

Atlantic Coast Conference  
**CURRENTS**

Spring/Summer 2023  
Volume 44, Issue 2



## Sacred endings, beginnings

Green burials, planting trees draw congregation near to natural cycles of life, death

*By Jim Shenk*

*This article originally appeared in Anabaptist World, April 28, 2023*

On March 29, we gathered for a graveside service to honor the life of a beloved Akron Mennonite Church member, Priscilla Ziegler. This would be unlike traditional interments.

We waited expectantly for immediate family and Priscilla's shroud-wrapped body to arrive. Few of the 250 family and friends had experienced this kind of green burial and its intimacy. Upon arrival, guests were handed a short description of green burials, written by Priscilla's husband, Don.

During the reading of a poem, family members gently lowered Priscilla's body into the 5-foot-deep earthen grave. While a violist played sacred tunes, we were invited to approach the grave and drop fresh-cut flowers and a note of blessing or memory. The flowers and notes thickly blanketed Priscilla's body.

Participants were touched by this sacred graveside experience. Many said, "This is what I want."

The possibility of green burials in the Akron Mennonite Church cemetery grew out of conversations inspired by end-of-life workshops more than a decade ago. Don Ziegler, Jerry Shank and Dick Leaman designed an eight-session curriculum and led discussion for the more than 100 people who participated.

Upon learning more about what happens to the human body when embalmed and the consequences for the soil and groundwater, many participants considered more environmentally friendly alternatives.

A few of us advocated for green burials as an option in the church cemetery. Some wished to be buried in a biodegradable container such as a shroud, seagrass basket or simple pine casket.

Nick, Abby and Lily Buckwalter joined 150 people who planted 450 tree seedlings in October at Akron Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania. — Bob Wyble

Continued on page 2



Charity Shenk plays viola as guests await the arrival of Priscilla Ziegler's immediate family for the graveside service in the cemetery on March 29 at Akron Mennonite Church in Pennsylvania. — Jim Shenk

Our cemetery is only the second in Lancaster County to offer this option. Glenn and his wife, Anne, led the way by making their own plans for shroud burial.

The ministry team that formed to consider more natural alternatives to practices of the funeral industry then started to dream about how to use the adjacent four-acre hay field to reflect the natural cycles of life and death.

Our dreaming led to rather grandiose plans that over the course of a few years evolved with input from a range of people from within and outside the congregation.

**“Congregational support was profoundly deeper than just support for this project. It was rooted in a commitment to be faithful stewards of the Earth”**

The original idea of a memorial garden shifted to a focus on a nature preserve connected to our cemetery space. It would be a place where life and death are experienced holistically, symbolized in the chrysalis and the butterfly. The congregation affirmed this refocusing.

Implementation of this vision

began last summer. Two months of excavations shaped the sloping tract of land and formed a bio-retention basin.

On a gorgeous day last October, 150 people planted 450 trees. Individuals and families from AMC, neighbors, students and representatives of five sister congregations were guided by staff of the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay.

This parcel of land is being transformed into a woodland of more than 20 native species, a meadow of native grasses and flowers, and walking paths.

A sidewalk was contoured along two sides of the property to meet borough guidelines but inset from the streets to make it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Bark-mulched paths were put down just in time to welcome winter walkers.

Congregational support was profoundly deeper than just support for this project. It was rooted in a commitment to be faithful stewards of the Earth by enhancing the natural environment for the benefit of all life.


This commitment was evident in support for a project led by Nick Buckwalter to install solar panels on the church's roof; in 25 volunteers gathering on a Saturday to clear invasive trees and

bushes from our campus; in congregational leadership proposing creation care as one of our congregation's four core values; and in a resounding call for the nature preserve project to be understood as part of this larger commitment.

A Green Team was formed to give leadership to this commitment to creation care. Plans include collaborating with the Diamond Street Early Education Center, resident in our facility, to develop an outdoor classroom, a creation-care curriculum and a StoryWalk; developing contemplative spaces at benches with access to resources via QR codes; collaborating with interfaith partners for the Chesapeake and neighboring groups working on similar initiatives; and educating and developing awareness of individual, family and community actions to benefit the environment.

Donna Mack Shenk, convener of the Green Team, notes both the remarkable breadth of gifts within the congregation and the rich connections that have been developed with like-minded individuals, groups and churches in the community.

“It is so inspiring to see our small efforts as part of something much larger, locally and globally,” she said.

What began as a conversation about end-of-life has evolved into a life-giving initiative that offers opportunities for coming generations. 

*Jim Shenk and wife Donna have been part of the Akron Mennonite Church team that has envisioned and guided the nature preserve initiative. They live north of Lititz, Pa., in a three-generation household.*

*Currents* is a quarterly publication that seeks to inspire and inform about ways God is working in congregations and related ministries of Atlantic Coast Conference of Mennonite Church USA.

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Atlantic Coast Conference  
100 Quarry Road  
Leola, PA 17540  
1-717-394-8107  
1-800-238-0126

[office@atlanticcoastconference.net](mailto:office@atlanticcoastconference.net)  
[atlanticcoastconference.net](http://atlanticcoastconference.net)



## Re-Storying God's Mission: ACC holds Annual Assembly

By ACC Staff

Reflections on beginnings and endings defined much of this year's ACC Annual Assembly, held at African Community Church of Lancaster (ACCL) on April 22.


The delegate business of the morning included the approval of a new budget and the affirmation of a slate of new leaders. Affirmed for a second term on Executive Committee are Assistant Moderator Todd Gusler, Secretary Lynn Brubaker, and Members at Large Steve Crane and Addie Banks. Affirmed for second terms as committee chairs were Keith and Ruth Miller for the Peace & Justice Committee and Dawn Ranck-Hower for the Ministerial Leadership Committee. Elisa Parmer was affirmed as the new Youth Committee chair, as was Michael Charles as the Gifts Discernment Committee chair, along with new Gifts Discernment committee members Pyllis Pellman Good and Dwight Rohrer.

Delegates released two congregations from ACC membership, Hope Community Church in Fleetwood, PA and Oley Valley Mennonite Church in Oley, PA. Both had requested release from ACC membership. A prayer of blessing was shared for both congregations as they seek affiliation elsewhere.

We celebrated the ministry of Merv Stoltzfus who retired as Executive Conference Minister after serving over 30 years with ACC. Staff and Executive Committee shared gifts followed by a time of storytelling and thanking Merv for his deep impact on so many lives in his time of ministry.

After lunch was the formal installation and blessing for Joanne Dietzel, who began her role as Executive Conference Minister on April 1.

The afternoon included sharing from speakers and group conversation on "re-storying God's Mission". Eric Frey Martin, Nelson Okanya, and Emily Ralph Servant each shared about different aspects of pursuing God's mission in the world and how, for many, the vision of mission has shifted to focus on our home communities. Groups were invited to share how their congregations view "missions" and speakers shared about how missions was viewed historically and how we can practically pursue God's kingdom in our neighborhoods today.

A recording of both the delegate session and the missions presentations is available on the ACC Youtube channel, [youtube.com/@acc\\_menno](https://www.youtube.com/@acc_menno). 





## Merv Stoltzfus Reflects on 30+ Years of Ministry and Leadership with Atlantic Coast Conference

*in an interview with Phyllis Pellman Good*

Merv Stoltzfus has been in leadership in Atlantic Coast Conference for more than 30 years. In those three-plus decades, our whole society has experienced convulsive change, including the church. How did Merv not lose his way? How did he not get pulled off-base in the middle of many tensions? How did he sort out which were his personal references—and what was appropriate for the church, for the people?

Unruffled and at ease, Merv answered a series of questions about how he has kept his bearings through the years.—Phyllis Pellman Good

Merv Stoltzfus: I've had close personal friends outside of my work. These are peer friends who I seek out. They know ministry and leadership. They treat confidentiality with high regard. They have been neutral. They have created a safe space for me where I can release what I am carrying and be the person I want to be. Humor and laughter are often present when we're together! We have become mutual assets to each other.

I also live out of a spiritual foundation. For the last 20 years I've pursued a spiritual well, deepening practices with the help of a spiritual director. That has been incredibly helpful and has made it possible for me to disconnect from the difficulties of my day and from my ego. Sometimes humans hurt each other. When that happens, I want to

work through those situations as much as possible.

And for the last 15 years, I have an almost daily practice that begins after dark. During at least three seasons of the year, I sit outdoors on our deck for one to three hours, just being present with the night sky, surrounding roads, the neighboring Sheetz, the nearby airport. I don't take any books outside with me. I try not to look at my phone.

It's kind of a prayer time, although I don't attempt to focus and think. I'm just present to what is. No words or petitions. People and situations may come to mind, but not always in formed words. I'm preparing for the night with this kind of "being prayer." I stay out there til I'm ready to come in.

**PPG: What changes, shifts, and trends have you observed in the church during these past 30 years, both good and of concern?**

MS: From 1982-1984, I was Youth Minister for both the Conference and for Ridgeview Mennonite Church. At that time, our congregations were planting new churches with amazing energy, many of them in urban settings, requiring considerable financial commitments. These were relatively local projects, often four to six hours away, primarily in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York.

The church was flourishing in interesting ways, including starting nonprofits to meet various needs. Our people got very personally involved, and this benefited the Conference. We took great risks. For example, we bought a building in

one of the worst parts of Baltimore, and, in partnership with Eastern Mennonite Missions, turned it into the YES Center. It needed a whole lot of renovation!

We've shifted to not as much church planting today. Now we're looking at systemic and institutional injustices. With more awareness of these concerns, congregational discussions are leading to giving financial support and taking action to assist change. One such focus is on immigration. Congregations take on resettling immigrant families, helping them with all the processes required to get established here—from learning the language, to setting up banking, to moving the children into school. It is a significant commitment of time and finances. It is a lot of work to help immigrant adults to find work.

We have also shifted to valuing female voices and female leaders, along with persons from all cultures, and of other sexual identities. We're recognizing how entrenched oppression is against blacks, Hispanics, and, now with COVID, the demonizing of Asians. This is a large societal situation, but we have taken up the cause of being faithful in this new way.

In the '80s, we understood faith formation as teaching about life ethics. We believed in conveying our convictions and expectations by way of a speaker to an audience.

Now, in a new trend, we've shifted to inviting youth into conversation. We're convinced that they are thinking. We've come to understand that learning excels when people are invited to express

themselves, especially when they're young and we do them the honor of listening to them working out their thoughts.

Our faith-formation style is a lot more conversational now—more invitational, creating safe spaces for young people and older persons to truly talk together.

Overall faith formation has become much more, too, about having adults share about their differences within a community. Our unity is our faith in Christ—that's our focus—rather than how that may affect our different perception of particular issues.

Another change I've seen is from growing our church primarily through generational growth, when our children took on our beliefs and practices themselves, to more social growth. By that I mean when we invite persons of differing ecumenical backgrounds, or those without Christian faith, to join us.

**PPG: What do you think needs careful and mindful attention in congregations and the Conference, now and in the near future?**

MS: So we're working now at having adults learn how to build capacity for differences—usually cultural differences. Today we're trying to create capacity to learn from each other, to see what we can openly discover from and share with each other. That's where I see hope, although we have a long way to go.

We're experiencing another related shift. Before, most of our leaders were from generational Mennonite culture. Now we have much more of an increase of pastors from other ecumenical Christian backgrounds who are drawn to Anabaptist ideals.

We ask them to learn and become educated in our history and theology. But they receive an open invitation to be part of our conversation. We want them to minister in our contexts.

**PPG: Where do you see hope?**

MS: God has always loved people of hope in the church. God will keep restoring the church, even if we're diminishing for a time. That's a foundational piece for me. God does restoration. That's the basis of my hope.

People are becoming more aware of those who need a place to belong, to be cherished. I see people reaching out to offer this. We're developing capacity to walk

alongside people and together learning a more healthy way of living. It takes energy not to ostracize but to care for those who society has pushed away.

We're also welcoming and not as fearful of people who didn't come with our theology. We're seeing that they may have something to offer us.

Small groups are forming for people who are being drawn back to faith as part of their life foundation. Small groups are a place where they can be safe.

We were once building bigger buildings. Now we're growing these multiple groups rather than property size.

People today continue to have a passion for what they believe. Faith is rooted in Scripture, but their passion runs deep and looks for ways to express itself, whether progressive or conservative. So let's recognize those differences and be okay with them. The better we do that, the stronger the church will be.

It's challenging, and not everyone can do this. But more and more people seem determined not to let one issue disconnect us. We all do something well, and we have much to learn from each other.

**PPG: What have you learned about yourself by carrying this responsibility?**

MS: I am a learner. I like to learn so I can adjust and move. I've worked at being a flexible person. Even if I don't like what's going on, I still want to understand it. It might be difficult, but I don't want to be crazy negative.

I desire to be hopeful, joyful—so I lean into the fact that change will come.

Even with my body, I've had to give things up earlier than I expected, but that's life. I want to be positive.

