

Conference-related agencies navigate ministry in difficult circumstances



Warren Miller and Maggie Garber work at Highland Retreat clearing brush. They are both prior summer staff who were committed to working this summer, as well. They have been helping with various projects this month while Highland Retreat has funds to pay them through the Paycheck Protection Program. **See article on page 3.** Photo courtesy of Highland Retreat

Meeting the needs in our faith community and beyond

By CLYDE G. KRATZ



n account of the Early Church meeting a felt need of the community is in Acts 6:1-7. Scripture reports that "the Hellenists complained against the

Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food."

The Early Church leaders made the decision to set aside individuals to specialize in the task of mutual aid on behalf of the community. This action recognized the importance of meeting the needs of the faith community in addition to the task of sharing the gospel message. The faith community met these needs by providing intentional leadership from within the church.

Virginia Mennonite Conference benefits from our relationships with Conference-related organizations (also identified as Conference Ministries and Conference Endorsed Ministries). These not-for-profit ministries were started at a particular time when the faith community recognized a need that was not being met through the local congregations' ministries.

By developing an intentional vision and mission for a ministry with a board of directors, staff, and organizational structure, the essential focus of ministry was meeting the identified need from within the faith community, and also serving the broader community's needs.

Today, the constituency and the surrounding community of Virginia Mennonite Conference are blessed with high-quality ministries that seek to remain connected to our Conference even as they serve a broader constituency than our Conference.

In this special issue of *Pathways*, each Conference Ministry and Conference Endorsed Ministry was invited to provide an article highlighting the challenges and opportunities that they are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am grateful for the way in which these valuable ministries have provided these reports for our constituency. I have also invited each ministry to be bold and invite your financial support if they choose.

I am aware that many in our constituency contribute to their local congregation's financial mission with their charitable giving as their first priority, and that many individuals participate in financially supporting these various ministries.

As you may have discretionary financial resources, I invite you to consider supporting the ministries represented in this issue of *Pathways* as they navigate these uncertain times. They are providing a valuable service to our communities, and certainly value your generous support. Thank you.

■ Clyde G. Kratz is Executive Conference Minister of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

VMC Bulletin Notes

VMC still sends bulletin notes to congregations for distribution. These are also available at wmc-bulletin-notes/

Conference Updates

VMC organizations send periodic updates to the Conference and are distributed throughout VMC. To read these and other updates, visit <u>virginiaconference.org</u>

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Loss, adaptability, and hope at Highland Retreat

By RACHEL MILLER

uring this pandemic, few people or businesses have escaped the negative effects; in particular, grief over lost plans and the troubling weight of an uncertain future are part of nearly everyone's shared experience this year.

At Highland Retreat, COVID-19 has upended plans for guest groups, summer campers, and employees, forcing us to grapple with the unexpected, find ways to adapt, and cling to each reason for gratitude and hope.

Most people who come to Highland do so for a retreat with a church, school, or family group. This part of Highland's ministry is also our main source of income, as guest groups of various types can come to Highland at any time of the year – until, of course, a pandemic comes along.

The first cancelled event at Highland was the Sr. High Youth Retreat that we had planned in partnership with VMC's Youth Council and several local Mennonite churches. Since that cancellation in mid-March, we have had to cancel about three months of guest groups, into early June, with some groups also choosing to already cancel reservations further into the future.

Though we are now again able to host groups of up to 10 people, the majority of our existing reservations this summer are still uncertain as we wait to find out how Virginia's reopening will proceed and how people will respond. Keeping guest groups updated and informed about changing restrictions, safety guidelines, and policies has been a challenging and ongoing process.

The cancellation of so many guest reservations has definitely had a significant financial impact on Highland – this year's loss of income will continue to be felt next year and beyond – but it has also had an emotional impact on us as Highland staff.

Our very purpose as an organization is to minister to people by bringing them together to "meet Jesus Christ, explore nature, and build relationships," and being unable to fulfill that mission at the moment grieves us. Recently, though we've had more staff meetings than usual to keep abreast of the frequently changing situation, we have had no guest groups to pray



Friends of Highland Retreat enjoy a hike on the property. Photo courtesy of Highland Retreat

for. There are real feelings of loss in even these seemingly small things.

Our recent decision to cancel this year's summer camps is perhaps even more heartbreaking. In many ways, Highland Summer Camps are the core of our ministry, our most direct outreach and our greatest opportunity to speak the love of Jesus directly into individual lives. We held out hope that we might be able to hold summer camps in some form for as long as we could, but eventually it became clear that maintaining safe physical distancing this summer will make it impossible to give campers an experience that actually feels like camp. Many beloved camp activities involve the kind of close interactions that are not safe right now for people from different households, so choosing not to hold traditional summer camps this year is the right decision, though a difficult one. More than one staff member became a little teary as the idea of no summer camp took hold.

We are not wallowing in grief and despair, though! We have felt each loss, but then adjusted our focus to figuring out how we can make each new situation work. With the support and guidance of Highland's

wonderful Board of Directors and a special COVID-19 taskforce, we have been able to adapt to the challenges that face us, zero in on the options that are still available to us, and find ways to make the most of those opportunities. Even as we finalized the decision to cancel summer camps, we were able to redirect some of our passion for that ministry into the possibility of bringing more individual family groups to Highland this summer. We will have more facilities available than ever - including our newly renovated cottages, which are typically utilized by summer camp – and will be able to offer families some of that special summer experience in a safer, more flexible form. We also have plans to open our pool. Ideas like these that spark enthusiasm and hope are so important right now.

The flexibility of our employees is also giving us purpose and hope. An extended period without guests creates a dilemma for staff whose jobs specifically center around serving guest groups. With no buildings to clean or meals to cook, what would keep our housekeepers and food service staff

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employed? As it turns out, many of these part-time employees were ready and willing to take on a variety of atypical tasks, such as painting and landscaping, and thanks to a loan through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), we have been able to pay them to do so.

Similarly, projects that are funded by designated donations, such as renovating the former Green Valley Clinic, building two new bridges, and finalizing upgrades to our cottages, have kept our guest services coordinator busy, along with some of the young people who had already committed to working this summer.

