

How VMC is responding to the current pandemic

By CLYDE G. KRATZ, EXECUTIVE CONFERENCE MINISTER

Beginning in January 1918, the world faced the Spanish flu. Its impact continued for years, through December 1920. It infected 500 million people around the world—27% of the global population. Most influenza outbreaks disproportionately kill the very young and very old, with a higher survival rate for those in between, but the Spanish flu pandemic resulted in higher than expected mortality rates for young adults.

According to Wikipedia, the spreading of the flu was aided by the activities of World War I. More specifically, the close quarters of soldiers and massive troop movements contributed to the fast movement of the flu. The flu had a first wave, whereby individuals and communities learned about the flu, its impact, and engaged in means to offer care. The second wave was actually deadlier than the initial wave. Persons who were initially infected in the first wave demonstrated immune responses during the second wave. In the second wave, soldiers in the trenches—adults who were young and fit—were most vulnerable.

The Mennonite faith community has navigated pandemics in our past. While Mennonite historians waxed eloquently about our responses to World War I concerning our courageous responses to conscription, war bonds, threats of imprisonment, and legal challenges associated with potential violations of the Espionage Act of 1917, little is written about the Mennonite faith community response to the Spanish Flu Pandemic of

1918. Dr. John L. Ruth, a Mennonite historian par excellence, opens the curtains slightly on our Mennonite past by providing anecdotes for ways that our forebears navigated the (misnamed) Spanish Flu of 1918.

Writing the history of Franconia Mennonite Conference in Maintaining The Right Fellowship, (1983), Dr. Ruth provides a fleeting glance about the Spanish flu in terms of the changing funeral practices of Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites. He offered one insight about its impact: *But a half year later, in October 1918, the most unusual funeral activity in years took place, as eastern Pennsylvania yielded a quota of victims to the worldwide influenza pandemic. Meetinghouses and churches were closed to avoid contagion, and some of the victims had only funerals conducted at the graveside. On October 13, no church services at all were held in the Franconia region. Perhaps these traumatic events were the final blow to the old all-day funeral tradition.* (p. 445).

In writing the history of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, The Earth is the Lord's (2001), Ruth offers another vantage point concerning the Spanish flu. He writes: *Just at the close of the war, the worldwide pandemic of Spanish influenza brought so many deaths that church services were canceled and coffins became scarce. Families lost parents and children, and survivors were sobered. Thirty-four year old farmer John S. Hess was among the seriously ill who made new spiritual commitments. In the following year, he*

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Naomi Rowe Francisco: A legacy of faith and love

By LESLEY FRANCISCO McCLENDON

Naomi Rowe Francisco wore many hats and went by many names: Sister Naomi, Neme, Aunt Neme, momma, sister, cousin, friend, grandma. She was known by hundreds of Calvary Christian Academy students and C3 members as Mother Francisco. I had the distinct privilege to call her Grams, and the privilege of being with my grandmother for most of my life. She moved into our home in 1994 and served almost like a third parent.

In delivering her eulogy in February, I summed up her life using Scriptures from Jude 20-23. The book of Jude details the key ingredients that I believe made up the very fabric of Naomi's being: faith, hope, love, and prayer. These ingredients shaped her into the special person she was.

Build herself up in the faith

She first learned to build herself up in the faith, the first ingredient. What does that mean? It means that she had a desire to grow in the Word...however, she did not stop at desire, but she had follow-through. This type of faith is

Francisco continued on page 6

was ordained minister at Hess and became a much-used evangelist.

As a window on these mournful weeks, we may use the pages of Bishop Peter Nissley's diary for the second half of October 1918. On Saturday the twelfth, he preaches a funeral service in a house in York County, then returns home to find his son Hiram in bed with the flu. The next evening he goes with East Petersburg Deacon Amos Kauffman to baptize a stricken Ada, daughter of Henry Hershey. On Tuesday, son Simon also stays in bed, so that daughter Gertrude must drive the "roller" in the field. On Wednesday with both sons in bed, the bishop goes to Florin to baptize another son of a Mennonite, and on Thursday he does the same for two more young people who are "right sick." In the following week, he preaches at three more funerals before noting that son Simon Peter is again good enough to haul in corn. Finally, on November 1, he gratefully inscribes in both German and English the psalmist's words, "Bless the Lord, O my Soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name" (p. 871-872).

Here we are in the twenty-first century facing a new pandemic. Our faith experience will also be tested as family, friends, and neighbors are impacted by the flu, some becoming fatalities to this mysterious disease. All of us have an obligation to engage in conscientious activities that offer safety and health to ourselves and those around us: 1) Wash hands often, 2) Cough into the elbow, 3) Limit face touching, 4) Maintain a physical distance of 6+ feet from another person, 5) Stay home if you feel sick.

Leadership Responses

Pastors have appropriately closed their meetinghouses to worship on Sunday morning, but most of our pastors have creatively used social media to conduct worship and pastoral care. Many pastors have learned about Zoom and Facebook Live Feed. Members are logging in to Zoom meeting worship services. Pastors are reporting that former members who have moved out of the area are reconnecting to some of their worship services because of the Zoom connections. Pastoral care remains a challenge, because it is often about the pastor's presence. Pastoral contacts are now being made by phone, Zoom call, or letter. The greatest pastoral care challenge is the death of a member, as well as responding to a death by suicide. Grieving in place is a new form of responding to a death as a result of so-

cially distancing. Postponing grief is not a good solution, but new ways of caring are emerging.

District Oversight Leaders are meeting with their pastors on a bi-weekly or weekly framework by Zoom or phone. In these meetings, the District Minister learns about the challenges being faced by pastors and offers some additional insight and resources. Collaborative learning is occurring among our pastors. As pastors share their ideas, practices and challenges, resources are being brought to bear on their needs.

As the Executive Conference Minister, I have convened a weekly meeting of the District Oversight Leaders to learn about the challenges they are facing and seek to provide resources to them. I have contacted Dr. Lonnie Yoder and Sarah Bixler to provide resource opportunities to their cluster of pastors. Lonnie and Sarah are Eastern Mennonite Seminary faculty and can utilize their experiences, knowledge and insights to equip pastors for the challenges they are facing.

As I have learned about the challenges that some congregations are facing financially, the Finance Committee of our Conference approved the establishment of the **COVID-19 Benevolence Fund**. This fund can assist a congregation with pastoral financial support, congregational mortgage and utility expenses that are unmet as a result of closing their meetinghouse.

