When God became a baby

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• Many rivers to cross
• God’s body
In every season, God invites you to discern your call.

Eastern Mennonite Seminary

Harrisonburg, Va., Lancaster Pa., online
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Rohrer was gift to the church

I was deeply saddened by the news that Raymond Rohrer, 83, of Lancaster, Pa., passed away on Oct. 26. Not only was he a dear friend but one of those overlooked, unsung treasures of Mennonite Church USA. The obituary and news release give the “facts” of his passing but don’t do justice to telling his story (neither does this letter).

I first met Raymond in 1984, when I was hired as the Director of Deaf Ministries at the former Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM). Here I was, a young upstart, fresh out of graduate school. I was not a member of the deaf community, could barely “speak” their language and had much to learn about this community. Yet naively I had accepted the call to serve in this leadership role. Should not Raymond have been offered this position?

Over the six years I worked at MBM, he humbly and lovingly helped steer my well-intentioned but sometimes misguided attempts at “helping the deaf.” Over the years since, I’ve learned much from the deaf community and have remained in contact with him, his wife and the Mennonite deaf community. He consistently remained a quiet, wise man of faith nurturing the spirit of many deaf (and hearing) people. He did this in spite of having little access to the resources available to most (hearing) pastors in the church.

When I would become angry at the injustices and inequality (between deaf and hearing people) in our denomination, he would calmly “listen,” then go about the work God had called him to. He never expressed bitterness toward the church but always hopes and joys for this imperfect bride of Christ.

He was a precious gift to the Mennonite church and one many did not know. He was a true servant of Christ to both deaf and hearing people. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him.

—Sheila S. Yoder, deaf ministries coordinator, College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., and church relations associate, Mennonite Mission Network

Thanks to Congo delegation

We thank all our brothers and sisters from far and near who participated in our ordinations on Sept. 22 in Kinshasa and Oct. 6 in Kalonda (“1,000 Gather in Kinshasa for Ordinations,” November). Our gratitude is directed first of all to the Most High, who allowed these events to take place and go well. We say thank you to our church, Communaute Mennonite au Congo, for having lifted the ban on ordaining women.

Our thanks extend to Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Women, Mennonite Mission Network and Western District Conference for sending representatives to Congo. We also thank all our friends in Canada and the United States for your letters of encouragement, your prayers and your gifts.

The delegation representing you at our ordinations testifies to Psalm 133:1-3, which begins, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”

The presence of this delegation, representing all our Mennonite brothers and sisters across the world, confirmed the unity and love we have in Christ and the continuity of the missionary work in Congo.

We continue to solicit your prayers, that we may be permitted to carry out this great, divine task.—Fabienne Kidinda Ngombe, Sidonie Falanga Swana and Bercy Kalote Mundedi, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo
I’m very glad to write to Mennonite Church USA for the first time. May the peace and grace of our Lord be with you. I thank you and Mennonite Mission Network for sending women pastors to celebrate with us as we ordained women in Congo. Pray for all women pastors.

Don’t forget to educate women and help them provide for their families. Remember the people who are starving in Congo. Continue to send others to work alongside us.—Anastasie Nyange, secretary of Communauté Mennonite au Congo (Mennonite Church of Congo)

Why article about military chaplain?
I’m a little confused by the inclusion of “Seminary Alum Ministers to Soldiers in Afghanistan” (October). The only hint of irony that reminded me I wasn’t reading a Southern Baptist periodical was the term “peace-and-justice theology.” Is there any evidence it has any influence on prospective military chaplains? It’s unclear whether the article is a celebration or a lamentation. I apologize if my rhetoric sounds harsh, but the bottom-line raison d’etre for military chaplains is to reassure any troops having a moral crisis about killing and returning them to duty.—Scott Smith, Greensboro, N.C.

EMS leaders respond
Eastern Mennonite Seminary regularly seeks to affirm core commitments and honor those whose convictions differ. For instance, Mennonite students who affirm adult baptism study with United Methodist students who affirm infant baptism.

Soldiers are often tools of decision-makers operating at levels far above them. This is one reason some Mennonites pair peace commitments with care for traumatized veterans. Where, then, is the line between caring for soldiers after service as opposed to while in service? This is tricky business. Mennonites risk turning military personnel into enemies we’re allowed to hate. The article on Jacobs refrained from doing so by nonjudgmentally telling his story. We also must ever remember the battlefield opponents nations train soldiers to see as enemies.

I hear Scott Smith inviting the latter awareness in future articles, and I concur. I hope we can be a seminary within which those who hold different—even “enemy”—perspectives can learn from each other. I also want EMS to be primarily grounded in Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of Jesus’ way.

—Michael A. King, dean, Eastern Mennonite Seminary

What about Yoder’s family?
I have been distressed and saddened by the lack of thought or care for John Howard Yoder’s family during this time of renewed attention to his personal failings. I was fortunate enough to become friends with one of his children many years ago in college and was welcomed into the extended family as well. I have many fond memories of my hours with the Yoders and have continued to be in contact with them.

I recognize that there are still people who remain wounded and in need of continued healing. But I am unclear as to how this renewed public attention could be helpful. I speak as the survivor of childhood sexual abuse—from which it has taken many years in and out of both therapy and the Mennonite church to achieve full healing. I have only recently found that the final key to my healing was forgiveness of myself—not in the sense that I was “at fault” but that I needed to recognize and forgive the vulnerability of myself as a young girl.

I imagine that self-forgiveness may be a missing piece for many of the women who have not yet achieved healing themselves, and perhaps there is a sense that John Howard was not (Continued on page 54)

**IN THIS ISSUE**

The Christ-child as a living, breathing, in-the-flesh infant is the theme that emerged through three pieces in this issue.

“The Almighty Creator took shape as a mewing, hungry baby born to a Jewish girl in an animal trough in an obscure backwater village in the outskirts of the Roman Empire millennia ago,” says Gordon Houser on page 12. “We tend to mouth this belief—or merely think about it briefly once a year—without considering quite how outlandish, how radical such a belief is.”

In his column (page 8), Isaac Villegas says, “The incarnation of God in Jesus means that God cannot forsake us because God has chosen human life as God’s life.”

The editorial (page 56) notes that it is God’s body lying in the manger and describes the significance for the first Christians that this was a son: “In that time and culture, a man’s ‘essence’ continued to live on in his son, especially a first-born son. ... The all-powerful, all-loving Creator of the universe was embodied in that tiny little boy, the essence of God.”

The majority—21 to be exact—of the articles and columns, are either written by women or women are the subject of the pieces.

These include Marty Lehman’s happy memories as an Amish child when her culture celebrated Christmas but did not observe Advent (page 30).

“Now, as an adult, what I value most about the Christmas season is Advent. ... Advent allows us to slow down.”

On page 31, Paula Killough and Sandy Miller describe the great joy in the Congo when the last of three Mennonite groups changed its policies and ordained women to pastoral ministry. They quote one woman, Charly Kasha, as saying, “Why not me?”—Editor
Western District hosts conversation on church and homosexuality

NEWTON, Kan.—More than 130 people signed up for the Western District Conference (WDC) Reference Council with the theme of “The Church and Homosexuality: A Conversation that can Hold us Together,” held Oct. 26 at Faith Mennonite Church in Newton.

The goal of this symposium, planned and led by the Human Sexuality Discernment Task Force of WDC, was that Christians with profound ethical disagreement engage in respectful conversation and theological reflection.

Participants mentioned repeatedly two insights by the participants. One was “the grace of uncertainty,” offered by Keith Graber Miller, Goshen (Ind.) College professor.

He encouraged participants to remember that we all see through a glass darkly in this life. Therefore it is best to offer our certainties with a good measure of humility.

A second often-noted insight was offered by David Boshart, conference minister for Central Plains Conference.

“Jesus demonstrated special concern for those rejected in society or who were living in a state of alienation,” he said. “So should the church. But Jesus did not practice radical inclusion. He practiced radical hospitality.”

Participants said they were grateful for the open, honest conversation. Many hoped for this kind of conversation in their congregations.

Many noted that there are other sexual matters that also need the church’s attention including pornography, the exploitation of sex, premarital sex, rape and healing ministries for those wounded by sexual violence.—WDC

Resources available for World Fellowship Sunday

BOGOTÁ, Colombia—World Fellowship Sunday takes place on a Sunday close to Jan. 21, the date of the first adult baptism in Switzerland in 1525. On that Sunday Mennonite World Conference (MWC) invites Anabaptist congregations around the world to take the time to pray for each other, worship together in spirit, using shared worship materials, and fellowship together by connecting with other congregations across conferences and countries.

MWC also invites a special offering to be taken for MWC. One way to think about this offering is to invite each member of the congregation to contribute the cost of one lunch in their own community to help support the networks and resources of our global Anabaptist church family.

For more information, go to: www.mwc-cmm.org/article/world-fellowship-sunday.—MWC

Clinton Frame Mennonite celebrates 150 years

On Oct. 13, during the first worship hour, people meet in the sanctuary of Clinton Frame Mennonite Church, near Goshen, Ind., with men sitting on the left and women on the right, to hear stories and sing through the years, celebrating the congregation’s 150th anniversary. Wes Bontreger, former member at Clinton Frame and now pastor at Yellow Creek Mennonite Church, spoke about how Christ is building his church. Terry Diener, lead pastor at Clinton Frame, responded.—Diane Lockwood

First Deaf Mennonite pastor dies at 83

Raymond Eby Rohrer, 83, of Ronks Pa., died Oct. 26 at Landis Homes in Lancaster, Pa. He was the first ordained Deaf pastor in the Mennonite Church.

Born in Smoketown, Pa., he was the son of the late Israel D. and Edna Eby Rohrer and stepson of the late Lydia Weaver Rohrer. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth King Rohrer.

He graduated from Philadelphia School for the Deaf and worked as a linotype printer for 25 years. His spiritual commitment and gifts for ministry were noticed by people around him, and he accepted a call to pastoring.

He was called to First Deaf Mennonite Church in Lancaster in 1973 and pastored there for 22 years. He also served as interim pastor for Orrville (Ohio) Deaf Mennonite Church and Frederick (Md.) Deaf Church of the Brethren.

Prior to becoming a pastor, he taught the deaf Sunday school for many years. He started deaf Youth for Christ, deaf youth camp, Deaf Crusade for Christ and a deaf senior citizen group. He served on the boards for several agencies: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services in Lancaster, Anabaptist Deaf
Ministries in Elkhart, Ind., and American Deaf Missions. He was a longtime member of the Pennsylvania Society for the Advancement of the Deaf.
—Sheila Yoder

Former president of Mennonite Church of Congo dies
ELKHART, Ind.—Robert Sakayimbo Cibulenu, president of Communauté Mennonite au Congo (Mennonite Church of Congo) from 1987-1995, died Nov. 1. Cibulenu was around 80 years old; the date of his birth is uncertain.

“Pastor Cibulenu was an appreciated advisor and confidant of current church President Komuesa and was not afraid to ask hard questions,” said Rod Hollinger-Janzen, executive coordinator of Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission.

Cibulenu was also a farmer-entrepreneur who believed that small businesses could benefit Mennonite families and help the church in Congo move toward greater self-reliance.

During the celebration of Mennonite Church of Congo’s centennial anniversary last year, Cibulenu made his last great contribution to his beloved church. Despite his failing health, he helped research and write the French version of biographies of Congolese Mennonites, 100 Ans de Mission Mennonite en République Démocratique du Congo (100 years of Mennonite Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo). The English title is The Jesus Tribe.—Mennonite Mission Network

Fund-raiser challenges Mark Driscoll to join a CPT delegation
Tyler Tully has organized a fund-raiser that’s trying to address the statements of a well-known evangelical preacher.

Mark Driscoll said on Oct. 22 (http://theresurgence.com/2013/10/22/i-s-god-a-pacifist/) that “the Prince of Peace is not a pacifist” or a “pansy.” He said that “engaging evil in order to protect others is not evil.”

Tully writes that he and others agree but also think the way of Jesus means we engage evil nonviolently, just like Jesus does in the Gospels.

Tully is asking people to invite Driscoll to join a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation in places like Colombia, Iraq, Palestine, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the U.S./Mexico borderlands to experience the bold, raw, nonviolent activism of CPTers and their peacemaking partners.

Tully is asking people to donate to this campaign. Go to http://www.crowdrise.com/sendmarkdriscoll/fundraiser/tylertully. “If [Driscoll] doesn’t think he is up to the challenge,” writes Tully, “we’ll take all monies raised and use them for CPT’s general scholarship fund. This fund empowers CPT delegations to visit peacemakers around the world who are doing the difficult work of transforming violence and oppression.”—Tyler Tully

Goshen College’s 91.1 FM The Globe wins trifecta
GOSHEN, Ind.—On Nov. 9, Goshen College’s radio station, 91.1 FM The Globe (WGCS) was named “Station of the Year” by the Indiana Broadcasters Association (IBA) at the 26th Annual Spectrum Awards in Indianapolis.

As a station within the South Bend (Market Two) radio market, The Globe is judged against the work of all member stations in Market Two (Evansville, Fort Wayne, Lafayette, Muncie, South Bend and Terre Haute), regardless of size or FCC licensure. This is the first time WGCS has been named a finalist in the “Station of the Year” category. The other finalists were both commercial radio stations.

“To be awarded ‘Station of the Year’ by IBA is a phenomenal accomplishment,” said Jason Samuel, WGCS general manager and assistant professor of communication.

Earlier this year, Goshen College was named “Radio School of the Year” by the Indiana Association of School Broadcasting, and The Globe earned the nation’s top honor of “Best College Radio Station in the Nation” from the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System.

“It’s like the triple crown, the trifecta.” Samuel said.—Goshen College

Member of the year
Laura Jensen, a junior from Everest, Kan., at Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., has been named Kansas Member of the Year by the Kansas chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She received the honor Oct. 18 at Fort Hays State University.
—Bethel College

Ten Thousand Villages appoints CEO
LANCASTER, Pa.—Fair trade retailer Ten Thousand Villages has announced the appointment of Pam Raffensberger as Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

Raffensberger, who most recently served as interim CEO and standing Chief Financial Officer, brings a wealth of experience in sustainable product sourcing and financial strategy, having already contributed toward the redesign and growth of the brand’s online channel in addition to spearheading successful launches of two new storefront locations this year.

Raffensberger will lead Ten Thousand Villages’ brick and mortar and online network of more than 80 fair trade retail stores in the United States.—Ten Thousand Villages

—compiled by Gordon Houser

Numerous Spectrum A wards in Indianapolis.
The Jesus Tribe
—Mennonite Mission Network

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The Lord is with you

During Christmas we remember that God has come close, as close to us as a soon-to-be born child is to her mother: God in a womb, God in our flesh.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the angel says to Mary. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son … the Son of God.” The messenger delivers the good news: “The Lord is with you.”

That’s the gospel: The Lord is with you, God is with you. Everything else we say about God and ourselves and the world is commentary on this announcement: The Lord is with you—with us in joy and suffering, with us in our friendships and loneliness.

That God is with us doesn’t mean our lives will be free from loss, from heartache. As Simeon, the man at the temple, tells Mary as she brings her newborn to be circumcised, “a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” Simeon prophesies the death of her child while she holds Jesus in her arms.

