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ON THE COVER: Photo by Everett Thomas
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. Send to letters@themennonite.org or mail to Letters, The Mennonite, 1700 S. Main St., Goshen, IN 46526-4794. Please include your name and address. We will not print letters sent anonymously, though we may withhold names at our discretion.

—Editors

Nourishment from dissertation
Thank you for the piece on the history of J. Lawrence Burkholder’s Princeton dissertation (“Burkholder’s Dissertation ‘All But Banned,’” March). I vividly recall sitting in the main library of the University of Iowa reading his dissertation on microfilm, which I could order as a graduate student in the mid-1970s. Quickly I realized why his dissertation had not received the seal of approval from the Mennonite establishment of the day and he had been sent into academic exile.

However, I received from his work essential intellectual nourishment, permission and challenge to enter and engage the ambiguous reality of the world in which we actually live as Mennonites while retaining a connection to Anabaptist idealism. I, too, celebrate that Burkholder finally received the seal of approval from the Mennonite establishment of the day and he had been sent into academic exile.

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The likelihood of conflict
Thank you for the recent article, “Board Considers Conflict Needs” (March). Although I attended only a portion of the Executive Board’s meeting, the summary of my input contained in the article could have been confusing to your readers.

First, the research cited was based on my unpublished 2002 master’s thesis, which was a comparative case study of conflict over homosexuality within 25 Christian denominations in the United States. The research I conducted at that time examined the effect of three variables—governing structure, organized movements and countermovements, and theological innovation—on the likelihood of conflict over homosexuality within the largest American denominations.

Second, the results of this research were more nuanced than the article reflected. As my thesis concluded, “the only sufficient combination of causes (of high-intensity conflict leading to possible schism) is the presence of strong movements and countermovements combined with no history of early ordination of women.” In other words, it was the combination of currently well-organized advocacy movements (both in favor of and opposed to the full inclusion of gays and lesbians) and the failure to ordain women prior to World War II that most strongly predicted conflict over...
homosexuality in these denominations. Developments since 2002 have also provided support for the hypothesis that more centralized denominations are experiencing greater conflict intensity over this issue than more decentralized ones.

Third, the quote attributed to me, “When the center doesn’t hold, you end up with a Northern Ireland,” was made when the discussion had turned to polarization in the broader society rather than in the church.—David Brubaker, Harrisonburg, Va.

The passing of Gene Stoltzfus
I was a colleague with Gene (“CPT Founder Stoltzfus Dies,” April). He was leading the Mennonite Voluntary Service program for General Conference Mennonite Church while I worked with the Mennonite Board of Mission’s Voluntary Service program. His death is sad news.—Rick Stiffney, Goshen, Ind.

After receiving the sad news of Gene’s passing, I wrote and sent a letter to our national ARROWS (Alliance to Resist Robotic Warfare & Society) list. In honoring Gene’s decades of incredible service, it is worth noting the important but perhaps little-known role he played in the final year of his life, helping cofound ARROWS, a new national and international network of concern and nonviolent resistance to the rise of the robotic warfare system in the 21st century.

In sorrow at Gene’s passing and joy at the gift of his amazing life.—Peter Lumsdaine, Boise, Idaho

Cannot know timetable
I resonate with much of what Myron Augsburger says in “A Paracosmic Millennium” (March). I affirm his call to recognize the biblical emphasis on the kingdom of God as both present already and still future. The teachings of Jesus and the apostles consistently urge followers during this interim—between “already” and “not yet”—to live their lives in accord with the values of God’s still in-breaking reign.

However, I am troubled by Augsburger’s plea to place more attention on Jesus’ return. He laments that we no longer argue about various views of the “millennium.”

“In discussing our differences,” Augsburger writes, “we were at least giving attention to this mystery.” I find his use of the term “mystery” intriguing. In Scripture it occurs predominantly to refer to “that which God reveals” rather than “a riddle to be solved.”

Discussions about eschatology have typically deteriorated into shouting matches about how to solve the riddle created by snipping Bible verses out of their contexts and then reassembling them in conformity to each interpreter’s schema. What we need instead is humble attentiveness within the community of faith to what God has revealed climactically in Christ, as attested in the Scriptures.

One particular problem with Augsburger’s argument is his discussion of the Greek word “telos,” which he defines as “an ultimate end.” Telos (and the English word “end”) can refer to chronology (cessation, termination) or to the goal or desired outcome (consummation) of God’s work within salvation history.

A careful contextual reading of 1 Corinthians 15:24 argues for the latter meaning (telos/end as goal rather than cessation). What is destroyed when the kingdom is transferred to the Father is not the world but “every rule and authority and power.”

My disquiet about this article arises especially in the assumption that we as humans can somehow (continued on page 62)

IN THIS ISSUE

I remember weeping with Dale Stoltzfus when he shared the news that his 6-month-old grandson had died. That was June 6, 1992; we were colleagues at the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) had not touched the life of anyone I knew.

Four months ago we learned that Nicolas Stoltzfus’ twin sister, Kate, was ready to write about her life without Nick. Her reflections (page 12) are our cover story in this issue.

In his article on Pentecost (page 17), Isaac Villegas describes the miracle of communion that emerged from that fire from heaven.

“Eating together and praying together … is dangerous because you can’t choose who you want to invite,” Villegas says.

Weldon Nisly (page 20) describes a reunion in Iraq, where he was injured in 2003, and the discovery of the man in Rutba who carried him to an ambulance.

The News Brief section includes a report of Mennonite Central Committee partners being attacked on March 20 and the sad conclusion to Joe Rosa’s life (page 8).

The news section introduces the new name for Mennonite Mutual Aid, which prefers to be called MMA. Later this fall, MMA will become Everence (page 37). We also reprint a heartwarming story about a Kansas youth group from which six pastors emerged (page 38).

For the past two years, we have held a photography contest so that our designer would have fresh photos for her designs. In this issue we publish three of the entries submitted in the 2009 contest: photo illustrations on pages 23 and 30 and a photo on page 26.—Editor
Preparing for Pittsburgh

Mennonite Church USA Convention is an every-other-year event. A year ago I had the joy of serving as co-coordinator for the prayer team of Columbus 2009. It was hard work, precious work, rewarding work. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to serve in this way and to see the convention from a different viewpoint from my usual delegate spot.

In this year between conventions, I have been given an opportunity to see Mennonite Church USA Convention from still another point of view. I am one of 12 volunteers serving on the adult planning committee. Another group of 12 volunteers serves on the youth planning committee. Both committees also have coordinators, Executive Leadership and convention staff members.

At this writing, we have met twice and will meet twice more. The first meeting was a joint one of the two committees. We spent 2½ days together exploring Scripture, experiencing the Pittsburgh setting where the next convention will be held, reflecting on our church and convention experiences and listening for the Spirit’s leading in the midst of it all. Just 30 minutes before the scheduled end of our first meeting together, suddenly it all came together.

As we recognized that we were in agreement, we knew God’s Spirit had led us to the 2 Corinthians 5:16-20 text and the “Bridges to (the) Cross” theme for Pittsburgh 2011.

I was not a part of the youth planning committee, so I can only describe what happened at the adult planning sessions. At these sessions, we decided upon daily worship themes and thought about possible worship leaders and speakers. Again, we felt God’s Spirit working through us and among us as we discussed and planned.

As we worked at theme-setting and worship planning, we had glimpses into other areas of planning for convention. For instance, did you know that convention staff negotiates with hotels in the area surrounding the convention center for lower room rates, which include rebates that cover the costs of renting the convention center? They also do a taste test of the meals that will be served to convention-goers who buy the meal plan. Granted, meals prepared for a few cannot taste exactly like the meals prepared for thousands. But they do their best to ensure the meals will be tasty, wholesome and meet the dietary needs of many, many people.

An agreement to purchase the meal plans also serves to lower the cost for using the facility—and therefore registration costs for convention-goers—while giving people a safe and handy option for fueling their bodies throughout the week. At Pittsburgh, meals served at the David Lawrence Convention Center will include produce actually grown on the rooftop of our meeting space. You can’t get more local and fresh than that.

Mennonite Church USA Convention is a wonderful opportunity to view a picture of the denomination—much larger, broader and more diverse than our local congregations and area conferences. It is not the entire picture and cannot be. But it has potential to be a larger picture if those who are able practice some mutual aid.

What if every congregation within driving distance chose to be a partner with a congregation that feels challenged financially to send delegates and/or participants because of distance and limited funds? What if youth groups set aside 10 percent (or more) of their fund-raising efforts to be a partner with a resource-challenged youth group so those youth could have the experience, too?

What if relationships were established even before meeting in Pittsburgh because of the contacts made to talk about mutual aid? Those who offer assistance could well discover how generous the gifts are that they receive back from those congregations in need. What is already a grand picture could be made even grander as we come together to worship, learn and discern.

We have opportunities ahead of us as well as challenges. We will come from different places and experiences, bringing a variety of expectations and desires, to worship the same Lord. Will we be able to see the face of Jesus in those we meet? Will we recognize the heart of Jesus in those with whom we disagree?

I hope and pray that as we celebrate, discern, worship and learn together, God’s Spirit will be made glad in our love for one another and devotion to God.
Tattered veil in the wind

by Catherine Swanson

Are you able to tell us how you counted your family’s meal, grain by grain, having dragged your pot to the truck and back? And after boiling up and stirring, after setting it to cool, and each one dips his fingers in, will you show us how you used part of your own dress to wipe the pot clean?

You’ve walked all night with bare feet, murmuring to the little ones: Hush, quickly now, you must leave your toys, your pet.

Even the strongest have only two hands. Do you cover their eyes or their ears? Which child do you hold, when you are empty and they are stunned? How do you do this and sing them to sleep on the ground in a ragged tent, your voice breaking only when the journalists arrive?

A woman is always a woman in the world—holding the cries of her startled sons and daughters. You are never restful, never safe, and weary in the unrelenting way no camera lens, no printed page can share. How much grit and sting will have to blast from a treeless condition before we can feel what you must know: that someone out there wants it this way.

Catherine Swanson lives in Indianapolis.
MCC partners in Congo injured in attack
AKRON, Pa.—Staff members of a Mennonite Central Committee partner organization in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were injured when their vehicle was ambushed by armed men March 20. The group of six men and women was returning to the city of Bukavu in South Kivu province after visiting a site designated for a humanitarian aid project in cooperation with MCC. They work with the Ministry for Refugees and Emergencies, a department of the Church of Christ in Congo, which is known by its French acronym ECC. ECC is a national council of churches that includes Congolese Mennonites. The men and women were beaten, slashed with knives and robbed before being released. The two women in the group were hospitalized with knife cuts and serious bruises.—MCC

Joe Rosa found dead by apparent suicide
PITTSBURGH—The body of former pastor Joe Rosa was found in a wooded-area in Union County, Pa., on April 1. Police officers say his death was a result of self-hanging, or suicide. Rosa, former pastor of Congregacion Menonita Shalom, New Columbia, Pa., left his home in May 2009, and police searches failed to locate him.

According to the Standard Journal of Milton, the body was found about one mile from Rosa’s home. Last June, police charged him with indecent assault, alleging he molested boys between 2005 and 2009. Congregacion Menonita Shalom is a church plant of Community Mennonite Fellowship, Milton, Pa.

On April 6, pastor of Community Mennonite David Martino said a memorial service was planned for April 17 at Revival Tabernacle in Watson-town, Pa. “We’re looking for it to be a healing event for the family,” Martino said. “It’s just a shock to people who knew Joe and were mentored by him. We want to give a balanced picture of what Joe’s done in our community.” —Anna Groff with reports from Associated Press

MVS signs agreement with Selective Service System
SAN ANTONIO, Texas—On April 21, Mennonite Voluntary Service was to become the first faith-based service organization recognized by the United States Selective Service System as a member of the Alternative Service Employer Network (ASEN) for conscientious objectors. The signing was to take place at the San Antonio Mennonite Church.

This event marked the first ASEN signing in 25 years. The signing means that if a military draft is ever reinstated, MVS is an officially recognized agency capable of hosting alternative service workers or conscientious objectors.—MMN

CPT reservist arrested
TUCSON, Ariz.—At the Aerospace and Arizona Days military exhibition on the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base on March 21, two Tucson residents were arrested for trespassing. Christian Peacemaker Teams reservist John Heid, 55, and Gretchen Nielsen, 77, unfurled a banner declaring, “War is Not a Show.” The Tucson city police took the pair to the Pima County Jail, where they were processed and released by 10 p.m. They were scheduled to appear in Tucson City Court for arraignment: Heid on April 29 and Nielsen on April 30.—CPT

MARP to discontinue as church agency
GOSHEN, Ind.—The board of the Mennonite Association of Retired Persons has decided to discontinue MARP as a church agency, effective June 30. However, all of MARP’s current activities will continue to be offered to its members through other church organizations. The board made the decision during its fall 2009 meeting.

The board and staff, after reviewing trends related to Baby Boomers and aging during the past year, determined that MARP has fulfilled its mission. Executive director Jay Roth says, “Baby Boomers seem to have an aversion to the concept of retirement. They are choosing to work in some cases because of an uncertain economy. Research indicates that work will be a more significant part of their later years than it was for previous generations.”

Stuart Showalter, chair of the
MARP board, says these factors—and no doubt additional ones—have contributed to a decline in interest in MARP’s activities and a shrinking membership base during the past decade. He says budgetary considerations and an overall attempt to consolidate programs spurred the decision to turn MARP’s program activities over to other Mennonite organizations. Roth will serve as executive director part-time through June.—MARP

Conference names steering committee
HARLEYSVILLE, Pa.—The board of Franconia Mennonite Conference has named a conference review steering committee to provide oversight for the assessment being performed by consultant LaVern Yutzy.

In early March, Franconia Conference announced plans to dismiss most of the conference staff. Then on March 15, the conference board announced those plans will be put on hold while an in-depth review of the conference is undertaken.

The process is designed to review the role, structure and staffing of Franconia, clarifying issues around the March events and underlying concerns while not intending to answer all questions. The conference will send postcards with response questions to all congregations and delegates, encouraging feedback by April 24. The conference review steering committee will develop a potential process for reviewing the recommendations and a path for decision-making. The report is expected to be available to the board and delegates in mid-May.—Franconia Conference

MMA responds to health-care reform
GOSHEN, Ind.—Mennonite Mutual Aid responded on March 23 to the passage of federal health-care reform, noting that the legislation generally supports the goals outlined in the Health Care Policy principles adopted in 2007 by Mennonite Church USA. “Members can remain confident in their coverage and continue to expect the customary high level of service they receive from their MMA plans,” said Evan Bontrager, vice president of insurance products. “The general objectives of the reform do not conflict with the faith-based principles that MMA supports—including fairness to those who lack the resources for health-care security. The legislation appears to maintain support and funding for Medicare and we will continue to provide additional coverage through our Medicare Supplement products.” Some aspects of the law will go into effect soon—while other significant changes will occur after 2014.—MMA

Peace Institute closes
INDIANAPOLIS—The board of directors of Indianapolis Peace Institute (formerly Indianapolis Peace House), the 6-year-old inner-city collaboration of Indiana’s three historic peace colleges, announced that the Institute would discontinue its on-site student programming as of March 31. The economic downturn has put an unbearable burden on the nonprofit project of Earlham, Goshen and Manchester colleges.

Nearly 100 Indianapolis organizations have benefitted from the service learning of Peace Institute students, said Kim Overdyck, executive director. The board of directors has placed the house on the market.—Indianapolis Peace Institute

Zwier wins C. Henry Smith contest at Goshen
GOSHEN, Ind.—David Zwier from the Dominican Republic won first place with his speech “Facing Food Waste: The Truth About What We Don’t Eat” in the Goshen (Ind.) College’s annual C. Henry Smith Peace Oratorical Contest on Feb. 9. The runner up was Kayla Hooley, Peoria, Ariz. Her speech was entitled “Media Influences On Body Image: How The Media Shapes Our Minds And Divides Society.”—Goshen College

Volunteers build shed at Camp Mennoscah
Mike Goossen, Marv Goossen, Rodney Ensz and other workers from First Mennonite Church, Beatrice, Neb., work at Camp Mennoscah March 23. Seven volunteers, aided by Mennonite Voluntary Service worker Michael Unruh and maintenance coordinator Torrey Ball, spent several days in early spring at the camp near Kingsman, Kan., pouring concrete for and building a sports shed near the ball diamond to replace one that was destroyed by fire last fall.—June Galle Krehbiel

Jennifer Makens
Saving U.S. water and sewer systems would be costly

Today, a significant water line bursts on average every two minutes somewhere in the country, according to a New York Times analysis of Environmental Protection Agency data. In Washington alone there is a pipe break every day, on average.

State and federal studies indicate that thousands of water and sewer systems may be too old to function properly.

For decades, these systems—some built around the time of the Civil War—have been ignored by politicians and residents accustomed to paying almost nothing for water delivery and sewage removal. And so each year, hundreds of thousands of ruptures damage streets and homes and cause dangerous pollutants to seep into drinking water supplies.

George S. Hawkins’s answer to such problems will not please a lot of citizens. Like many of his counterparts in cities like Detroit, Cincinnati, Atlanta and elsewhere, his job is partly to persuade the public to accept higher water rates, so that the utility can replace more antiquated pipes.

“People pay more for their cellphones and cable television than for water,” says Hawkins, who before taking over Washington’s water system ran environmental groups and attended Princeton and Harvard, where he never thought he would end up running a sewer system.

“You can go a day without a phone or TV,” he says. “You can’t go a day without water.”

But in many cities, residents have protested loudly when asked to pay more for water and sewer services. In Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Sacramento—and before Hawkins arrived, Washington—proposed rate increases have been scaled back or canceled after virulent ratepayer dissent.

Hawkins says the average age of the Washington’s water pipes is 76, nearly four times that of the oldest city bus. He describes how old pipes have spilled untreated sewage into rivers near homes.

In the last year, federal lawmakers have allocated more than $10 billion for water infrastructure programs, one of the largest such commitments in history.

But Hawkins and others say that even those outlays are almost insignificant compared with the problems they are supposed to fix. An E.P.A. study last year estimated that $335 billion would be needed simply to maintain the nation’s tap water systems in coming decades. In states like New York, officials estimate that $36 billion is needed in the next 20 years just for municipal wastewater systems.

“We’re relying on water systems built by our great-grandparents, and no one wants to pay for the decades we’ve spent ignoring them,” says Jeffrey K. Griffiths, a professor at Tufts University and a member of the E.P.A.’s National Drinking Water Advisory Council.

