

## Mennoscah shelters and renews campers

by Olivia Bartel, Director, Camp Mennoscah

Back at the house on 38th Street, we had a huge forsythia bush. It was one of the greatest things ever. In spring it popped out in a gloriously bright yellow, turning a brilliant froggy green after the blooms disappeared. The branches dropped down and created a space for hiding, imagining, reading—a place of shelter and renewal.

Our summer youth camps are practically here and Camp Mennoscah is closing in on forsythia season. Camp is vibrant with laughter and colors when campers gather together to worship and play. It's a shelter to escape the constant nagging of an everyday schedule. Imagine singing or hooking a catfish or floating in the pool or making one more friendship bracelet or sprinting for the tube during Borrow the Balls.

Youth talk of being able to be themselves at camp. They talk about how they feel closest to God at camp. Well, it's a double whammy this summer. We're going to "Get REAL and Find Our True Selves in Jesus." We'll shed our societal skins, casting off false expectations and electronic anchors.

Camp Mennoscah is sacred space that does amazing things for people. I've seen lives start anew, attitudes change, and watched growing leaders head back to their home communities. Camp Mennoscah is a place where people of all ages come to renew themselves, their relationships, and their connection with God. In this most sacred space, we intentionally seek the intersection of God, nature, self and others. For summer 2014 schedules and registration, go to: [www.campmennoscah.org](http://www.campmennoscah.org).

## Coming Events

**April 5 and May 3**

WDC Resource Library open  
(10 am-12 pm)

**April 25-27**

Pastor/Spouse Retreat  
Camp Mennoscah

**June**

SHINE curriculum training  
TBA

**July 4-6**

WDC Annual Assembly  
Lakeview Camp & Retreat Ctr.  
Waxahachie, TX



# WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference  
April/May 2014



## Houston Mennonite's new church to symbolize counter-cultural welcome

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

In the next two years, Houston Mennonite Church will witness the building of its new church, designed to symbolize being in the world, but not of it. That gospel principle is at the heart of the church's desire to continue to be a welcoming presence that is also counter-cultural.

Houston Mennonite, planted by Western District Conference (WDC) in 1967-1968, sought to welcome others in Christ by reflecting its values of peace- and community-making. Over the years, that welcoming spirit helped to establish a 90-member congregation that is overflowing its sanctuary capacity.

The congregation has decided to replace its former building with a new meeting house on a section of the former four-acre hog farm purchased by WDC for the church plant. Several years ago, the congregation began discussions about its future. It considered moving to a new location but then felt led to remain on a little less than half of the original site that was once in the suburbs but is now part of the city proper. The congregation is selling a bit more than two of the four acres for \$2.4 million to a residential developer.

By sometime in 2015, the congregation will break ground on the remaining acreage to construct a new

9,000 square foot building with proceeds of that sale. The current building is about 4,400 square feet.

"We have always been oriented around an Anabaptist understanding of peacemaking that is an alternative to the violent society around us, and we asked our architect to design a building that symbolized that," Pastor Marty Troyer said. "The floor plan includes a building that is not at right angles. Many churches are symmetrical or square, but we wanted a shape that reminded us of our calling to be different.

The building is designed like a bicycle wheel with spokes, Troyer said. The foyer is the center of the wheel, and it is shaped like a triangle with no right angles. The sanctuary, one of the spokes off the foyer, has several cut-outs and odd shapes in it. One of its corners is a prayer room, and the nursery juts out into the sanctuary intentionally.

"The part I am excited about is that it will double our space and that will double our flexibility," said Lynda Voran, chair of the campus development team and member of the congregation since the mid-1980's. "With our new multipurpose area, we can better do fellowship meals and can offer space to groups in our community. "

In their excitement about the future, Troyer, Voran

## Annual assembly to highlight church planting, Year of the Bible storytelling

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

As congregations and individuals gather for Western District Conference's annual assembly in Waxahachie, Texas, on July 4-6, they will explore the theme, "God's Patient and Persistent Pursuit." "We will reflect on that theme as we celebrate stories about how we have lived into our emphasis on the Year of the Bible (YOB) and as we launch into our new emphasis on church planting," said Marlene Bogard, WDC's Assembly planner.

**Friday evening:** Tag-team preaching with WDC pastors, celebrating Year of the Bible and Communion.

**Saturday:** Delegates will conduct business and spend time in discernment about a variety of issues, along with free time and several break-out sessions. In evening worship, Gilberto Flores, WDC's Associate Conference Minister from Texas will interview several church planters, to hear their stories, inspiration and dreams.

**Sunday morning:** All will worship with the Hispanic congregation, *Iglesia Luz del Evangelio*, in Dallas, about 45 minutes away from the retreat center.

Registration information will be available in early May at [mennowdc.org](http://mennowdc.org).

 **Western District Conference** is a regional grouping of Mennonite Church USA congregations located in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

**Western District Conference**

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and other members of the congregation have not forgotten the vision and generosity on the part of WDC in the past. These “roots” are giving the congregation the “wings” it needs to grow its campus and its ministries.

A portion of a letter sent to WDC on November 4, 2013, reads, “From our beginnings in 1967, our relationship with the WDC has been strong and meaningful. In 1966 and 1967 WDC conference pastor Elmer Friesen was instrumental in catalyzing and forming the nucleus of what would become Houston Mennonite Church, and on April 14, 1967, he accepted the call to be the first pastor in Houston. In June of 1967, with monies from the Home Mission Committee of WDC, four acres of land at

1231 Wirt Road (our current location) were purchased. ...On November 17, 1968, services were held for the first time in the new facility, which was constructed for a total cost of \$48,500, with funds coming again from the WDC Home Missions Committee.