Pre-funded projects and employees willing to bend with the unusual circumstances have been blessings to us, though now that our PPP funds are nearly gone, we are again facing difficult decisions regarding Highland's long-term health and the staffing necessary to serve this summer's guests, including the families who may enjoy a Highland experience.

As we face these hard times, we are grateful to do so amid a supportive community. Group leaders and camper parents have generally been understanding of the changes we've had to make; friends of Highland have spent extra time volunteering with

us; and those with the means to do so have generously offered financial support, aware that donations are more vital than ever as we seek to keep Highland healthy and functioning in this strange season.

We are always grateful to our donors, but each gift these days is a special cause for rejoicing and another reminder that, even while we don't fully know what the future holds, the God of all time and creation is still our loving Provider.

■ Rachel Miller is Bookkeeper at Highland Retreat, Criders, Va.

God is still working at WCRC

By RENEE HOGAN

t the Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center (WCRC), things have slowed down. Some employees are working remotely or with reduced hours and groups have been limited to under ten people. Though numbers have been reduced, WCRC continues to provide a place for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of kids and adults. In the weeks since the state's stay-at-home order was announced, we have been encouraged by testimonies of God's goodness to those in our community. Two individuals shared their stories of the way God has worked in their lives at WCRC through this time of quarantine.

Lang Craighill and his family have attended Family Camp at WCRC for the past several years. WCRC has been a significant place for them as both he and his son Shane first publicly declared their relationships with Christ while here. Recently WCRC has been the host of another significant time of connection and growth for the Craighill family. After deciding to go through Family Life's Passport2Purity curriculum with his oldest son, Lang said, "It came up naturally to consider the WCRC facility and we were able to rent a cabin there. So Shane and I spent the weekend there and Shane still characterizes the weekend as the best weekend of his life."

Since the experience was so positive with his oldest son, Lang decided to have another retreat, this time with his younger son, Joshie. When they returned home, Lang's wife, Wendy, noticed a behavior shift with both boys and thought that Joshie was thinking of himself differently as a result of the weekend.

Lang stated, "Not that they weren't already brought up thinking of God's Word and His plan, but [the weekend] kind of personalized it for them and was significant

coming from a parent in that close, focused amount of time."

Lang was glad that COVID-19 did not prevent him from having this life-changing experience with his sons and even explained that the isolation made the time more special. "It added to the overall experience in a weird sort of way. We had the place to ourselves. It was a solitary time



The Craighill family L-R Shane, Wendy, Joshie, and Lang. Photo courtesy of WCRC



alone, talking about important things and God's Word and being able to focus on that and each other." Lang also said it was a perfect environment for the weekend.

Another family, Amos and Sandy Goldie, along with their dog Murray and cat Charlie, traded the busyness of Richmond for our peaceful grounds to wait out the quarantine. In November, the pair bought a Travato camper van to get away on the weekends. Early on they booked a stay at WCRC and immediately felt at home.

Sandy said "We just loved it! We were surrounded by the woods and it's so serene and there are birds everywhere. It's so peaceful but we still have Wi-Fi capability and showers and things like that so it's not totally off-road. Every weekend [when] it was time to leave we were like: 'Well let's just go back to Williamsburg!'" Once their

jobs were moved online, Amos and Sandy took the opportunity to spend extended time enjoying the peaceful outdoors. Now a month into their stay in the RV campground, they have a beautiful setup for living and working.

During this isolation and stillness, Amos and Sandy have still managed to thrive in their careers and have a positive impact on their community—all from the comfort of their RV site. Sandy works for Virginia Commonwealth University teaching music and Amos is the organist and choir director at St. Matthews Episcopal Church in Richmond. Sandy practices her viola, conducts youth orchestra, grades final exams, and coaches students; while Amos helps produce their church's Sunday service.

According to Sandy, "What's been amazing to me is that physical distancing hasn't always meant social distancing" and she explained that the quarantine has given her time to connect with family from other states and grow closer with her fellow faculty members. Likewise, their church

community has thrived with choir members sending voice recordings of their vocal parts and Scripture readings." Gesturing toward the leafy forest, Sandy smiled and said, "When you're out here you're just surrounded by trees and nature, even though you still have to work, it gives you increased clarity when you realize that there's other purpose in life. When you come to this place it gives you peace and it reminds you to savor the good things in life, to slow down and enjoy that crackling of the fire, and that purring kitty, or that snuggly dog, or the birds singing... to appreciate the people in your life. Everything else in life disappears and you're just down to the basics of what's important. God gave us pretty much all the things we need to survive and be happy, and the rest is just dressing. Our hope is that we will come out of this pandemic somehow stronger or better people than when we went into it."

At WCRC, God is clearly working during this time, and we are grateful that He is using our peaceful grounds to give guests the space to connect with one another and to hear God's voice more clearly. Thank you to Lang Craighill and Amos and Sandy Goldie for sharing their stories with us.

■ Renee Hogan is Administrative Assistant at Williamsburg Christian Retreat Center, Toano. Va.

Mennonite Disaster Service volunteers 'still surprise us all' even after 70 years

By KEVIN KING

e at Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) recently had the honor of hearing from one of our original founders, 94-year-old Marcella Diller. She lives at Schowalter Villa in Hesston, Kansas, where her normal visits from family members and friends have been taking place over the phone. She still remembers the church picnic she attended back in 1950, at which the very first conversations about MDS began over (of course) delicious food. "We had fried chicken, potato salad, and baked beans…everybody brought something and

every dish was special," she said. Marcella said that those early conversations that formed MDS felt like a natural extension of everyday life in Hesston: "Those were the kind of people who lived around here. They helped each other."

Over 70 years since then, MDS has grown into an organization through which, every year, nearly 6,000 volunteers from across the U.S. and Canada help those in need. Last year, volunteers built more than 68 new homes and repaired 313 more. But this year, on March 13, it all stopped—

because of COVID-19. One of the most difficult decisions I've ever had to make was closing our projects and sending our volunteers home. Yet I found that, when they got home, they couldn't sit still! They began helping in the ways that they could—all while safely social distancing. At this point, MDS volunteers have made over a half million masks for everyone from healthcare workers to great-grandmothers like Marcella Diller.

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In Virginia Mennonite Conference, Harrisonburg resident Betty Brunk, on her 87th birthday, penned a poem that colorfully tells the story of how MDS volunteers just won't stop (safely) serving, even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In her poem, entitled "GIVE ME A TASK!" Brunk wrote (in part):

Give me a task!

