

Menno-Life



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Don't forget in the light what you learned in the darkness

Wanda Stopher

"Life is defined not by what we've let go, but by what we let in..." This is a quote from the British series, *Call the Midwife*, shared as part of staff devotions recently by Mary Pannabecker Steiner. It's especially interesting as we live into the season of Lent in which Christians traditionally focus on giving up something or letting go. Especially in this extended season of pandemic that has brought with it so many losses, it can be a temptation to dwell in the loss. So I appreciate the challenge of this Menno-Life issue to watch, listen, and appreciate the unexpected gifts that life offers even in the midst of very difficult times.

And there have been unexpected gifts throughout the pandemic. Extended quiet space and time for reflection have been the gift of limited activity and gathering. Deliberate and regular connection with people who matter most to us is the gift of recognition of the loss of opportunities that we may have taken for granted in the past. A renewed focus on health and what it is that actually creates wholeness is a gift of the threat of the pandemic to the world community.

These are very general. I also think of some specific gifts I've heard people note. Specifically, I've heard reflections from individuals as they tell about their engagement in the Bible Scribe Project. Repeatedly I've heard people say that their experience was one of really feeling a peace or a calm come over them as they scribe. One person said, "It's just like you said, I became intimately engaged with the scripture in a powerful way." It has also been a gift of the project not to become distracted with ideas of perfection, but instead, to value and focus on the experience of engaging with a passage of scripture. It's been a gift to work together even while we're still distanced, by devoting ourselves to a common project, with the common goal of going deeper in faith.

All this reminds me a bit of another quote, one I've read by American editor, author and poet, Joseph Bayly. The quote goes, "Don't forget in the darkness what you learned in the light." It's a reminder that the truths we discover in the daylight, if they are really true, are hardy and will not only withstand the cold realities of the darkness, but will actually encourage and sustain us in times of loss and despair. The funny thing is I can never remember for sure which way the words go, in part because both are equally true. My hope and prayer then continues to be "Don't forget in the light what you learned in the darkness." By naming these gifts in the midst of difficult days, may we also remember in brighter days to come, the truths and the gifts we want to carry forward when restrictions lift and pandemic life is past.

Gardening becomes source of hopefulness in time of Covid

Jeff Boehr

To be honest, my observations about this year in pandemic time will take some processing to connect to the meaning it is contributing to life. This is mostly based on the reality of my personality type which

draws me to step back and dwell on what I have been noticing before offering a sense of meaning to experiences.

There is an observation that has reinforced a strong positive basic value for me: that gardening has taken an upward turn in the past year. We increased the size of our garden last spring in response to a sense that it is good stewardship to grow some of our own food and be in touch with and participate in the path our food takes in sustaining us. It is also a source of joy for me to be close to how the earth has been created to benefit our well-being and the well-being of all life. Being a part of that is life-giving as well as life-receiving for me.

It has been a source of hopefulness in the disruption of the time of Covid that feels very real to me when I taste the green beans, kohlrabi, lettuce, kale, beets, and carrots from the garden. Even, and especially, the Brussel sprouts are the taste of hope for me!

I have always liked playing or working in the dirt since my childhood. It is still fun for me and during this year of Covid the fun times are needed and welcomed. As I write this, the nice blanket of snow is melting and the thought of getting in the garden for some fun and growing the taste of hope makes me smile. I can say with confidence that Covid time has alerted me to the increasing joys of gardening.

Life is defined not by what we let go but what we let in

Nearly every episode of the British television series, Call the Midwife, makes a comment on the human condition and often those comments can apply to our past 12 months. In one episode, this quote stands out: "Not all of us can choose what we give up. The things we love are taken or never ours at all. Life is defined not by what we let go but what we let in friendship and kind words – frailty and hope. To be human is to be imperfect and to accept that is to thrive." (Jennifer Worth)

We've given up much in the past year, but through that, we've learned that when we cannot alter things or control things, we can learn to recognize the gifts within those parameters. What follows is how some FMC responded to questions relating to this quote. ~ Mary Pannabecker Steiner

If anyone at Maple Crest has reason to think less than positively about this year-long isolation, it might be **Mary Yoder**. Having well passed the 95-year mark, plus breaking a hip and undergoing hospitalization and rehab early on in our Covid days, Mary is back in her Maple Crest apartment and attending exercise class regularly. "My eyes are bad," she says, "so I can't read as much as I used to. I probably watch more TV than I should, but I want to keep up with things in the rest of the world. I think my mind still works pretty well, so I do what I can."

