



Exploring our possibilities, facing our challenges

We are in the middle of a very exciting and intense time of discernment in the life of our congregation. In our first congregational discernment event, “Remember Our Past,” we identified four core values that we want to carry forward into our future together. We will continue to return to these as we complete our current process and also as we move into our future. These core values are:

1. **Following Jesus:** This is first, and the value out of which all the others flow. At the core we value *following Jesus*. “Vision: Healing and Hope” continues to inspire and guide us.
2. **Nurturing faith:** We at FMC are committed to *nurturing faith within the fabric of our relationships*. In particular, we long for community and nurturing faith in the context of relationships over the entire life span and range of life experiences, and in ways that are intergenerational.
3. **Connecting:** We are committed to lives of mission, peace and justice, and service, reflecting Christ’s broad invitation to all people, our neighbors across the street and around the world.
4. **Worshipping:** We place a high value on corporate worship and we recognize that for us, worship and music are of the same cloth. Our worship each week purposefully grows out of scripture and engages us with scripture.

In our second congregational event, “Explore Our Possibilities,” we were challenged to hold two seemingly very different realities together. We reflected on our current realities, both the challenges we face, and the resources we bring to bear. A review of the raw data (a summary of which is in mailboxes) reveals that most of the challenges identified actually fall into one or more of the four categories of the core values that were identified in our first event. In addition one more category becomes apparent. Challenges that do not fall into one or more of the four core values, cluster around societal and congregational changes that impact our life together as a congregation. These might be described as symptoms of the deeper challenges we face.

These symptoms include declining attendance, need to prioritize and perhaps even to reallocate resources, programmatic structure that no longer seems to fit us as a congregation, generational and demographic changes. The data we have confirms what we already recognize anecdotally:

- Average worship attendance has dropped from 271 in 2007 to 219 in 2016.
- We are graying as a congregation as indicated by the graph below. Over one half of the congregation is 60 years old or older. Young adults are among the smallest percentage among us.
- While membership numbers remain constant over the past 20 years at just around 556 members, changes in individuals’ understandings of the meaning of membership make this a number that does not reflect the number of active participants, which is today more like 356.

The entire list of challenges makes it clear that work will need to be done beyond the scope of the current Congregational Discernment Team (CDT) focus. Recommendations will be forwarded by CDT to Council both outlining direction for the search committee as they begin their work by the end of March, and identifying congregational steps to address these challenges.

February 26, we met for the third and final event in this series, “Live Our Journey.” At that event we began to express our hopes and dreams for our congregation. We imitated the imaginal cells of a butterfly as we considered this question: “As the caterpillar transforms to a butterfly, the imaginal cells begin acting not as discrete individuals, but as a unique multi-celled organism. As a Butterfly, the caterpillar no longer crawls but flies. We, like imaginal cells, each bring our hopes and dreams for the future to our new, transformed life together as a congregation. As we move forward, what if we could no longer do any of the things we typically think of as doing church? What would we build into this new life together?” As with the first two events, the raw summary will be made available in church mailboxes. However, we believe that this is a question that will continue to bear fruit in the days and years to come.

Please continue to pray for the church as we discern the Spirit’s guidance. Pray for the CDT as we synthesize all that we’ve heard and as we draft our recommendations. Pray for the Search Committee, now being formed, and for Staff Relations as they update and prepare documents that will be used in the search process. We are deeply grateful for the participation in these events and all the conversations that have taken place! (Rich Bucher, Laura Hartzler, Chris Moser, George O’Reilly, Rhonda Winstead, and Wanda Stopher)

-- Wanda Stopher

Events/dates to remember

March 2, 16 – Bluffton community dinners, 6 p.m., Senior Center

March 6, 13, 20, 27, April 3 – Lent Practice, 7 p.m., FH

March 11 – CDC regional gathering, Wadsworth First Mennonite

March 17 – Menno-Life deadline

March 28 – FIRST Night, 6 p.m.



Venture Club members observed Valentine's Day by making valentines for FMC members who live at Mennonite Home Communities of Ohio's various facilities. Venture Club leaders are Megan Coffman, Sabrina Longworth and Alison King.

Happy birthday to:

Darrel Yoder, 94, March 5

Burton Yost, 89, March 5

Mary Boyer, 93, March 8

Corrinne Boehr, 86, March 23

Linda Suter, March 28

Happy anniversary to:

Sharon and Carlin Carpenter, 56, March 25

Lent Practice focuses on creativity

You are invited to join others in a creative venture called Lent Practice. Each Monday through April 3, in preparation for Lenten worship, all are invited to gather and share something you've created in response to the weekly prompt. We will discuss how these creations could be shared in worship. To prepare, consider the text that we include in the bulletin each Sunday, then apply the ideas, words, images and feelings to create something that reflects these themes. Write a story, poem, mini-play, song or a piece of music. Draw, sculpt, whittle, paint, sew, knit, crochet or weld. Use wood, yarn, cloth, clay, rock, marbles, metal, instruments, paper, or string. Entering this space of awe and beauty is an act of creativity. Please come even if you do not have something to share. All are welcome. *Children are welcome and childcare will be provided. See Victoria Woods-Yee or Wanda Stopher if you have questions.*

Mennonite Women cancel March meeting; attend Lent Practice

A change has been made to the March 13 Mennonite Women meeting. Instead of the regular meeting, you are invited to join the Lent Practice experience being held at FMC. Lent Practice is held each Monday during Lent now through April 3 (see more details in Lent article above.) You are invited to attend as many as you wish. The Mennonite Women's theme for March, "Waiting for God," ties in well with Lent Practice. Marlene Kropf writes in her devotional, *Faith Travels*, "...the example of Moses shows us the path to intimacy with God -- a path that includes listening, waiting, spending time with God....We can open ourselves to the God who calls us to 'come away' and dwell in God's presence."

