

C H R I S T I A N L E A D E R

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Why pain?



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Love fiercely

Supporting each other in hardship

A diving accident at age 17 left Joni Eareckson Tada a quadriplegic and deeply depressed. Through the prayers and practical support of Christian friends, she found purpose and joy. “It’s hard to be mad at God when his people love so fiercely,” she says.

Life involves both pain and joy. And yet when difficulty comes, we’re often caught off guard. One day everything is okay—maybe even great—and the next day we find ourselves coping with loss, sorrow or suffering. For one friend, it was her husband’s unexpected decision in October to move out of their home and in early 2022 to file for divorce. For another, a stumble in January resulted in a disastrous fall and weeks of rehabilitation and recovery.

The world hurts. We hurt. In writing about the questions and lessons that pain, suffering and hardship present, writers in this issue identify community as a source of comfort and support. Tony Petersen writes, “We are not meant to endure suffering, difficulties, challenges or grief alone. We are called to share one another’s burdens, to pray for one another and to love one another.” Writing about the importance of being with those who are in pain, Jon Annin says, “When I see people hurting, I often think about what to say. When I am the one hurting, I just want a hug.”

I wish I could give my two friends a proper hug, but both live in other states. I am so thankful that these women have family and friends nearby who give them hugs as well as support and care as they navigate situations that suddenly upended their lives.

When we face difficulty, the presence of people who have had a similar experience offers special encouragement. When my nephew died of cancer five years ago at the age of 25, I knew my sister’s sadness was deep. While I offered love and support, the thing that made a notable difference as she grieved was attending a retreat specifically for women who have lost a child. These women understood her pain in a way I could not.

When my mom died and Deb said that the death of a mother is a special loss, she was speaking from experience and her words carried weight. When Gwen and I talk about the challenges of living with chronic digestive issues, we both know the other is speaking from experience. When talking with Sara or Amy about the sadness of watching a parent live with dementia, their words of comfort are backed by experience.

I am thankful for the people who surround me in times of grief, pain and hardship. I am grateful for those who speak from shared experience. I don’t want to only be on the receiving end of these expressions of care and support. I want to make use of my experiences to encourage others. I invite you to do the same—to love fiercely. ■



Connie Faber

has served as editor of Christian Leader since 2004. She and her husband, David, are members of Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.

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CL editorial committee announced

A *Christian Leader* Editorial Committee has been formed to fulfill one of six recommendations proposed by the CL Review Team and approved by the USMB Leadership Board at its October 2021 meeting.

The Editorial Committee has met twice in 2022 via Zoom to orient itself to its responsibilities and the work of the magazine. The group will meet again in March to begin selecting themes and writers. The first issue that will reflect the Editorial Committee's work will be the Sept/Oct 2022 *Christian Leader*.

Members of the Editorial Committee are: Matt Ehresman, media director at Ridgepoint Church in Wichita, Kan., and host of USMB LEAD Pods; Rick Eshbaugh, Central District minister; Michele Fiester, church planter of Renewal MB Church in Rapid City, S.D.; Aaron Garza, associate pastor at Mountain View Church Sunnyside in Fresno, Calif.; Ryan Loewen, assistant professor of theology at Tabor College and pastor of worship and adult ministries at Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church; Lynn Patterson, university program specialist in communications outreach at Appalachian State University who attends Boone (N.C.) MB Church; and Shelly Spencer, office manager at Butler Church, Fresno, Calif. CL editor Connie Faber and Janae Rempel, CL associate editor as well as Don Morris, USMB national director and editor-in-chief, also serve on the committee.

A CL Review Committee is still to be named. The Review Committee will review feature essays, the editorial and "other content that contains theological perspectives" prior to publication. —CL

PDC to hold special convention

The Pacific District Conference Executive Board is calling for a Special Convention to be held March 24 for the purpose of amending the bylaws to allow for the termination of PDC membership. The first step in holding a Special Convention is for member churches to approve the recommendation; PDC congregations were asked to vote on this request by Feb. 14. As of press time, results of the vote were not available.

In a letter to PDC churches, district minister Jordan Ringhofer explains that the need to amend the bylaws became apparent as the PDC and Willow Avenue Mennonite Church, Clovis, Calif., came to a mutual agreement that a "parting of ways between Willow and the PDC/USMB would be appropriate." Ringhofer writes, "While the PDC bylaws outline how to receive a church into membership, handle assets should a church dissolve as well as grant authority to the Conference to suspend membership of a church, we do not have authority to terminate membership of a church, either by action of the church or the Conference."

In keeping with California nonprofit law, the Special Convention, to be held in the Fresno area, will be held in-person. If the February vote is favorable, a draft of the proposed bylaw amendment and Special Convention details will be sent to PDC churches. —PDC

ASCENT registration opens

Registration is open for ASCENT, USMB Youth's annual national high school summer camp, which will return to Glorieta Adventure Camps in Glorieta, N.M., June 10-14, 2022.

Register by April 30, 2022, to take advantage of the earlybird rate of \$350 for students and \$175 for leaders. The price will increase by \$50 per person on May 1.

Each church can receive one free ticket to ASCENT if their lead youth worker is part of the National Youth Worker network. For more information or to join the network, visit www.usmb-youth.com/members/register.



Jon Fiester, lead pastor of Renewal MB Church in Rapid City, S.D., will serve as speaker, while Presence Worship will lead worship. To register for ASCENT, visit www.usmb-youth.com/ascent. —USMB Youth

LEAD Pods announces guest lineup

USMB has announced a new lineup of LEAD Pods, a podcast by and for U.S. Mennonite Brethren. Recent episodes have and will feature three USMB Gathering 2022 speakers, including Jeff Hubrich, campus pastor at Lakeview Church, Grantsville (Utah); Jeff Bell, lead pastor of Mosaic in Littleton, Colo.; and Gary Comer, author, professor and founder of Soul Whisperer Ministry.

Other podcasts guests include Kyle Goings and Russ Claassen discussing the new Leadership Pipeline; Janine Westlund, a spiritual director, sharing about self-care; Bob Davis, International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) U.S. advocate; and Aaron Myers, digital outreach

director for Crescent Project, speaking about evangelism.

Hosted by Matt Ehresman, LEAD Pods are accessible on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and Spotify. To listen on the USMB website, visit: www.usmb.org/lead-pods. —USMB

Youth gather in Wichita for SDJHYC

Two hundred youth and adult leaders from 12 churches gathered at Ridgepoint Church in Wichita, Kan., for the Southern District Junior High Youth Conference (SDJHYC), Jan. 29.

Focusing on the theme, Resilient, speaker Dustin Mulkey, youth pastor at North Oak Community Church in Hays, Kan., based two session messages on Daniel's resilience and faith in the face of adversity.

"God desires for us to have a resilient faith—one where when difficulties come, we grow through them, standing firm in our trust in him," Mulkey says. "We looked at the book of Daniel and the stories of resilience as Daniel and his friends' faith was tested, how they stood firm in what God desired for them and how they were blessed because of it. My hope was that students would see those stories and understand that following Jesus often means standing out in culture and that we honor God by following him rather than culture."

Joe Weaver, worship pastor at Cross Timbers Church in Edmond, Okla., led worship. The event also included two workshop blocks and free-time games. New this year was an extreme team challenge with athletic and non-athletic challenges testing team chemistry among four-person teams.

"My prayer is that students were able to connect in some way with God through Scripture, teaching, music and the fellowship of being together," says

Southern District youth minister Russ Claassen. "Our desire is for these events to be places that bring us together in fun and meaningful environments for these purposes." —CL

COVID-19 relief funds redirected for church planting

MB Foundation Board of Directors has redirected the remaining \$216,315 in the COVID-19 Church Relief Fund to be used for church planting. The fund was started in April 2020 to assist Mennonite Brethren churches during the pandemic.

The fund launched with an initial \$25,000 donation that was matched by MB Foundation. An invitation was extended to individuals and ministries to help churches maintain financial stability, prevent major staff transitions, continue to preach the word of God and provide pastoral care. Any unused funds were earmarked for church planting culminating in the recent action.

In mid-May 2020, MB Foundation made an additional contribution of \$350,000. With donations from 131 individuals and organizations, just over \$527,043 was raised for the Church Relief Fund. Funds totaling \$310,728 were allocated to 54 MB churches in the form of 69 grants. —MB Foundation

Resilient Conference exceeds expectations

The Resilient Conference, hosted by Lighthouse Church in Denver, Colo., Jan. 28-29 exceeded expectations according to lead pastor Josh Shaw.

"It was a wonderful time," Shaw says. "All expectations and goal were met and more. We had a goal of seeing 100 pastors attend and to give away \$10,000 in grants."

The event included Friday night worship attended by 350 people, and Saturday sessions and breakouts attended by 120 pastors. More than \$15,000 in grants were given to seven churches. Shaw says if feedback is positive, Lighthouse would like to host the conference again next year.

Conference content is available at www.resilientconference.com free of charge. —CL

FPU to offer new nursing program

Fresno Pacific University's Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) Program was recommended for approval Jan. 13 by the California Board of Registered Nurses (BRN) Education and Licensing Committee, and complete board approval is anticipated in mid-February, according to Tara Sirvent, dean of the School of Natural Sciences.



Applications are open for the inaugural cohort of 24 students to start in August 2022. Once final approval is granted, the BSN program will offer two pathways, including a new pathway for students to enroll at the university without having prior experience in the profession and who may be right out of high school; and a pre-existing degree completion RN-to-BSN pathway for registered nurses seeking further education and career opportunities.

For more information, visit www.fresno.edu/programs-majors/nursing-programs-fresno-pacific-university. —FPU

5 minutes with...

MCC sends food, relief to Cuba

An MCC shipment containing more than 17,000 cans of canned chicken, 800 hygiene kits with toothpaste and 840 relief kits arrived in Cuba in September 2021. The Brethren in Christ Church of Cuba (BICCC) distributed some 44,000 pounds of MCC relief kits, hygiene kits and canned chicken.

Cuba continues to feel the effects of the U.S. embargo, which has banned most trade between the U.S. and Cuba for 60 years. In 2020, new restrictions made it harder for Cubans abroad to send money back home. The last two years have seen pandemic travel restrictions deprive Cubans of one of their most important sources of income—tourism. Without a steady stream of visiting beachgoers, Cuba's already hampered economy is barely hanging on. The country hasn't seen scarcity like this since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

MCC doesn't have a formal presence in Cuba but has sent relief there in the past. Over the last few years, MCC has sent relief funds that partners like BICCC could use to buy and distribute food and supplies locally. However, money can't buy food from empty store shelves. Shipping anything to Cuba from North America is complicated. It's legal to ship humanitarian relief but difficult to find companies willing to do it because of the perceived risk of operating under the U.S.'s far-reaching embargo.