Although the recent heavy snow has kept **Paul Klassen** from his regular daily walks outdoors, he has brought some of his wood-working tools into his apartment so he can keep on creating art even while living his days inside. We hope to see the results of his handiwork soon.

Last fall, **Joanne Niswander** decided it was time to go through all the carousels of slides that had accumulated from 50-plus years of marriage and traveling. A good project for the approaching days of isolation. Salvaged were a treasure-trove of family pictures, some 700 in number, that now are housed in one tiny thumb drive available for viewing on computer any time she wants to reminisce.

Greg Ring

Over the last year, I have been able to slow down and really see the beauty of nature all around us. I have been able to hear scripture in a whole new way through the voices of our Sunday school class. I am able to completely absorb the love of my family.

Beth Raeburn

What have you *let in* during the past year? Would you hope to continue those even after things open up again?

Home has always been a wonderful and safe place for me and I am fortunate to be able to say that about my entire life. But home has felt even safer during the last year. This happened gradually since last March, but it is so comforting to me to be at home and away from the worries of being *out and about* during this pandemic. *Out and about* means doing necessary things like grocery shopping, but it also means teaching in person with 17 students all year. What a relief to be at home where I don't have to worry about catching the virus. I let this feeling in and I am so thankful for it. And I think this new, added feeling of safety and the love of being at home will continue.

What is the one thing you're looking forward to when the pandemic lessons and our world opens a bit more?

If I had to pick one thing I am looking forward to the most when the pandemic lessons and our world opens a bit more, it is being inside my family's homes and our friends' homes. We've made being distanced in garages and on patios work very well, no matter what the weather, but I can't wait to enjoy being inside safely again! We were in my brother's garage this past weekend and the wind chill was 0 degrees. While I love winter, this was about all I could take! I am ready to enjoy connections inside!

Top 5 list of things that you've found surprisingly enjoyable or special over the past year?

1. It's been wonderfully special to gather outside with a wonderful three other couples almost every weekend over the past year.



2. We have enjoyed being able to continue to gather with my family outside, thus keeping up the every weekend supper together...bringing our own food and sitting apart, but nevertheless, still being together. We've done this with my Suter family for 25 years now. The pandemic did not stop this!!!

3. Professionally, the pandemic has forced me to grow and learn new things that I never guessed I would have been faced with and this is my 28th year of teaching! While it hasn't been easy, I have enjoyed learning

new skills and teaching in new, different ways. More than ever, I so appreciate special colleagues. In my role as teacher union president, I am also thankful for a year of successfully working closely with our excellent administration so that students and teachers could have the best year possible.

4. Our family of three has grown even closer and I can't put into words how special this is. While it isn't always easy to be at home together for so much time over a year, we have done this very well! We have had to work together to adapt to lots of unexpected events over the years, and so maybe those things in the past helped us to adapt to what we would need to do to make this year be special, too.

5. I have enjoyed the many gifts of so many of the members of our congregation during this year of online church. While this is not surprising, it has been great to hear and see what our members have to offer in such unique ways! I'm not sure I would have been aware of many of these gifts had we been meeting in person all of these months!

Rich Bucher

The last 12 months have definitely changed my life. Feb. 24, 2020 saw Gloria and I returning from a trip to Australia and New Zealand. Little did we know that in two weeks our lives would be changed in many ways, probably forever.

- I became aware of my health and the health of others in new ways.
- It is okay to wear a mask to protect all of us.
- I have found myself making sure I get enough sleep
- Trying to relax more instead of go, go, go!
- I communicate more with my sons (even with zoom)!
- I find myself asking others how they are doing and if there is something I can do to help them.
- One of the things I have learned a new appreciation for is the Bluffton Public Library. They are very good at making available the books you would like to read
- Making friends again with my accordion.

There are a number of things I look forward to doing again.

- Number One is GOING TO CHURCH AGAIN! Life doesn't feel right without it. My routine is messed up when I don't go to church!
- Traveling by car to visit family and friends, and especially my friend in prison
- Enjoying longer trips to family and friends in western Canada (Alberta, Saskatchewan)

Linda Headings

What have you *let in* during the past year? Would you hope to continue those even after things open up again?

A year ago, as I adjusted to the limitations of staying safe during the pandemic, I found myself dusting off my sewing machine and exploring new creative outlets that soothed my soul. Hours each day have been spent sewing, quilting, embroidering, and trying out felting and other hand arts.

