



# The Vine

A newsletter of First Mennonite Church  
June 2022

## Casting Parts in the Body of Christ

by Pastor Michael

On May 27-30, Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) held a Special Delegate Assembly in Kansas City. Delegates from congregations, conferences, and other constituencies of MC USA gathered to worship, deliberate, discern, and decide on several key matters of faith and discipleship within the broader church.

This was a “special” assembly because MC USA ordinarily meets biennially around a larger weeklong Convention that includes worship, seminars & workshops, an exhibit hall, and other learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults across the church. This year’s assembly came between Convention years, an extra gathering necessitated by Covid and a full agenda.

Congregations send one delegate for every hundred members or fraction thereof. Sheryl Dyck and I served as FMC’s delegates. There were 506 total delegates, seated throughout the weekend at tables of 6-7, with our tablemates as our primary conversation partners for the duration of the assembly.

The weekend began with worship. Reflecting on the time when Jesus led the disciples safely through a storm (Mark 4:35-41), Anna Yoder Schlabach, a member of the pastoral team at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, IN, drew on her experience with theater. She told of a community theater director from her childhood who would cast anyone who showed up. “If there weren’t enough parts, she wrote a new one.” *What if this is how God calls us to be church?*

From this sacred beginning, the weekend was dominated by big questions: What does it mean to be a part of the body of Christ? What is MC USA’s role in writing the parts for its members? The majority of our decision-making would be focused on two momentous resolutions.

The first, proposed by the Executive Board of MC USA, resolved to “retire the Membership Guidelines” of the denomination. The sticking point was the third and final section of the Guidelines, although the resolution itself said very little about it. “Section

Three” has hung over MC USA for the two decades of the denomination’s existence. It presented a harmful theology of gender and sexuality and called for disciplinary practices that have hurt LGBTQIA people and their allies within and beyond the church. The resolution to retire the Guidelines passed overwhelmingly, with 82% of delegates voting in favor.

(Note: For the remainder of this article, I’m using “LGBTQIA” and “queer” interchangeably. People choose many designations for their gender and sexuality, and I want to honor that diversity. LGBTQIA stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual).

Not only did the majority of MC USA churches want to undo this past injustice, the vote was also a recognition that the Guidelines simply never represented the way MC USA does church. In MC USA, most authority is conference- and congregation-based, meaning decisions about pastoral credentials (ordaining LGBTQIA people, for example), marriage (same-gender marriages, for example), and church membership are made by area conferences and congregations. With so many congregations and conferences – though definitely not all – already open to queer people in ministry, marriage, and membership, it was clear that the Guidelines did not serve the church in any meaningful way. Praise God, they were retired.

But many of us believed that wasn’t enough. The second resolution, “A Resolution for Repentance & Transformation” (R&T), was written by the Inclusive Mennonite Pastors leadership team, of which I’m a part. I helped draft this resolution, and I have a confession to make: I am bursting with pride (the healthy, self-love, Jesus-inspired, Mennonite kind; mostly) at the work represented by this resolution.

Anticipating that the Membership Guidelines would be “retired,” R&T bore witness to the collective violence and harm done to LGBTQIA Mennonites and their families. It named ways that the church has perpetuated this harm, and in so doing opened up a path for the whole church to begin working on healing and restoration from the brokenness caused by our denomination’s “policies, practices, and theologies.” Hallelujah, the resolution passed, with 55% of delegates voting in favor.

R&T challenged the delegate body. Many people heard the testimonies of pain and hope, but simultaneously felt grief over their own congregations or conferences, full of people who were closed off to this testimony and likely to reject it. Some heard these testimonies for the very first time. An older pastor at my table told us tearfully (I'm paraphrasing): "I've never had this experience before. I'm breaking in two. I realize now that I have to choose between sacrificing LGBTQIA people and sacrificing my family and other people in my church who have rejected their testimony. I see that LGBTQIA people have been sacrificed for too long, so I'm voting for this resolution."

My sense is that many people experienced this kind of opening *and* felt this fracturing, which made a momentous, joyful moment also a tender and tearful one. I am thankful for people like the man at my table, even while I realize that telling his story once again centers the pain of a straight, cis-gender man in a conversation about the church's failure to love queer people to the fullest. I like to think that God's love is big enough to prioritize the latter *and* embrace the transformative journey of the former. That is, after all, my story too.