Supporters can join MCC in advocating for the U.S. government to lift the Cuban embargo and provide relief in Cuba and dozens of other countries by visiting donate.mcc.org/cause/relief.

—MCC



Johnny Kerr

Arizona artist Johnny Kerr was excited to show his work again in person after nearly two years of cancelled events due to pandemic concerns. Last December and January his photography and paintings were the centerpiece of a Phoenix gallery's "Abstracted Realities" exhibit. Kerr's art is also a frequent element in worship at Axiom, a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Peoria, where he is part of the church's Creative Collective.

How would you describe your art?

I've practiced art my whole life, focusing primarily on photography for the last decade. After exploring various genres, I found my voice as I moved toward abstraction with architecture as my subject matter. Working with elements of color, light and shape, I found the abstract to be ripe with metaphor. God spoke to me in ways I hadn't experienced before as I engaged these works.

What did people respond to at your show?

My series "In Honor Of..." features colorful abstract photographs named after people in my beloved community. Each photograph is accompanied by a public confession honoring a relationship that has shaped me (too often this is done only in memoriam). It proved to be a healing practice of gratitude, especially during the tensions of pandemic life. Gallery guests were touched by the personal stories and often surprised to find my photographs weren't paintings.

You have said that your art is a "vehicle for asking questions." What does that mean?

Curiosity is important to my process, and it keeps the wonder of God alive

in me. I don't go out with a particular question in mind, but rather a big question mark, present and open to whatever God reveals.

How does the Creative Collective at Axiom function?

We use imagination and creativity to invite people to encounter Jesus. We may create visuals to accompany teachings or interactive stations to engage thematically with church seasons. I've been a churchgoing artist my whole life, but Axiom is the first church to nurture my creativity rather than dictate it. They celebrate creative exploration beyond typical figurative representations and icons.

What do artists have to teach us in the church?

It takes imagination to live in a kingdom that is here and yet to come. Artists are especially equipped for introspection and stewarding mystery. When we rush to certainty, we end up missing out on the chance to face uncertainty with Jesus and find the richness on the other side. But if we allow ourselves to be present with the dark areas and pain inside us, any demons we have lose their power as they are called into the light.

Website: johnnykerr.com

Interview by Kathy Heinrichs Wiest

Reflecting on my cancer journey

Big and little aspects of cancer cause trauma

Four years ago in January, in the middle of an average day, I entered a whirlwind. The tumult began with a doctor's visit, followed by a CT scan and then an ASAP referral to Wichita Urology. Each step along the way, doctors prioritized my care.

The next morning, I received a call from my doctor, catching me before my urology appointment. Having reviewed my previous day's CT scan, my doctor took a few moments to prepare me for the words I would soon hear: "You have a tumor in your bladder. You're going to be told you have cancer."

I sat on the kitchen floor. I asked my husband, Russ, to write out Psalm 23. I resonated with the words, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

Since that time, I've had six surgeries. I've had 12 Bacillus Calmette-Guerin (BCG) intravesical immunotherapy treatments and am considered BCG failure for the number of times my cancer returned. Treating cancer in an area of the body with constant fluids is tricky, and we couldn't contain the cancer to my bladder despite the efforts of a gemcitabine chemo treatment after my third surgery and a series of eight weeks of mitomycin chemo treatments.

My bladder cancer spread and became ureter cancer. I had three surgeries in 2020 as the cancer spread. Early in the year I was told I was most likely on the road toward a cystectomy within the next five years.

In October 2020, we saved my right kidney by removing five centimeters of my ureter and re-attaching it to a new location in the bladder. Due to a rare set of events, I lost a lot of blood and my hemoglobin dropped. It took months to regain health and strength.

My world has constantly been affected by and reactive to diagnosis after diagnosis.

We chased opportunities for clinical trials, but that is a tricky business because of the pathology and grades of tumors needed to qualify for certain opportunities at the right time. Within seven months, two such trials flipped requirements and

the location of my cancer changed, and the opportunities once again didn't match up.

Then came an immunotherapy called Keytruda. Keytruda has been around a little while and used to treat other types of cancer. But in the fall of 2020, it had just cleared clinical trials (the ones I couldn't quite get matched up to) to be used for bladder and urinary tract cancers.

I became the third person in the nation to start using Keytruda in an urological setting. I am Wichita Urology's first patient to receive Keytruda, and at present, continue to be the youngest patient on Keytruda. I have infusions every three weeks and lab work the week prior to each treatment. Others are now receiving infusions; some have already had to stop treatment due to adverse side effects.

Keytruda is extremely expensive, and I've had 15 infusions to date with a two-year goal of 34 treatments or until my body no longer can handle the treatment. This month, I will complete my first year of Keytruda. I am grateful for an excellent care team.

For this anniversary reflection, I'm passing over so many specifics to this journey. I seem to get many rare and challenging situations, including a recent significant skin allergy to the adhesive used following my port-a-cath surgery. The healing process of the incision has been slow and with complications. Thanks again to a wonderful primary doctor who I can call and receive excellent and immediate care when I need it.

All the big and little aspects of cancer cause trauma. I suffer from cancer PTSD and have developed a massive white coat syndrome, despite the excellent care I receive. Recently my blood pressure was 202/102 in the office, and my heart was racing outside of my chest. It stabilized quickly but remained high. Anxiety presents itself even alongside prayers, breathing exercises and spiritual reflections.

I have, in a way, become an observer of my own journey and the vast changes of primary emotions that present after each new diagnosis or surgery.

Millions of situations and events reside within the larger sphere of the cancer narrative. I am a student of human emotion, the effects of our feelings, deeper awareness and noticing the volitional movement towards and away from God that can result.

My identity work with others has benefited vastly as we work toward authentic expressions and deeper knowing of ourselves and God. I am beyond thankful for the relationships and work I do as a spiritual director. It is an honor to meet with people and hear their narratives through vulnerable sharing. I'm thankful for the flexibility it creates for me and my own health story.

My last three bladder scopes—I have them every three months—have been clear since

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starting Keytruda, as well as the yearly CT scan I had in October. As expected with the reimplantation of the ureter, things look different, and the reflux causes that right ureter and kidney to be enlarged.

I am so thankful for the opportunity for Keytruda and the timing of access for it. It does scare me that I qualify for the treatment because I am presently a candidate for a cystectomy. While I walk out this cancer narrative daily, I operate under the belief that currently I am cancer free. Bladder cancer is a lifelong journey though.

Cancer not only affects the individual but the family. I'm saddened that one fourth of my younger son's life has the narrative of cancer. All of my older son's high school years and beyond have the cancer narrative. I mourn the losses they've experienced. I mourn the lack of energy I have. I do everything I can to be present and have a front row seat in their lives. People make assumptions that I am thriving as they see me out and about, but honestly, everything is prioritized with what I say yes to, and the recovery and rest are significant on the flip end.

I'm so thankful for Russ and his constant companionship; he is with me through it all. I'm thankful for being seen and heard and known by my fabulous Triune God. Jesus



Chandelle Claassen is a trained spiritual director and certified life coach and member of the USMB LEAD Coaching team. Chandelle lives in North Newton, Kan., and dreams of creating a retreat house. One of her greatest joys has been being mom to her two boys.

Suffering well



What Jesus teaches us in Gethsemane about affliction

To be human is to suffer—to endure difficulty, experience pain and eventually die. This is the case for every single human being.

In our attempts to mitigate this pain and suffering, we read books, watch television series and films, follow sports and politics and go online and on our smart phones. We long to escape from the suffering we currently face in this life, and many spiritual gurus offer such an escape. Life is suffering, they say, so the right response is detachment from the everyday worries of life by emptying the mind. As followers of Jesus, however, we know the day when sufferings cease will not come in this life. Jesus himself encountered great suffering.

Suffering the Jesus way

In his humanity, Jesus encounters much of the daily suffering that all humans experience. But we see his suffering most acutely in his waiting for the coming of the cross in the garden of Gethsemane. In preparing for his sacrificial death, Jesus—the Son of God who is one with

the Father and whose whole purpose in coming is to take on the sins of the world—endures such suffering.

He prays, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Despite knowing that his death on the cross is a part of his eternal plan to rescue sinners, Jesus’ suffering was so intense that he asked for it to be taken from him.

This ought to encourage us in our own suffering. When we suffer, it need not signal that God has left us or that he does not care about us. Jesus suffered too, and he identifies with us in our suffering.

What’s more, as Jesus identifies with us in suffering, we can learn from him how to endure suffering ourselves. In the description of Jesus’ suffering in Mark 14, we see a model for suffering well: Jesus offers prayers of faith in community again and again.

Jesus prays

In Gethsemane, Jesus is in great distress. The first

By Tony Petersen

thing he does is not do all he can to stop the suffering. We don't typically do this. The moment we encounter suffering, our inclination is to try to get out of it however we can.

Jesus himself is God and could stop what is coming. But Jesus does not do this. Rather, he falls to the ground and prays to the Father.

Remember, too, the content of his prayer. He asks that the Father take away his suffering. We are allowed to do this too! When we experience suffering, we should come to the Lord in prayer. We can even ask him, in his power and grace, to take our suffering away.

Prayers of faith

Jesus prays what I consider to be the most faithful prayer of all: "Yet not what I will, but what you will" (v. 36). How is this a prayer of faith?

I have heard it said that to qualify our prayers to God in this manner is an example of faithlessness, not faith. I cannot disagree more. There is no more faithful prayer than praying, "Lord, let your will be done." Let me explain why.

God's will is good. He has good plans for us, he seeks our flourishing, and he longs for us to experience all his goodness forever. We can trust his will for us. God is also all-powerful. He created all things; he is sovereign over all things. So, we can trust that, if he wills something, he will make it happen. Praying such a prayer is not a faithless qualifier to an otherwise bold request. It is a faithful petition from one who trusts in God's good will more than his or her own. There is no more faithful prayer.

What's more, offering prayers of faith like Jesus did reminds us of the heart of Christianity. What's important is not how much we believe, but in whom we believe. If we have earth-shattering faith in a faulty savior, we are in trouble. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed in Jesus Christ, mountains can be moved. As Timothy Keller writes, "It is not the strength of our faith, but the object of our faith that saves us."

