

A man in a light-colored shirt and a white face mask is seen from the side, looking out over a lush green landscape. In the background, there are rolling hills and a town under a dramatic sky with large, dark clouds and a bright sunset or sunrise glow. The word "Leader" is written in a large, bold, dark blue font across the top of the image. A teal-colored arrow graphic points upwards and to the right, starting from the top of the letter 'd' and ending above the letter 'e' in "Leader".

# Leader

PRACTICAL. EFFECTIVE. ANABAPTIST.

## *MINISTRY* IN THE AGE OF **COVID-19**

SPECIAL EDITION

## Leader

Special Issue

Summer 2020 Vol. 17 No. 5

*Leader* (ISSN 0745-1695), published quarterly by MennoMedia, seeks to inspire, equip, and empower both pastors and lay leaders in helping their congregations fulfill the missional vision of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

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### EDITOR

Sharon K. Williams

### EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, Michael Danner, Kathy Giesbrecht, Amy Gingerich, Mollee Moua, Donita Neufeld-Wiebe, Gordon Smith

### EDITORIAL OFFICE

PO Box 866  
Harrisonburg, VA 22803  
Phone: 1-800-245-7894  
Email: [info@MennoMedia.org](mailto:info@MennoMedia.org)

### WEBSITE

[www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org)

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**Sharon Williams**, editor of *Leader* magazine, is the minister of worship at Nueva Vida Norristown New Life Mennonite Church in Norristown, Pennsylvania.



## C O N T E N T S

- 1 **Editorial** by Amy Gingerich  
Mutual aid for leaders
- 2 **The mysteries of cloud and fire** by Isaac S. Villegas
- 5 **Echoes of anguish** by Melody M. Pannell  
Anabaptist leadership and trauma stewardship
- 13 **Planting a 21st-century church ecology** by John Tyson
- 17 **Pandemic pastoral care for marriages** by Melissa Miller
- 20 **Question** by Ryan Harker  
How is your congregation staying connected during this time, beyond virtual meetings and worship?
- 21 **Seventeen spiritual truths from COVID-19** by Fred Longenecker  
Reaching out to spiritual-but-not-religious skeptics

## Leader tips

- 23 Leading worship online: Considerations and strategies by Enten Eller
- 25 Take care by Mary Nitzsche

## Submit resources to *Leader*

Have you been part of creating an interesting worship series? Have you been in a congregation with a worship series you found meaningful?

*Leader* magazine is open to your submissions! For each summer issue, we publish worship resources that have been developed by and for Anabaptist congregations.

Contact editor Sharon Williams at [SharonW@MennoMedia.org](mailto:SharonW@MennoMedia.org) to make a submission or suggest a series.





## EDITORIAL

Amy Gingerich

### Mutual aid for leaders

The age-old expression of building the road as you go has never felt more appropriate for church leaders than in this time of global pandemic. To sing or not to sing? To meet in person or to continue meeting virtually? And how in the world do we do it all safely?

**“Someone took the instruction manual for church leadership and accidentally dropped it in the paper shredder.”**

#### WHAT TO DO?

The government mandates and requirements are complicated and fluctuating. What seemed like good counsel last week may be different this week. It is as if someone took the instruction manual for church leadership and accidentally dropped it in the paper shredder. Now we are trying to construct a new manual using fragments of the old while also leaning hard on each other and the Holy Spirit to help us construct something new. None of us are experts and yet all of us are experts. The way out is harder than the way in. All of us need grace upon grace as we discover what it means to follow Jesus in these times.

Before the pandemic, only one-third of churches had online worship services. Now that number is at 90 percent. In a recent survey by Amplify Media, nearly all these churches said that they will continue to offer online worship services after the pandemic ends.<sup>1</sup>

#### CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

As congregations put together reopening teams and plans, no two plans will be

alike. Context is everything. Consider, for example:

- Not all congregations have been affected by COVID-19 in the same ways. In some areas, very few people have been affected by the virus and a congregation may be eager to resume its pre-pandemic worship life and church practices. In areas hard hit by this virus, congregants may be cautious about returning to church.
- Some congregations have ample space for people to spread out for worship and Sunday school. Others don't.
- Some congregations have staff and volunteers equipped to think through the countless details needed for a science-based and faith-filled reopening plan. Some pastors have to carry the load alone.
- Some congregations rely on older volunteers—a demographic that may not want to return as quickly to in-person activities. Others have pews filled with children or young families who have different concerns.

The individual economic and social experiences found within each congregation are tremendous too. Within each church, some are exhausted by working from home, while others are out of a job and wishing desperately for work. Some have been unaffected financially by the pandemic, while others are not sure how to make a rent or mortgage payment next month or to put food on the table. Some are lonely, and some just want time alone. Pastors are trying to navigate and provide hope amid all these scenarios and more.

#### MUTUAL AID

At *Leader* magazine, our tagline is Practical, Effective, Anabaptist. As this pandemic unfolded and many congregations closed their physical doors in mid-March, our team started to imagine what might be helpful to churches.

We started by asking pastors to write short leadership thoughts and reflections (shared on MennoMedia social media channels). We then launched *Leader* magazine's Adaptive Church webinar series, which has hosted two webinars<sup>2</sup> with more to come, and Wednesday Word, a Bible study for adults. And we are delighted to offer you this free, online-only edition of *Leader* magazine.

**“We want to provide mutual aid to you, our companions on the Way, sharing ideas for what it means to live into our missional callings.”**

This digital issue is available to everyone, as we want to build up *Leader* as a place to exchange resources with one another and share fresh ideas for ministry that can work in our various contexts. We want to provide mutual aid to you, our companions on the Way, sharing ideas for what it means to live into our missional callings.