Please give me a task!

Is this too much to ask?

That you give me a task?

What's this about masks?

Somebody needs masks?

That sounds like a task that I could do.

Brunk was among dozens of volunteers in Harrisonburg who helped deliver over 1,000 masks and 600 TyVek gowns to first responders, including rescue squads, firefighters and police officers; 1,200 masks to the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community; and 2,000 masks to Catholic Charities. I would like to extend my personal thanks to all the volunteers involved in that effort. This has turned into an ecumenical response that includes other faith groups as well.

On a national level, MDS, with our partners Everence® and Mennonite Central Committee U.S. have joined together to launch a COVID-19 Congregational Relief Fund to aid churches facing a financial crisis due to the pandemic. Already, more than \$750,000 has been committed. The need is quickly growing: Within the first two weeks, churches submitted more than 250 applications.

As much as COVID-19 surprised us all, the volunteers keep surprising us with their creativity and compassion. The relief fund donors have surprised us with their willingness to share their own precious resources during an extremely uncertain financial time.

That "surprise" power of compassion is one thing that simply has not shut down for MDS—and I hope it never does. Marcella Diller also vividly remembers when, some 40 years after MDS was created, a



Marcella Diller, one of the original founders of MDS, shares a moment with her grandsons, Kyle and Ryan. Photo: Mark Diller

devastating tornado tore through Hesston. Weirdly, the date was March 13, 1990—the very date this year, 30 years later, when MDS projects were temporarily closed.

The home in which Marcella and her late husband, Bob, had brought up five children, was badly damaged. "I remember, after the tornado, we went to my son's place to stay. When we went back to the house the next day, the MDS people were there already. I couldn't believe it!" Marcella said.

Even one of the original founders of MDS was surprised by the compassion that volunteers showed! So was her grandson, Mark Diller, who was 11 years old at the time. As Mark Diller remembers today: "That was a pivotal, developmentally important event in my life," he said. "Seeing people come to volunteer really was impressionable for me."

Mark Diller went on to volunteer many times with MDS, most recently with his wife and their two boys, ages 16 and 14, in Eureka, Kansas, to help repair a home damaged by a flood.

Meanwhile, his grandmother is still regularly delighted by news about MDS. "I follow the newspapers and read about MDS all the time," she said, "and even what they are doing during this virus—it's so helpful."

As we look back on the 70-year history of MDS, I am reminded of some time-honored traditions that have not changed. One is that we tend to get our best ideas over delicious food! The other is the surprising strength of the fresh compassion of our volunteers. May it continue for 70 more years and beyond. To God be the glory.

■ Kevin King is Executive Director of Mennonite Disaster Service.

VMRC: Values in action

By VMRC STAFF

eaders at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community in Harrison-burg, Virginia, stated that they have consistently witnessed their employees demonstrating the organization's values during the COVID-19 crisis.

"One of VMRC's values is being Christ-centered," said Maureen Pearson, director of Public Relations. "Many staff were re-assigned jobs to help keep COVID-19 from the campus and were willing to take on just about any responsibility asked of them."

Care staff moved from food coordinator roles in Woodland Park to direct care when the organization was faced with staff challenges. Dining staff prepared meals for Woodland Park residents while other employees volunteered to deliver meals. Employees from VMRC's closed Wellness Center were among those who arrived early and stayed late to conduct daily employee health screenings.

"It looked like the Body of Christ in action," said Maureen. "Every person had a role, and that role was important to keeping our campus healthy and operating."

Another VMRC value is being innovative.

- Many people made masks and gowns to supplement the needed personal protective equipment.
- Staff created an Admissions Wing in Transitional Care to isolate and care for patients.
- Its emergency response team developed extended food supply and medical supply plans.
- Wellness & Community-Based Services developed cable programming to keep residents and staff informed, entertained and inspired.

"During this time when another nursing home in our community was lacking PPE, we shared medical supplies and offered care packages to their staff and residents," said Maureen. "This demon-



During the COVID-19 crisis, VMRC residents used technology as a way of staying connected with family and friends. Courtesy of VMRC

strated our value for authentic, caring relationships."

VMRC was one of only a few organizations to offer bonus pay in appreciation to direct care workers and those who supported them in their responsibilities.

"As with everyone, the onset of COVID-19 brought (our normal work) to an abrupt halt," said Betsy Hay, Vice President of Wellness & Community Based Services at VMRC. "Our team pivoted quickly to new ways of promoting wellbeing for both residents and staff."

Staff started the *Community of Hope* internal TVchannel with the theme "Stay Connected. Stay Informed. Stay Well." Three daily weekday broadcasts included devotions led by chaplains and other staff, community updates, exercise workouts, programs such as hymn sings, poetry readings, brain games, nutrition programs and celebrations of holidays.

"What was once an auditorium where so many residents gathered for worship and concerts from across campus now became an instant television studio," said Betsy. "While we were so grateful to have the technology and capacity to connect with our residents in this new way, we suddenly had to learn a lot more about our sound and camera system."

Operation Tip
Top began as a way
of keeping Residential Living residents
in "tip top shape,"
said Betsy. Several
staff began calling
residents as a way to
check on how they
were coping with the
stay-at-home orders.

"These calls have proven to be a great way to stay connected and offer encouragement," said Betsy.

Life Enrichment team members in Supportive Living were equipped with iPads to provide one-on-one interactions with residents and enable residents to visit with family members via FaceTime and Skype. In Assisted Living, Life Enrichment specialists assisted with 20 to 25 FaceTime visits every week. Staff also continued with arts, crafts, literature and baking projects—all one-on-one and with social distancing.

Under guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, VMRC chaplains visited with residents only on the occasion of end-of-life.

"While we have had no cases of COVID-19 among our residents, we have had several residents die of other conditions during this time. Our chaplains have been allowed to visit with residents to ease and comfort this journey," said Betsy.

The WCBS team also helped to encourage, appreciate and sustain VMRC's frontline staff who are under tremendous stress in their daily work.

- Chaplains write a weekly "Message of Hope for Your Week" distributed by email to staff.
- Weekly video segments called "Employee Q&A" are recorded featuring Judith Trumbo, CEO, and Shawn Printz, Vice President of Human Resources, addressing questions and concerns of employees.
- Exercise classes, devotions and fun programs are posted as a way of encouraging wellbeing.

