



BY STEVE THOMAS

# ‘What’s your business?’

## In a time of gender equity, why do we still have a men’s organization?

**F**OR GOOD REASON, there’s sometimes suspicion when men meet or organize. When I was crossing the border from the United States to Canada, a border agent asked, “What’s your business entering the country?”

I told him I was coming to lead a men’s retreat. He asked who would be there and where it would be held.

When I mentioned a rural camp, he became suspicious. He directed me to pull over, park and proceed to the immigration office. There an officer asked

a series of questions that felt like an interrogation — as if I were with the Michigan militia, coming to conduct a training camp.

So, what is our business?

“Our,” in this case, is Mennonite Men.

At a time when we are moving from patriarchy to gender equity and inclusion, why do Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada still have a men’s organization?

If I could have a do-over with the officer over a cup of coffee, here’s what I’d say:

Mennonite Men is about engaging men to grow, give and serve as followers of Jesus for God’s shalom.

We promote an Anabaptist way for men that focuses on following Jesus, forming community and building peace with a model that is more whole and life-giving than our culture’s dominant version of masculinity.

From our faith perspective based on the way of Jesus, we engage in work that affirms men, supports their personal growth, forms healthy relationships, transforms social problems and cares for the Earth.

All to bring about God’s shalom — a peaceable order with abundance, security and justice throughout all creation.

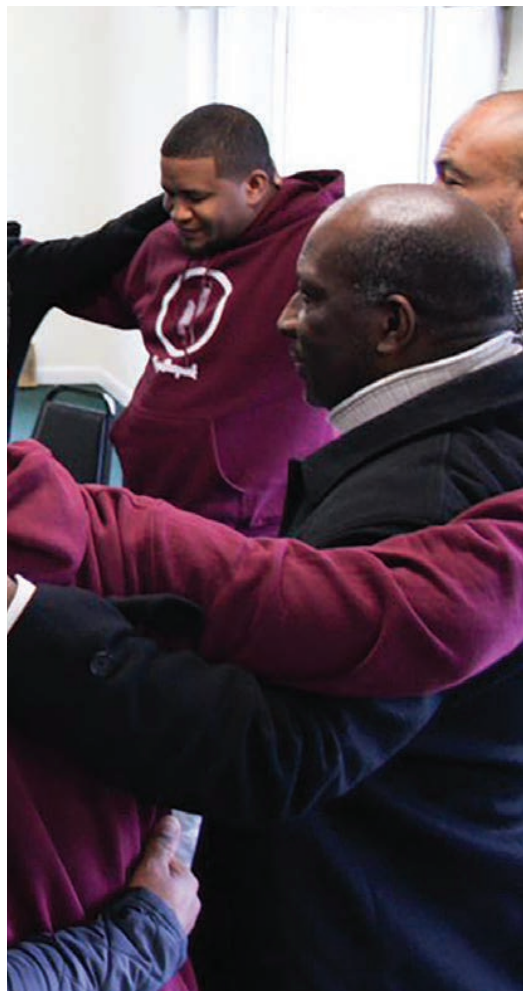
We do this by providing gatherings and resources for men, encouraging social action, funding building projects for new churches and planting trees for climate action.

### A vision for men

Our vision is of men enjoying and extending God’s abundant life by:

1. Respecting themselves and all people as beloved children of God.
2. Following Jesus, the image of God and model human.
3. Becoming strong, loving and wise in the Spirit.
4. Practicing love across the range of our relationships.
5. Using power with and for rather than over and against others.
6. Sharing resources with generosity to meet human needs.
7. Standing with marginalized people for diversity and inclusion.
8. Transforming oppressive systems for freedom and justice.

Above: Participants from New York City take part in a retreat sponsored by Mennonite Men at Camp Deerpark. [CAMP DEERPARK](#)



Steve Thomas leads a “Living That Matters” gathering of Goshen College faculty and employees Feb. 3 at Pathways Retreat in Goshen, Ind. KEVIN SHULTZ

9. Relating to all creatures as kin in the community of creation.
10. Caring for the Earth to sustain its beauty, biodiversity and abundance.

Motivating men to be their best selves for a better society, we seek to inspire action with vision. We call forth positive change for greater well-being with abundance, freedom, love and justice — the fruits of God’s shalom.

### Our approach to men’s work

Because men historically have been responsible for constructing patriarchy — and because we continue to benefit from systems that privilege males — men have a responsibility to transform these systems.

We approach this and other social problems from within a positive framework. The highest forms of cooperation depend upon not a push but an invitation, calling people to respond more from aspiration than confrontation.

According to Reinhold Niebuhr in *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, blaming, scolding and shaming provoke resistance. Research on

motivations for social engagement confirms Niebuhr’s observation that a positive vision and tone inspire people for action.

We promote what we’re for as we denounce what we’re against. To transform patriarchy, we focus on God’s shalom, which calls us to build respect, equity and justice for all genders.

**Because men historically have been responsible for constructing patriarchy, men have a responsibility to transform these systems.**

### What Mennonite Men does

So, how does Mennonite Men go about its business? How do we live into our vision?

Since its beginning in 1950 with the General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Men has focused on Christian growth and service. Today, we have three programs:

**JoinMen** is our program for engaging in men’s work for spiritual formation, loving relationships and healthy masculinity (points 1-5 of our vision). We do this by providing resources on our website and publications like *Peaceful at Heart: Anabaptist Reflections on Healthy Masculinity* (produced with Institute of Mennonite Studies) and *Living That Matters: Honest Conversations for Men of Faith* (Herald Press, 2023).