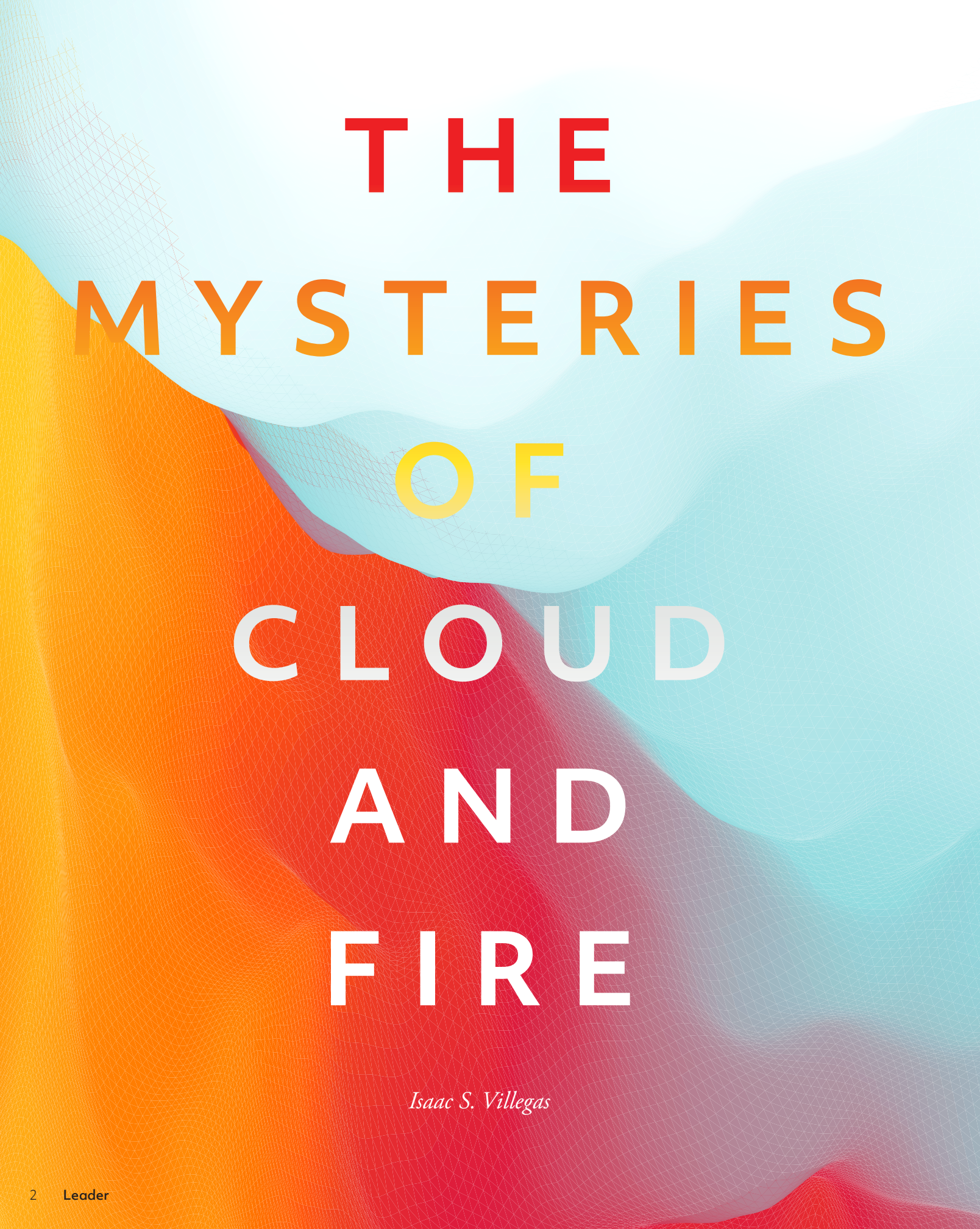
To walk this path set before us, we need each other and the Holy Spirit more than ever. Collectively, we are the body of Christ, and together, by God's grace, our congregations are doing extraordinary things for the kingdom of God!

---

**Amy Gingerich** is executive director and publisher at MennoMedia and its book imprint, Herald Press. She lives with her family in Hudson, Ohio, and is a member of Friendship Mennonite Church in Bedford Heights, Ohio.

1. Shared during an Amplify Media Now and Next webinar, “The State of the Church: You're Not Alone.”

2. “Preaching to the Screen: Sharing the Good News in the Age of COVID-19” and “Pastoring from a Distance: Offering Pastoral Care while Social Distancing.”



# THE MYSTERIES OF CLOUD AND FIRE

*Isaac S. Villegas*



*"God went before them  
in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire."*

—Exodus 13:21 (author's translation)

## May 22

"I don't know."

I find myself saying that a lot these days. Most recently, it was during our weekly online service when a church member asked if I had a sense for when we might be able to go back to in-person worship. "We have a committee thinking that through, but we just don't know at this point." Another person asked about singing—if we'll be able to do that together, as a church, anytime soon? "I don't know," I said. "Probably not, since that's an especially easy way to spread this virus."

### **"I don't know what next month holds for our churches, nor next year."**

I don't know what next month holds for our churches, nor next year. COVID-19 hasn't taken the life of anyone in our congregation, but members have requested prayer for friends and relatives who are suffering from the virus. We have been offering laments as death ravages the wider community, as the coronavirus snatches from our neighbors near and far the lives of loved ones. This collective mourning—as a society, as a globe—will be the sounds of these years. A season of lament. And for those who have suffered loss, the sorrow will not end.

Without a vaccine and an adequate federal response in the U.S., we've been left to tread water in the deep end, to struggle for life. Our local communities are in survival mode, barely afloat, as we support essential workers and advocate for the safety of vulnerable populations. With letters and phone calls we take time to offer words of hope, of reassurance, that there will be life after all this, even if what comes next doesn't resemble what we had before. The call, for now, is perseverance and solidarity—to care for the forgotten, to cultivate relationships of mutual aid.

## THE FALLOUT

The economic ruin has only begun. The May 2020 unemployment rate in the U.S. reached 15 percent. Forty-three million people have filed for job-loss relief. That means one in four workers have lost their income and need assistance for groceries, rent, and bills. At some point—this month, next year, this decade—this financial reality will reorder all our communities, if it hasn't already. Church life will be affected. Our people will be affected. Unless, of course, we've purged vulnerable people from our membership rolls and isolated

our churches from neighbors at risk of economic hardships. A year from now, if the losses haven't touched our congregations, if the devastation hasn't affected our lives, then we should rethink the lifestyle decisions that have immunized us from the tribulations of victimized populations.

I don't know what the rhythms and rituals of church life will be like for this decade, as we go on in the aftermath of such devastation. This is a season of bewilderment, as we lament the loss of life. We've entered a *cloud of unknowing*, as the anonymous fourteenth-century pastor entitled his devotional book of mystical theology—an experience where explanations fail us, where our breath falters before we can pronounce a word. Our faith shouldn't be a cheap reassurance that everything will get back to normal soon enough, that God will bring restoration while we hunker down in our enclaves and wait it out. As professor Peter Dula writes, "The arc of God's purposes in history bends toward the cross."<sup>1</sup> The Christian faith is not an escape from the ordeals of society but a devotion to our neighbors, a commitment of solidarity, to be counted among those disciples who stay with Jesus at the cross, who hear his last breath, who bear witness to crucifixion. Our faith exposes us to the suffering of the beloved of God—all of them, all of us.

## June 5

I just got back home from a vigil for George Floyd. Hundreds of us gathered downtown. We lit candles and held them for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, all of us silent, to remember those long minutes when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into Mr. Floyd's neck. Nearly nine minutes, a slow murder, as three other police officers watched, accessories to the crime, accomplices to the killing.

## TONGUES OF FIRE

Pentecost was last week, a Sunday on the church calendar set aside to remind us that the Holy Spirit once ignited a fire, empowering people to speak truth in the streets of Jerusalem—words as tongues of flame, sparking redemption.