The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls. – Pablo Picasso

What gifts have you found within the pandemic?

I have always been drawn to history and the stories behind the events, which over the years has led to a passion for genealogy. In a normal year I travel to libraries near and far for access to free genealogy site subscriptions and to look at microfilm. This past year many of those resources have been made available free to library card holders at home and I have been able to do research and not be limited by time or distance. Extra time this year has also allowed me to document my parents' stories with the goal of sharing the memories of their childhood, siblings and grandparents with my wider family.

What is the one thing you're looking forward to when the pandemic lessens, and our world opens a bit more?

Hugging my Mom and Dad as Ron and I hit the road for some TRAVEL and new adventures!

Top 5 list of things that you've found surprisingly enjoyable or special over the past year?

1. playing Wingspan (a board game) every night after dinner with Ron
2. reading the family Facebook posts by Laura Hartzler and Kathy Dickson
3. playing pickleball at BFR with our bubble group of players
4. the engagement and creativity of worship from FMC members' living rooms and the outdoors
5. giving away to Et Cetera Shop what I could not part with before

Fred Steiner

What have you *let in* during the past year? Would you hope to continue those even after things open up again?

This is the heavy-duty one: I've learned that birds couldn't care less about the pandemic. It's not the end of the world for them. Life simply continues with them. I'd like to adjust my thinking like this. However, I do not mean this in a selfish way. I do want to be alert to the issues facing other people.

What gifts have you found within the pandemic?

- Baking. It's something I can do for myself and have an immediate reward. It doesn't matter if what I attempt flops.
- Putting together 1,000-piece puzzles. I never thought I could do it.

What are you looking forward to when the pandemic lessens and our world opens a bit more?

- Sitting in front of the coffee shop on a Saturday morning and watching the crowd walk by.
- Getting on the Amtrak Empire Builder in Chicago and taking a round trip to La Crosse, Wisconsin, to visit our daughter, Lindsay.
- Driving to Cincinnati and either watching the Reds play, or listening to a Cincinnati Pops concert, with our daughter, Anne.
- Visiting an art museum with my wife.

Top 2 things that you've found surprisingly enjoyable or special over the past year?

1. Not having to attend an evening meeting in person. I can sit at home and do it on Zoom.
2. Oddly, I've found less things to spend money on in random ways.

Theo Andreas

Top 5 things I've found enjoyable during the past year:

1. Disc golf
2. Watching movies/shows together as a family
3. Learning more about racial justice
4. Getting to continue playing soccer
5. Getting to continue in-person school

Jan Wiebe

Top 5 things I've found enjoyable during the past year:

1. Backyard bonfires, even in the snow
2. Daily walks, alone or with others
3. Engaging more with racial justice issues
4. Outdoor activities with the family (disc golf, tennis)
5. Not having to travel for my work

Exploring, connecting to the music and texts of *Voices Together*

Dr. Mark Suderman

The new 2020 Mennonite hymnal, *Voices Together*, is the first full hymnal created by the denomination since *Hymnal: A Worship Book* came out in 1992. Two hymnal supplements were issued between those dates, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007). While the publishing date for *Voices Together* is 2020, our hymnals arrived at First Mennonite Church just a month ago, in late January 2021.

A few facts from Menno Media about Voices Together: It has 992 pages—more than any of our previous hymnals. It features 760 songs and 309 worship resources. Of the 760 songs, 58% are four-part. An additional 11% feature some vocal harmonies, 31% are fully unison, 51% are tune and text from HWB, STJ, or STS; and 12% use a text or a tune from these books.

With every new hymnal, there are mixed feelings of excitement about what new hymns will be explored, as well as trepidation about what favorite hymns might be left out. These mixed emotions are true for me as well. However, I strongly believe that the publication of a new hymnal was needed. The (universal) Church changes and the music must adapt accordingly. We need new music and new texts to



move us forward in our faith journey. That is not to say that old hymns no longer have a place in our church's repertoire. Many hymns, both in music and text, still speak strongly to spiritual growth, faith exploration and more. However, outdated texts need to be brought into the present, when possible, without destroying poetic function and beauty; plus, theology, that in the past seemed appropriate, may now need to be altered to match the change in thought or understanding of the current church. Even certain musical styles may no longer speak to the current generation. Again, just because music may be "old" doesn't mean it is no longer useful or valuable. However, some music just does not stand the test of time. These are long, difficult subjects to discuss and discern, and, most likely, were a major portion of the hymnal committee's considerations in finalizing hymn choices. So, with those understandings in mind, I offer some personal thoughts.

