
Gathering Virtually, Bound Together Spiritually

Rhonda L. Mitchell

Grace & Peace Mennonite Church, now a primarily virtual congregation, was initially established in 2019 as a house church in the Bronx, New York, after a small group of believers with longstanding ties to various New York City (NYC) Mennonite churches came together to explore possibilities for fellowshiping together. For many of us, chronic health conditions and impaired mobility made it impossible to regularly and/or comfortably attend church services. Working closely with Ruth Yoder Wenger, Atlantic Coast Conference Minister for NYC, we explored the question “What is the perfect church for me?”

Many of our answers reflected the complications and uncertainties of living with physical challenges such as severe asthma, COPD, fibromyalgia, lymphedema, various degrees of mobility impairment, sensory integration disorder, and the physical and cognitive changes that come with aging. For some of us, just getting to and from church on a “good” day was exhausting. Sometimes paratransit logistics or a home health aide’s schedule interfered. For others, loudly amplified worship music was problematic. We all wanted to participate fully in congregational life, yet realized that some of our specific limitations made that impossible, even with physically accessible church spaces.

Rhonda Mitchell, a native of the Bronx, New York, has been part of the New York City Mennonite community for over fifty years. She has been an active member of three Mennonite congregations in New York. At Good Shepherd Mennonite Church she coordinated and facilitated children’s after school Bible Club and Summer Day Camp programs for children ages five to twelve. While at King of Glory Tabernacle, she taught Sunday school for children ages six to eight, and was part of the nursing home ministry. A graduate of Hunter College, she worked for twenty-five years in various New York City social service agencies serving foster care youth, senior citizens, developmentally disabled adults, and people court-mandated to attend impaired driver programs. Due to debilitating mobility issues, Rhonda has been homebound for the past fifteen years. Rhonda rejoices in God’s faithfulness and is grateful for new opportunities for spiritual growth and service. Presently Rhonda is a member of Grace and Peace Mennonite Church, a primarily virtual congregation, where she is part of the leadership team. She is also enrolled in a fully online master’s degree program at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

At that time, my church had a “sick and shut-in” ministry, but it did not meet my needs. Visits were infrequent. And although I appreciated having people come pray for me or have a short Bible study, I often felt isolated and disconnected from the church community. It was important to me to be a full participant in congregational life, not only an observer or a “project.” What I really wanted was to have the entire congregation in my home every week for Sunday service!

The meetings that eventually resulted in the formation of Grace & Peace Mennonite Church, and our subsequent worship services in 2019 and early 2020, all took place in my apartment. As we processed an exercise in understanding “the perfect church for me,” we developed a statement of identity:

We are an Anabaptist/Mennonite congregation committed to accommodating the diversity of needs among us. Our faith community values connection and mutual accountability.

We decided to meet two Sunday afternoons each month for worship and to gather once a month for fellowship.

In March 2020, the emerging COVID-19 pandemic resulted in New York State issuing mandatory stay-at-home orders, and on Sunday, March 22, 2020, we held our first virtual service on Zoom. This enabled us to meet weekly for worship, and we quickly realized that meeting online gave us an even better way of “accommodating the diversity of needs among us.”

We moved forward by affirming a three-person leadership team consisting of Anita Castle, Rhonda Mitchell, and Naomi Yoder, and expanding our Zoom meetings to include all aspects of congregational life: worship, fellowship, Bible study, and organizational decision-making. We ultimately decided to be a primarily virtual church named “Grace & Peace Mennonite Church.” Today we have a core group of ten people who meet together regularly, and an extended church family of thirty.

Because of Zoom, we all grew accustomed to connecting with each other regardless of physical proximity. This became especially important in the fall of 2020, when Monroe Yoder and his daughter, Naomi Yoder, made the difficult decision to relocate from the family’s home of forty-six years in the Bronx to his childhood community in Grantsville, Maryland. We were deeply grateful that this upheaval did not need to disrupt our church family. When an article written by Tim Huber about our congregation appeared in the February 2021 issue of *Anabaptist World*, the headline captured our experience: “Virtual Fellowship Is Real Fellowship: COVID-19 Helps NYC Church Become MC USA’s First Primarily Virtual Congregation.”¹ It also reflected our gratitude for the way the pandemic helped us move beyond our original house church model.