“There’s a lot of evidence that people are getting sick,” he says. “But because everything is out of sight, no one really understands how bad things have become.”—Charles Duhigg in The New York Times

Death by water

More people die from polluted water every year than from all forms of violence, including war, the United Nations said in a report March 22 that highlights the need for clean drinking water. The report said an estimated 2 billion tons of waste water—including fertilizer runoff, sewage and industrial waste—is being discharged daily. That waste fuels the spread of disease and damages ecosystems.—AP
“Avoid the term “global warming.” I prefer the term “global weirding” because that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird. The hots are expected to get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous.” —Thomas Friedman in The New York Times

More praying, fewer staying
The number of Americans who are praying is increasing at the same time that more of them say they have no formal religious affiliation, according to a major polling organization. “We are witnessing a decoupling of ‘spirituality’ from ‘religion,’” says Omar M. McRoberts, a University of Chicago sociologist and researcher. The University of Chicago study, released last October, was based on numerous surveys, including the General Social Survey’s own study of 52,000 U.S. adults. According to the study, 22 percent of Americans have never attended a religious service, up from 9 percent in 1972. However, the study found that the number of adults practicing daily prayer rose from 52 percent in a 1989-90 survey to 59 percent now.—The Christian Century

20-40
Percent of homeless youth who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, according to a 2007 study—the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Foreign workers boost economy
In a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, economist Giovanni Peri trawls through nearly five decades of immigration data and finds that foreign workers have boosted the U.S. economy, jacking up average income without crowding out American laborers. For each percentage of the workforce that is foreign-born, he found an almost 0.5 percent bump in average wages. Immigrants, Peri says, push native-born workers into better-paying positions, expanding the size of the job pie so unskilled Americans aren’t left out.—Newsweek

Seniors and drugs
- Percentage of U.S. seniors who take five or more prescription drugs daily: 51
- Percentage of those who do not feel knowledgeable enough about the drugs they’re prescribed or their potential side effects: 34—Yes! Magazine

10 largest U.S. Christian bodies
1. The Catholic Church: 68.1 million, up 1.49 percent
2. Southern Baptist Convention: 16.2 million, down 0.24 percent
3. The United Methodist Church: 7.8 million (U.S.), down 0.98 percent
4. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: 5.9 million (U.S.), up 1.71 percent
5. The Church of God in Christ: 5.5 million, no change
7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: 4.6 million, down 1.62 percent
8. National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.: 3.5 million, no change
9. Assemblies of God: 2.9 million, up 1.27 percent
10. Presbyterian Church (USA): 2.8 million, down 3.3 percent—2010 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches
A sister reflects on the death of her twin brother when they were babies.

Cookies for Nicholas

by Kate Sherer Stoltzfus

The photos are precious and few, spread across the lap of an old quilt. Several stick with me, worn around the edges, more faded than all the rest. One I’ve folded and tucked deep inside my jacket pocket, a frozen moment warmed in the palm of my hand.
Pregnant in Ireland: There is my mother, standing gorgeously young in a way I'll never know her. The hills of Ireland billow around her, not quite as bright as the smile sewn to her cheeks. She is resplendent, the picture of a young traveler with her hands resting on the great swell of her belly. My brother and I are there with her, carried close to her, though we can't be seen. I look at that picture and can't help thinking how happy my parents were—so vibrant and young, so untouched by life's misery. The photo has preserved something time has undone.

There on the quilt, amid all the framed images of baby smiles, lips laced with milk, and two yawning twins in that bulky double stroller, a picture catches the eye and says more than any sentence could.

At my brother's grave: The photo shows the passing of time. I have been transported to the warmth of my mother's lap, again pulled close and swallowed by rolling farmland. We both squint against an invisible wind, my face turned from the camera. It is hard to tell whether my mother squints from this wind or from something else unseen, but when you follow her glance, her expression becomes more traceable. We are a bundle of love beside a headstone unweathered by time; a baby lamb has been erected across the front. My brother is there with us, too, but this time he is the only one who cannot be seen. I am alive and well, a rambunctious 2-year-old, and he is there in the solid granite we lean against; in the trees, in the sky and in us, too.

To learn the story of my brother, I had to retrace many steps. For me, it's like the past was erased, a page torn from the book of my life before I got a chance to read it. I was a drooling 6-month-old when my twin brother Nicholas passed away from SIDS.

For the majority of my life I've felt far removed from the event. I have no memories of him, only the pictures in my head, which have been conjured from the words of others rather than real life. I wish I was able to remember so that I could feel something other than indifference. I've grown up without him, unable to miss him because his absence is the only thing I've ever known. But in some distant way I've felt a longing to know who he was.

As a tiny girl falling asleep under the sheets, I would make a tent with the moon coming in and think all sorts of things about my long-lost brother. Did he have a pillow underground? Did he eat? I couldn't imagine it. I would whisper that I missed him and that if he were here, we could eat buckets of waffles and throw bread to the ducks. I'd even share my tire swing. I imagined a best friend. Though I have no memory today of those late-night thoughts, I must have felt on some unconscious level that part of me was missing. I had a brother who was gone and I wanted him back. I put his picture by my bed and wrote him letters in crayon.

Yet it seemed to be a phase I went through, this wanting Nicholas. He soon became just another wayward thought in my head, stored away and almost forgotten. After I was given a baby sister to play with, as I started school and slowly began to grow up, real life was better. Nicholas slid easily to the sidelines of my mind.

I had a brother who was gone and I wanted him back. I put his picture by my bed and wrote him letters in crayon.

We were born as a pair, so it was only natural to have a fondness for things in twos. We were twins, born two months early, requiring a two-month stay in the ICU at St. Vincent's Hospital. We were not yet ready for the world but came into it anyway, wrinkled and wizened with arms and legs as fragile as eggshells. We squinted in the lights of the incubator helping keep our tiny bodies warm. The nurses knew us by name and cheered each time we gained an ounce.

After we put on six pounds, our bodies finally slipping into healthy coats of skins, we were ready for the world. In our case, the planet expanded minimally; brought home to a closet-sized Brooklyn apartment, the space was cozy and crowded and did nothing to mask our cries. My parents took turns going out to the dim hallway to sleep, where the noise of screaming babies was at least somewhat muffled. The kitchen, visible from the bedroom, was crammed with an endless stream of relatives and friends who stopped by to help out. Mom got used to feeding a baby in each arm, cradling the phone against her shoulder as we squirmed.

As twins, Nicholas and I shared many things: a zoo’s worth of stuffed animals, a lacy bassinet, a double stroller that took weeks to find. We discovered each other one day, realizing our worlds overlapped, and spent hours with eyes locked.
Tangling hands and feet, we were in amazement at the solidity of the presence of someone else. It was a wonder to have someone so close, to learn each other by sight and touch rather than with words. It was as if our happiness suddenly depended on the other one being there, too.

Although we were twins, Nicholas was a boy all his own. Whenever I ask now what he was like, people are always sure to mention his smile. He could light up a room with his grin. It was a smile that would come in handy one day, that kind you put on after stealing a cookie or pinching your sister. He had everyone in the palm of his baby hand. It is still a mystery why we had to do without this smile; why he had to go.

**The morning of June 4 began like any other morning.** The day was unashamedly hot, devoid of clouds, steam rising from the streets. Windows were open, dogs were walked and worn out, a paper slid under our door. It was an ordinary day, summer in the city with the buildings shimmering. My parents went to work—my mother’s reluctant fourth day back—and a babysitter stayed with us in their absence. I wonder if we were fussy that morning, if we were hot. We drank our bottles in the shade of a park, Nicholas and I sharing a swing with our backs against one another and overfed pigeons scuttling beneath us. We wore laceup shoes, and our hair came in waves now. We were getting big.

After the park was naptime, sleep a relief after chattering crowds. Maria put us down with our stuffed hippos, drawing the shades, following a familiar routine as we yawned milky yawns and closed our eyes.

When my mother came in the door, setting down her briefcase, I was crying. She brought me out to the kitchen so I wouldn’t wake Nicholas. He did not stir as she lifted me from my blankets. Babies cry all the time; I was probably just hungry, maybe needed a change. But I can’t help thinking I must have known something my parents did not.

This is where I switch to autopilot. I cannot identify or even try to picture the way my father, home for dinner, went to wake Nicholas, his work shoes scuffing the floor, printer ink still on his hands. If he had only known what was coming, he might have walked more slowly. Dad anticipated a hungry boy waiting for him in the bedroom, gumming a smile as he woke from his sheets.

**Instead, the heat from my brother’s sleeping body slowly grew cold, and he did not wake.**

I can’t imagine what my dad must have been thinking as he ran down the pavement with his little boy clutched in his arms. Deep down, he already knew the worst. Yet with each step came the reminder that the solidity of our life was still there and it must not be disturbed. He only had to reach the hospital and everything would be OK. If only life were kinder. Instead, the lives of my parents and my life, too, were about to change.

The hospital confirmed what my parents already knew: Nicholas would never wake up.
In the middle of our darkest time, when nothing seemed right or true or even real, my family was surrounded by the support of many people. I still cried and wanted food; my cloth diapers still had to be changed. My parents had to go on with normal as best they could, when everything was so far from it. When my brother’s body needed to be transported across state lines to the countryside, my great uncle was there to take him. There were cards and calls and food from down the block, a circle of waiting arms where grief could begin and comfort taken. It was all there for us, a community of love in a time of need.

The funeral had white roses, lovely music, the smallest casket many had ever seen. A crowd of people showed up to mourn my brother, and I joined them, held by my mother and dressed in blue. I was quiet in her lap, sleeping while someone gave a testimony and others lit candles. It was only during the last song, “Children of the Heavenly Father,” that I cried. It wasn’t even a cry; I was wailing, mourning my brother, who should have been next to me, should have been cradled safely in what was now empty space on my mother’s lap. Two weeks later, at a cousin’s funeral, I cried during the same song. Some things cannot be explained. Was I sad? Did I realize? A baby’s grief is hard to understand.

My parents buried Nicholas while the sun was out. It felt too wrong with the light mingling in the dirt, a pretty day for something so bleak, but there they were. He was laid on a hilltop overlooking the swell of gorgeous fields. Cows walked leisurely along the fence, and wildflowers grew rampant. Since that day, a barn has been erected in the distance. Plows hum with the heat, corn grows fierce and tall; life moves on.

It has been a long time since Nicholas went away. Long enough for me to forget I was ever a twin, long enough for it to seem normal. The pictures hide in a box collecting dust. On the rare occasion I do look at them, I find it hard to believe that the gurgling baby with her hands curled into fists and staring intently at the brother beside her was me.

But Nicholas is aimed right at the camera in his wrinkled sailor suit, smiling one of those precious grins at the person behind the lens. This is how I choose to see him. I don’t dwell on why he died, why it was him instead of me. There are no answers to these questions.

I do not ask for sympathy. I am merely telling my brother’s story. I tell it for my parents. I tell it in the hope of figuring out some piece of myself.

Nicholas’ death has taught me, as clichéd as it is, not to take life for granted. He has missed out on all my favorite things in this world; he will never eat a chocolate chip cookie still gooey from the oven, never hear the climax of a symphony. He will never get to breathe in air so cold it stings or dive headfirst into a hot summer pool. For Nicholas, I enjoy everything twice as much. I try to smile the way I think he would have. I eat two cookies and hug my parents extra hard.

I look across the cafeteria at twins giggling over lunch, so close and so real with that visible bond, and I smile. We might have had that. I will never know, and that’s OK. I’m content to imagine we would and leave it at that.

I see us at a crossroads with the light coming down hard; I am on the brink of something new, a high school senior about to step out into a beckoning world. And I see Nicholas with that silly smile; he raises a hand to wave and it’s as if he’s saying, “See you later.” Until then, Nick, I love you, and I’m letting you go.

I don’t dwell on why he died, why it was him instead of me. There are no answers to these questions.
What is SIDS?
Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is the sudden death of an infant under 1 year of age that remains unexplained after a thorough case investigation, including performance of a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene and review of the clinical history.

Facts about SIDS
• SIDS is the leading cause of death in the United States among infants between 1 month and 1 year of age.
• Most SIDS deaths occur between 2 and 4 months of age.
• SIDS occurs more often in boys than in girls (approximately a 60- to 40-percent male-to-female ratio).
• African-American babies are more than twice as likely to die of SIDS as white babies.
• American Indian/Alaskan Native babies are nearly three times as likely to die of SIDS as white babies.
• About one in five SIDS deaths occur while an infant is in the care of someone other than a parent.
• Babies used to sleeping on their backs who are placed to sleep on their tummies are 18 times more likely to die from SIDS.
• A SIDS death leaves a family with an urgent need to understand what happened. Lack of a discernible cause, the suddenness of the death and possible involvement of law enforcement complicate the grieving process.
• SIDS is not preventable, but the risk can be reduced by placing the baby on his or her back to sleep on a firm surface, by making sure the baby has a smoke-free environment and by keeping the baby from being overheated.
• With the introduction of the Back to Sleep Campaign by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1992, the incidence of SIDS has decreased by almost 50 percent.

For more information visit the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (www.nichd.nih.gov) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org).
Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind—Acts 2:2

Pentecost happened with a bang. Heaven came down to earth and blew through the room. This heavenly wind “filled the entire house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:2). While all this is exciting stuff, the story dances on the edge of danger. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them” (v. 3). God’s fire isn’t something to be messed with. Remember what happened to Sodom. The people were inhospitable to strangers, to three foreigners, and God consumed the city with fire from heaven (Genesis 19).
Pentecost is the miracle of communication that leads to the miracle of communion.

That same fire comes again at Pentecost: God’s fire, spectacular flames from heaven. Excitement fills the room and pours out into the streets. This isn’t the first time the disciples get excited about divine fire. In Luke 9, Jesus and the disciples try to pass through a Samaritan village. But the villagers refuse. In response to their lack of hospitality, James and John ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to consume the people (Luke 9:54)—just like Sodom and Gomorrah. The disciples want to use God’s heavenly fire to punish the Samaritans. But Jesus rebukes them. God’s fire is dangerous; Jesus won’t let the disciples use it.

On Pentecost these flames come down from heaven, but this time God’s fire doesn’t destroy anything. The fire doesn’t punish inhospitable people. Instead, the divine flames create the church—a group of people ablaze with God’s spirit of hospitality. With the fire comes the Holy Spirit, who enables the disciples to speak in different languages. People visiting Jerusalem from all over the world hear the invitation of the gospel in their own language. Acts makes it a point to list all the peoples and languages so we get a sense for how expansive this invitation is—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome … everyone, Jews and Gentiles (Acts 2:9-11). Everyone is invited to join this movement of God. And that’s basically Peter’s interpretation of the event when he quotes the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”—notice how Joel says all flesh (v. 17). And skipping to the end of Peter’s quotation of Joel: “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”—again, notice how Joel says everyone (v. 21).

The Pentecostal Spirit of God leads the followers of Jesus into a mode of communication that opens them up to everyone, to different people in different languages. Pentecost is a communication miracle. And the point of the miracle is an invitation. The Holy Spirit doesn’t descend with power in order to provide an exciting experience that comes and goes. Rather, the Spirit comes with fire and enables the followers to speak in different tongues so that everyone can hear the invitation of the gospel and join the fellowship of Christ. Pentecost is the miracle of communication that leads to the miracle of communion: people come together, foreigners become family, strangers become friends.

After Peter’s impromptu Pentecostal sermon, the author of Acts describes what happens: “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. … All who believed were together and had all things in common. … Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (2:41-46).

Speaking in tongues is only the beginning. Complete strangers start hanging out together. They devote themselves to fellowship, to being with one another. People open their homes for grassroots worship services—breaking bread, talking about Jesus and praying. And they share their stuff with anyone who needs it. The miracle of communication that happened on Pentecost birthed a miracle of communion, of fellowship.

Yes, this communion is a miracle because it’s hard work to get together all the time; it has to be the Holy Spirit who makes it possible. People do a lot of traveling between here and there. Acts tells us that they eat every time they get together but fails to mention food preparation. Since these were daily communion meals, there must have been a lot of food to prepare.

Theologians like to come up with what they call “marks of the church.” They narrow down the few practices that need to happen for church to happen. Different churches have different lists. If I were to pretend to be a theologian and come up with the two most important marks of the church according to Acts 2, they would have to be prayer and food preparation. The church needs people who are always learning how to pray and always coming up with new recipes for...
good food to share. This is an earthy spirituality: make food and eat it with people, then pray about what’s going on in your life.

If, as I noted earlier, flames from heaven are usually dangerous, how can this be said of eating together and praying together? Well, this stuff is dangerous because you can’t choose who you want to invite; you can’t choose who you want to open your life to; you can’t choose who you fellowship with. Think of the dangers and inconveniences that come with inviting strangers into your house. Didn’t our parents teach us to be afraid of strangers? But if anyone heard the invitation, the host would invite them to her house and give them a seat at the table. That’s dangerous. This isn’t just friends getting together for a good time. The fire of the Spirit comes with dangers. But that’s nothing new; after all, Jesus is killed when he follows the leading of the Spirit.

**To believe in Pentecost is to believe that heaven has come,** that Jesus is here, that the Spirit is on the move. And this kind of belief is not something you decide to do in your head. There’s a lot of Christianity out there that insists that faith is all about a conviction you have in your head, a decision you make in your mind—that God exists or that Jesus saved us. It’s all theoretical and rational—a faith for intellectuals. But Pentecost shows us that Christian belief and spirituality happen to your whole body. Your mind follows your feet. Decisions come after something happens to your life. A new consciousness comes when you have to figure out what to do with the mess of people all around you and the concrete responsibilities of mutual care: feeding people, praying for needs, sticking around when some folks start getting annoying, or sticking around when the excitement wears off and life gets boring, mundane, ordinary.

All that is what it means to have faith. The story of Pentecost, which is the story of the beginning of the church, begins and ends with people just hanging around, waiting for something to happen. First they gathered in the upper room, just because that’s what Jesus told them to do before he left (1:4). Then the Spirit came upon them. The Holy Spirit didn’t come because they first believed. No. Pentecost just happened, and it happened to their whole bodies, not just their heads. Their minds followed their feet out the door and into the streets. Finally, the miracle of communication created a regathered and renewed community. After all that came the decision of faith, the decision of belief.

They faced the same decision we do today. Faith is simple but involves everything you have: to make food and eat together, to break bread and share a cup, to talk about Jesus, to pray for one another, to stick around even when you are annoyed and bored, to clean up after a mess of people invade your house, and then, after all that, to invite them to come back. That is faith: to decide to return, reassemble, come back, because that house of worship is where the Holy Spirit sustains our life, because this mess is what salvation feels like and what heaven looks like. Pentecost is a vision of eternal life.

