustained economic growth,” she says.—The Marketplace

Catholic, Reformed agree on baptism
Leaders of Catholic and Reformed churches have signed an agreement to recognize each other’s sacraments of baptism, a public step toward unity among groups that are often divided by doctrine. Signers represented the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Roman Catholic Church and United Church of Christ.—Religion News Service

Numbers to ponder
• Percentage by which a male college graduate’s hourly wage was higher than a female’s in 1979: 11
• Percentage by which a male college graduate’s hourly wage was higher than a female’s in 2011: 24
• Percentage of its energy demand that Denmark has pledged to fulfill with renewable resources by 2050: 100
• Percentage that Germany has pledged to fulfill using renewables by 2030: 50
• Percentage that the United States has pledged to fulfill using renewables: 0
—Yes! Magazine

0.1% of the world’s population lives in Israel.

25% of world stories in the New York Times last year mentioned Israel.—Pacific Standard
Easter blooms in a visit to a monastery in the desert of New Mexico.

Resurrected joy

by Anita Amstutz
I went to the desert to pray. It was the bleak midwinter of January. The brothers of the Benedictine Monastery in Northern New Mexico were welcoming and warm as always. But the landscape was naked. The frozen air singed my nose hairs. I had been here in the summer, when the high desert was blooming and the birds were thick as thieves. But the austere beauty of the winter landscape took my breath away. The sheer orange cliffs were dusted with snow, and the Chama River was a stunning, diamond-encrusted sheet of glass. Every day I walked for miles up the canyon with the sun on my face, singing me home to my soul.

I came to sit in the silence and song, among the brothers who chanted the Scriptures no less than seven times a day. Sometimes at night, after evening prayers, I walked out into the black velvet of the night, the starfields above me, the coyote’s haunting wail like surroundsound. I was startled into wakefulness and alertness in my heart, a receptivity to the Divine that I often don’t feel in my daily hubbub.

Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, writes about Jesus as “Moshel Meshalim,” the teacher of wisdom, the one who awakened us to the kingdom of heaven that is within us (Luke 17:21). She writes, “To realize that the kingdom is here and now is really a matter of developing a kind of X-ray vision—looking through the physical appearance of things and responding directly to their innermost aliveness and quality.” This ability of the heart to see beneath the surface of how things seem to be and know the presence of Christ in all things, even suffering, begins the sacred alchemy of transforming and attuning the heart to the very nature of Christ’s love.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office [prayer]. I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like 10 lamps of fire, and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”—a saying from the Desert Mothers and Fathers
sprouting hops. As our conversation unfolded over the water jug—throughout the sweaty heat of the morning—I suddenly felt as though I were the woman at the well, standing before the real deal, being offered living water for my thirsty soul. Or perhaps I was Mary Magdalene in the garden, who in a moment knew that the risen presence of Jesus was suddenly there before her, a radiant presence of resurrected Love, filling her up with renewed hope and joy.

This particular day, Father John told me of the story of Abba Lot and Abba Joseph, from the desert fathers: “If you will, you can become all flame.”

Fr. John invited me (again) to deepen my prayer life. No matter who you are, where you are called, what you are doing, he reminded me that prayer is the way to fan the flames of love for a suffering world and keep one’s heart alive with God’s grace. For Fr. John, prayer isn’t just a laundry list of things that God can do for him. Prayer is communion, a daily, ongoing intimacy and relationship with the creator of one’s body, mind and soul. And if one is connected to this Living Presence, then any and every thing one does in ordinary life becomes like the burning bush—holy ground, alive with meaning and purpose.

Fr. John appears to live in a perpetual state of resurrected joy. It’s not that he doesn’t know suffering. I know little of his life, but I do know he has served the poor in the inner city and lived through the horrors of the Balkan wars in 1990. But he has come to know the secret of a faithful and rich inner life, which is not predicated on the news of the day. These days, he lives in a small hermitage, helping the brothers with repairs and other handyman services, meeting people throughout the day with his radiant and authentic countenance. He is turbo charged by the love of the Resurrected Christ. Those who meet him are awakened, stirred to life by the vibrancy and living color of his being.

And so, in the depths of my winter monastery visit, Easter was beginning to bloom, far before the snow melted and the land sent up green shoots. Resurrection was afoot, in spite of the troubled world I would return to. A world that seemed so very far beyond this cloistered place but was really close at hand. A world longing to be filled by yet one more flame of love.

Anita Amstutz is pastor of Albuquerque (N.M.) Mennonite Church.
Anne Berry is visiting assistant professor of graphic design, faculty advisor for Lakehouse Design (a student-run design firm) and faculty advisor for BFA candidates, all at the University of Notre Dame, Ind. She serves on the worship commission at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, Ind., and is a board member of Goshen Farmers Market. She has served as assistant professor of art and co-director of the Hershberger Gallery at Goshen College.

Do/did you have a woman leader as mentor? If so, how does/did she help you?
I’ve had numerous female mentors over the years, my sister among them. She and I share similar perspectives as far as gender, religious affiliation and ethnicity are concerned. Consequently, having someone to talk candidly with regarding the various facets of my identity has been important for developing the kind of confidence necessary to lead.

Are you mentoring a young woman who may be a potential church leader?
I mentor many young women who have the potential to be church leaders. I continually oversee students who are connected to faith communities. So, though we may not think of artists and designers as traditional church leaders, these creative women still have important contributions to make in their respective congregations.

If so, how is her experience the same/different from yours?
I had few connections when I started my design career and have subsequently tried to build some of those bridges for my students. One former student (from Uganda) hadn’t used a computer prior to college but will soon be graduating with an MFA in graphic design from the same program I did. I would like to think I helped make that journey easier for her.

What impediments have you faced in becoming a leader?
Self-doubt and anxiety are two of the biggest internal challenges to overcome. Opening myself up to criticism, knowing that I may fall short of expectations in a public way—particularly as a woman of color—can be daunting. Institutional racism also means I have to confront prejudice and stereotypes that others project onto me.

When you face challenges as a leader, what encourages you?
I’m encouraged by other women leaders who openly acknowledge the difficulties they sometimes face. —Anne Berry
What's a Mennonite to do?

The Amish makeover of Christian fiction

by Valerie Weaver-Zercher
Now, some 100 years after he left the church of his birth, characters dressed like my grandpa’s mother are flooding the inspirational fiction market. Eighty-five new Amish romance novels were published in 2012; that’s one new Amish-themed novel about every four days. It’s also 83 more than were published a decade earlier, in 2002. With few exceptions, the novels are written by evangelical Christian authors and published by evangelical publishing houses. The top three authors of Amish fiction have sold more than 24 million books, and Amish romance novels regularly appear on the New York Times bestseller lists.

The Amish-fiction phenomenon has been covered by the Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg Businessweek, Time and Newsweek, among other venues, and full-page ads for Amish-themed novels regularly appear in the pages of this magazine.

That the Amish, whom he left, would become so popular among the evangelicals, to whom he fled, might have appeared to my grandfather the ultimate irony. From his early and mid-20th-century vantage point, the Amish likely appeared in the rearview mirror of history, and the engines of industrialization, urbanization and evangelicalism would have confirmed for him their marginal place in both his story and the larger American one.

That fictional Amish women would someday dominate the bookshelves of the Christian bookstores he frequented and that articles about the so-called “bonnet-rippers” would appear in newspapers and magazines around the country—and that Amish-themed reality TV would introduce millions of viewers to Katie Stoltzfus and Lebanon Levi—well, it’s safe to say that my grandfather couldn’t have seen any of it coming.

Eighty-five new Amish romance novels were published in 2012; that’s one new Amish-themed novel about every four days.

As I researched the blockbuster popularity of Amish fiction for my book Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels, I thought a lot about my grandfather and about how my connection to him might flavor my consideration of the genre. I knew I couldn’t offer an objective analysis about this Amish-fiction phenomenon, to which I felt some intimate if mostly historical connection, and that it would be disingenuous to pretend I was an aloof observer. So I wrote myself and my Mennonite identity into the book. I needed readers to know that I had some skin in the game, so to speak, and that I felt a strange blend of flat-tery and revulsion as I watched the burgeoning size and commercial strength of the genre.

I’d wager that many North American Mennonites feel a flicker of pride in our theological and...
historical connection to the group that has become the buggy-driving superstars of popular culture. This is likely truer of Swiss-German Mennonites who share ethnic bonds with the Amish than of Mennonites of other ethnic backgrounds; still, a shared Anabaptist genotype with the Amish makes all Mennonites, regardless of ethnicity, ecclesial cousins if not actual ones. Maybe all the Amish hoopla in popular Christian and secular cultures signals that there really is something excellent about this faith to which we belong. Indeed, telling Amish-fiction readers I interviewed that my grandpa grew up Amish, or that I had visited with Amish people in their homes, never failed to impress them.

Yet as I read Amish novel after Amish novel, I felt a niggling sense of annoyance, too. It had something to do with the borrowing and benefiting at work in the fact that 60 non-Anabaptist novelists are advancing careers by locating their stories in Amish country. I felt uneasy that a culture and faith that I felt close to was being sliced and diced into loving glances over chicken pot pie and conversions in the cornfield, and I wondered whether readers were learning anything about Anabaptism’s communitarian ethics, nonresistant commitments and history of persecution. The near absence of references to nonresistance in the books made me suspicious. Although I hesitated to blame romance novels for offering a partial view of a complicated and centuries-old religious tradition, I also wondered whether these gentle narratives of marriage and family and neighbor and land did more to illuminate or obscure the identity of a complex culture.

**Romance novels are not theology** or history texts, and they shouldn’t be read as such. It’s a novelist’s prerogative to create a cast of characters, choose a setting and build a plotline from the stuff of imagination; if a writer were only allowed to write about her or his own ethnic or religious groups, literature would be much impoverished. And while I didn’t do a factual inventory of the novels—despite the fact that the first question I got from many readers was, “How accurate are the books?”—as far as I can tell, some of the novels do an admirable job of getting both the details and essence of Amish life right.

But as I read Amish novels, and as I interviewed readers and writers and publishers of the books, I couldn’t help but wonder about what is drained from a religious faith when it becomes the epicenter of a commercially successful literature. What aspects of Amish or Anabaptist life are filed down to pleasing size in Amish novels, or perhaps even erased? When one novelist of Amish-themed romances, in describing her workshop “Amish Fiction 101” at the American Christian Fiction Writers’ Conference, wrote that the Amish world “is such a perfect fit for Christian fiction,” I wondered what part of the Anabaptist story she might be missing.

Let’s be clear: Mennonites both consume and produce Amish romance novels. One marketing manager told me that the books produced by his publishing company, which publishes some of the leading Amish-fiction writers’ work, sell best near Amish communities. “That’s not because we’re selling to the Amish,” he clarified; “that’s because we’re selling to the Mennonites who live near them.” I spoke with many appreciative Mennonite readers of the novels, and heard about many more, including one 92-year-old retired Mennonite farmer who read almost 90 Amish novels before he died.

**Mennonites are creators of Amish novels,** too. Good Books, a Mennonite-owned publisher, is publishing the novels of Linda Byler, the only currently Amish novelist writing Amish-themed novels available to a general readership. And Herald Press was one of the first entrants to the Amish fiction field, having published Clara Bernice Miller’s Amish-themed novels in the 1960s and 1970s and then Mary Christner Borntrager’s and Carrie Bender’s novels in the 1980s and 1990s, long before Beverly Lewis landed the lucrative Amish-fiction account.

It makes sense, on one hand. Many Mennonite readers of fiction are looking for the same things other Christian readers of fiction want: novels that won’t offend their religious and sexual ethic and that will spur them on to greater Christian devotion. Amish romance novels are chaste texts about chaste protagonists living within what is perceived to be a chaste subculture: one that has remained set apart from many of the seductions of technology and modernization. Historian Eric Miller, writing in *Christianity Today,* suggests a key appeal of the genre to evangelical readers—
and, I would add, to many Mennonite readers—is that the Amish are “an adequately alien, adequately familiar community to imaginatively work out persisting cultural and theological questions.” Questions of how much freedom is too much, of how a church community should shape the lives of its members, of how Christians should respond to modernization and consumption and changing social mores: these and other questions preoccupy many people of faith, and Amish fiction becomes a stage on which one answer is played out.

For some Mennonite readers of Amish fiction, of course, the Amish are more than “adequately familiar”; they’re downright familial. Still, many Mennonite readers experience the stressors and pace and anomie of modern life in the same way non-Mennonite readers do, and while they may feel psychically closer to the Amish taproot of the novels, they share the concerns of their non-Mennonite evangelical sisters and brothers about the directions and distractions of modern life.