Prior to the pandemic, the VMRC Foundation focused on face-to-face conversations, group gatherings, and events to tell the story of VMRC residents' needs around compassion funding and memory care.

"COVID-19 changed that," said Les Helmuth, CFRE, executive director of the VMRC Foundation. "We've cancelled major 'thank you' events and the VMRC Golf Benefit this summer. However, donors have still responded with generous support for the Good Samaritan Fund and a newly established COVID-19 Emergency Fund."

Giving through the end of March showed a 12 percent increase in the Good Samaritan Fund. Through April, giving is even with last year's. The Good Samaritan Fund provides ongoing support for residents who have exhausted their financial resources.

The emergency fund will help reduce the impact on operations of the sudden increased need for Personal Protection Equipment, staffing changes, and disruptions of schedule.

"We have found a way to keep in touch with donors through phone calls, texts, special emails and FaceTime," added Helmuth.

Challenges and grace at Pleasant View, Inc.

By DAVE GULLMAN

s an agency that supports a vulnerable population, Pleasant View has had to make significant changes in our day-to-day operations. Pleasant View is honoring the Governor of Virginia's stay-at-home order. Our community-based services which include supported employment, our center-based day supports, and our volunteer services through Community Connections are closed. Over fifty people who do not live in one of our houses are not able to attend their usual supports. Needless to say, this has forced us to rethink how we operate day to day.

Most of the individuals whom Pleasant View serves have had to make schedule changes and many have had to stop working as a result of the current restrictions. This has been very difficult for many, as they have had to curtail all outside activities such as daily interactions with friends, Special Olympics, Best Buddies, eating out and so on. Remarkably, most of our residents have risen to the challenges brought on by this pandemic and have made the necessary adjustments with grace.

In order to keep staff working and our residents as safe as possible, we have shifted the work load of the direct support professionals working in day support services into residential assignments. This requires new work shifts as well as new duties. The staff have done remarkably well in making this change and have risen to the challenges which these changes entail. Many of our staff have been cross-trained in several programs and have become familiar with people from the different residences. This has served Pleasant View well as these current changes have become necessary.

Highlighting some of the examples of grace and hope in the midst of great loss, we share the following stories:

A few weeks into the shut down one of the Community Connections staff who was reassigned to a 3 to 11 PM work shift, took it upon himself to arrange a video conference call with Community Connections participants every Wednesday at 10:00 AM. The response has been phenomenal, with individuals Zooming in from family and group homes. This weekly connection has



Craft Night at Louk House engages residents' creativity. Photos courtesy of Pleasant View, Inc.

enhanced the lives of many. They do not feel so alone and this gives them something to look forward to when the time at home seems long.

Part of the mission of Pleasant View is to support the individuals spiritually. We continue to do this in multiple ways:

- For almost 20 years, Pleasant View has sponsored a monthly worship service for individuals with disabilities, family members and friends, called Faith & Light. Since meeting as a group is not possible, the planning team decided to try using Zoom as a way of connecting and maintaining community when everyone feels so distant. The joy we all experience in seeing friends is palpable. The opportunity to sing and pray together is very important. As the planning team reflected on the first of such meetings, they decided to have similar video meetings twice a month.
- Dave Gullman, Pleasant View's pastor, continues to monitor the spiritual health of all the individuals a little more differently because of the current restrictions. One aspect of his work, which is a direct response to the pandemic, is to send out a brief reflective devotional five days a week to the homes and to other individuals. This has been well-received by those we

support, as well as by staff and family members.

Another area of grace received is through the community support we have received throughout this pandemic. Pleasant View would like to thank the many donors in the community who have made face masks, face shields, and other PPE for our staff.

The community support has lifted our spirits and reminds us that we are not forgotten. There are also businesses which have shown flexibility in meeting our



Residents enjoy a van ride in the countryside.

needs. As staff found it risky to shop for groceries, SYSCO, a local food supplier, stepped in and has begun delivering food for all of our homes. This helps take the burden of safety off our staff and we are grateful.

Finally, as spring shares it's beauty with all of us, many of our residents are finding emotional release by getting out for walks around the house and taking short drives in the beautiful countryside.

Some of the challenges we have had to overcome and some we continue to face:

- Schedule changes have brought on many challenges for our staff. As we look to the future, a question that will need to be answered is "how do we go back to somewhat normal functioning?"
- The virus has affected some of our staff and we have had it in one home. This adds stress and anxiety to an already anxious time so we appreciate prayers for everyone as we negotiate our way through the coming days.
- Some of our individuals have not been able to work and are feeling the loss of meaningful employment. This will definitely be something we need to address as the restrictions ease up.
- We have had significant losses in program, investment, and fundraising revenues over the past few months. As we go forward and strategize safe ways to be in the community as the world opens up, we need to continue to communicate our need for financial support of our mission. We are participating in the Great Community Give on Wednesday, June 24, 2020, with a \$25,000.00 goal (donate.great-communitygive.org/organizations/pleasant-view-inc). We also plan to have our Charity Golf Tournament on Friday, August 14, 2020.
- Finally, this pandemic has raised the anxiety level of many staff and individuals. There is a deep sense of loss and there will be ongoing need for response in the areas of emotional, mental and spiritual health.
- Dave Gullman is Pastor at Pleasant View, Inc., Broadway, Va.



Four Tobin sisters (from left) Melody, Jessamyn, Bethany, and Hosanna) shared their stories from a vast array of experiences in ministry and personal growth at the February 20 Women Encouraging Women in Adversity event. Photo: Deb Pardini

Engaging and encouraging women even as gathering events go remote

By ANITA CLYMER

n the evening of February 20 this year, over a hundred women gathered in the fellowship hall of Harrisonburg Mennonite Church for Mennonite Women of Virginia's annual missions day event to pray for and give financial love gifts to our sisters who work as missionaries around the world. We clustered in groups of eight to ten around tables to share a meal and get to know one another as we enjoyed the evening's program together.

One of the topics of conversation at my table that evening was travel plans. My mom was wondering whether or not she should cancel an upcoming trip to Thailand due to concerns about a viral outbreak in Asia and possible travel restrictions. Little did we know how quickly that virus would travel around the world and change all of our lives for the foreseeable future. No one was going anywhere (including my mom, who postponed and then ended up canceling the trip)!