### **"To speak the truth requires breath, to inhale air and exhale words."**

To speak the truth requires breath, to inhale air and exhale words. At Pentecost, the Spirit who shared God's breath in Jerusalem was the same Spirit who breathed life into human beings at creation, the same gift of breath choked out of George Floyd's body.

1. Peter Dula, "Hope and History," *The Cresset* 82, no. 1 (2018): 39.

# "OUR FAITH SHOULDN'T BE A CHEAP REASSURANCE THAT EVERYTHING WILL GET BACK TO NORMAL SOON ENOUGH."

## ACTS OF MURDER

To kill is a personal declaration of war against God's domain, for every life belongs to God, every breath a gift of the Spirit. For a person to kill another child of God is a physical act of blasphemy, idolatry, and sacrilege—for a person to claim divine power over life, to stage a coup against God. The police officer who killed Mr. Floyd and the others who were accomplices to the murder decided to enlist themselves in a war against God's creation when they put on their uniforms that morning, pinned badges on their chests, and strapped holsters to their waists. They gave their bodies as a living testimony of their rebellion against God. The handguns they carried were manifestations of their idolatry, that they had given their lives to a world order outside of God's justice.

**"Protests are prayers for justice, bodily devotion to God's righteousness."**

## A BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

The same Spirit who breathed life into George Floyd is now breathing life into a movement of thousands who have taken to the streets, with their tongues on fire, their voices speaking the truth about a society that has desecrated Black lives for generations. When the late Sebastian Moore, a Benedictine monk and theologian, encountered the protests sweeping across the United States and Europe during his lifetime, he described them as prayers for justice, as bodily devotion to God's righteousness. "Unlike the birth of contemplative prayer in the medieval monastery," Moore wrote in *Let This Mind Be in You*, "its birth today will be political, and generate a holy rage."<sup>2</sup>

2. Sebastian Moore, *Let This Mind Be in You: The Quest for Identity through Oedipus to Christ* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 53.

To march in Black Lives Matter protests and other protests against police brutality and systemic racism this year is a form of contemplative prayer, where we immerse ourselves in the mysteries of God's love for a people who have endured the violence of the state and society for far too long. This movement is like a river, flowing through our cities and rural communities, offering a baptism of the Spirit. There, with God's people, with human images of God's presence, we are "bathed in mystery,"<sup>3</sup> as Moore put it. These assemblies in the streets are Pentecostal liturgies. The chants are litanies. The calls beckon a response.

"The [Spirit] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it," Jesus instructed us, "but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

**"God is in the cloud and the fire with us."**

## GOD'S PILLARS OF CLOUD AND FIRE

There is a lot we do not know. We're in a cloud of unknowing. But as the mystics tell us, God is in the cloud with us. God is in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, our guide in the wilderness, leading an exodus toward liberation.

Yesterday, today, and forever, the Spirit has been and will be a breath of life, the promise of justice, for our neighbors who can't breathe.

3. Moore, *Let This Mind*, 51.



**Isaac Villegas** serves as the pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship and is the president-elect of the North Carolina Council of Churches. He is a columnist for *The Christian Century* magazine and was the recipient of the Associated Church Press's first-place Award of Excellence for theological writing in 2018. Isaac's website is [isaacvillegas.com](http://isaacvillegas.com).



# *echoes of hooves anxious echoes*



**Anabaptist  
leadership  
and trauma  
stewardship**

*Melody M. Pannell*



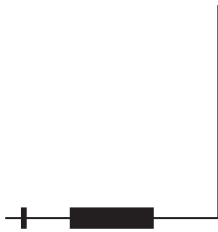
### FOR A TIME OF SORROW

I share with you the agony of your grief,  
The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.  
I know I cannot enter all you feel  
Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;  
I can but offer what my love does give:  
The strength of caring,  
The warmth of one who seeks to understand  
The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.  
This I do in quiet ways,  
That on your lonely path  
You may not walk alone.

—Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*<sup>1</sup>

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage,  
all you who wait for the Lord.”

—Psalm 31:24



1. Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 211. Used by permission.



As a native of Harlem, New York, my heart was greatly affected by the agonizing reports I heard from afar while social distancing in Harrisonburg, Virginia. I called my family and home church community daily to inquire about their safety and emotional well-being. Although I was not experiencing the same level of crisis, I resonated with the words of Howard Thurman: "The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own."<sup>2</sup>

As of June 24, New York City has seen at least 218,089 cases of coronavirus and at least 21,838 people have died from it.<sup>3</sup> The New York City region was reported to be "an epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic."<sup>4</sup> For over three months, our Mennonite pastors and lay leaders have striven to care for their congregations and support their communities amid the traumatic realities of this global pandemic.

In three articles published by *Mennonite World Review* in April, May, and June 2020, these pastors and lay leaders shared some of their firsthand experiences, laments, and challenges in coping with the unsurmountable grief and loss of COVID-19. The responsibility of responding to the grief and sorrow of congregational and community members was and still is a heavy load to bear.

Pastor Elvis Martinez of the Evangelical Garifuna Church in Manhattan disclosed that "'it has been hard to sleep at night sometimes.' . . . The image of three children weeping after their mother died from COVID-19 sticks with him. . . . At least 17 people in the congregation's faith community have died from the virus, and many more across the congregation's extended community and family networks. Others within the church have recovered from the virus."<sup>5</sup> Another leader at the Garifuna Church lamented, "There has been so much loss in such a short amount of time, it's been really challenging," admitting that "sometimes I have to take a minute for myself before making a difficult phone call to someone who has lost a family member recently. It's so much bad news, it's heavy for everyone."<sup>6</sup>

## A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

Our Anabaptist churches throughout the world are experiencing the impact of *collective trauma*, and our pastors and lay leaders are on the front lines. Carolyn Yoder writes that

when a traumatic event or series of events affects large numbers of people, we speak of *societal* or *collective trauma*. Trauma may be directly experienced, but it can also occur

2. Thurman, *Meditations*, 211.

3. "New York City Coronavirus Map and Case Count," *New York Times*, June 24, 2020.

4. Jesse McKinley, "New York City Region Is Now an Epicenter of the Coronavirus Pandemic," *New York Times*, March 22, 2020.

5. Sara Alvarez Waugh, "NYC Church Offers Care through Virus Crisis: Congregation in Epicenter of COVID-19 Offers Support, Connection, and Hope," *Mennonite World Review*, June 1, 2020.

6. Waugh, "NYC Church Offers Care."



when witnessing or merely hearing about horrific events. Whether direct or indirect, a group experience of trauma can set off widespread fear, horror, helplessness or anger. . . .

