

Together

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Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren



Seeds of Blessing

Whether we realize it or not, all of us are in the farming business. We are called to be seed planters. The Apostle Paul, who was an artisan involved in leather crafting and tent-making, identified himself as a seed planter after his conversion on the Damascus Road. In 1 Corinthians 3:5-6 we read, *“What after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you come to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.”* You see, after Paul’s conversion, as it is with us after our conversion, we become seed planters for the Kingdom of God. This can be an awesome responsibility that we dare not take lightly! Many Christians just meander through life not aware of the seeds they’re planting through their words and actions. Even worse are those who are planting the seeds of doubt, division and distrust.

Our District Conference theme for 2023 was “Grow with a growth that is from God,” from Colossians 2:19. Our moderator, Ty Pyles, used this theme to reference our relationships with one another as a root system connects trees in a forest. He says, “Christians grow when they are rooted in Christ and connected through an ecosystem of communication, nourishment and sacrifice.”

These are the seeds we are called to plant and then trust them to God for the growth. We have all been celebrating the fact that the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (EYN) is celebrating their 100th anniversary this year. Several months ago, I was preaching at the Olivet COB and found out that Albert Helser, one of the founding missionaries, was from that congregation. This small country church in central Ohio sent Helser out to plant the seeds of the gospel in Nigeria. Many times, we think we have nothing to offer, we’re too small, or we can’t make a difference. I don’t know what Helser and his partner H. Stover Culp thought when they embarked on their adventure, but because they said “yes” to the call and had faith in the God and the denomination that sent them, their small seeds have blossomed into the largest national body of the Church of the Brethren in the world. Neither man was blessed to see the powerful growth that has occurred but that is not our responsibility. They planted the seeds and trusted the growth to God.

I see many good seeds being planted in the district and the denomination. As we address the injustices in our society, how we can improve the communications within the district, how we can best use our resources to support our ministers and congregations, we offer our time, talent and resources up to God to bless them and use them for the work of his kingdom.

May the seeds we plant be the kinds of seeds God will bless to grow his kingdom here on earth.

Michael E. Be...



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Mycorrhizal Christians

by Ty Pyles

I am intrigued by the connection between science and spirituality. In nature we are able to see the Divine. Out of millions of examples, the Divine can be seen in trees. Trees do not live alone. Although we often think of them as individuals, standing by themselves with roots in the ground and branches in the sky, they need soil, water, air, and sunshine. They also need cooperation and community.

Based on a *Nature* program on PBS, the 2023 District Conference theme came from the last section of Colossians 2:19: "... the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, **grows with a growth that is from God.**" In that *Nature* program it was reported:

"Ecologists have studied underground networks called mycorrhizae. In these networks, fungal fibers fasten tree roots, one to another, beneath the forest floor.

Trees are not lonely at all. They are bound together, deeply.

If you were to dig up the earth around a tree, you would find a network of fungal fibers. These fibers are not much to look at: Milk-pale, inky, or translucent. But they connect the trees and help them in a number of ways. The fibers carry water, carbon, nitrogen, and biochemical information between trees that are related ... between trees of the same species ... and even between trees of different species.

A community is created in the forest by mycorrhizal networks. In them, a fungus assists the trees by helping to supply their needs, and the trees help the fungus by providing it with sugar."

I find that fascinating! Now it is true that a fungus is not an attractive image—milk-pale, inky, and translucent fibers are kind of gross. But mycorrhizae illustrate how we receive nourishment from Christ and share it with each other. When we remain rooted in Christ, we find that the words of Paul to the Colossians come true: "the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God." Christians grow when they are rooted in Christ and connected through an ecosystem of communication, nourishment, and sacrifice.



Pittsburg Church: Widening their Welcome

by Ken Oren

I was called to Pittsburg in 2009. Through the years, we undertook to accommodate immediate needs by making the facility more accessible. This included an addition to the back deck and a widened doorway in a stone wall for ADA compliance. To reach out to the community, we did Gospel concerts, free festivals, free food, free carriage rides, and open Christmas Eve candlelight services.

Just as we were beginning to gather again after COVID-19, my leukemia doctor told me it was time to act on my high blood count numbers. Chemotherapy took me out of commission for almost seven months. This could have turned into a crisis—but COVID-19 along with the leukemia treatments only strengthened our resolve to grow our ministry.

We felt the Holy Spirit moving, starting with the LifeWise organization looking for space to teach local children Christian values. Next, we received a generous anonymous gift which spurred us to consider improvements. When I was able to return to service, we started our Bible Café Sunday School, a “Fall for Jesus” festival, and a live nativity.

With this new vitality, we voted to embark on a major remodel project to upgrade unusable overflow space. We pledged to put ten percent of the amount spent toward local outreach. Though the budget was tight, we trusted God’s people to support a ministry that teaches and



preaches the Word of God and endeavors to expand God’s kingdom. Virtually every member and attendee, and several non-attendees, volunteered in some aspect of the work—praying, constructing, cleaning, and cooking; as well as donating small tools, materials, time, etc. Two local fire departments, Verona and Pittsburg, donated their time to redo the ceiling (as fire training time). With the many volunteers, our budget allowed us to add a wheelchair lift.

We worked around our LifeWise class—and gained excitement observing the children’s progress. They brought new energy and purpose to Pittsburg. We can’t wait to see what is in store for this new space and our relationship with the community. It feels like the timing was Divine, and we give God the glory.



Flat Creek and Mud Lick Churches

by Bettina Balmer

The work at Flat Creek started in 1943, as a “home mission” by Manly Deeter. Ferdie Rohrer was its first pastor, followed by Allen Weldy. Dwayne and Elaine Yost came in 1960, and they still serve at Flat Creek and Mud Lick.

The work at Mud Lick started in 1948. Mareta Shrider was the first person to live there. Butler Sizemore served both Mud Lick and Flat Creek. By 1980, the work at Flat Creek was incorporated as the Flat Creek COB, which included Mud Lick. Dave Balmer is the current pastor at Mud Lick, and he serves alongside his wife, Bettina.



Both churches hold services for all ages each Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Children look forward to Bible school each summer, and our congregation enjoys carry-in meals throughout the year. At Mud Lick, we also serve the community one evening each fall with a hot dog roast and lots of candy!

Pray for our churches as we labor to serve Christ in the hills of Southeast Kentucky.



Lessons Learned Growing Tomatoes

by Tony Price

⁵ After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. ⁶ I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. ⁷ It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work.

—1 Corinthians 3:5-8 NLT

As I was growing up in southwestern Ohio, one of my fondest memories was helping my Grandpa in the garden. Now, Grandpa planted several different plants in the garden, but my Grandpa Gearhart was a tomato farmer. Between his children's properties, he would put out HUNDREDS of tomato plants! It was a project that involved the whole family. The first job was tilling to make the soil soft. Then we would dig holes for the plants. Taking the plants carefully from the plastic holders to maintain the root structure, we placed one plant in each hole. This was followed by a cup of water and a mounding of dirt. We repeated all of this until the tomato plants were planted. It would have been nice if that were the end of the story, but as the plants grew and the hot summer weeks went on, so did the jobs. The plants needed watered and caged and the rows needed tilled on a regular basis. Finally, harvest would begin and the daily task of assessing each tomato plant for fruit ensued. It was quite the work to get from small plants to red tomatoes!

As I consider the passage from 1 Corinthians and the memory about the tomatoes, a couple biblical truths came to mind:

1. In our family, we all had a job (or two) to get to the end result of fruit. Some planted, others watered, some tilled, and then some harvested. It's also like that in the church. To see mature fruit takes a team; each one of us using our gifts to nurture others toward the "fruit" of Christlikeness. We must not grow weary of pouring into others, even if it seems like our part of the process is small or unnoticed. If the watering crew had decided that our jobs weren't necessary in the weeks of July, the



Photo supplied by the author

consequences could have been rather unpleasant—both for us and for the poor plants! We must each do our part to contribute to and not miss opportunities in the work of Christ as it is presented to us.

2. The end result wasn't the same for every tomato. I have a harvest-time picture in my mind of Grandpa sitting in his garage, wearing his coveralls, chewing on an unlit cigar, and inspecting each and every tomato. There were two buckets: one for PREMIUM and one for CANNERS. Premium would head to local grocers. Canners would go to Grandma to become juice. Not many tomatoes were wasted in this process. We must remember that, even though we might be different than our siblings in the next pew, God can and will use us all. He will use us, as we are reminded in Ephesians 2, "to do the good things he planned for us long ago."

At this time of harvest, may we be looking for ways to join Christ in the work of His church for the glory of God and our neighbor's good. Amen.

Beatrice (Bea) Kashindi – A Story of Faith and Growth

by Caleb Kragt

As the eldest of six siblings, Bea (*Bay-uh*) often drives her younger siblings to church. Bea's parents fled the Congo for Tanzania, where Bea was born. She grew up there until the family was admitted to the U.S. with refugee status.