The theme of that evening in February was "Women Encouraging Women in Adversity." How fitting the theme has become as we've all faced weeks and months of isolation. One way we've attempted to keep connecting with and encouraging women is through a blog that was started almost a year ago (mwva.home.blog). Without needing to be in close contact, women (and men!) may access the poetry, stories, and reflections there that will hopefully encourage them to continue steadfastly and

faithfully in whatever life God has called them to at this time. In late March I shared a poem on the blog about how small I have felt in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet how as a community we can have a great impact on the spread of the disease. The poem is called "Juice."

Juice

I'm not a superhero many times not even a great mom or a wonderful person at all

Caught up with all of you in the throes of a national crisis a global pandemic

I find myself feeling quite ordinary my efforts infinitesimal compared to the magnitude of the galloping beast

Living here at the foot of the mountain there are not even other humans within six feet of me whom I could avoid (family counting as a single organism)

So here I just am making juice for jelly from the collected bodies of canned grapes whose first juice we have already drunk

these discards are heated on the stove poured through a sieve gently mashed to release their final goodness (no, actually the chickens will still eat the skins) dark purple pulpy juice runs down gathered in surprising quantity in a bowl and the fragrance is like early fall all over again

[gorging ourselves on grapes beneath the arbor

juice running down our chins the sweet, pungent aroma lingering on our stained fingers]

And so I too
offer my one small body
joined with many others
a collected offering of good will and intentions
producing together an urn-full after all
a pleasing aroma

We invite you to visit the blog and use it as a way to connect with other women

across our conference. Everyone is welcome to participate in discussion to encourage and uplift one another.

While Mennonite Women of Virginia has not had to cancel any events this spring, we have faced the challenge of continuing our planning—without meeting in person—for the summer prayer breakfast and fall women's retreat, both of which usually take months of preparation in advance.

This year's prayer breakfast will be unique in that we plan to meet virtually. We welcome all women to join our Mennonite Women of Virginia Virtual Prayer Breakfast to be held at 9 a.m. on Saturday, July 11 via Zoom.

We encourage you to prepare your coffee, tea or breakfast and join us online as we anticipate having VMMissions workers share with us on the topic of Experiencing God Through COVID-19. If you are not currently on Virginia Mennonite Women's email list and would like to be a part of this event, please find our page under the "Ministries" tab on the Virginia Mennonite Conference website and send an e-mail to our secretary to get on the list.

Mennonite Women of Virginia plans to hold our annual fall retreat (in-person if possible) on the weekend of November 13-15, 2020, in Richmond, Va. See the blog or check our page on the VMC website for updates and announcements concerning these events.

■ Anita Clymer is a writer on behalf of Mennonite Women of Virginia

Roberta Webb: Rising up to the challenge

By MELODY M. PANNELL

n March 18, 2020, S. Duke Storen, Commissioner for The Virginia Department of Social Services, released the following statement:

"The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) is closely monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic and all guidance that is being distributed to child care facilities at the federal level. For centers that remain open, we encourage you to adapt your service settings as much as possible to align with public health recommendations, which include social distancing. Please encourage your families to remain at home to care for their children if at all possible. This will help ensure spaces for essential personnel in need of child care as they directly support the COVID-19 efforts. For now, classroom childcare settings should limit capacity to ten individuals to include staff."

The Virginia Department of Social Services also mandated that child care centers should continue to follow a number of guidelines for safety and to maintain social distancing. VDSS ended this comprehensive list of mandated guidelines with this empathetic yet firm and clear statement:

"Understanding this may be very challenging, we ask that child care centers only remain open if they can adhere to these guidelines for protecting vulnerable populations." Vulnerable populations. Those words rang in my heart and placed a heavy burden, deep responsibility and sense of urgency on our board members, administrative team and child care staff at the Roberta Webb Child Care Center. This was not just a mandated guideline for a singular aspect concerning the life of a vulnerable child. This was a multifaceted, multilayered "calling" to respond to the intersections of public health, socio-economic disparities, emotional stressors, family dynamics, mental wellbeing and the critical educational needs of our children.

This was a "call" for compassion, courage and creativity to rise up and meet the challenge to continue our mission "to serve ethnically diverse families by providing quality and affordable childcare." As the mandate was clear from the Virginia Department of Social Services in this time of unprecedented health crisis, so is our mission.

RWCCC made the challenging decision to "rise up," remain open and implement creative, innovative and strategic classroom structures to recreate a safe and welcoming learning environment. We not only felt called to meet the needs of our children, we were also deeply concerned about the health and financial wellbeing of our staff members and their families.



In order to remain viable, conscientious and socially responsible, we would need to rely on the continuous communication and collaborative efforts of our state and local community leaders, local businesses, child care center networks and non-profit administrators during this coronavirus outbreak.

Under the leadership of our Executive Director, Mrs. Angela Rouse, we issued a

temporary two-week closure in March and implemented a deep cleaning plan in order to effectively prepare and make the necessary adjustments for our reopening. Our board, Executive Director, administrative Team, and classroom staff worked diligently together to ensure that all policies, best practices and state regulations will be executed in an efficient manner.

We have relied on the wonderful relationships that we built with our families and community to trust that we would utilize all of our resources to be intentional in recreating an innovative and adaptive RWCCC program.

When we reopened on March 30, we watched with great delight as our parents partnered with our teachers to make sure that their children were safe and ready to learn. Children were educated about COVID-19 through storytelling, new social distancing individual learning stations, and new routines emphasizing creative personal hygiene practices. In the midst of the horrors of COVID-19, children were laughing, playing, learning and growing. Children were being educated through compassion, courage and creativity.

RWCCC team members were working together like never before, taking on extra

time, being mindful of one another and being open to learning new skills.

As some self-quarantined and some sheltered in place, we learned how to Zoom together, meet up on GSuite, and offer grace to one another in this radical transition and "new normal." It has and continues to be a steep learning curve of being courageous, living out our mission and depending on one another to keep RWCCC afloat.