In community

Jesus asks others to come alongside him in his hour of suffering. He prays in community. Granted, the disciples are not a very big help. Though tasked with simply keeping watch with Jesus, they cannot stay awake. And yet, we see in this passage a recognition that, as human beings, we are not meant to endure suffering, difficulties, challenges or grief alone.

We are called to share one another's burdens, to pray for one another and to love one another. Our world has become increasingly individualistic, and so much of American culture encourages hobbies, activities and employment in isolation. I am grateful to experience this kind of love we are offered in the body of Christ in my own local church community.

Again and again

In Mark 14, Jesus repeats this process, not once, but twice. He does not stop praying prayers of faith in community. Neither should we.

I believe that this process prepares Jesus for his agony to come. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that "for the joy set before him, he endured the cross." Such a joy in the midst of utter despair and distress can only be possible in seeing beyond our present circumstances to a hope that is more sure.

This is the difference Christianity makes in enduring our own suffering. We need not suffer in agony. Though we don't know why God allows suffering, we know that it can't be because he does not love us. God experienced the deepest, darkest depths of suffering for us.

We need not suffer in isolation. God himself has come down, becoming flesh and blood and suffering for our sake. God identifies with us even in our worst sufferings so we may identify with him in his glory.

We need not suffer forever, for a glorious future is promised to us, where God will wipe every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. Neither will there be mourning, crying or pain anymore, for all these things will have passed away.

As we encounter our own suffering, let us look to Christ, who, in providing for us a model for suffering well, suffers and dies so it can be defeated forever.

Tony Petersen is a campus pastor at Mountain View Church in Fresno, Calif., and adjunct history professor at Fresno State. He and his wife Roxanna have three daughters.

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Whose fault

God is powerful and loving.
So why does the world hurt so deeply?

By Jon Annin

Whose fault is it? Whose fault is it that the man in John 9 has lived with blindness his whole life? Coming across a man who has been blind from birth, the disciples ask Jesus this question. They know that it must be tied to sin, but was it the man's or his parents'?

It is easy to judge the disciples' question, but the question lingers. The third century Greek philosopher Epicurus poses it this way: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

If God is all powerful and all loving, why does the world hurt so deeply? Wouldn't a loving God relieve the pain? This argument lands with philosophical and emotional weight. It is difficult to argue against it or offer encouragement without slipping into platitudes about the mysterious nature of God, his sovereignty or the ultimate good that may come out of suffering. But the question remains.

There are times when God uses suffering for our growth (Rom. 5:3-5) and times when he uses suffering ultimately for our good (Rom. 8:28). However, if we are not careful, as-signing these motivations to God may flow from our own egocentricity.

My brother died as a teenager and that caused me to come back to faith and become a pastor. While this was the result, the changes in my life are not the reasons my family suffered this tragedy. Looking beyond the ego of this claim, a God who operates like this would be a monster, killing one brother to improve the life of the other. We all tend to believe that we are the main character in the story, but this is most certainly not the case.

Like the disciples, the belief that suffering flows out of and is a punishment for sin is alive and well today. Modern Christians frequently operate with a karma-based worldview. "God, I did everything you asked—went to church regularly, tithed, served—and you let my wife die from COVID-19." Or, "I follow you, I pray and this pain has never gone away. Yet my neighbor cheats on his wife, leaves his children and everything falls into place for him."

Love leads to pain

Once we move past these surface reasons for suffering, we ar-

rive at the central issue. We arrive at the godly couple that prays for a child for years and has incredible difficulty getting and staying pregnant only to give birth and lose the child in the first year. The teen who walks into a trampoline park and leaves a quadriplegic. The family who buries their 23-year-old daughter who is killed by a drunk driver. Moments that go beyond pain as a consequence or a hidden good. Moments that leave us asking why.

The answer lies in the beginning, in the created order. Not in the Genesis 1 creation narrative but in a choice built into creation and a great but beautiful risk the Creator takes. God makes humans different from any other creature on Earth, making us "in his image" and for relationship based on love (Jeremiah 31:3). It is this love relationship that is difficult, because love is always a risk; it opens us up to pain.

I love my wife, and, as far as I can tell, she loves me. Through this love we have the power to bring both joy and pain into each other's lives based on our choices. It is tempting to limit the choices of the person we love. But if the person has no choice whether to love and to be in a relationship, it is not a relationship but captivity.

If there was no choice there would be no love. This is where Epicurus' equation breaks down. An all-powerful God could create a situation that does not include suffering, but it would also not include love, freedom and choice. Adam and Eve reject God's love, and in fear they choose self-sufficiency and isolation over trust and intimacy with God. A short while later the first fratricide occurs as Cain kills Abel, and the Bible says that Cain moves away from the Lord's presence and travels east of Eden (Genesis 4:16).

This movement away from God's presence that began at the tree continues today. The consequence of rejecting God is sin, death and a brokenness that travels through all areas and aspects of life. An all-powerful God did create the world Epicurus envisioned, but then people broke it.

God is not done

The good news is that God is not done. Even though we fail on our end, because of his great love, God is moving us from Eden toward heaven. Surprisingly, the way he moves us forward is by suffering himself. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, steps into our world and suffers alongside us in the "normal" sufferings of life before going to a Roman cross to pay the price we all deserved (Galatians 3:13).

When we see suffering and God's response this way, our response changes. Like Christ, our response is to be with the hurting. The answer is not in having the answers but entering

is it?



deeply into the lives of the hurting. When I see people hurting, I often think about what to say. When I am the one hurting, I just want a hug.

Job's friends were doing a great job sitting with him in his pain, and then they opened their mouths and begin to cause pain. I recently heard a friend say, "She's in a better place" to a friend whose wife had died of COVID leaving him to raise two kids. While this is of course true, it was not helpful, and in fact was hurtful.

It's complicated

In addition to being with those in pain, we can remember we live in a complicated time—the time between when God's kingdom is beginning to break through and when it is fully realized. We want heaven and we want full relief now, but the fullness is still in the future. How do we operate in the meantime?

Stephanie Hubach says it well in her book, *Same Boat Different Lake*: "Think about the 'already-not-yet-ness' of the kingdom being reflected along a spectrum of expressions of restoration. Healing is the fullest and most present expression of restoration; hope is the most future-oriented expression and help is in the continuum in between."

Our "healing" ministries sometimes fall back into the Epicurean pitfall, asking why an all-powerful God would not want everyone healed right now. I have witnessed and heard downright embarrassing stories of people on mission trips trying to pray every person out of their wheelchairs and restore every blind man's sight. But we are still in the "not yet" portion of the story where hope and help are just as important as healing.

Strength in community

Finally, our response to suffering will always drive us to live, be and heal in community. Suffering demonstrates that we are weak. A bridge is weak the moment before it collapses even though to the onlooker it appears strong because it stands upright. We are all one moment away from a collapse. If the right issue strikes us in the right place, we

"When I see people hurting, I often think about what to say. When I am the one hurting, I just want a hug."

will collapse. Acknowledging our weakness and depending on community gives us strength.

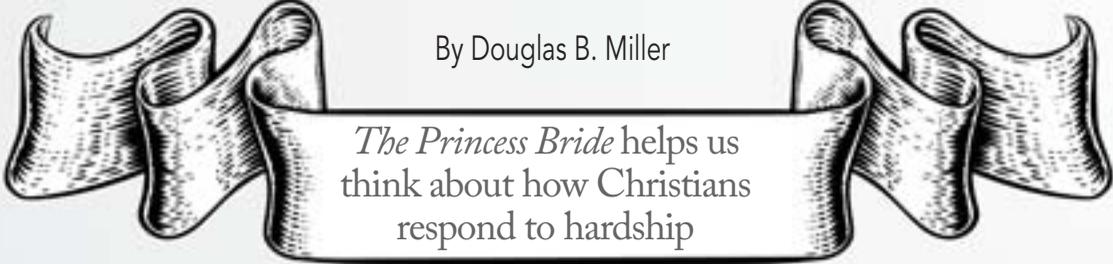
I have spent time with parents of special needs children through my wife's ministry. In this community there is a divorce rate some statistics have as high as 85 percent. One of the ministry events is an annual camp for these families. Many of the families come into the week very tired, but they leave strengthened. There are many reasons for the rejuvenation, but an important one is that by coming together in community they realize that they are not alone. They share the burden with one another as well as with loving staff who come alongside to help.

As we live with suffering and seek to minister to those around us who are in pain, let's remember the value of simply being with one another, of recognizing that full healing is still coming and of finding strength in community.

Jon Annin is lead pastor at Stony Brook Church in Omaha, Neb.

Pain, fairy tales and butterflies

By Douglas B. Miller



The Princess Bride helps us
think about how Christians
respond to hardship

The film *The Princess Bride*, directed by Rob Reiner, was released in 1987 with only moderate box office success. In the video market, however, it fared much better, and since has been highly regarded, both as a comedy and as a love story.

On one level, the film is a rollicking fairy tale adventure—an account of quests on top of quests: wealth, power, revenge and romantic love. It displays courage and cowardice, honesty and deception, justice and injustice, duels, beasts and a giant. And as is traditional for such tales, the good guys win, and the threatened lovers are reunited.

On another level, like all fairy tales, *The Princess Bride* raises questions about life that we all care about. And it sometimes startles us with them. William Goldman, the author of the screenplay and the book on which it's based, cared deeply and emotionally about this story.

Yet even those who have seen and enjoy the film may miss some of its deeper significance. Important questions about pain and hardship are raised by this account of the farmhand Westley, his beloved Buttercup, the Spaniard swordsman Inigo Montoya, the giant Fezzik and other characters we meet in this fairy tale. It is worth considering how these issues are engaged by Christian faith.

Life is pain

"Life is pain," says Westley to Buttercup. "Anyone who says differently is selling something." And then the two experience not only the fire swamp (and rodents of unusual size) but separation from each other and the torture of Westley.

At least two aspects are worth pondering in a culture that struggles to eliminate hardship and hurt and that is wrestling with an opioid epidemic on top of the COVID-19 pandemic. How can there be a good, loving and powerful God, which Christians proclaim, in the midst of such a difficult world? And, in fact, do Christians hide their embarrassment about that problem by trying to sell their God as a magic potion for all things painful? The latter can happen through a "health and wealth" gospel or by a spirituality that denies the importance of physical existence.