I am grateful that the Finance Committee allocated a recent estate gift to launch this urgent initiative on behalf of congregations to sustain their pastor and ministries. If congregational leaders are struggling with the financial realities of this pandemic, they should contact their District Oversight Leader to access this fund. Persons or congregations desiring to participate in a Conference-based ministry of mutual aid to congregations can make *donations to Virginia Mennonite Conference, designated for the COVID-19 Benevolence Fund*.

Leaders of Conference Endorsed Ministries have also been challenged by this pandemic. In my role, I have invited leaders of not-for-profit ministries to gather in a Zoom meeting to share about their challenges. We are offering resources through David Brubaker, faculty member at Eastern Mennonite University, and providing an opportunity for each leader to report their adaptations to COVID-19 pandemic directly to our constituency. The information that each

organization provided to us has been shared with our constituency.

Not-for-profit organizations rely on donations to meet their financial obligations. This includes congregations, the Conference, the denomination, Conference Ministries and Conference Endorsed Ministries. I want to encourage you, as members of Virginia Mennonite Conference, to continue to financially support your local congregation as your first priority and continue to support the many important ministries associated with our faith community as you have the opportunity. Give online or write your personal check in order to sustain the ministries that you value.

As reported in the news outlets, the time period of April 1- April 15 could be the peak of the pandemic impact. In other words, our nation could see a high number of deaths during this time. As we continue to be the people of God, I want to encourage you to stay connected to your pastor and congregational ministries. Increase your prayer ministries and phone conversations with your neighbors and friends. Please keep in mind that we are physically distancing from one other for safety, but our human need to be in relationship with other people remains strong. Our relationships can be sustained through phone calls, Zoom meetings, Facebook, and other means.

As a people of God, we do not live by fear. As I listen to the unfolding drama on the news, I realize that there is no "play book" on how to navigate this crisis in culture. But I do one thing—I trust in God and seek to provide understanding and hope to those impacted by this potentially catastrophic event.

I concur with the writer of Proverbs, *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all our ways acknowledge God and God shall direct our paths."* (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Pathways

Spring 2020 – Volume 5, Number 4

© 2020 by Virginia Mennonite Conference. *Pathways* is published quarterly to connect congregations to the ministries of VMC. Periodical rate postage is paid at Harrisonburg, VA.

Editor & Designer: Jon Trotter

Pathways is distributed free to each household of supporting congregations. To join mailing list, contact: *Pathways* (540) 434-9727 • (800) 707-5535
info@virginiacommunity.org
Website: virginiacommunity.org

POSTMASTER Send address changes to: *Pathways*
601 Parkwood Dr., Harrisonburg, VA 22802.

Keeping and seeking the unity of the Spirit

By TOM YODER NEUFELD

Text adapted and excerpted from presentations at VMC Winter Delegate Session, Waynesboro, Va., February 1, 2020.

Spare no effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the chain of peace (Eph 4:3).

Our world, both inside and outside the church, is becoming ever more binary and intolerant. Anabaptists thus yearn for unity, but are also ambivalent about it. We more likely think of discipleship as nonconformity than of unity. Many congregational and conference relationships within the Anabaptist family have thus for centuries succumbed to a kind of virus of separation—sometimes dubbed *Täuferkrankheit*, the “Anabaptist illness”—typically justified as the price of faithfulness. It is one thing to separate from “the world,” but it did not and does not take long for those within the body of Christ who don’t measure up to our sense of what is faithful to become “the world,” from whom one should separate. This impulse comes from both ends of the spectrum: “I can’t stand what “they” do and what they tolerate. We can’t have that in the church,” versus “I can’t stand intolerant people. They have no place in the church.” This has affected us within congregations, but also between congregations, even conferences.

We have historically not been strong in recognizing how core unity is to God’s will and thus to what it means to be faithful. Being one—one with each other, and, especially, one with God—as Father and Son are one—is the very heart of Jesus’ prayer for us in John 17:23. Ephesians 1 speaks of God “gathering up all things in heaven and earth” in and through Christ (1:10).

That was as unsettling then, as it is today, from Jesus’ consorting with sinners and tax collectors, to Paul tormenting his fellow Jewish believers with his gospel being open to Gentiles. And all that within the unity of the Spirit! God’s gathering—we call it grace at work—has always created trouble, especially for those already gathered.



Tom Yoder Neufeld leads two sessions at Winter Delegate Session on “The Unity of the Spirit,” February 1, 2020. Photo: Jon Trotter

The first half of Ephesians rehearses God’s unifying grace at work, crystalized in the great peace text in 2:11-22, at the center of which is a hymn that celebrates Christ as “our peace.” “Our” is, importantly, made up of “us” and “you” strangers and aliens. We are together given birth as the “new human” in Christ, made possible by the dismantling of barriers, culminating in the “killing of enmity” itself through Christ’s death on the cross. This costly unity is driven by the Spirit who brings strangers and enemies, both individuals and groups, into the presence of their divine parent (verse 18). As 2:10 puts it so well, we—we and you together—are God’s “poem,” God’s work of art, brought to life by the wind and breath of the peacemaking and unifying God.

So, when we speak of the “unity of the Spirit,” that is the unity we have in mind. It is not the unity we make, nor the unity we achieve; it is the unity God is creating in Christ with the Spirit. It is a turbulent unity,

an unsettling peace, not least because the Spirit doesn’t stop blowing, Christ doesn’t stop calling and evangelizing, as long as there is still estranged and hostile humanity out there to be reconciled and reborn.

Paul likes to mix organic imagery like body with architectural imagery like building. So also here. The church is a temple, God’s home. Evidently God goes to the land-fill site, or the ReStore, to get the building materials, which are held together by the rather unpredictable energy of the Spirit. Yes, there is the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the corner or head stone. But the rest of the building materials are sisters and brothers whom we, if left to ourselves, would never choose to be a part of, and too often choose to separate from. But exactly this is the true community of the Spirit, the true unity—an ungainly body and a ramshackle home.