This delegate session also continued MC USA's new practice of hosting youth delegates. I was overwhelmed by courageous youth, especially queer youth, who stepped up to the microphone and declared to *their* church the importance of charting this path towards healing. (Side note: Please stop telling young people that they are the "future of the church." If they're here, they are also its present). These youth told us it was high time to "stop kicking the can down the road," and warned that "my peers are watching" what my church will do. Alex introduced himself, a young adult transgender bi-sexual man headed to seminary this fall, and declared that by harming queer people the body of Christ has been harming itself. "Our feet bear the gaping wounds of the sword wielded by our own hands," he said to a silent crowd of 600.

Candidly, I never expected this resolution to pass. I questioned within myself the language we chose, and the path we took, to get it to the delegate floor. But the Spirit of God took these words of witness, Good News carried on wounded feet, and planted them in the church's heart. This is truly a new day for MC USA.

R&T does not do all the work. Arguably, it does only a small piece. There were, after all, 45% of delegates who voted against it, many of them representing conferences and congregations who will continue to practice exclusion rather than open themselves to the liberating joy and wholeness that the church is now calling for at the highest level. Some of them will probably leave the denomination.

Remember: MC USA authority is conference- and congregation-based. That's a good thing. We can bear witness to each other, but we can't force each other to do what we want. So, we will continue to bear witness to our Spirit-led hope.

And there is so much hope in R&T. It calls for the creation of an LGBTQIA constituency group to join denominational leadership, for efforts to support queer people becoming pastors and leaders in the church, for educational and spiritual care resources to help congregations as we seek to love our LGBTQIA members, for the development of theologies and practices that honor LGBTQIA people and the range of relationships – including same-gender marriage – that can be blessed and celebrated in the church.

The discussion also exposed deep rifts when it comes to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in MC USA. The resolution names specific barriers faced by queer people of color in the church, calling us to acknowledge the ways that the church's wholeness will also need to reckon with racism. All of this is ongoing work.

Two more resolutions made that clear. One was a "study document" (so we didn't vote on it) on the injustices of the "U.S. Criminal Legal System," calling on the church to learn about incarceration, policing, and the legal system, and to find ways to act together towards a more just world.

Another called MC USA – and all individual Mennonite churches – to a more robust commitment to accessibility for people with disabilities. The resolution passed unanimously. And yet, during discussion time speakers shared their own experiences of being neglected by the church's normative practices and noted ways that even the assembly planners had missed out on opportunities to practice the commitments named in the resolution. There is much work to do. At FMC, we've tended to do this piecemeal. The resolution calls us to a more systematic review of our spaces and practices and offers an abundance of resources. I hope we can make space for this work.

The preachers on the final day of the assembly – Sarah Bixler and Malinda Berry, professors at Eastern Mennonite University and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, respectively – encouraged us with a word about "rejoicing and mourning in the same body." We are complex individuals and we make up a complex church. God holds it all together, the finished and the unfinished, the pain and the joy, the present and the future.

For all of us, the question is: What is our part? The Spirit of God has written into the script a part for each and every one. Truly, we are the body of Christ.



**A chance to join our community**

*by Marcia E Nelson*

In recent years one of the intentions many in our congregation have had with regards to anti-racism work has been to get out of our own spaces to get to know our community and engage with other local groups doing justice work. We have several opportunities coming up, primarily in celebration of [Juneteenth](http://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth) (visit [www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth](http://www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth)).

Juneteenth marks the day when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865, to take control of the state and ensure that all enslaved people be freed. The troops' arrival came a full two and a half years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth honors the end to slavery in the United States.

The Racial Justice Working Group encourages you to bring your children and celebrate with our community. Here are the events that we are aware of at this time and I will make further announcement if more events or details are forthcoming.

**The Time is Now: A Community Prayer Service Against Violence**

**Friday, June 17th, 2022** - 6:00, Bethel AME Church, 401 E. Park St., Champaign

*Sponsored by the Ministerial Alliance of Champaign-Urbana & Vicinity*

We will offer prayers across race, class, age, gender, and faith traditions to show that we are united both in our sorrow and in our resolve to stem the devastating epidemic of gun violence.

**Juneteenth Emancipation Day Celebration**

**Saturday, Jun 18, 2022** 12:00 pm – 3:00 pm, Douglass Park, 5th and Grove, Champaign

Enjoy music and visit different vendors while learning about this important holiday. Children can make arts and crafts, play on the bounce house and obstacle course, or get soaked in the Splash Pad. Sponsor: Champaign Park District.