The angel’s peace-filled words linger with Mary while she carries the presence of God for the world, even as she ponders Simeon’s ominous warning: the promise of a violent future. God will be with her; even as she will endure the torture of separation from her grown child when the sword pierces Jesus’ side and pierces Mary’s soul, too, as Simeon predicted.

What does it mean for God to be with Mary, and with us? It means that the story of God cannot be separated from the stories of human beings, from Mary’s life and now from our lives. We name God with our lives. We describe God with our words and actions. We share God with what we do and say; because in Jesus God has become flesh; because in Mary we see God’s nearness, God becoming internal to human life; because now God is still with us—incarnate, enfleshed, dwelling within us, making a home in our lives.

During the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we remind each other of the gospel: that God is with us, that God has chosen life with us on earth, that God will not be God without us.

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Mary’s body proclaims the good news that God is not foreign to humanity but inside human life, within our lives, on our side. Her womb reveals the eternal decision of God to be for us, to join our struggle, to share in our suffering and joy, to love the world through us.

The story of Mary and Jesus assures us that nothing will separate us from the love of God. That’s what the doctrine of the atonement is all about: the promise of our “at-one-ment” with God, the union of God and us in Jesus Christ.

“Humanity is at one with the divine in Jesus,” writes theologian Kathryn Tanner in Christ the Key. Incarnation brings us atonement with God, our oneness in Christ through the Holy Spirit, who rests upon us now as the Spirit rested upon Mary.

Christmas invites us into a mystery: the story of God’s birth as a human being, as one of us. Not the divine as separate from human. Not heaven as divorced from earth. Not God as above and us below. But God as transgressing those boundaries in order to be with us forever, an intimate presence, as close to us as flesh and blood.

“The Lord is with you.”

The angel’s words to Mary are also for us, as we share in her bewilderment at the announcement of the mystery of God in the flesh: God within her, God within us. Such news invites us to wonder at the surprising beauty of a world transfigured by God, creation as God’s embrace of our lives. With God’s incarnation, we now live in a world of ordinary miracles.

To believe is to let God astonish you with the Spirit’s presence, to feel your way into God’s mundane wonders and find yourself at the edge of words, where poetry is born, where reason tumbles into faith, where something or someone births hope within us, God’s world reaching through our world, the new life of God all around us—in the eyes of a friend, the face of a stranger, the touch of a loved one, the words of a passerby.

“Christ who is all and in all,” as the apostle Paul wrote.
New perspectives in church history

In the summer of 2001, I. P. Asheervadam, a young historian and rising church leader in the Conference of Mennonite Brethren in India, came to Goshen (Ind.) College to do research for a history of Mennonites in the subcontinent of India. At the time, the Global Mennonite History project—now a five-volume history of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church—was still in its infancy. For Asheervadam, it was one of his first forays into the primary sources. And, initially at least, he was delighted at what he found. Here, carefully preserved in the archives of the Mennonite Church USA and the holdings of the Mennonite Historical Library were records of the early Mennonite church in India, told in reams of onion-skin copies of correspondence, reports in church periodicals, and the published histories and memoirs of several generations of missionaries.

Over the next few years, however, Asheervadam’s perspective began to shift. While it was wonderful to learn that sources related to the Indian Mennonite churches had been preserved, the story those records told was nearly entirely from the perspective of missionaries, administrators and sending congregations. As Asheervadam dug deeper into the project, he realized he was going to need to look at a different set of sources. Thus began his quest to gather records that would enable him to tell the story of the Mennonite churches in India from the perspective not primarily of the missionaries but of the indigenous churches, who had long since assumed control over their institutions and were now nurturing a fourth generation of Indian Mennonites in their baptism preparation classes.

In the years since then, Asheervadam has worked steadily to build up a collection of church-related sources in Hindi, Telugu and several other local languages. Those holdings have now found a permanent home as the Historical Library and Archives at the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College in Shamshabad (Andhra Pradesh). Asheervadam has an expansive view of the collection. The archives not only includes materials from the Mennonite Brethren conference—by far the largest Mennonite group in India—but also records from the (Old) Mennonite Church’s missions in the Dhamtari region, a few items from the General Conference churches and holdings of the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI), the service organization of the Brethren in Christ and various Mennonite churches in India. Under his leadership, students at the MB Centenary Bible College have been writing histories of their local congregations; and the library features a growing shelf of master’s papers written by graduates of the school on theological and historical topics.

Soon after returning from a visit with Asheervadam and other church leaders of the Conference of Mennonite Brethren in India, I began to digitize a collection of correspondence between J. D. Graber, longtime general secretary of the Mennonite Board of Missions, and Pyarelal Joel Malagar, the first India national ordained to the office of bishop in the Mennonite Church in India and the first director of the MCSFI. Although the material does not focus specifically on the Mennonite Brethren story, Asheervadam nonetheless expressed keen interest in these sources, and I was glad to support the growing archival collection in Shamshabad.

As I worked through that material I found myself pulled into the story of P. J. Malagar, following a journey across a full decade of his deepening friendship with Graber while also being struck by the persistent undercurrent of tension—the challenges of cross-cultural communication, the struggle to move beyond patterns of paternalism, and a deep sense that there were things happening on Malagar’s side of the story that were not fully expressed in the official correspondence.

In 1981, Malagar himself wrote a small book called The Mennonite Church in India that included a frank appraisal of the challenges the church faced in the aftermath of the missionary era. But I sensed there are still aspects of the history that have not yet been sufficiently explored. Now, 30 years later, I. P. Asheervadam and other gifted Indian historians, are gathering the materials needed for an even fuller accounting of that story and many others.

Writing church history is not merely record-keeping. Rather, the sifting, sorting and interpreting of the past—always with an eye to God’s transforming presence in the lives of fallible human beings—is an act of theological interpretation that shapes ecclesial identity. As the future of the Mennonite churches in India continues to unfold, their mission and identity will be strengthened by the growing archives in Shamshabad and by the many stories still waiting to be written.
The church often adopts the ‘binary of liberalism’

Church members often reflect the wider society in their conflicts and how they identify themselves. Joshua Brockway, a Church of the Brethren minister and a doctoral student who works on the staff of that denomination, writes about this phenomenon in his blog for Missio Alliance.

In “Scandal of the Brethren: Binary and Church,” he notes how churches often divide themselves into two camps: conservative and progressive. He calls this the “binary of liberalism,” which he says “has framed the way we imagine ourselves as disciples.”

We in Mennonite Church USA must recognize that this isn’t just true of the Church of the Brethren. It is also true of us.

Brockway writes about how this plays out: “We unintentionally (or intentionally, depending on who you talk to) label our congregations and our districts as progressive and conservative. There are even certain places that receive a wink and nod when they are mentioned because of the extent to which they reflect one or the other of the modern camps.”

He goes on to get more specific about how this tends to work by looking at the question of sexuality. He notes that in 2009, Church of the Brethren leaders initiated an extended process of local study and districtwide listening sessions in response to two different responses to the question of sexuality that were presented to the church for discussion at an annual meeting. In 2011, the final report was presented to the church, and a decision was made.

“The report was a case study in the conservative-progressive divide in the church,” he writes. Though not a statistical survey, the report showed that there were generally three camps that emerged from the local conversations.

First, the report said there are two camps at the far ends of the spectrum, one conservative and one progressive.

The surprise came when leaders realized that together “the two groups comprised one-third of the members of the denomination. That means that one-sixth of the denomination is decidedly progressive and another sixth is conservative.”

This means that two-thirds of the denomination are somewhere in the middle of the question about sexuality. “In terms of parliamentary procedure, the deciding majority is in the middle,” Brockway writes.

Further, this means that the two ends of the spectrum—the minority—are driving the conversation. Sound familiar?

This has serious consequences for the church. Brockway writes: “The ideologues on the ends—those most set in their perspective regardless of what is happening in their congregation and in their community—make no room for those in the middle to narrate their perspectives or experiences. The majority of the church is shut down by the constant debates and politics of one-third of the membership duking it out among themselves.”

Brockway says that in his experience, this same breakdown is true for other issues as well: war and peace, mission and evangelism, gender and leadership. This does not mean, however, that the middle is lukewarm.

Brockway warns against adopting a model of making decisions that teaches us “there can be only two options—winner and loser, with us or against us, yes or no.”

This model derives from modern liberalism, he writes, with its emphasis on efficiency and the binary of progressive and conservative, which forms us to expect only two answers.

By following this model, he concludes, “we have not only lost the memory of our past but we have lost the ability to envision the possibilities of faithfulness in our context.”

Perhaps we can learn something from our sister denomination.—Gordon Houser
If it were somehow possible to deport the 11 million undocumented immigrants [now] in the United States, the result would be to deprive countless Catholic and Protestant congregations of a source of their growing spiritual vitality.
—Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

Wasteful appraisal
According to David Posen in his book Is Work Killing You? A Doctor’s Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress, the writing of performance appraisals and reviews is a vexing and unproductive bureaucratic practice. It’s important to give feedback to employees about their work: what’s working, what needs to be improved. However, the yearly or semianual exercise of writing these reports has been shown, in some research, as not only wasteful of time but actually counterproductive in terms of the dialogue between employees and their bosses. Feedback should be timely and continuous, not infrequent, judgmental and tied to compensation, which makes it stressful instead of instructive.—The Marketplace

Different pleasures, empty calories
Hedonic pleasure is gained through good food and drink, while eudaimonic pleasure is gained through serving the common good. Researchers have discovered that the two kinds of pleasure have different biological consequences. Hedonic pleasure leads to a gene expression associated with inflammation that can cause arthritis and heart disease. Eudaimonic pleasure has the opposite effect: it reduces the stress associated with inflammation. Hedonic pleasure may be the emotional equivalent of empty calories: it offers short-term pleasure with long-term ill effects.—Christian Century

Unreasonable expectations
When Thom Rainer pastored a church in St. Petersburg, Fla., he gave his deacons a list of 20 pastoral functions. He asked each deacon to put the minimum number of hours they expected him to devote to each function. When he averaged and tallied the results, it came out to a 114-hour workweek.—Christian Century

Bad news about jobs
Talk about a Catch-22, in his article “The Case of the (Still) Missing Jobs,” Timothy Noah notes that businesses are reluctant to invest their record profits in new workers because they aren’t convinced people can afford to buy new goods and services. Too many of them are unemployed.—Pacific Standard

Union busting
Percentage of working Americans who belonged to unions in 2012: **10**
In 1983: **20**
—Bureau of Labor Statistics

Inefficient food system
According to food activist Francs Moore Lappé, there is enough food in the world to feed everyone. “For every human being on the planet,” says Lappé, “the world produces two pounds of grain per day—roughly 3,000 calories, and that’s without even counting all the beans, potatoes, nuts, fruits and vegetables we eat, too.” The problem is an inefficient food system. Nearly half the food purchased by Americans goes to waste. Meat consumption is also inefficient. “For every man, woman and child alive, 1,700 calories in grain are going to livestock, which at best can return only 400 calories to us in meat.”—Christian Century

Drone strikes in Pakistan have killed thousands
The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, based in London, has made a strenuous effort, using news sources, to count bodies after CIA drone strikes. It estimates that from 2004 through the first half of 2013, 371 drone strikes in Pakistan killed between 2,564 and 3,567 people (the range covers the minimum to the maximum credible reported deaths. Of those, between 411 and 890—12 percent to 35 percent—were civilians. Everyone agrees that the amount of collateral damage has dropped over the past two years. The BIJ estimates that civilian deaths from drone strikes in Pakistan fell to 12 percent of total deaths in 2011 and to less than 3 percent in 2012.—The Atlantic

Church news outlets struggle to keep editorial independence
The closing of several Protestant denominational newspapers, magazines and other news services has played a part in eroding the standards of professional religious journalism, according to members of the Associated Church Press. As denominational news services contend with fiscal challenges that have beset secular media as well, church press officials worry these outlets have lost their editorial independence and are increasingly performing public relations roles for their denominations.—Religion News Service
A meditation on the implications of incarnation

When God became a baby

by Gordon Houser
Our small congregation celebrated the births of two babies this past summer. On a Sunday morning and at other gatherings, you’ll see people taking turns holding these infants, giving the parents a break and themselves the pleasure of holding a baby. But after a while, the baby gets fussy, then cries, perhaps needing to be fed, and back he or she goes to the mother.

Babies are wonderful, innocent, cuddly, so cute. But they also cry and poop and need attention, sometimes in the middle of the night, when parents are trying to get some needed sleep.

Which brings us to Christmas.

When you dig through the consumerist clutter that Christmas has become, you get to a startling belief: at a point in real history, God became a baby.

The Almighty Creator took shape as a mewling, hungry baby born to a Jewish girl in an animal trough in an obscure backwater village in the outskirts of the Roman Empire millennia ago.

We tend to mouth this belief—or merely think about it briefly once a year—without considering quite how outlandish, how radical such a belief is. Or what implications it may have for our own lives.

It’s so radical, in fact, that we tend not to believe it—not in our bones (pun intended).

The belief I’m talking about has a theological name: “incarnation,” which means “in the flesh.” It is one of the central doctrines of Christianity—and one that distinguishes it from other religions.

In the first several centuries of the Christian era, the church was sorting out the implications of
their experience of Jesus having been born, having walked among witnesses, died, then been raised from the dead. In several councils—gatherings of leaders from across the church—participants decided on language that carefully named Jesus as human and divine. The Nicene Creed, for example, says that Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made” and later adds that he “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary.”

In our spirituality we are to follow the Spirit’s leading and manifest the divine life in the arena of worldly existence.

Although we may not often use such language, we tend to take this belief for granted and wonder why those Christians back then fought over the wording. The reason, in a very small nutshell, is that many followers of Jesus either denied Jesus’ divinity (Arians) or his humanity (Gnostics).

Arianism taught that Jesus was made by God the Father and is not “of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed states.

Gnosticism, meanwhile, taught that the material world should be shunned and the spiritual world embraced. “Spiritual” here means nonmaterial.

Many followers of Jesus held to one of these beliefs, and that was a problem. But that was then, you say.

Today, however, these same beliefs exist and are temptations for all of us.

Are some of us not inclined at times to see Jesus as a great teacher and prophet, one who showed compassion to the marginalized, yet not as divine? That’s just going too far.

Are others of us not inclined to question the importance of the things of this world and focus solely on going to heaven when we die? Do not some of us downplay what we may call “social issues” and want to focus on spiritual realities and preaching the Word?

In my book Present Tense: A Mennonite Spirituality (Cascadia, 2011), I write that “‘spiritual’ does not mean noncorporeal or disembodied. In our spirituality we are to follow the Spirit’s leading and manifest the divine life in the arena of worldly existence.”

**God is present in our world.** As Richard Valantasis in his book Centuries of Holiness: Ancient Spirituality Refracted for a Postmodern Age (Continuum, 2005) has written: “everything in the world—every religious tradition, every scientific exploration, every medical breakthrough, every political situation, the environment, outer space—everything in the world has been altered by the presence of God in the physical universe.”