Unity continued on page 4

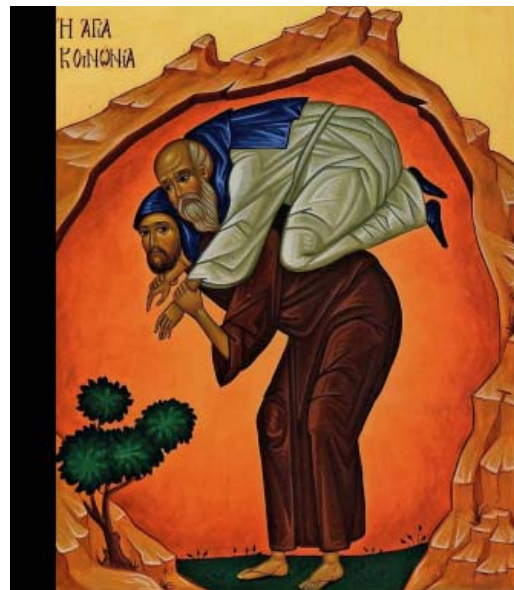
God loves it that way. We need to adjust our aesthetics to God's aesthetics. We need to see the beauty God sees in such a body and such a home. This does not mean giving up on our Anabaptist heritage of perfection, which has too often been at the root of our inability to put up with each other's faults and failures, and thus our inability to see our own. After all, Jesus commanded us to "be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:38-48). We must not miss that those words sum up his command to love enemies. Might he want us to include the enemy close at hand—the sister and the brother in the church? The congregation in our conference? The conference itself? Perfection in a world of estrangement and hostility, even within the church, is to love those from whom we are estranged, as Christ has loved us (5:2). Such a church will not be pretty. But it will be graceful, lovely.

This is the unity we "keep," not make. God creates it, in Christ and with the Spirit. But it is a unity into which we grow. In that sense it is a unity we "seek."

Eph 4:1 asks us to "walk in a way that is worthy of our calling" by "keeping the unity of the Spirit in the chain of peace." Eph 4:12 in turn speaks of Christ's gifts—the church's leadership—as equipping believers to "build each other up until we reach the unity of the faith." In short we—all of us—are to seek the very unity we have already been gathered into.

How do we seek unity with those we struggle to walk with, who are faster or slower, stronger or weaker, better or worse than we are? We get a clue right at the beginning of Eph 4. We are to walk chained to each other in peace, with humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with, putting up with, suffering each other—what we have come to call forbearance. Col 3:12-15 augments this list with compassion, kindness, meekness, and forgiveness. Actually the term is quite literally "gracing": as the Lord has graced you, grace each other. And covering it all, love.

This is captured in the great hymn in Phil 2:6-11, where Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not grasp or exploit this equality with God, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a human being, even that of a slave, humbling himself, to the point of death on a cross. Paul uses that famous song as a template for walking together in



Holy Koinōnia

(or "holy community" or "holy communion"
from the Dormition of St. Ephrem of Syria)

unity. In Phil 1:1 he calls it the "koinonia" or communion of the Spirit. Paul then adds to our inventory: encouragement, consolation, sharing (koinonia), compassion, sympathy, having the same mind, the same love, being in full accord, unselfish, without ambition or conceit, humbly looking out for the interests of others. Note! Being of the same mind, or being in full accord, does not mean thinking alike on every issue. Having the "mind of Christ" requires that we all share in the mindset of the One who gathers all, who gave his very life to bring the far near, to murder hostility, to give birth to the new human made up of strangers and enemies.

I can add the famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13. Typically a wedding text, it is in fact for a church torn by conflict and brokenness. Not surprisingly, verses 4-8 echo the inventory we have been putting together: Love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, neither irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It suffers all things, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

1 Corinthians is first and foremost a "unity of the Spirit" text! And once again we encounter patience, kindness, humility, deference to others, and pleasure in truth. Love suffers, trusts, hopes, and endures—everything and everyone! Suffering each other, "forbearance," is nothing other than the exercise of faith, love, and hope within the immediate experience of conflict and discord, refusing to leave each other alone, quite literally.

There is one item I wish to highlight, one dear to Ephesians as well. Verse 6

reads: "[Love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing or injustice, but rejoices in the truth." How timely for our day where truth and trustworthiness ranks very high in our collective anxiety. The struggle over what is true is often what makes unity so difficult. We want to be confident that our most fundamental faith convictions, our ethical and theological perspectives, are true. But, as we know too well, strength of conviction can easily morph into intolerance, rigidity, and closedness, as we have experienced in the Anabaptist community again and again.

Ephesians reminds us that we need not fear the truth, nor the insistence on it, if we want unity. On the contrary—what God has given us in the "word of truth" (1:13) is Jesus himself. Truth is "in Jesus," 4:21 says, reminding us of John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Yes, the truth about Jesus matters absolutely—who he is as the Christ, as the Word not only with God, but truly God. So does the truth Jesus taught and modeled. But Jesus Christ himself, in whom we are joined in the unity of the Spirit, is the truth that welcomes outsiders, sinners, strangers, and enemies into the transforming and re-creating womb of Christ. It is in my view urgent for the sake of the unity of the Spirit that we strengthen our hold on that basic truth, lest we be blown about by every whim and wind of teaching threatening to tear the body of Christ apart, as 4:14 warns us. Could one such wind be that my take on truth is more important than my unity with you?

Eph 4:15 uses a verb we don't have in English: "truthing." We are to "truth in love." "Truthing" means bringing all the

transforming grace and patience to bear on our sisters and brothers in the midst of conflict and disagreement, knowing that we don't know it all, that at best we look through a mirror into a puzzle (1 Cor 13:12). The truth may sometimes be hard to hear, hard to take, and hard to speak. "Truthing in love" means being willing to say and do what love demands, but always with the intention of building each other up. It also means receiving words that may feel harsh or condemning. We need both tender hearts and thick skin for walking together in truth, in the unity of the Spirit. As Eph 4:24 reminds us, we are to speak truth each with his neighbor, "truthing" together with other members of the body of Christ. It means speaking truth not to each other but for each other. "Telling it like it is" in the body of Christ is always to speak with hope, speaking words that build up and communicate grace (4:29).