Becoming more collaborative has been a positive aspect of COVID-19, along with operating on an even higher level of compassion concerning responding to the sufferings and needs of others. I believe that this time has been character-building for everyone involved. We were also reminded of our deep connection to the community in this coronavirus crisis. We are interconnected with our Virginia Mennonite Conference and Harrisonburg community. We are interdependent on the support of our local churches and organizations.

There is a Nguni Bantu term that I believe embodies and exemplifies the core of our new growth mindset: *ubuntu*, which is "a quality that includes the essential human virtues, compassion and humanity." According to Angela Thompsell, Professor of British and African History, "One meaning

of *ubuntu* is correct behavior, but correct in this sense is defined by a person's relations with other people. It refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community. Such acts could be as simple as helping a stranger in need, or much more complex ways of relating with others."

We are grateful for our many friends who have donated to the RWCCC throughout our 25 years of service. Now more than ever, we need your financial support to ensure that we can continue providing quality and affordable child care. We invite you to consider giving a special gift to support our efforts as we respond to meeting the needs of our children and families during this public health crisis. So many of our parents are dependent on having a safe place to care for their children. Join us as we rise up to the challenge and answer the call to compassion, courage and creativity. We thank you in advance for your support in empowering us to continue this important work of educating society's future citizens, our beloved children.

■ Melody M. Pannell is Director of Development for Roberta Webb Child Care Center.

FLRC serves a needy and anxious community

By MARIE BRADLEY

amily Life Resource Center remains open. The agency is taking necessary precautions to protect our clients. We have some counselors working from home and offering teletherapy to clients who are seniors, immunocompromised, or are just unsettled about coming into the office. However, we have counselors still continuing in-person sessions for those clients that may not have access to the internet or clients in dire need of faceto-face sessions.

We find that the counselors here at FLRC are needed as much as ever as anxiety and depression are at all-time highs. We are seeing an increase in anxiety, depression and fear of the unknown concerning COVID-19. The agency allows a safe and nurturing environment to explore and process feelings. We have been told numerous

times that right now counseling is the only constancy or "normalcy" in their lives. Clients also have the ability to speak openly about their faith. We welcome this as we know people are missing their church families and support.

People are also worried about how they are going to pay for sessions as more clients are experiencing financial hardships due to COVID-19. The FLRC scholarship program is continuing to allow clients to receive the services that they otherwise would not be able to afford. The agency also feels the crisis as scholarship funds are limited, cash flow is diminishing and the counselors are earning less.

The agency will stay true to our name and continue to promote Hope, Health and Healing. We have remained consistent during this crisis by remaining open so that we show our community that they are not in this alone. We choose to walk with our clients as Jesus serves as our guide. Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

If you would like to help the agency during this time, we greatly appreciate any donation amount to the scholarship fund. Please visit our website to donate at www.flrc.org or mail checks to:

Family Life Resource Center 273 Newman Avenue Harrisonburg, VA 22801

■ Marie Bradley is Administrative Director of FLRC, Harrisonburg, Va.

Eastern Mennonite University is "Leading Together" through challenges and opportunities

By SUSAN SCHULTZ HUXMAN

n March 11, the same day the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a global pandemic, Eastern Mennonite University began our COVID-19 response.

It has been disruptive and disorienting, sad and scary on an unprecedented scale. But we have seen creativity, courage, responsiveness, and resilience from our students, faculty and staff on an unprecedented scale.

Our entire campus community has shown each other an impressive "can-do" spirit, from quickly getting all students safely back to their homes, including those studying abroad, and ramping up for all courses and key support services online. Students responding to a survey gave a 94% vote of confidence for the exemplary care they received through the all-online, personalized instruction and other key forms of support from faculty and staff during the last six weeks of the semester.

So now, along with every other college and university across the United States, we have moved from a response phase and a resourcing phase to a re-visioning phase.

Here are three challenges of our current reality and three opportunities we've embraced.

There are big unknowns, which in turn challenges our decision-making. We are collecting as much information as we can, listening to public health authorities and others, in preparation for different scenarios, but there is still much uncertainty regarding the future of this pandemic. Our decision-making is also time-sensitive, and has long-term consequences for many people, including our students and employees. And we know everyone is in the same situation, making difficult choices with rapidly changing information.

The pandemic has created severe financial challenges and uncertainty

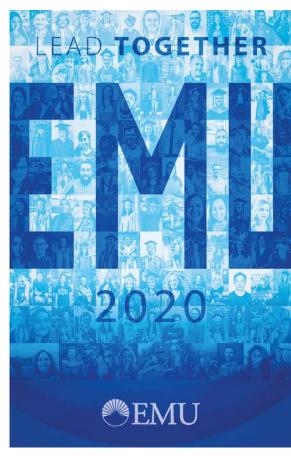
for EMU and its students. Though the CARES Act and the Paycheck Protection Program have provided some financial relief and we expect to close the year with a balanced budget, we know finances will be an ongoing challenge. In response, we've started the Emergency Student Compassion Fund and the UFund for Resilience, both of which received record donations from EMU supporters during our LovEMU Day this spring. Visit emu. edu/resilience-funds for more information.

Enrollment at colleges and universities is projected to decline nationwide, in part because of so much uncertainty. However, we're cautiously optimistic about our incoming class numbers and confident in our ability to continue to deliver high-quality education in formats that support our mission and goals. We plan to open in the fall as usual, but with the readiness to adopt any one of several learning environments—a decision dependent on the status of COVID-19 in the region and the recommendations of health and educational authorities. Six teams of superbly committed faculty, staff and administration are working hard to prepare for contingencies.

Opportunities:

EMU has staked out a unique niche: We have built a reputation at EMU as a caring community of learners, with small classes, personal attention, and mentors and coaches committed to walking with our students every year and nurturing them: personally, socially, intellectually and spiritually. This was an appealing educational model before the pandemic for many students and parents. It may be even more important today.

We have expanded our outreach to offer wider engagement with EMU's mission and values: The recent push into online learning, and EMU's own 20 years of experience with online learning, has



EMU made a poster to celebrate 2020 graduatess with contributed portraits of seniors and graduate students. Image: EMU/Courtesy Lauren

helped to accelerate innovation in our areas of expertise. Our globally renowned Summer Peacebuilding Institute is now entirely online, and has welcomed more participants who could not get visas or afford to travel from around the world, but also within the U.S. We've expanded summer undergraduate offerings and reached into the healthcare and teacher education areas with special offerings related to restorative justice and trauma and resilience.