*Secondary or vicarious trauma* refers to the effects experienced by [those] who . . . attend to direct victims firsthand.<sup>7</sup>

Yoder reminds us that “trauma [does] affect individuals and groups physically, emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally, and spiritually.”<sup>8</sup>

### **“Create space for the continuous waves of grief and loss.”**

As our Anabaptist churches begin the healing and recovery process around this collective trauma, considering how pastors and lay leaders can prepare themselves to minister and support their congregations in a healthy manner is crucial. In order to accomplish this, it is vital to recognize the potential effect of this current collective trauma on the holistic well-being of our pastors and lay leaders as they create space for the continuous waves of grief and loss.

## **WOUNDED HEALERS**

In his seminal work *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen makes this profound statement: “Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in his own heart and even losing his precious peace of

mind? In short: ‘Who can take away suffering without entering it?’”<sup>9</sup>

In our Anabaptist biblical tradition, we strive to embody the values of being a covenanted community, commitment to servanthood, the importance of the missionary church, centering on the love and life of Jesus Christ, and peacebuilding. We are called to be a witness of practical assistance to a needy and hurting society, to offer compassion to the world, and to be compassionate with one another, to “love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]” (Mark 12:31). For wounded healers, writes Nouwen, “compassion is born when we discover in the center of our own existence not only that God is God and man is man, but also that our neighbor is really our fellow man.”<sup>10</sup> Galatians 6:2 admonishes us to “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

## **COMPASSION FATIGUE**

However, during a crisis or traumatic event, caregivers on the frontlines, such as pastors and lay leaders, can experience what Françoise Mathieu calls *compassion fatigue*—“the profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professionals and caregivers can develop over the course of the career as helpers.” Compassion fatigue, notes Mathieu, has been described as “the cost of caring for others in emotional pain.”<sup>11</sup>

### **“Our moral values can increase the possibilities of being affected by compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.”**

The Anabaptist community has a high regard for serving well, extending ourselves, and putting the love of Jesus Christ in action. We do our work well. Yet our good intentions, our positive efforts, and even our biblical faith traditions do not make us immune to compassion fatigue or secondary trauma. In fact, because of the high standards of community and the emphasis placed on service, our moral values can even increase the possibilities of being affected by compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.

As pastors and lay leaders prepare to resume public services and gather in community, as well

9. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 72.

10. Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, 41.

11. Françoise Mathieu, *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8.

7. Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security Is Threatened* (New York: Good Books, 2015), 12.

8. Yoder, *Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 14.



as continue to provide grief and loss support to their congregations, we need to be mindful of the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and vicarious trauma. Noting the differences between these concepts is important. Mathieu, the compassion fatigue specialist, helps us understand these nuances:

While *compassion fatigue* refers to the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate, the term *vicarious trauma* describes the transformation of our view of the world due to the cumulative exposure to traumatic images and stories. This is accompanied by intrusive thoughts and imagery and difficulty ridding ourselves of the traumatic experiences recounted by clients. *Secondary traumatic stress* (STS) is the result of bearing witness to a traumatic event or to a series of events which can lead to PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]-like symptoms.<sup>12</sup>

## WHEN WE START SINKING DOWN

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk call these symptoms a *trauma exposure response*. A trauma exposure response may be defined as “a transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings.”<sup>13</sup> Lipsky and Burk encourage caregivers to analyze 16 warning signs of trauma exposure response:

1. feeling helpless and hopeless
2. a sense that one can never do enough
3. hypervigilance
4. diminished creativity
5. inability to embrace complexity
6. minimizing
7. chronic exhaustion/physical elements
8. inability to listen/deliberate avoidance
9. dissociative moments
10. sense of persecution
11. guilt
12. fear
13. anger and cynicism
14. inability to empathize/numbing
15. addictions
16. grandiosity: an inflated sense of importance related to one's work<sup>14</sup>

12. Mathieu, *Compassion Fatigue Workbook*, 14.

13. Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 41.

14. Lipsky and Burk, *Trauma Stewardship*, 47–113.



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



**Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.** Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995.

This in-depth outline of 24 articles of faith is from an Anabaptist/Mennonite theological perspective. These statements provide a framework in which members of the Anabaptist community can understand and share what it means to follow in the way of Jesus Christ.



**Davis, Fania. *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and US Social Transformation*.** New York: Good Books, 2019.

Social activist Fania Davis (sister of Angela Davis) offers the practices of restorative justice as a framework to address social inequity issues and concepts such as mass incarceration, intersectionality, and racial trauma. Newly emerging social movements such as Black Lives Matter and truth and reconciliation models are presented as a path to healing racial prejudice.



**DeWolf, Thomas Norman, and Jodie Geddes. *The Little Book of Racial Healing: Coming to the Table for Truth-Telling, Liberation, and Transformation*.** New York: Good Books, 2019.

Advisory board president Jodie Geddes and program manager Thomas Norman DeWolf of the organization Coming to the Table (CTT) bring the vision and mission of CTT to readers in this helpful and relevant resource “for all who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism that is rooted in the United States’ history of slavery.”



**Levine, Peter A., and Ann Frederick. *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*.** Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997.

Peter Levine and Ann Frederick discuss resolving trauma through a naturalistic response. *Waking the Tiger* lays out the argument that human physiology is the key to healing traumatic symptoms. Body awareness exercises are incorporated in this work to provide an outlet for the four components of trauma: hyperarousal, constriction, dissociation, and freezing.

**Lipsky, Laura van Dernoot, and Connie Burk.** *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009.



Lipsky and Burk introduce the terminology *trauma exposure response* and *trauma stewardship* as new ways of thinking about the definition, symptoms, and paths to practice self-care. Sixteen trauma exposure responses are named along with five directions that include finding balance and building compassion and community.

**Mathieu, Françoise.** *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization.* New York: Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), 2012.



This hands-on guide to self-care for those in the helping fields, such as clergy and counselors, offers several experiential activities and concrete strategies that equip practitioners to make realistic changes in their self-care awareness and compassion fatigue prevention plan.

**Nouwen, Henri J. M.** *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society.* New York: Doubleday, 2013.



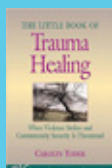
This classic resource for pastors and others who would identify as servant leaders argues that it is by leaning into our own human suffering that we can help bring hope and healing to those we serve. Looking at our woundedness empowers us to be a positive and powerful transformative influence.

**Thurman, Howard.** *Meditations of the Heart.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.



Originally an extension (vol. 2) of *Deep Is the Hunger*, noted as *Meditations of the Heart*, Howard Thurman's prolific and profound words are shared openly for all. These words of meditation and wisdom were originally shared with Thurman's congregation, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. The meditations address some of the deep and insistent needs of the human spirit.

**Yoder, Carolyn.** *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security Is Threatened.* New York: Good Books, 2015.



This work on trauma healing by psychotherapist Carolyn Yoder is seminal in the field of trauma and is the foundation for the curriculum and program of Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP). Yoder was the first director of the STAR program and shares her teachings that draw from trauma and resilience studies, restorative justice, conflict transformation, human security, and spirituality.