To conclude, the unity of the Spirit is a gift from God. We are not asked to make it, but to keep it. But we keep it best when we seek it together, when we seek unity in Christ. This will require every ounce of commitment, energy, and strength. That means that even if the chain breaks—as it has, does, and will—even if the bonds of unity fray, the persistent artisan of peace will continue to doggedly gather in all things, including the broken pieces of the body of Christ. Christ has hung in there with and for us through all the breaks and tears his body has suffered. As those who are to walk in love as he did (Eph 5:2), the same is asked of us. Let's remember that there is a much deeper unity of the Spirit than any of our organizational structures. Our sparing no effort at unity means living into that unity even when our relationships are strained to the breaking point, and beyond. And it means living in the hope of arriving even after estrangement at the unity of the faith. Such unity of the Spirit is at its core never the search for what we can all agree on. Least of all is it a search for the lowest common denominator. That is not the unity of the Spirit. It is the highest and deepest common denominator, so high and so deep that it is able to handle the peacemaking generosity of God, whose Spirit continues to bring the most disparate persons and communities together into the transforming presence of God. Thanks be to God.

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Strategic Planning Task Force unveils process and findings



David Brubaker shares an update on the process and timeline of the Strategic Planning Task Force at Winter Delegate Session in Waynesboro, Va, February 1, 2020.

Photo: Jon Trotter

By DAVID BRUBAKER

In March of last year, Conference Council authorized the formation of a Strategic Planning Task Force, with the mandate to "develop strategic initiatives (for the conference) for the next three to five years." Council appointed five voting members—James Akerson, Deb Horst, Moriah Hurst, Armando Sanchez, and Clyde Kratz—to the task force, and contracted with consultant David Brubaker to guide the process.

Process and Findings

The task force has convened ten times, beginning with an initial organizing meeting on July 25 and continuing through our most recent meeting on March 13. Members of the task force also met with all eight districts, partner agency heads, and business leaders on ten other occasions between September and February. Altogether, 125 persons participated in these meetings, an average of 12 per session.

Five themes emerged from these sessions, which we shared with participants at the Winter Delegate Session on February 1. The themes follow:

1. *Focus Outward* (on mission and service)
2. *Support Leadership* (especially pastors)
3. *Prioritize Relationships* (not structure or policies)
4. *Increase Support and Belonging*

5. Improve Processes (of dialogue, discernment, and decision-making)

In addition to these five themes, emphasized by multiple groups, we also noted concern from some groups for more attention to supporting women in leadership. There was also an explicit call from the floor of Winter Delegate Session to attend to racial diversity and inclusion in the conference.

Next Steps

In April and May, we will focus on drafting a strategic plan that addresses the major themes we heard during the listening phase of our process. We anticipate bringing a draft plan to the Conference Council meeting in May, and then a proposed strategic plan to the July Conference Assembly for discussion and approval.

One of the clear themes we heard this past fall was a call to listen not only to current VMC members, but also to future VMC members and to God. We are committed to doing so, and invite your prayers and ongoing input. If you have not had an opportunity to share your thoughts and ideas with a task force member, please send them to one or all of us prior to April 30. We also invite your prayers, that God might guide us as we seek to discern God's voice.

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most holy because it's set apart from other beliefs. Her confession was that the words of God flowed from her lips, creating an atmosphere of God's presence where she went. The only way she could do that is if she knew the Word of God. So she made it a point to feast on the Word of God and speak life-giving words that would lift her up, and also others. She wouldn't let you complain or speak negatively.

Pray in the Spirit

The second ingredient of Naomi's "secret sauce" is that she would often pray in the Spirit. When she first got saved and I'm sure on other occasions, too, she was struggling to live the Christian life. She believed that in order to walk this life, you must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Now many people have different views on this, but the infilling of the Holy Spirit is what got her through most days. She also believed, as I do, that if you want the gift of the Holy Spirit all you have to do is ask, and then thank God that you've already received it. She believed in Ephesians 6:18 -

Pray in the Spirit at all times, with every kind of prayer and petition. To this end, stay alert with all perseverance in your prayers for all the saints.

She committed Thursday of each week as a day of thanksgiving to God. That was her day not to ask God for anything but to thank God for everything. She said all her trials came on that day. That's where she got the ability to declare *in* everything, not just for everything, *give thanks!*

She told me that worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but doesn't get you anywhere, and that's why you have to cast all your cares on Him cause he cares for you. She taught me that a problem not worth praying about is not worth worrying about. Even as many of us were facing challenging times or obstacles, she would often say, "May joy go with you, peace follow behind you."

Remain in God's Love

The third ingredient for Naomi was cultivating a love relationship with Christ by abiding in the love of Christ. If you don't love God, it's very difficult to love other people. She would challenge you to keep yourself in God's love. It is God's part to keep man; but it is man's part to keep himself in the love of God.

Because she was so full of the love of God, she went easy on those who hesitated in the faith or didn't understand it one hundred percent. She went after those who went the wrong way. She was tender with those who didn't always get it right, but not soft on sin.

She allowed people to be who they are without judgment, even before the popular saying of "Only God can judge me." Because she loved God rightly, my grandmother had the biggest heart! She had a certain sensitivity about her that it didn't matter what age or stage you were in life, she saw you as Jesus would see you.

She was the epitome of grace and truth. Salvation meant something to her. She realized here on earth that she didn't accept Christ just to secure a better life after this one, she got saved to serve. She would snatch people from dangers seen and unseen.

She had a gift of discernment. She knew if she needed to give you some encouragement over coffee and also when it was time to give a more direct approach. She had this gift about her, where she could offend you in love and you'd walk around feeling honored. It reminds me of someone being on fire and in need of rescuing. You don't reach out your hand gently and say, "Can you come here please?" You get them out by any means necessary! She had this kind of by-any-means-necessary love, often coupled by a hearty slap on the back with a loud laugh.

The three ingredients that made up Mother Naomi's life of faith and who she was has the power to transform all of us into who we are called to be:

1. Build yourself up in the faith
2. Pray in the Spirit
3. Remain in God's love



Naomi Francisco (center) with her husband, Bishop Leslie II, along with their sons (from left) Myron, Leslie III, and Steven. VMC Archives

In addition to being a woman of strong faith, Naomi had a deep abiding love for all of her children, both natural and spiritual. I leave you with a personal prayer she hand wrote in her journal that I found as I was going through some of her things....

My goal is to please God. All I want to do is to please and do the will of God.

Our children are our investment. We invested our love, time and whatever God told us to invest in them to raise them up to be men of God. Now we are reaping the investment we put in them. Whatever you put in your children when they are growing up, you will reap in the end. We are reaping an abundance of love, joy, peace, and financial blessing as I see my sons living for the Lord. I lack for nothing.

Love you, my sons and daughters, grand, great grand, great-great grand—which I probably will never see some of you in this life, and we dare not forget all of our spiritual sons and daughters. Keep up the good thing God has put in you.