We do indeed "Lead Together." Our new tagline is a real descriptor of both how we operate and the kind of student we prepare for the world. It makes a difference in how we go about our business and in the ways we interact with each other, including our students, parents, and the community. We know this special commitment to community is visible and important, and enables us to engage in a kind of teamwork that is both nimble and responsive.

At one of our recent Town Hall meetings with faculty and staff, to give us perspective on this pandemic, I invoked the

spirit of the psalmist, in two verses.

First, invoking thanks: "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!" (Psalms 118:24)

And second, invoking faith: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea!... Be still...and know that I am God.... The Lord

of hosts is with us." (Psalms 46: 1-2; 10-11)

Dramatically different passages, but both are fitting verses in times of crisis. Why? Because the strange and contrasting origin of the word "crisis" is this: the word means both danger and opportunity; it means both emergency and breakthrough; it means both contraction and new growth.

We are living into this reality with whole hearts and with strong faith—pre-

paring, persisting and praying together, and finding ways, even though physical distancing, to being the loving embrace of God to each other and those in need. And we give thanks for the sustaining presence of you as well in this community.

■ Susan Schultz Huxman is President of Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va.

COVID-19 can't beat community

By ANDREA WENGER

community before COVID-19," reflects Justin King, Eastern Mennonite High School principal. "And—because of that—we are able to shine now more than ever."

"Shining" during a pandemic closure for Eastren Mennonite School K-12 has meant lots of connection. Principals, teachers, and school counselors have connected with the school's 350 students in groups and 1:1, as well as with parents, since the March 18 move to distance learning.

"The quick response EMS has had in the midst of the pandemic has enabled EMS students to continue learning and advancing academically in ways their peers in other school systems, unfortunately, haven't been able to," one parent observed. "This is a blessing we don't take for granted."

Creative "Classrooms"

Teachers navigated PowerSchool Learning Management System, various video-making tools, Google Meet, Zoom, and other technologies to keep connections strong and continue learning.

A sampling of activities included:

- A smoothie-making lab in each person's kitchen for Family and Consumer Science
- Videotaped watercolor tutorials by Malea Gascho, art teacher, using supplies picked up from school
- How-to-bake-a cake video contest—in Spanish—with two teachers from their own homes



Christine Fairfield (EMS staff and parent from Springdale Mennonnite) her daughters, and German exchange student, share a photo for the student-organized #FlamesStrong spirit day. Photo by Christine Fairfield

- A virtual choir of students, alumni and staff performing John Bell's "Don't Be Afraid," appreciated by more than 33,000 listeners on EMS YouTube and Facebook.
- Real-time AP Literature discussions
- Virtual field trips
- Elementary "show and tell" Zoom meetings
- Google Meet math work groups
- Senior presentations—a tradition in Kingdom Living class—on Zoom

Some students wished for more online school work, while other students (and stressed parents) needed less, observed Maria Archer, K-8 principal, early in the closure. "Needs vary from day to day, as everyone navigated this strange new world," she said. "We have the capacity to know our student and family needs and are doing our best to serve them."

Faculty met to pray daily for students. Students had drop-in support groups. Principals met weekly with parent representatives. The Student Council Organization met weekly to share student feedback and plan virtual activities to keep students connected and having fun.

Various staff and guests shared videotaped "mini chapels" for grades 6-12, and Maria Archer, recorded weekly K-5 Gathering videos. Librarian Julianne Ross organized safe opportunities to return and pick up books reserved digitally.

Students stayed physically active through home-based "Olympics" events and challenges. Weekly videos featured interviews and demonstrations by alumni athletes, area coaches, and fitness experts. Students shared photos and videos with teachers and classmates.

Celebrating Graduates

For the 38 members of the class of 2020, there were a lot of losses. "We know we can't make up for the disappointments," says Principal King. "But we are consulting with seniors and parent representatives to come up with creative ways to help create special memories and mark the important milestone of graduation."

Senior class advisors Jodi Hertzler and Shannon Roth met regularly with the whole class, as well as class officers to process ideas and hear concerns.

Principal King delivered yard signs, caps and gowns to each senior's home in late May. Teachers, administrators and guests planned to cheer the seniors from their cars during a drive-through parade in the auditorium lot on Friday, June 5. Each graduate will receive a logo blanket, a specially designed COVID-19 class t-shirt, and a unique mug created by ceramist Herb Weaver '75.

And, on June 14, seniors and their families with limited guests will join faculty and administrators for a parking lot commencement ceremony. Each senior and limited guests will exit their car to receive their diploma on a parking lot stage and get a photo—all appropriately distanced.

Donor Support Steady

EMS committed early on that no family would need to leave the community due to corona-related hardships. Thanks to generous donors, that has been possible.

Alumni, parents, faculty, staff, students, and friends shared 98 gifts totaling \$26,920 on the April 22 **#FlamesStrong Giving Day for the COVID-19 Aid Fund.** Additional gifts brought the fund to \$31,498 as of May 15. Those "additional gifts" included \$500 from the Student Council Organization, a gift made by student leaders to share funds that would have gone to the outdoor "beach day" celebration they had earned by meeting Christmas Fund Drive goals. Gifts are still welcome and deeply appreciated!

Go to easternmennonite.org/support.

Fall 2020

EMS' vision to be a school where every student belongs, thrives and lives God's call remains strong, even in—and especially during—this time of closure. "We would love to be all together next fall," says Paul Leaman, head of school. Recognizing that may not be possible, he explains that planning efforts are focusing on developing scenarios that will be safe and in line with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control, and "accommodate EMS

families' varying needs as best as we can."

The schools' leadership team is reviewing extensive information that is being generated each day by educational experts nationwide. In particular, says Leaman, leadership is looking to the Virginia Association of Independent Schools, as well as Mennonite Schools Council in developing scenarios for everything from being together to distance learning to a "hybrid" approach. "We need to be ready to remain nimble and ready to respond to changing guidelines."

"We covet your prayers," says Leaman.
"We deeply care for our students and families, and remain committed to fulfilling our mission to 'join home and church in calling students to faith in Jesus Christ, academic excellence, personal integrity, and compassionate service in the world."