The Bible, from Job to Jesus, consistently embraces the goodness of physicality and presents accounts of joy and triumph that go through—not around—what is painful and difficult. Jesus promises to be with us, not always to deliver us (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 21:16-19). A prime example among the early believers is that James was executed while Peter was delivered from prison by an angel (Acts 12). Thus, the Bible itself gives witness to the difficulty of this issue as believers celebrate the Good Shepherd who leads them and cry out in lament during times of loss and confusion.

Get used to disappointment

Inigo Montoya, who has spent the last 20 years be-

coming the best swordsman he can, is astonished at the skill of the man in black and demands to know who he is. "Get used to disappointment," the man responds. And likewise, we tell our children that things do not always turn out the way we desire.

Our world is broken, in a whole variety of ways. And most concerning, we humans as God's crown of creation are broken as well.

Sometimes this reality becomes so overwhelming that we are tempted to cynicism or (the pit of) despair. As in other ways, Jesus is here our model: when he felt abandoned by God in his suffering, Jesus cried out but remained faithful and was delivered through death (Matt. 27-28; Rom. 8:18-24).

Prepare to die

Inigo has been searching the world for the six-fingered man who brutally murdered his father. When he finally confronts Count Rugen, he repeats the phrase he has been practicing since that tragic day, "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

One of the disappointments of the story is that Inigo has not found a better way to engage the injustice of his life than to perpetuate a cycle of revenge through his own act of murder. One of the more encouraging aspects of the story is that Westley later chooses not to kill or maim Humperdinck but allows the prince's disgrace to suffice for punishment.

Yet Inigo reminds us that we all must prepare to die, that the reality of death helps us to look beyond the tinsel, trivialities and relativities of our culture to ultimate issues. Jesus asks the crucial question, "Who do you say that I am?" and calls us to take up a cross, an instrument of torture and death, and to follow him (Mark 8:27, 34).

Mostly dead and inconceivable

When Westley is tortured and killed, other characters in the story nearly lose hope. Inigo and the giant Fezzik take him to Miracle Max to see what can be done. Max evaluates the situation and proclaims that Westley is only "mostly dead." And when the chocolate-coated pill miraculously brings Westley back to life, hope is reborn. It reminds us of Vizzini's earlier proclamations that certain things were "Inconceivable!"

Certainly, Jesus' brutal torture, asphyxiation, and death on a Roman cross left hope barely alive. Christians proclaim that Jesus' (inconceivable!) resurrection is his defeat of death and the continuation of God's powerful plan of salvation (Luke 24:36-48; Rom. 4:25; 6:9).

True Love

The film is framed by a young boy, sick in bed, who is visited by his grandfather. His grandfather brings a book, *The Princess Bride*, with which to help the boy ease his time of sickness and boredom. The story begins with a young lass, Buttercup, who falls in love with Westley, a poor servant on the farm. Westley leaves to seek his for-



tune and return, but alas, Buttercup hears that his ship was attacked by the Dread Pirate Roberts, who never leaves any survivors. Buttercup is distraught, but eventually resigns to her fate and agrees to marry Prince Humperdinck. But Westley has actually survived, returns and in disguise chides Buttercup for her disloyalty. When Westley's identity is revealed, her defense of lost hope ("But you were dead!") is rejected by Westley: "This is true love. You think this happens every day?"

The grandson initially protests the direction of the plot ("Is this a kissing book?"). But through the accounts of danger, Buttercup's kidnapping and her eventual restoration to Westley, the grandson is eventually won over and doesn't mind the celebration of their romantic reunion.

A theme deeply woven into both the Old and New Testaments is the way romance and marriage model God's love for creation. Jesus is presented as the bridegroom and his church the bride (John 3:27-30; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 19:7; 21:2; see also Hos. 1-2; Isa 54:5). But Westley, unlike God, says "As you wish" to communicate "I love you." How is God's love experienced in a world of pain and tragedy?

Vultures and butterflies

Some years ago, I was deeply moved by reading Susan Classen's *Vultures and Butterflies*, her account of living in El Salvador during the 1980s, a time of brutal civil war. I was impressed that those who experience Job-like tragedy can sometimes rise to amazing heights of faith and hope.

She writes, "Just before Guarjila we passed a dozen vultures. I noticed them from far off and was afraid we would find another cadaver in the road.... As we got closer the vultures reluctantly flew to a nearby fence

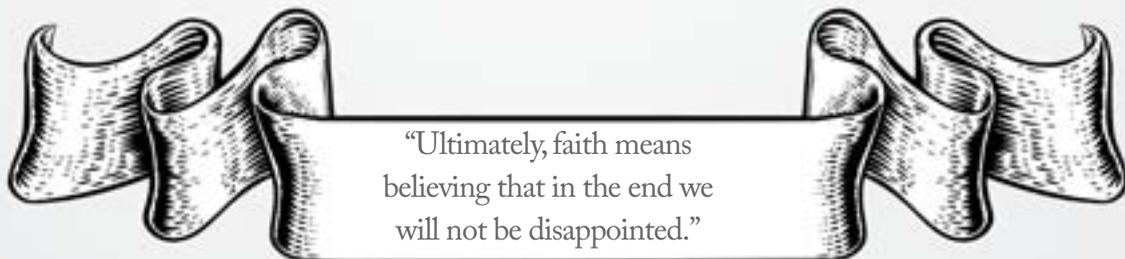
and I realized hundreds of yellow and white butterflies danced in that same area. We passed through their graceful flight. Vultures and butterflies. I was struck by the contrasting symbols of life and death. The vultures seemed so big and overpowering but the butterflies were there all along. I wondered about good and evil in my life. Do I let the evil loom so large that I miss the hundreds of small gifts of goodness?"

As Classen engaged those who had suffered terribly through poverty, oppression and war, she noticed a contrast of faith responses. In her experience, many in North America felt abandoned by God when enduring times of tragedy and hardship. In contrast, her Salvadoran neighbors, though they don't ascribe suffering to God's will, recognize God with them (Rom. 8:35-37). For example, Elena declares, "If it wasn't for God's presence in my suffering, I wouldn't be alive!" And Maria says, "Real suffering makes you realize the presence of God."

Ultimately, faith means believing that in the end we will not be disappointed. It means having hope that the distortions of our world and our lives will be remedied and us along with them through the sacrifice and life of Jesus our Savior who loves us (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:18-25).

Joy comes out of and in the midst of problems and disappointments. It is the genuine sign of God's Spirit present with us. It comes not because everything turned out the way we thought it should or because things always make sense. But it involves a recognition that despite setback and hardship, God is bigger than all, and greater than evil and wrong. As Westley said to Buttercup, "Death cannot stop true love. All it can do is delay it for a while."

Douglas Miller is professor emeritus of biblical and religious studies at Tabor College, in Hillsboro, Kan.



"Ultimately, faith means believing that in the end we will not be disappointed."

Relief sales continue to support MCC despite pandemic

MCC relief sales require creativity, flexibility during COVID-19

Around the country, organizers of relief sales benefitting Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) are holding plans for the 2022 sales loosely as the Covid-19 pandemic continues on into a third year.

In early 2020, when MCC was set to celebrate its centennial year, sales were one by one cancelled or postponed as the reality of Covid-19, particularly its implications for large group gatherings, began setting in.

Two sales typically held in April are the West Coast Celebration for World Relief in Fresno, Calif. and the Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale in Hutchinson, Kan. The boards overseeing these sales were forced to make quick pivots in planning that March.

Organizers of sales held later in the year, such as the South Dakota MCC Relief Sale in Freeman, S.D. typically held in July, had perhaps more time to make decisions, but ultimately ended up cancelling in-person events as well.

“In general, when Covid hit in 2020, many sales pivoted to online version of their sales, with some adding drive-thru meals to keep food offerings active,” says Les Gustafson-Zook, Relief Sale Coordinator with MCC.

Online sale success

Steve Goossen, board chair for the West Coast sale, said that literature promoting the sale had already been printed and mailed in March 2020 when the local health department mandated that

no large group gatherings should be held. At around that same time, Fresno Pacific University, where the sale is held, closed down its campus and went to online classes.

“We postponed the sale rather than cancelled because we still had quilts to auction off,” says Goossen. “Everybody wanted to wait and see how it would pan out.”

Organizers ultimately decided to try an online quilt auction, complete with a live auctioneer. They moved the auction from April to July to allow time to choose and learn about the software needed, as well as to take and share photographs of the quilts to be sold.

“We had so much support from people; we were just amazed how many



The Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale returned to an in-person format in 2021, although the dates were moved from April to July. Board Chair Jim Robb said the sale, held at the Kansas State Fairgrounds in Hutchinson, was a success despite its smaller size.

Photo by Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale

people bid on the quilts,” says Goossen. “Because you couldn’t be there in person, that was the next best thing.”

The first auction was successful enough that the board decided to hold another online quilt auction in November 2020, which raised an additional \$16,300 for MCC.

A third online auction was held in lieu of an in-person sale on April 10, 2021.

“One thing an online auction allows you to have is more than just your local clientele,” says Goossen. He said they had bids from people all over the United States.

Goossen said the board is currently planning to hold an in-person sale in April of 2022, although those plans are subject to change and decisions have yet to be made about safety protocol, such as whether they will ask attendees to wear masks.

Generosity on display

In Kansas, the board of the Mennonite Relief Sale challenged families and churches to find creative ways to raise money to support MCC in 2020 after the sale was cancelled.

“Our goal was not to get in the way and micromanage, but to support and help with advertising and use our communication system to get the word out for a variety of things,” says Jim Robb, board chair.

Relief sale volunteers moved to selling traditional items like almonds, caps, and yard sticks online; some people sold items such as zwieback out of their homes; and others held drive-through events. Robb says people from all over the state were concerned about MCC, which resulted in their raising close to the usual amount donated to MCC even without the weekend sale in Hutchinson.

“What came out was a tremendous amount of generosity,” says Robb.

Heading into 2021, the board worked closely with MCC to determine if an in-person sale could safely be held. The consensus was that a sale held in April would be risky, but a summer sale might be a good alternative.

“We made the decision early to change it to July, knowing that it was going to change the scope and the amount of activity at the sale,” says Robb. “In July in Kansas there’s a lot of wheat harvesting and farm activity. It was a smaller sale and there were things we couldn’t do, things that make sense in March or April but don’t make sense in July.”

Even with the changes Robb feels the 2021 sale was a success, with no reported health incidents resulting and again, a significant amount raised for MCC.