## GOOD STEWARDS OF TRAUMA

According to Article 21 in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*,

as servants of God, our primary vocation is to be stewards in God's household. God, who in Christ has given us new life, has also given us spiritual gifts to use for the church's nurture and mission. The message of reconciliation has been entrusted to every believer, so that through the church the mystery of the gospel might be made known to the world.

We believe that time also belongs to God and that we are to use with care the time of which we are stewards.<sup>15</sup>

As Anabaptists, how can we embrace what it means to be good stewards of trauma? Lipsky and Burk state that

trauma stewardship is not simply an idea. It is a practice through which individuals, organizations and societies tend to the hardship, pain or trauma experienced by humans, other living beings, or the planet itself. Those who support trauma stewardship believe that both joy and pain are the realities of life, and that suffering can be transformed into meaningful growth and healing when a quality of presence is cultivated and maintained even in the face of great suffering. Trauma stewardship calls us to engage oppression and trauma whether through our careers or in our personal lives—by caring for, tending to, and responsibly guiding other beings who are struggling. At the same time, we do not internalize others' struggles or assume them as our own.<sup>16</sup>

## INTERSECTING TRAUMAS

As we strive to avoid internalizing others' struggles as our own, we also recognize that all our communities are not experiencing this pandemic in the same way. The collective trauma of COVID-19 has been multifaceted and multilayered. Although recognized as a health crisis, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the harsh realities of socioeconomic and racial disparities in the US. The *New York Times* reports that “many of the neighborhoods with the highest number of cases per capita are areas with the lowest median incomes and largest average household size.”<sup>17</sup> The hot spots include

15. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), 77.

16. Lipsky and Burk, *Trauma Stewardship*, 11.

17. “New York City Coronavirus Map.”



communities where many of our Mennonite churches are located. “While age is a major factor in who dies from COVID-19, neighborhoods with the high concentrations of black and Latino people, as well as low-income residents, suffered the highest death rates.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in the midst of people of color having to deal with the compounded intersections of identity, black and brown communities are also experiencing the effects of historical and racial trauma after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others.

## HISTORICAL AND RACIAL TRAUMAS

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart “defines historical trauma as ‘the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group trauma.’”<sup>19</sup> In many cases, “a ‘conspiracy of silence’ surrounds events for which grieving and mourning have never taken place.”<sup>20</sup>

*Racial trauma* is “the physiological, psychological, and emotional damage resulting from the stressors of racial harassment or discrimination.”<sup>21</sup> Racial justice activist Fania Davis identifies “*structural racism* [as] the normalization and legitimization of white supremacy, enacted from the nation’s beginnings, by vast historical, governmental, cultural, economic, educational, institutional, and psychological forces, all working in concert to perpetuate racial inequity.”<sup>22</sup>

## HEALING TRAUMA

*Trauma*, a Greek word, means “wound.” Many of our pastors and lay leaders of color are indeed wounded healers. This kind of wounding happens, writes Apollos Machira, “when our ability to respond to a threat is overwhelmed.”<sup>23</sup>

Thomas DeWolf and Jodie Geddes, leaders of *Coming to the Table*, note that “trauma hits us where we are most vulnerable. Whatever order exists in our lives becomes chaos. . . . Becoming trauma-informed is a key to racial healing.”<sup>24</sup>



And healing is possible. Carolyn Yoder sees the community’s response as key. “Trauma can either strengthen or undermine community. . . . In some situations of ongoing trauma, a strong sense of community develops as people band together to help each other. Healthy mourning and grieving are key to trauma healing.”<sup>25</sup>

As we gather in covenant community, let us remember that we are all mourning in varying and distinct ways. Lipsky and Burk offer five directions to consider moving toward as we strive to become good stewards of trauma:

1. creating space for inquiry,
2. choosing our focus,
3. building compassion and community,
4. finding balance, and
5. a daily practice of centering [one’s self].<sup>26</sup>

Let us center ourselves so we can hear the voice of God through the stories of others. May we become vessels of healing as we say to one another, “The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.”<sup>27</sup> Amen.

18. “New York City Coronavirus Map.”

19. Quoted in Yoder, *Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 13.

20. Yoder, *Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 13.

21. Kenneth T. Ponds, “The Trauma of Racism: America’s Original Sin,” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 22, no. 2 (2013): 23.

22. Fania Davis, *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and US Social Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2019), 45.

23. Apollos Machira, *Working for Peace* (Thailand: Centre for Conflict Resolution-Kenya, 2008), 42.

24. Thomas Norman DeWolf and Jodie Geddes, *The Little Book of Racial Healing: Coming to the Table for Truth-Telling, Liberation, and Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2019), 13.

25. Yoder, *Little Book of Trauma Healing*, 13.

26. Lipsky and Burk, *Trauma Stewardship*.

27. Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 211.



**Melody M. Pannell** is a counselor, restorative justice seeker, STAR practitioner, racial equity trainer, and ministry leader. Melody serves as the board chair of The Mennonite, Inc. and is the founder and executive director of Destiny’s Daughters Inc. She worships with the Immanuel Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia.



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# Planting a 21st-century church ecology

*John Tyson*

**I**t was my first spring season in the Midwest, and I was driving through the Kansas prairie when something caught my eye on the horizon. Clouds of smoke hovered beneath blue sky. Getting closer, I realized a fire was blazing. I drove by with the sinking feeling that something tragic was afoot. Later I learned that I had witnessed a prairie fire, an essential part of prairie preservation, instead of an unfolding disaster!





## CLEARING THE UNDERBRUSH

Prairie fires burn away old plant material, consuming lifeless grass and shrubs and trees. Nutrients revert into the soil. The burn exposes soil to the sunlight. New grasses soon emerge in the warmed soil and provide pleasant grazing for native wildlife. Fire, a force of destruction and creation, sustains prairie life.

That prairie fire drive and the ecological lesson I learned later have resurfaced in my memory during these days dominated by COVID-19.

### **“What *unknown* ways of being church will emerge?”**

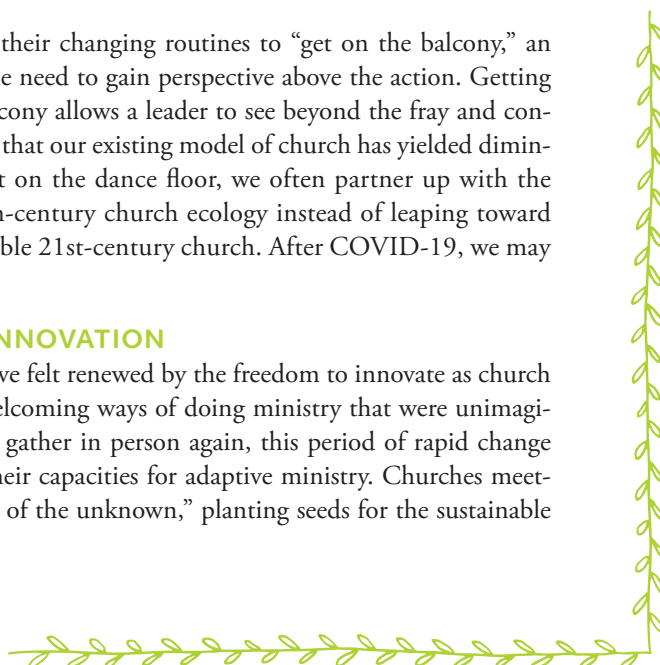
When the pandemic materialized by mid-March in the US, I felt an urge to process this event with other millennial pastors—some Mennonite, some not. After about 20 conversations, I began to hear a common “song beneath the words” rising to the surface: *We will lament the immense suffering and loss caused by COVID-19, and we may also treat this as a moment to cultivate new beginnings in the church.* Like a prairie fire, the impact of COVID-19 may clear out the existing patterns and structures that dominate the ecology of the church we’ve *known*. What *unknown* ways of being church will emerge in their place?