Lesley Francisco McClendon serves as an Assistant Pastor at C3 (Calvary Community Church), Hampton, Va.

Strengthening community at Weavers Mennonite

By PHIL KANAGY

During the fall months of 2019, a community building exercise we engaged in at Weavers Mennonite Church was an Appreciative Inquiry. An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process that explores where God is at work in the congregation—past and present—and where he may want to work in the future. The AI is a cooperative search for the best in people and in congregations. It's more about finding the strengths and positive attributes in the congregation than it is about focusing on weaknesses and dissecting problems (not that problem areas are ignored). As such, the AI is a way of helping congregations develop an appreciative eye for things, and to pay attention to the ways God is present with us.

To conduct the AI, we created a survey of 14 questions and asked the congregation to respond thoughtfully to as many of them as they were able. After compiling the responses, we met as a congregation in four consecutive Wednesday evenings in January of this year to explore the responses and results of the AI survey. Two primary focus areas of our AI were identity and purpose. We asked questions about who we are, such as: *"What are some of your best experiences at Weavers? Why are they your best?"* *"What do you value about our congregation? When have you experienced these values?"* *"What values do we aspire to, and what values do we actually practice?"*

These questions helped us to explore who we are, how we have experienced God in congregational life, and what is important to us. The value questions overlapped with a specific question we asked about purpose: *"What do you think is the primary purpose of Weavers Mennonite Church?"*

The responses from the congregation fit into five categories (or dimensions) of congregational life: *community, worship, discipleship, equipping and service, and evangelism and outreach.*

We then discovered that all five of these categories/dimensions are already addressed in our congregational mission statement: *"Called into God's family, we join together (Community), to be transformed through worship (Worship), to nurture one another (Discipleship), to be equipped to*

serve Jesus Christ (Equipping & Service), to carry out His mission in the world (Evangelism/Outreach)."

Besides helping to clarify who we are (identity) and what we are here for (purpose), the AI revealed many strengths and gifts of our congregation. An accompanying revelation is that there is much to celebrate and be thankful for at Weavers. God has been present and active in so many ways! His faithfulness in the past inspires hope and confidence that he will be present in the future as well. Perhaps the greatest gift of the AI process is that it helped us to pay better attention to God's presence among us and in each other. A strong awareness of God's presence and faithfulness evokes human responses of worship and gratitude, as it did for Jacob in Genesis 28 when he was running from his brother Esau's wrath. Jacob laid down to sleep in what he thought was an insignificant, empty place—a no-name place to merely pass through on his way out of Dodge—only to discover that he was in a sacred place, a place that God inhabited. After a dream in which Jacob encountered God in that most unsuspecting of places, he was moved with wonder. *"How awesome is this place!"* he cried. *"This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"* (Gen. 28:17). Sometimes we take our congregations for granted, or—worse—imagine they are uninhabited by God. But they are awesome places, places that God inhabits, gates of heaven... The AI reminded us of this kind of sacredness and holiness within our own community of faith, and led us to worship.

Another question we asked the congregation to respond to on the AI, and which we hoped would also be a community-building exercise, was a question about diversity: *"How does Weavers handle differences of opinion and differences of Biblical conviction/perspective? Can we value each other in spite of differences?"* It's no secret that political, cultural, sociological, economic, and theological differences in the culture and society around us are also present in our congregations—often leading to the same kinds of tortured conflicts and polarizations within the church as we see outside the church. So, we wanted to be honest about differences that exist in our

own congregation, even while we celebrate God's presence and work among us. But, more importantly, we wanted to explore how we can remain in authentic relationships with brothers and sisters with whom we may have differences. What we believe is important, but no more important than how we hold those beliefs. How we hold our beliefs (or how we behave with them) can be toxic to the whole community and damaging to our public witness, or they can become opportunities for growth and deepening of relationships as we develop our capacity to hold differences.

Holding diversity within covenantal relationships of the church can obviously be challenging. Extremes on both the right and the left of any issue often produce soundbites that are narrowly focused, unnuanced, and fail to address the full complexities of the issue. The extremes of the right and the left can also find it difficult to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other. And the middle often gets shredded by the extremes as the outliers "shout" across the middle at each other, or because they view the middle as a betrayal of their particular bias.

Here at Weavers, we are committed to promoting Christian unity by focusing more on what we have in common than by creating enmity by exploiting differences that may divide us. Most of us recognize that we are more alike than we are different, and we are better together than we are separated. Maintaining our unity will require continual monitoring and work, but we seek to nurture relationships of genuine love and grace, marked by honesty and grace-filled forbearance for one another...in the spirit of Colossians 3:12-14: *As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*



Phil Kanagy is Lead Pastor of Weavers Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va.

Leading together

By ERVIN R. STUTZMAN

My phone rang, with a message that reshaped my retirement plans. It was the spring of 2019 and the caller was Aldine Musser, the Northern District Minister. She informed me that my friend Mike Metzler would be leaving Zion Mennonite Church as pastor by the end of July. Would I be willing to serve there as an interim pastor? I was surprised by the request. Just a few weeks before, I'd given notice to Virginia Conference to change my ordination status from active to retired. I was enjoying my retirement immensely from Mennonite Church USA and wasn't looking for a job.

I told Aldine that I'd only consider an interim pastorate if my wife Bonita, also retired, was part of the team. That's because my leadership roles and preaching responsibilities had too often required us to worship in different congregations on Sunday mornings. My retirement in early 2018 had made it possible for us to worship together every Sunday morning, a privilege and a joy I was not ready to give up. I wasn't about to ask Bonita to "tag along" with me to a new church.

To my considerable surprise, Bonita was eager to join me in a co-pastoring venture, even though it meant that we'd need to take a leave from our beloved congregation at Park View Mennonite. We had both been deeply involved there for many years, including Bonita's role as an elder for seven years. She was still carrying ordination credentials in Virginia Conference from her years as a chaplain at Rockingham Memorial Hospital.

Although Bonita and I have served in different job roles, we've worked together on many projects such as home remodeling or redecorating. We look back with a sense of joy and accomplishment to many ventures that bear the stamp of our joint endeavors. We revel in "couple power," the dynamic energy released when the two of us harness our differing gifts and perspectives, hitch onto a significant challenge, and pull in the same direction. We wondered, was God calling us to exert "couple power" as copastors at Zion Mennonite?