Robb said they plan to return to the usual spring dates for the 2022 relief sale, which is scheduled for April 8-9 at the Kansas State Fairgrounds.

“We’re watching Omicron, and hoping we have enough weeks between now and April for that to drop,” says Robb. “We hope that we’re able to come together and have some community and some feeling of togetherness.”

The theme for the sale this year is based on Romans 15:13 which says in part, “May the God of hope fill you with joy.”

“We’ve come through two extremely difficult, challenging years providing hope to lots of people around the world, and we hope that we’re joyful in that regard,” says Robb.

Organizers stay flexible

Edie Tschetter has been one of the organizers of the South Dakota MCC Relief Sale since 2014. She said that “while it was hard to give up an in-person event [in 2020], the decision was easy because it was the right thing to do.”

“We offered silent bidding on a number of items and also chose numerous MCC projects to which people could



FUN FACTS

Most common sale meal: **Pancakes & sausage**

Most common snack: fried raisin fritters, known as Christmas cookies, portzelky or New Year’s cookies

Top-selling quilt: Sold for **\$42,000** at the New Hamburg (Ontario) Relief Sale in 2015

Sale with **men’s pie baking** competition: South Dakota MCC Relief Sale

First quilt purchased at a virtual sale while on an airline flight: Oct. 2, 2021

Sale where local ministers create a **“Sleep through a sermon for free” pass** to be auctioned: Nebraska Mennonite Relief Sale

Amount raised for **My Coins Count** in 2021: **\$398,679**

Relief sale events in U.S. & Canada: 2019: 38 / 2021: 27

Online sale auctions: 2019: 2 / 2020: 18

Relief Sale donations to MCC: 2019: \$4,455,000 / 2020: \$2,665,000*

*Even though relief sale income was down in 2020 due to COVID-19, many generous people donated money directly to MCC instead.

Compiled by Les Gustafson-Zook, MCC Relief Sale Coordinator

contribute in cash,” says Tschetter. “We did this all through church bulletins and church email group mailings and did not do any sales via Internet.”

In planning the July 2021 sale, the sale committee decided to hold the entire event outdoors at the Prairie Arboretum, adjacent to the Freeman Academy Campus where the sale is usually held. They planned for live musical performances, a smaller auction, and pie and ice cream instead of a full sit down meal.

“When the day came, the Covid numbers were at a low point which was a good thing because it rained,” says Tschetter. “We moved everything inside the auditorium and tried to keep in mind safety concerns.”

Tschetter says that while the sale did not attract as many young families as usual, they still raised about the same amount for MCC as in a usual year.

The committee was set to begin planning the 2022 sale in late January, taking into consideration some of the changes that resulted in positive feedback from attendees in 2021.

Gustafson-Zook says that while participation in the sales was down in 2021, “donations and sales were strong, and relief sales generated over \$3 million in donations.”

“People seemed to be excited to get together again, and sales balanced the health and political differences of volunteers and participants by relying on people self-selecting their participation depending on their comfort levels,” says Gustafson-Zook.

For current information on the relief sales taking place in 2022, MCC offers a page on its website with dates and locations for all the sales planned, as well as links for those sales that have their own websites. Many of the sales also have Facebook pages that offer up-to-date information.—*Jessica Vix Allen*



Volunteers for the West Coast Celebration for World Relief in California help prepare quilts for sale in 2020. Sale organizers have held three online quilt auctions in lieu of in-person sales since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Photo by West Coast Celebration for World Relief*

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Gathering 2022 will highlight evangelism

Presenters include guest speakers, USMB pastors

USMB Gathering 2022, the biennial national pastors' conference and national convention, is coming to Kansas City, July 26-30.

The theme is "Increasing Impact: Reaching the Lost" and will focus on outreach and evangelism. Church multiplication and evangelism is one of USMB's collectively-discerned three core commitments.

"I think the majority of us would say that we need to do a better job of proclaiming the gospel to those around us who don't yet know Jesus," says USMB national director Don Morris. "Jesus himself said, 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10). If that's why he came, then we need to do all we can to join with him in that, to see more people come to know him and become true Jesus-followers."

With a full lineup of speakers, workshops, worship and business, USMB Gathering will provide an opportunity to gather with and support others in the USMB family, experience community and be encouraged, challenged and resourced.

Speakers

Five featured speakers will highlight

the event, including Gary Comer, author, professor and founder of Soul Whisperer Ministry.

Comer will provide six sessions during the pastors' conference July 26-28, including interactive sessions based on his newest book, *ReMission*. Comer will also kick off Session 1 of the national convention Thursday evening, focusing on material from his book, *Soul Whisperer*, which offers a new way for the church to view evangelism.

Other speakers include Hillary Morgan Ferrer, apologist and founder of Mama Bear Apologetics; Don Morris, USMB national director; and two USMB pastors—Jeff Hubrich, pastor at Lakeview Church, Grantsville (Utah) Campus, which launched on Easter Sunday 2021, and Jeff Bell, lead pastor of Mosaic in Littleton, Colo.

"We have a lot planned for those who attend Gathering 2022—great speakers, workshops, testimonies and worship—to help us learn how we can be better at evangelism, both as individual followers of Jesus and collectively as churches," Morris says. "I'm very excited for this pastors' conference and convention and what we'll learn together. Plus, it'll be great to actually meet in-person again—to talk, worship, share, learn and laugh with one another. We need that."

Schedule

The pastors' conference will begin with dinner followed by Session 1 on Tuesday, July 26, and conclude at noon on Thursday, July 28. Comer will speak during the

six sessions. Pastors and spouses are encouraged to attend.

Registration for the convention will be from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Thursday, July 28, with the event beginning with dinner and Session 1. Lunch and dinner will be provided on Friday. The convention will conclude at noon Saturday, July 30. Everyone is encouraged to attend.

Business will be split between two sessions Friday and Saturday mornings, with items on the agenda to include the election of new board members and representatives, affirmation of the 2022 budget and renewal of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission memorandum of understanding with USMB.

Workshops will be offered in two blocks Friday afternoon. Topics will include evangelism in rural churches, pastoral finances, engaging in global mission and evangelizing the next generation, among others.

Kim Bontrager and a team from Ridgepoint Church in Wichita, Kan., will lead worship.

Children's and youth activities will be available for the pastors' conference and national convention.

Congolese pastors and leaders will gather Saturday afternoon through Sunday for a mini-summit.

Accommodations

USMB Gathering 2022 will be held at the Stoney Creek Hotel and Conference Center in Independence, Mo., which is a suburb of northeast Kansas City about 45 minutes from Kansas City International Airport.



Gary Comer



Hillary Morgan Ferrer



Don Morris



Jeff Bell



Jeff Hubrich

USMB Gathering 2020 was initially planned for this venue before the convention moved to an online format because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The conference center is attached to the hotel and is on one level. The venue is located near Crackerneck Creek Falls, a small lake, a park and a 2-mile walking trail, as well as restaurants and shopping.

Delegates and guests will need to make hotel reservations by June 25, 2022, in order to receive the discounted room rate of \$112 per night, which includes a complimentary breakfast buffet, Internet and parking.

Registration

Registration fees are \$119 per person for the pastors' conference, \$169 per person for the national convention, \$99 for youth ages 12-18 and \$89 for children ages 3-11.

For more information or to register, visit www.usmb.org/gathering2022.

Area attractions

Free time is built into the schedule on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons and will give attendees an opportunity to explore a number of area attractions.

Located minutes from downtown Kansas City, Independence is Harry Truman's hometown and is one of a limited number of cities with a presidential museum and library. Independence was also the beginning of the Santa Fe, Oregon and California Trails in the 1800s. Other area attractions include the Arabia Steamboat Museum and the National WWI Museum and Memorial.

Independence is six miles east of the stadiums of the Kansas City Chiefs and Kansas City Royals.

For a list of attractions, visit www.usmb.org/area-attractions-2022. —*Janae Rempel*

Mobilizers eager to invest in new leaders

Internships intended to identify, train people for ministry

As a pipeline transports water for a purpose—providing clean and reliable water to homes and businesses—USMB's new Leadership Pipeline is designed to create a pool of future leaders from which Mennonite Brethren churches can draw.

It's needed, says Russ Claassen, one of three new part-time Leadership Pipeline mobilizers, citing the calls he's received from churches asking for names of youth pastor candidates.

"There's just not a lot of people going into ministry right now from anywhere, and I think we definitely see that in our Mennonite Brethren churches," Claassen says. "A lot of the new hires that we've had in USMB churches have come from outside the denomination. So, one of the goals is to raise up leaders that can then serve with our Mennonite Brethren churches, or anywhere."

To help make these connections, USMB has hired Claassen and two other mobilizers to oversee the pipeline, with the goal of identifying and training a steady stream of interns interested in ministry in a mutually beneficial partnership with local MB churches.

Making connections

In addition to Claassen, Kyle Goings and Heidi Quiring will serve as mobilizers. Working approximately 5 to 7 hours a week each, mobilizers will establish connections with churches and individuals interested in pursuing internships and facilitate training.

USMB national director Don Morris, USMB Youth and the USMB Leadership Board initially intended to hire one part-time leadership development mobi-

lizer, then shifted the approach to seek multiple regional mobilizers.

More important than geographic location, however, became a shared interest and ability to network and connect, says Goings, who will serve as lead mobilizer.

"COVID-19 has changed how we connect and who we connect with," Goings says. "Now it's more of a common interest; it's more of a shared experience connection than it is, 'I'm in this region, I (am in) this state; therefore, I'm connected here.' That's why we threw out the regional part and said, 'Let's bring in people who are naturally networking, naturally can connect and (have) a passion for what we're trying to do.'"

All three mobilizers bring established connections to the role.

Quiring, from Hillsboro, Kan., serves part-time as a mission mobilizer with Multiply, the MB mission agency. When she heard about the open position, she says she thought the role would be a good fit with her current work.

"I really want to see our churches be more united and connected, and I think this is one way for that to happen," says Quiring, who attends Ebenfeld MB Church, rural Hillsboro. "We all bring different giftings to the table."

Meanwhile, Claassen, Southern District youth minister from Newton, Kan., who is part of Koerner Heights Church, has worked closely with Goings and is already involved in national youth programming.

"I bring my Southern District connections, and I've worked with some national events," Claassen says. "I think the LEAD Cohorts have helped provide some different connections as well."

