



PIKE MENNONITE CHURCH ELIDA, OH

BY MATTHEW CORDELLA-BONTRAGER

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Reflections on God's Work – Part 12

God is at work. In 2023, the *Beacon* feature articles seek to capture a snapshot of the ways God is working in churches across our conference. We pray that these articles encourage your faith and spur you on to join God in the work He is doing in your local congregation.

~Kelsey Jurkovich, Publication & Literature Committee

Elida Road shoots you straight from Lima to Delphos, past glowing signs for McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Five Guys, Arby's, Taco Bell, KFC, Chipotle, Panera, Jimmy John's, Tim Hortons, and Starbucks. If there is no drive-through, there is an app for curbside pickup. There's no reason to get out of your car. Why would you?

To me, Elida is dissolving in the contactless flow of traffic and money. Houses in the shadow of the Elida water tower (like mine) receive about half of their mail addressed to Lima, and I suspect that the percentage of "Lima" mail is increasing. In 100 years, if Elida endures in the popular imagination, it will probably be as Elida Road, swollen to six lanes, but still a reliable shot from Lima to Delphos.

If Elida Road is a CrunchWrap Supreme...then Pike is Wilma Hofstetter's taco soup...

Elida Road is the "New Delphos Pike." Yet the Old Delphos Pike is still around. It's barely two lanes wide. It doesn't shoot anybody anywhere. It curves through corn and soybeans, progress interrupted by the creative placement of yield signs and the unexpected crossing of barn cats. It winds toward the Pike meetinghouse, which sits, white and unadorned, beside the Old Delphos Pike, much as it has for nearly 150 years. There's a letterboard sign on the corner, which I haven't updated in nine months. Why would I? "The time has come! The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Good News!"

If Elida Road is a CrunchWrap Supreme, eaten in haste behind the wheel of a Kia Rio, then Pike is Wilma Hofstetter's taco soup, served out of a Crock-Pot and eaten around tables in the

church basement. If Elida Road is a straight shot from Lima to Delphos in 20 minutes of autopilot, then Pike is five months of Thursday nights with Ben Baldauf, tracing the weave of God's Word to the prophet Zechariah.

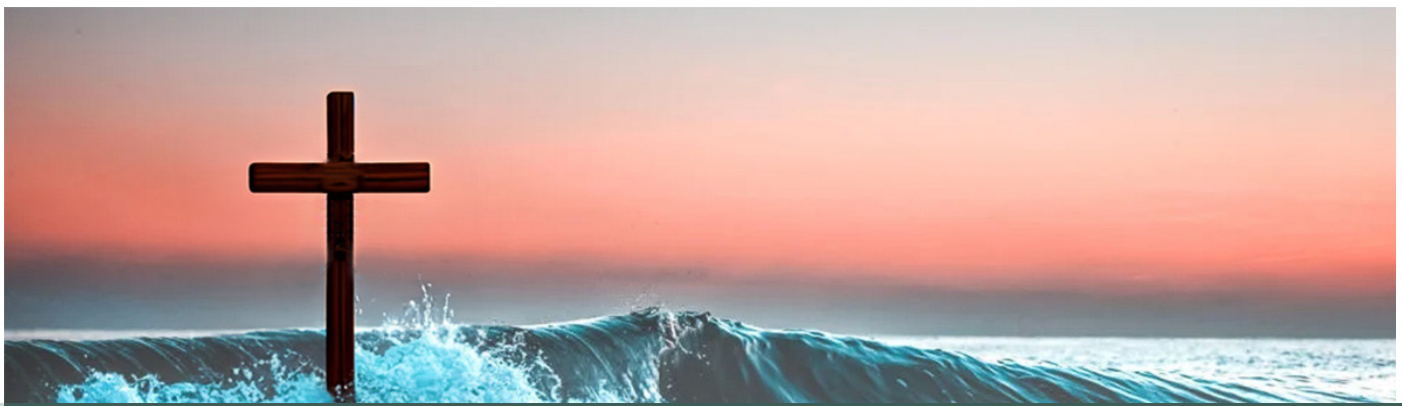
We do not champion the slow for slowness's sake or the small for smallness's sake. The wood paneling and orange upholstery in our sanctuary do not make us morally superior. To be sure, we have taken the road less traveled, but this is no reason to assume that we are on the correct road. No, our assurance has everything to do with Jesus. So does our attachment to this congregation, to this way of being the Church.