**Mennonites are also** some of Amish romance novels’ most disgruntled critics. One Mennonite professor suggested in an academic paper that the genre is as damaging to female readers as TV shows like *The Bachelor*, since both contain the underlying message, “Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride—in a limo or a buggy—because a man’s agency is all that matters, not your own.” And a Mennonite blogger could not disguise her disgust. “Without going into the literary quality (or lack of) of any of these books, the #1 thing that makes me cringe when I read them is the authenticity factor. … It’s typically cavalier American to think you can do some reading and visit a few Amish families and write an authentic novel. An Amishman would never be that audacious about a different culture, assuming that you could read about the Masai, for example, and visit for a week and then write a story about them.”

It might be a misplaced sense of custodianship that has these writers and me feeling anxious about non-Anabaptist novelists representing “our” people—who aren’t, of course, “ours” at all. The Amish don’t need us as Mennonites to look after them. In fact, many Amish people would likely feel more kinship with fundamentalist-evangelical readers of the novels than they do with some of us Mennonites who share their churchly DNA. Still, it’s hard to ignore the sense that people are paraphrasing a religious tradition not far from our own and to wonder whether something is being lost in the translation.

**As I talked with Mennonites**, both loyal readers of the novels and vehement critics of them, the breadth of Mennonite opinion that exists about the genre became clear. Mennonites belong to different “taste publics,” as theorist Herbert Gans calls groupings of people who share aesthetic sensibilities and ways of evaluating art and literature. What one taste public values—such as uncomplicated prose, piety-driven narratives and happy endings, in the case of Amish fiction—another dislikes. Since Mennonites are a diverse lot in that regard—which is a good thing—I don’t presume to propose some sweeping Mennonite reaction to Amish fiction. And because the genre is nearly as diverse as the people whose lives it fictionalizes, making grandiose claims either about its merits or its dangers is unhelpful.

**Because the genre is nearly as diverse as the people whose lives it fictionalizes, making grandiose claims either about its merits or its dangers is unhelpful.**

Valerie Weaver-Zercher is author of *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Johns Hopkins University Press, March 2013). She is a writer and editor in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and a member of Slate Hill Mennonite Church.
Musings on peace from an armed pickup truck

Dec. 4, 2012: It was just after breakfast when the pickup truck arrived that would take me, a Mennonite Central Committee worker in Laos, on a trip into the countryside to visit a health clinic. To my surprise, on the back of the truck stood four Lao soldiers, armed with AK-47 submachine guns and grenade launchers. My travels that day with a doctor from the Ministry of Health would take us through…
The logic of taking four soldiers for protection is as common and everyday as the air we breathe. This logic permeates the evening news, our entertainment industry, our national security policy, our school playgrounds and even our homes. If someone threatens you, be prepared to threaten them back. If someone attempts to harm you, harm them first. Intimidate, frighten or beat anyone who might plot ill against you. And in a fascinating sequence in Luke’s Gospel (9:51-56), we find this same logic also active in the minds of Jesus’ disciples.

On their way to Jerusalem from Galilee, Jesus and his disciples walked through Samaria, widely known as hostile territory due to the long-standing enmity between Samaritans and Jews. When they were refused hospitality at a Samaritan village, James and John seethed with anger. “Shall we call down fire from heaven to destroy them?” they asked Jesus. Having just argued about who was the greatest, they were eager to use their power to set up the kingdom in Jerusalem. Peeved by the nettlesome Samaritans in their path, their response was as old as Cain and Abel and as new as drone strikes in Afghanistan: a holy and revenge-filled fire from heaven.

Jesus rebuked his disciples, and they went on to another village.

To my regret, I must acknowledge that I did not challenge the pre-emptive fire from heaven assembled on the pickup truck that day in Laos. I sat in my front seat and tried not to think about the soldiers in the back. By taking my seat that day, I violated my most deeply held beliefs about the nature of God, the way of Christ and my commitment to peace. Had any of the four Lao soldiers been harmed or had they harmed or killed someone else, I would have been devastated.

My reflections on this troubling experience surfaced with greater intensity in an MCC project visit to Iraq in 2004, just about a year after the U.S. invasion. Knowing we would be spending time with a landmine clearance agency that regularly used armed guards and not wanting to repeat the experience in Laos, I arranged in advance not to travel in one of their vehicles. Yet everywhere we went there were U.S. military Humvees and trucks, all with many M-16s sticking out the side with trigger fingers at the ready. There were huge military bases, military convoys, guard posts and checkpoints. We were still surrounded by lethal firepower, even though our vehicle was unarmed.

So I have come to realize that for all intents and purposes, I am still in an armed pickup truck.

As U.S. citizens and members of a community of faith who follow the way of Jesus, we struggle with a mighty contradiction. For as we pledge our allegiance, not to nations but to a God who calls us to love even our enemies, we travel the world in a metaphorical U.S. pickup truck bristling with real weapons. “Fire from heaven” streaks from the truck with regularity, creating the smoldering ruins of villages such as the disciples of old had envisioned. With high-tech weaponry available in abundance, there is no need for government to implore God to send down fire from heaven. Yet God’s blessing is regularly invoked by political and religious leaders alike.

In the context of a military that outspends the next 15 countries combined, our malls, sports industry and Hollywood are like a narcotic, dulling us to the pain we visit on God’s children here and abroad.

Held in the truck by thousands of economic tethers sewn by our own hands, we are bound to the interests of corporations in the global market that bring many of us the good life. We purchase relatively cheap food, fuel, clothing, electronics and entertainment brought to us through trade policies that are often unjust. In the context of a military that outspends the next 15 countries combined, our malls, sports industry and Hollywood are like a narcotic, dulling us to the pain we visit on God’s children here and abroad.

Yet many in our communities are realizing the
truth of the prophet Samuel, who warned the people of Israel about the inevitable oppression of a king with a standing army (1 Samuel 8). A highly militarized power structure will take resources from the people, sucking up the very air the common good needs to breathe. While the king will have his chariots and horses, his drones and smart bombs, the people on the margins and the agencies that serve their needs will struggle to survive. Indeed not everyone on our U.S. pickup truck is enjoying the ride. While high-cost weaponry glistens on the exterior, poverty and hunger stalk the interior of the truck.

What would happen if training in nonviolence became a part of preparation for baptism?

Several days after James and John had nearly fire-bombed a Samaritan village, Jesus told a story about a man who was robbed while walking on the rocky road from Jerusalem to Jericho and left beside the road for dead. Holy people—a priest and a Levite—came along and passed by on the other side of the road. Jesus’ disciples leaned in to listen, knowing the next person would be the hero. Likely expecting it to be someone like themselves, they are astounded to hear Jesus declare that a Samaritan was the one who offered grace and healing to the wounded traveler. It is almost as if Jesus deliberately reached back several days’ journey to the village the disciples wanted to reduce to a pile of ashes and picked up a Samaritan to place into the story.

In so doing, Jesus challenged the disciples even as he challenges us to reject the popular narrative of enemy stereotyping and violent revenge that so characterize our national life. Yet Jesus goes way beyond inviting us to be civil or tolerant toward our enemies. In the form of a story, he reminds us that people we may want to destroy may in fact be capable of offering grace and healing from God. He reminds us that it is we who carry self-images of cultural and national superiority, who may in fact be the wounded ones in need of healing.

And so, I wonder, What would happen if we were bold enough to humanize our enemies as Jesus did? What would happen if we routinely remembered the victims of U.S. drone strikes in our Sunday morning prayers and regularly drew attention to them in letters to our local newspapers?

What would happen if our churches became a place where nonviolent peacemakers of all nations and religions were so celebrated that their names rolled off the tongues of our youth as easily as the names of sports stars, movie actors/actresses and pop singers?

Where might God’s Spirit lead us collectively if we who benefit from the protection of the guards on the pickup truck withheld our war taxes? What if our tax dollars went instead toward local and international acts of justice, mercy and peacemaking? Might we find blessing in such a corporate act of restoration and healing?

What would happen if we loved the soldiers on our pickup truck, especially those wounded in soul and spirit from the brutality of war? What if we recognized that their wounds symbolize our collective failure to learn and practice the ways of peace?

What would happen if we invested the same energy to prevent our nation’s bombs from falling on others, as we have invested in seeking our own exemption from military service?

What would happen if training in nonviolence became a part of preparation for baptism?

In all likelihood, I will travel the world on this metaphorical U.S. pickup truck the rest of my life. I will be blessed by the many good things on the pickup truck, but I hope I will never stop struggling with the contradictions between the faith I live by and the logic of empire that permeates many of the realities in my life. For this struggle, surely we all need another visitation of fire from heaven, like the fire of the Holy Spirit that descended on fearful believers at Pentecost. This was not a fire that destroyed. Rather, it brought together the entire known world, breaking down the barriers of language, culture, race and nation, inspiring a season of sharing and unity. Would that such a fire would burn within our community of faith on the pickup truck, inspiring courage and creativity in our commitment to living Christ’s way of peace.

Titus Peachey is Mennonite Central Committee’s peace education coordinator.
Living with Jesus’ story (Philippians 3:20-21)

Heavenly citizenship

by Hyun Hur

Why do we live here?

It was only when I was in my late 20s—and encountering undocumented immigrants coming to work in South Korea—that I began to ponder the significance of citizenship. Korea was becoming one of the most economically developed countries in Asia, and people began pouring into Korea from all over Asia, Africa and South America, looking for work opportunities from manual labor to high-tech expertise. Many came with work visas, but many also entered on tourist visas, then settled in the country with documents that had expired. Many of these undocumented workers often faced abuse while enduring unspeakable working conditions without any guarantee that they would even be paid for their work.
As I worked with my church to find ways to serve the people, I wrestled with the questions, Why do these people come to Korea? Why do they put up with such abuse and suffering? Is there any divine purpose other than the economic opportunities in Korea that brought them so far from their homes?

Now living in Los Angeles and having worked with immigrant churches, I have known undocumented Korean immigrants in congregations who live with the anxiety of someday being arrested and deported. Many of these friends feel as though a path to citizenship in America would be the answer to all of their day-to-day struggles.

I also know many successful first-generation immigrants who have a green card or U.S. citizenship but have not assimilated to the dominant culture. Most of the time, their focus is on how to survive in America and how to secure the well-being of their immediate family.

And I know U.S.-born children of immigrants who have had access to educational and financial resources but feel disconnected from the history and tradition of their immigrant parents as well as the larger American history and tradition taught in the classroom.

The impact of citizenship is indeed complex, but I still have the same questions. Why are we here? Is there a diverse purpose for us to be in America other than the economic and social opportunities?

Working with immigrants across the spectrum has taught me about the dynamic interrelationship among history, identity and mission. A community shares the stories of its history, and these stories shape its identity and mission. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul writes to a church in the city of Philippi—a unique city with a distinctive history, identity and mission. Like people today, the Philippians knew the value of citizenship, and it is to these people Paul addresses his words about the core identity Christians share and how to truly live as citizens of heaven.

**Background**

Philippi was located in Macedonia, a northern part of the Greek peninsula. It was built in 358–357 B.C. and named after Philip, king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great, after he conquered and occupied the land. Later, this city was destroyed and rebuilt by Emperor Octavian and became a colony of the Roman Empire. Octavian strategically set Philippi up as a military outpost, with the mission of bringing Roman culture and rule to northern Greece and expanding Roman influence on neighboring areas.

Philippi was populated with war veterans, and since it was a Roman colony, those who lived there were granted Roman citizenship with its many privileges, including property ownership, tax exemptions and legal protection. These privileges also were extended to Macedonian Greeks and Jews in Philippi, and they too valued and felt proud of their identification with Rome.

I wonder what common stories the Philippians knew by heart and retold to the next generation. How did these stories shape their identity as Philippians and unite them?

We can imagine that many living in Philippi knew the shared story of the Battle of Philippi, in which Octavian became the victor for Rome to prevail. Perhaps Philippians frequently expressed how lucky they were to be living in the reign of Pax Romana and acknowledged Philippi’s significant role in the Roman Empire. Because they were granted citizenship in a colony located outside Rome, they probably did not take the privileges of their citizenship for granted. The prestigious prize of Roman citizenship conferred the ultimate power of Rome.

**The text**

Paul, who knew the power and privilege of being a Roman citizen, strategically planted a church in Philippi instead of in the small port of Neapolis (Acts 16). He knew the context of the Philippian church well, and challenged the Philippians not only to live in the history, identity and mission created by the Roman Empire for the citizens of Philippi, but also to embrace the deeper story rooted in the life and power of Jesus—to live as citizens of heaven here and now, and to wait with hope.

Verse 20 begins with “but,” so we must examine verses 18 and 19 to see the contrast Paul makes between those who are and are not citizens of heaven. Paul identifies those who do not follow Christ as “enemies of the cross” (v. 18). Their primary focus is on “earthly things,” and they fulfill their selfish desires and ambitions any way they please. The distinctions can be seen in the following comparison:
Paul boldly declares, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20). Paul exhorts the church members to remember that their identity is found in Jesus, from whom they have citizenship in heaven. Their new identity is founded solely on Jesus. Paul also purposely uses the word “soter” (“savior”) in this verse. “Savior” was usually used to refer to Caesar, but Paul subversively uses it to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ, contrasting Jesus with Caesar.