Goings, who is from Wichita, Kan., chairs USMB Youth and served in the Central District for eight years. He is a member of the pastoral staff at Ridgepoint Church, Wichita.

"All of us are Mennonite Brethren people," Goings says. "We already have

established connections, but the best part is, not all of the connections are the same.”

Whether traveling to meet face to face, making phone calls, joining Zoom meetings or sending emails or Facebook messages, mobilizers will encourage churches to seek out students displaying leadership qualities.

“All of us have that desire to grow connections with people that we don’t know and churches that we’re not already connected with,” Claassen says. “I’m excited to see this grow and see how the pipeline can be part of a larger USMB network.”

Training future leaders

The pipeline will both identify and train future leaders, utilizing a new website, www.leaderpipeline.net, where churches can post openings for internships and potential interns can post profiles.

“I think we’ll find a lot more churches are open and available to start off with because churches are already established, and we already have networks with churches,” Goings says. “We don’t have an established pool (of) up-and-coming leaders, so the hardest part about our job as mobilizers is identifying leaders and helping others identify leaders and then getting them onto the pipeline.”

Once a part of the pipeline, interns will benefit from training on both the individual level and group level.

Interns will meet regularly with a supervisor at the local church, utilizing a 10-week training package provided by the mobilizers touching on topics such as spiritual development and expectations.

During weekly video calls, mobilizers will facilitate intentional leadership training specific to the area of ministry the intern has chosen, whether working with children, youth, worship, media or in another area. Interns will have the opportunity to hear from veterans and experts in certain fields, possibly in collaboration with MB institutions and ministries. Training will include identity and confirming one’s calling, battles faced and ministry essentials, including a crash course in ministering to new generations.



USMB’s three Leadership Pipeline mobilizers met with USMB National Director Don Morris (top right) via Zoom in late January to solidify plans for the pipeline, which will identify and train its first interns in Summer 2022. Clockwise from bottom right: Russ Claassen, Heidi Quiring and Kyle Goings. *Photo by Don Morris.*

Mobilizers would like to explore ways to work together in mutually beneficial partnerships with MB institutions, including Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kan., Fresno Pacific University (FPU) and Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary in Fresno, Calif., as well as Multiply, FaithFront and MB Foundation.

While the details are still in negotiation, both Tabor and FPU plan to offer scholarships for pipeline interns, Goings says, and possible funding for internships is available through MB Foundation’s LeadGen scholarship fund.

Goings also expressed a desire to explore overlap and assistance at the district level, including with the PDC NextGen Board.

Looking ahead

Mobilizers would like to see 10 interns in summer 2022, although Goings says a more realistic expectation is three to five, adding they would like to see 20 church profiles created on the website regardless of whether that church has an immediate opening.

There are no age restriction for interns, but the target age is post-high school and college, with possible future expansion into residency programs.

“Our goal is for it to be the most effective it can be at identifying and raising up

leaders and then plugging those leaders into places where they can serve,” Claassen says. “We hope it’s a benefit to the churches as well.”

For more information, listen to Episode 46 of USMB LEAD Pods in which host Matt Ehresman visits with Goings and Claassen about the pipeline.

Potential interns and churches wanting to create a profile for the pipeline should visit www.leaderpipeline.net to sign up.

—*Janae Rempel*

USMB coaches support pastors

Trained coaches offer year-long partnership

Ben Friesen registered for LEAD Coaching to set himself up for success as he began his pastoring journey.

The lead pastor at Cornerstone Community Church in Topeka, Kan., says he needed a coach to help him improve both his skills and his mindset.

Through working with LEAD coach Ed Boschman, Friesen gained tools for ministry and an ally in his corner to provide encouragement.

“One of my specific goals was to grow my discernment ability, especially in relation to a vision for my church family,” Friesen says. “I feel significantly more equipped, and the coaching relationship helped me to trust my instincts while also giving me the tools to be more discerning.”

LEAD Coaching, a USMB initiative pertaining to the core commitment of leadership development, offers a year-long partnership with a trained USMB coach to help people move from where they are to where they want to be through accountability and support.

Coaching beginnings

LEAD Coaching began in 2009 or 2010 as a result of conversations between Ed Boschman, then-USMB executive director, and Don Morris, director of Mission USA at the time.

“I was convinced that we needed to offer coaching as part of serving our pastors (and) leaders,” Morris says. “After reading several books about coaching, the program and principles revealed by Building Champions director Daniel Harkavy in his book *Becoming a Coaching Leader* made a lot of sense. Plus, they were a coaching network based on Christian principles.”

Tasked with developing a coaching program to encourage and resource church staff, Morris traveled to the Building Champions office in Portland, Ore., to learn more about the leadership development and executive coaching services firm’s strategy and materials.

“We eventually teamed up with the Christian segment of Building Champions, Ministry Coaching International (MCI), for use of their training, systems and materials,” Morris says. “MCI ceased to exist later on, and we petitioned them to be able to continue to use their products and principles, which they agreed to allow.”

A group of seven or eight USMB leaders, including Boschman, Morris and several district ministers, completed initial coaching and training through MCI and received certificates as trained coaches.

“I remember way back when we were launching this thing, I was a little dubious, a little skeptical,” Boschman says. “But clearly the experience, the systems, what I personally learned in that process, made me a better leader, a wiser coach and provided some resources that I didn’t have before.”

Morris, who has participated in two, one-year coaching programs through MCI, also benefitted.

“Delving into life and family issues, creating a ministry vision, time management—all of those segments were extremely valuable,” Morris says. “I simply don’t understand why more of our pastors (and) leaders don’t take advantage of this tremendous coaching program provided by our own USMB family.”

When Boschman retired as USMB executive director in 2014, he became the LEAD Coaching head coach. In addition to Boschman and Morris,

LEAD Coaches are: Chandelle Claassen, Terry Hunt, Aaron Hernandez and Rick Eshbaugh.

Coaching through the gap

LEAD Coaching provides resources and accountability to help people identify their current reality, describe a preferred future and then take steps to get there.

“The big goal of coaching is, ‘Let’s take a realistic look at where are we right now and where do we want to go?’” Boschman says. “What do we need to change? Is there passion or is there pain? How will we get there? We call it ‘Coaching through the gap.’”

Coachees fill out a Growth Guide, which includes four sections Building Champions calls the “Core Four:” Life Plan, Ministry Vision, Ministry Plan and Priority Management.

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These four sections provide the focus for the one-year coaching partnership. The material is one benefit highlighted by coach Chandelle Claassen.

“The resources that are available through this coaching program really are amazing,” Claassen says. “It’s not just meeting one-on-one with somebody.”

The Life Plan includes two comprehensive inventories—completed by coachees on a personal retreat—which offer a foundational picture of an individual’s personality and behavioral style, as well as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, awareness of others, decision-making and stress management.

The inventories help a person understand why they might feel a drain on their energy.

“If you’re a staffer in a church, it reads whether your team, or, even larger, the church family, is pressing you to be different from your natural self,” Boschman says. “Then we get to a place where we measure the differential between what you’re wired to do and what you’re doing, and what you’re thinking other people want you to be doing.”

A coachee will also review his or her faith account, current priorities, health, family, friends, finances and service.

“Those seven are outlined in the growth guide with specific scripture references and questions probing into those areas,” Boschman says.

Working together with their coach, a person will identify three foci for the year.

“It helps create balance,” Claassen says. “We don’t want to be stagnant in certain areas of life while we’re moving forward in other areas.”

A coach’s goal is to be more inquisitive and less directive.

“When people buy in to their own ideas, they’re going to have action on it completely in a different way than if they’re told, ‘You should do XYZ to get to this point,’” Claassen says.

Coachees record their insights and goals in an action plan on a Life Map



Ben Friesen, lead pastor at Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan., has benefited from LEAD Coaching. “After this year of coaching, I’ve got a better hold on my spiritual life, my faith journey, as well as some of the leadership and administrative skills that I’m going to need to help my church take a step forward,” he says. *Photo by Ben Friesen*

spreadsheet, which is updated and shared with the coach prior to each coaching call.

For pastoral staff, coaching provides an opportunity to implement lessons learned with their team.

“That’s encouraged, obviously, because they can lock that into their ministry systems right away,” Boschman says. “In a way, what they’re doing is they’re coaching their team with similar principles to what they’re picking up along the way.”

While LEAD Coaching grew out of a need for pastoral support, Boschman says coaching is for everyone, including

business people, parents and church staff.

“It works for anybody and for everybody,” he says, adding later: “LEAD coaching is not just for leaders.”

Commitment to growth

Coaching requires a commitment of time and resources. Coaches talk with coachees on the phone twice a month and assign books to read, podcasts to listen to and homework to complete.

The coaching investment is \$1,800 plus \$150 for the two inventories, but Boschman says expense should not be a limiting factor as there may be opportunities for partnerships on the national, district and local church level to split the cost. Because coaching sessions happen over the phone, no travel expenses are required.

“The accountability is worth the price of admission,” Boschman says. “We do what Building Champions does for a fraction of the cost, and we offer scholarships to anybody who can’t afford it.”

Since its inception, 25 people have participated in LEAD Coaching.

“We have great trained coaches, (and) it makes a significant personal difference as well as enhances pastoral effectiveness,” Morris says. “A church investing a nominal amount for their pastor to receive coaching is an investment that sees immediate results. I wish more churches would provide this for their pastors and ministry leaders.”

For Friesen, LEAD Coaching has birthed a journey toward more confidence in who God has called him to be, as well as provided a system for practical administrative tasks.

“If you want to improve your skills and have someone encourage you along the way, sign up for coaching,” he says. “It is helpful, you have access to wonderful godly people, and they can help you pursue ministry (and life) at a higher level.”

To learn more, visit www.usmb.org/lead-coaching. —*Janae Rempel*

Praying the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-16, Psalm 34:8, Hebrews 12:2

Thank you, Jesus that you see me and want to sit down and teach me. May I be committed enough to find that quiet place where you are, sit down and learn from you.

May I see my good fortune when I trust you as all that I need.

Refresh and comfort me with your grace when I have confessed and mourned over my sins.

Grant me peace and contentment as you mold me into someone who is kind-hearted, sweet-spirited and self-controlled.

Nourish me with your justice and goodness as I actively seek you. May I be satisfied, yet always hunger and thirst for more.

Shelter me with your promise of mercy as I care enough for others to show them mercy.

Purify and heal the hidden world of my mind and heart and in this process see your presence in the world around me.

May the peace I experience from being your child overflow so that others find peace in knowing you.

