

gospel evangel

connecting the congregations of
indiana-michigan mennonite conference

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Jerry and his RV parked outside of East Goshen Mennonite Church.

Extending Hospitality

A story of giving, receiving and growing in the practice of hospitality.

By: Joanne Gallardo, conference minister

During my first few days at the IMMC offices, located at East Goshen Mennonite Church, I heard Jerry's name talked about with a smile. After meeting Jerry, I completely understood why his name brought joy. Upon meeting Jerry, I found him to be friendly, approachable, and down to earth. He jokes around with staff and just about anyone who happens by East Goshen's building. I had the privilege of sitting down with Jerry and Pastor Merle Hostetler to hear about Jerry's journey into East Goshen's orbit and how they have started writing their own metaphorical handbook on what it means to be hospitable.

Jerry is from the Goshen area, and prior to a few years ago, Jerry was living in his van. Jerry's life has been marked with a lot of transition and pain. After roaming around a bit after a friend had died, Jerry had made his way to the Depot in Goshen where he met a member of East Goshen, Elvie Bontrager. Jerry began sharing his story, including a need for a place to park his van, and after a phone call to then-pastor Steve Slagel, Jerry was able to make a new home in East Goshen's

parking lot, thus beginning Jerry's relationship with the faith community. He temporarily stayed in a church member's apartment, but found out quickly that he preferred his van life. Jerry, after purchasing an RV, came back to the familiar parking lot at East Goshen.

After a storm blew through the area, Jerry took ownership of the parking lot to keep it free of debris. People from East Goshen saw him picking up and raking around the parking lot and drove slowly near where he was working. Jerry said he felt like a "freak show," which embarrassed him, but he also understood why some might be taken aback at someone they didn't know taking care of the property. The caretakers at East Goshen approached him about cleaning up after the storm asking, "Did you do all this?" When Jerry said "yes," he said, "I blended right in."

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Extending Hospitality



Jerry, sharing his story with Conference Minister Joanne Gallardo (not pictured) and East Goshen Pastor Merle Hostetler (not pictured).

Soon, Jerry began using electricity from the church for his RV in exchange for shoveling some snow. Soon after that, he got a key to the church enabling him to take showers in the basement. The rest, they say, is history.

Jerry is now a permanent fixture of life at East Goshen. He likes the property and the people here, saying he feels he doesn't have to look over his shoulder like he does

other places. Right now, Jerry has his own place and while he is "okay" with his new living situation away from the parking lot, he still enjoys the thrill of the open road in his RV.

Jerry's new living situation is an apartment at Greencroft. He found the transition from RV life difficult. It was a rough move. Jerry felt like he didn't belong at Greencroft, emphasizing how his upbringing was much different from many of the folks there as well as the congregants of East Goshen. This led to some difficult feelings at times for some.

During much of our conversation, Jerry talked about "fighting personal demons" and being very aware that all his family is now gone. Jerry is reticent to start attending East Goshen, though he has been to a few events and worship services. He did not grow up in the church, and prior to visiting the Depot the day he met the East Goshen member, he didn't have any connections with Mennonites. "I was told I was Protestant growing up," Jerry said. He admits he doesn't completely understand the Bible, or what the pastors talk about on Sunday mornings. "There's a disconnect," Jerry says. However, he now has a sense of what hospitality means for Mennonites.

Jerry is a self-proclaimed "work in progress." He admits to putting up walls and boundaries to keep himself safe. Events where emotions are high, such as a funeral, leave him feeling uncomfortable. This can sometimes further his feeling of being on the "outside." But one thing is clear: East Goshen has become Jerry's "new family." He was quick to mention how both physically and emotionally, he feels like he is taken care of and belongs at East Goshen Mennonite Church. Pastor Merle Hostetler mentioned in our conversation that East Goshen is also a work in progress, saying, "This congregation is learning what

it means to welcome people from different backgrounds." Merle named several instances where Jerry has been a very relatable person to people in the congregation. For both of Pastor Merle's sons, as well as others in the congregation who have not attended regularly, Jerry is a person they can connect with and relate to.