## FORCED TO THE BALCONY

Every pastor I’ve conversed with has used their changing routines to “get on the balcony,” an adaptive leadership phrase that describes the need to gain perspective above the action. Getting off the dance floor and going up to the balcony allows a leader to see beyond the fray and contemplate the future. On the balcony, we see that our existing model of church has yielded diminishing returns for at least a generation. But on the dance floor, we often partner up with the *known* work of preserving a decaying 20th-century church ecology instead of leaping toward the *unknown* work of cultivating a sustainable 21st-century church. After COVID-19, we may no longer have a choice.

## ADAPTATION, THE MOTHER OF INNOVATION

Many pastors with whom I’ve conversed have felt renewed by the freedom to innovate as church life adapts to COVID-19. Churches are welcoming ways of doing ministry that were unimaginable mere months ago. While we long to gather in person again, this period of rapid change has empowered congregations to expand their capacities for adaptive ministry. Churches meeting this moment are becoming “incubators of the unknown,” planting seeds for the sustainable 21st-century church.







## **“Welcoming the unknown means tolerating uncertainty.”**

Welcoming the unknown, however, means tolerating uncertainty. For the small, urban congregation, an undercurrent of uncertainty in church finances is the norm. I found this out when I transitioned into my current assignment at Des Moines Mennonite Church two years ago. With COVID-19, the undercurrent of uncertainty is a full-blown wave. While the financial impact of the pandemic may first affect small congregations (those of less than 100 members), we should expect that all congregations will need to adapt to new financial realities.

Bill Wilson, director of the Center for Healthy Churches, predicts that because of the pandemic, an unprecedented one-third of US churches could close by 2025. Wilson anticipates that congregations will endure a giving decline of 33 percent in 2020. Likewise, Elise Erickson Barrett of the Lilly Endowment Inc. suggests that churches will close five to ten years earlier than expected—a result of COVID-19’s financial impact.<sup>1</sup>

### **WE HAVE HOPE**

Despite these sobering statistics, we have reason for hope. Just as congregations have embraced new ways of doing ministry in recent months, they are adapting to new methods of financial sustainability as well. New ministry and new methods of financial sustainability go hand-in-hand.

Online giving is now a necessity but cultivating support streams far beyond the immediate congregation may soon prove necessary too. One of the first things I did when the pandemic hit was submit a grant proposal to an organization that helps small churches improve building maintenance. Now may be the time to normalize churches seeking crowdfunding, through platforms like Kickstarter or Patreon, to release creative ministry ventures. We may find ourselves pursuing microloans to jumpstart a task force’s new idea. These ideas aren’t new, but they are now shifting from the margins to the center.

While cultivating unconventional support streams addresses technical problems, pursuing financial sustainability also means raising adaptive questions that challenge the underlying assumptions of 20th-century church structures: How do we invest seriously in multi-vocational ministers? Is it viable to have two small Mennonite churches in one city or six Mennonite churches in one small town operating as silos? As Mennonite conferences expand beyond their geographical origins, will congregations who cultivate a robust online community follow suit? As 20th-century church structures wither and decline, these 21st-century questions seem ever more relevant, especially if we hope to preserve our timeless mission of being Christ’s peace in the world.

1. Ken Garfield, “Will the Church Financially Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?” *Faith and Leadership*, April 28, 2020.



Embracing support streams and financial sustainability beyond the 20th-century model may boost church vitality. Leaders often experience disappointing setbacks when a church's 20th-century budget structure doesn't have flexibility to facilitate their 21st-century ideas. Ministry ventures that must generate enthusiasm beyond the congregation and funding beyond the budget may sharpen ideas, demand follow-through, and bear more fruit. Small "speedboat" churches will likely need to explore these support streams, as a matter of survival, before larger "ship" churches make the turn. The experience of so-called speedboat churches in the next few years will unveil important lessons for 21st-century ministry.

### THE ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITY

Planting a 21st-century church ecology calls for an entrepreneurial mindset. Prominent Christian leaders, such as Kenda Creasy Dean, suggest that churches become cradles of creativity, willing to redefine the church from the ground up.<sup>2</sup> While this "entrepreneurial moment" once seemed visible yet distant, like clouds of smoke hovering on the prairie horizon, the deep impact of COVID-19 has brought the moment to our doorstep overnight. Congregations who now embrace being "incubators of the unknown" will plant the seeds of a sustainable 21st-century church ecology. They will nurture what comes next.