With my physical disability, I've always wanted to live life the best I could—with fun and joy and healthy personhood. I've never wanted to be bitter and angry and upset, so I pushed every boundary and worked at being okay with it. I'm grateful for all I have, even though with my limitations I'm always thinking about the actual physical steps I have to navigate. That's part of who I am, and it's okay.

We all have this thing we're working with and whether we can walk into it



and move through it. It has an important impact, but it doesn't need to steal your joy.

That has helped me not be thrown by whatever comes before me, believing that the outcome will be full of joy, grace, and God-with-us. John 10:10 is my favorite verse.

**PPG: What about your leadership responsibilities have you found most satisfying?**

MS: It's been the perfect job for my personality—the variety, challenges, experiencing the different ways people do things, the way youth groups keep changing.

I enjoy people—and all their differences.

I enjoy being an encourager, being part of the cloud of witnesses, observing what I see as people's strong suits from a safe space.

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**PPG: What have you found most difficult?**

MS: When congregations need to leave ACC to be faithful. I knew I would miss them and what they had to offer us. I still tried to understand their reasons, but it was always difficult and disappointing.

**PPG: What are you looking forward to after March 31?**

MS: Taking time to step back from intense engagement.

Figuring out how I can give of myself and serve now in another stage of life with less energy and fewer hours. How can I find my priorities? I'll take plenty of time to discern this.


Taking naps! Sleeping in! Also getting up early since I can take a nap! It will be a process since I want to make good choices.

Jan and I are permitted, according to Conference guidelines, to retain our congregational memberships at Ridgeview, but I'll give Conference leadership space. I may want to drop in to visit congregations I wasn't directly responsible for as Executive Conference Minister to learn to know them better.

I have a lot of interests—vehicles and vehicle repair, landscaping, my model train set. I want to read more; visit other places, including non-church settings, try new recipes, and get back in the wood shop.

**PPG: As you reflect, are you surprised that you've spent much of your life primarily working in and for the church?**

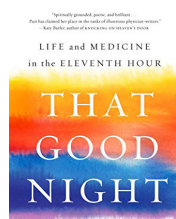
MS: I thought I'd be a cabinet maker and refinisher, re-creating antiques. Although quite a few years ago I knew I'd be in a more formalized ministry. I was sure of God's nudge toward ministry, and that has been my commitment.

I stayed in youth ministry till 2016. I still love it. It's still an energizing, passionate part of myself. I still love talking to youth and youth leaders! And I continue to be intrigued at how informative youth ministry has been for ministry with all ages in a congregation—and with leadership. 

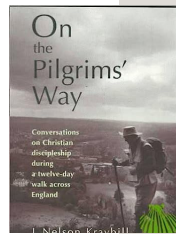
*Phyllis Pellman Good, a member of East Chestnut St. Mennonite Church in downtown Lancaster, PA, is a book editor and writer.*

**Safe for consumption: media to feed the soul**

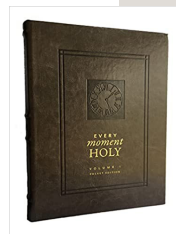
Each quarter someone in the ACC family will provide a list of new and old content that's worth consuming. This quarter's column comes from Randy Keener, Director of Chaplaincy Care and Education at Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health. He is a member at Laurel Street Mennonite Church.



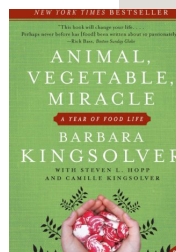
**That good night: Life and Medicine in the 11th hour** by Sunita Puri. Dr Puri's expertise is palliative care; something many have heard of yet often don't grasp what it is and its importance for medicine. If you are interested in themes of end of life, advance care planning, spirituality and healthcare, this book is highly meaningful. Puri is vulnerable and authentic as she reflects on her own life story, all the while showing us a picture of what medicine could look like when the whole person is cared for and the goal is healing- not necessarily a cure.



