

My summer sabbatical is over and the fall is back in full swing!

It was such an incredible gift to be given a three-month sabbatical. This was very apparent as colleagues shared with me how rarely they had seen that kind of thing granted in campus ministry spaces - both from the Mennonite tradition and beyond. Those three months were incredibly valuable as it gave me and my family a great chance to rest, reflect, and look forward to this new year on campus, our sixth fall season of 3rd Way Collective. Thank you for that gift.

Our four student officers have returned, full of ideas and a vision for new ways that 3rd Way Collective can be creating connecting points around peace, justice, and faith. Their enthusiasm is a real blessing in this work, and a reminder that while we struggle to draw in the majority of the 46,000 Penn State students, when we find people who resonate with our direction it has the power to be incredibly transformative. It is also rewarding to think back on how challenging those first few years were to simply find students, to know that we've come so far as to have some name-brand recognition across this massive campus.

Already we've hosted our first guest speaker - Raleigh Mennonite Church's Rev. Melissa Florer-Bixler - and will have our next big event on Monday evening as we welcome and co-host the podcast hosts of Harry Potter & the Sacred Text on campus. We've shown up at the Penn State Involvement Fair, LGBTQ Welcome Back Reception, and the annual LION Bash.

I continue to reflect on what it means to be less focused on programming, and more focused on presence in student's lives. Our unique approach provides students with an alternative to the dominant campus ministry model, and our willingness to go into spaces where other faith groups do not go provides us with a meaningful perspective. It seems like the best conversations continue to be happening around a table - whether that is at one of our formal planned events, or in more casual conversation over coffee or a one-on-one meal.

As this fall got underway I got a lovely note from Carissa (Heine) Brewton, a regular attendee at UMC for her time at Penn State. Carissa wanted to say thank you for continuing my work with 3rd Way Collective. Even though Carissa's primary faith identity at Penn State was with another campus ministry, her time beyond this community has made her more appreciative of groups like 3rd Way Collective, and my ability to walk with her and her husband, both in officiating their wedding ceremony, but also as their theological understandings have grown and shifted beyond some of the more sheltered or fundamentalist ideas of the campus ministries they were a part of during their time here. It is one more reminder of the need for us to continue to present an alternative to the dominant Christian culture - one that is often too rigidly tied to conservative politics, USA nationalism, and a focus on the afterlife rather than living a Christ-inspired life each day.

Students continue to tell me that 3rd Way Collective has helped to salvage faith for them, at a moment in their life when they were ready to leave their faith tradition or sense of spirituality

behind, our organization has helped to redeem faith identities for them, and provided them with a map for a new way of imagining what their spirituality can be in the world.

I believe this year is going to be a pivotal one as we review who we've been, reflect on this specific campus pastor role, and imagine how 3rd Way Collective might be more sustainable moving forward.

Thank you for your ongoing support as a congregation, and your belief that we are pursuing something that is rooted and grounded in our unique Anabaptist tradition at University Mennonite Church!

- Ben Wideman
Campus Pastor for 3rd Way Collective