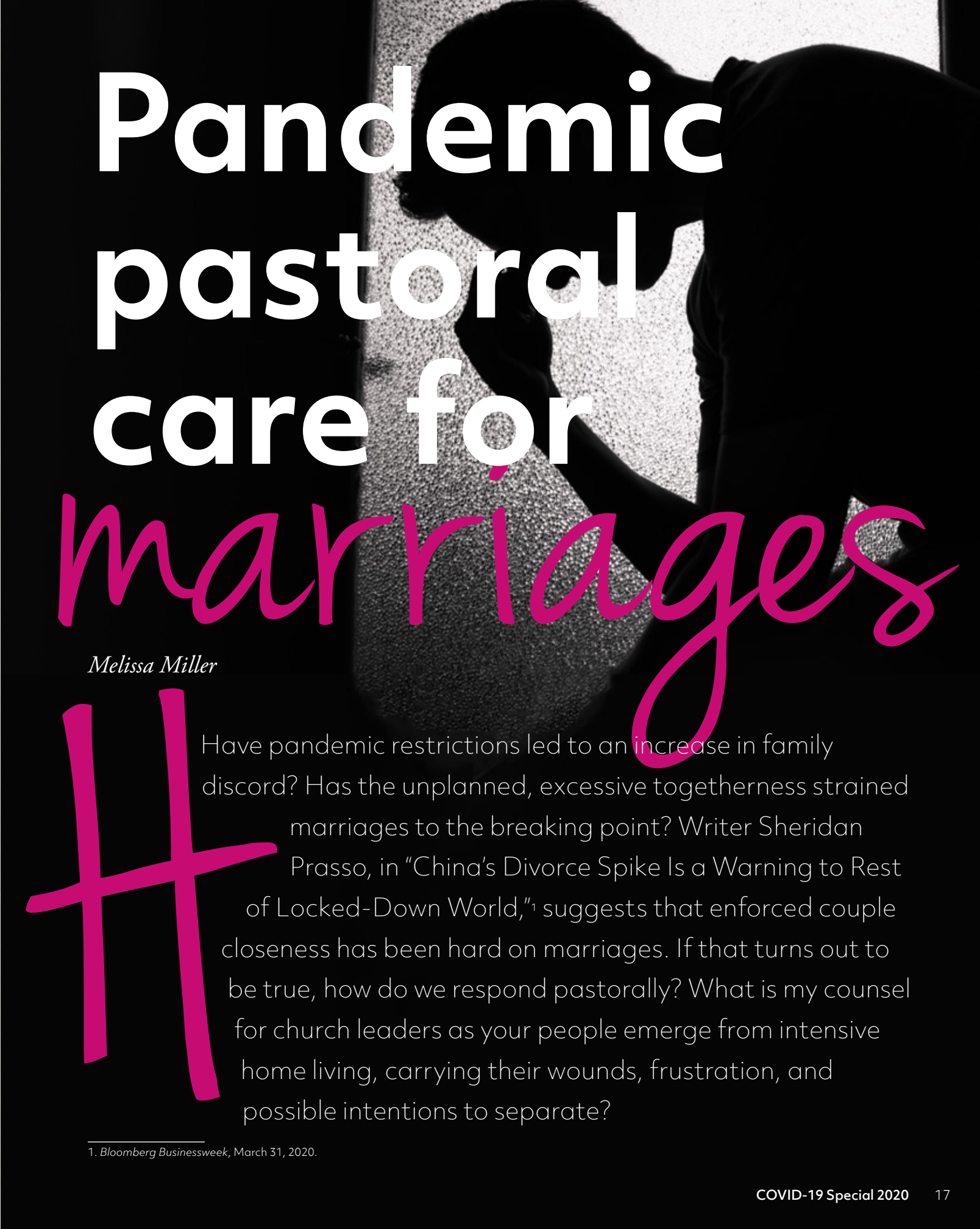
**"Our world is in desperate need of a church who is there with God's life-giving love in this time of crisis."**

Take heart because many pastors and leaders have decided to treat this as a moment to cultivate new beginnings in the church. Have hope because a sustainable church breeds a vital church, and a vital church breeds an engaged church that is equipped to serve its community. We know that our world is in desperate need of a church who is there with God's life-giving love in this time of crisis. If we hope to fulfill our mission to bring peace in the name of Christ—today and in the decades to come—then we no longer have a choice but to embrace the unknown work of cultivating a sustainable 21st-century church ecology.

2. Kenda Creasy Dean, "Love Made Me an Inventor," Fuller Studio, video, 46:22, July 25, 2017.



**John Tyson** serves as the pastor of Des Moines Mennonite Church in Des Moines, Iowa.



# Pandemic pastoral care for marriages

*Melissa Miller*

Have pandemic restrictions led to an increase in family discord? Has the unplanned, excessive togetherness strained marriages to the breaking point? Writer Sheridan Prasso, in “China’s Divorce Spike Is a Warning to Rest of Locked-Down World,”<sup>1</sup> suggests that enforced couple closeness has been hard on marriages. If that turns out to be true, how do we respond pastorally? What is my counsel for church leaders as your people emerge from intensive home living, carrying their wounds, frustration, and possible intentions to separate?

<sup>1</sup> *Bloomberg Businessweek*, March 31, 2020.





### CARE FOR YOUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

First and foremost, I urge you to tend to your own intimate relationships. Pastoral leadership has many pitfalls. One of those is the lure of tending to others—their needs and problems—as an alternative to facing one’s own foibles and fallings, needs and commitments. Pastors and their families are not immune to the stresses caused by the pandemic. Be open and clear-eyed about where you have struggled over the last months, where you have failed, where your closest relationships and your deepest hungers need attention and care. Be accountable to a spiritual friend or mentor. Aim to be the healthiest pastor you can be—spiritually, physically, emotionally—as you care for others.

*"God continues to work among us, bringing healing and hope."*

### LOOK FOR THE GOOD

Second, as you endure bad news, ongoing pandemic disruptions, and caring for those who are hurting, keep an ear tuned for good news. God continues to work among us, bringing healing and hope. Notice where individuals have experienced God’s grace and strength. Lift out their stories, celebrate them in the community, invite others to give thanks for this good news. Continue to celebrate engagements and new marriages. Recognize that many of those who are marrying during this pandemic time are

doing so without the desired physical gathering of their families and friends. Find ways to encourage and bolster them. Honor anniversaries, particularly those who have weathered hard times and have longevity.

### ASSESS CONFLICT

Third, when responding to individuals in strained marriages, assess the levels of conflict. Listen for signs that abuse has taken place. With courage and sensitivity, invite couples to unpack their pain. “What happens when you fight? Does it get scary? Do harsh words get said? Is property destroyed? Does anyone get hurt physically?” As people respond to these questions, you are in a better position to determine if there is a danger of abuse. If you suspect abuse, you must refer the individuals to community resources as available and help persons gain safety.

*"Lift up God's intentions for marriages to be life-giving, mutually respectful, and an arena for discipleship."*

### OFFER RESOURCES OF FAITH

Fourth, as a pastor, offer the rich resources of Christian faith, including prayer, Scripture, and the church. You can bring these resources to bear in several ways. In congregational worship, pray that couples will find spiritual strength to hold strong to their marriage vows, and for God to bring peace and healing in times of conflict. Use sermons to address family conflict, abuse, pandemic stress, and mental health. From Scripture, lift up God’s intentions for marriages to be life-giving, mutually respectful, and an arena for discipleship (e.g., Genesis 2:18-25 and Colossians 3:12-19). Take care to note oppressive elements in society and in biblical interpretation that are counter to God’s intentions for mutuality and equality within marriage.

Practice and teach forgiveness and grace. These great gifts from our loving God are taught and modeled by Jesus. Forgiveness allows us to release the burden and hurts of the past and build anew. God’s grace is infinite. It’s poured out upon us like a drenching shower and holds us securely. Offer God’s generous gifts to the people.

Invite those within the church community to walk alongside each other. Surround a struggling couple with steadfast companions to pray for and encourage them, possibly within a small group, or with two or three mature lay leaders. Assess whether practical resources, such as financial support, can be offered. As available, encourage couples to seek counseling outside the congregational setting. Model vulnerability as appropriate and, if you are married, with the permission of your spouse. Let others know that pastors also struggle, fall short, and seek reconciliation and healing.