Furthermore, every part of our life—how we eat, bathe, work, play, celebrate or worship—is to be spiritual activity, following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Stephanie Paulsell in her excellent book Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice (Jossey-Bass, 2002) calls us to “honor our bodies and the bodies of others in the midst of everyday life” and to attend to “the sacredness of the body when we bathe and dress, eat and drink, run and rest and love.”

Some of the implications of Christmas, of this belief in God becoming flesh, are not very comfortable. Just as those cuddly babies soon need feeding or having their diapers changed—and often in the middle of the night—so we are bodies that often break down, that experience hunger or thirst, illness, the hundred little things that bug us. Just as we tend to romanticize Christmas—the
tinsel, the gifts, the family together, the old movies on TV—we tend to romanticize our spiritual lives. Following Jesus is more about serving others, sharing the gospel or going to church than about our everyday activities around bathing, dressing, eating, resting or loving. We’d rather not talk about how we spend our money, our sexuality or dying. Such things are private and hidden away. Money, sex and death are taboo subjects.

In this way we tend to follow the ways of our society. Esteemed critic Harold Bloom has called Gnosticism the American religion. More and more of our existence is disembodied. Increasingly we relate to each other via the Internet, where the flesh does not exist. Fewer of us gather together. Instead we stay in our offices or our living rooms.

Mennonites lift up community as a central concern, yet we often fail to practice it. It’s difficult to maintain such a practice in a society where the individual is preeminent.

Paulsell writes that “the integrity of our bodies is a gift from God, but the meaning of our bodies does not stop at the boundaries of our skin. For we belong to one another, and so we are called to attend to the effects of our choices.”

This need for relating is a part of how we are made and even goes to our genes. In his article “The Social Life of Genes” in Pacific Standard (September/October), David Dobbs reports on research showing how our experience affects us even on a cellular level. He interviews a scientist named Steve Cole, who studies social psychology and the genetics of immunology.

Cole discusses stress and notes that “social isolation is the best-established, most robust social or psychological risk factor for disease out there.” He adds, “Nothing can compete.”

Cole also makes a distinction between our environment and our experience. “Your subjective experience carries more power than your objective situation,” he says. Two of us may share the same environment but experience it differently. “You can shape both your environment and yourself by how you act,” he says.

We live in the flesh. In Jesus, God became flesh and “lived among us” (John 1:14). In that environment we experience all kinds of limitations—hunger, thirst, sickness, suffering, death—as well as joys beyond our hopes—a sumptuous feast, good company, loving friends.

We’d rather not talk about how we spend our money, our sexuality or dying. Such things are private and hidden away.

That environment is where and how we live our spiritual lives, following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

According to Cole, “your experiences today will influence the molecular composition of your body for the next two to three months, or, perhaps, for the rest of your life.” He adds, “Plan your day accordingly.”

As we celebrate Christmas, God becoming flesh in a vulnerable baby in that faraway time and town, let us live in the flesh in ways that build communities of grace, joy and peace.

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One of the reasons for this, especially among people under 30, is the feeling that organized religion equals hypocrisy, that what religious people say is not reflected in what they do. In reality, they feel, religious people are exclusive, not inclusive. They are selfish, not generous. They care about themselves, not others. This is a real problem, though it is not a new problem. It is something people who have faith have struggled with since the beginning.

In our Mennonite women meetings we are studying of the book of Amos. At one meeting the topic was true worship. We looked at an uncomfortable passage. Amos, speaking on behalf of God, says: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5:21-23).

This is God’s opinion of religious hypocrisy. It is God’s reaction to folks doing what they think God wants in terms of worship, then going out into the world to live lives that are greedy and selfish, judgmental and hurtful to others and themselves. This was happening in Amos’ day, and it happens in our day as well. This is the hypocrisy some folks in our own culture have experienced. They hear empty words and false promises. So they throw in the towel and become a “none.” Can you blame them?

At our Mennonite Women meeting we considered this passage from Amos and talked about worship. For most of us, worship on a Sunday morning is a meaningful part of our lives. That feels good. But then our leader, Jeni, asked us, “Do you think God is pleased with our worship? Do you think there’s any need for a
What we do on Sunday morning is reflected in our prayers and actions all week long, in our care for one another, in our everyday lives.
prophet like Amos to challenge us, to say to us, You’re being hypocritical, you’re just going through the motions, your worship is all noise to God?” That question startled and disturbed us. We didn’t know what to say.

In his booklet “What Is an Anabaptist Christian?” (Missio Dei, Number 18, Mennonite Mission Network, 2008), Palmer Becker writes that as Anabaptist Christians we have three core values:

1. Jesus is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the center of our lives.
3. Reconciliation is the center of our work.

Our worship includes thanking God for and living into the salvation we’ve received through Jesus Christ.

How do these core values shape our worship?

Let’s start with the first core value: Jesus is the center of our faith. We follow Jesus. He is our Savior. According to Becker, “In the Anabaptist tradition, salvation means being transformed from an old way of life to a life that exemplifies the spirit and actions of Jesus. Salvation … is made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who empowers disciples to follow Jesus in daily life.”

Our worship includes thanking God for and living into the salvation we’ve received through Jesus Christ. We do this by learning about Jesus, by knowing who Jesus is and by following Jesus in our daily lives. What does that entail?

“When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:16-21).

Jesus claimed these words from Isaiah 61 as his mission. If we truly are followers of Jesus, this is our mission as well. It seems that keeping Jesus at the center of our faith leads us directly to the third Anabaptist core value: Reconciliation is the center of our work. The rituals of Sunday morning worship—singing, praying, proclaiming, hearing—are important because they keep our focus on Jesus and teach us about him, but they are worth nothing if this focus is not carried further, if the work of reconciliation—Jesus’ work—does not become the focus of what we do in our daily lives. If we, as followers of Jesus, honor God and do the work of reconciliation, we will stand strong and bring glory to God. “They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.” (Isaiah 61:3b) This is part of true worship.

However, from an Anabaptist perspective, worship is not an individual act. It is something that happens best in community. Yes, we each need to spend time with God on our own. But this is not enough because the very act of coming together is also a means of worship, a way of honoring God. Coming together and becoming a community is what God desires for us and for the world. The
author of Ephesians expresses this well:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. … So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:13, 19-20).

God works to reconcile those who would be enemies or strangers and bring them into one community. Through Jesus, God does this. God reconciles Jews and Gentiles, outsiders and insiders. We honor God by taking this seriously and by coming together as a community, core value #2. There we practice living faithfully and peaceably together, inspired by the teachings of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, fueled by prayer and praise. Then we take our faith out into the world to work at reconciliation, to build community there as well. All these things go together. We cannot take them apart and still be in God’s favor.

When we pledge our allegiance to God, it is not something to take lightly. If we enter into this relationship and then turn our backs on parts of it, we are in for trouble. If we focus only on “me and Jesus” and decline to be part of the work of building a community, or if we dedicate our lives to working for reconciliation but do not look to God for guidance and strength, or if we allow the worshiping community of which we are a part to become riddled with hostility, then we can justifiably be called hypocrites. Our worship is no longer sincere. It is not true. And it is worse than that: It is damaging to us and to the world around us, a world that desperately needs to see something authentic and be invited into the life-giving light of God.

Our worship, if it is true, has an effect on the world. What we do on Sunday morning is reflected in our prayers and actions all week long. It is reflected in our care for one another. It is reflected in our everyday lives. We gather to worship so that we can be scattered to serve. It is all these things together that make us a true and convincing witness to the love of God and to the life we have received in Jesus Christ.

True worship includes but is not limited to the rituals of our Sunday mornings. It includes but is not limited to the caring and sharing that happens in our communities. It includes but is not limited to the ongoing work of reconciliation in our daily lives. True worship is all these things and more, for it expresses our longing and desire to be like Jesus and to honor God with our whole being. This is something the world will see and will know is real.

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Could we learn something about Christian worship from spectator sports?

Shortly after dawn one day, my husband and a friend headed out to a football game. Their anticipation had begun as soon as they had tickets. They packed food and gear and confirmed directions. They drove through towns, over mountains and into the fan-filled parking lot. Finally, the pair inched into the stadium, joining the crowd arrayed in blue and white. Spectators shouted, pumped their fists, leapt to their feet, clapped wildly and occasionally writhed in distress. Collective groans and cheers rang out. This football game was truly a total body experience.
worship

by Rose Breneman Stewart
Much current western worship requires little preparation and calls for little movement. We rouse from sleep, gobble some food, drive to church and slip into a pew. Distracted by myriad concerns from the week, we try to quiet ourselves. What follows is often a sedentary and somewhat solitary service. We sit and listen to prayers, sermons and testimonies.

Could we learn something about Christian worship from spectator sports? What would it mean if believers brought the same level of anticipation, spirit, purpose and fervor into corporate worship? Just like the pair who prepared for the game, we should be expectant in mind and body as we look ahead to worship. As the spectators felt a common purpose in supporting their team, we should unite in worshiping one God and feel spirited and fervent in doing so. Using our bodies and our voices more might help us experience more joy, spirit and unity in our worship.

Using our bodies and our voices more might help us experience more joy, spirit and unity in our worship.

Indeed, modern believers can draw lessons from ancient Israel’s three major pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkoth. All involve preparing food, reciting Scripture and traveling. The ancient Hebrews marched up to Jerusalem singing and praying. We have a record of these prayers of ascent in Psalms 120-134.

Contemporary culture suggests that posture and movement are important for communication. We ask students to sit up, we expect prospective employees to give a firm handshake, we smile when we greet friends and we stand when a dignitary enters the room. In all these, our body not only communicates but also informs our disposition.

Jesus seemed to have underscored the importance of the body when he instituted Communion. Often we stand and process forward toward a common table in quiet meditation. Some of us fold our hands, and others may join in reverent, meditative hymns. In taking the bread and the cup, we reaffirm that we are body, we sustain the body and we nourish our souls by this simple yet profound act.

Movement and vocalization make prayer more meaningful. As a child, I knelt for prayers and felt reverence. We stood to say the Lord’s Prayer aloud every Sunday, and I marveled at the sound. More recently I have been moved by the full-throated unison singing of the Lord’s Prayer as we stand and clasp hands. When we stand, we are ready to receive. When we kneel, we are reminded of our humanity and God’s sovereignty. Once in a Good Friday service, my congregation knelt 12 times at regular intervals during a solemn liturgy, an act that transformed Good Friday for me.

We already use our bodies and voices in worship: call-and-response readings, reciting Psalms or prayers together, standing for singing or for the Gospel reading, giving offerings by walking or dancing to the front, passing the peace or kneeling in prayer. These moving and powerful ways of engaging our whole beings in worship are too infrequent and unimaginative.

Corporate worship is an opportunity to engage together in praise and prayer. It is our chance to affirm our belonging to the new creation, and it is our chance to strengthen ties with the universal assembly of believers. If we approached worship more like a football game, we would enrich those corporate bonds, connect to Christians worldwide and stand on ancient Hebrew ritual. Even the most sedate among us can feel a leap of joy in clapping or shouting an amen.

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How to overcome the hurtful practice of murmuring against others.

Mulling and murmuring

by Ted Lewis
Like a leaky faucet, negative thinking and speaking patterns can also persist over time, distracting us with their constant dripping. This can happen between two people who complain about a third person, but it can also happen inside our own minds, where we may carry on a conversation between our inner selves. I call these two examples murmuring and mulling.

Mulling for me is most obvious when I lie awake in bed, unable to sleep well, reviewing over and over an unresolved situation with another person. The sure sign of this is that I can’t turn off my thinking, no less than I can turn off a dripping faucet. “It’s unfair what he did to me, so how can he think he’s in the right? Yet why did I react that way to him? I wish I would have just walked away. The next time we meet, here’s what I’d like to say.”

Murmuring is a sign of a group’s failure to take responsibility for getting into a tough situation plus failure to take positive responsibility for getting out of it.

There’s nothing wrong with any of these ruminations. Everyone experiences them. But the issue is that an emotional pressure source keeps them going like a broken record. This is different than mulling over a one-time decision: “Hmm. Should I go to that meeting this evening?” That’s not the sort of thing that keeps me up at night. What I’m writing about are thoughts that keep cycling through our heads with no positive outcome.

Murmuring can simply be seen as the social equivalent of mulling. It involves a verbal exchange between people who sustain a chronic drip, drip of negative commentary. Even the etymology (mur-mur) suggests repetition. Sometimes within a church community, certain people will gravitate toward each other because they share an acceptance of airing critical opinions about others without taking positive action.

Both mulling and murmuring, then, have a chronic dimension, a negative-focus dimension and, third, a dimension that blocks constructive resolution. They seem to have a self-perpetuating element that resists closure. This keeps people stuck in the past, unable to move on in life. But thankfully, in light of biblical wisdom and God’s grace, there is a remedy to end the dripping.

The classic biblical example of murmuring is when the Israelites grumbled about their lack of food or water in the wilderness (Numbers 11 to 16). “Did you bring us here to die? We want to go back to Egypt.” Imagine how Moses felt, being the target of discontent. Several complaint stories have these common features: The murmuring crowd dwells on their lack, dwells on the past and dwells on their mistrust of leaders.

At root, murmuring is the logical outcome for people who have little to no trust. This is usually why their diagnosis of a given situation is exaggerated and anxiety-ridden. “We’re going to die,” they cry out. In the narratives, God actually gets perturbed, ready to wipe them out, while Moses plays the cool-headed mediator to avert all-out catastrophe.

Numbers 13 is worth noting for the way one subgroup had “spread discouraging reports” to the larger group. Israelite spies had scoped out...
of the Promised Land, returning with good news and bad news: “The food is large, but so are the warriors.” Fear, then, contagiously infected the community. “Now we will die in battle.” This sort of socially sanctioned fear is hard to reverse.

The worst part of murmuring is when people start blaming others, and that’s what folks did to Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb. They projected their own inner negativity onto their leaders and “talked about stoning” them. One conclusion is that murmuring is a sign of a group’s failure to take responsibility for getting into a tough situation and failure to take positive responsibility for getting out of it.

Let’s return now to mulling. Like the characters in a murmuring narrative, mulling can involve an individual’s pattern of blaming and not taking responsibility. But there is an interesting twist with chronic mulling. Mulling is often marked by an ambiguous mixture of blaming others and blaming oneself. We may find ourselves conflicted as to how we interpret a complex entanglement with another person.

A classic biblical case study for mulling is Saul, Israel’s first king. Saul is portrayed as a conflicted soul, torn by inner fears and jealousies. Within Saul is an inner victim that is never fully healed and an inner offender that never fully accepts personal responsibility. And thus Saul mulls to his own detriment. How ironic that David, a musician-comforter for Saul in his tormented moods, later becomes Saul’s very nemesis. Saul’s obsession to kill David is really about his own conflict with his darker self.

As a mediator of people in dispute, I have worked with clients who say how they lost good sleep for many years due to emotional stress. I, too, have had poor sleep at times. One time I struggled for several months over a situation with another person that set me into a downward spiral of mulling. It involved a mix of self-blaming and blaming the other, yet the line between them was always blurry.

What helped me to rise out of the mire of mulling were three strands that wove together:

- compassion
- vulnerability
- responsibility

Praying became a way for me to halt the dripping thoughts of mulling; through partnership with God, my weakness became an area where I felt new strength.

Having compassion for the other person’s history was a significant starting point for me to break through the broken-record messages in my head. Without tuning into the longer history of his woundedness, my thoughts would dwell on my own short-term woundedness. But by a conscious effort to dwell on his possible past pain, I became more compassionate, and this provided a bridge where there was once a wall.

Second, I began to accept my own vulnerability and powerlessness. “God, I just can’t fix this situation.” Through prayer I was able to release the weight of things. And the more I went into prayer mode, the more I could accept my own vulnerability on two levels: my offending role and my victimized role. Praying became a way for me to halt the dripping thoughts of mulling; through partnership with God, my weakness became an area where I felt new strength.

Finally, I was able to shift from the past to the future, and this allowed me to take personal responsibility. Rather than feeling sorry for myself or projecting my darker issues onto the other per-
son, I was in a better place to choose positive thoughts toward him and work on personal areas of growth. This is where transformation begins. As in the verse, “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good,” change starts in the mind and moves into action.

This trio of compassion, vulnerability and responsibility can also reverse the social dynamics of murmuring. It only takes one or two courageous people in a church subgroup to break through the chronic dripping of negative complaints or rumors. It begins with the open acknowledgment that “we are all in this together.” Everyone contributed to the anxiety and can now contribute to positive change.

Without this foundation of forgiveness, it is hard for us to make progress in our intertwined journeys of healing and formation.

In writing to the Philippians, Paul showed this church how to ward off mulling and murmuring. He first narrated his own story, where he could have easily blamed himself or his enemies for landing him in a Roman prison. Instead, he narrated his joy and acceptance and how God’s purposes can be advanced in his suffering state. His story, of course, was patterned after the “mindset of Christ” that sets the bar for all Christians.

Meanwhile, two church women of Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, are divided from each other. Perhaps one or both are locked into habits of mulling and murmuring. Paul pleads for them to be reconciled, then weaves together several themes that can offset the power of negative thinking and communication: joy, forbearance (or gentleness) and prayer, all of which lead to a transcendent peace. These are the positive antidotes that complement Paul’s admonition in chapter 2: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing.”

**But what if we personally feel wounded** by another person, or what if we are dealing with another person who has a past history of deep woundedness? How do we cope when the default reflexes of protectiveness or guardedness go into high gear? It helps to know that we are not alone in our efforts to practice compassion, vulnerability and responsibility. God, through Jesus, has already mastered these practices, and the result is unconditional forgiveness for all humanity.

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Without this foundation of forgiveness, it is hard for us to make progress in our intertwined journeys of healing and formation. But as God gives us both the gift and the guide for moving forward, we can begin to live as if that forgiveness has already released us and others from the complexities of woundedness and woundings. Jesus bore it all. By inviting the disciples to touch his own post-resurrection wounds, now healed, he is effectively saying, “Your own wounds need not remain touchy or oversensitive.”

With such forgiveness and freedom, we can then be extenders of forgiveness (John 20:21f). We experience our solidarity with others, being the same complex human beings to hurt and to be hurt, but also being Christ-led human beings to practice compassion, vulnerability and responsibility. With Spirit-empowerment we wish blessings upon those who have troubled our minds and open ourselves to be part of that blessing.

Ultimately, reversing the negative drip-drip-drip of mulling or murmuring lets us enter a zone that is freer and lighter and opens the door for newness and transformation in our relationships with others. By arresting the negative momentum, we move forward in our healing and formation journeys, and if that leads to better sleep at night, all the better.
Many Mennonite Church USA congregations are engaging the Scriptures with renewed intentionality. These initiatives are taking a number of forms, including congregation-wide Year of the Bible programs. This energy fits well with our denominational priority of spiritual formation.
The stories of the Bible have the capacity not only to make a one-time impact on our lives but to continue shaping us over a lifetime.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of reading a passage in the Bible that speaks to you at a certain time in a certain way and then you read it again at another time and it has something fresh to say to you. This is a common experience. The Holy Spirit is at work in us, connecting us to the biblical story just when we need it, in just the way that we need it.

I’ve had that experience a lot with the Good Samaritan. As time goes on, Jesus’ story has continued to reverberate with new meanings and new shapings for me. Below I share four lessons the Good Samaritan passage has taught me over the years. These may be like or different from your own learning. They attest the ongoing formation that the living word is accomplishing in the lives of Jesus’ followers.

**Lesson one**
In my younger years, the Good Samaritan spoke to me as a story about good people and bad people. The priest and the Levite were bad people because they didn’t help someone in need. The Samaritan was a good person because he did help someone in need. And through his story, Jesus is encouraging me to be a good person like the Samaritan—one who helps others; one who helps others even when it is inconvenient. That’s a good lesson and a good encouragement.

**Lesson two**
During my seminary years I had the privilege of learning a lot about the Jewish people in Jesus’ day. I learned that the Jews and the Samaritans were neighbors and did not get along. In this context of hostility between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus comes along and tells a story to Jewish people that holds up a Samaritan as a role model. We can imagine his listeners being disconcerted, perhaps offended, and certainly challenged. For Jesus’ first listeners, he told about a bad person who turned out to be a good person, and that’s not the way the world is supposed to work. Jesus intentionally chose the most unacceptable hero for maximum shock value. And he did this to register a sharp social challenge.

That was a new lesson for me. The Samaritan was not just neighborly; he crossed a wide social divide in order to be neighborly. The Good Samaritan is about good people and bad people but also about prejudice, prejudice about how we determine who is good and who is bad.

Jesus’ story encourages me to examine my own prejudices, where I may have labeled individuals or groups as bad and been blind to their goodness. Jesus’ story asks me, “Where are the social divisions in my community, school, church, civic organization, business, retirement community? What can I do to help dismantle those divides? Jesus’ story shows that difficult circumstances can bring out the best in people and lift up the common good that binds us together. How can I work for the common good? That’s a good lesson and a good encouragement.

**Lesson three**
Jesus’ story is about good people and bad people. It’s about prejudices and overcoming social divides. The Good Samaritan is also a story about the hard choices we sometimes make in order to serve others, that life is often about difficult decisions between two good options.

This new lesson came to me when I realized I’ve been hard on the priest and the Levite over the years. Rather than being hopelessly bad people, they were faced with a difficult choice about which way to serve God and others. Their choice wasn’t between good and bad options but between two good options. Let me explain.

When Christians read the New Testament, we are set up to think the worst about Jewish leaders and not without reason. Some of them were enemies of Jesus. So we’re disposed to regard the priest and Levite as selfish and heartless for not stopping to help the injured man.

Yet most people in Jesus’ day respected priests and Levites. The priests led worship at the Temple, and the Levites assisted them. To exercise
those duties they held to a strict code of religious purity. And God was the one who chose the priests and Levites for such important roles.

One thing priests and Levites had to avoid was touching a corpse. This would disqualify them from worship duties. They could be reinstated but only after a lengthy purification process.

The situation on Jericho Road is complicated for a priest or Levite. Jesus says the robbers left their victim half-dead. He may well have looked fully dead. A priest or Levite may have wanted to help. Yet to misjudge and touch a dead body would violate God’s law and disqualify the minister from serving others in worship. He may have thought, Why dishonor God and be irresponsible to others who are counting on me? Perhaps it was a hard choice, a hard choice between two good ways to serve God and others.

We understand hard choices. A youth sponsor is driving her group to catch the plane for Phoenix. It’s a tight schedule to get everyone there, unloaded, checked-in, through security, to the gate. She sees a car broken down and people in distress. Does she stop and help? The wheat is ready for harvest, and the forecast is for hail and it’s Sunday. Is God pleased with the farmer who keeps the combine in the shed, loses his crop and risks impoverishing his family?

Those are hard choices. Maybe the priest and the Levite had a hard choice to make, too.

So the Good Samaritan asked me some new questions: When have I experienced difficult decisions between two good things, even two good things for God? How did I resolve the tension? How did things turn out on the basis of my choice? Would I choose differently the next time? In what areas of life do I struggle with too many choices? Where are my personal hardest choices between good and good?

**Lesson four**

The Good Samaritan encourages me to help others, to overcome prejudices and to be kind to others who face difficult choices.

And here’s one last stop on my journey with the Good Samaritan—for now. This lesson comes from a new insight into Jesus’ brilliance as a storyteller. I noticed that Jesus receives the lawyer’s question (“Who is my neighbor?”) and doesn’t answer it. Instead, Jesus changes his question to a new question, and through this new question Jesus invites the lawyer to a whole new life.

Jesus makes this change subtly. Essentially the lawyer asks, “Which people should be the receivers of my neighborly actions?” He wants to spend his energy wisely. Jesus’ story, however, focuses not on the receiver of neighborliness but on the actors: The priest, the Levite and the Samaritan.

Jesus changes the lawyer’s question from Which people should receive my neighborly actions? to, Which one of these—priest, Levite or Samaritan—acted like a neighbor? The lawyer can only answer Jesus’ new question, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

The lawyer came to Jesus for a scorecard; he leaves with a role model and a challenge.

The lawyer came to Jesus for a scorecard; he leaves with a role model and a challenge. Jesus says to forget about analyzing who’s inside your circle of responsibility. Neighborliness is showing mercy, and mercy has no limits. “Neighbor” is not a service to the worthy so the server can earn maximum points. If somebody’s in need, just help. Don’t focus on inheriting life; focus on sharing life; do that and inheriting life will take care of itself.

Jesus is brilliant. Through the subtle change in his story, he takes away the lawyer’s surveillance camera and hands him a mirror. Jesus also encourages him with an opportunity. As I listen in, Jesus encourages me as well: Don’t worry about categorizing the people you meet. Trust the merciful response; that will lead to life.

**Conclusion**

That’s four forming lessons the Good Samaritan has offered me—and counting, Jesus’ story continues to reverberate with ever-new meanings. And this passage is not unique. The Holy Spirit can use any portion of the Bible to speak fresh words to us, words that spiritually transform us. The Scriptures are indeed wonderful words of life from the God of life.

David A. Stevens is pastor of Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kan.
The gift of Advent

I did not grow up with Advent as part of my Christmas experience. For me as an Amish child, Christmas was nothing like today’s consumer-driven celebration. When I think of my childhood Christmas, I think of fewer chores and more free time to play. I think of snow and that warm feeling you get when you come in out of the cold.

Christmas was a time when the family schedule changed and things slowed down. It was a time when we ate oranges, as they were considered a luxury food in our northern Indiana household. We went to Topeka (Ind.) when Santa Claus came to town and were delighted with the free candy he gave us. We spent time with grandparents and extended family. I have many fond memories of Christmas at my maternal grandparents, with all the adults sitting around the room, eating candy, telling jokes and enjoying the day.

Christmas gifts were not a central part of my childhood Christmas experience. I still have the two blue glasses I got from my paternal grandmother one year—the only Christmas gift I recall ever getting from her. Gifts from our parents were limited. One year, two of my sisters and I got dolls. These were the only dolls we ever received, and I still have mine today. My younger sister got a school bus. She was most unhappy about her bus, so my parents tried to compensate by getting her a smaller, less expensive doll that she named Mabel. But since this was not the kind of doll my sister wanted, Mabel was often neglected and lived a most unhappy life as a doll. Despite the lack of gifts, I loved Christmas. Christmas was about the fun activities, the food we had only at that time of year and the slower pace of life and time with extended family. It was not about gifts.

Now, as an adult, what I value most about the Christmas season is Advent. I value the anticipation, the waiting, the silence and the music. Advent really is about waiting. Each Sunday we light another candle, and then we wait. We go about our week, knowing what is on our schedule but not really knowing what tomorrow will bring. It gives us time to think beyond this week or even this month. Advent gives us time to ponder the work of God in us and through us.

Today’s holiday season is fast paced and hectic. There is shopping, making cookies, decorating the house and the yard, attending parties—and the list goes on. On the news we hear of the importance of Christmas sales and the impact on the economy. It makes us feel guilty if we’re not shopping and “helping grow the economy.”

Advent allows us to slow down. It allows us to sit in silence and hear that still small voice within us. In times of silence we have only ourselves and our thoughts. Silence reminds us of what is bothering us, what needs attention, what needs to be tended to. In her book Illuminated Life, Joan Chittister says that silence is “life’s greatest teacher. It shows us what we have yet to become and how much we lack to become it.”

Advent gives us silence. Mainstream American society emphasizes Christmas Day and the New Year’s celebrations. We’ve bundled all this into the “holiday season.” Naturally we need gifts and proper clothing for all these holiday events. “Over the river and through the woods” we go in planes, trains and automobiles as we try to meet the demands of our pressing holiday schedules.

Advent allows us time to sit back and sing those traditional songs. We sing them every year, and every year they grow richer in their meaning. We take time to ponder the words of each song and sing them with our whole being. We look for new meaning in each verse and word.

Advent gives us time to meditate on Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46-49): “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

Advent. The time of anticipation. A time of waiting.

Then Christmas Day comes, and we light the Christ candle. We celebrate the birth of our Savior.
Celebrate new women pastors in Congo

We want to thank Charlie Malembe and Nancy Myers for their excellent article “1,000 Gather in Kinshasa for Ordinations” (November). They communicate well the excitement and the sense of kairos—God’s timing—that we were privileged to share as part of the delegation from Mennonite Church USA and its agencies.

We are still in awe of the patience, suffering and faith of our Congolese sisters as they waited for this day. We are also amazed at the humility and willingness to share leadership on the part of the male church leaders. Some of them resisted women’s ordinations in the beginning but have now embraced women in leadership and given them their blessing. We met many male pastors who have become convinced that recognizing the pastoral gifts of women is biblical and essential to the church’s vitality.

Male pastors leading the Kinshasa ordination service acknowledged this milestone several times and invited all women to consider the door open to church leadership. Sounds of appreciation and celebration could be heard from women and men alike in response to the pastors’ words.

A collaborative spirit and solidarity among women have already started blurring the boundaries between denominations. Ordained women from the other two Congolese Mennonite denominations were present at the ordinations, as well as Methodist and Presbyterian women.

We are fully convinced that God’s work in Congo will be strengthened now that the spiritual gifts of women are added to those of men. The giftedness of both women and men are needed to realize God’s desire for the way we were created to live on this earth.

One of the most moving moments in our three-week visit to Congo occurred in Tshikapa when the ordained women in our delegation, the two of us and Amanda Rempel, who represented Western District Conference, were invited to join the circle of male pastors in blessing the newly invested pastors. For Sandy, Revelation 7 came to life, with people from diverse tribes and nations gathered around God’s throne in worship. For Paula, it was a realization of Galatians 3:28:

Why not me?—Charly Kasha

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

We were also privileged to have conversations with the female students at Kalonda Bible Institute. Marie-Louise Chermba Yama from Kabuatu entered seminary last year at age 60. Inspired by the visit of Addie Banks, a pastor from New York who was part of a Mennonite Church USA delegation several years ago, Marie-Louise said that Pastor Banks was a woman like her, with skin the color of hers. “I had been told that I could not be a pastor alongside my husband because I am a woman, but I had hope after I met Addie,” Marie-Louise said.

Another student, Thérèse Tudiakuile, married and in her 40s, said, “When I saw that the road had opened for women after the vote last year, I came here to study.” Her husband and her children were willing to make adjustments to free her for study.

Another Kalonda student, Charly Kasha from Nyanga, 22, a single woman, told us, “Before, there was no place for me in leadership, but now the door has opened, and I said, ‘Why not me?’”

With greater access to theological education come new challenges. There is no additional housing for women students at Kalonda—and four more women students have enrolled in this fall term. Although the school tries to provide housing for each student, and their family if they are married, all four of the current second-year students live in the one house available to women. Kalonda Bible Institute is working to raise funds to cover this desperate housing shortage.

At the end of our visit with these first-year seminary students, we gathered under a tree to pray. God filled this space. We ended our time together by standing and holding hands as we sang, “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord” (in French and English) as our benediction to each other. When we opened our eyes, we were surrounded by about 400 kids quietly watching us, as if they had a sense of the holy power of the moment. These children will grow up addressing both women and men as “Reverend Pastor” and knowing that God blesses both women and men with the gifts of wisdom and leadership.
Mennonite Central Committee is responding to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, providing funding for relief, supporting an initial assessment team of an MCC partner organization and working with partners to determine needs for longer-term recovery.

MCC is providing an initial $50,000 to Church World Service (CWS), which is working with the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction Network, to respond with urgent food and nonfood items. Initially this assistance is focusing on Surigao del Norte and Dinagat Island (both in Mindanao) and on Bohol and Samar (both in Visayas), areas where MCC’s partners have access to be able to help.

MCC also is providing funding to Peacebuilders Community, a Mennonite-related agency, to send a 10-member team from Cebu and Mindanao, trained in disaster preparedness, to Leyte Island, an area where thousands of people are believed to have perished.

The team left on Nov. 12, flying to Cebu and then traveling by barge because of transportation challenges. The group will continue by foot if necessary.

Dan and Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi, area directors for MCC’s work in Southeast Asia, say that communication has been sketchy, and team members do not know what they will find.

“They will try to go by foot to some of the areas that are not yet accessible by road because of debris, landslides and bridges out,” the Jantzis say.

From 2009 to 2012, MCC partnered with Peacebuilders Community to train peace and reconciliation teams in disaster preparedness—a project planned in the Philippines because previous conflicts have arisen amid the severe needs after major disasters.

The Philippines Council of Evangelical Churches has connected Peacebuilders Community with local pastors in the area, and the team plans to help mobilize, train and deploy some 50 volunteers from five churches to help in several affected areas. The goal is that working with local pastors and congregations and using the training the team has had in responding to disasters and distributing assistance systematically and peacefully will help to prevent conflict.

“In a situation like this, training in disaster preparedness gives team members the experience to help communities respond in their own areas,” the Jantzis report. “That has more impact than trying to send volunteers from outside the country.”

Two of the team members are psychologists with experience in disaster trauma healing work. They will bring training materials and be prepared to work in this area as the need arises.

Bruce Guenther, MCC director of disaster response, stressed that this is the beginning of MCC’s response, which will help meet immediate needs and support longer-term recovery.

“There are urgent needs to be addressed now,” Guenther says. “At the same time, we want to explore how to support communities’ longer-term efforts to restore livelihoods and recover from this devastation.”

To donate to this effort, please go to mcc.org/typhoon-response.—Marla Pierson Lester for Mennonite Central Committee

Typhoon Haiyan battered the Philippines, including this area of Eastern Samar. MCC is responding through partners. Learn more at mcc.org/typhoon-response.
Churches can lead communities in resolving conflicts by launching a “pilgrimage of justice and peace,” says the World Council of Churches (WCC). This invitation for member churches to journey together in seeking God’s peace was the heart of the closing message of the organization’s 10th annual assembly held in Busan, Republic of South Korea, Oct. 28-Nov. 4. Thirty Mennonites from eight countries were among the more than 3,500 participants. The theme of the assembly was “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.”

James R. Krabill, senior executive for Global Ministries for Mennonite Mission Network, attended the assembly as a representative of Mennonite Church USA. Sarah Thompson of Christian Peacemaker Teams attended as part of an international gathering of young theologians.

Assembly activities included worship services, workshops, Bible studies in various languages, and visits to local churches. There were also two meetings among about 60 representatives of the historic peace churches (Mennonites, Quakers and the Church of the Brethren), Krabill says.

“When we go to a conference of this nature and meet Christians committed to working for God’s shalom—justice and peace—we need to be at the table because we have a theology to share with people who are working at the same issues,” Krabill says.

Formed in 1948, the WCC includes Protestant and Orthodox churches that came together after the horrors of World War II. With a deep desire for churches to be agents of peace, the first founding assembly affirmed that “war is contrary to the will of God.” More recently, the WCC initiated the “Decade to Overcome Violence,” which has explored the framework of “just peace.”

Based in Geneva, Switzerland, the WCC currently has 345 member churches. These churches across the globe make up about 25 percent of the world’s Christian population. Mennonite World Conference is comprised of 100 entities, of which three Mennonite churches from Germany, Holland and the Congo are also members of the WCC. Mennonite Church USA is not a member of the WCC (or the National Council of Churches in the United States) but has sent guest participants to WCC assemblies.

“We want to be in relationship and conversation with this part of the body of Christ, as well as other parts of God’s family,” says André Gingerich Stoner, director of Interchurch Relations for Mennonite Church USA. “Mennonites are one small but important part of the body of Christ. We have gifts to receive and gifts to share as we seek to be faithful witnesses to Jesus. It is important to be at the table together.”

“We cannot be reconciled in the abstract but only to real people who may have values and convictions we often find difficult to stomach,” says Stanley W. Green, executive director of Mennonite Mission Network. “If we are to know them beyond the stereotypes and get the nuances that characterize their beliefs, it is critical that we stay engaged.”

Other statements issued by the WCC during the assembly include a renewed emphasis on mission and evangelism in changing landscapes, support for the rights of indigenous people, and a statement on the way to a just peace.—Wil LaVeist of Mennonite Mission Network
Ohio seeds symbolize growth of Mongolian church

Known Christians in Mongolia grow from five in 1993 to over 50,000 today.

With each cup of corn kernels poured into a glass bowl, audience members witnessed a visual illustration of what their commitment to mission in Mongolia had produced over the years—from just five known Christians in 1993 to more than 50,000 today.

The nongovernmental umbrella organization coordinates the ministries of mission agencies.

Stanley W. Green, Mission Network’s executive director, and John F. Lapp, director for Asia and Middle East, presented Schlabach, the JCS representative for Bayanhongor, with a certificate of appreciation for her career-long service as an administrator.

“We acknowledge that you have made a contribution that inspires all of us to give our lives to the cause of Jesus Christ,” Green said.

In keeping with the evening’s symbolism and celebratory mood, banquet co-hosts Myron Weaver, pastor of Berlin (Ohio) Mennonite Church, and Dean Heisey, church relations associate with Mission Network, performed skits that included their contrasting attires.

Weaver sported a plaid blue shirt and farmer’s overalls, while Heisey donned a tuxedo.

The co-hosts honored the congregations, leadership team members and all the mission workers for their commitment.

“Together, these folks represent 61 years of service in Mongolia,” Weaver said of the mission workers as they stood before the audience and received applause. “Tonight we say thank you.”

Mission Network’s Work in Progress Ensemble led the gathering in a rendition of “Blessed Assurance” to honor the mission workers. Schlabach helped the audience say “Jesus loves me” in Mongolian—“Yeh-soos nahdud herte.”

Weaver concluded the banquet by leading participants in the pouring of kernels of corn into a glass bowl to represent the growth of the church in Mongolia.

More than 20 years ago, Mennonite Board of Missions (a predecessor agency of Mission Network) and Eastern Mennonite Missions began exploring ministry in Mongolia.

Meanwhile, the Ohio churches were seeking ways to work together more closely.

The Mongolia Mission Partnership provides church members with hands-on experience to overseas mission.

In addition to offering financial support and prayer, 51 members of the six remaining supporting Ohio congregations have visited Mongolia to foster relationships and to work on short-term projects.

For more stories and information about the Mongolia Mission Partnership, check out the October issue of Beyond Ourselves.

Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, leads, mobilizes and equips the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world.—Wil LaVeist of Mennonite Mission Network
New building empowers community

Toba-Qom people construct space for community education, Bible study.

After seven years of offering classes in churches, the Instituto Bíblico Toba-Qom (Toba-Qom Bible Institute) in Castelli, Argentina, will soon have their own space.

Supported by Mennonite Mission Network, the institute offers leadership development training and deeper biblical understanding for Toba-Qom people in and around the towns of Castelli and Miraflores, located in the Chaco region of Argentina.

The new building for the group in Castelli will have a room for the institute’s classes and community-led workshops, a radio station and a recording studio for musicians from Toba-Qom churches.

“This project will open new opportunities for our people,” says Francisco Marcial, a musician and student who helped construct the building. “We’ve never had a recording studio or our own FM radio station. This place will be a gathering place for lots of people: making radio programs, recording their music, studying the word of God. It gives our community strength and energy.”

Construction started in 2012 and has proceeded with funds from local donors, from the provincial government, and from Sonnenberg and Pike Mennonite churches in Ohio.

The institute paid community members who had construction experience to build the structure up to the roof. At that point, community volunteers added the roof.

“The idea [to build the classroom] came from conversations with Toba-Qom people about getting an independent space for our vision,” says José Oyanguren, an international partnership associate with Mennonite Mission Network whose family is sent by Bragado Mennonite Church to serve in the region. “Our faith alone inspired us, because we didn’t have anything else.”

For many years, the group of Mennonite Mission Network workers and associates in the Argentine Chaco, called the Mennonite team, sought culturally appropriate and structured ways to respond to a need for leadership development.

In 2007, Oyanguren and Toba-Qom leaders developed the Bible institute that focused on keeping students within their communities, used indigenous teachers and operated mostly from student contributions.

Now that the institute is well established and has 50 students enrolled, the leaders want it to have its own building that could also function as a community space to support education and cultural expression.

The radio station and recording studio included in the new building will give the Toba-Qom people access to communication media that weren’t easily available before.

Oyanguren says the institute also hopes to host in the building an accelerated high-school program for adults aged 18 and older. Already, 80 people have signed up for the program. Since the new building currently has only one classroom, Oyanguren will send a proposal to the government to fund more classrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen to make the space more comfortable.

Continued church and local donations of funds and raw materials move the building closer to completion. Now that the walls and roof are built, the institute will work on construction as funds are available.

Energy from this construction project spurred the formation of the community-led Centro Educativo Qom Sayaten (Qom Knowledge Educational Center) that has the motto “Ca ayaten yañoxot” (Knowledge empowers).

The center will share the space with the institute and will offer cultural strengthening, language preservation and Christian ethical formation.

“I hope [the center] is a blessing for many,” says Marcial. “It gives us power and strength as we move forward.”

—Sara Alvarez of Mennonite Mission Network

From left: Francisco Marcial, son; Ricardo Marcial, father and a preacher with the Iglesia Evangélica Unida (United Evangelical Church); and Sebastián Marcial, grandson. Three generations of the Marcial family help construct a building for the Instituto Bíblico Toba-Qom (Toba-Qom Bible Institute) in Castelli, Argentina.
Andean women pastor each other

Around 50 women receive training on ‘caring for ourselves and others.’

Women from several Andean countries participate in a session of “Caring for ourselves and each other among women,” facilitated by Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Elizabeth Soto Albrecht.

Forty-nine women pastors and leaders met in Cachipay, Colombia, Aug. 7-10 to receive training on the theme of “Caring for ourselves and each other among women”—also known as “Sister Care.”

The event was part of the Anabaptist Women Theologians Movement of Latin America (MTAL) and brought together women of the Andean region: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, along with some from Argentina and the United States. The training was facilitated by Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, moderator of Mennonite Church USA. Sister Care is a ministry of Mennonite Women USA.

Soto Albrecht shared that many leaders give and give but often do not stop and care for themselves. This workshop “became a time in which we pastored each other, walked with each other and modeled what confidentiality and trust looks like in cultures where it is very hard to trust.”

This gathering was a small step of joining forces, to listen to and respect each other in regard to our faith.—Daniela Velásquez

The workshop began with an analysis of the Colombian context and its implications for the Andean region, and participants shared about the toll that 60 years of war has had on their country, their community and their families. Time was given each day for personal reflection and profound internal work and for sharing in community and supporting each other in sorrows and joys.

Many women were able to journey toward healing in this community. “God was there very much, present and tangible through the love of these sisters and the openness of our spirits,” says Soto Albrecht. “It was a privilege to be able to see and hear from sisters, with tears and profound conviction, that they were able to claim profound healing in those areas of their lives.”

This diverse group, with differing theological positions, was also able to dialogue about controversial issues the church faces.

Daniela Velásquez of Peru, one of the youngest participants at the event, was greatly impacted by the way they were able to learn in the midst of these differences. “We were able to hear the opinions and ideas of each person and learn to live with these views that differ from our own in an atmosphere of respect and without imposing on others,” says Velásquez. “In this way this gathering was a small step of joining forces, to listen to and respect each other in regard to our faith.”

Decisions were also made regarding the future of the Anabaptist women theologians’ movement in this region. A new facilitation team for the Andean Zone was elected, with a new model of coordination between two women, Martha Lucía Gómez, a pastor, and Zaraí Gonzalía, the executive administrator of the Seminario Bíblico Menonita de Colombia, the Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Colombia. They will be accompanied for the first year by outgoing coordinator Alix Lozano.—Kristina Toews of Mennonite World Conference

Martha Gomez (left) and Zarai Gonzalía were elected to be the new facilitation team for the Andean Zone of the Anabaptist Women Theologians Movement of Latin America.
Sister Care shared globally

Seminars for women move beyond United States to Asia, Latin America, Africa.

What began as a seminar for women in the United States has now been shared in Asia and Latin America, with additional invitations received from Kenya and Trinidad.

Sister Care is a Mennonite Women USA-sponsored program that equips women to continue their own healing journey, to identify God’s grace in their lives and to walk with others in compassionate ways.

The Sister Care manual was developed by Carolyn Holderrread Heggen, psychotherapist and teacher, and Rhoda Keener and Ruth Lapp Guengerich, Mennonite Women USA co-directors. The manual is available in English and Spanish. About 2,500 women have attended the workshops; 500 from outside the United States.

In the past year, the Sister Care seminar has been shared in the following places: the All-India Mennonite Women conference in Orissa, India; Tansen and Kathmandu, Nepal; Guatemala City; Chihuahua, Mexico; and Bogotá, Colombia. A workshop was scheduled for Santa Cruz, Bolivia, in November.

Olga Piedrasanta of Guatemala reflects: “One of the major problems for women in the churches is their life context, which may include domestic violence, poverty and urban violence—which affects family, church and jobs. Women need to help one another become stronger rather than to be mired in these difficulties.”

Ofelia Garcia of Mexico and Piedrasanta received training in Guatemala to lead the workshop in Chihuahua, with women from various conferences and cultures, including Hispanic, Germanic and Tarahumara indigenous.

This workshop in Chihuahua took place five months after the assassination of pastor Josefina (Chepina) Rempening Diaz in Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, and helped heal the pain. The sessions about loss touched the women deeply. They felt both the loss of a pastor and the loss of their sense of security. “Since Chepina’s death I had not cried and talked like today. Thank you. It is very healing,” commented one participant.

Following the workshops in Guatemala and Colombia, participants from 12 countries took 1,500 manuals home to their congregations and communities and are leading workshops. Phyllis Groff, Eastern Mennonite Missions worker in Guatemala, is translating the manual into Kekchi.—Mennonite Women USA

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The two-handed tea

Stories at Christian-Muslim peacemaking banquet

From left: Grace Shenk serves tea to Angelica Prins, Carol Bornman, Jonathan Bornman, Andres Prins and David Shenk during a reenactment of an African tea ceremony.

Eastern Mennonite Missions’ 2013 mission vision banquet, titled “The Two-Handed Tea,” featured stories of peacemaking among Muslims from EMM’s Christian-Muslim Relations Team. Some 500 people listened to team members Jonathan Bornman, Andres Prins and David Shenk, along with Shenk’s wife, Grace, tell stories at the Lancaster (Pa.) County Convention Center on Nov. 1. Andres Prins talked about visiting a local mosque with Brian Miller in Lancaster, Pa., where they met with the leader of the mosque and shared a time of warm hospitality together.

“I explained we were there as disciples of Jesus and as Mennonites,” Prins said. “We are commanded to work for peace and mutual understanding and to bless those around us.”

Jonathan Bornman shared about his April trip to the Congo. In Lubumbashi, where there had been almost no previous interaction between Christian and Muslim leaders, he went with local Mennonite pastors to visit Muslim leaders in the community.

Grace Shenk started the evening by introducing a reenactment of an African tea ceremony on the convention center stage. While Doris Dellinger narrated, Grace and David Shenk, in native African attire, acted in the roles of an African couple who were greeting guests to their home. Andres and Angelica Prins and Jonathan and Carol Bornman portrayed guests who had come to call on the Shenks.

“Sharing tea and being hospitable are very important parts of African culture,” Shenk. “Young women or girls in the family provide a basin for guests to wash their hands, and tea is often served with a treat. So a two-handed tea means you may have a cup of tea in one hand and a cookie in the other.”—Linda Moffett of Eastern Mennonite Missions

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Syrian villages welcome return of aid

Mennonite Central Committee appeals to U.N. on behalf of 3,000 Syrian families.

After opposition forces overtook the Syrian villages of Haffar and Sadad on Oct. 28, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) appealed to the United Nations to make it possible for humanitarian aid to reach the estimated 3,000 Syrian families endangered there.

A week later, access has been restored, report Doug and Naomi Enns, MCC representatives based in Beirut, Lebanon, and working in Lebanon and Syria.

Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Sadad and Haffar had been relatively safe places, where many Syrians sought refuge after being displaced by violence in other parts of the country. After the takeover, civilians were killed and injured as opposition forces used the villages as a base to fight government forces. Houses and cars were confiscated and movement of supplies and people in and out of the area severely restricted.

“I could hear children cry in fear of the situation,” says Riad Jarjour, president of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD), describing an Oct. 22 phone call with his brother in Haffar. “I could hear the faint sounds of the barrage of mortars and intense fighting raging outside.

MCC works through Syrian partner organizations to provide humanitarian assistance throughout Syria based on need. In these historically Christian villages, where Muslims and Christians live peacefully together, MCC provides food and educational assistance.

Jarjour and Bishop Selwanos of the Syrian Orthodox Church in nearby Homs, another MCC partner, appealed to MCC to advocate with the U.N. to negotiate safe passage for the Red Crescent to reach the wounded and safe evacuation of affected families in Haffar and Sadad.

Doug Hostetter, director of the MCC United Nations Office, took their message to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on Oct 23. It was welcomed, Hostetter says, and shared with OCHA in the Middle East. MCC advocates in Ottawa and Washington also talked to government officials about the situation.

MCC’s request was in line with an Oct. 2 U.N. Security Council Presidential Statement, Hostetter says, which includes this sentence: “The Security Council calls on all parties to respect the U.N. Guiding principles of humanitarian emergency assistance and stresses the importance of such assistance being delivered on the basis of need, devoid of any political prejudices and aims.”

On Oct. 28, Jarjour and the Ennses thanked all those who had prayed and invited continued prayers for Haffar and Sadad and for partners in the area.—Linda Espenshade of Mennonite Central Committee
MDS dedicates homes on Sandy anniversary

Mennonite Disaster Service volunteers repaired over 35 homes, rebuilt two.

It’s been a long year of wondering and then waiting, but two Crisfield, Md., residents are moving back home. A year after Hurricane Sandy pummeled the East Coast, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) volunteers celebrated with Charlie Adams and Ruth Fountain as they dedicated homes for both Crisfield residents.

MDS volunteers have been working in Crisfield since November 2012, first cleaning up and now rebuilding; bringing storm survivors home.

When Hurricane Sandy hit, a five-foot storm surge inundated Crisfield and left virtually the entire town underwater. Working together with Lutheran Partners in Disaster Response, The American Red Cross, the Diocese of Easton Episcopal Churches and the Somerset County Long-Term Recovery Committee, MDS volunteers have repaired over 35 homes and rebuilt two new homes, have two homes underway and have several additional new homes planned.

MDS volunteers at projects in New York are also repairing and rebuilding homes that were damaged by Hurricane Sandy.—Mennonite Disaster Service
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Empowering women in Afghanistan

MEDA project sees thousands of women raise vegetables and increase earnings.

A public forum on “Empowering Women in Afghanistan” was held in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 22, jointly sponsored by the Anabaptist Peace Center of Washington and Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). The event took place in the Howard Zinn room at Busboys and Poets, a restaurant chain in Washington that promotes world peace and provides the locale for various justice events in the Washington community.

Suraja Sadeed, a graduate of Eastern Mennonite University Center for Peacebuilding, Harrisonburg, Va., and now a doctoral student at George Mason University, spoke of her efforts in providing humanitarian aid, medical care, education and hope against seemingly insurmountable odds in some of the most inhospitable conditions imaginable. Her work has directly benefited nearly 2 million Afghan children and their families. She has been honored for her efforts at the highest levels of government in both the United States and Afghanistan. She was recognized by President George Bush and First Lady Laura Bush at the White House in 2006 and has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, which itself resulted in a $1 million grant from Oprah for the work in Afghanistan.

As a person born and raised in Afghanistan herself, she knows the importance of working through the men in a male-dominated society. Help the Afghan Children has trained teachers in Afghanistan and has helped Afghan women understand their rights to be educated in an extremely complex and difficult social situation. There are still at least 10 million land mines left in the country from the wars of the past, dating back at least 30 years. Students are taught how to recognize and disarm them.

Helen Loftin, vice president of Economic Opportunities for youth and women at MEDA, has directly managed several women’s economic development programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan. She was based in Pakistan for two and a half years. Since 2010, Loftin has led MEDA’s women’s economic empowerment work in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Haiti and Libya.

Loftin also underscored the necessity of “working through men to help both men and women” in Afghanistan. Women in rural areas of Afghanistan live their lives behind mud walls surrounding their homes, but there are ways of working with them and for them by gaining the acceptance of the all-male village councils. MEDA’s Through the Garden Gate project saw thousands of women raise vegetables and increase their earnings from zero to $350 on average, per year, making a huge difference in family income. Some women earn thousands per year as a result of the project.

Both speakers emphasized that meaningful change will not come quickly in Afghanistan, where 78 percent of people cannot read or write. There are huge disparities between rural and urban populations within the country. One-third of young Afghan men are without jobs, and per capita annual income is about $900.—Mennonite Economic Development Associates

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Hess appears on *Jeopardy!*

Melanie Hess places second on the show that aired Oct. 25.

When Melanie Hess took the online test to qualify for *Jeopardy!*, she had no idea that months later she would be a contestant on the show in Los Angeles.

“My then-fiancé, now husband, Travis, encouraged me to take the online test,” she says. “I figured I’d done OK but not as good as others, so I kind of forgot about it.”

Hess was shocked when she received a call in July from a *Jeopardy!* producer inviting her be a contestant. The show with Hess as a contestant aired on Oct. 25. Her taping date was Sept. 11—just 10 days before her wedding.

Prior to the call from the producer, she received an email in May inviting her to audition in New York City. She took the train and spent a few hours in the Beacon Hotel conference room, where she played a practice round and completed a paper test of 50 questions.

Hess placed second and went home with $2,000. The Final *Jeopardy!* question was in the European Literature category: “This 1922 novel’s first chapter is titled ‘The Son of Brahman.’” That show’s winner was the only one with the correct answer: Siddhartha.

Hess is “kicking herself” about that question.

“I’ve heard of Siddartha, and I knew it was by Hermann Hesse, so it makes sense that it falls in the category of European Literature,” she says. “But there was no way I was going to think of it.”

Hess, who earned $10,200 at the time of the final question, wagered $4,900 on the Siddartha question.

She watched the show on Oct. 25 at her home with Travis, and some friends stopped by. “It was fun to watch with them, as I was able to say, ‘Oh! Here’s where this happened’ and, ‘Oooh, I get this right.’” she says.

“The key to *Jeopardy!* is absolutely the buzzer,” she says. “You can’t ring in until Alex finishes reading the question and these little lights go on. If you ring in too soon, you’re locked out for quarter-second, which gives everyone an advantage over you. Finding a buzzer rhythm that works is crucial, because you have to get the timing exactly right. I’d get the answer in my head before he was done and then position my hand to ring it as fast and furiously as possible, but I never really found a good way to know when to ring in.”

Hess worked for Mennonite Mission Network as a marketing writer from 2009 to last March. She now works as a technical writer for Parsons Brinckerhoff. Hess is a member of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church in Lancaster, Pa. She and Travis live in Lancaster.—Anna Groff
White spiritual and racial formation: three conversions

Miller Shearer: Institutional pattern is crisis, contrition and relapse.

I’ve come to believe three conversions are necessary for white people in the Christian community. A deeper understanding of these conversions can support our common reflection during the kairos moment now calling us to new action in the face of racial injustice.

These reflections grow from my immersion in academic, activist and spiritual formation disciplines over the course of the last two decades. I am grateful for the gifts of wisdom and insight from mentors, both white people and people of color, who have taught and challenged me. I write also from my experience as a highly privileged white male academic, a Mennonite by choice and family tradition, and a child of God.

While there are essential conversations that have long been taking place in the church about spiritual and racial formation among communities of color, I offer these comments specifically to other white people. I suggest that our collective path of spiritual formation involves three distinct but interconnected conversions.

Racism is not dead: The first conversion asks us to recognize that racism is not dead. Although we need to continue to examine our past engagement with Native American/indigenous peoples, African Americans, Latino/as, and members of the Asian community, we cannot afford to suggest that racism is no longer with us. As made plain through the experience of immigrants in Arizona and the summer trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, overt racism continues to oppress people of color. Ongoing racial disparities in access to education, health care, employment and housing make evident that racism is present, recurrent and systematically maintained. To unequivocally affirm testimonies about racism from our sisters and brothers in the church is a spiritual and emotional struggle for many of us white people. Our privilege often blinds us to the daily experience confronted by people of color.

Back in 1955, when the murder of Emmett Till called for prophetic response, white Mennonites were ill prepared to take action. Although leaders in the 1930s and 1940s—such as James and Rowena Lark and David Castillo—had broadened church membership outside Germanic/Swiss/Russian communities, many white Mennonites viewed Till’s murder as an anomaly, a southern problem and an issue separate from the church’s mission.

Despite the courageous efforts of those who called the church to pass a statement on race relations that same year (“The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations,” 1955, Guy F. Hershberger, et. al.), the bulk of the white Mennonite church and the broader Christian community had not yet gone through this first conversion.

In the early 1990s, I remember administrators who censored an article I had written describing acts of racism in the Mennonite community. They refused to release it because they felt it would be too controversial. That we can now have frank and open conversations about racism in the church is a significant step forward that should be both acknowledged and celebrated. At the same time, I do not know if we have collectively moved through this first conversion a half century later. But I am hopeful that fewer of us in the white community deny the contemporary reality of racism.

Power and privilege: The second conversion calls us to recognize that the purpose of race is to provide people with power and privilege. Rather than a social force that only harms people of color, racism ensures that white people receive access to the benefits and opportunities that white skin affords, what Peggy McIntosh has described as an “invisible backpack” in her classic essay (“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack,” 1989). These privileges include freedom from harassment, opportunity for enrichment, access to employment, and support for cultural norms regarding time, beauty and worship style—the latter of particular importance to the Mennonite community as we seek to embody missional values. At the same time, gender, class, sexual orientation and physical ability modify white privilege in complex and ever changing ways.

Although prophetic leaders in the church, such as Vincent and Rosemarie Harding, Lynford Hershey, John Powell, Grace Torres and others, identified white privilege and power in the church during the 1960s and early 1970s, their witness frequently fell on deaf ears. It is no accident that many of them left the church, having been alienated and ostracized. Given the willingness of some contemporary white church leaders to heed voices of people of color and take seriously the reality of white privilege, I am again hopeful that this second conversion may gain wider purchase.
**Shapes us who are white:** The third conversion asks us to come to terms with the profound and unacknowledged ways that white power and privilege shape us who are white. In terms of our spiritual formation, it is difficult to learn to be dependent on God when the systems and institutions within this country affirm, encourage and sustain us. In the process, our spirituality often becomes weakened.

In those times and places where white privilege reigns supreme, we fail to exercise our dependence on God’s grace. Likewise, the unacknowledged receipt of white power and privilege can create a sense of entitlement, hamper authentic interracial relationships and warp our self-assessment. White privilege also erodes the Anabaptist value of Gelässenheit—yieldedness to God’s will. It is difficult to learn to yield to the leading of the Spirit and to practice authentic humility when we are conditioned to expect power and privilege.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the white church, like much of the broader white society, withdrew from the intense conversations about race that had opened up in the 1960s. Although some, such as Hubert Brown, Joy Lovett, Hubert Swartzentruber and others, continued to address the church’s racial identity, discussions about white power and privilege seldom surfaced in the church’s official publications. For the better part of the last 20 years, antiracist activists in the church have initiated dialogue about the effects of white power and privilege. I can only hope this third conversion, invariably the most spiritually and emotionally demanding of the three I outline, will gain wider purchase in the coming months and years.

These three conversions are intimately connected to crises in the church. As is the case with white people in general, we have a tendency to focus on our racial identity—our “whiteness”—only in times of crisis (for a more detailed examination of this idea, see my essay “Conflicting Identities: White Racial Formation Among Mennonites, 1960-1985,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 19 no. 3 [2012]: 268-284"). This linkage between crisis and identity suggests that we who are white have an additional challenge to pay attention to racial issues in general and to our racial identity in particular when people of color around us are not forcing us to do so.