“We have benefitted greatly from the vision and generosity of Western District Conference! We stand on the shoulders of faithful leaders who sacrificed so that Christ’s message of liberating love could flourish in Houston. And the blessing to build a new space is offering us the opportunity to pay it forward and to bless and nurture other ministries and groups with whom we can partner in Houston,” Troyer said.

[www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org](http://www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org) - Find us on Facebook!

## Bible Stories become warp and weave of daily life

by Laurie Oswald Robinson



Since Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church (AMC) began the “Reading the Bible in 90 Days” challenge, the scriptures have been shared at coffee breaks, sports events, supper tables, hair salons and car dealerships. Comments about the readings are even finding their way onto Facebook, said Hope Greiser Graber, youth pastor.

This social sharing of spiritual insights is one of the best surprises of the experience, said members of the AMC pastoral staff. In fall 2013, the pastors invited the congregation in Goessel, Kan., to consider embarking on this challenge. The church would consolidate all its adult Sunday school groups into two intergenerational classes for perspective and encouragement. And the weekly readings would help shape Sunday morning worship.

The congregation began the challenge Jan. 26. On April 27, the church will celebrate its culmination of the challenge with a worship service and fellowship meal. In the meantime, the pastors are rejoicing at the growing community-wide fascination with the biblical narrative.

“People are saying they are surprised by what they are reading, because they are reading it as an over-

view, rather than in bits and pieces. It suddenly is a complete story and that is giving people an entirely different perspective and appreciation,” said Linda Ewert, Associate Pastor of Christian Formation and Pastoral Care.

The challenge is also serving to unify the congregation in an era of less cohesion as a group, said Pastor Steve Schmidt. “There aren’t many things we do together anymore except for Sunday morning worship and MCC. The Bible is our common book, and Scripture is our base for life, and it is fitting that we are sharing it together.” For more information, go to: [www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org](http://www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org).



## Generosity outsizes congregation’s membership

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

The 35-member Ransom (Kan.) Mennonite Church may be considered small in number, but its heart is as big as the western Kansas sky.

After an unusual fiscal surplus in 2013, the congregation decided to gift seven organizations – including Western District Conference (WDC) – with \$4,000 each. The other recipients are Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee, the Heifer Project, True Vine Tabernacle in Elkhart, Ind., and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart.

John Dietterich, longtime church treasurer, said, “It was an unusual year for us, because we had two local people giving above and beyond what they normally give, and then we also had some other unexpected income. And we are now renting out the parsonage, and so we found ourselves with an unusually large

bank account. Our church board decided rather than to squirrel that money away somewhere, it would be better to use it for the church’s greater good.”

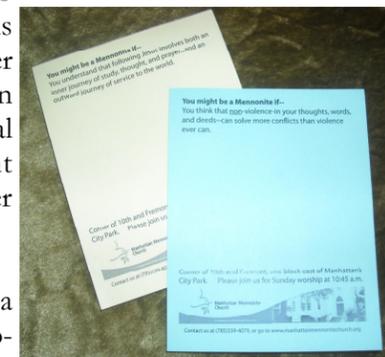
Some of that greater good has been to help strengthen the low-resource True Vine Tabernacle, an inner-city church plant in Indiana-Michigan Conference. The church, which had dwindled to about 15 members, brought in Carlos and Nancy Lora, formerly of New York City, to strengthen its ministry. As a result, the congregation has grown to 100 members. The \$4,000 gift is helping the congregation secure a building of its own.

“I am really proud of our little congregation,” Pastor Eldon Epp said. “The church has always been a generous one – taking part in things like the Heifer Project and the MCC pennies’ project. And over the years, it has helped people with medical bills and has been part of Everence’s Sharing Fund program. But as God brought an unusual year, the congregation stepped forth in an unusual way.”

## You Might be a Mennonite If...

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

In fall 2013, Manhattan (Kan.) Mennonite Church (MMC) knew that the days of the Yellow Pages were extinct, and cyberspace was here to stay. So MMC member Dave MacFarland created a fresh spin on the congregation’s Mennonite beliefs in its welcoming campaign, “You Might Be a Mennonite If ...”. The list of 12 found its way into four quarter-page ads in the local newspaper and on notepads given away at the annual community borscht supper that serves over 500 people.



“We haven’t seen a huge rush of new people coming to our church because of this campaign,” Barbara Krehbiel Gehring, co-pastor said. “But the campaign has helped us to get our message out to a community that doesn’t know much about Mennonites, since we are the only Mennonite congregation in town. And it has helped to

express one of our hopes, which is to convey that anyone can be a Mennonite if they choose.

The list is found on a rotating scroll in the upper left of the congregation’s website: [www.manhattanmennonitechurch.org](http://www.manhattanmennonitechurch.org). Here are some examples:

### You might be a Mennonite if ...

1. ...you seek to understand and nourish “The Spirit of God” in your own life, and spread that loving spirit more widely.
2. ...you take to heart the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount, including Jesus’ unpopular insistence that we love our enemies.
3. ...you believe that as God’s servants on Earth, we should have no part in hurting His Creation or each other.
4. ...you understand that following Jesus involves both an inner journey of study, thought, and prayer...and an outward journey of service to the world.
5. ...you like breaking bread and sharing stories with your church family at monthly potlucks.
6. ...you try to resist the lures of consumerism, give away your surplus, and attempt to live simply—so that others may simply live.