**Juneteenth Celebration**

**Saturday, June 18, 2022** 2:00 pm - 7:00 pm, Crestview Park, 1802 South Cottage Grove Ave., Urbana

Sponsored by [HV Neighborhood Transformation](#), an organization working on disrupting cycles of violence in our community "established to provide services to high-hope, under-served communities through neighborhood building, motivational mentorship, community support, and the advancement of social consciousness". Details of the event are not yet posted.

**Martin Luther King Jettie Rhodes Day**

**Saturday, June 25, 2022** 12:00 pm - 04:00 pm, King Park, 915 W. Wascher Street. Urbana

Join us for the 21st annual celebration! Martin Luther King Jettie Rhodes Neighborhood Day was founded by the late Mrs. Jettie Rhodes. Mrs. Rhodes had a famous quote: "Who's your neighbor?" This day is all about giving back to the community with fun, family, networking, and a diverse atmosphere.

Enjoy free food (while supplies last), live entertainment, kids' activities, raffle prizes, and a wealth of resourceful information provided by various local nonprofits. You may also recognize some of our public officials and community members who volunteer for this event each year. Rain or shine, the fun goes on!



**RAWtools**  
by Pastor Michael

Almost one year ago a group of faith leaders in Champaign-Urbana came together and asked what part our praying, serving, peacemaking communities might play in addressing gun violence in our community. It affects us all in different ways, but it affects us all.

Enter RAWTOOLS. RAWTOOLS is a Colorado-based organization that is rooted in the Mennonite Church. The organization collects firearms, decommissions and dismantles them, and then uses a blacksmith's fire and hammer to transform them into garden tools. The prophetic image comes from the Bible's prophets:

*"they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4)*

Tools meant for destruction and death pass through the fire, emerging on the other side remade as a tool fashioned for growth and new life. This is the RAWTOOLS vision for all of us caught up in cycles of violence and trauma. Transformation.

At a moment when our nation's idolatrous worship of firepower reaches a new low of grief and despair, Champaign-Urbana is poised to welcome RAWTOOLS and the hope of transformation. That group of faith leaders from earlier – representing mostly the Ministerial and Interfaith Alliances of Champaign County – grew and shifted into a collection of organizers, artists, city officials, and faith communities planning for a weekend of RAWTOOLS events, July 29-31.

**Mark your calendars for the evening of Friday, July 29 at the Randolph Street Community Garden in Champaign.** The gathering will start at 5:00 pm with food trucks on-site, and then transition into the RAWTOOLS program at 6:00 pm. RAWTOOLS blacksmiths operate the forge, transforming a gun into a

garden tool while local artists, musicians, and storytellers guide a service of lament and transformative hope. The service ends with community members – especially those directly impacted by gun violence – invited to take the hammer themselves and help transform the gun.

**On Saturday, July 30, from 10:00 - 11:30 am,** local organizations like the Trauma & Resilience Initiative and the CU chapter of Moms Demand Action will host a workshop with breakout sessions on trauma awareness and political advocacy, among others. **Then from 12:00 - 4:00 pm,** a neighborhood block party in Champaign's Beardsley Park, with the RAWTOOLS forge providing demonstrations of their work throughout the afternoon.

**Finally, on Sunday July 31, time TBD,** an open mic and makerspace at the Cunningham Township Supervisor's Office in Urbana for all ages. Community members are invited to convert leftover gun parts into small signs and other works of art.

The opportunity to host RAWTOOLS in this way is simply amazing. Plan to come out, connect, and learn from one another how God's peacemaking ways are becoming real in the neighborhoods and communities of Champaign-Urbana.

FMC's contact people, serving on the RAWTOOLS planning committee, are Karen McKenzie and Randy Nelson. Feel free to reach out with questions or [visit rawtools.org](http://visitrawtools.org).



*RAWtools signs: made from gun parts that can't be made into garden tools.*



*A RAWtools mattock: A hoe on one side & fork on the other, is made from 5" of a gun barrel.*

# READ. TALK. PLAY. Everyday!

by Cindi Schieber

Studies show that 90% of children's brain growth happens before they even begin Kindergarten. Read. Talk. Play. Everyday! is a community-wide initiative to provide preschool-aged children (0-5) and their families with opportunities and resources for reading, talking, and playing, every day. This is a community-wide campaign that began in May and is sponsored by United Way.