After a few weeks of prayer and discernment, we agreed to further exploration

with Aldine and the leaders at Zion Mennonite. Eventually, we agreed to be "interim transitional co-pastors," a more comprehensive role than pulpit supply. Because we wanted to reserve significant time for other interests, I decided to limit my involvement to half time, while Bonita decided on quarter time. The Congregational Leadership Team readily approved of this arrangement and announced it to the congregation. A few weeks before we began our interim work, we met with a small team of leaders who drafted a covenant of understanding.

The primary goal of our interim co-pastorate is to help the congregation make a healthy transition from Mike Metzler's leadership to that of the next long-term pastor. In the pursuit of that goal, we hope to find a unifying mission for the congregation. That task is made somewhat more challenging since Mike decided to start a church plant, along with some members who have since left Zion. By God's grace, we sense some healing from the grief of losing a beloved pastor and fellow members in spite of a diligent pursuit of unity in the face of differing convictions.

When we began in August 2019, we invited Sarah Piper to join us as an equal partner on the pastoral team. She had already been serving as the part-time pastor for children and families at Zion for some years. Sarah has helped us "get up to speed" with the pastoral practices and congregational rhythms at Zion, and has been a vital part of our decision-making processes.

We soon learned that Zion Mennonite is highly organized. Because they have competent lay persons in charge of nearly all aspects of congregational ministry, it wasn't hard to "go with the flow" of their work. For the most part, Bonita and I have carried on the congregational rhythms and life at Zion without making many changes. However, the congregation feels the need to cut back on the number of roles and responsibilities specified in their bylaws. In a recent congregational meeting, the members agreed to suspend some of the role descriptions in the bylaws in order to experiment with some innovative ideas proposed by a structure revision task force.

A few months after Bonita and I began our work, we formed a Transitional



Ervin and Bonita Stutzman serve as interim transitional copastors at Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va. Courtesy zmcva.org

Steering Team. The group comprises the two of us, the chairpersons of the Elders, the Personnel Committee, and the Congregational Leadership Team, plus one person chosen at large. This group's most innovative work has been to introduce an Appreciative Inquiry process. This approach has often been used across Mennonite Church USA in pastoral reviews. In that setting, it's a way of identifying a pastor's strengths in the work of the church, rather than drawing attention to a pastor's weaknesses or need for improvement.

Similarly, we used Appreciative Inquiry at Zion Mennonite to identify what has worked best for the entire congregation in a wide variety of areas—worship, stewardship, Christian education, outreach, and so on. A large part of the congregation has been involved in some part of the inquiry process, responding to different questions in various group contexts. We intend to use the learnings from this work to inform the pastoral search and to shape best practices for the congregation's future.

Just as God called Bonita and me into this interim ministry, God has provided the wisdom and grace to carry it out. We're grateful that we've learned a lot in this new venture, including some things about each other. We rejoice that our yoked efforts in this part of God's field are eliciting couple power, where our energy and individual gifts are bringing about greater results than either of us could achieve alone.

Thoughts on saying ‘goodbye’ to CMC

By PHIL KNISS

As a pastor in Virginia Mennonite Conference and Harrisonburg District for almost 30 years, with the first six of those years at Community Mennonite Church, the transfer of the congregation to Allegheny Conference stirs up some feelings for me.

I love Community Mennonite Church. I love the particular expression of Christ’s body at CMC, I love the people there, I love being in a church-to-church relationship with them. CMC’s departure hits different people different ways. In times of social conflict, groups tend to categorize or objectify each other.

Some in VMC may be tempted to see CMC as an abstract entity that thinks this way, or acts this way, and so belongs in this category. This is not a time to be abstract. This is a time to ground ourselves in a particular context—our historical, relational, and ecclesial context. Our own stories are deeply bound up in and with the story of Community Mennonite. Now is a time to remember and tell the story.

Community was founded almost 50 years ago in Harrisonburg, and from the start, had a strong identity as innovators, as an alternative for persons weary of traditional church. In 1972, Chicago Avenue Mennonite Church vacated their building on the corner of Chicago and Green, and moved south of town and renamed itself Harrisonburg Mennonite Church. Myron Augsburger, president of Eastern Mennonite College at the time, had a passion to help the church reach out to the community in active witness, and did not want the empty building on Chicago Avenue to leave Mennonite hands.

He knew a number of new young Mennonite faculty at EMC who moved to Harrisonburg from outside Virginia were having trouble finding a church home and were looking for something different than what VMC was offering then. So Myron arranged a purchase of the building to house a new Mennonite congregation in Harrisonburg District with those EMC faculty couples as the first core group. That fledgling group developed its mission and identity on its own, hashing and rehashing things out

together, processing and reprocessing, valuing consensus, and valuing every voice in the body.

Two decades prior, in the early 1950s, Harrisonburg District was established because churches forming in the city (like Park View and Chicago Avenue and Broad Street and Ridgeway, etc.) did not fit the traditional mold of historic rural Mennonite congregations. They wanted a place within the conference to be themselves and do church the way they felt called, and not have to conform to Virginia Conference traditions, such as Districts having rotat-

Harrisonburg Mennonite Church moved into their new building—Virginia Conference had a major division toward the right wing. Twelve churches of the West Valley District left VMC and formed a more conservative group called Southeastern Conference. There was a simultaneous shift to the left and right. Churches were trying to face the challenge of being faithful as a church in a world that was changing rapidly. CMC and Southeastern Conference were both trying to meet that challenge, but in different ways. We are all still trying to do that today, albeit in different ways.



Community Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va., founded in 1972, transferred membership to Allegheny Mennonite Conference upon an affirmative vote of delegates at Winter Delegate Session, February 1, 2020. Executive Conference Minister Clyde G. Kratz and CMC lead pastor Jennifer Davis Sensenig read a jointly-composed letter detailing the process of discernment, decision, lament, and blessing as they leave Virginia Mennonite Conference. Courtesy Flickr

ing preachers instead of permanent pastors who stayed with one congregation. From its beginning, Harrisonburg District was an effort to make room for innovation while staying connected to the whole.

1972 was a momentous year: Vietnam, a nuclear arms race, Watergate. In this same year—when CMC was founded and

CMC was never content with stock answers to hard questions, or pronouncements from an authority figure, or the words “we’ve always done it that way.” CMC asked, “Why?” Everything should be, and usually was, open for evaluation and analysis.