**Patterns in crises:** In my historical work, I have noted a pattern of crisis, contrition and relapse that has recurred in numerous church agencies, from Mennonite Central Committee to Mennonite Mission Network and in most of our educational institutions of higher learning. An unjust job termination, biased personnel policy, public epithet or other overt act of racism triggers a racial crisis. Institutional leaders turn their attention to it and, in most cases after a period of denial and obfuscation, express contrition. In some instances changes at the level of personnel or policy may occur, but the status quo then reappears and, with time, relapse takes place.

Such a pattern has been at least partially arrested in some of our institutions through a costly, faithful process of collective tripartite conversion, as described above. Movement through such a process is often built on the recognition, as our sisters and brothers in the conflict transformation movement remind us, that conflict and crisis are not only normal but, in the case of antiracism work, welcome.

Of course, those committed to antiracism and antioppression work need to bring much wisdom and integrity to crisis invitation. Otherwise, we can become cynical and manipulative, in the process replicating the very misuse of power that we claim to stand against. I find myself drawn again and again to prayer as a means of staying centered in the midst of racially induced crises.

The language of conversion carries its own history of coercion within our religious community. By invoking it, I do not mean to support emotionally abusive altar calls. An orientation toward invitation, reflection and conviction that comes to us from the practice of spiritual direction represent my use of conversion as an about face, a new identity and a commitment to take new action.

As we move forward on our spiritual journeys, both individually and collectively, we in the white community will be better positioned to practice authentic humility, grounded action and prophetic witness to ongoing racial injustice and the many other forms of oppression present in our world. Movement through these opportunities for spiritual renewal and conviction will result in a more attractive community to those seeking a message of hope and an answer to the twisted policies that have resulted in a country that does not welcome immigrants and allows the murderer of a young black boy to go free.

**Ideas for action:**

- Join efforts in your community to organize to overturn Stand Your Ground laws and sentencing guidelines that have disproportionate influence on people of color. For action resources, see the materials developed by Showing up for Racial Justice: www.showingupforracialjustice.org/archives/1765.
• Use the resources of the Mennonite Central Committee Washington Office to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform and to support the End Racial Profiling Act of 2013 (S. 1038/HR. 2581). The act seeks to prohibit racial profiling by law enforcement agencies and officials on federal, state, local and indigenous levels. This bill also proposes a federal law enforcement training on racial profiling issues, a data collection/investigation on racial profiling issued by the Attorney General (which is to be made available to the public), as well as grants to fund the data collection and other antiracial profiling measures. See: http://washington.mcc.org.

• Sponsor an antiracism discussion group in your congregation, using resources provided by the Racial Healing Task Group of Mennonite Church USA. For more information, contact Joanna Shenk: joannas@mennoniteusa.org.

• Contribute to groups such as Roots of Justice, an anti-oppression training organization that sponsors Damascus Road and Fire and Clay trainings: http://rootsofjusticetraining.org. — At the University of Montana, Tobin Miller Shearer is an associate professor in the history department and director of African-American studies.
Students explore nonviolent peacemaking

Six Bluffton University students attend MCC U.N. Student Seminar.

Interested in exploring nonviolent peacekeeping methods, six Bluffton (Ohio) University students attended the Mennonite Central Committee United Nations Student Seminar in New York City Oct. 23-25.

Held at the MCC U.N. office across the street from U.N. headquarters, this year’s conference focused on U.N. peacekeeping work—done with armed soldiers as peacekeepers—and on unarmed/nonviolent efforts such as Nonviolent Peaceforce and Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Cincin Akanya, a Bluffton senior from Nigeria, noted her prior understanding of peacekeeping as always solving violence with violence. “I’ve been enlightened,” she says, “because MCC focuses on holistic healing and not just individual healing.”

Seeing a war on education in northern Nigeria, Akanya wondered if there was another way to resolve the conflict. “We just want peace now, and that’s been through war, but it is not working,” she says. After attending the seminar, Akanya suggested informing her generation about nonviolent actions, like mediation, as a step in the right direction.

Katie Conrad, a junior from New Carlisle, Ohio, and Southside Mennonite Church in Springfield, Ohio, has been familiar with MCC. During the seminar, she was exposed to the option of a nonviolent, armed military overseen by the UN.

Conrad considered peacekeeping on two different levels: person-to-person through grassroots organizations and systematically through international law and policies. “Both are effective methods, and both are needed to resolve conflicts,” she says. While the U.N. sends armed forces to help resolve conflict, Akanya adds that she “loved that MCC took the extra step to help those involved in traumatic events with therapeutic sessions after conflicts were resolved.”

Both agreed that MCC often gives voice to those who do not have a voice in conflict situations.

Emily Kolezynski, a junior from Strongsville, Ohio; Nnenna Onwukeme, a senior from Nigeria; Luz Varela, a junior from Goshen, Ind.; and Kiera Fenwick, a junior from St. Marys, Ohio, also attended the conference under the supervision of Paul Neufeld Weaver, an associate professor of education at Bluffton. Bluffton students have attended the conference for 18 years. Several campus organizations helped fund this year’s group, including Student Senate, Women’s Council and the Pi Delta society.—Alexandria Ferland of Bluffton University

ELLIS STUTZMAN tells about his extraordinary experiences when in 1995 he traveled to Kenya with his wife and three young children for a short term voluntary service assignment to manage the Mennonite Guest House in Nairobi, East Africa.

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Easy to Read

Cincin Akanya (in red), a Bluffton (Ohio) University senior from Nigeria, speaks to a group including Bluffton junior Nnenna Onwukeme (in blue), also from Nigeria, at the MCC UN Student Seminar.
**CALENDAR**

April 3-4, 2014: Fairlawn Haven Auxiliary Open House & Auction, Founder’s Hall, Archbold, Ohio.

**WORKERS**

Eberly, Matthew, was installed as lead pastor at Shiloh Mennonite Church, Reading, Pa., on Oct. 16.

Hess, Jay, was licensed as associate pastor at Byerland Mennonite Church, Willow Street, Pa., on Oct. 20.

Kolb, Bradley, was licensed as youth pastor at Grace Mennonite Fellowship, Harrisonburg, Va., on Sept. 15.

Satvedi, Valentina, was ordained at East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pa., and her credentials transferred from Pacific SW Conference of the Church of the Brethren Church on Sept. 11.

Sharp, Don, was installed as intentional interim pastor at Rossmere Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pa., on Oct. 20.

**OBITUARIES**

Belousek, Lydia Clare Snyder, Lima, Ohio, was stillborn on Sept. 3. Parents: Darrin W. and Paula J. Snyder Belousek. Funeral: Sept. 7 at Salem Mennonite Church, Elida, Ohio.


For the Record is available to members of Mennonite Church USA. Births and marriages appear online at www.themennonite.org. Obituaries are also published in The Mennonite. Contact Rebecca Helmuth at 800-790-2498 for expanded memorial and photo insertion options. To submit information, log on to www.themennonite.org and use the “For the Record” button for online forms. You may also submit information by email, fax or mail: Editor@TheMennonite.org; fax 316-283-0454; 3145 Benham Ave., Suite 4, Elkhart, IN 46517.


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RESOURCES

Pacifists in Chains: The Persecution of Hutterites During the Great War by Duane C.S. Stoltzfus (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, $29.95) documents the disturbing history of four pacifists imprisoned for their refusal to serve during World War I. Stoltzfus, who teaches at Goshen (Ind.) College, explores the tension between a country preparing to enter a world war and a people whose history of martyrdom for their pacifist beliefs goes back to their 16th-century beginnings. Stoltzfus’ article “Standing in Chains at Alcatraz,” based on this research, appeared in our August 2012 issue.

A Family Affair by Ruth Naylor (Finishing Line Press, 2013, $14 plus $2.49 for shipping) is a collection of poems whose subject matter is Naylor’s own family relationships, though the poems express a universal experience.

Christian Philosophy: A Systematic and Narrative Introduction by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen (Baker Academic, 2013, $22.99) is an introductory textbook that offers a comprehensive narrative of philosophical thought from a distinctly Christian perspective.

Rhythms of Poverty: Reconsidering Our Affluent Approach to the Poor by Murray Nickel (2013) outlines stages of compassion we commonly move through and addresses the disappointment we feel when projects don’t go as planned. Nickel’s experiences led him to a healthier conception of compassion, which he summarizes in three foundational virtues: justice, mercy and humility. Order from nickelmurray@gmail.com.

The Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale by Anton Wessels (Eerdmans, 2013, $28) argues that Jews, Christians and Muslims must read their Scriptures together and not against each other.

The Ox-Herder and the Good Shepherd: Finding Christ on the Buddha’s Path by Addison Hodges Hart (Eerdmans, 2013, $15) shows how a work from a 12th-century Chinese Zen master known as the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures trace a universally recognizable path of contemplative spirituality. Hart explores how this ancient Buddhist parable can enrich and illumine the Christian way.

Walking Through Fire: Iraqis’ Struggle for Justice and Reconciliation by Peggy Gish (Cascade Books, 2013, $28) draws on stories of Iraqis to show what war and the U.S. government’s antiterrorism policies have meant. Gish conveys the efforts of Iraqis speaking out against injustices and building movements of nonviolence and reconciliation.
Sunnyslope Mennonite Church, a well-established urban congregation in Phoenix, Ariz., has an immediate opening for a lead pastor. For information, contact Dick Davis at 909-243-5003, email dickdavis@pacificsouthwest.org.

James Street Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pa., seeks a half-time pastor. The position gives leadership to the congregation’s holistic Christian witness, including hospitality, local outreach, global missions, and peace and justice ministries. Responsibilities also include joining the pastoral team in teaching, etc. Contact Pastor Stan at sshantz@jsmchurch.org or visit www.jsmchurch.org for the job description.

Erisman Mennonite Church of Manheim, Pa., a semirural congregation of 175 members, is seeking a lead pastor. This person will serve with a leadership team and have preaching and administrative responsibilities. An interest in youth and young adult ministries is desirable. Submit MLI and cover letter to Bishop Carl Horning at chorning@aol.com.

Country living at its best near Shipshewana, Ind. 17 acres available in Amish Country. 12 acres cleared ready to build and plant, 5 acres wooded. Spring fed creek runs through property. Contact: myronyoder@aol.com.

Pigeon River Mennonite Church, Pigeon, Mich., is seeking a full-time senior pastor to lead our congregation (average weekly attendance of 210) as we seek to maintain our strong faith heritage while reaching out to the surrounding community. Please submit a résumé or requests for information to Lee Gascho at lgascho@gmail.com.

Little Eden Camp, Onekama, Mich., is seeking a full-time food service director to manage its kitchen operations. Responsibilities include administration of the kitchen and its staff, menu planning, ordering and food preparation. Five years cooking and management experience preferred. Experience in Christian ministry/camping helpful. admin@littleeden.org

Camp Friedenswald, Cassopolis, Mich., supported by Central District Conference, is seeking a visionary, motivated leader to serve full-time as executive director. Responsibilities include (1) overseeing operations, (2) staffing and programming, (3) aptitude for fund-raising. Qualifications include strong skills in communication, public relations, organization and experience in fund-raising. Send résumés with references to Phoebe Graber at pwgraber@gmail.com.

Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is inviting applications for a full-time lead pastor to commence in summer 2014. We are seeking a person with a strong Anabaptist theology as well as ability to engage the congregation through worship and preaching. This person will have strong administrative skills and be able to work with and lead a multimember pastoral team. Our desire is that the successful candidate, along with the pastoral team, can enable and nurture the gifts of the congregation in order to enhance the overall mission of the church. Pastoral experience along with a Master of Divinity degree or equivalent is preferred. Please send résumés to jbpeters@shaw.ca or contact Jake Peters at 204-889-5094 for information. For more about Bethel Mennonite Church see: http://bethelmennonite.ca.

Lombard Mennonite Church seeks a full-time lead pastor with a strong commitment to Anabaptist values and theology and skills in preaching, leadership, spirituality, teaching and congregational care. Requirements: M.Div. degree (or equivalent), pastoral experience (prefer urban or suburban setting), and demonstrated experience in managing church staff. International experience a plus. LMC is a member of the Illinois Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA. We are a vibrant Anabaptist congregation in the western suburbs of Chicago whose members come from diverse Christian backgrounds. Position open Aug. 1, 2014. Interested persons should contact the Illinois Conference associate minister, Roland Kuhl, at rgkuhl@mennonite.net.


Germantown Mennonite Historic Trust protects and maintains the historic 1770 Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse (Philadelphia), site of the first permanent Mennonite settlement in North America. We seek candidates with a connection to Mennonite history and community to build relationships and engage the public with the Germantown story. We have two open part-time positions whose responsibilities together will include executive leadership and vision, program development, administrative operations, development and fund-raising, communication and awareness-building, and landlord responsibilities. On-campus housing options available. More information is available at www.meetinghouse.info. Starting date is April 2014, with flexibility. Send cover letter and résumé to Dave Hersh, k3lknaol.com.

Iowa Mennonite School is seeking a dynamic, qualified educational leader for the position of principal/chief administrator in rural Kalona, Iowa, for the 2014-2015 school year. All job descriptions and applications may be viewed at the IMS website at http://www.iowamennonite.org/about/job-opening.
Beautiful mess

A beautiful mess is the title I would give my attempt to make applesauce this year. The only logical explanation for why I would undertake processing two bushels of apples with the help of my infant son and toddler daughter is that I’m optimistic (or that I have caved under the pressure to have Instagram-able moments of motherhood).

However, it is exactly that kind of crazy optimism that led to a truly beautiful mess (at moments near disaster). As I tried to recover from my wrong turn on the way to the orchard, I staved off meltdowns by singing the children’s songs I had rehearsed with my sisters on the many road trips we took growing up. As the sweet little toddler voice sang strong, “Jesus loves me, this I know,” I was overcome by the beauty of that message and the preciousness of an emerging faith understanding—things I would have missed if I had just turned up the radio to cover the crying.

I had to bite my tongue to keep from yelling as water from her full sink sloshed onto the floor. “I helping with dishes,” Anna declared proudly. It really was beautiful—the three of us lined up along the counter: her washing the freezer boxes, me working at the colander, the baby giggling from his high chair. A beautiful moment I would have missed if I had allowed my frustration with mess or the slow pace of the project to take root.

There was mess: in the burnt-on peels of the pot of apples boiling too long as I tried to nurse between tasks, the cut on my thumb from dancing around with the baby in the backpack while coring apples, and the pinch in my right shoulder from the weight of balancing an interested toddler while stirring, pouring, mashing and scooping.

There was also beauty: in the sweet pink sauce, delicious and warm with our supper, the squeal of excitement for Daddy when he came in the door—his proud helper sharing the details of our day—and the satisfaction of a task accomplished.

Does not life often end up being a beautiful mess? We optimistically try to accomplish things on our own or feverishly work, thinking the final product is the prize when really God is calling us to attend to the beauty and joy amid our work.

Young adulthood, in particular, can often feel stranded in threshold times of possibility in which you hold everything and nothing at once.

As I find my way between being a “young adult” and being “middle aged,” I realize these threshold experiences are universal. Whether it’s high school graduation, the start of a new career, sending your last child to college, starting a new career midlife or retiring after 40 years of service to an organization, we all face moments (sometimes extended) of liminal time in which we embrace possibility with nothing concrete.