Comfort me with your love when my commitment to you provokes persecution.

May your truth give me courage and strength when people insult and slander me because they are trying to discredit you. Help me hear all of heaven cheering me on as I persevere toward the joy set before me.

May others taste and see that you, O Lord, are good, as I take refuge in you. Preserve, protect and purify those around me as my character and lifestyle draw them to you. May your light shine in me so that others recognize, honor and glorify you. Thank you for the experiences that have taught me you are trustworthy in all things.

Amen

Amelia Patrie was a *Christian Leader* freelance writer when she was part of Henderson (Neb.) MB Church, now Living Hope Church. She and her husband, Chuck, currently live in West Lafayette, Ind.

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Stoking the fire

We need others around us to retain enthusiasm

My friend Monte told me a parable about a charcoal fire. When the coals are piled together, each coal remains hotter for a longer period. The coals help each other remain white-hot. Conversely, when a coal becomes separated from the others, it cools more quickly. Like hot coals, we need other Christians around us so we can remain “white-hot” for Christ.

For the past few years, the whole world has felt like a lonely, separated coal that’s lost touch with the others. I’ve felt that way as well—not within just my extended family but also our Mennonite Brethren extended family. It’s been a tough couple of years. As a pastor, it’s been hard enough to do just local church projects, but it’s been even harder to travel and connect across the country with our district and national MB relationships. Like coals in a fire that get separated, we lose our “heat” faster when we’re apart.

But I see new hope and even a fresh start on the horizon. We can and we need to reconnect. The devil loves it when we’re disconnected. It causes discouragement. It leads to hopelessness and isolation. It limits our ability to do God’s work. So, with renewed vision, we need to reconnect on critical matters like discipleship and evangelism.

And that’s why I’m writing my first ever article for the *Christian Leader*. One way I’m excited about seeing this reconnection happen is with the newly formed national USMB Church Planting Council (CPC). The CPC has been formed in 2021 to help facilitate and collaborate for planting and enhancing MB churches across the U.S. In other words, this council is designed to get us connected to “pull the coals closer together” for church planting, church growth and church encouragement.

The CPC is designed to be a resource

and an encouragement, working alongside the five districts and local churches. I’ve been on the Southern District Conference’s church planting commission (CEEC) for most of my 17 years in Oklahoma, and I for one, love the idea of a national collaborative effort. It’s hard to plant churches, and it’s hard to do it alone. It’s hard to dream when you feel you have limited resources. We’ve got some amazing people serving on this new national council, and in the months to come, I hope you get to meet some of them in person to, “fire us up” to start more churches.

Like individual coals, each of our churches alone may struggle with a momentous project like planting a church. But collectively, even if our contribution seems small, we can participate in the “heat” of a cause. One of our CPC goals is to foster more organic conversations about pooling our resources, experiences and our passion for planting.

Let’s make this practical. If you come to my church and say, “Go plant a church!” that might be overwhelming. But what if you say, “Let’s get a group of church leaders from your region to pool our resources, locally, district-wise and nationally, to plant a church.” Imagine a half-dozen churches in this conversation. One church might have a young family that’s been thinking about planting, another might be able to cobble together some money for startup costs and another might be able to offer workers for specific project assistance.

Those coals that were spread apart couldn’t do much alone, but together, with each coal providing some heat, the whole becomes greater—hotter than the sum of its parts. That’s why the new national Church Planting Council exists. Increasing impact: together. ▀



Brian Harris is pastor of Pine Acres Church, a USMB congregation in Weatherford, Okla. He serves on the new Church Planting Council with Christian Kohs, Aaron Hernandez, Henri Ngolo and Don Morris.

Mission & Ministry news stories and columns highlight USMB’s three core commitments—church planting and evangelism, intentional discipleship and leadership development.

Plagiarism in the pulpit

The temptation to cut corners when preparing to preach

Contrary to the well-worn joke, pastors do not only work for 30 to 40 minutes on Sunday. In fact, as a pastor, it often baffles me how a week's hours fill up without me even realizing it. A few ad hoc meetings, a member conflict that's arisen, emails that need a careful response. How does Sunday arrive so soon?

Yet, of all the work a pastor does, the Sunday work we joke about and the preparation for that sermon may be some of the most important work. In 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul calls young pastor Timothy to "preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." Here we find the high call to proclaim God's Word to God's people, which requires preparation and care.

Most pastors I know believe the work of preaching carries a weightiness. Pastors want the church to hear from the Lord. But sometimes, these two realities—busyness during the week and time needed for sermon preparation—collide. It is tempting to cut corners and to quicken the process. And in our technology age, it is easy to have a sermon manuscript from another preacher in a few simple Internet clicks.

This past summer, plagiarism in the pulpit became a topic of conversation as a few high-profile preachers in a well-known denomination were found borrowing from others without citing the pastor(s) from whom the work originated. While it was said that there was permission to use the material, the truth is that congregations were encouraged to believe that this material was their pastor's work. It may not have been

"theft," but are these the actions of an honest shepherd?

It would be easy to point fingers and say shame on them, but before we point out the speck in their eye, let's check for a log in our own. The temptation to "borrow" an outline or make a clever one-liner seem like our original idea can seem innocent—especially when the week gets busy or a pastor has studied the passage and doesn't know what to preach. (Did I mention it is easy to find content online to reuse?) We must remember an enemy prowls, looking to tempt pastors away from doing the work to prepare God's Word for God's people.

So, where do we go from here? Are our pastors corrupt and their sermons unworthy of trusting as original? No! However, we should not consider USMB pastors exempt from this temptation as Sunday approaches. So, people in the pews, I encourage you to respond to this reality in a few ways.

Encourage: Take time to thank your pastor for the message you heard and encourage him to continue to richly study the Scriptures so that he can proclaim well.

Ask: Ask how his study of the Word is going, how he prepares for a sermon and how you might specifically pray for him in that process.

Pray: Pray for your pastor, that he may listen well to the Word and that his preparation can be led by the Spirit and protected from temptation.

Let me also give a word to fellow pastors who grind out sermons faithfully every week. Brothers, keep up the excellent work. Be faithful in preparation. Trust the Spirit and preach the Word! May God bless you in this work. ■



Dan Strutz is the pastor of Community Bible Church, a USMB congregation in Mountain Lake, Minn. He and his wife, Susanna, came to serve the southern Minnesota congregation in 2015. In 2020, Strutz became the part-time Central District Conference minister.

Vantage Point gives USMB district ministers and ministry leaders the opportunity to reflect from their point of view on the USMB core commitments (church multiplication/evangelism, discipleship and leadership development) and other topics.

MILESTONES

BAPTISM/MEMBERSHIP

Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif., baptized 19 people in 2021.

Anthony Zillmer, Bill Morris and Tahlia Brown were baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, St. George (Utah) Campus**, Jan. 30.

Kaycee Foster was baptized and received as a member at **Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan.**, Jan. 23. Cody Foster, David Gramkow and Audrie Gramkow were received as members.

Kermit Ratzlaff was received Jan. 9 as a member at **Parkview MB Church**.

Luke Johansen, Arabel Wuest, Andy Benedick, Brooklyn Coley, Lila Minnis and Brian Curley were baptized Dec. 12 at **South Mountain Community Church, Draper (Utah) Campus**.

Kamara Tuxen, Brandon Tuxen, Cheryl Stout, Cortney Carter, Teresa Lukey and Cherie McWilliams were baptized at **South Mountain Community Church, Lehi (Utah) Campus**, Dec. 12.

WORKERS

Josh and Sarah Murrell are serving in associate and children's ministry roles at **Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Ore.**

Jessie Hart is serving as an intern at **Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan.**

Janice Outfleet concluded her service as nursery coordinator at **North Fresno (Calif.) Church**. Loretta Acosta is now serving in that role.

Henry Serrato began serving as worship ministries leader at **New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.**

Kathy Wiest began serving as bookkeeper at **Hope Kingsburg (Calif.)**.

DEATHS

Kliwer, Roy Willard, Corn, Okla., member of Corn MB Church, Jan. 1, 1930—Jan. 14, 2022. Parents: Willie P. and Matilda (Suderman) Kliwer. Spouse: Maralea Penner. Children: Gary, Michael, Nancy Fast, Shelly Loewen, Rhonda Gossett; 13 grandchildren, 20 great-grandchildren.

Luce, Christopher J., Keyport, N.J., member of Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan., Dec. 18, 1971—Nov. 29, 2021. Parents: Jeffrey and Violet Luce. Spouse: Kara. Child: Joey [deceased].

Reimer, Alyce Carolyn, Lynden, Wash., member of Good News Fellowship, Ferndale, Wash., Nov. 24, 1924—Dec. 18, 2021. Parents: Guy and Lueta Archer. Spouse: Winfred Reimer (deceased). Children: Ronald, Kent, Glen, LeAnn Clement; 10 grandchildren, six great-grandchildren.

Rink, Vivian L., Wichita, Kan., member of Ridgepoint Church, Wichita, Aug. 7, 1927—Jan. 3, 2022. Parents: Herman and Adeline (Smith) Maechtlen. Spouse: Leo Marvin Rink (deceased). Children: Larry, Curtis, Scott, Dalene Barton; nine grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren.

Stahl, Anita Tonja, Huron, S.D., member of Bethesda Church, Huron, Oct. 28, 1938—Dec. 29, 2021. Parents: Byron and Edna (Wood) Walton. Spouse: Tony Stahl (deceased). Children: Dale, Dean, Darrell (deceased); six grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren.

Stahl, Donald Mark, Huron, S.D., member of Bethel MB Church, Yale, S.D. and attendee of Bethesda Church, Huron, May 21, 1953—Dec. 29, 2021. Parents: George and Bertha (Tschetter) Stahl.

REACHING IN

FELLOWSHIP

Valleyview Bible Church, Cimarron, Kan., held a Valentine's banquet with an auction and steak dinner Feb. 12.

Women at **Axiom Church, Peoria, Ariz.**, hosted a Galentines event Feb. 7 with dinner and gifts.

Bethesda Church, Huron, S.D., hosted an ice skating party Jan. 16. Hot chocolate and treats were provided.

Bennet Peters celebrates 40 years at Okeene MB Church

The Okeene (Okla.) MB Church honored pastor Bennet Peters for 40 years of service with a reception Sunday, Jan. 16. Peters continues in the pulpit as the longest-serving USMB pastor at one church.