[Community continued on page 10](#)

CMC was the first (or one of the first) Mennonite congregations in our area to make small groups truly the center of congregation life and the primary location for discernment and decision-making; to make church decisions by a consensus model; to purposely dispose of existing pews and use chairs instead; to have a woman serve as a pastor; to be led by a pastoral team of equals; to have annual membership renewal ceremonies; and there were probably many other firsts. Now, many of those things are commonplace in our churches.

I visited CMC when I was in high school a few times in the mid-70s when our family was connected at Ridgeway. And in the early 80s, as a young couple, my wife Irene and I stayed at Ridgeway, but I always looked over at CMC with a little bit of holy envy because they seemed to be moving toward what the church should be.

After moving to Gainesville, Fla., for seven years to plant a church, our family moved back to Harrisonburg in 1990 for me to finish seminary. We knew, long before we arrived in town, that we would attend Community. They welcomed us right away, gave me opportunity to exercise my gifts, and within a year, I was put in the lead role on their pastoral team, and served there for five more years, half-time. Then they graciously released me when I was called to pastor full-time at Park View. And I have stayed connected through personal friendships with its members and all their pastors over the years. And we at Park View have been close collaborators with CMC in worship and in mission for several decades now.

So I have known Community for about 40 years—13 years as a fascinated observer, 6 years as a member and pastor, and 23 years as a community colleague and ministry partner. I have contradictory feelings right now. I have deep gratitude. I thank God for Community, and its impact on me and my life and ministry, but even more for its innovative influence on our Mennonite community in Harrisonburg. I have hope and optimism. I expect and pray that CMC will thrive and grow and be a witness to the

Gospel of Jesus for generations to come.

And I have grief, I lament. There is failure here in our part of the body of Christ in Harrisonburg to maintain unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is no reason to point fingers of blame at any one person or leader or group—CMC, District, or Conference. We all share responsibility, together. Collectively, we have fallen short of our calling as a body. May God have mercy, and forgive us, and heal us.

I believe there is a future, yet to be revealed, in which there will be a collective healing and restoration. I don't know what that will look like. The broader Mennonite church family is in a state of flux and realignment.

We do not know what VMC will look like in another 25 years. We certainly do not know what MC USA will look like. So as long as I am active in ministry in this conference, I will live in hope that there will be another way of uniting and being one body, not only with Community, but with other congregations and bodies we have journeyed with in the past.

I commit myself personally, and I commit my congregation at Park View, to stay connected in friendship and shared ministry with our pastoral colleagues and friends at Community. We are still siblings in faith. We will always have our shared history. We will continue to share a common faith, a common local community, and a common mission field. It will be hard to maintain institutional relationships once the personal relationships end, and those will end. Pastors move, change, retire, and die. Connections need mechanisms to sustain them. Let us create structured mechanisms for connection that will outlive any of us personally.

Thank you to CMC for traveling with us in the District and conference for the last 48 years. And may God guide all our steps as our journey together continues along a different sort of pathway.



Phil Kniss is Senior Pastor at Park View Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Va.



Promoting congregational life in community

By MARIE BRADLEY

Since Family Life Resource Center's beginning over three decades ago, we've believed that one's spiritual and congregational life plays a vital role in one's mental health. Family Life Resource Center is one of the few faith-based counseling agencies in the area.

The agency continues to walk with individuals and couples needing to remain constant in their faith. FLRC maintains its roots of providing marriage counseling and resources but has branched out and grown into a full-service counseling agency with a group of qualified therapists offering a wide range of specialized skills.

The agency began with Virginia Mennonite Conference, and is now also well-connected to the broader Harrisonburg community and surrounding counties, recognizing that healthy individuals lead to healthy relationships which lead to healthy congregations and communities.

Family Life Resource Center offers support to churches and pastors helping their congregations with mental health. The agency not only gives clients the ability to have a trained professional to walk along side them spiritually but also allows pastors and leaders to have resources as well.



Marie Bradley is Administrative Director of Family Life Resource Center, Harrisonburg, Va.

A message from Eastern Mennonite School

By PAUL LEAMAN

In February, when Virginia Conference requested our content for this issue, we had no idea that we would be in the midst of an extended school closure when the copy was due.

As I write on March 20, we are adjusting to the biggest transition I have experienced in my 30+ years as an educator and school administrator. The change is calling on all of us to bear with one another in ways we never imagined.

Our teachers—like educators across the region and country—have risen to the unprecedented challenge of teaching from a distance. Our students are showing resilience and positivity, even as they grieve lost time with friends, athletic competitions, performances, and milestones.

I believe our resilience as a community now -- in a time of crisis -- comes, in part, because we are intentional about building relationships in “normal” times. We encourage students, teachers and staff to listen to each other, not just to hear, but to develop empathy and understanding.

In Curt Stutzman’s Bible 10: Sermon on the Mount class, for example, students choose a topic that is divisive, particularly

in the church. They research the topic and interview people on opposite sides of the argument, trying to understand why each thinks and believes as they do.

“They present what they hear, and we talk about the issue,” says Mr. Stutzman. “I see students become able to disagree with each other in a respectful manner, and still maintain their convictions, while gaining new insight and understanding.”

With grace for each other in this time of unknowns and communication challenges, God is with us. We feel God’s presence in nature, in connections made virtually, in the hope in our hearts, and in songs we sing.



Myles Curry, Madalyn Bollinger, and Arpana Ghale—all members of the class of 2020—stopped by the school on March 17 to retrieve belongings and prepare for distance learning.

Photo: Andrea Wenger



I invite you to listen to music by our Touring Choir to uplift your spirit at this time, explore additional resources, and see some of the things happening in our community. You’ll find a link to “resources” on our website at easternmennonite.org/corona.

In these days and always, EMS aspires to reflect Christ’s light as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives and lives God’s call. We remain committed to that vision and join with the broader community in prayer for all the students in our area and beyond.



Paul Leaman is Head of School at Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Va.

Curt Stutzman teaching senior-level Kingdom Living class in spring 2019. Photo: Andrea Wenger



Monacan Nation Chief Kenneth Branham speaks at SPI Community Day. The Amherst County resident connected with EMU through Center for Justice and Peacebuilding graduate student Tala Bautista, a member of the Sumacher First Nation, Philippines. Photo: Macson McGuigan

Eastern Mennonite University is working at issues of racial injustices, violence, and identity

By LAUREN JEFFERSON

How do we learn to live in community with all people — honoring and respecting their differences and appreciating what challenges us? EMU hosted several events in recent weeks speaking to these themes and hosted community members investigating the same questions at Summer Peacebuilding Institute’s Community Day.