Merle has had discussions with Jerry about the role God has had in Jerry's life. Jerry admits that there are many situations in his life where he or someone he loved could have died. One time in Goshen, a flatbed truck slammed into his van, totaling his vehicle while just missing Jerry. This, Merle said, is where a "God story" can come out. Years ago, Jerry's wife, now deceased, was held up at gunpoint. When the trigger was pulled, the gun didn't go off. Jerry acknowledges these nearly fatal events as significant, and they have him reflecting on peoples' purposes in life.

Merle points out that there is no "manual" for what is happening with the relationship between East Goshen and Jerry. It hasn't always been perfect. Feelings have gotten hurt, and relationships have been broken. There have been people who have not treated Jerry very well. Jerry admits he can get close to people but then back off, which can leave others confused and hurt. Merle continued to emphasize that everyone is learning as they go. And everyone, absolutely everyone, is a work in progress.

In the pictures included with this article, you can see Jerry's most recognizable accessories, his hat and his turquoise-streaked RV. He has been asked to sell it, but he says he never will. The best part of his life right now, according to Jerry, is when he takes some time for himself in East Goshen's outdoor sanctuary, a place meant for worship and reflection in nature. This outdoor alone time is important in his life.

East Goshen is both a study and an example of what it means to be hospitable. Both parties, Jerry and East Goshen, are stumbling their way toward what it means to be family together. Large, extended families are often made up of people with different upbringings, different ways of doing things, different life experiences and ways of being in the world. But all are born of one blood and one love, and that is the tie that binds.

Jerry mentioned that he is excited that his story is being shared throughout IMMC because he very much enjoys meeting new people. So, if a turquoise-streaked RV and a man in a bucket hat show up at your church, invite him in and get to know one of our kin from East Goshen.

Belmont Neighborhood Fellowship

Congregations collaborate to bring neighbors together.

By: Joanne Gallardo, conference minister

Belmont Neighborhood Fellowship is a congregation that meets on Sunday evenings in Elkhart, Indiana. They share a building with Belmont Mennonite Church (BMC), or the “morning congregation” as it’s called. BNF has a mission focus with a heart for the neighborhood surrounding their building, and it’s in this spirit that Pastor Kevin Yoder, Sylvia Stark, Chris Schott, Ray Bair, and Glenn Leinbach got together to collaborate on a summer block party for the neighborhood called “Neighborhood Celebration.” This event happened on August 1st of this year.

According to the steering committee, the plans for this event have been in the works for over a year. While it was unable to happen in 2020, this group was determined for it to take place in 2021. BNF wanted to make sure it reached out to the congregations close to them so they could all plan together. To be exact, these congregations are within 300 feet of each other. This included the BMC as well as New Beginnings United Worship. BMC and BNF congregations knew each other well but had not collaborated with New Beginnings in the past.

Fliers went out across the neighborhood, named “Sterling East,” advertising free food, games, and other fun activities. Not only did BMC and New Beginnings have their own fliers to give out, BNF hand delivered them to people in their neighborhood, getting to know their neighbors in a new way. Glenn was invited into the home of an older man who told Glenn that he was a long-time community member. Others met young families and Sylvia noted that she met a young person who was “scared” of church. These were important and informative conversations for this group as they became aware of the people who are a part of their community.

At the event on August 1st everyone had a job. Chris got to hand out food, or as she said, “I did the fun stuff.” Sylvia oversaw activities such as sidewalk chalk, basketball, corn hole, volleyball, arts and crafts, bubbles, and the ever-popular face painting—a big hit at this event. Glenn reported that 160 hot dogs were consumed, estimating that



Left to Right: Darick, Marva, Keith, Nora, Doug, Rod (Mayor of Elkhart), Kristine, and Bob.

around 130 people attended. Pastor Kevin said that 2 bands, the worship team at New Beginnings as well as the group Fishers of Men, provided music for the gathered crowd.