First, I am very grateful for all the people and the hundreds of hours that were invested in this project of love and thoughtful care. I am sure that each person was dedicated to do their best in offering this new book to the Mennonite denomination. Second, and very importantly, it should be mentioned that this book not only contains hymns, but also readings, poetry, resources of various kinds, and even artwork. All these items will enhance worship and spiritual growth for many years to come.

I have now played through/sung all the new hymns in *Voices Together*. As I did this, I made note of hymns that I believe will positively enhance our worship at First Mennonite Church. My list includes over 75 new hymns of various styles, languages, and genres that I am excited to share and introduce to the congregation. I am sure I have missed additional hymns that others will appreciate and enjoy. I am also looking forward to analyzing, pondering, and connecting more deeply to the music and the texts after this cursory, initial excursion through the book.

While we continue to borrow music and learn from other denominations (which we should continue to do to broaden our church body and its connections), there are many new Mennonite/Anabaptist composers and poets in this hymnal. It is exciting to see the Anabaptist growth in this book – both musically and theologically. There are more hymns about justice and peace, including texts about racial justice, gender equality, creation care, and more. I believe that there are more new unison hymns than four-part hymns. While this may be more positive or negative depending on what a church typically sings, there are quality additions in both areas that will serve the wider church well, especially in the unique and broad-based accompaniment book that is part of the entire collection. Beyond the music, there are insightful, challenging, and unique new readings. Also included in the resource section, are additional scripture references to hymns, which are incredibly helpful in worship planning. And, to come back to how music outside of our norm can positively affect us, there are more multicultural hymns that will help us better understand and connect us to our sisters and brothers, not only around the world, but right here in our country between various ethnic groups and denominations.

Yes, some of my favorite hymns are missing (and I'm sure that will be true for others as well), but the vast array of new music and text far outweighs these disappointments. And on a side note, we are fortunate to have pew rack space at First Mennonite Church for more than one hymnal. While we want to spend much of our time exploring and growing, it is important to maintain our connection with the past, including remembering and enjoying the music that formed our faith foundation. We will continue to learn new hymns through our virtual worship services at this time, including a new hymn each Sunday of Lent, but I can't wait to join together in person to raise our voices with our new songs in praise and adoration to our awesome Creator God.

A lifetime of hearing and singing hymns; ready to learn more

Joanne Niswander

I've been asked to make a few comments about our new hymnal. And, since I've been in and around church music for all my 91-plus years - playing it, singing it, listening to it, I guess I have a bit of background. So, let's begin at the beginning.

When I was a child, music at Meadows Mennonite Church in rural Illinois (my birth home) was primarily gospel songs of the Homer Rodeheaver-style. My mother played the old pump organ some times, and also the upright piano. I was still living at home, in high school I think, when we got our first electric organ - a real upgrade. And, by that time, we also had real Mennonite hymnals and were becoming more acquainted with what I might call a "higher church" type of hymn.

And then I came to Bluffton College as a music student and was introduced to the music at First Mennonite. Oh yes, we sang some of the same songs I knew from home, but the entire service was more formal and music was a good part of our worship. I loved the four-part singing.

By the time Dean and I were married, in 1950, I was organist at First Mennonite with all the duties that came with it - prelude and postlude, leading the hymns and accompanying the choir. Services were formal (and ladies still wore hats - the men suits), the music primarily classical. Usually, hymns were chosen to enhance the general theme of the morning. I don't remember a new hymnal being introduced during those 14 years, but I know that I thoroughly enjoyed accompanying the fine four-part singing.



From 1964 to 1990 we lived away from Bluffton and found our niche in Methodist churches that, in many ways, echoed the striving for quality of music we had found here at Bluffton (but not quite!) But then we returned to Bluffton and got immersed in the music at First Mennonite again.

Shortly after we moved back, our present *Hymnal - A Worship Book* was introduced. Christine Purves and I were asked to lead some evening learning sessions and so we got busy finding new hymns to introduce in creative ways. There were, in that new book, many hymns new to us. Two stood out that we thought were especially beautiful but hard to sing and different from the standard. So we tackled them.