Peters, his wife, Jamie, and their family moved to Okeene in December 1981. The Peters had moved 13 times in 10 years become coming to Okeene and were hoping to stay five to 10 years.

In 40 years, Peters has performed eight marriages, 21 baptisms and 125 funerals, including 46 MB church members and 79 non-MB church members.

When not performing church duties, Peters can be found on the farm. He has worked for 48 people and businesses, including many local farmers and the Sooner Coop. He is also involved in the community, serving as president of the Okeene School Board; serving on the Okeene Public School Foundation for 16 years, including 14 years as treasurer; and announcing grade school and junior high football games.

Asked what has kept him going for 40 years, Peters says: "Determination (and) not wanting to fail as a pastor, but also realizing that God put me in Okeene for a reason. He knew my love of farming, so he put me in this community. Also, the people in the church and community (are) supportive and (encourage) me to stay and not leave." —Leigh Bisel



The Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan., congregation shared testimonies, readings and musical renditions Dec. 19.

Butler Church, Fresno, Calif., hosted a city-wide prayer gathering Jan. 17. The Amor y Fe congregation held a Three Kings' Day Children's Festival Jan. 9 where each child received a gift.

Cornerstone Community Church, Topeka, Kan., hosted a Christmas party Dec. 19 with dessert, a hot chocolate bar, sing-a-long and ugly Christmas sweater contest.

Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church held a Valentine Extravaganza Feb. 12 with a meal and entertainment by Rhett Walker. Women's Ministries held their first annual ornament exchange Dec. 19.

The women's ministry at **Salem MB Church, Freeman, S.D.**, hosted a carol sing, devotional and cookie exchange Dec. 16.

Stony Brook Church, Omaha, Neb., hosted a Christmas-style Taco Tuesday Bingo event Dec. 14 with an ugly sweater competition.

Women from **North Fresno (Calif.) Church** made Christmas wreaths Dec. 11.

WORSHIP

Corn (Okla.) MB Church hosted a Christmas Cantata Dec. 12.

CELEBRATIONS

Mission (Texas) MB Church will hold an inauguration service for its new building March 20.

The Lustre MB Church, Frazer, Mont., congregation recognized Frank Lenihan and his wife, Debbie, for 20 years of service as pastoral couple, Jan. 23.

REACHING OUT LOCALLY

As part of peer counseling at **Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif.**, 43 people were assigned and met with a counselor in 2021. For its monthly projects, the congregation filled more than 150 Easter baskets, collected 10,000 wipes and about 1,760 diapers for Young Lives, donated \$10,260 for Neighborhood Degree Project scholarships, donated 1,643 cookies for Salt & Light, donated 673 pieces of bedding for Sleep in Heavenly Peace, served 25 children in foster care through Care Portal and donated 13,000 pieces of candy to Houston School.

People from **New Life Community, Dinuba, Calif.**, held a prayer walk Feb. 20, followed by pizza and sharing.

Cross Timbers Church, Edmond, Okla., supported 31 children and 13 families as well as caregivers through participation in a Prison Fellowship Angel tree program.

People from **Bible MB Church, Cordell, Okla.**, supplied potatoes for Christmas food boxes delivered to neighbors in the community.

Women from **Hillsboro (Kan.) MB Church** baked cookies for Tabor College students.

Parkview MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan., raised \$31,689 for apartment renovation at Main Street Ministries.

North Fresno (Calif.) Church shared Jesus' love with its neighbors by distributing 25 Christmas food baskets, giving presents to 30 youth and raising \$4,000 to help neighborhood youth attend Hume winter camp.

The **Corn (Okla.) MB Church** congregation raised \$1,360 to purchase Wal-Mart gift cards for 20 needy families.

The **Zoar MB Church, Inman, Kan.**, junior high youth group assembled more than 900 luminaries for the community's annual live nativity event.

Buhler (Kan.) MB Church purchased gifts for local families.

Mountain View Community Church, Fresno, Calif., hosted its neighborhood blessing event Dec. 18, handing out gift cards and invitations to church.

People from **Salem MB Church, Freeman, S.D.**, purchased gifts for residents at Oakview Terrace and the Salem Home for the church's Christmas giving project.

People from **Faith Bible Church, Omaha, Neb.**, wrapped 70 gifts and distributed them to their neighbors Dec. 16. The congregation went caroling Dec. 12. The congregation also donated \$689 for Gospel for Asia.

The **Ebenfeld MB Church, Hillsboro, Kan.**, congregation hosted a live nativity Dec. 18-19. The congregation went on a hayrack ride around town to go Christmas caroling, then gathered for soup and snacks Dec. 12.

Kingwood Bible Church, Salem, Ore., partnered with the Dream Center and the Mission Care Team to give Christmas gifts to children Dec. 15.

The Bridge Bible Church, Bakersfield, Calif., hosted Merry Christmas Bakersfield Dec. 10 with lights, hot cocoa, interactive craft rooms and food trucks.

Faith Bible Church delivers gifts to neighbors

Members of the Faith Bible Church congregation in Omaha, Neb., delivered 70 Christmas gifts to their neighbors, Dec. 16, with an intention to share about Jesus and let people know they are valued and not forgotten, says pastor Stephen Stout.

Included in each gift was a flashlight, blanket, devotional, Gospel tract, chocolate covered cherries, handwritten card and an invitation to church.

"People were very warm and friendly at the door, and many friendly visits were had on that day," Stout says.

Photo by Stephen Stout



GLOBALLY

Ridgepoint Church, Wichita, Kan., packaged food with Numana for families in need in Nicaragua Feb. 19.

Neighborhood Church, Visalia, Calif., donated Lego sets, snacks, glue sticks, markers and soccer balls through Students International in Costa Rica.

Bethel MB Church, Yale, S.D., gave an offering helping to give a coat and shoes to 110 Syrian refugee children in Jordan.

CLEARINGHOUSE

Local Church

Pine Acres Church, located in Weatherford, Okla., is seeking a part-time worship leader. The job requires a skill set of musicianship, leadership and technology. If interested or to see a complete job description, please contact Lindy Miller, Search Committee chair, at misslindy21@yahoo.com or pineacres@pineacres.org

Agency

Planned Giving Advisor: MB Foundation is looking for a planned giving advisor in our Fresno, Calif., location. This is a relationship-building type of position. If you like talking to people and caring for them, this is a job worth considering. If you are looking for a career change, have a heart for people, stewardship and love the Lord, read on. This is a full-time position with a generous benefit package. Salary commensurate with experience. Training is available. If interested, go to www.mbfoundation.com/employment or email your resume to Ron Infinger at Ron@dba-search.com

University

Fresno Pacific University invites applications for faculty in nursing—undergraduate and graduate. Complete job description and requirements, as well as additional job openings, are at www.fresno.edu/careers.

Resources

LEAD Pods are the official USMB podcast devoted to leadership development and spiritual growth. This is Mennonite Brethren sharing ideas with other Mennonite Brethren—and beyond. It's the best of us to the rest of us. Subscribe on Apple, Google, or Spotify. Learn more at usmb.org/lead-pods

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Don't miss Gathering 2020

Summer convention focuses on evangelism

As we approach the summer months, I invite and encourage each of you to join us July 26-30 in Independence, Mo., (north Kansas City) for USMB Gathering 2022. Make plans now to attend the biennial National Pastors' Conference for pastors and spouses July 26-28, and the national convention for everyone July 28-30.

The theme is "Increasing Impact: Reaching the Lost" with a focus on evangelism and outreach (Luke 19:10)—as we strive to make a real difference for Jesus in our communities, nation and the world.

The guest presenter for the pastors' conference will be author and speaker Gary Comer. Comer is the founder of Soul Whisperer Ministry, an organization dedicated to helping churches develop missionally. He has planted/pastored two churches and has served as an adjunct professor at Talbot Theological Seminary. He is the author of six books, including his signature works *Soul Whisperer: Why the Church Must Change the Way It Views Evangelism* and *ReMission: Rethinking How Church Leaders Create Movement*. He is known for his energetic style of presenting, which includes considerable interactive opportunities for attendees. Comer will also provide the opening address for the convention portion of USMB Gathering 2022 which begins Thursday evening, July 28.

It'll all take place at Stoney Creek Hotel and Conference Center, just a few miles down the road from the stadium of the Kansas City Chiefs. In 2019, Stoney Creek Hotel received the "Certificate of Excellence" from TripAdvisor. It has a lodge-type feel thanks to its large wood beams, outdoor themes and modern rustic decor. A lake, waterfall, park and walking trail provide a beautiful backdrop to the hotel and will provide a small oasis for our gathering. The conference center, located at one end of the hotel, is on one level, and there are several near-by places for shopping.

USMB Gathering 2022 is something that we do together to build strong bonds and relationships. It's been way too long since we've been able to gather in person. There's just something really good about being together for worship, sharing meals, listening to quality speakers, doing a little business and talking in the hallways that just can't be replicated through Zoom. It's something Mennonite Brethren have done for decades.

One reason for choosing the Kansas City area is that it is relatively close or within driving distance for many in our constituency. The Kansas City airport is also close for those needing to fly in. We've intentionally worked at keeping the cost down for those attending. Even so, we do realize that it is an investment. It's an investment I hope you'll make!

The various speakers we have lined up, in addition to Comer, will share from their perspective about how we can faithfully be used by God to passionately spread the Good News to more people. We'll hear stories of life transformation, and we'll praise God together under the guidance of the worship team from Ridgepoint Church of Wichita, Kan.

Many of our churches will send their pastors, but I sincerely hope that many others will attend as well. When we gather in this collective way, we build up one another and uphold relationships. We need one another and we need to simply be together at times.

So, I'm asking you to consider this gathering as a priority. Pastors and ministry leaders, please encourage your church family to attend. Come to north Kansas City prepared to intermingle with others. Come prepared to worship with those who make up this marvelous larger family of believers—as we join God in fulfilling his vision for us. Come prepared and inspired to learn how we might have increasing impact: together!

For registration information go to <https://usmb.org/gathering2022> ■



Don Morris began serving as the USMB national director Aug. 1, 2016. Prior to accepting this new position, Morris served as the USMB interim executive director for two years and as the director of Mission USA since 2004. He and his wife, Janna, live in Edmond, Okla., where they attend Cross Timbers Church.

A photograph of a white ceramic coffee cup filled with dark coffee, sitting on a light-colored surface. Next to it is a brown leather-bound Bible. In the foreground, a white document with the heading "Goal Detail" is visible, showing some faint text and a table structure. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light green.

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