This verse also challenges the Philippians to conduct themselves as citizens of heaven in the present, not somewhere in the distant future after their death. Church members are to bring the reign and rule of heaven to earth here and now with the hope of their Lord by the power of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ power is strong enough to bring all powers under him and to transform his followers to be able to finish their mission from heaven.

Thus, Paul reminds the Philippian church of an alternative narrative they are to cling to—the central story of Jesus, who became victorious not through war and violence but through his self-emptying at the cross (2:6-11). Jesus ushered in Pax Christus and the reign of heaven, in which his followers have citizenship under his glory and power. This is the story citizens of heaven must remember, retell and pass down to generations that follow to shape their identity and mission.

**Reflections**

1. What kinds of stories shape our identity as followers of Jesus Christ today?
2. What kinds of powers should be under the reign of Jesus Christ in our lives?
3. How have stories of power, privilege and wealth shaped and influenced the stories and identities of Mennonites as followers of Jesus?
4. What kinds of mission are we engaging that stem from our identity as citizens of heaven?
5. How are we influencing the world around us as citizens of heaven?

**Then why do we live here together?**

It is only when we seriously identify ourselves as heavenly citizens that we can truly unite as a body of Christ. No earthly categories and documents will have the power to divide the citizens of the kingdom. As a community of heavenly citizens, we can share the mission given us and work together to proclaim the reign of God.

We can focus so much on sending that we fail to welcome those who are before our eyes.

Thinking back to my ministry years in Korea, the irony was that while foreign laborers were flooding into Korea, Korean Christians were focusing on sending missionaries to the “10/40 windows” (parts of the world located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the Equator, including Saharan and northern Africa and almost all of Asia)—almost the same places the laborers were coming from. Korean Christians were blind to the strangers in their midst and to the abuse and the injustice the foreign workers faced. We can focus so much on sending that we fail to welcome those who are before our eyes.

We need to see the significance of the strangers and newcomers around us, for they play a big role in the body of Christ with their views and needs. In our global context, everyone is—in a way—a stranger and a welcomer. We are to identify ourselves as strangers in this world and to be broken in our identities as strangers. We are also to identify ourselves as heavenly citizens and welcome the strangers around us. This is the mission God has called us to be part of.

Mission is happening all around us, in our workplaces, schools and homes. May it bear fruit so that the world may see Jesus’ invitation to become citizens of heaven.

**Hyun Hur lives with his wife, Sue, who contributed her insights and editing to this piece, and three children in Temple City, Calif. Five years after planting and pastoring a Korean Mennonite church in Southern California, they recently launched ReconciliAsian (ReconciliAsian.com), a peace center for Korean immigrants and beyond. Born in Suwon, South Korea, Hur believes Mennonites could offer an alternative and refreshing perspective to Korean Christianity.**
Jesus and gun violence

Each year hundreds of people carry the message of peace and justice across the heart of New York on Good Friday. For many years Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship has sponsored one of the Stations of the Cross, this year #11, which shows Jesus being nailed to the cross.
The ambulance arrived, and we all stepped back. His mother’s wails made my spine crawl.—Jesus Gonzalez

2013 Good Friday Station 11: Mark 15:22-24

“One scene is engraved in my memory. Witnesses’ tears reflected the police lights as the young man [lay] on the ground. His eyes grew big; he had a piercing stare; it was like he could see into my soul. I placed my hand on his chest, and it felt as if I could grab his heart. His heart was pounding. I told him everything would be all right. The ambulance arrived, and we all stepped back. His mother’s wails made my spine crawl. Later, young people gathered to place flowers and candles where their friend had been killed … in the past 13 years. I’ve witnessed five incidents of gun violence and been to many more funerals.”—Jesus Gonzalez (Jan. 30), retrieved from www.wnyc.org/shows/rookies/blogs/rookies-blog/2013/jan/30/op-ed-gun-city/

Gun violence is an intense reality not only in Newtown, Conn., but here in New York City as well. This story belongs to Jesus Gonzalez, an activist and community organizer living in Bushwick (Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood). His is just one story of many victims of gun violence in this city.

Jesus our Lord was nailed to the cross. Imagine the trauma and pain Mary went through watching her son nailed to the cross. Imagine that same trauma and pain etched in a mother’s face as she watches her child fall victim to gun violence. Imagine the community’s response: a mix of grief and acceptance. This is just another day in the neighborhood.—Katie Penner and Allison Schrag

Prayers of the faithful

Today, we pray for the victims of gun violence in our city and that their suffering can bring about change. Together we pray,

God, grant us peace. Heal our broken hearts with your love.

Today, we pray for comfort and healing for the communities torn apart by violence. Together we pray,

God, grant us peace. Heal our broken hearts with your love.

Today, we pray for wisdom for the politicians and activists advocating for stricter gun regulations. Together we pray,

God, grant us peace. Heal our broken hearts with your love.

Today, we pray for change to come to this place. Together we pray,

God, grant us peace. Heal our broken hearts with your love.
A week before last November’s election, a video went viral showing a 4-year old girl in tears. Her mother, who had been listening to National Public Radio, asks her why she’s crying. The little girl sputters, “Just because I’m tired of Bronco Bama and Mitt Romney.” The mother gently responds, “It’ll be over soon, Abby. The election will be over soon. OK?” Abby tearfully replies, “OK.”
In response to that video’s popularity, NPR is—sued a formal apology to Abby and “all the many others who feel just like her. We must confess, the campaign’s gone on long enough for us, too. Let’s just keep telling ourselves, Only a few more days, only a few more days, only a few more days.”

**The prophet Isaiah envisions** an entirely different political campaign. This is how God would run it: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street” (Isaiah 42:1-2).

Contrast that with the barrage of attack ads that pummeled us for the weeks and months before the election. Contrast that with all the defaming and distortions and fear-mongering to which we were subjected in the presidential campaign. The tactics made me embarrassed to be a member of either political party.

But God’s candidate is gentle and nonviolent in his approach: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” (42:3a).

Our political system would say that’s ineffective. God’s candidate will never get elected that way. And even if he or she does get elected, such a candidate will never be able to get anything done.

But that’s not what Isaiah says: “He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching” (42:3b-4). Isaiah is telling us that God’s way of bringing justice is very different from our usual arm twisting.

Jesus makes a similar point in the Gospel of Mark. His disciples, James and John, want powerful positions in Jesus’ new government. They take him aside and ask if they can have the top cabinet posts: “Let us be the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense.” When the other disciples hear about it, they’re outraged, because they wanted those cabinet posts.

Jesus has to calm them all down: “You know that among the Gentiles—those pagans who don’t know the true God—that their rulers lord it over them, and their officials act like dictators, pushing for their own political interests. But that’s not how it’s going to be among you. Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be a slave to all. For the Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life to rescue all” (Mark 10:41-45 paraphrased).

**God’s government conquers not through force or filibusters, not through bullying or badgering, not through threats or war but through persistent self-giving love.**

**This is the politics of Jesus.** This is not the politics of the Republicans or the Democrats or the Libertarians. This is a politics of overcoming evil with good. This is a politics of overcoming resentment with reconciliation. This is a politics of overcoming pride with service. God’s government conquers not through force or filibusters, not through bullying or badgering, not through threats or war but through persistent self-giving love.

Today, some of us voted for one set of candidates, some for another set of candidates, and some did not vote at all. As Christians we must recognize that when we vote—if we vote—neither major political party represents Jesus’ way. We must recognize that when we vote—if we vote—we are supporting a system that is only the vaguest suggestion of the justice and peace God’s kingdom is bringing. We must recognize that when we vote—if we vote—there is only one Christian nation, and it is not the United States. It is the church—a nation without borders or immigration restrictions, a nation without an army, police force or weapons. This is the nation we believe in; this is the nation we hope God uses to help bring healing to humanity.

Today, let us remember our allegiance is to Jesus and to Jesus’ way. Yes, let us witness to the government. Yes, let us try to influence the government for good. But let us do it the way Christ would do it.

*Ryan Ahlgrim is pastor of First Mennonite Church in Indianapolis.*
Twill gave herself completely to her vocation as a teacher. She loved her work, her students and the deep-rooted feeling that teaching in a public school was exactly what God had called her to do. Well before she’d ever heard the word “missional” uttered on the lips of a preacher, she had joined God in mission at Valley Oaks Elementary in Houston. This was her expression of faith and creative way of seeking the peace of our city. And she was good at it, too, for decades. She not only taught with excellence but cared for co-workers, was known for her nonanxious presence and prayed daily for her students.

But her efforts didn’t fit the mental model for being a “good Christian,” which meant serving in church or being on mission through volunteerism above and beyond time spent at work. “It was always as if what I did didn’t matter to the church,” she says. “Unless I volunteered or joined a committee, I always felt the church didn’t count what I did. The pressure was always to do more.”

This story helps us think about the way we think. For most of us, the teacher in this story has us pegged for what we are: compartmentalized thinkers. For hundreds of years, the way we think about the work of Christ and the church has gone something like this: Special people do special things for God, and everybody else supports it financially.

Kristi was one of the many “special ones” in our congregation who had said yes to overseas missions. From early in college she was passionate about missions, and after several doors closed for her in other countries she embraced mission work in China. Her time in China was formative for her faith and worldview, changing her forever.

But a curious thing happened while there: She realized she was called to a different mission field. Her true mission field was the corporate world, in particular to live as a missionary at Exxon Mobile in Houston. She is now a missionary at Shell, giving the best of her life and energies where she works rather than by volunteering. She is one of our core leaders at Houston Mennonite, and we’re aware that in previous generations her new mission field, like Twila’s, would not have “counted.” We think that needs to change.

In his book Public Jesus, Tim Suttle says that we may spend up to 65 percent of our time at work. Yet, as the story illustrates, in the old model of being a Christian, this doesn’t count. The worth of “normal Christians” comes in their capacity to support financially the “special Christian” and in the amount and quality of time they can shave off their busy schedules to volunteer.

Work is something I do over there to allow me...
to participate with God over here. The “ethical version” of such a mental model is an invitation to do your job purely (after all, work is a necessary evil, isn’t it?): not gossip, keep your books right, not cheat, maybe start a Bible study.

**Compartmentalized thinking** assumes there is a place that God acts and a place God seemingly doesn’t. But how can we faithfully follow Christ in all of life if our mental model suggests that what matters happens only in my limited “Christian” time, such as going to church and volunteering? Such compartmentalizing of our lives is incompatible with Anabaptism, which insists we are to follow Jesus in all areas of life. Daily discipleship to Jesus is a call for all Christians in all areas of life, not just an elite few who perform special tasks.

Let’s look closer at the 65 percent of our time we spend at work. Work is not a necessary evil, drain on your time or boost to your bottom line. It connects you intimately with God’s work and mission in our world. It’s an invitation for you to catalyze your best energies of heart, mind and strength to seek shalom in our cities and the common good of neighbor and enemy alike.

In describing Mennonite faith and practice in his book *Beliefs*, John D. Roth says: “Mennonites believe that hard work—the disciplined skill of the artisan and professional, the creative expressions of poets and musicians and artists, the routine tasks of parent and farmer—is a reflection of God’s original act of creation. Work that is honest and constructive, that heals and reconciles, that makes the world more beautiful—all such work celebrates the goodness of God.”

Through both the form and the function of our jobs, we can glorify God. Formally, we can be Christian in our workplace by insistence on paying a living wage, practicing caregiving to co-workers, exercising concern for the environment or allowing our word to stand for itself.

Functionally, we can connect faith and work through the specific type of work we choose to do. We as a congregation build, engineer, teach, heal, nurture, organize and engage in work that genuinely furthers the common good. This work in and of itself should be brought under the lordship of Christ and given the appreciation it deserves. And when people like Twila and Kristi are doing just that, it should be the church that supports them in their mission, more than demanding them to support the church’s through volunteerism.

**Your work matters.** It doesn’t matter because it allows you to tithe or is flexible enough to permit you to volunteer. No, it matters, business matters, production matters, employment matters. It matters because it is part of God’s healing plan for our world. It’s a powerful way to participate in the reign of God with the 65 percent of your time too often ignored when we compartmentalize.

Do you see how big the gospel is? It completely obliterates the notion of “secular” and integrates work into our faith. As Paul says, “Whatever you do, in word and work, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” God is creating a beautiful new world right in our midst and invites us to join in through the work that we choose to perform. Thus Suttle says, “Our jobs, our work will have meaning for us only when it finds its proper place in God’s good creation.” Is your work part of the reign of Christ? Or is it dedicated to something other than Jesus?