SPI Community Day, a preview of the globally renowned Summer Peacebuilding Institute held in May and June and open to all who want to gain skills in peacebuilding, hosted approximately 100 attendees for plenary sessions with Monacan Nation Chief Kenneth Branham, speaking about the history and struggles of his people, and Professor Frank Dukes, who co-facilitated community input for the new memorial to enslaved laborers at University of Virginia. Workshops were offered about circle processes in educational settings, formation for peacebuilders, transforming community spaces and much more. Learn more about SPI 2020 at www.emu.edu/cjp/spi.

EMU celebrated Black History Month with the leadership of the Black Student Alliance, Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, and the Office of Multicultural Student Services. Events included speaker Cornell William Brooks, former president of the NAACP; a poetry read-in with On the Road Collaborative middle and high school students; and the annual Town Hall on Race.

This year’s town hall format was modified to invite more engagement and dialogue from the campus’s white members, after feedback from a recent MLK Day panel that featured students of color speaking about their experiences on campus with microaggressions and other forms of racism. In a *Weather Vane* article, BSA co-president Maya Dula said, “On this campus, white skin allows you comfort and ease; yet you’re still silent. Students of color do not have that comfort on this campus and yet they speak up...”

The Green Dot program hosts two student trainings this semester to help bystanders de-escalate or prevent power-

based situations. The trainings are tailored so that attendees can come up with a solution that’s within their comfort zones. This semester marks the full rollout of the trainings, which were first held for community advisors and pastoral assistants. The Green Dot program, which is offered at more than 300 colleges, will expand the training to incoming students this fall.

One student recently used an intervention at a bar to help two women who were clearly uncomfortable with a male patron’s increasingly physical attentions. Another student said the intervention framework is “useful and accessible, and I soon found myself practicing things I’d learned.”

EMU students were invited to join JMU and Bridgewater College students for a series of conversations, activities and engagement on the theme of healthy masculinity.



Lauren Jefferson is Editor-In-Chief within the Marketing and Communications Department of Eastern Mennonite University.

In remembrance of Naomi R. Francisco (1935-2020)

By ELWOOD YODER

When Naomi Francisco got married in 1956, she did not want to be involved in church or anything religious. She did not want to marry anyone who would preach and be active in the church like her father. After several years of marriage, however, and the birth of three sons, Naomi's husband stopped drinking alcohol and going to clubs to dance the night away. With her husband's changed life, the Holy Spirit gave Naomi new purpose to fully support his pastoral ministries.

In 1966, Leslie W. Francisco II received ordination in the Virginia Mennonite Conference. Naomi worked actively with Leslie in a Mennonite church plant in Newport News, Virginia. Naomi taught Sunday school and Vacation Bible School, directed the children's choir, led prayer meetings and women's activities, and helped in any way needed in the church.

When Nelson Burkholder stepped aside as minister of Calvary Mennonite



Naomi and her husband, Bishop Leslie W. Francisco II, in an undated photo.

Photo: Mennonite Church USA Archives

Church in 1973, Naomi's husband became the lead minister of the VMC congregation.

The church became charismatic, including speaking in tongues, energetic music, weekly altar calls, and testimonies. The church held street meetings in Newport News and grew in numbers, but Leslie Francisco II developed a vision to plant a church near their home in Hampton, some miles away.

Both in Newport News and then at Calvary Community Church in Hampton, Naomi became the spiritual Mother of the congregation. Whether to her growing Francisco family, or the large crowds

that came for weekly worship, Naomi was affectionately known as "Grandma" to some and "Mother" to others. Her sparkling eyes, beautiful smile, bubbly personality, hearty laughter, and generous nature warmed the hearts of many. Naomi encouraged many children in the Calvary Christian Academy that met in the church. She came into their classrooms and offices with special treats and words of wisdom for Christian living.

In 1985, Naomi and Leslie moved their ministries to Hampton and established the Calvary Community Church. After Leslie was ordained bishop in the Warwick District of Virginia Conference, the church planter couple traveled to Ames, Iowa, for the 1985 Mennonite Church General Assembly. There, the Mennonite Board of Missions gave Bishop Leslie and Naomi Francisco the James and Rowena Lark award, for their significant work in evangelism and church development. The mantle of leadership at Calvary Community Church in Hampton passed to Naomi's son Leslie Francisco III in 1986 when her husband's health forced him to step aside.

At Naomi's large funeral service at Calvary on February 12, 2020, Naomi's granddaughter, Calvary Pastor Lesley Francisco McClendon delivered the message. A host of bishops and ministers attended Naomi's funeral service. Also in attendance were Hampton officials, including the Hampton Mayor and Hampton Councilman Steven Brown, a former minister at Calvary Community Church.

Naomi Francisco was the co-founder of Calvary Community Church, the matriarch of her community, and loved by many. With regional political officials in attendance at Naomi's funeral, it is not surprising that the Virginia State Senate passed Resolution No. 39, February 27, 2020, that recognized the accomplishments of Naomi Rowe (Taylor) Francisco.



Elwood Yoder teaches Bible and Social Studies at Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Va.

Naomi Francisco. Photo: Calvary Community Church



SAVE THE DATE | JULY 16-18, 2020

VMC is mindful of the COVID-19 pandemic. If Assembly is cancelled or postponed, VMC will send notifications.



VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE 2020 ASSEMBLY

Living Life to the Fullest

*A Retreat for Mature Age
People*



*October 6-8,
2020*

A retreat at



Living Fully - Being Prepared

Teresa Boshart Yoder
Managing Director, Everence



Living Fully - Facing Grief and Disappointments

Steve Landis
Residential Living Chaplain, VMRC



Living Fully - and Realistically

Beryl Jantzi
Director of Stewardship Education,
Everence

- **Each session will have a Bible study** led by Harold Miller, pastor of Trissels Mennonite Church
- **Worship leaders** will be Skip and Carol Tobin and Josh Brown
- **Wednesday evening: "Telling God Stories"**
- invited persons will share stories, with opportunity for conversation afterwards
- **Free time** with access to nature trails, games, shopping, Colonial Williamsburg, etc.

Contact WCRC

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