**Pentecost means that Jesus now comes when the Spirit brings people into fellowship, into communion.** Salvation isn’t simply about knowledge, as if we are a bunch of theoreticians and intellectuals. What you think in your head won’t save you. Instead, we believe in a saving relationship. And to believe in this saving relationship is to let your mind follow your feet; you have to lean into this relationship, slowly and patiently live into it. It takes time, ordinary time, to grow into the saving life of Jesus made present in his body, in you and me, ordinary people doing ordinary things, like eating and praying.

**Pentecost shows us that Christian belief and spirituality happen to your whole body. Your mind follows your feet.**

If you are like me, you have a hard time seeing how all this ordinary stuff of church is infused with the spectacular Spirit of God. The usual doesn’t feel very miraculous. The Spirit of Pentecost seems so distant. It’s hard to believe that heaven is always at our fingertips. But that’s OK. In fact, that’s just the way it goes with faith. Paul says as much: “Now hope that is seen is not hope. ... But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:24-25).

We wait for it with patience. The miracle of Pentecost begins and ends with a bunch of people hanging around, waiting for something to happen.

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Neighbors in Iraq

"Blessed are the eyes that see what I see," Jesus said to his disciples, adding that many people don’t see clearly. Just then a lawyer questioned Jesus and Jesus turned the question to the love commandment and told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:23-37).

Do we see an enemy or a neighbor in Iraq?

by Weldon Nisly

Jassam Mohamed, an Iraqi medical assistant (left), hugs Weldon Nisly, whom he cared for when he was injured in a car accident in March 2003. Photo by Jamie Moffett
“I remember you. I carried you,” he said, a revelation that was as straightforward as it was startling. For seven years I had remembered Rutba but did not remember being carried by someone after collapsing from injuries in Iraq. For seven years I had longed to return to Iraq, especially to Rutba, where some Iraqi people bandaged our wounds in a time of war. These Good Samaritans saw Cliff Kindy, from Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), Shane Claiborne, from the Simple Way, and me as injured people rather than hated enemies.

Seven years ago when the U.S.-led war on Iraq began, I was in Baghdad with other members of CPT, “getting in the way of war.” We wanted to help the world see the war through Iraqi eyes—a different war from the “embedded” view seen on American television and newspapers.

On March 29, 2003, seven CPTers, including Cliff and me and a few others from the Iraq Peace Team, including Shane, left Baghdad in three cars. We were traveling across the Iraqi desert when our car blew a tire, careened into a ditch and turned over, injuring Cliff, Shane and me as well as a Korean peacemaker and our Iraqi driver.

Some Iraqi men in a car speeding the other direction saw us and stopped to help us while U.S. bombers flew overhead. These Good Samaritans quickly put us in their car and took us to a small clinic in Rutba, where an Iraqi doctor and his medical team treated us.

While caring for us, the doctor expressed distress that the hospital had been destroyed by U.S. bombs three nights earlier and asked, “Why would your country bomb our hospital?” He quickly added, “But don’t worry, we help anyone here; Christians, Muslims, Jews, Iraqis or Americans. You are our brothers, and we will take care of you.” He also apologized for their meager medical supplies and facilities. Cliff and I well remember having stitches put in our head with no anesthesia available.

When we were leaving, we tried to pay the doctor, but he refused to take money. Instead he asked us to tell the world about Rutba.

In the seven years since this life-changing event, we have remembered their generosity and told the story of Rutba. We have also longed to return and find the Good Samaritans who cared for us while our country invaded theirs.

Finally, in January, Shane, Cliff and I, along with Peggy Gish, another Iraq CPTer, made this journey. Joining us were Greg Barrett, who is writing a book about Rutba, Jamie Moffett, who is producing a film about Rutba, Sami Rasouli, an Iraqi leader of the Muslim Peace Team, and Logan Mehl-Laituri, an Iraq war veteran who is now a conscientious objector.

When we arrived in Rutba, we were escorted to the hospital where we were welcomed by Dr. Nazir and the mayor of Rutba. With typical Iraqi hospitality, we were served tea and juice. Both men insisted that we were their guests and graciously provided our lodging and meals during our entire visit.

A tour of the hospital let us see what they had rebuilt from the rubble of the earlier bombing. We heard the sad news that a little boy who was in the hospital and his father were both killed in that bombing. We saw a small operating room with an old operating table that had been dug out from under the rubble. We met a father and mother who brought their ill baby daughter to be treated at the hospital. We saw again that what they lacked in modern medical facilities and equipment they more than made up for with compassionate care, just as we had seen seven years ago.

We saw again that what they lacked in modern medical facilities and equipment they more than made up for with compassionate care, just as we had seen seven years ago.

The most eye-opening encounter for me happened one evening in the hospital guesthouse. We were visiting with hospital staff members when suddenly I saw the weathered face of a man standing in the doorway wearing a big smile. A puzzled feeling came over me at the sight of this strangely familiar face.

An unremembered yet familiar man walked in and said with delight, “I remember you,” pointing to Cliff, “I remember you,” pointing to Shane, and “I remember you,” pointing to me. Then he added to me, “And I carried you.” As Sami translated what he said, I grasped what it meant; he had been there and had carried me from the car into the clinic. Sa’ady Mesha’al Rasheed is the ambulance driver and was at the clinic when the Iraqi men brought us there seven years earlier.

I had told our Rutba story many times but had never mentioned Sa’ady carrying me from the car to the clinic because I had not remembered—
until I saw his face in the doorway and heard him speak. Then my body remembered. With tears in my eyes, I thanked him and listened as Sa’ady told us what he remembered. He had been suffering from asthma that day, he explained, adding simply, “But you were collapsing, so I carried you.”

Sa’ady also shared other distressing memories of the war in Iraq. “We’ve been traumatized by the invasion,” he said. One night he and his family were awakened by the explosion of a bomb blowing open his front door, a terrifying sound that had been heard many nights in Rutba. They felt the terror of heavily armed soldiers storming through the house in the middle of the night. With quiet sadness but without malice he said, “It was painful for me to see soldiers pull down a cabinet filled with nice china I had bought for my wife on my travels. They destroyed everything for no other reason than to humiliate us. I kept silent because I was afraid of being handcuffed and tortured if I said anything. I will never get over that night. Our children have witnessed these things and will never forget.”

“Another time,” Sa’ady continued, “I was driving the ambulance, taking a pregnant woman to the hospital in Ramadi, three hours away. She was in labor, bleeding and in pain. American soldiers stopped us, put me face down on the ground for three hours while they searched the ambulance. They could hear the woman moaning and pleading for help. After three hours someone brought a dog to check the ambulance before they would let us go on to the hospital.”

We heard many other stories about life in Rutba the past few years. One man told us that during the years that U.S. troops occupied Rutba he and his family went to bed with their clothes on. Nightly raids humiliated women who were pulled out of bed and traumatized everyone as they handcuffed men and took them away. One young man was pulled out of bed and handcuffed wearing only an undershirt. He was forced to lie on the floor of a helicopter. It was a cold night and they left the helicopter doors open as they flew, and he almost died of hypothermia. Another summed up our return to Rutba when he said, “Your being here is good because you will help Christians see that Muslims aren’t terrorists and Muslims to see that Christians aren’t infidels.”

Our only disappointment was not meeting Dr. Farouq, the doctor who cared for us seven years earlier. He is now at the hospital in Ramadi near Baghdad, about three hours away, and could not get away to come back to Rutba while we were there.

Nevertheless our return to Rutba was also rewarded when we met Tariq Ali Marzoug, a nurse, and Jassam Mohamed, a medical assistant, who had cared for us seven years earlier. When Jassam came in, I eagerly reached out to shake his hand, but he reached out and gave me a big hug and said, “I welcome you with an Iraqi greeting.” With amazed delight he told us, “When I heard you were here I thought you must have forgotten something. I could hardly believe that you came such a long distance to see us.” We asked what they thought when Americans were brought to their clinic that day. Without hesitation they replied, “We did not see you as Americans. We saw you as injured people who needed help.” They assured us that this is not an exception but is the Iraqi way.

Jesus ended the parable of the Good Samaritan by asking who was a neighbor to the injured? The lawyer confessed that it was the one who showed mercy. Jesus concluded, “Go and do likewise.”

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From confusion to comprehension

I consider myself a rural person and I’m committed to our participation in rural revitalization as integral to the Christian mission God has for us in a rural community. Still, there are things...
I appreciate about the city and urban life. I like the diversity of people found on city streets, in contrast to the ethnic uniformity that characterizes most rural communities.

Yet despite this obvious pluralism of the urban population, there is a superficiality in this diversity. Though the residents of the city have a rich ethnic and linguistic heritage, they are all required to speak the same language in order to make the city “work.” So the apparent ethnic diversity is something of a sham. Though the city attracts people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, it requires them all to conform to the purpose for which the city exists.

The often unspoken aim of the city as a spiritual power is clearly expressed in Genesis 11. The people in this story came together for two purposes: (1) to build a city with a tower that would breach heaven’s gates and (2) to make a name for themselves so they would not be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.

The building of the city with its tower was made possible by the introduction of new construction technologies—the replacement of stone with baked bricks and the replacement of mortar with bitumen. This made the famous ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia possible, just as steel made the construction of the skyscraper possible in our day. In each case, the intention of these impressive building achievements is the same. It is for humans to make a great name for themselves, to breach the very gates of heaven, to make into one all the diverse peoples who come to the city and thus to make God irrelevant.

This human effort to make God irrelevant becomes obvious in the creation of the city as a sphere of spiritual power. The dominant cultures of our world represent the human desire to take God’s place, to force an artificial uniformity on humankind, and to show how great we are as humans. And indeed, the achievements of the city are impressive. Who cannot be moved by the imposing architecture, the works of high culture in art and music, the technological developments, the works of commerce and industry, the political and educational and religious achievements of urban life. We humans are indeed given great capabilities by God, being made in God’s image, and the city reveals as nothing else does how nearly divine we are as humans.

At the same time, I’m grateful that God keeps intervening, as God is portrayed doing in Genesis 11, to protect us from the consequences of our human pride. Just when we think we will achieve our greatest successes, God steps in to confuse our language and to scatter us abroad upon the face of the earth. Perhaps in our time God’s hand can be seen in the economic crisis we are experiencing, as a global economic system premised on unlimited and unsustainable growth is disintegrating.

The problem is not with our desire as humans to create. That’s something God-given. The problem is with the motivation that too often lies behind our creative drive. We want to make a great name for ourselves instead of honoring the name of God, our Creator. We want to impose an artificial uniformity on humanity instead of reveling in the rich diversity of humanity God has created. We want to create an artificial human environment, to build a skyscraper that will breach heaven’s doors, thus denying our dependence upon God and God’s creation.

It has often been observed that the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, represents a reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel we have been describing. The confusion of language that led to the scattering of the people and prevented them from completing their project of doing away with God is reversed as people from “every nation under heaven” are able to hear the gospel, “God’s deeds of power,” in their own native language (Acts 2:5-11). Confusion yields to comprehension as the people who hear the gospel come to understand what God has done for them as humans in the person of Jesus Christ. All this is made possible by the coming of the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ on Pentecost.

Now the people are able to understand why their speech has been confused, why they have not been able to complete their human projects and why they have been scattered across the
face of the earth. Now the people can comprehend that in order to fulfill their human projects, they must engage in this work not to make a name for themselves but to exalt the name of God and to participate with God in God’s work of redeeming a broken world, the work God accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Here are a few observations, based on the stories of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and the coming of the Holy Spirit in power on Pentecost in Acts 2:

First, God revels in human diversity. In the story of Pentecost, God doesn’t expect everyone present to learn Greek in order to hear the gospel. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, everyone from every nation under heaven was able to hear the gospel in their own native tongue as the apostles spoke. God’s project, as opposed to the human project described in the Tower of Babel, is not to create an artificial uniformity in which people are required to become the same and give up their unique ethnic heritage. God’s project is to create a new humanity in which the uniqueness of humanity is respected and in which the people of each culture are free to worship God in the ways appropriate to their culture.

Second, God likes to see humanity scattered. This may sound strange, and I’m sure God has nothing against having people from around the world come together in one place to worship God, as people came to Jerusalem from “every nation under heaven” on the day of Pentecost. But in the story of the Tower of Babel God makes sure humanity is dispersed. God is all too aware of our human propensity to begin projects that try to dispense with God. God likes to see humanity scattered over the face of the earth, in many local communities that live peaceably with other local communities in sustainable ways.

Third, God wants humanity united in Christ. This is a unity that respects and honors human diversity, a unity that breaks down the dividing walls that separate the human family without doing away with the unique heritage each person and each group brings to the whole. This is not a unity imposed forcibly on the human family in order to achieve some human aim, like that of building the pyramids or the Twin Towers. This is a unity whose purpose is to bring people together freely in praise and worship of God for what God has done for us in Christ.

God’s intention in the creation of the church is that the church become the place in which people of every nation and race and ethnic heritage and language can come together in all their rich diversity, not to make a name for themselves but to exalt the name of God. This is what the visitors in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven comprehended as they heard the apostles speak about “God’s deeds of power” in Jesus Christ, each in their own native language, on the day of Pentecost. Here the Holy Spirit had come to bring a redeemed humanity together in a new community we have come to call church—that unique creation of God that is first of all local and specific but at the same time universal and eternal.

Our world continues to suffer from a profound confusion of tongues. We can’t seem to understand each other. More than ever, the world needs to hear about God’s deeds of power accomplished in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, each in their own native language. Confusion needs to yield to comprehension, as we hear, each in our own native language, what God has done for us in Christ, and then come together to exalt not ourselves but the name of God, who has done such deeds of power on our behalf. Praise God for the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ in our midst and in our world, who makes this miracle possible in the creation of the church as God’s redeemed community in the world.

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Helping children live counterculturally

by Leonor Kennell

A countercultural church needs parents who set clear limits and focus on responsibilities and relationships.
In Jon J. Muth’s adaptation of Leo Tolstoy’s story “The Three Questions,” a young man asks his animal friends three questions:
• When is the best time to do things?
• Who is the most important one?
• What is the right thing to do?
Not satisfied with the answers he receives from his friends, he visits Leo, a wise turtle, who is busy digging a garden. The young man offers to help the turtle, and soon a series of events occur in which the young man rescues a panda and her baby during a storm. The turtle then discloses to the young man that he has found the answers to the three questions by his very actions. Leo further clarifies his meaning this way:
• The most important time is now.
• The most important one is always the one you are with.
• And the most important thing to do is to do good for the one who is standing at your side.
That is why we are here.
These words illuminate the intent of Jesus’ life and teachings; a set of beliefs that are truly countercultural. Yet, at least in the way we raise our children, we seem to be losing sight of this. Our acceptance of and assimilation into our culture easily preclude following the more radical message of the life and teachings of Christ.

What are the characteristics of our current culture?
1. We live in a society that values things and speed over people—over relationships: friends and family.
   Nothing could be more evident when I choose to email my next-door neighbor rather than knock on her door and engage in face-to-face, genuine conversation.
   A national convention youth sponsor told me that the youth with whom they traveled were actively involved in conversation during the trip, but once their plane landed, they immediately took out their cell phones and engaged them rather than each other.
2. We live in a society in which our sense of self is measured externally—by our successes, clothes, how many activities our kids are involved in and possessions in general.
   As a former teacher in an infant and toddler program in New York City’s affluent Upper West Side, I recall parents’ concerns about adequate peer interaction opportunities for their young children. They placed them in our program as well as signed them up for music and dance lessons. These families were frenetically self-conscious about creating extraordinary children.
3. We live in a society where the focus is on individualism and competition as opposed to a more prosocial paradigm where the group is also important.
   Growing up in a Mennonite mission church in New York City in the 1960s, I remember the large number of voluntary service workers who came to work among our disenfranchised communities. These youth found their experiences meaningful, and many chose to remain in these communities and continue their contributions long after their required service terminated. Today, without the draft, there are no Mennonite voluntary service units in New York City, and I wonder if this culture of service has been replaced with a focus on “getting ahead” and “making it.”
4. We live in a society of two working parents and a high-rate of divorce, one in which parents are less physically and emotionally accessible to their children.
   We are aware of how difficult it is for parents who work all day to attend adequately to the needs of their children. Exhaustion takes its toll, and quality family time bears the brunt. Recent studies demonstrate that children whose families have regular family dinner times are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors, yet this routine has become the exception rather than the norm.
   Many of our children grow up doing few or no chores, perhaps because they don’t have the time due to other involvements or perhaps because parents feel guilty about the little time they have for them. When children do have chores, they are often monetarily compensated. These children grow up with little or no meaningful role to play at home. As they mature, they will likely also have an ill-formed sense of relationship to or responsibility for the larger social order.

What has been the result?
• We have higher numbers of socially and psychologically at-risk children. While this has always been true of children who live in poverty, this has now become a significant issue among affluent preteens and teens, whose rates of
depression, anxiety and substance abuse show alarming growth.

- Peers are raising peers. Our children have greater peer influence at a younger age when they typically were more influenced by their parents. The ability to develop a core sense of self is impaired. And primary peer influence in general promotes a greater acceptance of deviant behaviors such as substance abuse, violence and delinquency.

- Children who spend long hours in poor quality child-care centers typically exhibit higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. This can damage neurons in developing brains, resulting in later learning and social difficulties.

- Guilty parents may give their children things rather than their time. Yet we hear teens saying they wish they’d had more time with their parents when growing up—more than having received the latest electronic gadget and more than belonging to teams or clubs.

- Children have become less useful at home, and need much done for them. They have not been allowed sufficient time within the context of nurturing caregivers to resolve the very tasks of early childhood.

What are the tasks of early childhood?

- The ability to delay gratification and tolerate frustration—how can these skills develop when emotional needs are continuously being met by things or peer groups? It is in the context of a bond with nurturing caregivers that children begin to develop these fundamental skills.

- The inability to delay gratification and tolerate frustration is resulting in a society of adults who are less giving and more egocentric, believing their needs must be met externally.

- We are aware of the influences of television and video games. Besides a tendency to learn violence and be exposed to other inappropriate content, we have a society of children whose neurological development has been rewired as a result of watching screen images steadily before age 2. These children have more difficulty paying attention and being motivated by experiences and consequences.

How do we counter this?

We can help our children develop a sense of self that will serve them as an internal guide to becoming positive and contributing members of society who follow the life and teachings of Christ.

1. We need to give the gift of time—the gift of time that will enable us truly to nurture and bond with our children. This strong bond, a basic attachment, enables our children to face the world and its challenges—to cope, love and care about others.