**Work connects you intimately with God’s work and mission in our world.**

Psalm 139 helps us answer those questions by moving us past the demand to incorporate God into all areas of life and into the promise of God’s presence in every area of our lives. A missional retelling might go something like this for my congregation:

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to NASA, you are there. If I spend all day engineering ditches, you are there. If I make my income in business or the corporate world, you are there. If I spend all day with patients, energetic students, clients or family, you are there. In all our workplaces your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast in pursuit of the common good.*

Most Christian business people today have heard few sermons in their lives directed at their work. Sermon applications that target family, marriage, church or spiritual life are prevalent. But few have heard that Christianity calls us to move beyond volunteerism to vocation. If as a church we continue to embrace a missional identity, that must unequivocally change. I pray you have or find that meaning in your work. And I pray for wisdom in empowering you for your ministry there.

*Marty Troyer is pastor of Houston Mennonite Church.*
n a few months we will gather in Phoenix for the biennial convention and delegate assembly of Mennonite Church USA. Since the local congregation is the locus of our church, why and how do we gather as a national conference?

We will come together for worship, celebration, business, monitoring the progress of our Purposeful Plan, fun and service. We will affirm our core values and be involved in networking, learning, biblical/communal discernment and a prayer walk. By gathering, we will strengthen our identity and discern next steps in our journey.

We desire that our convention be a signpost pointing toward the kingdom of God, which the Bible defines as justice, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. We want to make Spirit-led decisions of faithfulness that help all of us in the diversity of our geographical settings, experiences and theological understandings to be united around our core values, which include confessing Jesus as Lord, seeing the Bible as authoritative, owning the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and seeking the Spirit’s leading.

We will gather in polarizing times in our culture, and these polarizations impact us as a church. Sometimes we talk about conflict management and difficult discussions as if they were unique to our times, not always recalling that all generations have needed to struggle to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

I am challenged by the story of the special session of the Mennonite General Conference in 1944 in Goshen, Ind. The conference was called because of a conflict threatening the (Old Mennonite) church around differing definitions of nonconformity and disagreement on whether the national conference should have the authority to discipline area conferences that were noncompliant with national conference understandings.

Mary E. Bender wrote about this tension-filled gathering that had reached an impasse: “Sanford Yoder, for 16 years president of Goshen [Ind.] College until his retirement in 1940, quietly rose, … and Guy Hershberger, a delegate, described him this way, ‘In his gracious, irenic spirit, expressed through his gentle but deeply resonant voice, he pointed to the real reason for the impasse. The reason lay deeper than the rightness or wrongness of any given point of view. It lay in the disintegration of fellowship into mutual distrust, as each side ostracized the other.’

‘When Yoder sat down,’ continued Hershberger, ‘there was deathly silence. Had a pin dropped, you could have heard it—until a brother suggested a time of prayer.’ The delegates knelt for an hour and a half in that sultry August night. When the prayer was over, the discussion resumed, but this time it was confession more than discussion.

“The next morning when the delegates met again, a softened resolution from each side passed easily. The church was free to carry out the work to which the postwar years called it.”

This 1944 conference was a watershed moment in our history, and from my perspective it speaks to our questions of trust and our willingness to listen to each other and the Spirit in these times. So how will we gather in our national delegate assembly in Phoenix?

Will we gather believing the best about each other? Will we gather in humility to listen to the other and to study the Scriptures together? Will we do communal/biblical discernment? Will we gather to confess, bless each other, pray and seek the Spirit’s direction? Will we gather believing the best about each other? Will we gather around our core values? Will we gather realizing that unity is from God and that we are called to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

Mary Bender wrote that delegates “willing to loosen the grip of ego investments in their attitudes and move toward the other side in response to the love and grace of God can usher in a new day.” May that new day continue to dawn among us in Phoenix and beyond so that we can be God’s people of healing and hope.

May it be observed as we gather, “See how they love each other,” and may that love and unity flow through us to the world as a witness to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Celebrate God’s creation

Christians have marched, cleaned up roadsides and planted trees for Earth Day because of their love of the natural world and its creator. Others have been offended by the varied political stances of Earth Day promoters and have refused to support Earth Day. Some Christians contend that God will destroy the earth (Isaiah 24:1, 2 Peter 3:7), so living sustainably should not concern us.

Creation Day: Occasionally Earth Day celebrants have promoted pantheism (seeing God and nature/creation as one). Jewish and Christian environmentalists are usually careful to affirm that God is above creation, even if they believe God is seen in the created world. What we call “nature” or “earth” God created, as he created humans. So we should praise God for the goodness of his creation and celebrate all of God’s creation. Could we call the Sunday before April 22 (traditional Earth Day) Creation Day? The focus of this day would be finding ways to praise God by thoughts, words and deeds for the greatness of creation, including animal, vegetable, human and all parts of the created earth. Maybe we should include in Creation Day praise for sun, moon and planets, too.

Biblical basis: When we look at creation passages in the Bible, we begin to understand that all of creation, including humans, is intended to honor God. All creation, even sea monsters can praise God. See Psalm 148:7-14.

Humans as well as sky, water, animals and soil all contribute praise and glory to God. When we pollute these parts of creation, we lessen the praise they can bring to God. Destroying the habitat of the snail darter or the spotted owl (leading to their extinction) hinders God’s plan for creation. We participate in the process of redemption by cleaning up polluted streams, restoring damaged habitats and learning to make sustainability our focus (not using up natural resources).

Rededication to our part in the redemption of creation should be part of our Easter celebration.

Creation Day and the poor: Being at our best mentally, spiritually and physically requires a certain level of resources. Many people today do not have the food, health care and education that would put them at their best due to the current distribution of resources. With the spread of areas of drought, those financially better off move to areas with better resources. The poor cannot afford to and must live on polluted or dry land. Jesus gave a lot of attention to the poor. Perhaps the most important reason to focus on creation care is to give the same urgency to care for the poor that the Bible does.

Christians have cited Romans 8:22 (“creation groans”) and Revelation 11:18 (“destroy those who destroy the earth”) as indication of biblical support for creation care. But is it clear that these passages go beyond the Hebrew concept that moral corruption directly corrupts the soil? What is clear is Jesus’ concern for the poor. In our day it is clear that environmental degradation affects the poor first. Celebrating creation means enabling the poor to celebrate creation by stopping the pollution of their space, cleaning up of areas where poorer people live.

Creation and redemption: Easter, which often comes just before the proposed Creation Day, reminds us of the goodness of God’s creation and the promise that the consequences of sin to all of creation have or will end. In Christ, humans are brought back into a right relationship with God. God promises the same for the rest of creation. The future of God’s work is to bring about the restoration of the original goodness of creation (Romans 8, Revelation 20). Restoration includes stopping and repairing human misuse of creation. We participate in the process of redemption by cleaning up polluted streams, restoring damaged habitats and learning to make sustainability our focus (not using up natural resources).

Readers have pointed out the need to focus on the poor and the future of God’s work. We have quoted Romans 8:22 and Revelation 11:18 as indication of biblical support for creation care. But is it clear that these passages go beyond the Hebrew concept that moral corruption directly corrupts the soil? What is clear is Jesus’ concern for the poor. In our day it is clear that environmental degradation affects the poor first. Celebrating creation means enabling the poor to celebrate creation by stopping the pollution of their space, cleaning up of areas where poorer people live.

Rededication to our part in the redemption of creation should be part of our Easter celebration.

So let’s celebrate creation. Let’s celebrate God’s goodness to us through experiencing flowers, trees, mountains, rivers, birds, babies, athletes and our lovers. We can add to God’s praise by cleaning up Black’s Run, removing trash from Rawley Pike or starting a compost pile. Perhaps we should have our Creation Day service outdoors (weather permitting or not)—love that spring rain—to enhance our appreciation of the created world. Later, a walk in the mountains, along the seashore or to the garden can enhance our appreciation of God’s creation.

Celebrate Creation Day: Praise God and do his work.
Phoenix delegates to decide about new agency

MHS Alliance and Mennonite Church USA want to strengthen relationship.

Mennonite Health Services Alliance and its direct forbearers have been a part of the Mennonite family for a long time. During the Mennonite Church USA convention in Phoenix, Ariz., July 1-6, delegates will be asked to strengthen this connection by endorsing MHS Alliance as a full agency of the church.

With delegate approval, MHS Alliance would become the church’s fifth program agency, joining Mennonite Mission Network, MennoMedia (formerly Mennonite Mission Network and Thirdway Media), Mennonite Education Agency and Everence (formerly Mennonite Mutual Aid).

MHS Alliance member organizations, during their annual meeting Feb. 14, prior to Mennonite Health Assembly in Orlando, Fla., voted unanimously—41 to 0—to approve two proposals recommended by the MHS Alliance board of directors:

• that MHS Alliance accept the invitation to become an agency of Mennonite Church USA and

• that MHS Alliance by-laws be amended as recommended (to facilitate the change).

Marty Lehman, associate executive director of churchwide operations for Mennonite Church USA, says, “MHS Alliance’s becoming an agency of Mennonite Church USA is like a homecoming. Many of the member organizations, which were started as ministries of our mission organizations, have literally taken care of the orphans and widows. Thus, they have been denominational ministries all along. It is nice to welcome MHS Alliance to Mennonite Church USA as an agency focused on health and human service ministries.”

MHS Alliance has deep roots in the former Mennonite Church in the United States. As early as the late 1800s, Anabaptists in the United States began developing health and human service organizations such as nursing homes, mental health centers, hospitals, senior housing, underserved communities and agencies serving youth and those with developmental disabilities. In some cases, these ministries were initiated locally by individuals, congregations and other groups. Conferences and mission and service agencies at the regional or national level began other organizations.

A church-related network of health and human services organizations can be traced to the 1940s. Following World War II, when many Mennonite young people served in mental hospitals as conscientious objectors, Mennonite Central Committee began addressing mental health. Eventually, MCC established five mental health organizations under the umbrella of Mennonite Mental Health Services.

Paralleling these developments and spanning a longer period of time was the work of the Mennonite Board of Missions through its health and welfare division.

In 1988, Mennonite Mental Health Services was separated from MCC. At the same time, Mennonite Board of Missions spun off its health and welfare institutions to a reconstituted Mennonite Health Services. Then MHS began relating to other health and human service ministries supported by conferences and congregations from across the entire Anabaptist family.

Later, MHS refocused its mission and adopted a new name, MHS Alliance. Today, MHS Alliance has 74 member organizations in 17 states; 62 of these are affiliated with Mennonite Church USA. The organizations include acute-care hospitals, developmental disability services and mental health programs. Forty-eight member organizations provide health care and housing for seniors.

MHS Alliance has maintained strong church connections through covenant relationships with three different denominations: Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Brethren and the Brethren in Christ. These relationships have fostered exchanges of mutual accountability and benefits flowing between MHS Alliance and its member organizations and the sponsoring denominations.

The church-agency connection has also been reinforced by a board that takes seriously the church’s sponsorship of health and human services organizations. The three denominations appoint six members of MHS Alliance’s board, and the member organizations elect six additional members. Lee Snyder, former president of Bluffton (Ohio) University, has chaired the board since 2008.

Rick Stiffney of Goshen, Ind., has served as president and CEO of Mennonite Health Services since 1999. He advocates a close connection with the church, which he de-
scribes as shifting the trajectory or “bending the curve.” He says that many pressures can contribute to disaffiliation between institutions and the broader church.

“A strong and mutually beneficial relationship between church and institution is vitally important to the mission of MHS Alliance and our members—being part of God’s work of healing and hope in Christ Jesus,” Stiffney says. “If we are to have ministries that have Anabaptist character, we need strong relationships between the Anabaptist community of faith and the ministries. Through these relationships we seek to collaborate in ministry and witness, practice common core values and support one another.”

A few years ago, the MHS Alliance board revised the organization’s statements of vision, mission and values to guide it at the beginning of the 21st century:

- **Vision:** to be a community of vibrant Anabaptist health and human service ministries committed to God’s work of healing and hope in Jesus Christ.
- **Mission:** MHS Alliance strengthens and extends Anabaptist health and human service ministries in faithfully and effectively fulfilling their missions.
- **Values:** spirituality and prayer; community, mutuality and service; human dignity and compassion for all people; stewardship of God’s gifts; advocacy for justice, peace and reconciliation; ethical commitment; and grace and hospitality.

This constellation of vision, mission and values has an impact on the day-to-day operations of member organizations.

### MHS Alliance’s becoming an agency of Mennonite Church USA is like a homecoming.—Marty Lehman

“We believe that a vital relationship between organizations and their community of faith strengthens both the organization and the church,” Stiffney says, “providing a clear sense of faith-centered mission and identity.”

MHS Alliance provides a variety of faith-grounded services for its members. These include leadership development through the Values-based Leadership Program, executive support via Executive Circle and affinity group networks and expert consultations. Consultations focus on governance and compliance issues, leadership transitions and executive searches, and best-practices related to day-to-day operations.

In January, seven new consultants joined MHS Alliance, bringing a cumulative total of approximately 120 years of experience to MHS Consulting Services. They bring expertise especially in the areas of operations, finance, strategic planning and market research. These consultants serve clients and members nationally from offices located in Goshen, Ind., Camp Hill, Pa., Newberg, Ore., and Wichita, Kan.

As health and human services practices in the United States continue to evolve, MHS Alliance is poised to help its member organizations and the many other nonprofit organizations it serves adapt to ongoing change even as they maintain core commitments to the Anabaptist churches that gave them birth.—**MHS Alliance staff**

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### Finances for Mennonite Church USA agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MHS Alliance</td>
<td>$1,008,483,038</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEA</td>
<td>$115,460,085</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everence</td>
<td>$674,706,248</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMN</td>
<td>$8,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MennoMedia</td>
<td>$3,125,500</td>
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Each agency provided the information in this graph:

- **MHS Alliance total** represents the expenses for the organization and its members in 2012.
- **Everence total** is the 2012 revenue amount and includes new member deposits and return on investments in 2012.
- **Mennonite Education Agency** amount includes operating expenses for MEA and the higher education schools for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2012.
- **Mennonite Mission Network’s amount** is the operating budget for the current fiscal year and includes Mennonite Voluntary Service unit activities.
- **MennoMedia** is a binational agency of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.
Elkhart building brings diverse staff together

LEED Certification pending; about $2.3 million still owed

Jim Bixler, 76, has been volunteering at the three different Mennonite office locations in Elkhart, Ind., since January 1995. He worked full-time until a year ago, when he reduced his volunteering to half-time. Here he places envelopes through a postage machine in the mail room in the new Mennonite Church USA office building.

On April 14, 2012, Mennonite Church USA leaders gathered in Elkhart, Ind., for the dedication of a new office building. One year later, nearly 70 employees from five different denominational agencies or entities are using the facility, an environmentally up-to-date building that is still being paid for.

In February 2010, the Executive Board (EB) agreed to proceed with construction of the building and authorized a loan of up to $1.5 million. The goal was to have a more efficient, functional and flexible facility that would serve multiple organizations working together.

In June 2010, David Weaver, chief financial officer of Mennonite Mission Network, reported on progress of a Joining Together, Investing in Hope campaign. EB then gave approval to a $2.1 million loan and agreed to develop a plan for a debt-free building. It also authorized that 10 percent of the new money raised after June 15, 2010, in the capital campaign be used for racial/ethnic concerns.

By November 2011, $3.2 million was still needed (including $300,000 for racial/ethnic concerns), and the EB committed itself to helping raise funds for the campaign.

To date, the costs of the building, including construction, architect and professional fees, plus furnishing and equipment, are around $6.8 million. There is a mortgage loan balance of $1,995,000, with a current interest rate, which adjusts monthly, of 2.7 percent. An estimated balloon payment of $1,489,000 is due March 10, 2017, and there is a loan from Mission Network of $340,000.

Mennonite Church USA executive director Ervin Stutzman says that the fund-raising for the building has taken a back seat to other matters. “We have a manageable mortgage, so we are not pushing to get the building paid for,” he says. “However, we occasionally approach donors who have interest in the building.”

LEED Certification: Mennonite Church USA staff submitted documentation late last year for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Certification, says Weaver, then resubmitted with clarifications in January. Their goal is to be gold certified. To date, they have not received word about their certification.

The building of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, next door to the Mennonite Church USA building, is gold certified.

One goal of the new facility was to bring together a greater variety of Mennonite Church USA staff. The previous facility, which was rented, included primarily staff from EB and Mission Network.

As of December 2012, the building included 65 staff members from EB, Mission Network, Mennonite Education Agency (MEA), MennoMedia and The Mennonite. And Marty Lehman, director of churchwide operations for Mennonite Church USA, says that staff from other groups will be added soon. According to Weaver, “The current capacity is 90 [workers], with potential for 110, if the lower south wing [is] finished out.”

Collaboration: An outgrowth of bringing people from different agencies together in one building has been greater collaboration, says Lisa Heinz, senior director for operations and chief financial officer for MEA.

Carlos Romero, MEA executive director, says it has been “a positive experience,” although “it took some time to adapt.” MEA had its offices in rural Goshen, Ind., before the new building was completed, and EB expressed the hope that MEA staff would move into the new building.

Romero says that MEA discussed the move and hoped for the best. His staff has less space now than they had in their previous facility, but they’ve not been disappointed, he says. “There is a synergy and conversations taking place that would not have taken place otherwise.”

Lehman adds that the new arrangement has led to “more efficient work and more cooperation.” She says two staff members of the Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADNet) will move into offices on April 1, and one MennoMedia staff member plans to move into the building this spring and another one in the fall.—Gordon Houser
When loving neighbors conflicts with the law

Congregations wrestle with conscience in response to immigration issues.

As congregations across Mennonite Church USA engage immigration issues and relate to people who are undocumented, some are confronting the question of whether God is calling them to break the law or to follow the law of the land.

“We all want to love our neighbors, and we all want to be law-abiding citizens,” says Anne Mitchell, pastor of a Mennonite congregation. “When a decision needs to be made between showing love to a person who is undocumented and upholding the law, some aren’t sure what to do.”

Some Mennonites believe that breaking the law is contrary to faithful living, adds Nelson Kraybill, who pastors the same congregation.

Mitchell says that one of the congregation’s members who was previously undocumented was arrested and jailed last year.

“It was devastating for her family and for the rest of us,” she says. “She was taken out of town right away, and the church scrambled to support her. Thankfully, she was released from the state detention facility, which happened following a prayer vigil held by the congregation.”

“Her being arrested galvanized my convictions and the convictions of others,” says Kraybill. “When the laws demand that we act in ways that harm the vulnerable and the needy, then our first recourse is to seek change of law. We don’t just immediately go break the law.”

In the case of immigration, however, Kraybill believes laws may become more punitive. “At some point,” he says, “our resisting that law becomes a prophetic witness on the order of Acts 5:28-32, in which the apostles say, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority.’ In unusual circumstances, we, too, need to do that.”

**John D. Roth, professor of history** at Goshen (Ind.) College and director of the Mennonite Historical Library, shares perspectives on the issue of breaking the law from Mennonite history.

“At the beginning of the movement in the 1500s, Anabaptists were accused of being terrorists whose refusal to follow the law [by not swearing oaths or baptizing infants] undermined all social order,” he says. From then on, Roth explains, Anabaptists have felt a strong need to convince society that they do, in fact, have respect for the law.

“At the same time, Anabaptists have maintained a strong tradition of continuing to be willing to break the law of the land in order to uphold principles of faith,” he says. “The fundamental principal that Christians—in discernment with each other and the church—may at times violate or publicly disobey a law as a matter of Christian conscience is a well-established pattern in the Anabaptist tradition.”

“It would be nice if [people who are undocumented] could have come here by legal means,” Kraybill says. “That is the preferred way. But the waiting list is too long for following the legal process to be of any benefit. Their children would grow up hungry. And, however they got here, they’re here. They’re in our neighborhoods and churches, and they need work and food.”

**Shalom Mennonite Fellowship** in Tucson, Ariz., wrestled with these questions in the 1980s as undocumented people fled to the area during the wars in Central America and were denied refugee status by the U.S. government.

Bryce Miller, Shalom’s pastor, explains that Shalom was one of a number of churches offering sanctuary.

“There was a considerable disagreement over this in the church, and a fair number of people left,” he says. “The Shalom congregation that remained adopted a position of welcoming and shielding Latin American refugees.”

He notes that Shalom amended its bylaws to reflect this position and adds that the issue still is “very much present for us today as a church and as individuals.”—Hilary J. Scarsella for Mennonite Church USA
For Serbian young adults, the conflict of the 1990s is a vague memory, but the effects of that war still linger all around them.

Lane Stopher and his co-workers at the War Trauma Center in Serbia wanted to explore the aftermath of war on society. They enlisted the help of young adults by creating a video contest around the subject of “psychological effects of violence” and asked the youth to submit videos for a chance to both educate the public and win prize money.

The grand-prize-winning film, *Stolen Freedom*, featured the story of Serbian refugees who were fleeing the conflict that was encroaching on their homes in parts of Bosnia and Croatia. The refugees thought they reached safety, but they were immediately turned around and forced into the army.

That story, along with the other videos, helped illustrate some of the trauma that war causes to individuals and culture.

“Most people don’t really know much about the larger effects of war—the causes, the symptoms and what they do to the larger society,” Stopher says. “We wanted to do something educational but also creative.”

**The conflict in the former Yugoslavia** started at the end of the 1980s, when the once-prosperous country was facing growing economic challenges and rising turmoil in its diverse population. This combustible setting was ignited in 1991 by growing nationalism and internal and external political pressure, which catapulted the entire region into a dramatic and bloody conflict, resulting in the formation of six official countries and one disputed country. An estimated 140,000 people were killed and more than 4 million displaced during the 10-year conflict.

Stopher, from Central Mennonite Church in Archbold, Ohio, works at the War Trauma Center through a partnership facilitated by Mennonite Mission Network. He writes grants to help fund the Center’s counseling and psychological support for those traumatized by violence and ongoing conflict in the former Yugoslavia. The film project was part of the “Looking Ahead by Facing the Past” project, funded by Mennonite Central Committee.

Stopher and his coworkers thought a video contest would generate more interest and diversity of perspectives than simply paying for a professionally produced video.

Other entries included a silent movie called *Trauma*, about a soldier who lives with the memory of his field nurse being gunned down. Another film, *Temporarily Displaced*, is about a dissident who waits in fear as what appear to be government agents enter his house. Another video, called *20 Years Later*, documents the history of the war from the battles on the ground to Croatia’s admission into the European Union.

The video project was an opportunity for budding filmmakers to showcase their work for a good cause.

“People wanted to encourage young adults to use their skills and knowledge for social involvement, not just for money,” he says.

**Entrants were given one month** to submit their videos, and then, after being reviewed by a panel of judges for content and relevance, they were uploaded onto YouTube. The winner was determined by a weighted system of “views” and “likes,” which YouTube tracks.

The contest generated national media interest. One of the winners came from a small town, Stopher says, and his local radio news outlet contacted the War Trauma Center. The staff ended up speaking about the project and the work of the War Trauma Center on live radio.

“The winner let us know that during the voting period, a Bosnian newspaper contacted him, since they had gotten word of the contest and the content,” Stopher says. “The newspaper ended up writing a two-page article about the story the filmmaker depicted. It’s a relatively unknown story that’s very powerful.”

Stopher says the staff isn’t sure what they’ll do for next year’s peace project, but the video contest has provided a jumping-off point and sparked new ideas about how to communicate about war trauma and the mission of their organization.

The film *Trauma* can be viewed on YouTube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0Ws982D_4Q.—Melanie Hess of Mennonite Mission Network
Exhausted couple gets help from volunteers

Dows tried to cap their household at 25 children, slept with eight infants

T hough Litein doesn’t show up on most maps, three young women serving through Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM)’s GO! program have found their way to this hilly corner of rural Kenya. Courtney Mast, Mallory Beiler, and Olivia Kruis live and work in Litein, helping care for 52 children—orphans, the children of the village prostitute, and children who were simply discarded.

Five years ago, Greg and Mary Rose Dow, an American couple from Mount Joy, Pa., felt God calling them to help vulnerable children in Kenya. They sold their home, took their family of five to Kenya, bought land and set up a home. Children began coming from all directions.

Community leaders brought children who had been abandoned in fields or by the roadside. Aunts and uncles brought children they inherited from deceased family members. Parents brought their own children, hoping to give them to foreigners who might be able to give them a future.

On a visit to the Mennonite Guest House in Nairobi last year, Greg told an EMM worker about his family’s exhaustion. The Dows had capped the number of children they could care for at 25, but villagers kept bringing more children—children who would clearly die if the Dows refused to accept them.

So the Dows ignored their cap. Soon the home was understaffed and underfunded, and Greg and Mary Rose, who slept with eight infants in their bed each night, were exhausted. EMM offered to use its recruiting networks to find help for the Dows.

Within six months, the first EMM short-term worker arrived at the children’s home. Courtney Mast, a Hesston (Kan.) College graduate from Weatherford, Okla., was looking for a year-long assignment with children in Africa. She began working at the Dow Family Children’s Home in October 2012.

In January, Mallory Beiler (Mifflinburg, Pa.) and Olivia Kruis (Lititz, Pa.) joined Mast at the home. The three young women share a room in the main house.