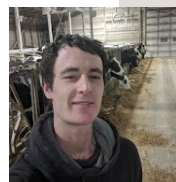
**On the Pilgrims Way: Conversations on Christian Discipleship during a 12 day walk across England** by Nelson Kraybill. I think the best way to travel is at 3 MPH and especially with some friends to talk with on the way. I love to walk and I love stories about pilgrimage in particular. When I read this book it reminds me of my own Camino De Santiago Pilgrimage in 2018. Kraybill also enjoys pilgrimage. A good listener and writer, he explores important topics every disciple of Christ can benefit to reflect on including peacemaking, doubts, vulnerability, and courage. Kraybill invites us into stories with other fellow pilgrims; Mennonites, Baptists, Catholics, and Anglicans to figure out together how to follow Jesus. *Solvitar Ambulando!*



**Every Moment Holy** by Douglas Kaine McKelvey (Author), Ned Bustard (Illustrator) This book was gifted to me by a patient at the cancer institute where I worked. It is every day liturgies such as for the washing of your windows, for going on a camping trip, for the end of reading a good book, or for the first hearth fire of the year. This dear patient who I got to know taught me that to die well we must also learn to live well. Part of learning to live well is an invitation for awareness that indeed, every moment is holy.



**Animal Vegetable Miracle : A year of food life** by Barbara Kingsolver Have you ever wondered what it would be like to only eat locally grown food for one full year? This book is about a families venture to do just that, along the way acknowledging the challenges and the joys of such a goal. This book is an excellent reminder to consider how our food choices impact the land and its sustainability for our future. Also included are some fantastic recipes from their kitchen!



**10th Generation Dairyman:** YouTube channel @10thgenerationdairyman61. I will admit, I have a few youtube channel subscriptions that can sometimes create too much screen time. One of those said channels is the 10th gen Dairyman. His Lancaster county farm is a place I visited often as a child because my uncle and aunt and their family used to live and work on this farm. With 415,000 thousand followers he is probably one of the more popular Mennonites on youtube and it is fun to see his audience continue to grow. It also makes me appreciate a glass of milk in a new kind of way.


## A note from the ACC Finance Committee

By Rod Yoder, Finance Committee Chair

The preliminary 2023-24 budget was approved at the recent Spring Assembly. In my comments there, I noted that the Finance Committee was proposing a budget that showed expenses exceeding income by \$25,000. We were comfortable proposing this due to the cash reserves built up over the past three years.

When COVID arrived, Conference expenses fell significantly. Cancellation of in-person meetings and conferences meant much lower travel and meeting expenses. However, support from the congregations did not waver. You continued to send in your share and for that, we are very grateful. It allowed us to build cash reserves during what we thought would be a difficult time.

With COVID subsiding, expenses have returned to more normal levels and inflation is evident. Our expenses are now exceeding our income. Every year, we send a letter to congregations asking for an idea of the support they will provide for the coming year. We are asking that you carefully consider increasing your support in light of our budget deficit. It is not an easy ask—we understand that many congregations are experiencing similar budgetary challenges.

Once again, we express our sincere gratitude for your past support and look forward to continuing to build connections and share in God's love together. 

## A Moment in the Neighborhood

By Sarah Reese


In both 2016 and 2019, New Holland Mennonite Church (NHMC) began a new series which they titled 'A Moment in the Neighborhood'. Those who served in leadership roles around the Eastern Lancaster County (ELANCO) community were invited to join the congregation during Sunday morning worship to share who they are and what they do.

The church family enjoyed this series so much that they began to ask, "When will we do this again?" For NHMC, it is important to stay connected to the ELANCO community, so beginning in February 2023, leaders around ELANCO once again began to come and share "A Moment in the Neighborhood" during Sunday morning worship.

Each ELANCO community leader is asked three questions to consider ahead of their sharing time. On their scheduled morning to share, they answer these questions from their perspective:

- What are the joys of ELANCO?
- What are the challenges of ELANCO?
- How can we pray for you and your work?

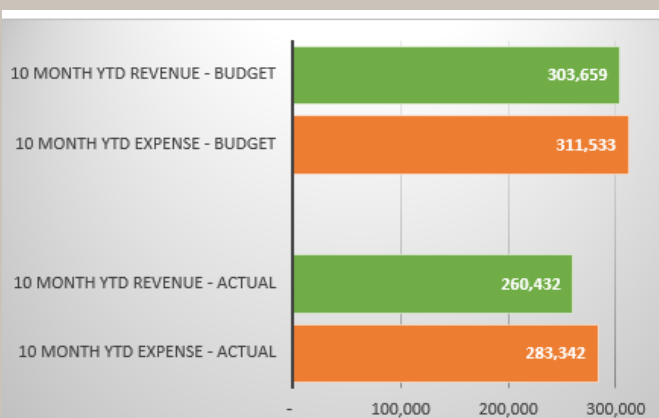
Some of the nine ELANCO leaders who have been invited to share during this year's series are a local elementary school principal, NH police chief, NH EMS chief, and the ELANCO School District Superintendent.