One of those hymns has not made it into the new hymnal - "O Let All Who Thirst" (page 495 in the old hymnal.) I will miss it, but it takes singers with good breath control as well as vocal range to do it right. (Mark, perhaps you can ask the choir to sing it again for me sometime.)

The other hymn I can't forget is *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, page 298 in the old hymnal and, in abbreviated form, page 370 in the new one. In this new edition, only the chant is depicted on one line - the verses can be found in the accompaniment edition.

I guess I'll just have to listen to that one in my head from now on.

So, after telling you all the things I will miss, let me say that I'm looking forward to the new hymns that will soon become familiar, thanks to Mark's pleasant way of prodding us along. And I can always sing to myself those favorites that aren't in the book any more. That's what memories are for.

And now, for those of us *elders* who can still remember the stentorian tones of the Reverends J.N. Smucker and Alvin Beachy, a word about the many syncopated, hard-to-read-the-music hymns in this new one. Don't even try to read the music - just listen to the beat and follow along. You'll soon be smiling, just like the younger folks.

Oh, one more thing: I am so happy that *This Is My Father's World* is now officially changed to *This is God's Wondrous World*. I want that hymn sung at my funeral - with the new/old words. Don't forget!

Racial Justice Ministry begins conversations on local and national issues

Jan Wiebe

This year Americans have been forced to stare in the face the reality that racism continue to profoundly shape life in our country. Many churches have responded with the recognition that the call to follow Jesus includes the call to dismantle systemic racism that perpetuates oppression and injustice. Out of this desire, Brent Schroeder initiated the formation of the Racial Justice Ministry at First Mennonite Church in July 2020 with a goal of undoing white supremacy and racism in the church, local, and national communities. The ministry is co-chaired by George and Anita Lehman, Jan Wiebe, and Theo Andreas. This article provides an update on some of the activities so far.

The ministry started by purchasing access to an anti-racism training made available by MCUSA and Widerstand Consulting. A group started meeting via Zoom to view and discuss things such as history of race and racism, white supremacy culture, and internal bias. Thirteen church members completed the training, and others viewed parts of it and participated in online discussions.



In an attempt to find local and national issues to get involved with, the ministry went on to host bi-monthly Zoom conversations on the impact of racism on housing, policing, and the justice system. In our meetings on housing, we've discussed zoning regulations, urging a village welcoming statement, and housing rehab, among other things. A housing group continues to meet to learn more about the topic and how we might be able to welcome more diversity in Bluffton. A guest speaker knowledgeable about bail reform spoke to our group about the problem of jailing people who are accused of minor offenses and awaiting trial. Cash bail systems discriminate solely on the ability to pay, and often have

long-lasting impacts on trial outcomes, jobs, housing and families. Jan participates in a weekly Racial Justice Committee in Lima to explore bail reform locally. Four FMC members participated in an all-day bail reform workshop sponsored by the ACLU.

A conversation with Tyson Goings and Quincy Salcido from Bluffton University centered around experiences of Black students in our village. While some students feel comfortable shopping and walking around town, others feel more comfortable going to Lima where they feel more welcome. Learning about uneasiness with the Blue Lives Matters stickers on police vehicles led us to a Zoom meeting with Bluffton's Chief of Police, Ryan Burkholder, about department policies, practices, and community relations.

Judy Steiner researched and compiled a list of racial justice-themed books for our church to purchase for the library. Most are books for children and youth, but will be appreciated by adults as well. Gary Wetherill donated children's books with Native American themes.

Jubilee Funds were used to give a donation to the Justice Fund, which was established in the summer of 2020 to help Mennonite churches who are doing the work of dismantling racism in their communities. While we are striving to do this work locally, we also want to provide mutual aid to congregations that are already deeply engaged in this work.

Much work has been happening simultaneously in worship services and in Sunday school groups that have strengthened and complimented the work of this ministry. The high school youth are discussing Drew Hart's book *Trouble I've Seen*, led by Carrie Mast. The classes led by Ray Person on Bible and Empire and by Perry Bush on History of Race and Ethnicity have added to the depth of understanding of these issues.

Going forward, we hope to find more concrete ways to act. Our next meeting is to learn about actions other churches in Central District Conference are taking, including an invitation to join Shalom Mennonite in Ann Arbor in a reparative act. The ministry is exploring an internal audit, where we look at First Mennonite's policies, by-laws, and worship practices to see where we might inadvertently be excluding people of color from participation. We are grateful for participation from a wide variety of people in the church, and welcome others to join our work at any point.