When both parents need to work outside the home, what can we do about our child-care environments to give children what they need? As a church, should we take a more active role in early childhood? Should we, instead of just planting churches, also plant quality day-care centers with well-trained and well-paid staff?

2. We need to reclaim the role of play in the classroom and at home. What do kids learn through play? They learn all the essential skills they need to develop emotional intelligence:

- self-control
- respect
- kindness
- tolerance
- fairness.

We are all aware that with the No Child Left Behind Act, many early childhood centers feel compelled to drill children in skills that are mostly inappropriate for their developmental levels. As a result, there isn’t the same level of child-directed play that enables children to develop self-confidence and problem-solving capabilities.

While we tend to think of play as an early childhood phenomenon, we need to reclaim it for our older children as well. My daughter, a high school senior, has attended an Expeditionary Learning school since junior high. In this model, students are involved in a variety of outdoor experiences for days at a time that build community and leadership skills. They learn to problem-solve together and share a common language and set of values that carry over into their relationships and learning experiences. These are the fruits of positive play.

When my daughter celebrated her 16th birthday at our home, she and 15 classmates of mixed gender played Ultimate Frisbee and walked a slack line with the abandon of young children. There was almost none of the typical discomfort between boys and girls. Relating rather than flirting was the order of the day.

3. We know that young children learn by mod-
eling and direct-teaching, so it is important to tell them to share, wait their turn, play nicely. As they grow older, they will internalize these values. Sometimes we have seen our older children stray away or rebel at a certain point in time. This does not mean we should not continue to stand for what we know is good and right and true—what is of love, what is of God.

We must allow children to fail without constantly rescuing them, at the same time that we set firm limits and allow them to deal with the consequences of their behaviors. Somehow we think that giving firm limits and consequences is equivalent to not loving children, especially when we are not emotionally or physically accessible to our children. Our feelings of guilt create problems for our children, preventing them from developing good coping skills.

4. Finally, a strong bond with our children helps them ultimately develop a strong faith in God. Experiences of trust, security and affirmation balanced with clear expectation set the stage for healthy belief in a Creator and sustainer.

A countercultural church needs parents who set clear limits and focus on responsibilities and relationships.

I challenge us to make big changes in how we raise our children.

We must allow children to fail without constantly rescuing them, at the same time that we set firm limits and allow them to deal with the consequences of their behaviors.

Leonor Kennell attends Fort Collins (Colo.) Mennonite Fellowship but lives in Estes Park, Colo., and is a bilingual early childhood special educator. This is a shortened version of a presentation at the Mennonite Early Childhood Network session at the Mennonite Church USA convention in San José, Calif., in 2007.
Discerning the times and looking to the future

Navigating in

by Natalie Francisco

And of the children of Issachar, [which were men] that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; the heads of them [were] two hundred; and all their brethren [were] at their commandment.

—1 Chronicles 12:32, KJV
This Old Testament passage is a favorite of mine because it challenges us to place ourselves in the context of Scripture and relate it to our contemporary, cultural settings. The men of the tribe of Issachar, as we see in this passage, were few in number; however, they served David the king both effectively and efficiently because of their skill and discernment of knowing exactly what to do, how to do it and when.

According to the Matthew Henry commentary, these men not only understood the natural times but could “discern the face of the sky, were weather-wise and could advise their neighbors in the proper times for plowing, sowing and reaping.”

During ceremonial times and solemn feasts, the sons of Issachar would also “call the people to the mountain” (Deuteronomy 33:19). They understood politics, public and national affairs as well as current events of the day. Their specialty, as evident in 1 Chronicles 12:32, was discernment of the times and seasons in which they lived for the sake of supporting the king and promoting the common good of the people of Israel.

Like the sons of Issachar, we must promote the agenda of our God and king as well as the common good of God’s people so that God’s kingdom is established on earth through the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and become naïve concerning the signs of the times. It is our mandate to discern the current state of affairs in our community, nation and world and respond accordingly with righteousness, justice and love.

Today we will participate in group discussions in an effort to discern the times and deliberate as we look toward the future with anticipated solutions for hope and healing. To prepare for such a task, I invite you to stand with me as we recite together the profound words penned in Matthew 6:9-13, known as “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is this prayer that sets the precedent for our daily conduct and commission to navigate through the murky waters of our world.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

It is our mandate to discern the current state of affairs in our community, nation and world and respond accordingly with righteousness, justice and love.

Natalie Francisco is co-pastor of Calvary Community Church in Hampton, Va., and founder of Women of Worth and Worship Institute.
I thought the lady was crazy. Here we were, on a family trip to the Bahamas, sitting lazily by the pool, soaking up the sun while family and friends back home in Pennsylvania dealt with temperatures in the 40s.

Tara, my wife, and I were sitting poolside with our two young boys, Zeke and Brett, dangling our feet in the water and taking stock of all of the people at the resort.

Our first few days on Paradise Island followed a routine as we saw the same group of people at the pool. Tara, who looks much more approachable than I do, befriended two women in their 20s from the Midwest. Between dips in the pool to harass the kids, I eavesdropped as they talked about family, college and, eventually, religion.

With the commonality of Christianity, the bond grew deeper. Our family said hi to the women as we passed in the hall of our hotel or on the way to the pool.

And we were poolside again on our new friends’ final day of vacation. Their bags were by their sides as one of the women scanned the pool. She locked eyes with Tara, showed a sign of relief on her face and hurried over.

“This is going to sound really weird,” she said, obviously nervous. “And I’m not the kind of person who does this kind of thing or says this kind of thing. But God has put it on my heart to tell you that something wonderful is going to happen to your family.”

Tara, looking puzzled, thanked her before they said their goodbyes. Eavesdropping again on the conversation, I was cynical at first. It smacked of an annoying mass email chain letter, a tract handed out at the airport or something straight from a late-night evangelist.

“What do you think it means?” Tara said.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “We’re not rich but happy, and we have supportive families. I think the only thing it could be about is having another child. What do you think?”

“The only miracle I would want is another child,” she said.

The roadblocks: As for most parents, the births of our children were among the happiest moments of our lives. And as for most parents, those births were not without a dose of adversity. Our oldest son, Zeke, now 11, was born while Tara and I were 19 and 20, respectively. We wouldn’t have traded anything for our blessing, but it wasn’t without its share of financial hardship as I worked full-time and went to college full-time while Tara stayed at home to raise our son.

Four years later, as we got a little more established financially, we became pregnant with our second son, Brett, after two miscarriages. Early in the pregnancy with Brett, a routine ultrasound discovered a defect in his spine. That started a journey that ended up in Philadelphia at the University of the Hospital of Pennsylvania as Tara underwent fetal surgery in 2003 as doctors from Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia repaired Brett’s back in utero to prevent any further damage from his spina bifida.

Tara was on strict bed rest in Philadelphia until she delivered Brett three months later as I played the role of Mr. Mom back at home in Pennsburg, nearly an hour away. Brett, one of just 50 children in the world at the time to un-
How a greeting from a complete stranger turned into a miracle

dergo the surgery, progressed better than we could have imagined as he crawled, walked and was able to keep pace with the rest of his peers.

Blessed with two young boys, we decided to try again. But this time around, things weren’t as easy. A visit to the doctor revealed Tara’s hormone levels were extremely low. The doctor prescribed a regimen of hormones and told us it would be nearly impossible for Tara to get pregnant again.

We were devastated. We had a gut feeling our family wasn’t complete and explored adoption. Friends from church had adopted from China, and we started to pursue that route. A month into the laborious process, we were set back again, as China’s adoption program requires both parents be 30 or older. And since we were both in our mid-20s and not interested in adopting from anywhere else, we were again back at square one.

The good news: Despite the medical evidence against us, Tara got the feeling, that only women apparently can get, that she was pregnant. We didn’t get our hopes up at first, but a pregnancy test (actually two of them) confirmed that we were going to be parents again—and it all happened just a month after our vacation to the Bahamas. Our experience from the miscarriages taught us not to get too excited. We kept the news to ourselves for the first few months, then spread the word.

Because of Brett’s spina bifida, Tara’s pregnancy was considered high risk. The high-risk part translated into a lot more worry, prayers and ultrasounds but all looked well leading up to the big day. And on Sept. 18, 2007, Tice James Hallman was born at Grand View Hospital in Sellersville.

Our third son’s birth, in our minds, was nothing short of a miracle. Despite the odds of getting pregnant with low hormone levels, and without the use of fertility drugs or experimental treatments, God somehow found a way to make it happen.

Months after Tice’s birth, amid trying to adjust to a home of three boys four years apart, we dwelt on what we felt was the premonition of our son’s birth from a complete stranger.

After the trip, we never spoke to or saw the woman who stepped out of her comfort zone to say what God laid on her heart. How many times have we, as Christians, heard, felt or been nudged to action and have not gone through with it? At the moment, we always say we’ll do it next time or think about it some more and then decide. Not wanting to look, sound or feel awkward we close our collective ears and hearts rather than listen and be led by the Spirit.

How many times have we, as Christians, heard, felt or been nudged to action and have not gone through with it?

The Bible, though, gives Christians the confidence to live life to its fullest. Acts 5:29 reminds us, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” From the Old Testament in Isaiah 43:1-3a: “But now, thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

Or Proverbs 28:1: “The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.”

It is with this spirit that we should live our lives—as bold as lions. The woman in the Bahamas could have taken the easy way out, said nothing, thought about her message from above on the plane ride home and then wondered a few years later what great things happened to that couple at the pool and their children. And we easily could have brushed her off, not taken the message to heart and not attributed our miracle to the true source.

But she shared the message, spreading God’s word and goodness in the process. To be on the receiving end of this is a great thing. My hope now is that I will be bold enough to repay the favor.

Jake Hallman is a member of West Swamp Mennonite Church in Quakertown, Pa.
As followers of Christ, we take seriously the call to live as faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. Our faith should inform our decisions and practices in use of money but also our use of time, talents and how we care for our health and our relationships with God and others.

The message of stewardship needs to be given attention year round in our congregations—not just as a year-end reminder to give to the lagging budget. This year, MMA is encouraging key practices from a research study, “Year-Round Congregational Stewardship: Six Best Practices,” by the United Church of Canada. The following six best practices can help congregations achieve a holistic approach to stewardship:

1. **Operational management:** The operational management of our congregational giving plan needs to go beyond meeting our budgets. We need to communicate that our giving plans support internal ministries as well as the mission beyond the congregation.

   Sound fund-raising methods can help make our congregational giving plan more than just meeting the budget. Clearly communicating our congregational vision and story helps connect the dollar amounts with our congregational ministries.

   Asking members to estimate or make a commitment of their annual giving makes congregational giving a priority for the year. There are many opportunities for giving beyond the Sunday morning offering, such as electronic funds transfer, online giving, planned-giving arrangements, fund-raising events and special offerings. Whenever we communicate with our members about the giving plan, be sure to express appreciation and thanks to those who make it a priority.

2. **Stewardship and worship:** Stewardship and worship are about offering our whole selves to God. Regular teaching on stewardship can be included in the worship service through sermons, prayers and litanies, stewardship quotes, bulletin covers, Scripture texts and children’s lessons. There are a variety of ways the offering can be celebrated as an act of worship.

3. **Stewardship formation:** Forming identities as Christian stewards will help counter the consumer culture that surrounds us. This is reinforced when we emphasize that we “offer” worship to God rather than “being fed.” Stewardship education as an aspect of spiritual formation needs to focus on all ages within the congregation.

4. **Stewardship leadership:** Unless someone is assigned the responsibility for the stewardship mission of the congregation it will probably not get done. In many congregations, a stewardship or finance committee is responsible for tending the budget, but little attention goes into the stewardship focus of the church beyond this.

5. **Spiritual nurture opportunities:** Understanding one’s identity as a steward goes hand in hand with spiritual maturity. People who take their role as a disciple of Jesus seriously tend to reflect that in their expression of generosity, including management of their time, talent and money.

6. **Engagement in social justice and peace:** How we use our resources reflects the level of concern we carry for those beyond ourselves. It has been suggested that a church giving plan/budget is the best window into the soul of a congregation.

   How we divide and distribute our money as congregations suggests whether we are concerned only for ourselves or for those who live across the street and around the world as well. The giving that congregations commit to assists others and has a direct justice and peace component. Congregations should be challenged to consider giving to missions and faith-based relief work around the world as part of our responsibility in extending healing and hope to the world.

I encourage congregational leaders to evaluate where your congregation is doing well and identify areas for improvement in stewardship ministry. MMA’s professional staff can help through a wide range of presentations and resources.
like rituals. Not a very Mennonite thing to say, perhaps, given how much the Anabaptist movement in its early years decried the exaggerated ritualism of its day. But it was the ritual of baptism, stunningly reclaimed, that opened vistas for the Spirit to transform ordinary people into fearless witnesses.

In recent weeks, we have traversed once again through the stories of Holy Week and then move with Jesus onto Ascension Day and Pentecost. Many of us reenacted Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, sharing bread and cup, washing each other’s feet or hands.

Our family and church community have often celebrated Passover—with adaptations of the Jewish Seder, hoping to more fully understand Jesus’ liberating word: “This cup is the new covenant.” I love the children’s questions inviting parents to retell their story of liberation: Why is this night different from all other nights? Why do we eat only unleavened bread tonight? Why do we mix the bitter herbs with the sweet haroset? Together parents and children of all ages “lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.”

Ritual, when done well, is the Word of God writ large in 3-D. It’s a minidrama where mere humans enter into God’s salvation story, for real. It’s not simply going through the motions, limited in time and space by a stuck materialism that pontificates, It’s only a memorial, a sign. Ritual can help create a “thin place” where we are transported into God’s time; when time as we know it sits still at the feet of Jesus.

Our family had an abbreviated Passover meal this year, mostly because Mom was in too big of a hurry with other things. As Wordsworth said so eloquently: “The world is too much with us; late and soon. Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.” But there were moments that transported us into God’s time. Gerald read the Passover story from The Five Books of Moses, a new translation by Everett Fox. Then we prayed, clapping hands as is our custom—and Gerald gave thanks for the ways God continues to liberate. I broke the beautifully braided, warm challah bread our daughter baked for the occasion (not generally used for Passover when unleavened bread is featured, but we’re not purists). We shared ceremonial cups and feasted on roast lamb.

When the children lived at home, we celebrated a Sabbath meal, thanking the “master of the universe” for the gifts of bread and grape juice and for the gift of a day of rest—a magnificent gift for an enslaved people—whether in Egypt or in frenetic North America.

For a family calendar my sister is making, I reviewed Wenger Shenk family dates. I noted the birthdays of each of our three children and their baptism dates. Scenes flitted in full color through my mind: mentor Jerry Holsockle’s original songs with one son on the piano and another singing tenor, words of blessing from grandparents, embraces by pastor Basil Marin, “wade in the water” with full immersion for one, the joy beaming from faces, and the clear word from each: “I have decided to follow Jesus.”

In a recent colloquium at Eastern Mennonite University, sociologist Nathan Wright from Bryn Mawr College provided an analysis of how Mormons have managed to persist in their core identity while adapting to changing circumstances over the generations. He spoke of “dynamic endurance” and demonstrated how ritual has played a decisive role in holding this community together despite significant conflict as they adapt to the mainstream yet manage to persist in their core sense of identity.

In my experience, Mennonites (not unlike others) are conflicted about the function of ritual. We’re aware that ritualism can be abused and so give ritual minimal attention. We tend to underestimate ritual’s power to unify or divide (e.g., recent furor over the role of the national anthem). We become captive to the notion that there is a right formula to do a ritual and are hyper vigilant—anxiously sticking with the rote performance of words on page rather than entering full-bodied into God’s time, where the Spirit (so full of surprises) actually shows up.

When Jesus knew he was about to be torn away from his friends, he said: “This is my body,” “This is my blood.” He gave his disciples a tangible way to hold onto him. What more could we ask for—in worship—than the ritual opportunity over and over again to hold on to Jesus for real?

As families and faith communities, we’ve unnecessarily starved ourselves. The full-bodied gifts of God are for the people of God. Thanks be to God. 

Ritual can help create a ‘thin place’ where we are transported into God’s time; when time as we know it sits still at the feet of Jesus.
What do Mennonites believe about …?

I was asked this question in hallway conversations at the Religion and Foreign Policy Workshop I attended July 14-15, 2009, at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City.

The Council on Foreign Relations is an independent, nonpartisan organization that seeks to create a deeper understanding of the world and the foreign policy choices facing world leaders. Its goal is to bring together people of diverse backgrounds, perspectives and opinions to discuss and debate matters of international importance.

The Council on Foreign Relations does not take positions on issues. It does not seek to make statements or pass resolutions. It does not expect that as a result of these debates everyone will come to agreement. It encourages people with differences to “make their case.” The workshop I attended included a wide variety of Christian leaders along with leaders in the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist communities.

The Council on Foreign Relations believes that conversation and debate, building relationships and deepening understanding will have a positive impact on the world and the choices made by world leaders, even without agreement.

I attended this workshop 10 days after departing from Columbus, Ohio, and the Mennonite Church USA convention with all its debates and resolutions and striving for an agreed-upon identity. As I pondered these two experiences I had to wonder:

What if instead of establishing doctrines and codes of conduct the church told stories, reflected on parables and shared in table fellowship, even with those who are different from us?

What if instead of establishing doctrines and codes of conduct the church told stories, reflected on parables and shared in table fellowship, even with those who are different from us?

Taking a new road will not be easy. Beyond acknowledging that there is a problem, changing paths will require personal acknowledgement of our own responsibility for the road we are on. It will require a recognition that continuing on our current journey will lead to death rather than life. It will require a recognition that we cannot move forward in isolated camps of agreement but need the relationships of a broad community. It will require that we open ourselves to relationships of accountability without making others responsible for our choices or functioning as if we are responsible for the choices of others.

Ultimately, maybe it’s not about “what Mennonites believe.” Maybe it is about what each of us believes about how we as Mennonites relate in community with those who have different perspectives.
MMA’s new name: Everence

Mennonite Financial Federal Credit Union will also use the name.

On March 25, MMA president Larry Miller unveils the organization’s new name and logo. The target date for the changeover is Nov. 1.

Mennonite Mutual Aid, which prefers to be called MMA, will have a new name: Everence. The name will also be used by the Mennonite Financial Federal Credit Union. The target date for the name change is Nov. 1. MMA and MFFCU leaders announced the name change and introduced the new logo in a press conference on March 25.

“Everence is a reminder of words like reverence, forever, permanence and everlasting,” MMA’s president Larry Miller said. “It is a reminder of our foundation of faith and our connection to the church, which is extremely important to us and is not changing. The new logo is primarily inspired by a vine. A vine is a prominent image in the New Testament that often signifies the interconnected nature of community. It speaks to how we are an organization that is building a community of members dedicated to the traditional Anabaptist understanding of stewardship … the vine is shaped [in] the image of a cross.”

MMA told the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board on Feb. 18 that it planned to unveil a new corporate identity and name “that brings together all parts of MMA into a unified brand.” Among the reasons: MMA members are confused by the variety of names currently being used; Mennonites no longer seek out other Mennonites to do business with as they did two generations ago; as an organization that works with multiple denominations, the word “Mennonite” is both a positive and a negative; in Internet search engines, the acronym “MMA” has been taken over by Mixed Martial Arts.

According to Miller, The name Everence Financial will be used as the overall name for the organization, and Everence will be applied to many of the organizations facets.

- Mennonite Financial Federal Credit Union will become Everence Federal Credit Union.
- MMA’s retail insurance and securities offices will be known as Everence Financial Advisors.
- MMA Trust Company will become Everence Trust Company.
- Mennonite Foundation will become Mennonite Foundation, A Division of Everence Financial.
- Mennonite Retirement Trust and The Corinthian Plan are programs of Mennonite Church USA, and their names will not be changed, Miller said. They will be administered by Everence.

“Changing an identity at a key juncture is not a new idea,” Miller said. “In fact, changing one’s identity to signal a new direction is biblical. Abram became Abraham and Sarai became Sarah. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel. And Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter. … A change of identity reflected that a new day was coming.”

W. Kent Hartzler, president of Mennonite Financial Federal Credit Union, also provided a statement at the March 25 press conference.

“I see several advantages in making this move,” Hartzler said. “It helps us fulfill our vision of providing a comprehensive set of financial services for members in partnership with MMA. Operating under a single name, especially in our joint office locations, brings all our services together in members’ minds. It is a name that does not give the impression that we are exclusively for Mennonites. … Preliminary reactions suggest the new name is also more appealing to younger members, which is important as we reach out to younger people.”

In a letter sent to credit union members, Hartzler also noted that the current name has so many words it is difficult to get them all on a sign large enough for passersby to see.

Steve Bowers, MMA’s director of marketing, said the cost for the name change would be “in the six figures.” Costs include new signs, changes to Web sites and changing the language in many documents. Miller said the name change will not require a change in Mennonite Church USA Bylaws.—Everett J. Thomas
The Jan. 10 ordination of associate pastor Bj Leichty at Holdeman Mennonite Church, Wakarusa, Ind., provided an opportunity to share about her part in the Mennonite Youth Fellowship (MYF) group at Yoder (Kan.) Mennonite Church in the 1970s.

It was also an opportunity to celebrate that four pastors raised in that small Kansas community are now leading Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference congregations.

The other pastors (pictured above left to right) are Bj’s sister Kay Bontrager-Singer, co-pastor of Faith Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.; Bj; Ron Diener, lead pastor of Pleasant View Mennonite Church, Goshen; Ron’s brother Terry Diener, lead pastor of Clinton Frame Mennonite, Goshen.

Bj, Terry and Ron were among six youth in the small Yoder MYF over a three-year period who have since been called to pastoral leadership. The others are Nick King, who pastored in Wichita, Kan.; Ervin Stutzman of Harrisonburg, Va., now executive director of Mennonite Church USA; and LaVern “Clyde” Yutzy of Lewistown, Pa., who has worked with Youth for Christ throughout his career.

The following excerpt is from the sermon Terry Diener preached at Bj’s ordination:

“The MYF saw in Bj leadership abilities and a deep spirituality,” Diener said, “which we affirmed by electing her as vice president and then president. Bj was one who could think outside the box and pushed us to try new things.

“The support and encouragement of Yoder Mennonite Church is part of the reason so many of us are serving as pastors today. One example: A local Mennonite college professor came to speak at a Sunday evening service. This professor brought a rather controversial message and pretty direct challenges.

“Some older adults in the congregation were very upset about what they had heard and verbally expressed their anger about what the professor had said. The youth were very upset at these older people who had responded so emotionally to the speaker, and the older people felt like the speaker had been disrespectful of their understanding of the Christian life. It was an important moment for both youth and adults—with some tension and potential for more conflict to emerge.

“After the service, Bj’s mother Ilva (Bontrager) arranged for some of the youth leaders to meet with the adults in their home—to talk about what had happened and to find reconciliation. In that meeting, forgiveness and grace were offered by youth and adults alike as they shared their thoughts and their hurts.

“Through this time of sharing from the heart, confession and prayer, the youth leaders grew in their understanding of what it means to be a part of a caring community and grew in their spiritual lives. They came to realize in a much deeper way that they were part of a community that loved and cared for each other, even in times of disagreement.

“I see this story as an example of your home and church community and the kind of experiences that nurtured your development as a young person and that make you the person you are today.” —Annette Brill Bergstresser, Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference
Dispersed staff helps all of MC USA

Staff connect to fringes rather than centralized locations.

Glen Guyton, Mennonite Church USA’s denominational minister for Intercultural Relations, works from his local community in Hampton, Va. He says there are two things he needs to do his job: a good Internet connection and a good way to connect with people.

The Internet allows Guyton to communicate with denominational office staff in Elkhart, Ind., Newton, Kan., and Harrisonburg, Va. He can work from home or carry his office with him via a cell phone and laptop. And good connection to people keeps him in tune with how God is working throughout the wider church—especially within his home congregation of Calvary Community Church, where his office is located.

“If we want to be a church in which every congregation and every person is at the center of what God is doing somewhere, then we need to value having staff work where they live,” Guyton says.

Guyton is one of many staff members who are “dispersed”—serving away from one of the denominational offices. Denominational leaders are embracing new technologies and attitudes that help them respond in new ways to constituents’ desire to be connected to the whole, says Ervin Stutzman, Mennonite Church USA’s executive director. Stutzman, in the short term, has chosen to serve the wider church from his home in Harrisonburg rather than move to Elkhart or Newton. Newton was the working site of retired executive director Jim Schrag. Stutzman may discern it best to move in the future.

“I want to be part of maintaining a network of people all over the church rather than perceiving the church as being in one or two centralized locations,” he says. “Many constituents feel on the fringes in one way or another. So we need to ask: Where is the center of the church? And how can we help connect the fringes to the center?”

Stutzman and the Executive Leadership staff with the church’s four agencies—Mennonite Mission Network, Mennonite Education Agency (MEA), Mennonite Publishing Network and Mennonite Mutual Aid—are discerning what “center” means for a church undergoing change.

“We are adjusting to the constant flux that is the 21st century, and I think it’s somewhat like living in the first or second centuries of the church’s existence,” says Ken Gingerich, art director for Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership Communications. He works from home in Albuquerque, N.M.

Rachel Swartzendruber Miller, director of Convention Planning for Executive Leadership, works from home in Phoenix, Ariz., and is a member of Trinity Mennonite Church in nearby Glendale. “Trinity has softened my heart for the churches on the fringes, whether they are in isolated rural areas, racial ethnic communities or urban centers,” she says. “Congregations need connections to denominational leadership that go deeper than an annual visit or a presentation at their conference gathering.”

Elaine Moyer, an associate director of MEA, works out of her home in Harleysville, Pa. She says she believes serving the church includes harnessing technology in ways that enhance Anabaptist community.

“At MEA we are exploring possibilities for expanding our online education capacities,” she says. “But we must be careful to contextualize this from an Anabaptist perspective that values communities and community discernment.”

Staff members also grapple with challenges, including lack of daily office interactions, says Bethany Shue Nussbaum, development associate for Mission Network, who works from an office at Central Christian School in Kidron, Ohio. “Because I’m an extrovert, working dispersed has taken some adjustment,” she says. “I miss the water cooler chats and pick-up-and-go-lunches, and long phone meetings can require extra patience and focus.”

Rhoda Keener, executive director of Mennonite Women USA, works from her home in Shippensburg, Pa. “I can get more work done in solitude at home, but I miss the relationships in an office,” Keener says. “I have to recognize my social needs and make sure those get met in other ways. There are also limits to long-distance communication. Some work really needs to be done in person.”

John Powell, a church relations associate and antiracism coordinator for Mission Network, works from home in Ypsilanti, Mich. “Research shows us the old church is moving away from its old ‘centers’ and into the periphery of other communities,” he says. “We need to be careful not to label anything as central—other than Christ’s call to be relational people. No matter what else we do, we need to help each other remain faithful to Christ’s call in all the places where we are.”—Laurie Oswald Robinson
Central Plains hosts hermeneutics seminar

Described as ‘conversation where we actually agreed and disagreed in love.’

Kent McDougal, pastor of Christ Community Church in Des Moines, presented “The Rule of Christ in His Church,” a paper that examines how obedience to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew equip us for ethical discernment.

On Jan. 9, Mathew Swora presented “Biblical Roots, Interpretive Connections,” in which he traced the scriptural roots of Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective and how the church has arrived at its current position regarding human sexuality. Swora is pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Minneapolis.

Cynthia Lapp, pastor of the Hyattsville (Md.) Mennonite Church, presented “Living Side by Side with Difference,” in which she proposed allowing a diversity of views and following the Gamaliel principal from Acts 5, “If it is of human origin it will fail, but if it is of God…”

Each of the papers and the conference’s policy on variance are available at www.centralplainsmc.org.

“Too often when we talk about issues of faith and life, participants begin by speaking to the issue primarily from their own experience,” says Boshart. “That’s a conversation, but it isn’t hermeneutical discernment. This meeting began with the establishment of a common foundation from which our experience could be tested and corrected through the lens of scriptural interpretation.”

Participants spent the last session in table groups of about eight people responding to these questions: What have you heard that represents the best of who we are as a faith community? What have you heard that raises concerns/fears for the future of our common life as a conference? What have you heard that will move us toward our highest hopes as God’s kingdom people?

In their written reports, many tables expressed appreciation for the respectful tone of the gathering, noting especially the humility of all three presenters. There was wide affirmation for starting with the Scriptures and “what unites us.” Some expressed feeling more confident that the church can do the work of discernment. “This is the church doing its job,” one person commented.

Concerns expressed most often by the table groups had to do with fears of division and of losing our witness because we get bogged down in controversies.

“I was impressed with the level of discourse,” says Lapp. “It was evident that we all take the Bible seriously and we all love the church. I was grateful to be part of a conversation where we actually agreed and disagreed in love.”

“I confess I entered this weekend with a bit of fear and trembling and lots of prayer,” says Detweiler. “But I left praising God for the way in which I saw God’s Spirit bring us together.” — Shana Peachey Boshart

About 120 people attended a Central Plains Mennonite Conference seminar for congregational leaders, “Come, Let Us Reason Together: Developing Common Understandings for Discernment,” held Jan. 8-9 in Des Moines, Iowa.

Last summer at Central Plains annual meeting in Freeman, S.D., the conference council shared with the delegates a plan to appoint a unity task group to study the conference’s policy on variance. Then at Mennonite Church USA Convention 2009 in Columbus, Ohio, the delegates approved a resolution calling for the development of resources for discernment around divisive issues.

Central Plains ministry staff considered these events and thought a good starting point for discernment would be Scripture and how we interpret it. Several pastors in the conference had also expressed a longing for more theological reflection around issues of variance.

Conference minister Tim Detweiler worked with pastors David Boshart, Kent McDougal and Mathew Swora to plan a seminar for congregational leaders on the subject of hermeneutics, or how we interpret the Bible.

“The purpose of this seminar was to help us reflect on our common understandings for discernment as we address issues of variance in our conference,” says Detweiler.

“In my memory,” says Boshart, “this is the first conference that was called for the purpose of Scripture discernment. We began by looking to the Bible as our common foundation for faith and life under the rule of Christ.”

On Jan. 8, Detweiler and moderator Diane Zaerr Brenneman opened the meeting and introduced the communication “ground rules.”

From left: Mick Murray, Julie Murray and John Blosser Yoder at the Central Plains Mennonite Conference seminar.
Leader names the challenge in creating boards large enough to represent all.

The chairs of two Mennonite Central Committee boards responded to a news article published by The Mennonite in April (“MC USA Moderator Questions MCC”). MCC U.S. board chair Ann Graber Hershberger and MCC (binational) board chair Herman Bontrager released a statement on March 19 in response to the article, which first appeared in the March 15 TMail.

“As your readers try to understand the concerns raised by Mennonite Church USA Moderator Ed Diller,” they wrote, “perhaps a bit of background will be helpful. … Mennonite Central Committee is working on revisioning and restructuring—the New Wine/New Wineskins process of the past 18 months. The process included more than 2,000 people from Canada, the United States and around the world. All 14 denominations that have representatives on the MCC Canada, MCC U.S. and MCC (binational) boards, plus the 12 MCC boards, are being asked to give multiple rounds of feedback and will approve the final proposals. Mennonite Church USA is fully engaged in this, and moderator Diller’s letter was part of the first round. Decisions on bylaw changes are part of the process and will be finalized no earlier than 2011.”

The statement referred to a Dec. 28, 2009, letter sent by the Mennonite Church USA moderator. In the letter, Diller expressed his concern that MCC will become a nongovernment identity, as has happened to Heifer International, and insisted that it “remain close to the church and not go the way of other nonprofit organizations.” As to its accountability to sponsoring denominations, Diller said, “Global Anabaptists should participate in a [new] governance board, but non-Anabaptists should not.”

MCC’s leaders did not respond to the concern about the organization becoming an NGO (nongovernmental organization), but they did note the difficulty of including so many groups in the reorganizational process. Bontrager and Hershberger said, “One challenge is to create board tables large enough to accommodate representatives of all the groups that need to be there: Canadian and U.S. Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches, local MCC offices and Anabaptist partners around the world who work with MCC in relief, development and peacebuilding in the name of Christ, the mission entrusted to MCC by the churches.”

Diller responded to the statement by email on March 23. “At this point the discussions with MCC are still focused on concepts,” Diller wrote. “While we believe that it is appropriate for us to express our strong desire for each of Mennonite Church USA and MCC to continue the close alignment with the other, it seems inappropriate for Mennonite Church USA to choose the time when MCC should release ‘thought pieces’ for broad public discussions of direction and detail. Mennonite Church USA and its members have been profoundly shaped and influenced by their connection and work with MCC in the past, and we look forward to a future where together Mennonite Church USA, MCC and other denominations and persons involved in the work and ministry of MCC will continue to bring God’s healing and hope to the world.”

The boards of the 12 MCCs (provincial, regional, national and binational), which include representatives from 21 Brethren in Christ and Mennonite denominations, adopted this new identity statement in 2009: “Mennonite Central Committee is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches.”—Everett J. Thomas
Reframing the immigration debate

Speaker asks, ‘What if we did the parable of the Good Mexican?’

The national conversation on immigration is stopped in its tracks by all the shouting and inflammatory rhetoric about the issue, M. Daniel Carroll Rodas told a Bluffton (Ohio) University audience March 19. But if people, particularly those of faith, start the conversation in a different place, the tone is different, too, he said.

Rodas, distinguished professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, was the keynote speaker for Bluffton’s three-day immigration conference, “Beyond Borders: The Role of Immigration in a Global Community.” He recommended that Christians begin the immigration discussion “at the beginning,” with the creation story in Genesis, because it says God created humans in his image and to rule the earth.

That gives every human infinite worth and potential, Rodas said, and so the question shouldn’t be how to keep immigrants out but rather, if they were created in God’s image, what they can contribute to the common good.

It’s not that he advocates open borders, he said, saying borders must be organized. If the issue is approached from a different point of view, however, organization of borders may be done differently, he said, arguing for “a bigger perspective” on what is a world issue.

Changing the conversation extends to asking if laws are good or bad, what values they reflect, how they treat the lowly and weak, and how Christians should react to them, said Rodas, who grew up in a bilingual, bicultural home in Houston and spent his summers in his mother’s native Guatemala, where he later taught for 15 years.

“We organize our lives according to our laws, and many of them are arbitrary,” he said, citing as an example the laws governing driving on either the right or left side of the road, depending on the country.

Among other provisions, Old Testament law allowed for rest on the Sabbath for the “sojourner in your midst,” as well as timely payment of a fair wage, Rodas said, pointing out that God’s law was already taking into account the human tendency to exploit outsiders.

In the United States now, he said, “we have forgotten all the stories” of how difficult it was for our ancestors as immigrants to America. “The only part we remember is the food,” he said, saying that while most immigration memories have dimmed with time, those that remain tend to be about traditional food.

“The Bible’s full of people on the move,” he said, and while all Christians are still sojourners, they have forgotten they’re “strangers in a strange land.”

Even Jesus began his life as a refugee, Rodas said, and eventually applied the command to love your neighbor as yourself to an outsider in the parable of the Good Samaritan. “That must have been a big hit,” he said. “What if we did the parable of the Good Mexican?”

“Jesus turns everything on its head,” he said. “Even if you don’t like immigrants, even if they’re your enemy, you feed them” and if they’re thirsty, give them water to drink.

The current, contentious debate about immigration “isn’t anything new,” he said, showing an 1890s cartoon in which Uncle Sam stands at a Washington gate and holds his nose at an immigrant marked with the labels “Sabbath desecration,” “poverty” and “disease.”

Fear of people who are different from you is a natural human reaction, he said, but culture isn’t static, assimilation happens—albeit at different rates—and today’s Hispanic immigrants will learn English as part of their assimilation. “We ought to see bilingual people as a gift, not a threat,” he said, saying tendencies to either demonize or idealize the immigrant “are both wrong.”

“It’ll just take time, but that’s why the church has a role to play,” he said.

More than 140 people attended the conference, which was sponsored by Bluffton and organized by Paul Neufeld Weaver, assistant professor of education at the university and its 2009-10 Civic Engagement Scholar. Also part of the event were more than 25 workshops and panel presentations, plus a session led by Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and a 1969 Bluffton graduate.—Scott Borgelt of Bluffton University

From left, M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, Paul Neufeld Weaver and Baldemar Velasquez at Bluffton’s Beyond Borders conference.
Professors offer contrasting views on anthem

Goshen College faculty present opinions; 1,200 sign petition against anthem.

Two Goshen (Ind.) College faculty members presented conflicting opinions on playing the national anthem before sports events at the college.

A March 24 campus convocation featured fast-paced presentations by Kathy Meyer Reimer, professor of education and chair of the department, and Joe Liechty, professor of peace, justice and conflict studies and chair of the department.

The 33-minute convocation, titled “Perspectives on the Anthem,” took place on March 24—the morning after the national anthem was played before college sports events for the first time ever. The anthem was played March 23 before a baseball doubleheader against Siena Heights University and a softball doubleheader against St. Joseph’s College. In an introduction to the convocation, President Jim Brenneman said it is important to discuss complex issues with academic vigor and a spirit of love. And the college, he said, is committed to continued conversation on the anthem issue.

Meyer Reimer said Goshen’s decision to play the anthem had removed “one of the symbols and sacred rituals borne out of Anabaptist convictions about nationalism. The anthem controversy also speaks to how we make decisions both large and small when there are conflicts between what we feel is asked of us by our faith and by the good country in which we live.”

She said those who approved playing the anthem in order to extend hospitality to non-Mennonite student-athletes and coaches may have made the college less hospitable. “If we want people who are not familiar with Anabaptism to understand some of the assumptions basic to practices that happen at Goshen College,” she said, “we need to be clear and willing to talk about the core Anabaptist beliefs that become rituals.”

Meyer Reimer said Mennonite and Anabaptist beliefs about militarism, nationalism and patriotism often are misunderstood as a lack of appreciation for the country.

“Anabaptist Mennonites have not expressed gratitude for those things they appreciate about living in the United States as often as they could or potentially should,” she said, “but it is not that they haven’t, on the whole, worked for the good of their communities or been of great service in times of national disasters.”

Liechty began his presentation by stating that he grew up uneasy about patriotism. “I was in second grade when I decided that I shouldn’t say the Pledge of Allegiance, and I didn’t,” he said. “As a high school student during the Vietnam War, I experimented with not standing for the national anthem, but then I decided that standing was the cost of playing basketball and football at Goshen High School, and so I stood, praying that God would understand that I was at least grumpy in my heart. Today, I don’t sing the national anthem or put my hand over my heart, which is a gesture that gets way too close to devotion for my comfort, although I do always stand for the anthem out of respect for those for whom the anthem is important.”

Despite misgivings, Liechty said he supported playing the anthem before campus sports events to promote the welfare of the college community. Liechty said he balanced one faith commitment—to refuse militarism and the excesses of nationalism—and another faith commitment—that a Christian college must promote hospitality and inclusion. “One commitment cannot simply trump the other; both need to be taken seriously.”

Liechty drew a distinction between the hospitality at a Mennonite church and a Mennonite college. Forty-five percent of Goshen students come from other religious traditions. Liechty said Goshen College should accommodate reasonable requests, such as playing the anthem.

“When I think about what the anthem means, I conclude that it does not have a fixed, inherent meaning.” He said that since the college has decided that the anthem will be followed by the reading of the Prayer of St. Francis, “it would be hard for anyone to go away with the idea that Goshen College supports militarism and nationalism.”

—Richard R. Aguirre of Goshen College

Editor’s note: On April 5, a group delivered to President Jim Brenneman an online petition signed by more than 1,200 people against the anthem decision. Brenneman said he would share the petition with the board of directors. The board will also review the decision in June 2011.

From left: Professor Joe Liechty, professor Kathy Meyer Reimer and President Jim Brenneman talk at Goshen (Ind.) College.
Twilight for campus legal codes?

Talking circles aid the aftermath of destructively drunk students and more.

After more than a decade of ushering misbehaving students at James Madison University (JMU), Harrisonburg, Va., through hearings, sanctions and other legalistic steps, Josh Bacon wanted a change. “I went into educational leadership and student affairs because I cared about young adults and their futures,” he says. “But that’s not how they perceived me—they saw me as the ‘bad guy,’ somebody there to enforce the university’s rules, somebody who wasn’t on their side.”

Seeking a fresh approach, Bacon signed up for a restorative justice course at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, taught by an internationally recognized pioneer in the restorative justice field, Howard Zehr.

Even before the semester-long course was over, Bacon was applying restorative justice principles and techniques to cases referred to JMU’s Office of Judicial Affairs, which he directs. In the last 18 months, Bacon has offered students the option of participating voluntarily in “restorative justice circles” about 20 times. All concerned—the errant student, the people harmed by the student’s actions, community members affected by the incident, such as campus police or residence hall members—have found it to be an overwhelmingly positive experience, says Bacon.

Bacon’s fresh but effective approach to discipline caught the attention of colleagues at JMU. As a result, 20 JMU officials joined 50 administrators from 11 other universities at a March 15 symposium offered by the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at EMU. About half this group returned to EMU for the next three full days to undergo intensive training. The leaders of these trainings offered multiple examples from their universities of handling destructively drunken students, vandalism, plagiarism, theft, assault, interpersonal conflict and noise issues through circles and other restorative justice processes. Bacon’s preferred process—a restorative justice circle—is not complicated, though it does require a trained facilitator, preferably with a gift for handling sensitive interactions.

To illustrate the circle process, let us start with a composite situation that would be readily recognizable to university officials: a 20-year-old sophomore living in a residence hall gets drunk at an off-campus party. He then joy-drives around the university’s baseball field, leaving deep tire marks. He tops off his evening by vomiting in the lobby of his dormitory. Called by campus police, the city police come and arrest the sophomore for vandalism and underage drinking.

This “offender” is the son of a lawyer, who proceeds to look for holes in the evidence against his son, fearing his son’s suspension or expulsion, not to mention police record. The father advises his son to admit nothing about the incident. Members of the baseball team begin sending the son angry emails and posting blog attacks because they can’t practice on their home field or host home games while new sod is being put down on the damaged parts of their field. The son begins to be afraid of being attacked by baseball players, when he can’t even recall driving across their field.

In the past, Bacon would have felt trapped in the legal issues of the case. Was a breath test given and what were the results? Is this the sophomore’s first offense? What is the cost of repairing the baseball field? But answering these questions would make nobody feel any better or motivated to change.

Today, this is what Bacon would do in such a case. He would contact each person affected by the incident—from the student himself to the person who cleaned up the vomit. He would offer each person the opportunity to participate in a restorative justice process whereby everyone would sit together and consider what harms were done by this incident and what could be done to “put things right.” Everything would be confidential and could not be used in judicial proceedings.

Each person would speak in turn, using the “talking piece,” initially telling his or her story. As each person speaks in successive rounds of the circle, the speakers usually move from how they were affected by the offense to exploring ways that the harm can be healed or mitigated. In such a setting, the sophomore no longer has any reason to minimize his role. He can explain that he was undergoing an initiation into a club and was urged to keep drinking even after he felt he had enough. His designated driver abandoned him, so he tried to get home on his own. And he loves baseball—he comes to all the games. He never meant to do anything to hurt the team.

Then Bacon would lead the circle to consider next steps. These may include a loan from Dad to pay for resodding the baseball field that the son will repay by working on the university’s grounds crew for the summer, volunteering to staff the baseball concession stand during home games so more funds could be retained by the team, and helping the residence-hall cleaners on weekends when they are shorthanded.

Of the 20 circles he has facilitated so far, Bacon says none have failed to yield positive outcomes. At the rate things are going, Bacon dreams of changing the name of his workplace from the “Office of Judicial Affairs” to the “Make Things Right Office.”—Bonnie Price Lofton of Eastern Mennonite University
Johnstown church forgives ex-pastor

Stahl Mennonite Church chose not to press charges against pastor who stole.

Tom Croyle, former pastor of Stahl Mennonite Church, Johnstown, Pa., faces charges of stealing money from two charities in Johnstown.

According to a Feb. 24 report in the Tribune-Democrat, Croyle is charged with misappropriating $64,484 from Bridge of Hope of the Laurel Highlands and stealing $18,615 from St. Francis Sharing and Caring Inc. in Conemaugh Township.

He paid back about half the money before he was caught, according to police.

Croyle also took an unknown amount of money from Stahl Mennonite Church. Croyle was the pastor at Stahl Mennonite of Allegheny Mennonite Conference for seven years.

Croyle confessed to the congregation in June 2008. After this, action needed to be taken by Allegheny Conference’s Leadership Commission, according to interim Allegheny conference minister Donna Mast. His license was suspended at that point, and following this, Croyle voluntarily asked that his credentials be terminated. His credentials were withdrawn in early 2009.

Joy Cotchen, conference minister of children and youth for Allegheny Conference and a member at Stahl, provides this statement from Stahl: “It was a difficult time for our congregation after Tom’s resignation, but we chose to work at healing and forgiveness with the help of our interim pastor Rose Bender.”

To address this issue, Allegheny Conference formed two teams, says Kurt Horst, former conference minister. One team helped Stahl decide what to do and aid in healing. The second team worked with Croyle.

Stahl Mennonite did not press charges. “Stahl named and grieved the abuse and loss and chose to move on,” says Horst.

“Things will go wrong,” Horst says. “When they go wrong, turn to your conference leaders for help. They have resources.”

He also says the Mennonite Church USA document on pastoral misconduct offered guidance.

Rose Bender finished as Stahl’s interim pastor early this year. Stahl Mennonite Church is in a pastoral search at the moment.—Anna Groff
Getting serious about being missional

Joining in God’s activity in the world, We develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures.

By adopting this mission statement, developing “missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” becomes the central task of Mennonite Church USA. This statement positions us to imagine a future where, in the words of Emil Brunner, “the church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.”

While the word “missional” continues to gain significance in our denomination, what it looks like to be a missional church remains elusive to many. Such is the case when we try to create a new world with our words.

Are we making progress in our attempts to embody the missional reality we desire? Is there need for course correction? In seeking answers to these questions, I conducted empirical research within Mennonite Church USA that identified a number of tensions that will need to be managed as we seek to embody the nature of a missional church. These tensions can inform how our denomination might best help increase positive missional tendencies while decreasing antimissional tendencies that persist. I will describe five of these.

1. The first tension is the transition from being a sending church to an understanding of the church as itself sent.

The institutionalization of the church in the 20th century reinforced notions that people are formed for ministry somewhere else for someplace else. Somewhere along the way, the church no longer saw the local context as a primary resource for spiritual formation and equipping for ministry. Some are sent, others stay home to support those who are formed for ministry in other places.

This is an anti-gospel understanding. Jesus understood the mission context as the preferred place to imagine how the kingdom is announced and witnesses embody the gospel (Luke 10). In order to increase positive missional tendencies, we will need to see the congregation as a primary place of formation for ministry so that all are sent.

2. The second tension is between replication and reproduction.

When we tell stories of churches that demonstrate “successful” missional practice, there is a persistent tendency to copy the activities and programs that appear to be successful.

Years ago, in response to a devastating upset in the hog market, our congregation began an annual hog roast to which our rural neighborhood was invited. As soon as this story was reported in the church press, I was amused to learn of five Mennonite congregations planning hog roasts for their neighbors. A number of them were town churches.

We need to tell these “success” stories in a way that highlights how congregations and their leaders are exegeting their community resulting in a contextually appropriate ministry. Recently, contextual exegesis has been named as one of the essential six pastoral competencies for missional leadership.

3. The third tension answers the question, For whom does the church exist?

There is a deep and persistent belief that the church exists for us rather than for the sake of the world. Conrad Kanagy’s Road Signs for the Journey confirms this tendency.

After the preaching role, pastors understand their primary role as shaping the congregation’s vision and equipping members for ministry. After the preaching role, congregational members hope the pastor’s primary role is to provide pastoral care and counseling to the members.

Mennonites have a gift for hosting the stranger, so long as the space into which the stranger is welcomed remains “our” space. Becoming a missional church will require us to get hosted into the world’s space and, in our spiritual discernment with the stranger, create a new space to incarnate the reign of God.

But much of our organizational energy has been focused on helping existing congregations be smoother-running machines for our members rather than forming every member for witness in the world.

4. Related to the third tension is the tension between focusing on boundaries or the center when it comes to matters of faith and life.

At some level, boundaries help us. We need to know the difference between the church and the
world. In the words of Andrew Walls, we need to remain clear how the gospel is at home in every culture and how it is foreign to every culture. What is needed is a common understanding of how to read the Scriptures that reveal the way of Jesus.

The more clearly the center is articulated, the less attention boundaries require. The challenge in this tension is to equip the church to get better at naming the way of Jesus as the true way. We need a denominational system that can build our competency for scriptural discernment at every level of the church.

5. There is a tension within the church that has to do with our identity in the world.

There is the tension between the church that reflects dominant social values vs. understanding the church as engaged in but different from society. We struggle to understand what it means to be the church in a society that is not hostile to the church; society simply acts as though the church doesn’t matter very much.

There remains a persistent consumer mentality within Mennonite Church USA that believes the church exists to help me live the life I have chosen a little bit better—which looks a lot like the American dream—rather than helping us be the vanguard of “the life that is to come.”

Here are two examples that demonstrate progress in our aim to become a missional church.

1. At the Mennonite Church USA Convention in Columbus, Ohio, last year, delegates were more assertive in their call to be engaged in discerning the missional direction of the church than we have heard from previous delegations. The spiritual practice of dwelling in the Word received more affirmation from the delegates than anything else that happened in the assembly. The delegates are now pressing the Executive Board to integrate practices like dwelling in the Word into the discernment of our common faith and life as a seamless cloth. The delegates present denominational leaders a tremendous opportunity when they want the Bible to be more integrated in their discernment.

2. Delegates observed that Vision: Healing and Hope (see box) is growing in influence throughout the denomination. Vision: Healing and Hope is a thoroughly missional statement. Delegates—and here I quote from one group of delegates—asked denominational leaders to “be radical in changing the organizational makeup of the church to more clearly reflect our vision.”

Let me suggest two key ingredients that can contribute to this radical approach to organizational change. First, the greatest opportunity for increasing our missional tendencies is to learn from those who are “working at the front.” Those working at the front think about contextualization and incarnation in ways our existing congregations often don’t. Those working at the front do it because they must. Our mission statement says that “we will develop and nurture Mennonite missional congregations of many cultures.”

To date, our organizational system has focused almost entirely on the nurture of existing congregations while the development of missional Mennonite congregations has been, at best, a marginal focus in the denominational system. If we hope our denomination becomes a missional church, then we will no longer see church plants as our junior partners to whom we write checks and commission leaders.

The first key ingredient for radical organizational alignment is a denominational system that moves the developing congregations into the center of our structure as essential partners in a learning community where we all ask how the reign of God is being incarnated in authentic and contextual ways.

Second, some organizational models will reinforce positive missional tendencies more than others. In the 20th century, Mennonites learned to view the mission of the church in mechanistic or instrumental terms focused on accountable results. Because God is the determiner of results in a missional church, organizational alignment directed by accounting our results is not well matched to the goal of becoming a missional church.

To become missional we will need to shift our focus from measuring results to measuring meaning. This requires a paradigm shift from adaptive learning to generative learning and from mechanistic discussion to reflexive dialogue. Adaptive learning is focused on how we “keep our ground.” Rather than ask, What are we accomplishing? generative learning asks the questions, What is being expressed that sounds like God’s mission? What is being attracted? and, What is being legitimized? Mechanistic approaches to organizational change cast the church as a problem that needs to be solved. Reflexive dialogue suspends our assumptions and opens the space for the Spirit to move us to imagine new worlds. A second key ingredient for radical organizational alignment is an approach to organizational alignment that is focused less on accountable results and more on generative learning and reflexive dialogue.—David Boshart is a member of Mennonite Church USA’s Executive Board and first presented this research at the September 2009 all-boards meeting. Boshart is the pastor of the West Union Mennonite Church in Parnell, Iowa.

Correction: South Central Conference is planting a church in Macon, Mo., not Macon, Miss. (April, page 47).
As Anabaptists in a country without a historic Anabaptist presence, how do you find a community that is essential to practicing your faith?

In December 2009, a group of about 40 people gathered in Stockholm, Sweden, to work at answering that question and to participate in the first physical gathering of the Scandinavian Anabaptist Network.

This newest network is one of several that have sprouted across the globe as Anabaptist Christians seek support and fellowship with others who share their convictions.

“Anabaptist networks are appearing in other parts of the world and have potential to be significant grass-roots kingdom movements,” writes Tim Foley, Mennonite Mission Network’s Director for Europe. “These networks are an effective way (with a minimum of overhead) to resource Christians who have discovered Anabaptism to be crucial for their understanding of discipleship and mission.”

Tom and Disa Rutschman, Mennonite Mission Network partners in Jokkmokk, Sweden, participated in the Scandinavian network meeting, which included authors, peace activists, theology students and seminary professors. Margot and Stephen Longley, who are partners with Mission Network in Finland, also attended.

The fledgling Scandinavian network invited Stuart Murray to speak at their first official gathering. Murray is active in the Anabaptist Network in the United Kingdom, a partner organization with Mennonite Mission Network.

His presentations focused on the nature of post-Christendom, mission in post-Christendom and the core convictions of the U.K. Anabaptist network.

Arne Rasmussen, Swedish Anabaptist theologian, attended the meetings and reflected on Murray’s words. “Something like the diaspora ecclesiology of [John Howard] Yoder, though it may take different forms, seems necessary for a church that wants a measure of freedom from its bondage to Christendom,” he says.

Murray also led seminars with local church planters, reports Jonas Melin, the current network organizer. “Stuart Murray taught on church planting in practice,” writes Melin in his blog. “He went through 12 different models and looked at the strengths and weaknesses of different models, giving concrete examples and practical tips. Many testified that they recognized themselves, had ‘aha experiences’ and helped each other move forward.” —Melanie Hess of Mennonite Mission Network
‘Turning toward peace’ for Afghan children

Initiative redirects war tax dollars to MCC’s Global Family education program.

Each year, thousands of people in the United States decide to witness for peace by withholding the portion of their taxes that would support war efforts and using it to support peace.

For those who make the choice to withhold, Mennonite Central Committee U.S. offers the “Turning toward peace” initiative—an invitation to sow the seeds of peace by redirecting war tax dollars to help children in Afghanistan through MCC’s Global Family education sponsorship program. In Afghanistan, Global Family works with MCC partner Help the Afghan Children, an organization that addresses education and peacemaking concerns.

Since 1996, MCC and its Global Family program have provided more than $7 million in humanitarian and educational assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

Global Family sponsorships help maintain peace rooms—welcoming, stimulating and safe places for students to work on meaningful projects related to peace.

Students also acquire skills to help heal the trauma experienced through the violence around them. Children also receive school kits, computers and other educational supplies.

Titus Peachey, director of peace education for MCC U.S., says the struggle with conscience regarding taxes that support war has a long history.

“European Hutterites in the 1500s, Prussian Mennonites in the late 1700s and contemporary peacemakers from Canada and the United States to Ethiopia and Japan are among those who have wrestled with this question,” says Peachey.

For people of faith, theological commitments play a key role. According to Peachey, most who have chosen to withhold believe, “If we cannot conscientiously participate in war with our bodies, we cannot pay for it either. We need to give our money to causes that build up rather than destroy the presence of God in each person,” he says.

Most inform their governments of their actions. “Given the presence of Western military action in Afghanistan today, the opportunity to contribute to peacemaking there is timely,” says Peachey. “Equally important is the way in which withholding war taxes challenges our own systemic militarism.”

Find more information at us.mcc.org/wartaxes and donate.mcc.org/global-family—Ed Nyce of Mennonite Central Committee

Students study peace education at a school funded by MCC partner Help the Afghan Children outside of Kabul, Afghanistan.

Urban leaders form global network

A newly-formed network of urban Anabaptist leaders facilitated by Mennonite Central Committee is developing organically. Person by person, they are gradually connecting with each other because they share the commonality of engaging the city as Anabaptists. The first steps took place last August, when a group of urban leaders, most from Philadelphia, flew to Seoul, South Korea, where they were hosted by the Korea Anabaptist Center. KAC participates in MCC’s exchange programs and was interested in more interaction, and Philadelphia is home to the largest group of MCC urban constituents on the East Coast.—Linda Espenshade of MCC

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High demand for Bible study in Argentina

Leader is Mennonite Mission Network International Partnership Associate.

Expectant students gathered around open Bibles on March 20 when a new branch of the Instituto Bíblico Toba (Toba Bible Institute) in Argentina’s Chaco Province began classes in Espinillo, 70 kilometers north of Castelli.

The need for another location grew out of the excitement generated last December, when 35 students graduated from Instituto Bíblico Toba’s first three-year program in Castelli. In April, a second group of students began classes in Castelli. The student groups meet in churches.

“Learning together is a great experience,” says José Luis Oyanguren, who leads the Bible Institute’s teaching team. “We are encouraged by many who are eagerly waiting to begin the coming year’s studies.”

Instituto Bíblico Toba graduates named some of the benefits they gained from studying together:

• Learning with and from each other knit us, as members of various denominations into a more cohesive body of Christ.
• Studying in our mother tongue helps us rediscover our identity and our value in the sight of God.
• Knowing more about the “hidden” parts of God’s Word helped us better teach our own congregations.

Alfonsina and José Luis Oyanguren and their three children are members of Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina (Argentine Mennonite Church) from Buenos Aires province. They became Mennonite Mission Network International Partnership Associates working with the Mennonite team in the Chaco in 2004.

In addition to teaching at the Bible school and participating in indigenous church life, the Oyangurens continue to invest considerable energy in perfecting their Toba language skills and deepening their understanding of Toba cultural values.

“What is important is to maintain a learning spirit and an appreciation for the indigenous worldview, for in this we communicate the good news,” José Luis Oyanguren says.

Oyanguren, along with two Toba teachers, was chosen by the Chaco Province Department of Education to write a Toba grammar curriculum and train bilingual (Toba/Spanish) teachers in the Castelli area.—Lynda Hollinger-Janzen of Mennonite Mission Network
Several days after the powerful 8.8 earthquake struck Chile on Feb. 27, Eastern Mennonite Missions workers Michael Hostetter, Dustin Gingrich and Travis Kisamore traveled north with Chilean co-workers to assist in the hard-hit coastal regions around Concepcion.

As they gave tents, food and water to homeless people, Hostetter said, they witnessed extensive destruction from both the earthquake and tidal waves from the tsunami. More than a million homes were destroyed. There is also extensive damage to roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

Hostetter said that in the region they visited many people had lost everything and were sitting around in a dazed state, staring at heaps of rubble that had been their homes. The team took a lot of time just to listen and pray with people who were both physically and spiritually crushed.

In a second trip several days later, Dustin and Sarah Gingrich and Travis and Bekii Kisamore traveled north again. They visited homes and assessed next steps.

Local friends and churches in Puerto Montt donated stuffed toys and balls to share with children in the earthquake-affected area. The EMM team said the government is doing a good job of providing temporary shelters for the homeless. Designate funds for “Chile relief” and donate online at emm.org/donate or mail checks to P.O. Box 458, Salunga, PA 17538.—Jewel Showalter of EMM
Funds boost projects for Global South churches

Mennonite World Conference funds provide water, church buildings and more.

Fresh, clean water from a new well in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, is a source of joy and hope. The well is at the heart of the “Women & Water for Life” project of the Kanisa la Mennonite Tanzania (Tanzania Mennonite Church). A $10,000 gift from the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Global Church Sharing Fund (GCSF) early in 2010 is helping make it happen. The church and local community raised $3,000.

Other GCSF gifts have been approved or are in process. A $10,000 grant is helping train pastors and church leaders in Honduras. The San Marcos de Ocotpeque Mennonite Church there also has developed a relationship with Mennonites from Millersburg, Ohio, over the past five years. The Ohio group helped build the Koionia Mennonite Center, which is used for the training program.

The Bible Missionary Church in Myanmar began to construct a church building in January. The building also will house the mission board head office. The church raised $12,500, which along with the $10,000 gift from MWC allowed the project to proceed.

In Jamaica, the Good Tidings Mennonite Church proposed expanding its building to accommodate enhanced community outreach and youth ministry as well as renovating its worship space. The church has raised $18,000 and still needs to raise $2,000 to add to the $10,000 GCSF gift to complete the project.

In the past 18 months, MWC has sent Jubilee gifts of up to $10,000 to churches in Vietnam, Congo, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Honduras and Colombia totaling $94,600. In addition to the projects described above, funds have been used by MWC-related churches for translation of the MWC Shelf book What We Believe Together (Vietnam), church construction (Ghana), education seminar (Congo) and an assessment of the agricultural capacity of church lands (Zimbabwe).

MWC established the GCSF in 1997 at Assembly 13 in India, with individual donors, Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mutual Aid making initial contributions totaling $1 million. The funds were to be shared in the spirit of biblical Jubilee (Leviticus 25) with Anabaptist-related churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The balance in the GCSF as of Dec. 31, 2009, was $265,856. To donate, go to www.mwc-cmm.org.—Ferne Burkhardt of Mennonite World Conference.
Dutch Mennonites voice views on war

Leaders send letter expressing concern for increased troops in Afghanistan

Dutch Mennonites are expressing their views against participation in war in a variety of ways. Henk Stenvers, Mennonite World Conference General Council delegate from the Netherlands says, “The board of ADS [Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit] is convinced that it is the task of the church to witness about the peace of Christ and not to give the government arguments to prolong involvement in any war.”

Stenvers was part of a delegation of the Dutch Council of Churches that spoke with government representatives in 2007, when the government was contemplating prolonging the Dutch presence in Afghanistan.

The ADS board also decided to suspend its membership in IKV Pax Christi (Church Peace Council) after its director published an article in support of prolonging Dutch involvement in the war in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan. The board feels the stance of this organization implies agreement with the concept of “just war.” Before proposing to the conference to end its membership in IKV, the ADS board will meet with the IKV board. Leaders of the Dutch Mennonite Church also sent a letter to Mennonite Church USA in December 2009, expressing their concern about President Barack Obama’s call for the U.S. military’s escalation of troops in Afghanistan.

“The [U.S.] decision felt so contrary to President Obama’s stance during the election campaign. … The letter was meant as a sign of solidarity with the search for peace of Mennonite Church USA,” says Stenvers.

Ed Diller, Mennonite Church USA moderator, responded with a letter of appreciation, saying, “Along with you, Mennonite Church USA is deeply concerned about military buildup in Afghanistan.” Diller included resources Mennonite Church USA made available to conferences and congregations, as well as a copy of an advertisement churches could place in their local newspapers. Diller asked the Dutch Mennonites to “pray that we may be bold in proclaiming Christ as the Prince of Peace.”

Dutch Mennonites have tended to express their views through ecumenical organizations, but it is difficult to have their voice heard. Stenvers says he thinks Dutch Mennonites could follow the example of Mennonite Church USA in encouraging churches to speak out and be more active in expressing the opinion of its church leaders to the government.—Ferne Burkhardt of Mennonite World Conference

Our doors are open to you this summer.

Come to the summer open house at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary
Monday, June 28, from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Sit in on a class, meet faculty and students, and explore our MDiv and MA programs. Visit www.ambs.edu/openhouse to register by June 14.

Located in Elkhart, Ind., AMBS offers graduate degree and certificate programs in ministry and theological studies.
CALENDAR

Annual Lancaster Family History Conference, May 8; 8:30 a.m.-4:15 p.m., at Willow Valley Resort. Theme of this year's annual genealogy conference is, "Back to Our Roots: Celebrating 300 Years of Lancaster County History." Keynote speakers are author Jack Brubaker (aka "The Scribbler" of Lancaster New Era newspaper) and historian Steve Nolt. Call 717-393-9745 to register.

May 25-29, 2010. St Jacobs Mennonite Church, “Quilts for the World”. See the work of talented local quilters, daily demos and gift boutique. All proceeds to MCC. Part of the Quilt & Fibre Art Festival Waterloo Region, Ontario. www.stjacobs.com or 1-800-265-3353

Idaho Mennonite World Relief Festival. This annual auction of handmade quilts, afghans, wall-hangings, furniture and other handcrafted items is held at The College Church of the Nazarene at 504 E. Dewey in Nampa, Idaho. Proceeds benefit MCC and CATCH, a local program to help homeless families. An event for the whole family, there are activities for children, homemade pies and a country store with many irresistible goods for sale. More information is available at www.idahomrs.org.

WORKERS

Dauji, Silas, was licensed toward ordination Feb. 21 as pastor at Fairhaven Mennonite, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Fountain, Brian, ended a term as lead pastor at Peace Chapel, New Cumberland, Pa., on Jan. 31.

Garber, Shirley, ended a term as deaconess at New Danville Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pa., on Feb. 15.

Mast, Lois Stoltzfus, was licensed for specific ministry March 14 as youth pastor at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship, Goshen, Ind.

Schantz, Merle, began a term as associate pastor at Lebanon Christian Fellowship, Lebanon, Pa., on Feb. 21.

Stoltzfus, George, ended a term as CEO of Friendship Community, a conference agency, Landisville, Pa., on Jan. 1.

OBITUARIES


### Obituaries

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<td>Frederick, Sara Lu Graber</td>
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<td>Frank and Lena Kauffman</td>
<td>March 23</td>
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<td>March 2 at First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, Iowa.</td>
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<td>Dave and Bena Roth Kraybill</td>
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<td>Lapp, Wayne</td>
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<td>March 18</td>
<td>Mountain View Mennonite Church, Kalispell.</td>
<td>March 22 at Mountain View Mennonite Church, Kalispell.</td>
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### Resources

**Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ** by Eugene H. Peterson (Eerdmans, 2010, $24) is the fifth and final book in Peterson’s series of “conversations” in spiritual theology. Here he brings the voice of Scripture—especially Paul’s letter to the Ephesians—and the voice of the contemporary Christian congregation together to unpack what it means to fully grow up “to the stature of Christ.”

**New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology**, edited by Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder and Karl Koop (CMU Press, 2010, $29.50), collects 17 essays that engage Believers Church theology with topics such as denominationalism, the sacramental tradition, the Emerging Church movement and global Christianity.

**Donkeys and Kings and Other ‘Tails’ of the Bible** by Tripp York, illustrated by Zak Upright (Resource Publications, 2010, $11), brings to life eight animal stories from the Bible as seen from the animals’ perspectives.

**Science and Origins: Probing the Deeper Questions** by Holmes Rolston III, edited by Carl S. Helrich (Pandora Press, 2010, $21.50), includes presentations from Goshen (Ind.) College’s Conference on Religion and Science, a yearly lecture series featuring distinguished scholars involved in a dialogue between religion and science. Rolston, an environmental ethicist, points out that we are at one of the rupture points of history in which we face the prospect of great tragedy.

**Jesus and Money: A Guide for Times of Financial Crisis** by Ben Witherington III (Brazos Press, 2010, $18.99) explores what the Bible does and doesn’t say about money and examines what Jesus and his earliest followers taught about wealth and poverty, money and debt, and tithing and sacrificial giving to help readers understand the proper role of money in modern Christian life.


**Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age** by Gerald W. Schlabach (Brazos Press, 2010, $28.99) encourages readers to relearn certain virtues that all Christian communities need to sustain their communal lives. It offers a vision for the right and faithful roles of authority, stability and loyal dissent in Christian communal life.
Lewis, Martha “Marti” M.M., 57, South Bend, Ind., died Jan. 5. Funeral: Jan. 9 at Kern Road Mennonite church, South Bend.


Miller, Betty R., 63, Berlin, Ohio, died Feb. 25. Parents: Roman H. and Elva H. Raber Miller. Funeral: Feb. 28 at Walnut Creek Mennonite Church, Walnut Creek, Ohio.


Want a life-changing adventure in China? Mennonite Partners in China needs English teachers for one semester or more. Through this exciting assignment you can learn Chinese, meet Chinese university students, worship with local believers and learn more about the history and culture of China. Apply at www.mennonitemission.net/Personnel/Openings/Workers/International/ (under China).

Associate pastor of youth and family ministry. Hesston (Kan.) Mennonite Church (adjacent to the campus of Hesston College) is seeking an additional pastoral staff member with emphasis on youth and family ministry. Responsibilities include nurturing spiritual growth and faith commitment, resourcing Christian education ministries and developing lay leadership. EOE. Send cover letter and resume to James Krehbiel: jkrehbiel2@cox.net or 120 Kingsway, Hesston, KS 67062

Kern Road Mennonite Church, South Bend, Ind., a globally-minded congregation committed to being Anabaptist in an urban context, seeks half-time pastor for youth and young adult formation. Candidates must have demonstrable abilities to work with and relate to youth and young adults, a college degree and some biblical training and/or experience, and an ability to communicate via electronic media. For further information about the congregation and applications procedures go to: http://www.krmc.net.

Penn Foundation, a Mennonite-affiliated provider of behavioral health-care services in Sellersville, Pa., seeks a CEO to lead its $20 million/370-employee organization. Please submit inquiries to Caryn Howell at caryn@stiffneygroup.com or 574-537-8736.

Pleasantview Home, a Mennonite-affiliated retirement community in Kalona, Iowa, seeks an executive director to lead its $5 million/135-employee organization. Please submit inquiries to Caryn Howell at caryn@stiffneygroup.com or 574-537-8736.

You are invited to a 125th-year anniversary celebration May 23, 2010; Sunday school 9:15 a.m., worship service 10:30 a.m. Features include special music, an audiovisual presentation, video featuring the music of Zion, exhibits, fellowship meal and the release of the book by Elwood Yoder We’re Marching to Zion. For more information go to www.zmcva.org or call 540-896-7577.

Landis Homes, an aging services provider serving Lancaster County, Pa., and surrounding area, is seeking a vice president of finance/CFO who will monitor the financial status of Landis Homes and provide guidance to its financial direction. Qualifications include a college degree in accounting, finance or business administration, and experience in senior living finance operations or related health-care financial operations. Professional certification (CPA) is preferred, as are effective communication skills, ability to lead a team and collaborate with peers and an understanding of and appreciation for the Mennonite faith. Submit resume to Human Resources, Landis Homes, 1001 E. Oregon Road, Lititz, PA 17543, fax: 717-581-3899 or email: aheinley@landishomes.org. For more information about Landis Homes, visit our Web site: www.landishomes.org.

Landis Homes, an aging services provider serving Lancaster County, Pa., and surrounding area, is seeking a vice president of finance/CFO who will monitor the financial status of Landis Homes and provide guidance to its financial direction. Qualifications include a college degree in accounting, finance or business administration, and experience in senior living finance operations or related health-care financial operations. Professional certification (CPA) is preferred, as are effective communication skills, ability to lead a team and collaborate with peers and an understanding of and appreciation for the Mennonite faith. Submit resume to Human Resources, Landis Homes, 1001 E. Oregon Road, Lititz, PA 17543, fax: 717-581-3899 or email: aheinley@landishomes.org. For more information about Landis Homes, visit our Web site: www.landishomes.org.

Sales Mennonite Church of Tofield, Alberta, Canada, is celebrating 100 years as a congregation July 24-25. We would love to have you help us celebrate this historic and joyous event. Preregistration by May 31 is imperative so we can properly plan for this time together. For further information and/or to preregister contact: Joe and Elaine Kauffman by mail: Box 212 Tofield, AB T0B 4J0, phone: 780-662-2344; email: jolane72@gmail.com.

Goshen College seeks applicants for a full-time nursing faculty member to teach psychiatric/mental-health nursing courses in the classroom and clinical setting. The ideal candidate will bring significant experience in nursing practice and nursing education. Doctorate in nursing or doctoral candidate preferred, master’s degree in nursing required. For further details and to apply, see the position announcement at www.goshen.edu/employment. Goshen College, an affirmative action employer, is a liberal arts institution affiliated with Mennonite Church USA.

Eastern Mennonite University seeks qualified candidates for the following positions:

Assistant registrar—The assistant registrar serves as the manager for the registration component of the shared administrative database. Must understand the undergraduate curriculum and communicate related policies and procedures. Bachelor’s degree required. Work experience in an educational institution is desired. Database management experience is strongly recommended.

Associate campus pastor—The associate campus pastor responsibilities include leadership and training of the pastoral and ministry assistant programs, advising and assisting faith-related student organizations and working with activities and programs that provide opportunities for students to explore a call to pastoral ministry and congregational leadership. Qualifications: master of divinity or equivalent training preferred, training and/or experience in counseling and/or youth ministry preferred. Position is part-time.

To apply send a letter of application and resume to hr@emu.edu. For more information, visit our Web site: www.emu.edu/humanresources.
Risk management

At a recent youth worker conference, I was both surprised and a bit insulted when I learned that I still fit the “adolescent” category. A study into the development of healthy adolescents now shows that the human brain is not completely developed until age 27—meaning anyone under that age is still considered an adolescent. This was mildly offensive to me because of my hyper independence, my pride and my role as a youth pastor. How could anyone call me an adolescent? My whole job is to minister to adolescents. I am definitely not one myself.

After further reflection, and learning more about the researcher’s conclusions, the idea of adolescence extending to the mid-20s does make sense to me, particularly the idea of risk-taking. It is clear (or at least it should be) that someone in their mid-20s is not going through the same changes as someone in their teens. The teenage years are highlighted by the hormonal activity of the brain and changes that it brings to the body and psyche. By later adolescence, the hormones have already done their work, the body is fully developed, but the brain is still making significant changes, particularly in the frontal lobe, which, among other things, is responsible for decision-making and risk management.