Hygiene Kits: MCC sends urgent call for hygiene kits

Bags and content lists (see list below) are located on the table and bulletin board near the church office. We also need bag fabric and people to sew bags. Sewing directions are on the kit card in the kit collection area. Some precut bags and cords are also there. If making your own bags, please note that the bag size has changed over the years and fabric is cut 12 ½ x 38 in.

Hygiene Kit Contents - NEW items, in original packaging

- 1 adult-size toothbrush – (individually wrapped)
- 1 large bar bath soap
- 1 fingernail clipper (good quality)
- 1 hand towel (dark color)

Getting to know the congregation

Editor's note: In September, we began a series in which we briefly profile those among us, focusing on the work they do now or have done in the past. We'll touch all ages and all areas of work. Jesus told us that all work is honorable if done honestly and well; it's important to recognize that all of us work in different ways. This month we're connecting with Kaleigh Coffman, a First Mennonite fourth grader.

M-L: How old are you? What grade are you in?

KC: 9 years old, 4th grade



M-L: Tell me about your performance in the open mic night at Coffee Amici in Findlay. What inspired you to perform? Was it scary? What did you sing/play? Where do you plan to perform next?

KC: I got a very loud applause when I sang "White Christmas." We have been going to Coffee Amici for a long time and I saw the card for open mic night. I love to sing so I wanted to try the open mic night. It was scary at first but then it was fun! I plan on performing there again and then we'll see after that.

M-L: What are you involved in at First Mennonite?

KC: I am in Jubilate choir, Venture Club and Sunday school.

M-L: What activities are you involved in (outside of school and church)?

KC: I am involved in Girl Scouts and dance. I have been in dance for 7 years at Lyn's Academy of Dance in Elida.

M-L: Who are all of your family members at First Mennonite?

KC: My family members at FMC are my mom, Megan; brother, Ezekiel; Papa (Darrell Huber); Mimi (Kay Huber) and all of you (my church family)!

Preschoolers learn the importance of building a strong foundation



The wise man and the foolish man visited JP Schumacher and the children in the preschool Sunday school class on February 19, and helped the children understand the importance of a strong foundation.

Above from left, Milena King, Ezekiel Coffman, Leah Niekamp, Micah Hartzler and JP Schumacher. At right are twins Isaac and Everett Miller.



JHYF/SHYF stage “Sit with a Stranger Sunday”

JHYF and SHYF shook up the worship service on February 5 by staging “Sit with a Stranger Sunday.” The youth were not allowed to sit in their usual Sunday morning seats. Instead, they were encouraged to sit next to someone in the congregation who they did not know. This action came from a lot of conversation in the youth groups about strengthening relationships in our congregation. We discussed the divide between youth and adults in our church and how we can break down the walls of assumptions about each generation and show that we truly care about each other. We encourage you to stage your own “Sit with a Stranger Sunday!”

To supplement our Bible study on apocalyptic scripture, we invited Jackie Wyse-Rhodes, Bluffton University assistant professor of religion, to reveal some truths and misconceptions about the book of Revelation. Adults were also invited to attend this special bible study and the night resulted in a lot of laughter, conversation, and education about the apocalypse.

This month was also devoted to fundraising for the 2017 Orlando youth convention. With your help, we were able to raise \$1,500 with our babysitting and soup meal fundraisers.



We are grateful for your generosity. Watch for other fundraisers, including a Harry Potter-themed mystery dinner, youth auction and cupcake sales.

-- Shannon Thiebeau

At left, Isaac Andreas prepares for the soup fundraiser.

What's new in the library?

Through donations and new purchases we have added many new books to the library.

-- Library Committee (Alison King, Janine Paul and Amy Blount)

Eat With Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food by Rachel Marie Stone

Philippians: Believers Church Bible Commentary by Gordon Zerbe

Present Over Perfect: Leaving Behind Frantic for a Simpler, More Soulful Way of Living by Shauna Niequist

Words for Worship 2 by Diane Zaerr Brenneman

The Gospel Next Door by Marty Troyer

Simple Pleasures: Stories from My Life as an Amish Mother by Marianne Jantzi

Circles of Love: Stories of congregations caring for people with disabilities and their families by Dean Preheim-Bartel and Timothy J. Burkholder

Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism by Drew G. I. Hart

Bread for the Journey: Meditations and Recipes to Nourish the Soul by Lovella Schellenberg

The Spacious Heart: Room for Spiritual Awakening by Donald Clymer and Sharon Clymer Landis

Living the Anabaptist Story: Guide for Early Beginnings with Questions for Today by Lisa D. Weaver and J. Denny Weaver

Peace, Progress and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith by Perry Bush

Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice by Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill

A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn

Human Sexuality in Biblical Perspective: A Study Guide by Carrie A. Mast and Gerald J. Mast

For children and youth:

When a Peace Tree Blooms by Hideko Tamura Snider

My Big Book of 5-Minute Devotions by Pamela Kennedy and Douglas Kennedy

Sophie's First Dance by Nancy Rue

Sophie's Stormy Summer by Nancy Rue

DVD *Veggie Tales Little Ones Can Do Big Things Too*

DVD *Veggie Tales Lettuce Love One Another*

The Wonderful Things You Will Be by Emily Winfield Martin

Last Stop on Market Street by Matt De La Peña

Beaver Gets Lost by Ariane Chottin