In Christ, we have God's unshakeable grace, which alone makes the road sane and truly possible for us to rest. How else could we take the winding road of discipleship? How else would we have time to break for barn cats, if we did not have eternity? Jesus has favored us with a new way of life, which cannot be lived all alone in the car, but which flourishes around bowls of soup in church basements. We are close enough to know when there are feet to wash, and this is the work of God.

In a world increasingly designed for cars, not humans, is it really so strange to believe that people are locked into their loneliness from the inside? Or that people need a compelling reason to come out—a reason that the world cannot give? If they were to step out, would they not need a place to live together, as humans among humans? Christ has become, for us, such a reason; Christ has made Pike such a place. We are the work of God.



Matthew is a pastor at Pike Mennonite Church in Elida, OH. He is married to Rachel and has three young children.



The Wide Love of God

BY BRIAN HERSHBERGER

In 2021, my December article was about peace, and in 2022, it was about joy. To keep the Advent-themed streak alive, this year let's talk about love! Similar to peace and joy, the world has its own version of love at Christmas time. Typically, it is the warm fuzzies of gathering around the fireplace and exchanging gifts with family and friends, or putting on a friendly, happy face for all those Christmas parties and events. Rarely does the world's version of love at Christmas come close to the sacrificial agape love of Christ, demonstrated by His humble entrance into our world, where He took our sin upon Himself so we could be redeemed and restored to the Father. Now that is love!

If I were to rank my favorite hymn lyrics of all time, "The Love of God" would have to be near the top. The song wasn't in the hymnal we used at the church where I grew up, so someone had taped a copy of it inside the back cover of every hymnal. The third verse was my favorite:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.
O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints' and angels' song*

(Frederick M. Lehman 1917).

Oh, to be able to fully grasp and lay hold of the wonderful love of God! In Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, he said:


"...And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17b-19 NIV).

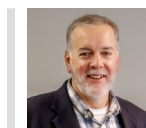
God longs for us to grasp and lay hold of His love! He wants us to taste it, to experience it, to be immersed in it, to live our

lives out of the overflow of it. For the sake of space in this article, let's consider only one of the adjectives Paul used. How *wide* is God's love?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Jesus did not say, "For God so loved the Americans, the self-sufficient, the well-behaved, the sober, the ones who have their lives together." He did say, "For God so loved *the world!*" Is the person halfway around the world, whose religion and value system are entirely different than yours, included in the world? Then they are loved by God! Is the person across town or down the street whose lifestyle, political convictions, and beliefs are diametrically opposed to yours included in the world? Then they are loved by God. Sometimes the hardest thing to believe is that you yourself are loved by God. We may sometimes find ourselves outside of the will of God, out of touch with God, or out of sorts with God, but we are never outside the reach of His love.

I would like to offer a challenge: In celebration of the wide love of God, demonstrate His love to someone outside your normal circle of warm, fuzzy relationships this Christmas season. I'm not talking about making cookies for your mailman or doing something nice for someone who provides a service for you. I'm talking about demonstrating love to someone who rubs you the wrong way. That's what Jesus did: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8b). 



Brian serves as executive director of Rosedale Network of Churches. He and his wife, Sharla, live in Marysville, Ohio, and are involved in community outreach and worship ministry at Lighthouse Fellowship.



Responses to the Middle East Conflict

BY RBC



The Peaceable Kingdom by Edwards Hicks

RBC reached out to two Christian leaders to give thoughtful responses to the current conflict in the Middle East.

Israel, Hamas, and Me – Conrad Hertzler

I sat staring dumbfounded at my computer screen, scarcely believing what I was seeing. Men and women fleeing for their lives. Peaceful communities shattered by violence and bloodshed. Young men armed to the teeth cutting down unarmed civilians in cold blood. Battered and bloodied hostages being carried away amid cheers. The edited videos did very little to hide the sheer brutality of what had been done.

Weeks later, I sit staring at my computer screen as bombs fall, tanks roar, and machine guns rattle. I see craters where homes and hospitals once stood. Streets filling with rubble. Men frantically sifting through the debris. Women and men wailing for their children. Shell-shocked children.

The brutal conflict between Israel and Hamas has come at us, not through the logical reporting of a trained correspondent, but through real-time video that almost forces us into the action, like a violent movie or computer game.

My reaction to the initial attack by Hamas was anger and horror. How can human beings butcher other human beings? These were clear-cut crimes against humanity. I felt justified in my outrage.