What I needed to do was understand that still being an adolescent is different from still acting like a teenager. What these researchers are doing is giving us a neurological framework to understand the behavioral differences between a 25-year-old and a 4-year-old. So what is the point of all this? There are two significant areas where I believe this directly affects young adults in the church. The first is personal risk management, and the second is congregational risk management.

The adolescent brain is designed to take risks, as it is a built-in feature. However, there are healthy risks and unhealthy risks. All risks have inherent danger or they would not be risks. Unhealthy risks involve drug and alcohol abuse, sexual experimentation or criminal activity. Healthy risks include road trips, launching out on one’s own, traveling to a different culture, living in a different culture, starting a new job and more. Brain researchers tell us what we have known for years: Stepping out on our own and taking a risk is vital for our development as individuals. If young adults are not taking any healthy risks in their lives, there is a much greater danger that they will be susceptible to the unhealthy risks.

Risk management also comes into play in the life of the church. Through the history of the church, it is the younger generation that has made up the movers and shakers of the church. We can look back to the 12 disciples and see that they were all in the waning years of their adolescence and not afraid to take a risk for the kingdom of God. We can go back to the 16th century and see that it was men in their late adolescence that started the Anabaptist movement by rebaptizing each other in a small Swiss apartment. We can look to our present-day church in North America and around the world and see that Christians in their 20s are clamoring to take risks for their Savior and their church. The question is how the church is responding to this.

Mennonite Church USA has done an excellent job of recognizing the passion, energy and willingness of young people to take risks. At the congregational level there is also positive reinforcement for the vigor of young adults, which I appreciate. The problem arises when the passion, vigor and risk-taking idealism of a young adult runs into the status quo of the critical mass of an established Mennonite congregation. The young adult is armed with the radical words of Jesus. The post young adult is armed with wisdom that comes with age and experience of at one time having been a young adult. The young adult has a brain programmed to take risk. The adult has a brain that is looking to avoid risks.

As the body of Christ we need to learn how to manage our risks. We need space for young adult risk-takers, and we need to retain space for the wise and experienced adults.

We need space for young adult risk-takers, and we need to retain space for the wise and experienced adults.
**FILM REVIEW**

The **Ghost Writer** (PG-13) depicts a ghostwriter hired to complete the memoirs of a former British prime minister and uncovers secrets that put his own life in jeopardy. This is the rare political thriller that deals intelligently with today’s headlines. It is also artfully shot.—Gordon Houser

**DVD REVIEW**

In **Brothers** (R) a young mother learns of her husband’s death in Afghanistan, only to find out later he survived. The film alternates between scenes of his captivity and torture in Afghanistan and the family’s attempts to heal. His return illustrates the “spiritual malnourishment” of the well-fed. "It’s not just hitting the jackpot that fails to lift spirits,” Kolbert writes. “A whole range of activities that people tend to think will make them happy—getting a raise, moving to California, having kids—do not, it turns out, have that effect.”

Happiness studies have shown that “happiness studies have shown that it’s not just hitting the jackpot that fails to lift spirits,” Kolbert writes. “A whole range of activities that people tend to think will make them happy—getting a raise, moving to California, having kids—do not, it turns out, have that effect.”

In his book **The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being** (Princeton), Derek Bok points out that America’s increase in per capita income in the past 50 years has not brought more happiness. He then asks, “What is the point of working such long hours and risking environmental disaster in order to keep on doubling and redoubling our Gross Domestic Product?”

He also notes that job loss has been shown to be more upsetting than divorce or separation. Nevertheless, the United States, Bok writes, does “less than virtually any other nation to cushion the shock of unemployment.”

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Hunger and Happiness: Feeding the Hungry, Nourishing Our Souls** by L. Shannon Jung (Augsburg Books, 2009, $15.99) exposes the atrocities of a global food system whereby the affluent “feed” at the expense of others. It explores how complicity in the hunger of others contributes to the “spiritual malnourishment” of the well-fed. Jung calls us “to access the spiritual abundance that gives meaning and purpose, satisfaction and joy … to human life.”—gh

**Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church** by Merold Westphal (Baker-Academic, 2009, $19.99) introduces current philosophical thinking related to interpreting the Bible. He says “our interpretations are relative to (conditioned by) the presuppositions we bring with us,” and these are not absolute. Such relativism, he writes, “is by no means the same as the relativism in which ‘anything goes.’” —gh

**Happiness is not the only thing**

We’re seeing happiness measurements often in the media. Look, for example, at the list of the happiest countries on Earth in our February issue (page 11). A Web site explains the method for arriving at such a list, but it seemed too complicated for me.

In the March 22 issue of The **New Yorker,** Elizabeth Kolbert looks at new books on happiness. She refers to a 1978 study of a group of lottery winners that showed they were no happier than a group of victims of devastating accidents.

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**Happiness Around the World:** The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires by Carol Graham (Oxford) studies countries around the world and concludes that “the relationship between money and well-being turns out to be a lot less straightforward than is generally assumed.”

Graham notes that the proportion of Nigerians who rate themselves happy is as high as that of Japanese, whose per-capita G.D.P. is almost 25 times as great. And the percentage of Bangladeshis who report themselves satisfied is twice that of Russians, who are four times as rich.

What to do about this is less clear. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen says, “The grumbling rich man may well be less happy than the contented peasant, but he does have a higher standard of living.” But she doesn’t see the point of trying to convince the “happy peasant” that he ought to be miserable.

These books raise the question of how much governments should take such happiness studies into account in making policy.

Kolbert wonders if this is the best approach. What if, she asks, America’s increased consumption in the past 50 years had increased our happiness? “Surely, trashing the planet is just as wrong if people take pleasure in the process as it is if they don’t,” she writes. “Happiness is a good thing; it’s just not the only thing.”

The Bible’s take on happiness is different. “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked” (Psalm 1:1). “Happy are those who make the Lord their trust” (Psalm 40:4). The word only appears once in the New Testament.

In her book **Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies** (Eerdmans, 2009), Marilyn Chandler McEntyre opposes “the commodified notion of happiness that links it so insistently with getting, spending, having, consuming and receiving the blessings of privilege without much reference to the burdens of payment.”

Scripture (along with these happiness studies) call us toward contentment and relationships rather than consumption.
MARCH 2010 CROSSWORD PUZZLE

THE GLORY OF THE GOSPELS

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Dorothy Zehr, Martinsburg, N.Y.
Florence Zehr, Manson, Iowa
Pearl E. Zehr, New Wilmington, Pa.
Leo Zook, Corbett, Ore.
References are to the NIV unless stated otherwise.

ACROSS
1. Animal name used interchangeably with the locust.
2. “The sluggard” is advised to consider the ways of this insect. Prov. 6.
3. King Solomon had this animal brought from the tropics to his kingdom. (singular) 1 Kings 10.
4. Babylon’s people “all roar like young lions, they ____ like lion cubs.” Jer. 51:38.
5. “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an ____ , will give him a scorpion?” Lk. 11.
6. Kine or livestock.
7. Animal in the second plague of Egypt. (singular)
8. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a ___ … ’” Nu. 21
9. “The infant will play near the hole of the ____ .” Is. 11.
10. Nathan rebuked David and told him the story of a poor man who “had nothing except one little ____ _____ he had bought.” (2 words)
12. “Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like ____ caught in a net.” Is. 51:20.
13. “My lover is like a gazelle or young ____ .” SS 2:9.
15. Jesus cast out the demons which then entered this animal. (singular) Mk. 5.
16. This animal marked when Peter would disown Christ.
17. “I am sending you out like lambs among ____ .”
18. Psalms recounts Egypt’s plagues: “Their land ____ with frogs, which went up into the bedrooms of their rulers.” Ps. 105.
19. This shepherd-prophet of Tekoa said the Lord took him from tending his flock in order to prophesy to Israel.
21. Aaron crafted a ____ calf idol for the Israelites.
22. “A lion has come out of his ____ ; a destroyer of nations has set out.” Jer. 4:7.
23. “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and ____ them open.” Hos. 13.
24. KJV of rabbit.
25. Psalm 58 condemns the wicked rulers, and they will vanish, “Like a ____ melting away as it moves along.”
26. On the fifth day “God created the great creatures of the ____ … with which the water teems .”
27. Scientists divide God’s earth into epochs, periods and this current time, known as the Cenozoic ____ . (singular)
28. Beasts of the Bible
By Jeanette Baer Showalter

Beasts of the Bible

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DOWN
1. “… the leopard will lie down with the ____ .” Is. 11.
2. “Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like ____ caught in a net.” Is. 51:20.
3. “My lover is like a gazelle or young ____ .” SS 2:9.
5. Jesus cast out the demons which then entered this animal. (singular) Mk. 5.
6. This animal marked when Peter would disown Christ.
7. “I am sending you out like lambs among ____ .”
8. Psalms recounts Egypt’s plagues: “Their land ____ with frogs, which went up into the bedrooms of their rulers.” Ps. 105.
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11. Aaron crafted a ____ calf idol for the Israelites.
12. “A lion has come out of his ____ ; a destroyer of nations has set out.” Jer. 4:7.
14. “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and ____ them open.” Hos. 13.
15. KJV of rabbit.
16. Psalm 58 condemns the wicked rulers, and they will vanish, “Like a ____ melting away as it moves along.”

RECOGNITION
To be recognized in our July 2010 issue, send the completed puzzle and form below to: The Mennonite, 1700 South Main Street, Goshen, IN 46526.

DEADLINE:
June 1, 2010

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NAME (PLEASE PRINT)
______________________________________________
ADDRESS
______________________________________________
CITY ____________________________________________
STATE/PROVINCE ___________________ ZIP/COUNTRY CODE
______________________________________________
EMAIL ADDRESS
______________________________________________
(continued from page 5) advance the cause of God’s kingdom by speculating and arguing about what only God knows: the timetable for the future. As opportunity continues, the community of the risen Christ has a different mandate: to give witness to God’s reign in which we participate and whose consummation we still await.—Jacob W. Elias, Kokomo, Ind.

**Warns of military recruiters**

I have been reading in several publications that the U.S. federal government is reviewing and revising the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The proposed areas of change make it sound hopeful for some improvement, yet I have seen nothing about the attachment at the end of the No Child Left Behind Act: the provision that allows military recruiters to enter public schools and get personal information about students. As a Mennonite and Anabaptist, I have been troubled to observe and learn how some military recruiters operate and how many parents, teachers and school administrators stand on the sideline with nothing to say.

Our elected officials in Washington have again tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the American public by deliberately attaching this provision to the end of the NCLB Act. The current NCLB Act permits yet another U.S. military invasion. This time the invasion is to infiltrate and infest the public schools of this country.—Fred Suter, Columbus, Ohio

**Why publish this article?**

Re “Two Hundred Gather to ‘Affirm the Faith’” by Heidi Martin (April): *The Mennonite* is the official publication of Mennonite Church USA. For the past 10 years, since 2000, *The Mennonite* has had a moratorium on “articles and letters that address Mennonite Church USA’s teaching position on sexuality and related membership guidelines that were adopted in 2001.” Presumably, this is an effort not to alienate people on either side of this polarizing issue.

But the article by Heidi Martin, using quotes from various church members and pastors from Pennsylvania congregations, equated homosexuality to “unwholesome sexuality.” It positively portrayed Harvest USA and Six11 Ministries, two organizations that offer counseling to lead Christians away from homosexual lifestyles. The article did provide a summary of a church-related event and, in that way, was valuable. However, the strongly opinionated undertone of the piece could send a negative message to church members who want to embrace their homosexuality while remaining active in the church. In this way, it seems that this article both violates the moratorium and overreaches *The Mennonite*’s mandate as the official publication of the denomination.—*Chase W. Snyder, Denver*

*Editor’s note: We have not made a change in the moratorium policy established in 2000. We do not publish letters to the editor or articles written to address Mennonite Church USA’s teaching position on sexuality. We do, however, provide news reporting of events that relate to this controversy. In the past year, such news stories have covered the activities of the PinkMennos group as well as the request from pastors in Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference that Mennonite Church USA stop such activism. Martin’s news article reported on yet another element in this churchwide debate.*

**Jesus did not need teaching**

I am responding to Mary Ellen Meyers’ letter in the March issue of *The Mennonite*. I am believing Jean Martin (Readers Say, Dec. 1, 2009) fully understands that Jesus was fully divine and fully human.

Jean was responding to an earlier article that said Jesus had something to learn on sexuality from a woman with whom he became acquainted.

All of Jesus growing in wisdom came from God the Father. At 12 he astounded the leaders in the temple. They had nothing to teach him, and he had nothing to learn from them or any other human he had contact with. Jesus was human in that he was subject to hunger, fatigue, sorrow, death, but not sickness, as I recall. He could not sin because he was a divine, eternal being and not a created being.—*Dale Welty, Wakarusa, Ind.*

**Misses Pontius’ Puddle**

I do enjoy *The Mennonite*’s new format very much. So much good, current information the church can benefit from. I miss seeing Pontius’ Puddle. Joel Kauffmann has a way of explaining a portion of Scripture that some theologians need several pages and a half hour or more to do. I also know it got the attention of our younger readers. Keep up the good work.—*Elmo Springer, Eureka, Ill.*

**Addresses of puzzlers**

Regarding the way the names of crossword puzzlers are listed: *Our Faith Digest* listed people according to state and city or town rather than alphabetically by last name. That was nicer, and the names were easier to pick out.—*Elzie Pennington, Lancaster, Pa.*

**Easter issue**

Re the April issue: I found the article “Ted Swartz Moves On” engaging, good reading—a remarkable journey. However, I prefer a cover article on Easter. I encourage you to match the important church dates/Sundays/seasons with matching cover articles.—*Weldon Martens, Henderson, Neb.*

*Editor’s note: The target date for our monthly schedule is the first Tuesday of the month. Because the first Tuesday in April fell after Easter, we placed the Easter cover article (“Whispers of Resurrection”) in our March issue.*
First things first Love God and neighbor

Jesus was once asked which was the greatest commandment in the Jewish Law. He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).

For the last few weeks, I’ve been pondering why Jesus might have called this the first and greatest commandment. It certainly wasn’t first in the sense of chronology. Dozens of commandments were given earlier in Israel’s history. It doesn’t even appear in the “Big Ten,” the listing of commandments Moses brought down from Mount Sinai on tablets of stone.

Rather, this commandment is found in Deuteronomy, a book that tells of God’s affection for Israel and deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It appears in the sayings of Moses, who recounted the long and circuitous journey of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the verge of the promised land. The context makes it clear that whole-hearted love for God and neighbor is but a fitting response to the LORD, who keeps “his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments,” (see Deuteronomy 6:5; 7:7, 9). The requisite love for God as described in Deuteronomy is not syrupy or romantic. It is resilient and strong, characterized by respect, obedience and honor. It results in humility and reaches out to foreigners.

Jesus viewed this “love commandment” as the most important directive in the Law, the mandate that demands top priority in our lives. The second commandment (to love one’s neighbor) is like it. Together, these commandments provide a sufficient anchor on which to hang all of the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus clearly viewed God through a different lens from that of the religious leaders of his day. They feared to even write or speak God’s proper name for fear of retribution. To them, God was an awesome and distant sovereign, untouched by the everyday needs and problems of the world. They hardly noticed the few passages in the Hebrew Bible that hinted of God’s paternal love. Jesus defied the status quo by boldly addressing God as a loving heavenly father. He further encouraged his disciples to address God this way in their prayers. None of his teachers had dared to approach the sovereign LORD with such intimate familiarity.

The disciple John was moved by Jesus’ testimony of God’s love. He wrote that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV). He also told of Jesus’ mandate to his disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV). Later, John wrote that “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. … We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:16b, 19, NIV). Paul declared that “whoever loves others has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8, NIV).

The “first and greatest commandment” and its twin point us toward the heart and soul of the missional church. The future of our church will ultimately be shaped by the depth and quality of our love for God and others. The best way to move into a missional future is simply to ask ourselves: How can we best express our love for God with all our heart, soul and mind? How can we best express our love for our neighbors? On these concepts hang all the theoretical and practical aspects of the truly missional church.
Lost in the debate around Goshen (Ind.) College’s decision to play the national anthem before sporting events (see page 43) was an even more significant change: president Jim Brenneman’s call for Mennonites to be “radical yea-sayers” alongside our tradition of “radical nay-saying.”

In an address on Jan. 20, Brenneman cited early Anabaptists as the source of the expectation that Mennonites would say no more often than yes.

“They said no to the fundamental religious and civil order of the time,” Brenneman said. “They rejected the church-state union, which had dominated Christianity for some 1,000 years. They championed human freedom and the separation of church and state. … These early Mennonites/Anabaptists were also ‘idealists’ and ‘perfectionists’ for whom the word compromise was considered sinful.”

The problem with Brenneman’s message is that few of us in the church are nay-sayers any more. That leaves the call to be yea-sayers a moot point since we are already so acculturated.

This call to be radical yea-sayers also begs a question: On what societal issues shall we say yes, and on what issues should we say no?

Some of us think we should say yes to the new national health-care program. Some of us think we should say no. Those on each side of the divide may think their convictions are rooted in Anabaptist tradition and theology, making them “radical.”

This lack of consensus about when to say yes and when to say no leaves us confused. Several years ago I had an experience as a member of the Goshen City Council that illustrates this confusion:

I enrolled in a 12-week Citizens’ Academy course sponsored by the Goshen Police Department because I am the liaison between the council and the department.

I was impressed with the excellent level of training and deliberate care given to departmental policies—especially the city’s continuum of force policy. But I noticed a gap in the continuum that led too quickly to the use of deadly force. After using pepper spray or a baton to subdue a suspect, the police officer’s only option was his gun.

Because the city had no money for Tasers, I started a fund-raising campaign to purchase them. Within a year, each officer began carrying a Taser. Studies have shown that both law enforcement officials and suspects are less likely to be injured when Tasers are used instead of the other options in the continuum of force.

It was not until I heard the phrase “radical yea-sayer” that I thought of this effort to change our city’s policy. But some Mennonite sisters and brothers in the community were displeased with my efforts. The reason: My involvement made me complicit in a system that considers violence justifiable.

But I saw the change as one that grows out of our roots: care for the physical well-being of people around us. In one sense, it was also a form of nay-saying: We do not want our police officers shooting people.

Perhaps the best we can do is examine our personal intersections with the culture in which we live. When we find ourselves supporting or opposing some element of public policy, are we doing so out of our convictions as disciples of Christ? If not, then we are compromising our beliefs. The early Anabaptists would have called such compromise sin.—ejt