Human nature may urge one to rush through the doorway, to push forward into the “next,” but the way of the Spirit is often not that of hurry or ease. Instead it is a call to savor liminal time. God invites us to take a moment and patiently stand at the threshold—calling us to be (perhaps crazily) optimistic, dreaming big and trusting in the Spirit’s ability to do more than we could ask or imagine. It can be exhilarating to stand on the threshold of something new and unknown. It can be equally terrifying. Often it is both, just as our world shows us beauty and mess at every turn.

I sense we are called to attend to these beautiful messes—whether our own or those of others. It may be a small mess in the kitchen, the consequences of our own choices. Or we may find ourselves in a disaster over which we have little or no control—a bitter career disappointment, a lost relationship or a life-altering diagnosis.

The beauty may be fleeting or hidden, but it is our choice to find the beauty amid a mess of disappointment or taste the sweet rewards of a task completed, even if it’s not to the standard we envisioned. I pray that we have the courage to step to the threshold time and again, willing to have crazy optimism despite what the world may say. And may we be gracious with others as they search for the beautiful in their mess.
**BOOK REVIEWS**

**All Is Lost** (PG-13) is the gripping account of a sailor whose 39-foot yacht takes on water after a collision with a shipping container at sea. With his navigation equipment and radio disabled, the man sails unknowingly into the path of a violent storm. Despite his resourcefulness, he must face his mortality. Robert Redford gives a remarkable performance and helps us as viewers imagine our mortality.—**gh**

**The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World’s Future** by David P. Gushee (Eerdmans, 2013, $35) seeks to rescue the life is sacred “before it is completely discredited by the politics of the moment.” Gushee thoroughly examines the sacredness of human life in the Old and New Testament and early Christianity. He looks at how the church has failed to uphold this conviction and at the many challenges to it up to the present. He goes on to argue for the sacredness of all God’s creation and that such sacredness is not only a moral reality but a moral task.—**gh**

**The Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology** by Richard J. Mouw and Douglas A. Sweeney (BakerAcademic, 2013, $19.99) seeks to address the imbalance of much theology that sees Jesus as “a Savior who suffers for us but not with us.” At the same time the authors warn against “identifying Christ with anyone who suffers.” It’s a Calvinist conversation but has insights for us all.—**gh**

**FILM REVIEWS**

**12 Years a Slave** (R) tells the true story of Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York who was abducted and sold into slavery in 1841. This powerful, unflinching depiction of slavery is difficult but necessary to watch. It shows the horror and evil of this long-standing American practice. Thus far, this is the best film of the year.—**Gordon Houser**

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**Many rivers to cross**

An important and gripping documentary series is playing on PBS stations. *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* is a six-hour series that chronicles African-American history, from the origins of slavery on the African continent through more than four centuries of remarkable events up to the present.

Presented and written by Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., the series draws on some of America’s top historians and heretofore untapped primary sources. Though a scholar, Gates brings a personal dimension to the series, identifying with the subjects, since he is one.

The first episode, “The Black Atlantic (1500-1800),” explores the global experiences that created the African-American people. Beginning a century before the first documented “20-and-odd” slaves who arrived at Jamestown, Va., the episode portrays the earliest Africans, slave and free, who arrived on these shores.

The second episode, “The Age of Slavery (1800-1860),” illustrates how black lives changed dramatically in the aftermath of the American Revolution. For free black people, these years were a time of opportunity, but for most African Americans, the era represented a new nadir.

The third episode, “Into the Fire (1861-1896),” examines the most tumultuous and consequential period in African-American history: the Civil War and the end of slavery, and Reconstruction’s thrilling but brief “moment in the sun.” From the beginning, African Americans were agents of their liberation—by fleeing the plantations and taking up arms to serve in the U.S. Colored Troops.

The fourth episode, “Making a Way Out of No Way (1897-1940),” portrays the Jim Crow era, when African Americans struggled to build their own worlds within the harsh, narrow confines of segregation. At the turn of the 20th century, a steady stream of African Americans left the South, fleeing the threat of racial violence and searching for opportunities in the North and West.

The final two episodes, “Rise! (1940-1968)” and “A More Perfect Union (1968-2013),” are aired on Nov. 19 and 26. Viewers can access the series at pbs.org.

This narrative is one most of us never heard in school. Beyond the broad outlines of history we may know, here we encounter many stories of individuals and details that expand our understanding of the extreme trials African Americans faced and overcame.

One historian points out that when our country was formed, slavery was assumed because the nation couldn’t exist without it. Slaves built much of the infrastructure of the United States, including roads and buildings, such as the White House and the Capitol.

There were many uprisings by slaves, not just that of Nat Turner. And when the Civil War began, a half million slaves ran away.

Of the 950,000 deaths in the Civil War, 40,000 were African Americans. African Americans influenced much of our culture, including food and music.

We learn about figures unknown to many of us. Ida B. Wells, co-owner and editor of a black newspaper in Memphis, attacked the evils of lynching in her newspaper, risking her own life. By 1900, there were three lynchings per week in the South. She called lynching “an instrument of terror.”

This series is well-worth watching and discussing. We have much to learn from this history.
(Continued from page 5)

punished enough and hope that another public airing will be helpful. Unfortunately, as a friend of the family, what I see is renewed suffering for them with no possibility of punishing John Howard himself. Now that the issue has been brought forward again, could we not find ways of assisting these women toward healing in a less public forum and allow healing for the Yoder family, too? —Kristen Long, Arvada, Colo.

What to do about Yoder?
What to do about John Howard Yoder? As a young boy I heard unkind jokes about the brilliant young professor with the “odd” behavior, John Howard Yoder. A decade or so later the thought came to me that John’s situation was not funny. I stopped telling JHY jokes. I only knew him from a distance, even as a student at the seminary in the late ’70s and early ’80s. But he always seemed to be sad and lonely, living in an isolated world. I did not suspect any of the abuse happening at that time.

The current discussion about Yoder is perhaps missing one important element. I’m not making a diagnosis. I’m not excusing his behavior, but this is something to be considered.

Hans Asperger first described a condition later known as Asperger’s Syndrome. His work did not become well known until the ’80s and became an official diagnosis in the ’90s. The latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders has dropped the Asperger’s “diagnosis” in favor of “Autism Spectrum Disorder.”

I taught special education and have worked with agencies providing services for people with autism and other special needs since the late 1960s. I taught people diagnosed with autism; my wife and I provided adult foster care for a severely autistic woman for about a decade, our foster daughter is diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome. We have also heard and read life stories of people dealing with high-functioning autism.

People on the high end of the autism spectrum have many of the characteristics John Howard Yoder displayed; included, most strikingly, is his high intellect and brilliant scholarship alongside his tragically abusive behaviors and social isolation. The fact that “he was difficult to manage” would come as no surprise for someone with high-functioning Autism Disorder. I have no idea whether he was ever diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome; but I doubt it since Asperger’s Syndrome became an actual diagnosis only in the ’90s. It can be difficult to diagnose if there is no one close who is familiar with the syndrome, and few medical people had expertise in this specialty area in the ’90s.—Dan Steiner, Goshen, Ind.

Also outside the box
I appreciated Becca J. R. Lachman’s well-written, thought-provoking article “Outside the Box” (October) because I live with the same question she posed, How can a Mennonite survive without community? Her response affirms my growing experience that the community of Christ thrives in many places and that an Anabaptist Mennonite voice is valued and desired far beyond our traditional communities. While I treasure the many years I lived and worked in a center of the Mennonite denomination, I am refreshed weekly by the passionate engagement with Scripture and profound commitment to justice of my new family of faith. It helps, too, that they sing heartily in worship.

Would I love it if there were a Mennonite congregation nearby? Of course. I often find myself praying for my former congregation and other Mennonite churches in the region. At the same time, my sense of call to this community deepens as I watch for and respond to the Spirit’s surprising invitations in this place. Like Lachman, I, too, “feel more Anabaptist today than at any other point of my life.” —Marlene Kropf, Port Townsend, Wash.

We need a place for dialogue
I welcome Ethan Bodnaruk’s Opinion piece (October) responding with dialogue about homosexuality to my February Opinion piece calling for such dialogue. Ethan presents many considerations that can lead our church to relax its stance against same-sex sex. They are ones that gain immediate traction for many in our church, resonating with deeply held values; so he does the church a service in articulating them, even though they may contain unexamined assumptions.

As I indicated in a comment on the online version of Ethan’s piece, I pray that one day our denominational leaders will host some sort of an “open source” or wikipedia-type website where these points of view—and the thoughtful, constructive responses to them—could be gathered in the interest of clarity and understanding and examination and discernment.—Harold Miller, Broadway Va.

Consistent Life ad too simplistic
I find the endorsements in the Consistent Life ad (November) puzzling. Although I agree with most of the general concepts, all the No’s seem simplistic, absolute, authoritarian and are perhaps the legalism that drives thoughtful people from church doctrine.

For example, “No abortion.” How about to save the life of the mother or the rape of a 12-year-old? It would be ideal if there were no need for this No, but until reality is addressed (i.e. responsibility for dealing with one’s testosterone, respecting equality and independence of all), the “no abortion” slogan could do more ultimate harm than good to the individuals involved—as well as society.

How many endorsers would be lost with an ad citing specifics on “No sex outside marriage” or “No unplanned/unwanted parenthood”? If one were to address each No item listed, significant inconsistency could be said about most generalized items listed if one were to apply it to the real world of the sick, old, dying, poor, life-imprisoned, abused, as well as rich.

—Donna Neufeld, North Newton, Kan.
God sighting at SpringHaven

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.—Psalm 85:10 TNIV

I have a deep appreciation for the many counseling centers that are affiliated with Mennonite Church USA because I recognize how much they contribute to our church’s vision to bring healing and hope to individuals in our communities, both inside and outside the church.

Not long ago, in the course of my travels for Mennonite Church USA, I had the opportunity to visit SpringHaven, a counseling center with two locations in rural Ohio—Mount Eaton and Crown Hill. Their motto is “Compassionately Leading People Toward Wholeness.”

I first heard about SpringHaven from Terry Shue, a charter member of the governing board. He spoke about the joy he experienced when the ministry was launched, and the pleasure it brought him to serve on the board. As he described the unusual events that led to the establishment of the center, he gave credit to God for what had happened.

Terry said the alignment of Lavina Miller Weaver’s leadership as the CEO with that of Steve Steiner as the board chair was a clear movement of God at work. They both have great credibility in their communities and worked tirelessly to catch up to what God was doing to provide a local mental health facility. The way things came together was a clear signal to Terry that God was at the center of the whole initiative. The board was confident that God was leading the way.

As with other counseling centers, clients come to SpringHaven with concerns such as depression, anxiety, grief and loss, phobias, disorders, sexual abuse recovery, marriage and relationship issues, behavior and eating disorders, adoption and attachment disorders and more. The staff provides counseling for individuals, marriages and families, as well as groups that can help in the healing journey.

Yet SpringHaven stands out from most other counseling centers in that it ministers to the “Plain community” in a significant way, which constitutes about one-third of its clientele. The leaders of the nearby Amish churches gave their blessing and their financial support to the launch of the building project at the main location. Now the Amish contribute a significant amount of volunteer time, supplies and meals to Amish clients who are under care. The Amish churches in the area share responsibility for maintaining Amish living quarters at the center and make regular visits to their church members there. Executive director Lavina Weaver and other counselors are able to communicate with their Amish clients in Pennsylvania Dutch, a practice that bridges communication barriers and builds trust across cultural divides.

SpringHaven is unusual in yet another way: It was started via a merger of several different ministries that developed a common vision for improving the mental health in their community. That made it possible for the ministry to get started without a debt. The surrounding community rallied around the vision and helped them upgrade an existing facility into a spacious and welcoming place under open skies with a vista of rolling hills. The horses in the equine-psychotherapy program seem right at home among the fields and pastures of the neighboring Amish community.

It seems appropriate to provide equine-assisted therapy to Amish clients who work with livestock every day. Horses are sensitive animals that readily detect a person’s emotional state, helping individuals understand the effects of their emotional state on others. Under the guidance of skilled therapists, interaction with horses can help clients develop skills of patience, self-confidence, trust and compassion.

The God of peace invites us all to make healthy choices among the stresses and strains of life, which leads us to true shalom. True peace is a kissing cousin to righteousness, expressing “right-relatedness” with God and each other. So when I see people walking the path toward greater mental health, I look for God’s footprints nearby.

Ervin Stutzman is executive director of Mennonite Church USA.

When I see people walking the path toward greater mental health, I look for God’s footprints nearby.
God’s body

*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*—Matthew 1:23

The infant lying in the manger is God’s body. That’s what “Emmanuel” means. The Hebrew word is, literally, “God with us.” The Isaiah prophecy quoted by Matthew is also specific that God will be with us as a son. But we seldom consider the meaning of sonship in the Ancient Near Eastern world into which Jesus was born.

In that time and culture, a man’s “essence” continued to live on in his son, especially a firstborn son. That is why it was such a big deal that Abraham had no son. It meant that his line would stop and there would be no trace of him in the world. This was so important to Abraham and Sarah that they conceived a work-around. Sarah told Abraham to take her servant, Hagar, and father a son through her. So this is how Ishmael came into the world and was to represent the “essence” of Abraham for all eternity.

But when Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son, suddenly the boy Ishmael was a threat to Isaac. There could be only one son to carry Abraham into the future. So Hagar and Ishmael were driven away. We know that in Islam much more was written about their lives than we have in our biblical record. And this is how Abraham became the father of not just one faith but three—Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

At Christmas time, when we again hear the story of Jesus’ Nativity, imagine that infant lying in a manger as the essence of God wrapped in swaddling clothes. This is a phenomenon almost too big to imagine: The all-powerful, all-loving Creator of the universe was embodied in that tiny little boy, the essence of God.

The phrase “son of God” is never used in the Old Testament. But 41 times the writers of the New Testament books use it to describe Jesus. By doing so, their readers understood the “sonship” dynamic between Jahweh God and Jesus the Messiah. Conversely, when Jesus gave us the Lord’s Prayer, he was using code language for “our Father” that carried with it the same organic and essence connection between a father and a firstborn son.

In a church that increasingly neuters the language of masculine references in order to be inclusive, we miss the powerful relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. But at Christmas time, we can celebrate the birth of God’s “only begotten son,” who came into the world because our Father so loved us. Or, as Gordon Houser says (page 12): “When you dig through the consumerist clutter that Christmas has become, you get to a startling belief: at a point in real history, God became a baby.”—ejt

Thanks, Dee

Dee Birkey, freelance designer for The Mennonite since 2005, is leaving this position at the end of 2013. After a search this summer for a new freelance designer, we selected Mary Jo Veurink from Broadway, Va., to succeed Dee. Mary Jo will design our January 2014 issue, with Dee providing some counsel during December.

During her tenure with us, Dee has been a wonderful partner. She understands Mennonite Church USA and our readers—something that Mary Jo will also bring. Dee also led the redesign process in 2009 that gave us the template we have used for the last four years. She has been generous with her time and occasionally donates some of her work to The Mennonite.

Dee, we wish you all the best as you move on and can say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”—The Mennonite staff