Growing up, I was told to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” As a teenager, I read *Exodus*, by Leon Uris, and celebrated with the Jews as they returned to Palestine and reclaimed their homeland. It is their homeland, isn’t it? And the Palestinians—they’ve lived there for generations. It’s really too bad, but they just need to deal with it because, after all, that land belongs to the Jews, doesn’t it? The Bible says so.

Thirty-five years on, things don’t seem so clear-cut. I’m a pastor, but don’t feel very qualified to speak about prophecy, covenants, and things of that nature. I believe God gave this land to His people centuries ago, but what does that mean today? Can Israel exercise whatever means necessary to preserve its existence as a people and as a nation? I am distressed by the suffering, violence, and death on *both* sides. Is this justified, even in the name of self-defense and preservation? How do I respond?

Answers seem hard to come by. Political and military solutions aren’t really my thing.

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Hearing from a Middle Eastern Christian – Darius Meraj

I grew up as a Muslim in Iran but fled my home country to become a refugee in Turkey at 21 years of age. While in Turkey, I met Christians who were assisting refugees. I was captivated by their love, compassion, and acceptance. I was overwhelmed by the message of hope and healing in Jesus. They extended kindness to me, in spite of my background and my views of them and Jesus.

Growing up in Iran, I’d been fed hatred towards the West, Jews, and anyone who thought differently. We consumed a daily diet of vengeance, intolerance, and fear of the future, not only of outsiders, but also of God. You can imagine that when I met Jesus, my worldview was turned upside down!

Now living in the West, I observe a lot of confusion around the subject of Islam. Here, Muslims enjoy the benefits of living in a free, secular society and want to be given uncritical respect and freedom of religion.

It appears to me that many Westerners are accepting Muslims in their midst without understanding that Islam is a religion that can and should be analyzed and critiqued as any other religion.

Muslims in the West want special treatment as an oppressed minority, but I’m keenly aware that Islam looks very different when it is in the majority. At its core, Islam has many violent teachings like *Jihad* (holy war), where the killing of non-Muslims, and even other Muslims, is a religious duty. In this current conflict, I am astonished by the lack of response from other Muslim leaders in condemning and rejecting Hamas’ terrorist activities. Instead, we have seen the opposite.

I don’t intend to give a green light for the Israeli government to punish Palestinians for the atrocities committed by Hamas and other Muslim extremists. It’s heartbreaking to watch civilians

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RBC is the educational arm of Rosedale Network of Churches, helping students lay the groundwork for their future by providing two years of mentorship, community, and biblical education in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition.



“Sign Me Up!”

BY MADALYN

Rosedale International (RI) is excited to introduce the newest member of our team—Jared, Director of Short-Term Programs. Jared spent fourteen years in leadership at Sharon Mennonite Church in Plain City, Ohio. These years of pastoral care solidified his passion to ignite young adults for Jesus and equipped him to lead the staff of Short-Term Programs (STP) to facilitate REACH and City Challenge, and disciple the programs’ many participants.

Jared’s journey to RI began in his senior year of high school, when he found himself attending church for the first time at the invitation of his girlfriend Sarah. “You know, you hear these stories about segments of our world not hearing the name Jesus. That was me for most of my life.”

Despite his dubious motivations for attending church, Jared’s faith soon became his own. At the age of nineteen, he attended his first Mennonite Church USA Conference, where he heard theologian Mike Yaconelli speak. “Hearing this older man describe life with Jesus like a roller coaster was incredibly formational for me. It clicked—it made sense to me. I think that’s very indicative of what Jesus does in our lives; He’ll find something you relate to and make the story come alive.”

Jared and Sarah married in 2005, and became youth sponsors at Sharon Mennonite shortly thereafter. In 2009, Jared officially stepped into the role of youth pastor, where he served for the next ten years. In 2019, he answered the call to become Sharon’s lead pastor.

When asked how he ended up at RI after many good years at Sharon, he responded, “I can explain it no other way than an act of God! I took a sabbatical in 2021, and leading into that, Sarah and I started to feel a stirring to something different, something new. I think we both explained it away as tiredness—we’d just come through COVID-19.” When they returned from sabbatical, they felt refreshed. “We were invigorated and had a path, a vision for where we could go.”