Each "Moment in the Neighborhood" gave churchgoers a brief glimpse into what the presenters do as well as new opportunities to pray. Each moment left churchgoers feeling more connected to their community and lastly, each moment left NHMC wondering, when can we do this again? 



Darrel Fisher, EMS Chief of New Holland EMS shares during a Sunday morning

### ACC finances at a glance: April 30, 2023 (year-to-date)



**September 16**

**Yard Sale**  
8:00 - 12:00

**Quilt Auction**  
1:00 - 2:00

**Chicken BBQ**  
10:30 - 1:00

**Crafters Tent**  
8:00 - 2:00

**Kid's Activities**  
10:30 - 2:00

  
- LANDIS HOMES -  
**FELLOWSHIP DAY**

**ONLINE VIRTUAL AUCTION**  
[LandisFellowshipDay.org](http://LandisFellowshipDay.org)  
September 11-16

**1001 East Oregon Road, Lititz PA 17543**  
717.381.3580 | [LandisHomes.org](http://LandisHomes.org)

# Upcoming Events

## 2023 Nickels for Neighbors project to help Roots Program grow

By ACC Staff

ACC congregations are encouraged to collect coins in their Sunday School classes, Bible studies, or services, primarily as a way to encourage giving among our children. These donations will be collected by ACC's Missions Committee in October 2023.

The 2023 ACC Nickels For Neighbors grant will be given to Roots, a four-week spiritual formation program for children ages six to fifth grade that meets each winter at James Street Mennonite church for four consecutive Sunday evenings. The focus is on introducing kids to a loving and trustworthy God in a faith community, as well as building relationships across congregations and conferences. Each week, a group of approximately 50 kids get together to play games, eat snacks, sing, and learn together about a loving God. Roots exists to give kids a sense of belonging inside a church setting. Several Lancaster churches have expressed interest in doing a similar program for kids in their area, and it is our hope to streamline this program in order to make it easier for more congregations to replicate.

Roots held its first program in February 2022 with students and volunteers from nine different congregations. The program continues to focus on providing elementary students with curriculum centered in an Anabaptist understanding of faith and Jesus' life teachings.

Our goal is to raise \$3,000 to be collected in October 2023. This size grant will allow Roots leaders to cover program expenses for 2024, including the development of a curriculum that could be used by others to multiply this opportunity in other churches/regions. It would also allow program leaders to develop a simple website that would streamline communication, registration, and volunteer invitations, and would provide a way for them to make these resources available to other churches/groups.

For details about the program and fund collection, visit [atlanticcoastconference.net/N4N](http://atlanticcoastconference.net/N4N).



## ACC Fall Youth Retreat

September 8-10, 2023

SAVE THE DATE! ACC youth groups are invited to the 2023 Fall Youth Retreat at Refreshing Mountain. The weekend will include daily worship and resource times, nighttime ultimate frisbee and times for youth groups to connect at the beginning of a new year. Look for more details at [atlanticcoastconference.net/youth/retreat/](http://atlanticcoastconference.net/youth/retreat/).



## July Youth Game Night

July 16, 6:30 - 9:00 pm

Long's Park, 1441 Harrisburg Pk

Instead of meeting at Landisville Mennonite as we had planned, meet up with other youth groups at Long's Park at 6:30pm for games and listen to the Steep Canyon Rangers concert at 7:30. Both Jr. and Sr. High youth are invited to attend. More details at

[conta.cc/43HDqky](http://conta.cc/43HDqky)



Acoustic, Americana, folksy, blue-ish-grassy, roots music from the Shenandoah Valley. Joyful, hopeful, original folk music and reclaimed hymns, with good harmonies by great friends. *A free-will offering will help cover costs of travel and keep the band going strong!*

## Leadership Transitions

### Beginnings:

**Arthur Stewart** (Marge) began as pastor at North Baltimore Mennonite Church on May 15.

**Elisa Parmer** (Hannah) was granted a License Toward Ordination for her associate pastor role at East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church.

**Kate Andre** was installed as pastor at Mennonite Congregation of Boston. She had been serving as interim pastor since

November 2022.

**Steve Crane** (Francesca) began as interim pastor at Laurel Street Mennonite Church on May 1.

### Endings:

**Audrey Kanagy** (Robert) ended her role as pastor at Ridgeview Mennonite Church on April 16.

**Judy & Ron Zook** ended their roles as co-pastors at Laurel Street Mennonite Church on May 1.