The goal of the program is to **encourage anyone who cares for children** – parents, guardians, family members and friends – to provide opportunities for reading, talking and playing every day so all children begin kindergarten ready for success. The program wants to convey to anyone who cares for children that they do not need a teaching degree or even many hours to make an impact that will last a lifetime.

The program sent information to FMC and subsequently to the S&O Committee about ways our congregation could help including:

- Posting a Read. Talk. Play. Everyday! yard sign in the front of church property.
- Adding information in our church bulletin and newsletter as well as post an informational flier on our bulletin board.
- Hosting a reading and/or game night during the month of May for everyone at our church with the emphasis on investing in the children and families of our congregation.
- Conducting a summer reading program for the children in our congregation and neighborhood with storytelling by congregation members, staff, and volunteers.
- Volunteering to visit neighborhoods around Champaign-Urbana and distribute bags with books and other resources for families of young children.
- Providing resources for the bag, which could include crayons, puppets, easy games, etc. which might involve a collection throughout our congregation for a particular item or a monetary donation.

In mid-March, the S&O Committee agreed to help in several areas over the next few months. On May 12, I walked with a group of other volunteers to deliver bags to residents throughout the Garden Hills neighborhood in Champaign. This event was sponsored by the [Champaign County Community Coalition Walk as One Initiative](#) whose mission is:

*(T)o provide a network of organizations and stakeholders that improve the lives of youth and their families resulting in youth who are empowered and safe, to promote effective law enforcement and positive police-community relations, and to support greater knowledge or use of the resources available.*

We spent a couple hours on Thursday evening in the neighborhood distributing materials to residents who have children 5 and under in their lives. It was a very enjoyable and rewarding experience for me.



## Service & Outreach Mission Corner

*FMC's 2022 spending plan lists 34 organizations that are beneficiaries of our mission giving. At least five others are recipients of either the children's offering or special congregational offerings. We provide you with information about some of these important groups. Featured this month: Refugee Center of Champaign-Urbana.*

### The Refugee Center of Champaign-Urbana

by Cindi Schieber

The Refugee Center was founded in 1980 by Vietnamese refugees to provide services to other newly arrived refugees. In the last 40 years the Center has expanded to assist immigrants, political asylum seekers, and refugees from all over the world.



The Center's mission is to:

*[P]rovide services essential to refugee and immigrant resettlement in East Central Illinois, and to aid in the exchange and preservation of their respective cultures.*

*As an organization, we believe in the inherent worth of all human beings, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, race, sex or gender, sexual orientation, or cultural heritage. We similarly believe that it is possible and desirable for all human beings to live peacefully together, and to work to create a more loving and compassionate world in which everyone's basic human needs and rights can be secured.*

*We open the door to new community members, help them get settled in Central Illinois, and encourage our community to understand and embrace its new members.*

Services provided include:

- Case management and counseling
- Tutoring and socializing opportunities to help children prepare for school
- Health education programs for families
- Assistance regarding other services available in the community
- Mediation services
- Going with clients to events that might require an interpreter including jobs, doctor visits, court hearings, school appointments, meetings with landlords, etc.
- Help with applying for government benefits
- Help with paperwork for citizenship, asylum, residency, family reunification, and other immigration issues
- Translation services in: English, Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Russian, Cantonese, Mandarin and other languages as requested

Recent initiatives include supporting Afghan nationals seeking refuge and resettlement through Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) or parole through the Afghan Parolee Assistance program.

Volunteer opportunities include:

- Tutoring clients in English
- Tutoring students one-on-one
- Translating documents
- Serving as an interpreter at the Center and/or within the community
- Teaching citizenship classes
- Monitoring kids' playtime on Saturday mornings
- Planning fundraisers and special events
- Providing office assistance
- Completing marketing and development projects
- Serving on the Center board.



Further, as with many charitable organizations, support has fallen during the pandemic due to canceled fundraisers, increased competition for funding, etc. so donations are always welcome.

Visit the [Refugee Center website for further information on volunteering.](#)

## 2022 Summer FMC Softball Snapshots



**GO MARTYRS!!**



Above: Batter up!  
Left: Winding up the pitch...  
Below: Waiting to catch the ball.

The coveted **Creative Cheer Award** goes to Tammie Bouseman, diehard Martyrs fan (and most enthusiastic cheerer)



Much gratitude to Perry Biddle for painting the sanctuary and to Bex for supervising (between naps).