¹ Tim Huber, *Anabaptist World*, “Virtual Fellowship Is Real Fellowship: COVID-19 Helps NYC Church Become MC USA’s First Primarily Virtual Congregation,” February

By the fall of 2021, Grace & Peace Mennonite Church was accepted into Atlantic Coast Conference of Mennonite Church USA, joined the New York City Council of Mennonite Churches, and held a hybrid service for the ordination of Anita Castle as our pastor. Anita enrolled in Hesston (KS) College's online pastoral training program through the Center for Anabaptist Leadership and Learning, and I enrolled in the Masters of Arts distance learning program in Theology and Global Anabaptism at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN), where I am also working toward a graduate certificate in spiritual direction.

In early 2022 our congregation suddenly had to cope with the deaths of two beloved members: Mervin Horst,² whose love of Anabaptist history and sacred music was irreplaceable, and Monroe Yoder,³ whose wisdom and guidance over the years had influenced the spiritual formation of many of us, and most recently had been instrumental in “spurring us on” in the formation of Grace & Peace Mennonite Church. The process of grieving Monroe's passing and celebrating his life made us even more appreciative of our virtual church. We were able to be together frequently and meaningfully, and we came to realize that our congregational foundation was strong and that we were well equipped to move forward in faith and love.

Our connections with other New York City Mennonite churches and the broader Anabaptist/Mennonite family continue to expand. We regularly participate in special Zoom events with North Bronx Mennonite Church. This spring we enjoyed participating in the Anabaptist Study Bible project, and we now sometimes incorporate the project's prompt questions into our study of scripture. Some of us were able to attend the annual Camp Deerpark Homecoming in September,⁴ which included the dedication of a new cabin named “Wisdom,” funded by a gift from Monroe and Rachel Yoder.

A scripture that has special meaning to our congregation is Hebrews 10:23–25 (NIV): “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.” We believe that meeting together as a community

3, 2021, <https://anabaptistworld.org/virtual-fellowship-is-real-fellowship/>.

2 LNP|Lancaster Online, “Mervin E. Horst” obituary, Jan 10, 2022, https://lancasteronline.com/obituaries/mervin-e-horst/article_25f7edd8-718a-11ec-9c7b-2327f5c2dcac.html.

3 *Anabaptist World News* online, “Amish Farm Boy to New York Bishop: Monroe Yoder Crossed Cultural Boundaries to Influence Development of Urban Churches,” February 10, 2022, <https://anabaptistworld.org/amish-farm-boy-to-new-york-bishop/>.

4 Camp Deerpark website, “Camp Deerpark Homecoming Festival,” Events tab, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://campdeerpark.org/events/homecoming/>.

of faith is essential as we discern God's leading for our lives, individually and collectively. And we are blessed to be able to give and receive support whether or not we are able to leave our homes, are bedbound, need continuous oxygen, or are hospitalized.

The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to know that God is in our midst whether we are joining together virtually or in person. Our faith makes God real to us—and the Holy Spirit dwells in all of us, connecting us in ways that are not bound by physical constraints. In many ways our experience is expressed in one of our favorite songs, “We Are the Church,”⁵ which was written in 1972, long before high-speed internet made virtual church a possibility. Nonetheless, the first verse is just as relevant for us as for any congregation: “The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people.” This is also true of the description of what participants do in church (“When the people gather, there’s singing and there’s praying, there’s laughing and there’s crying sometimes”). Sharing our lives, experiences, and emotions makes our Zoom church very different from watching a preacher on television or a service that is live-streamed. We very rarely use the Zoom chat feature, because participants are encouraged to express themselves verbally and engage fully throughout the service—particularly during our sharing time.

For our fledgling congregation, the pandemic revealed a way for us to meet together regularly, regardless of our location or physical capability. We do miss singing together in the same room, eating together, and the warmth of hugs when we greet each other and say goodbye; we have two in-person services each year to make all that possible. And between those gatherings, we have the comfort of connecting multiple times a week, holding unswervingly to the hope we profess, spurring one another on to love and good deeds—and never giving up on meeting together!

⁵ Richard K. Avery and Donald S. Marsh, “We Are the Church,” 1972, Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL.