



Anabaptist World

Mennonite news, inspiring stories

SACRED ENDINGS, BEGINNINGS

*Green burials, planting
trees connect to natural
cycles of life, death*

PLUS

WHEN SEVERE WEATHER GETS WORSE
HOW RESTORATIVE JUSTICE BEGAN
AN INDIGENOUS REQUEST FOR LAND
CHURCH ENDS ON A RESURRECTION NOTE

BY JIM SHENK

SACRED ENDINGS, BEGINNINGS



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. PHOTO: JIM SHENK

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

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

Some wished to be buried in a shroud, seagrass basket or simple pine casket. In Pennsylvania there is no legal requirement for a vault.

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.

Our cemetery trustees learned that in Pennsylvania there is no legal requirement for a vault. Such requirements are individual cemetery rules, primarily to prevent settling of earth for easier maintenance.

It did not take long for the trustees, led by Glenn Weaver, to approve green burials without vaults. 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.

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.

Local and state approvals were secured and financial contributions committed. Presentations were made



Flowers and notes of blessing and remembrance from guests blanketed Priscilla Ziegler's shrouded body. PHOTO: LLOYD CHAPMAN

by John Weber to area Mennonite congregations, with an invitation to join in this creation-care initiative and receive member privileges for burial options. Church council gave its blessing to move forward. Neighbors were invited to a service of blessing for the transformation of this space.

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.

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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



Excavation work last summer began the conversion of a four-acre hay field adjacent to Akron Mennonite Church into a nature preserve. PHOTO: PHIL RUTT

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 facil-

ity, to develop an outdoor classroom, a creation-care curriculum and a Story-Walk; developing contemplative spaces at benches with access to resources via QR codes; collaborating with inter-faith 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. ●

A staff person from the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay gives instructions for planting tree seedlings at Akron Mennonite Church's nature preserve in October. PHOTO: BOB WYBLE



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.