Each morning they are given an assignment—a child who needs one-on-one care, or a household task. They change babies’ diapers, wash children, wipe noses, bake bread, sing songs, play games and give hugs.

When the Dows visited the Mennonite Guest House again in January, they couldn’t stop praising their new helpers.

“They are a piece of cake,” Mary Rose says. With trustworthy assistants, the Dows have had a chance to catch their breath, increasing their chances for longevity in mission.

“Supporting like-minded ministries is one of the priorities for EMM East Africa,” says Aram DiGennaro, regional representative. “And this is definitely a like-minded ministry. The Dows are providing safety, nutrition and nurture for these children, giving them a chance and hope for the future. We are thrilled to give them a shot in the arm with these three GO! participants.”

M ast, Beiler and Kruis spend several days each month at the Mennonite Guest House, resting and renewing their energy. EMM long-term workers in East Africa are taking advantage of the opportunity to invest in the three young women during this time away from home, as they struggle with a new culture.

Their time in Nairobi includes one-on-one coffee chats (mentoring) with one of the long-term workers and several hours of daily seminar time focused on spiritual development, relevant topics in cross-cultural ministry and issues of cultural adjustment.

“We secretly hope they will return to the field as long-term missionaries,” says DiGennaro. “But even if they don’t, we’re sowing back into EMM’s constituency. When someone does the challenging work of raising their own funds to volunteer, you know God is involved and moving. We want to track with these young people during this important time.”

EMM GO! assignments last from two months to a year and vary according to participants’ interests and gifts. For more information visit www.emm.org/go.—Debbi DiGennaro of Eastern Mennonite Missions

Mallory Beiler helps out with a game of jump rope at the Dow Family Children’s Home in Litein, Kenya.
Bethel College continues connections in Haiti

Nursing students see lack of supplies, raise $1,200 for bottles, infant formula.

Bethel College senior students Payton Walker, left, and Susan Morris enjoy a meal during their visit to Haiti in December 2012.

Bethel College (North Newton, Kan.)’s Haiti connection continues to strengthen, most recently through two service-related trips by students and faculty.

After fall final exams and before Christmas, seven senior nursing students and one 2012 nursing graduate, along with one of their professors, Geraldine Tyrell, spent a little over a week in the country. All spent most of their time in Hinche, in the central part of Haiti, where Bethel graduate Wildy Mulatre lives with his family and works as a health-care administrator. Doug Siemens, assistant professor of education, was there most recently, Jan. 21-25.

The nurses were at Hôpital Ste. Therese in Hinche about four hours per day, doing basic care.

“We divided into two groups,” says Tyrell “so each spent [time] in the men’s ward/post-op, pediatrics, some OB and a little time in ICU with one particular patient.”

“It was a good cultural experience,” says Susan Morris, North Newton. “It was different from nursing in North America. We spent a lot of time sitting around, waiting for something to do. We prepared for the worst, but you can’t really imagine what it will be like. They didn’t have basic essentials” such as hand sanitizer (the group knew to bring their own), soap or easy access to running—much less hot—water.

One important thing they learned, however, was that Haitian health-care workers are “a lot more resourceful than we are, because they have to,” Morris says.

Examples they saw were an IV bag and tubing made into an irrigating catheter (an expensive item beyond the hospital’s budget) and a latex glove used as a tourniquet.

“We really had to focus on providing the best patient care possible [with what we had],” Morris says, and Tyrell adds, “We realized quickly the importance of a smile and a comforting hand.”

“Sometimes I couldn’t do anything but rub the patient’s back,” says Hinerman of an experience with labor and delivery. “The next day, the woman sought me out to let me know how much she appreciated that.”

With several fund-raisers during fall semester, the students raised $1,200 for bottles and infant formula for mothers who had problems breastfeeding, particularly in the case of premature infants. They also brought 360 lactation kits purchased through the Harvey County (Kan.) Health Department with funding from a United Methodist Church grant to Harvey County Health Ministries.

The group was gratified to be able to see some of the supplies put immediately to work. Both Siemens and the nursing students recognized from their short time in Haiti that the barriers to making life better for the average Haitian sometimes seem overwhelming. “Starting small,” as Siemens says, may be the only answer for now.—Melanie Zuercher of Bethel College
Rhoda Keener, co-director of Mennonite Women USA, and Carolyn Heggen, psychotherapist and teacher, returned from the Sister Care Guatemala Seminar they led together for 61 women Feb. 11-15. It was the first of three Sister Care seminar events slated for Central and South America. What made this trip so poignant was both the impact of the first Spanish Sister Care manual and the passing of the Sister Care leadership torch for the upcoming seminar in Mexico. SC Guatemala welcomed women from eight countries: Bolivia, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico and Guatemala.

Gloria Chacón of Costa Rica says: “The training took place amid powerful stories of pain. Many tears were shed, and there was an opportunity to think deeply about important issues, such as accepting ourselves as beloved of God, taking care of and understanding ourselves, learning to set boundaries, listening with compassion and managing stress. It was a healing space for many of us.”

Each country representative requested Spanish manuals to take back with her to continue the Sister Care seminar teachings at home. Over 800 Spanish Sister Care manuals were sent along. Two more translation projects sprouted from the new Spanish manuals as well: a translation into Kek’chi (a Mayan language spoken in Guatemala) and a Panamanian manual that will rely heavily on pictures and images, since many of the women recipients are illiterate.

“We feel so very good about the seminar,” Heggen says, “with such participatory, warm women who are grateful for the contextualized Spanish manuals and who told us over and over how much they have learned and will share with women in their churches and communities.”

SEMILLA, the Latin American Anabaptist Seminary, hosted the SC Guatemala event, where pastoral care professor Olga Piedrasanta was the event organizer. Piedrasanta secured funding from Mennonite Central Committee to help women travel to Guatemala from South America and Central America. The Sister Care leadership torch was passed from Keener and Heggen to Piedrasanta and Ofelia Garcia. Garcia is one of Mennonite Women USA’s International Women’s Fund recipients.

“I experienced something different among us,” Garcia says, “new courage and energy to continue breaking new ground. Beside us stands our sister, friend and companion, also taking up the challenges of the kingdom of God. Each is so different and yet we have so many things in common. This space was used to heal pain, express things that perhaps had been stored for a long time. It was a space created with freedom and confidence. The greatest impact of Rhoda and Carolyn has been open hearts, speaking from their own experiences, without masks.”

On the last day of the seminar series, Keener and Heggen trained Piedrasanta and Garcia for leading the seminar in Mexico. “The handing over of leadership for Mexico to these two Central American women is really powerful,” Keener says. In a pinning ceremony, Heggen and Keener removed their Sister Care pins and pinned them to the blouses of Piedrasanta and Garcia. Then the four women prayed.

Piedrasanta and Garcia will present Sister Care May 24-25 in Chihuahua, Mexico, and pass the gift to the next group of women. SC Guatemala was a ministry made available through funding from Mennonite Women USA, Schowalter Foundation, Mennonite Central Committee and the Latin America Committee of the Council of International Anabaptist Ministries.—Claire DeBerg of Mennonite Women USA
Public service announcements spark calls of desperation to Newton, Kan., office.

In the midst of callers wanting information on the newest Vacation Bible School materials, Gather ‘Round children’s curriculum or Mennonite Girls Can Cook Celebrations, the customer service staff handling most calls to MennoMedia in Newton, Kan., are sometimes caught off guard. That’s when they find themselves talking to a mother desperate to find help for a depressed, suicidal or drug addicted son, daughter or other relative.

And now, thanks to public service announcements on addictive substances such as drugs, alcohol and cigarettes that are airing heavily in the first six months of 2013, people are turning to the Mennonite church for help to stop smoking, too.

Never Too Late: Hope for Addictions 30-second and 60-second messages are airing on at least 132 stations across the United States (a number which includes only stations that send response cards or emails reporting on their use).

Using data from the cards and figuring conservatively, there will be at least 31,896 exposures of these spots over this year in 32 states, including the larger cities of Los Angeles; Las Vegas, Nev.; Phoenix; Nashville, Tenn.; Washington, D.C.; Spokane, Wash.; Oklahoma City; Birmingham, Ala.; and Charlotte, N.C. Dollar value for airtime for these exposures on 132 stations is lowballed at $250,000 to $500,000, time that is donated by the stations. “We calculate that probably double that number of stations use the spots and never let us know, so the dollar value of the spots airing is probably closer to at least $1 million,” says Russ Eanes, executive director of MennoMedia.

“People have only a vague or fuzzy idea of what they’ve heard when they call, so sometimes they are expecting more help than the booklets we offer on the spots,” says producer Melodie Davis. To date, 30 people have called in response to the addictions spots. Last year, a smaller number of stations were airing public service radio spots from MennoMedia on grief and mental illness, which prompted 41 calls during the year.

The spots feature actual people telling their stories of pain, addiction, stigma, loss of family and friends. “We are grateful to the major funder for this project, Schowalter Foundation, which enabled us to reach out to likely millions of listeners,” says Steve Carpenter, development director for MennoMedia. The spots also utilize original interviews first conducted for the documentary Finding Hope in Recovery, which received substantial funding from Odyssey Networks.

The spots end with a variety of tags to MennoMedia websites, with resources on issues cited; some have an 800 number listeners can call for MennoMedia’s pastoral care pamphlets as well as for purchased resources. Some spots simply end with, “This message from the Mennonite churches.”


BIPOLAR genetics

Researchers are looking for genes that may affect a person’s chances of developing bipolar disorder.

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Researchers are looking for genes that may affect a person’s chances of developing bipolar disorder.

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Gordon Allaby is grateful for the services Mennonite Church Canada provides. But he is deeply concerned about how charitable giving is changing. “The church is not just another charity,” he says. “We’re doing the work of God here,” he says, noting that Mennonite Church Saskatchewan also has its financial challenges.

Osler (Saskatchewan) Mennonite Church, where Allaby is pastor, is geographically distant from his wider church offices, so he frequently uses resources provided by Mennonite Church Canada that are freely available by phone and via the internet. He notes that his congregants have a high degree of trust in these resources.

“They know that important issues of the day have received disciplined discernment in a wider community. This sharing of wisdom is a great gift.”

In his church’s monthly newsletters, readers are often referred to links on Mennonite Church Canada’s website, where congregants can get the wider church’s voice on the interplay of current events and what they mean for Mennonites seeking to be faithful.

But Allaby expresses surprise and sadness to learn that Mennonite Church Canada is facing a $237,000 shortfall in donation income for the fiscal year just ended, on Jan. 31. “I agree with Paul, who said the church is the body of Christ. I want to be in this body. I want to give to this body and be a part of where God is leading us,” he says.

Financial support of Mennonite Church Canada’s national church ministries continued its eight-year declining trend in 2012. Preliminary figures indicate that the combined giving of congregations and individual and corporate donors was down a total of $237,000—6.75 percent below budgeted income in 2012, says chief administrative officer Vic Thiessen.

A dip in individual and corporate giving was already evident in September 2012, says Thiessen. In response, staff conducted a phone campaign, a direct mail campaign and increased personal visits during the fall of 2012.

By mid-December 2012, contacts with individual and corporate donors made it clear that a giving shortfall of $159,000 was unlikely to be reversed before the year’s end. An unanticipated additional shortfall of $78,000 from congregations became evident in January as congregations closed their books for the year.—Dan Dyck for Mennonite Church Canada News
Pastoral care through Facebook?

Church leaders are navigating social media use in their churches.

Pastor Jennifer Gingerich decided to conduct a type of Facebook experiment. She started as interim pastoral team member in August 2012 at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind.

Prior to this position, she did not use Facebook frequently. However, she soon discovered that a lot of Assembly Church members post pastoral concerns as Facebook status updates, especially with the number of losses and transition in the congregation.

“I’m here for a year, so I am going to engage with Facebook as a pastor for that year,” she says.

Depending on the type of concern, she posts back on their Facebook wall, sends an email or makes an effort to touch base in person with the individual.

Jennifer Gingerich

“I try to be really sensitive with my responses,” Gingerich says. Overall, the experiment builds her connections with congregants as she discovers their interests, vocation news and family activities.

Facebook has its drawbacks, however. One is often an observer, not a participant, she says.

“[Facebook] can be a way to follow people’s lives without them knowing about it,” Gingerich says.

Joanna Harader, pastor of Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kan., also uses Facebook to learn about her church members and their lives.

As a pastor of a small church, Harader is Facebook friends with most people at Peace.

She says Facebook offers a special tool for pastoral care, as sometimes individuals will post a significant life occurrence on Facebook and may not announce it anywhere else.

Harader also describes the “farther reach” as one advantage of Facebook. For example, a lot of the students away at college use Facebook messaging with Harader.

Some individuals consider Harader their pastor, and she corresponds with them online, but they do not attend Peace Mennonite or another church regularly due to proximity or baggage they have with church.

“It allows [me] to speak with and minister to people who would not be a part of a traditional church,” she says.

Jim Miller, pastor of Covenant Mennonite Fellowship in Sarasota, Fla., also uses Facebook to relate to the more transient individuals involved with Covenant, such as young adults and winter residents.

Covenant also established the “Friends of Covenant” term for people connected to the church but for one reason or another feel unable to participate regularly on Sundays in person.

Facebook offers a way for these individuals to experience the community through photos or church news posted, Miller says.

However, Miller says, the church considers how much to share online. For example, during the Epiphany Sunday service they held an anointing with water.

“It was intimate and powerful for those present,” he says. “Looking over the photos from the service, we had to decide what to share and what not to share. We kept out any of those that were too intimate.”

Pastor Leonard Dow of Oxford Circle Mennonite Church in Philadelphia also considers these issues, as Facebook can be a free for all, he says.

“That can be a blessing, as people are interacting, but can be a challenge when the page becomes an opportunity to prove a point,” he says. “Facebook can be a polarizing place if we try to ‘convince’ one another.”

A few times, Dow has stepped in and reminded people to post articles related to politics, elections or gun control on their personal pages, not the church page.

“If it’s on the church page, it’s like the church endorses it,” he says. “We don’t try to avoid the issues, but we try to approach them from a Christ-centric perspective.”

Prayer remains a significant component of Dow’s Facebook use.

“Weekly or biweekly, I post a question asking for prayer requests,” he says. “I’m amazed at the number of people who respond.”

He provides the option for individuals to post publicly or privately message him, depending on the type of request. Then Dow spends time in prayer surrounding those posts and messages, and he might try to interact with those who send messages.

Should we allow teenagers to view videos on smartphones while volunteering in childcare during congregational meetings?—Jennifer Gingerich

Jim Miller
“One of the key responsibilities [of pastors] is to be praying,” he says. “[Facebook] gives me the opportunity to engage in that.”

Oxford Circle’s worship team also uses Facebook to teach and disperse the worship music. “When there is a new song, they will post a YouTube video of it to the church’s Facebook page,” he says. “If it’s a new song, people can also express that they were blessed by the song through Facebook.”

Oxford Circle also utilizes the church Facebook page during intense care issues or emergencies. “Instead of a phone tree or email, people will post updates on the church page,” Dow says. This allows everyone to feel ownership and engaged in church life, instead of “always tapping the same people” to help, he adds.

Finally, Dow says that despite all the advantages, Facebook is not a place to build community. “It can be an added value, but … building community happens in person,” he says.

As a church, Gingerich says similar questions regarding technology arise. For example, do we allow youth to text during youth group? Should we allow teenagers to view videos on smartphones while volunteering in child care during congregational meetings? Assembly Mennonite members consider having a Sunday school elective to examine these questions and related issues.

On a personal level, Gingerich acknowledges that her Facebook experiment could compromise her time management as a pastor. One way to create boundaries, she says, is to create a favorites list of only Assembly attendees. When she logs on to Facebook at work, the newsfeed only includes posts from those individuals.

“This way she is focused on the 200 people from church. “I catch up, pay attention and let it go,” she says.

Pastor Harader follows another guideline to keep social media from dominating her office hours. “From the time worship begins on Sunday to noon on Monday, I try to stay off Facebook, blogging and email,” she says. “I don’t follow this rule 100 percent, but I try.”

Dow says he tries to limit his Facebook time to once in the morning, over lunch and at the end of the day for a total of about 45 minutes. Praying for requests made on Facebook does not replace the importance of his prayer walks in the community, he says.—

Anna Groff

**Politics, pastors and Facebook**

One regret I have had as a Mennonite pastor is sharing too much opinion, albeit subtle at times, in my Facebook posts. Sadly, it even resulted in a couple leaving my congregation because they suspected I was not as conservative or outspoken on a moral issue they are firmly settled on (turns out we are not too far apart, actually).

I found in the recent election that it was best to refrain from much posting about the candidates. I have both quite liberal friends and very conservative friends on Facebook. The conservative friends seem to post the most on issues dear to them. There is the temptation, at least for me, to want to share thoughts on Facebook, since I am a rather conversational person, but I have come to the conclusion that pastors need to establish a higher standard for themselves and either not share controversial issues or even refrain from being on Facebook altogether. I hope I can keep faithful in that area; I’m sure I will be tempted to post again on one issue or another. There have been moments when I envied a pastor friend who does not have a Facebook page, thinking, He’s smart.—**Tim Schultz, pastor of Aurora (Ohio) Mennonite Church**

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**New Media Project**

**Q#1: purpose of network (top 7 responses)**

- 32 networks are for the purpose of **friendship** (46%)
- 14 networks are for **preaching and sermon assistance and feedback** (20%)
- 14 networks for **idea and vision sharing** (20%)
- 12 networks for **professional networking**
- 11 networks for **news and information**
- 9 for **event advertising and publicity**
- 9 for **support of various kinds**

Source: The New Media Project, based at Union Theological Seminary, surveyed young clergy members in May 2011 to learn how they used social media in their ministries.
RESOURCES

Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works by James K.A. Smith (Baker Academic, 2013, $22.99) helps us understand and appreciate the bodily basis of habit formation and how liturgical formation—both “secular” and Christian—affects our fundamental orientation to the world. This is the second of a three-volume theology of culture.

Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games by Kevin Schut (Brazos Press, 2013, $16.99) offers a lively, balanced and informed Christian evaluation of video games and video game culture. Schut encourages readers to consider both the perils and promise of this major cultural phenomenon.


Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic by María López Vigil (Orbis Books, 2013, $30) is a collectively painted portrait of El Salvador’s beloved archbishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980), who took his place in history as a voice for the poor in the turbulent times leading up to El Salvador’s civil war and who ultimately offered the sacrifice of his life.

Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation by Peter Goodwin Heltzel (Eerdmans, 2012, $25) paints a picture of evangelical Christianity that eschews a majority mentality and instead fights against racism, inequality and injustice, embracing the concerns of the poor and marginalized, just as Jesus did.

The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World’s Future by David P. Gushee (Eerdmans, 2013, $35) traces the concept of the sacredness of human life from Scripture through church history to the present day.

Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics by Gordon Mark Zerbe (CMU Press, 2012, $26) is a collection of essays that offers a revisiting of Paul’s theological vision and practical activism around the theme of citizenship.

The Petals of a Kansas Sunflower: A Mennonite Diaspora by Melvin D. Epp (Resource Publications, 2013, $54) combines stories, photos and personal reminiscences around the collected poems of Epp’s mother, who reared eight children as a farm wife on the Kansas prairie.
CALENDAR

The 24th annual gathering of Connecting Families will be held May 17-19 at the Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, Mt. Pleasant, Pa. For more information or to request a registration packet, please contact Forrest Moyer at 215-589-4727; email forrest.moyer@yahoo.com. Deadline for registration is April 17.

WORKERS

Flores-Bixler, Melissa, was licensed at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, Chapel Hill, N.C., on Jan. 27. Melissa currently serves as pastoral assistant at Raleigh Moravian Church, Raleigh, N.C.

Nguyen, Peter H., was ordained as associate pastor of Vietnamese Mennonite Church, Philadelphia, Pa., on March 3.

OBITUARIES


Gunden, Evelyn, 79, Goshen, Ind., died Feb. 5. Parents: Lloyd and Erma Brutcher Rocke. Children: Sheri King, Kent, Carla Gunden, Marla Peak, Dennis; seven grandchildren; four great-grandchildren. Funeral: Feb. 9 at Belmont Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind.


Steria, Elmer James, 96, San Diego, Calif., died Jan. 11. Spouse: Grace Zehr Steria. Children: Gary, Calvin, Martha, Paul, Elmer, Jr., Stephen; numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. A memorial service will be held in the spring at Croghan Mennonite Church, Croghan, N.Y..


VanLake, Virginia “Ginny” Sue Bloom, 64, Mishawaka, Ind., died Feb. 1. Spouse: Gary VanLake. Parents: Millard H. “Joe” and Virginia Williams Bloom. Children: Laura Brandenburg, Michelle Shelley, Angela Buck; nine grandchildren; two great-grandchildren. Funeral: Feb. 8 at Kern Road Mennonite Church, South Bend, Ind.


Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
Robert Frost had a good editor
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Camp administrator: Crooked Creek Christian Camp, located near Washington, Iowa, is seeking a full-time camp administrator. Crooked Creek is situated on 300 acres of beautiful Iowa landscape. We are looking for someone who has a strong sense of calling for camp ministry and a personal commitment to Christ with an Anabaptist theology. Additional qualities desired are strong administrative skills, with emphasis in financial management, fund-raising, public relations, staff oversight and a heart for hospitality. For further information or to submit a resume please contact the Search Committee at cccc.search@gmail.com

Harrisonburg Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va., seeks full-time youth and young adult director. Master of Divinity degree and ministry experience is preferred. Interested candidates may contact the head pastor, Craig Maven, at cmaven@hmccchurch.org or 540-434-4463, ext 104.

Rainbow Mennonite Church (Kansas City, Kan.), a talented, diverse, growing urban church (262 members) seeks a new pastor(s) to begin September 2013. The congregation has identified five goals in its visioning document: Congregational Support Throughout the Life Span, Children and Youth Ministry, Church Growth, Community Service Programs, Variation in Worship. The gift of encouraging openness and inclusiveness in relating to congregational diversity is expected as well as a strong commitment to Anabaptist teachings. Please contact Ky Stoltzfus; email stoltzkb@gmail.com; or phone 913-236-8820.

Associate pastor: Hesston (Kan.) Mennonite Church (adjacent to the campus of Hesston College) is seeking an associate pastoral staff member with emphasis on youth ministry. Responsibilities include nurturing spiritual growth and faith commitment, resourcing Christian education ministries and developing lay leadership. EOE. Send cover letter and resume to Kent Rychener (kentr@hesstonmc.org) or 309 S. Main, Hesston, KS 67062.

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* BRITISH ISLES (ENGLAND, SCOTLAND & WALES) (Sept 13-25/2013)
* JAMAICA: ITS PEOPLE, NATURAL BEAUTY & FRUITS (Jan 18-27/2014)
* EUROPEAN CHRISTMAS MARKETS (Dec 9-15/2013)

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BEVERLY LEWIS

When Jodi Winfield comes to Lancaster to house-sit, the last thing she expects to find is a disheveled little girl alone on the side of the road. There have been no reports of a missing child—and this one doesn’t even speak English. It’s as if the girl appeared out of nowhere. Do the answers lie within the cloistered world of the Old Order Amish?

_The Guardian_  
_Home to Hickory Hollow_

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How to encourage one another

Through my work for Ohio Conference and connection with the Anabaptist Missional Project, I have the opportunity to interact with Mennonites from many different congregations in all parts of the country. One significant concern I hear repeatedly is the desire for more young adults to be engaged in the church; I even hear this in places where young adults are involved and well represented.

We’ve all read the data and heard the many reasons why there is a lack (real or perceived) of young adults in the church. In the past few months, I witnessed multiple situations that illustrate why young people don’t feel wanted, appreciated or welcomed:

- (To someone married four months): “You realize, your parents are the only ones in our Sunday school class without grandchildren. You should get on that.”
- (To someone in their late 20s): “Well, you did get married at an old age.”
- (To someone mid-20s): “Too bad you are the only grandchild your grandfather will not get to see get married.”
- (To parents of a 2-year-old): “It seems that new parents these days act so inconvenienced by their children. In our day, we gladly made adjustments and sacrifices for our children.”
- (To someone in their first job): “Well, once you work in the ‘real world,’ you’ll understand.”
- (When considering someone in their 20s for a position in the larger church): “At her age, how could she have any real leadership experiences? This would be too big of a responsibility.”
- (To a young pastor, repeated): “But we’ve never done it that way before.”

We’ve all said something during an awkward pause, then realized it sounded wrong. And I imagine these comments were made with the intention of connecting with the other person. But we need to be thoughtful in how we try to build relationships and offer encouragement. Consider the following:

- **Know (and use) people’s names** (especially young people returning from college or from a service trip). It means so much to realize that other adults in the congregation know who you are. There is such power in hearing your name spoken. We should not underestimate the significance of being known in a community.

- **Don’t expect everyone’s end goal is marriage and/or children.** Both are blessings. And many people do long for these traditional milestones. However, it takes two, and sometimes the pieces are not fitting together. Affirm other gifts and goals in a person’s life. He or she may be content or feel called to a life of singleness. When my husband and I were struggling with infertility, people’s (I assume) well-intentioned comments often felt hurtful.

- **Give leadership opportunities.** Yes, it can be a risk, but many young adults are gifted and capable of taking on significant leadership roles. Often within their profession they have been given much responsibility. Why are we so hesitant to extend the same opportunities in the church? The only way to gain experience is to have opportunities to lead. By finding ways to allow young adults to use their gifts, you are shaping the church—both the present ministry and the future. Those who feel valued and have a way to contribute are more likely to stay connected. And, practically speaking, you’re not going to sleep in on the Sunday you are teaching class or leading the children’s time.

- **Be open to new ideas or ways of doing things.** If you do invite someone to lead a ministry team, the group should also then be open to applying the suggestions and ideas that new people or younger perspectives bring.

- **Listen for what you can learn.** Yes, young people have a lot to learn, and mentoring relationships are great. Advice and counsel are also helpful, particularly at significant discernment points on the journey. However, consider that you may be inspired, challenged or encouraged by a friendship with someone from a younger generation.

What do you value about the church community? What made it a welcoming and comfortable place for you as a young adult? Now? How would you like to be cared for and included? How might those things translate into the hospitality and care you offer others no matter what age or stage in life?

By building relationships with each other in authentic community and through shared leadership we can enrich the ministry of our congregations and bring forth the kingdom of God.
**Documentaries take us to other worlds**

Every year, filmmakers from around the world produce documentaries that introduce us to worlds we may not encounter otherwise. These films serve not only to inform or teach us but to move us and even lead us to action.

I want to look at three recent documentary films now available on DVD (or through streaming). Each of these films is shot with skill and care, often on a meager budget.

*Searching for Sugar Man* (PG-13), which won this year’s Oscar for best documentary, tells the bizarre story of Sixto Rodriguez, a Detroit folksinger who had a short-lived recording career in the early 1970s with two well-reviewed albums that didn’t sell. Unknown to him, he became a pop music icon and inspiration for generations in South Africa.

The film interviews a music journalist who used hints from song lyrics to track down where Rodriguez had lived. He was able to dispel rumors that Rodriguez had committed suicide.

Eventually fans locate Rodriguez, who goes to South Africa and plays to sellout crowds of thousands. But the film testifies to this musician’s humility and concern for justice. He remains a simple laborer who lives in the same house in Detroit for 40 years.

*Detropia* (NR, a combination of “Detroit” and “utopia”) looks at the economic decline in Detroit due mostly to the long-term changes in the automobile industry. Rather than offer narration, it primarily follows three Detroit residents: a video blogger, a nightclub owner and a United Auto Workers local president. All three are African Americans who articulate well both the difficulties they face and the hope they carry that things will improve.

The film recounts the huge changes over the decades. For example, in 1930, Detroit was the fastest-growing city in the country; in 2010, it was the fastest-declining city. We learn of 100,000 houses being torn down.

We see up close the effects of this decline on these and many other residents. The film shows their anger and their determination to remain in their city and help it survive.

An artist couple represents the growing number of younger people moving into the city’s center, buying up houses at vastly reduced prices. And the Detroit Opera is part of the revitalization going on there.

*Brokeback Mountain* (PG-13), co-directed by French film icon and inspiration for generations in South Africa.

5 Broken Cameras (NR), co-directed by Palestinian Emad Burnat and Israeli Guy Davidi, is the remarkable first-hand account of protests in Bil’in, a West Bank village affected by the Israeli West Bank barrier.

Burnat shot most of the footage on five different cameras, and the film is divided into the periods of those cameras and recounts how each was broken, either smashed or shot.

Burnat gets his first camera in 2005 to record the birth of his youngest son, Gibreel. At the same time, a barrier is being built on village land that will isolate the village from much of its farmland, which the Israelis will then confiscate to build a settlement. The villagers begin to resist this decision through nonviolent protests.

These protests continue through the next five years, and Burnat records them, obtaining damaging evidence of the shameful actions of Israeli soldiers, including shooting to death several people, including an 11-year-old boy.

Burnat calls healing a challenge and says “it is a victim’s obligation to heal. By healing you resist oppression,” he says. “Forgotten wounds can’t be healed, so I film to heal.” These Palestinians’ courage and ability to remain nonviolent stands out in this powerful film.

Gordon Houser is associate editor of The Mennonite.
I entered Hesston (Kan.) Academy in the fall of 1951, just when Mennonite Church leaders had become worried that their young people were losing their grasp on “nonconformity,” which I, as a General Conference Mennonite, had never heard about.

“Nonconformity Week” was observed the third week of September at Hesston. All 23 of us high school freshmen sat in a circle in Charles Hall discussing nonconformity for one hour every day that week, on a rotating schedule. Marilyn, the daughter of president Milo Kauffman, sat to my left. I was totally at sea in a strange place with no idea of what we were talking about. I soon learned that the overriding issue was that of bobby socks—which the girls were wearing over their sheer nylon hose—creating the illusion that they were walking around bare-legged. The rules stated that if nylon hose were worn, they were talking about. I soon learned that the church opted for substantial change in the early church used in Acts 15 as they worked through a major shift in practice. He also sketched what those stages might look like for our church today.

This is timely. The author immediately preceding Kraybill and one several pages later suggest that we as a church should be changing our stance on committed same-sex relationships.

Kraybill also gave us a gift with his balanced caution that, although the church opted for substantial change in Acts 15, there were also “multiple cases in the New Testament when leaders did not embrace ethical or spiritual innovation.” —Harold Miller, Broadway, Va.

Regarding the profile of Mark Van Steenwyk (February): It was a stirring breath of fresh air in a Mennonite world where we often find ourselves justifying wealth and holding fast to safety and comfort. Mark and his merry band of fellow “followers of Jesus” raise provocative and disturbing questions. These questions have some clear answers, but these answers are not easy to live out in real life.

My wife, Joyce, and I spent four months at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Studies at St. John’s University and St. John’s (Benedictine) Abbey in Minnesota. This monastery is noted for its hospitality and welcoming spirit. Mark has clearly come to understand what hospitality means, what it means to try to follow Jesus, and is working on how to live in intentional community. We only wish we had known about Mark when we were in Collegeville, Minn. It would have been enriching to actually interact with his community. The bottom line is that this is a most encouraging article, pointing out some of the challenges we as Mennonites have in actually living out the Anabaptist traditions. Thanks to Joanna Shenk for a disturbingly beautiful article. —Jep Hostetler, Goshen, Ind.

Regarding “Post-Christendom or Neo-Christendom?” (February): I was hoping for some reference to “exile living.” Isn’t this a more appropriate image for Anabaptist Christians or all Christians? If we hadn’t relegated the book of Daniel to children’s stories and end-time predictions, we might have seen it as an alternative to the violence-based empire building and ethnic separatism of the Ezra-Nehemiah tradition. That tradition led to the Hasmonians and their treaties with the Romans, inter-marriage with Cleopatra’s relatives and ancestors of Herod.

The second century BC wisdom prophet (editor of the Daniel stories), with experience living in Babylon, also presented an alternative to the revolutionary violence of the Maccabees. He used the stories of Daniel to show that the people of God could live faithfully as exiles without either kind of violence. Where does the exile tradition and image (with their rejection of state and revolutionary violence) stand today with the people of God? —David Allenman, Harrisonburg, Va.
God sightings in Illinois Mennonite Conference

My friend Chuck Neufeld is one of the most missional leaders I know. He constantly scans the horizon for evidence of God at work, then joins God in that work. Furthermore, he’s good at telling stories about what God is doing, particularly in the Illinois Mennonite Conference, where he serves as conference minister. Because he exemplifies what I hope to accomplish in this column, I’ve gained Chuck’s permission to share two of his stories, just as he shared them with the leaders of Illinois Conference. The first took place at Berhane Wongel Ethiopian church in December 2011:

“I’ve got to tell you about what I’m claiming as the miraculous leading of the Spirit. Although I had originally planned to preach on a different passage, as Sunday approached I felt strongly directed to John 14:15-31. My sermon title was, “Because I live, you will live.”

The congregation had not been informed of my text or sermon title ahead of time. After the service, two women came running up to me. With great joy and amazement, one of them shared how she had awakened in the middle of the night and had felt the Holy Spirit direct her to read John 14:15-31. She received that passage as a gift and shared it with the other woman present. Earlier that morning the two of them had claimed the passage as their theme passage for Berhane Wongel. They were totally amazed when they came to church only to hear me preach on their theme passage.

We were all amazed at such obvious and profound leading of the Spirit. I guess we shouldn’t be that surprised—we were, after all, promised the Advocate, who would “teach and remind” us of all such things. Thanks be to God.

The second took place in February 2012 while driving to Canada:

This morning I picked up a man who was hitchhiking with a gas can in his hand. Assuming he was in need of a ride back to his car, I stopped to pick him up. Before he even got in, he confessed, “Sir, this gas can is a trick. It’s the only way I can ever get a ride. Forgive me.”

I just laughed and told him to get in. He asked if I could take him all the way to Fargo. “Sure,” I said. “That’s not too far to go” (bad pun intended).

Turns out it took only a minute or two for him to learn that I was a pastor and a Jesus follower, which then resulted in him sharing how he believed in Christ but also the extent to which he had been living in denial of God’s saving grace. After his confession—a long litany of offenses that resulted from much brokenness—he was able to receive God’s forgiveness and commit himself to following Christ in steps ordered by the Holy Spirit.

Pray a prayer of thanksgiving with me, for today there is yet another forgiven brother, Jerry is his name, who has accepted the unconditional love and forgiveness of our loving Savior.

He wept bitterly for the sins he named, but you should have seen his smile when I assured him of God’s love and forgiveness. Amazing joy. We ended in a time of prayer. I prayed for him, and he prayed for me—a tender coming together of two brothers who had not known of each other an hour earlier.

‘Sir, this gas can is a trick. It’s the only way I can ever get a ride. Forgive me.’—a hitchhiker

Hmm, here I assumed I was driving up to Manitoba to speak at a retreat, which I was—but might this meeting of Jerry and Chuck have been God’s ordered priority? If so, I am honored to have obliged.

Thanks be to God for the way Chuck shares his God sightings all around the Illinois Conference. And may there be many more.

Note: These and other stories are available through Neufeld’s weekly column, “Heart, Soul, Mind & Strength,” at http://illinoismennonite.com/page1/index.html
Welcome back!

It took nearly a decade to lay the groundwork, but Mennonite Health Services Alliance—known now as MHS Alliance—may become the fifth agency of Mennonite Church USA, if delegates to this summer’s Phoenix convention approve. For church leaders in the health-care field, this development represents a homecoming.

MHS Alliance is the umbrella organization for acute-care hospitals, developmental disability services and mental health programs. Forty-eight member organizations provide health-care and housing for seniors. Of its 74 organizations, 62 are affiliated with Mennonite Church USA (see page 34). Its corporate offices are in Goshen, Ind.

If approved as the fifth Mennonite Church USA agency, MHS Alliance would join Everence, Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Education Agency and MennoMedia.

“If we are to have ministries that have Anabaptist character,” says MHS Alliance CEO Rick Stiffney, “we need strong relationships between the Anabaptist community of faith and the ministries.”

Those strong relationships were deliberately severed in the early 1980s in the former Mennonite Church. Fearful of lawsuits, Mennonite Board of Missions and Mennonite Central Committee, sponsors of some current MHS Alliance members, discontinued their sponsorship.

“It had everything to do with creating a firewall,” says Gene Yoder, now the church administrator at Bahia Vista Mennonite Church in Sarasota, Fla. “What triggered it was lawsuits in other denominations.”

Yoder served as CEO at Greencroft Retirement Community in Goshen, Ind., from 1974-2004.

“In the early ’80s, we were notified that [Mennonite Board of Missions] no longer wanted to be our sponsor,” Yoder says, “and [they said] we needed to get community churches to be our sponsors.”

Instead, Yoder and several other institutional leaders got together and began dreaming of an organization that could become their sponsor. That was the beginning of what is now MHS Alliance.

“It has come full circle,” he says.

Lee Snyder, former president of Bluffton (Ohio) University, is also pleased with the emerging affiliation.

“At a time when MHS Alliance organizations are increasingly focused on faith values and strengthening the relationship with the church,” Snyder says, “the prospect of becoming an agency of Mennonite Church USA is a happy one.”

One such faith value is understanding that a missional church searches for the ways God is at work in the world—what Ervin Stutzman calls “God sightings” (page 55)—and then joining in that work.

There is also a missional edge for health and human service ministries that serve some of the most destitute and hurting people in our world. If each institution’s work culture is infused with integrity and unapologetically Christian, then both employees and those served can experience God’s healing and hope.

Delegates at the Phoenix convention will have a significant opportunity to ensure these institutions remain aligned with the church—and remain distinctively Anabaptist. I hope they will do so with as much conviction as did the institutional representatives when they voted unanimously on Feb. 14 to have MHS Alliance become an agency of—and accountable to—Mennonite Church USA. —ejt

For church leaders in the health-care field, this development represents a homecoming.

Welcome back!