*Living That Matters* is our guidebook for men tending to ourselves, our relationships and world. Recognizing that many men don’t have close friends, we provide resources for building friendships and having deeper conversations with others.

We provide gatherings in congregations and camps for men to enjoy meaningful conversations. Some of these include “Living That Matters,” “Healthy Masculinity: On Being a Man,” “Making Peace with Conflict,” “Wounded Lovers: Embracing our Sexuality” and “Life after Retirement: Living that Matters as Elders.”

Women who understand what we do often encourage men to partici-



pate in our work. When a Mennonite pastor saw a flyer for one of our events, she told her husband, “You need to go to this!” The fellowship, support and encouragement men experience in coming together are powerful and often life-changing.

**JoinHands** is our long-running building program for churches to acquire their first property. By giving, raising funds and making grants, we share resources to assist new congregations.

Much of this supports racial/ethnic congregations reaching immigrant populations — the growing edge of MC USA and MC Canada. Some of these congregations include people fleeing violence and other difficult situations and finding safe Mennonite communities of faith.

We are raising funds for a new Chin congregation in Central Plains Mennonite Conference that is growing with refugees from Myanmar. This will help

provide a place for their community to freely gather, honor their culture and offer ministry.

As we share our resources through *JoinHands*, we are supporting new churches and meeting human need (point 6 of our vision).

**JoinTrees** is our campaign to plant 1 million trees to help restore the Earth. We’re planting trees as one of the best, most cost-efficient natural climate solutions to care for the planet and support biodiversity (points 9 and 10 in our vision).

For all genders and ages, this action involves tree-planting on private, business and church properties, marginal farmland and large-scale international projects.

We currently have 10 projects lined up to plant 133,585 trees. Most are agroforestry projects in Latin America and Africa, many carried out by Mennonite communities. These plantings not only sequester carbon dioxide

and help cool the planet. They also protect intact forests and support the livelihood of vulnerable communities suffering from climate change.

Once these projects are funded and completed, our tree count will be 333,610 — one third of the way toward our goal.

**The fellowship, support and encouragement men experience in coming together are powerful and often life-changing.**

We rely on contributions to fund these projects. This provides a way for individuals, churches and businesses to make voluntary offset contributions to reduce their carbon footprint along with decreasing use of fossil fuels.

---

Community members in Baja Verapaz, Guatemala, with tree seedlings funded by Mennonite Men's JoinTrees program in August. EPIC







The Mennonite Chin congregation in Omaha, Neb., received a JoinHands grant from Mennonite Men.

CENTRAL PLAINS MENNONITE CONFERENCE

## We can do more

We have more to do. We need to pay better attention to diversity and inclusion (point 7 of our vision). We want to grow with more men from communities of color and seek to better include people who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender or queer — engaging the gifts and experiences of a greater diversity of men than we currently have.

Our expanding work is for engaging in social action (point 8 in our vision). We are exploring action with the Coalition for Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery to support Indigenous resistance to a proposed copper mine that would destroy their sacred land.

We are working with Mennonite Palestine Israel Network (MennoPIN) and encouraging men to join Mennonite Action in response to violence in Palestine. With MennoPIN, we are raising funds to replace Palestinian olive orchards destroyed by Israelis and planning a delegation to go to the

occupied West Bank to show solidarity with Palestinians, learn about Israeli occupation and apartheid and help farmers replace olive trees. These trees are not only vital to Palestinians but also symbolize God's shalom.

All these things are what Mennonite Men is about. This is our "business" — engaging men to grow, give and serve as followers of Jesus for God's shalom.

If we are a good organization of men, we will be known by our love, generosity and service as we extend God's abundant life. ●



**Steve Thomas** of Goshen, Ind., is U.S. director for Mennonite Men. He leads events for men and welcomes engagement. To learn more, access resources, support projects or schedule events, visit [MennoniteMen.org](http://MennoniteMen.org).

## Church building grant to assist refugee ministry

Mennonite Men has completed fund-raising for a \$40,000 grant for Omaha Chin Christian Church in Nebraska. With the release of these funds, the congregation will be able to move forward with its church building project on the outskirts of the city.

A member of Central Plains Mennonite Conference of Mennonite Church USA, Omaha Chin Christian Church is one of an increasing number of Chin Christian communities in North America. These communities, who have roots in Myanmar, are finding their way into MC USA and MC Canada conferences.

Connected to a large population of Chin immigrants in Omaha, this congregation has a ministry of helping people navigate a challenging new life in North America and find a home in the Anabaptist family.

Many people in this population have come from refugee camps and have been marginalized or exiled from their country. As the congregation grows and reaches more Chin people in Omaha, the church facility it plans to acquire will not only provide a space for worship but also offer a place for community activities to honor and celebrate their culture.

"We previously met in a rented space, and this has left the church feeling like they are not rooted," said Ngung Lian Mawi, pastor of the 70-member congregation. Leaders hope that having their own building will be a catalyst for unity and growth, both numerically and spiritually.

Omaha Chin Christian Church is the 93rd congregation to receive a JoinHands grant from Mennonite Men. Nearly \$2.5 million has been granted since the program began in 1985.

— Mennonite Men