A lot was learned at this event about who is a part of this neighborhood. Sylvia, having worked in the public schools, saw people she hadn’t seen in years. “It felt like a reunion,” she said. It was noted that it was quite an accomplishment to have so many people, many of them strangers to one another, hang out in the same place at the same time and get along. Pastor Kevin noted that in our polarized world these sorts of connections are “reassuring and invigorating.” He also noted, “God makes these relationships possible.” Ministry informed this event, and the group believed that the gathering of people, getting along, and making connections was a way the Spirit was at work.

When asked why we don’t often create these spaces, some noted that fear is often the case. Both planning and going to events where you may not know who will show up takes courage and tenacity. In addition, these events take a lot of time and energy to plan, which Pastor Kevin found out when contacting very busy churches. Persistence was key, and Pastor Kevin was able to get in touch with enough congregations and people to make the event happen.

When asked if they will plan an event like this next year, the answer was a resounding “Yes!”



journeying with our pastors



Sharon Yoder, IMMC Conference Minister, reflects on how we experience God's love through storytelling.

This issue is available online:

im.mennonite.net/gospel-evangel

We are a community of congregations... Centered on Jesus... Guided by the Holy Spirit... Acting through Grace, Love and Peace... Engaging the world God loves.

As Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (IMMC), we imagine living into our vision statement as we "grow in capacity for God-centered worship, Christ-like love, and reaching out to...neighbors in Spirit-led witness and service." We imagine living into this vision as we grow relationships with our sisters and brothers in other congregations and as we tell stories that celebrate God-with-us.

I'm deeply moved by the stories of hospitality featured in this edition of Gospel Evangel. Hearing stories of Spirit movement reorients us to God's Presence, encourages our faith, and invites empathy for our siblings in Christ. Telling stories of Spirit movement is countercultural. We expect to hear bleak news about Afghanistan, hurricanes, and the coronavirus. We expect to hear divisive and politically charged comments about Covid vaccines

and mask wearing. In contrast, stories that echo the Jesus Way of extending hospitality with grace, love, and peace are refreshing and formational.

Storytelling about God-with-us is a powerful spiritual practice. It is a deliberate avenue towards unity amidst cultural, racial, political, and socio-economic boundaries that threaten to divide. As we listen deeply to the stories of others, we grow in our capacity for empathy and curiosity. As we genuinely engage others' stories, we are invited to understand even when we disagree. Through story, we experience God's Love in and through one another.

I wonder how our world will be healed as we engage more storytelling. I wonder what transformation we will experience as we genuinely listen to each other's stories.

We are a community of congregations... engaging the world God loves. We have many stories to tell about joining Spirit-led connections in our communities. Let's share them!

ministry transitions



Frances Ringenberg began as interim pastor at First Mennonite, Indianapolis July 1, 2021.



Craig Oury joined the pastoral team at Shalom Mennonite, Indianapolis July 19, 2021.



Sophie Lapp Jost was licensed toward ordination at College Mennonite, for pastoral ministry with MMN in Germany, on August 8, 2021.



Deron Bergstresser began as Pastor of Senior Ministries at Waterford Mennonite Church on August 30 (and continues as co-pastor of Faith Mennonite).



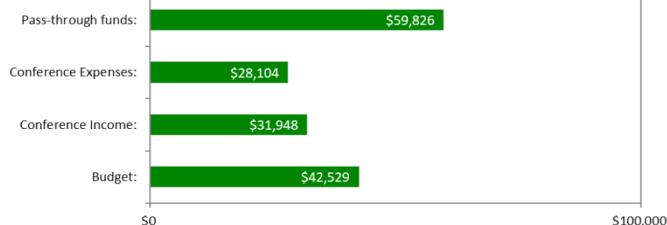
Amy Kratzer ended her ministry at Sunnyside Mennonite on July 24, 2021.



Joanne Gallardo ended her ministry at Berkey Avenue Mennonite on August 22, 2021.

financial report

Fiscal Year 7/1/2021 - 8/30/2021



Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference—a conference of **Mennonite Church USA**—is a community of congregations in Indiana and Michigan.

We are a community of congregations engaging the world God loves.

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