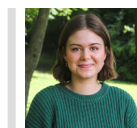
In March, Jared and Sarah had dinner with Preston and Liz Yoder from Shiloh Mennonite Church. “Preston started talking about a job, *this* job. I thought, *that sounds pretty amazing!*” Within two weeks, Jared had conversations with Caleb, Rosedale Network Church Planting Catalyst, and Kevin, RI Mediterranean Regional Director—both of whom mentioned

the job and encouraged him to consider it. “It was God’s stirring in it; it was hard to not pay attention.”

Jared’s excitement about this role is evident. “I love students. I love missions. To see how God strips down all of our inhibitions, all of our fears, and begins to develop a community that will go and be the hands of feet of Jesus all over the world—sign me up. Sign me up!”

In the short time he’s spent at the Rosedale International Center, Jared has developed close relationships with STP staff and REACH participants. This bond was evident as he spoke at REACH Commissioning. “I was here on the Saturday [the REACHers] arrived. They were nervous, and they were anxious. But when I came back on Sunday morning, they’d already begun to become family. Hearing the conversations around the tables, seeing the discipleship taking place, the relationships that have developed in a short period of time is motivating. Watching each student come to the realization of God’s love for them has been so impactful. There’s no denying God’s Spirit in this place.”

As he continues to settle into his role, Jared looks forward to “developing relationships with [Rosedale Network] churches, students, and youth leaders as they seek the best way to serve Jesus—doing my best to align them with the best service opportunity within RI, whether it be City Challenge for a week, REACH for nine months, or internship for a year. If a student or young adult is looking for somewhere to be refined, gain a better understanding of who Jesus is, what He’s truly asking us to do, and how we’re asked to live, then [I invite them to] come be challenged. Come experience the refiner’s fire. Be pushed. Develop relationships. Learn to know people at a very intimate level. And come serve Jesus.” 📍



Madalyn serves as media coordinator for Rosedale International. She lives in Columbus, Ohio, and attends Shiloh Mennonite Church.

But I am a citizen of the kingdom of God, and really want to be worthy of this Kingdom. My King said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

One thing we can do is mourn. We can choose to look into the faces of the people of Gaza and Israel caught in the crossfire and mourn *with* them as they weep over their dead and their loss of homes and safety. As best as we know how, we can strive to join them in their grief.

And, like my King, who wept over the city of Jerusalem, we can weep *for* the people of Israel and Gaza who are weary of bloodshed, who long for peace, yet who have rejected the Prince of Peace for centuries. We can weep for them because of the heartache that sin and separation from the Father bring.

Our King also said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." The conflict in Israel is spilling over into cities and college campuses around the world and could make its way into our tight-knit Rosedale Network communities.

We have the opportunity to be peacemakers, not by reconciling Hamas and Israel, but by being a people of peace. We can refuse to engage in arguments about who was there first, which side has the moral high ground, or a myriad of other topics. When rhetoric gets heated, we can engage with a focus on Jesus, the gospel, and true and lasting peace found only in Him.

We can continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, accepting that a resolution to the conflict may not happen very soon, or even in our lifetime. But we can pray that all nations will receive their King, the Prince of Peace. Together, we can look toward the day when the city of God, the New Jerusalem will come down, and the dwelling place of God will be with men; He will be our God, and we will be His people.

Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly. 🙏

Conrad serves as lead pastor at Fairview Mennonite Church in Kalona, Iowa. Conrad has lived in Ontario, Canada, as well as Mozambique, Africa. While in Mozambique, he, his wife, Heidi, and their three children served with Mission Aviation Fellowship.

and babies suffer for a crime they did not commit. But how should a government deal with a terrorist group like Hamas that deliberately uses civilians as human shields?

Some argue that there is no difference between Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). They both kill. But I believe that equating Hamas with the state of Israel is a moral failure.

It's never right to celebrate destruction and loss of life. Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 ESV).

Jesus was able to love sinners and at the same time reject sinful actions and thoughts. Balancing love and judgment is very difficult, but with wisdom, prayer, and caring hearts, we strive to love both Jews and Palestinians, while also calling out sinful deeds and ideologies.

I believe the leaders of the Muslim world are complicit in failing to call out their co-religionists for atrocities committed in the name of *Jihad*. The West can work to get rid of one terrorist organization after another, but the troubling core doctrine of *Jihad* remains.

My prayer is that one day Muslims will learn that Jesus is God and the only hope that can redeem all of us. 🙏

Darius is an Iranian American who has lived in different cultures and speaks multiple languages. He completed his M.Div. degree from Ashland Theological Seminary and works at Everence Financial in Kidron, as a financial consultant. He lives in Hartville with his wife, Emily, and two boys.