Search "Eastern Mennonite School" and "Eastern Mennonite School Chapels" on You-Tube to find many of the videos mentioned in this article, and "Eastern Mennonite School" on Facebook for stories and photos. Also see easternmennonite.org/news.

■ Andrea Wenger is Director of Advancement of Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Va.

Coronavirus sparks responses of compassion and creativity at VMMissions

BY CAROL TOBIN

he last three months of the coronavirus pandemic have introduced unimagined challenges and tragedy to the entire world community. At the same time, this adversity has unearthed deep wells of adaptability, creativity and compassion. This is certainly the story at VMMissions.

Ahead of the governor's shut down orders, Jon Trotter, Communication Associate for VMMissions, had already made information technology preparations for staff to work from home. The board quickly provided policy guidance needed to address the unfolding situation. Meanwhile, international workers and staff processed decisions of whether to stay or evacuate amidst

the anxiety and chaos of cancelled flights and closing borders.

Of the workers in Albania, four of the five families, already having endured the trauma of a major earthquake just a few months prior, made the decision to leave Lezhë. Dini and Klementina Shahini made the difficult decision to stay. Klementina, who serves as executive director of Lezhë Academic Center, oriented all of the teaching staff to online instruction. Through social media they also maintain daily connection with the Guri I Themelit church members. Remotely from his home country of Brazil, pastor Rafael Tartari offers an online version of his preaching and teaching ministry to the congregation.

Others have also continued their work from a distance. "I am teaching my two classes, 12th grade Civics and 11th grade Chemistry to my students," LAC principal Jim Beachy reports from his stateside home in Dayton, Virginia. While teaching online has its challenges, Beachy adds, "This has been a great time to work on curriculum, writing a teacher and student handbook, and other similar administrative projects."

Beyond this, mission workers Dan and Mary Hess are using their time in the US to help organize a two-month relief effort among their Roma neighbors in Lezhë and nearby Milot. VMMissions workers in Ecuador, Italy and Indonesia are involved in similar expressions of care for vulnerable



VMMissions workers Pam and Jim Beachy (on screen) share during an online Lezha Academic Center faculty meeting with Dini and Klementina Shahini and other staff. Video screenshot



MaryBeth Heatwole Moore and Chris Moore participated in the Keep Your Distance 5K.

members of their communities, demonstrating and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of location, VMMissions workers are noticing an important role they can play as followers of Christ, a role sometimes overlooked in busier times: simple presence. In Germany, Dave Stutzman has focused his efforts on meeting one-on-one online, doing discipleship, Bible study and coaching. He says, "Overall, we are thankful and have also marveled at the unexpected ways we can minister during this time. People were calling me out of the blue just to talk. We have found that there is an incredible openness for people to share, to process and to think about life anew."

For Tyler and Kendra Yoder, serving in Richmond, Virginia, the pandemic is providing new and vital ways to serve. They have been able to help in the distribution of food to families who rely on school meals. Tyler has pitched in with others to "adopt" a recovery house in their neighborhood, providing cleaning supplies and food for them during the crisis. Tyler wants to emulate the example of Christians throughout history who have seen trials, both persecution and plague, as an invitation to join God's mission, even to their own peril.

Responses of creativity and compassion are not limited to VMMissions mission workers. Office staff have also launched several new initiatives. Seeing a particular need within the constituency immigrant community, Lizzette Hernandez, Latino Ministries Coach, led the way in the es-

tablishment of the Coronavirus Immigrant Care Fund. Hernandez works with a team of Latino pastors to field requests from immigrant families in need. They also coordinate their efforts with New Bridges, an immigrant resource center in Harrisonburg. With the help of generous donors, the team has provided \$15,800 in aid to 55 families in Virginia and North Carolina.

Immigrant church planters also made staff aware of the need for face masks at local poultry processing facilities. Under the leadership of Lynn Suter, Director of Operations, a face mask drive was launched. Masks poured in from across the community, including a significant number from Old Order Mennonites, in batches of fifties and hundreds, enabling the timely distribution of over 2500 masks.

Looking beyond local needs, VMMissions is joining an interagency effort led by Mennonite World Conference to respond to requests for assistance from Anabaptist churches around the globe struggling in the wake of the pandemic. In addition to contributing funds, VMMissions is spreading the word about how churches and households can contribute to the MWC Global Church Sharing Fund. Interested persons can find out more at mwc-cmm.org.

Online training has become a priority for Discipleship Ministries Coach, Martin Rhodes, who recently completed a pilot project with a cohort of eight persons from within and beyond Virginia Mennonite Conference. The cohort tested and refined six online learning modules, ranging in topic from worship to race relations to the Great Commission and more. These modules will serve as training resources for both new mission workers and church leaders.

The cancellation of a number of events has sparked creative thinking on the part of Event Coordinator, Abe Hartzler, resulting in the VMMissions Keep Your Distance 5k virtual run, an event that involved 75 participants and generated \$4,000. A more significant blow was the sudden death of Steve Leaman, Director of Advancement. With affirmation from the family, VMMissions is exploring several ways to honor Steve, including holding Bike Shenandoah as a memorial ride and creating an endowment in Steve's name.

Equally important, VMMissions staff have sensed the impulse to pray, grounded in the belief that crisis is an opportunity to turn and embrace God's kingdom in new ways. Accordingly, VMMissions has begun hosting a monthly Kairos Prayer Gathering via Zoom, drawing participation from workers and partners from Europe, Asia, South America and the Caribbean, as well as board members, supporters, and staff. As Klementina Shahini has expressed it, "The challenges and changes we are experiencing require greater resources of love, care, creativity, inspiration, strength and a host of other qualities which we can only find in God's grace."

■ Carol Tobin is Mission Adocate at Virginia Mennonite Missions.



Pathways Virginia Mennonite Conference 601 Parkwood Drive Harrisonburg, VA 22802-2498

Virginia Mennonite Conference Assembly will look different this year in light of social distancing, gathering in an online forum in a one-day event via Zoom. Assembly will feature input by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Executive Director Ron Byler, focusing on MCC's 100 years of mission endeavors. Learn more at <u>virginiaconference.org/events/conference-assembly-2020/</u>

VIRGINIA MENNONITE CONFERENCE ASSEMBLY SATURDAY, JULY 18, 2020