Bea realizes that she is influenced by at least three cultures. In the U.S. there is opportunity for education and careers that are less accessible in Africa; Bea is a nursing student. However, she pursues her education slowly because her family's culture gives her the role of "second mom." She shoulders the lion's share of chores and cares for younger siblings while her parents work. Further, when Bea finds time with friends, K-pop and other Asian cultural influences are reflected in her clothing, her eating with chopsticks, etc.

Bea says, "I was born into a Christian home, so I was a Christian since the moment I was born." That's how inevitable the faith felt, given her mom's powerful faith and the praise music in her home. Now Bea claims her own faith walk. After experiences in Catholic and Protestant churches in Africa and a Mennonite church in Arizona, she regularly attends West Charleston Church of the Brethren—even when her mom cannot due to her work schedule or health challenges.

Bea acknowledges that the worship in Tanzania was livelier and people were more expressive. She prefers that style even as she insists that she also respects the Brethren culture. She appreciates the opportunities beyond

worship, an appreciation that began with her first Sunday School experience. She comments, "I loved how you wanted to actually teach us [youth] the scriptures, so then when we come in to worship, we understand so much more of the preaching and the Bible."

Bea has also joined West Charleston's Quilters group. Bea says, "I love how welcoming they are; even though they are elders, they will see me as one of them. I'm young, but they're willing to teach me stuff."

Bea affirms the congregation's vision of becoming the beloved community of Jesus, welcoming unconditionally, and breaking down walls that divide different groups. She says, "Whatever people's background, wherever they come from, no matter what people are going through, there's at least one church that will welcome them, because you all have made that commitment. The vision I have is that there will be even more cultures in this church—not just African, Hispanic, and white, but there will be even more coming."

Bea has a deep sense of patience and trust. The chief message of faith that she has shared with the church is, "Just because you don't see anything happening, it doesn't mean that God is not working....my mom has been getting sick a lot; sometimes we've been afraid that we're going to lose her...but then she pulls through and there are times it seems she's perfectly okay." Bea's steady faithfulness is an example of growth that comes from God. Perhaps unseen at first, it quietly builds, until it blooms and gives proof of the vigor inside.



Roots: A Meditation on Interconnectedness

by Janet Futrell

As new, rapidly changing scientific understandings are shared, I am amazed again and again at the complexity and wonder of the earth in which God has placed us.

One example is the discovery of how trees communicate with each other through an underground fungal network surrounds and interconnects with the trees' roots. Mycelia are thin threads within the network that can extend across many acres of undisturbed soil. These fungi that we do not see are mutually interdependent with the trees that we and so many other species depend on for health and wellbeing. The networks of mycelia share information about threats to their survival and growth, such as predators and toxins. The trees can use the same network to release hormones and chemicals that protect them from threats. They may also send water and nutrients to young or weaker trees.

What a striking image of interconnectedness! I am reminded of the story of Eden, the garden where God placed all that was needed for the wellbeing of all creation. I am also reminded of the people who were privileged to be part of a perfect habitat. In this place everyone depended on everyone else and each fulfilled their purpose in the whole. And they could walk and talk with God.

Jesus (referred to by Paul as the "second Adam") surely came to restore our connection with each other and all the earth. The kingdom he demonstrated

left no one out and made it possible for each to thrive as a uniquely valued being. Jesus always reached out to the ones in most need: rich and poor, young and old, of every place and time. As Jesus was nearing the end of his life, he repeatedly reminded his disciples of their interconnectedness with each other and with God, and he called them to also reach out to all the earth in love and grace.

The underground network that nourishes trees can be an example for us. It demonstrates the

interconnectedness that we live within and are challenged to nourish, each in our own compassionate, loving ways. As South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "We belong to one another," and, "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours." We are not able to see all that sustains our lives and the lives of our faith communities. But we are surely in this together, working together. We each play an essential part in God's intentions for the church and the wellbeing of all earth.

Side note: For a deep dive into the connections between trees and mycelia, often referred to as the "wood wide web," check out *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben.



Image from *Beauty in Biology – Wonders of the Wood Wide Web* — <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1948&context=ures>

Together

Together is a bi-annual publication of the Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren. Thank you to all who have contributed to this publication. Submissions of original artwork, poetry, as well as stories of ways we work together, or ways your church fulfills our mission of being Jesus' hands and feet in your community are always welcome. All submissions are subject to approval and editing by the Together editorial staff. Authors of original articles will be given the opportunity to preview before article is published. The theme of our next issue is "Seeking God's Face".

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