*"Urge people to choose a cooling-off period."*

### COUNSEL PATIENCE

Urge people to choose a cooling-off period, in recognition that the unusual circumstances of COVID-19 produced unusual dynamics for individuals and marriages. Encourage them to set a truce of three months. Suggest they use that time to reduce negative behaviors and conflict, allow each other personal and physical space, and seek perspective and healing. Ask them to reflect on what has been good and sustaining in their relationship. Invite them to recall and reflect on better times.

### DON'T GIVE UP

Recognize that all marriages cannot be saved. Sometimes there has been too much damage and disappointment to overcome. Sometimes individuals lose the will and capacity to break destructive patterns or lack hope for a better future. When a couple clearly cannot mend the fractures of their relationship, extend God's grace to them. Christian teachings of sin and forgiveness are most precious to us when we have fallen and then find ourselves held firmly in the grip of God's astonishing grace. Let individuals know that God does not give up on them, and that your church will not either.

Extend that same grace of God to yourself. Pastors care deeply for those in their churches. We want them to enjoy the fullness of abundant life in Christ. We may confuse our love and hope for congregants with our capacity to bring about change in their lives. We may base our self-worth on a particular response from an individual we are helping. When our

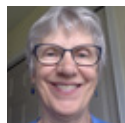
hopes are not realized, for our congregants or ourselves, we can be distressed and grow anxious and rigid. When that happens, we need to release ourselves and others into God's grace.

*"Sheltering in place is a beautiful pandemic phrase."*

### CHANNEL OF GOD'S LOVE

Understanding that we pastors are channels of God's love *is* important. We are like gardeners who tend to the spiritual growth of our people. God is the source of love, growth, and life. We give ourselves over to the work God has called us to do, the ministry of healing, reconciling, justice-making, and loving. The Spirit moves in others, calls them to life, and brings growth. With humility, we offer our counsel, compassion, and prayers and leave the outcome in God's hands.

*Sheltering in place* is a beautiful pandemic phrase. At our best, our families and marriages provide shelter, security, and warmth. In a healthy intimate relationship, mutual respect, trust, loyalty, and consistency thrives. As we love each other, we model God's love. May you, good pastor, know the shelter of God's love for yourself, your family, and your congregation.



**Melissa Miller** is a counselor and Mennonite pastor of Pioneer Park Christian Fellowship in Kitchener, Ontario. She has made a lifelong study of family dynamics and is happiest when everyone gets along. Sparing that, she is grateful for God's unending grace.



## QUESTION

How is your congregation staying connected during this time, **beyond virtual meetings and worship?**



**Ryan  
Harker**

I have never been one to adapt quickly to new technologies. I prefer the slow pace of a screen-free life and the cluck of a chicken to the ping of a cell phone. But when COVID-19 forced my congregation to rapidly adapt our practices, we began online worship and Zoom Bible studies.

Having grown up outside of the Anabaptist faith, one part of our spiritual life that I love is the value we place on simplicity and what I think of as an incarnational life—life together, in community, around a table, sharing a meal and conversing together. In fact, one of my favorite stories in my short time at West Clinton is about my 30th birthday party that the congregation threw for me. It was a simple gathering. We played board games and enjoyed snacks and conversation. In our online worship and Bible studies, we have missed these kinds of fellowship activities tremendously.

This is a “pregnant” time for disciples of Jesus. If we’re willing to participate, God will bring new practices and insights to birth in the midst of COVID-19. We are watching for what God is doing. In the meantime, we’ve found some meaningful ways to connect.

The most obvious way has been our “drive-in” services, one on Easter and one in May. We were the first congregation in our county to do this, and it was such a breath of fresh air! We plan to continue these services each Sunday in June as a transition back to indoor worship.

While we have been active online, a large portion of our congregation lacks internet connections. When our leadership team made the decision to temporarily cancel in-person worship, we quickly made a list of every vulnerable person in our congregation. Having divided the names of that list up among the seven leadership team members and myself, we are staying connected to that portion of our congregation through weekly telephone calls.

Through the COVID-19 ordeal, we have learned to never take physical proximity, in-person worship, and fellowship for granted. As we struggle to connect in this time, we’re watching for what God is birthing among us.

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**Ryan Harker** is pastor of West Clinton Mennonite Church, outside of Pettisville, Ohio.



# Seventeen spiritual truths from COVID-19

## Reaching out to spiritual-but-not-religious skeptics

Fred Longenecker

**R**eligion, church, and the Bible often get nowhere with today's skeptics. While persons who identify as "spiritual but not religious" (also known as SBNR) have learned to distrust almost everything around them, they often still believe in their inner world and their experiences. This list of 17 truths encourages a careful consideration of one's inner world and an examination of one's core identity apart from ego, thoughts, and emotions—in other words, to help spark an acceptance and experience of faith *from the inside out*.

These 17 truths speak to the high emotions of dealing with the coronavirus while introducing the indwelling Holy Spirit as a first experience of a living faith that is not primarily about books, the Bible, buildings, religion, or structure of any kind.

**01** We're not in control. Instead, the coronavirus seems to be. Realizing that we aren't in control is an important first step in spiritual growth. While we'd like to imagine otherwise, we first need to realize we *never were* in control. *Absolute control is an illusion.*

**02** We can't fix it. Nobody can. Instead, we muddle on. That's real life. Fixing everything to perfection isn't real. If we're honest, life is *always* messy. *Perfection is an illusion.*

**03** We need to slow down. Our spiritual growth depends on our *awareness* of life—not blazing through it. What would happen if we all paused and silently did absolutely nothing for 30 minutes each day? *Racing through life to find satisfaction is an illusion.*

**04** We need to trust. As we wait for the virus to pass, we are like children waiting for permission to resume our lives. We are being forced to trust that life will return to something more normal, though we have no certainty of when or how. This reminds us that *certainty is an illusion.*

**05** We aren't what we do. Have you been tying your self-worth to outward accomplishments? That is risky, because you will almost certainly crash someday—or maybe you already have during the pandemic. *Basing our self-worth on achievements is an illusion.*

**06** We aren't what we have. Have you been comparing what you have to others, and judging your self-worth based on your possessions? That is risky, too, because someone else always has more than you do. The pursuit of "more" is endless. *Basing our self-worth on possessions or comparisons is an illusion.*

**07** We aren't what other people say we are. When we are moving through life, with or without a crisis like COVID-19, whose voices are we listening to when we judge our self-worth?

Whoever it is, the voices need to be turned off. *Basing our self-worth on what other people say about us is an illusion.*

**Real spiritual growth begins with carefully naming what is true and what isn't.**

Use these life lessons prompted by COVID-19 to deepen your spiritual moorings.

08 How we define productivity is wrong sometimes. When we move through life too fast, we can find ourselves paddling “like mad” *but in the wrong direction*. In fact, it has always been true that our efforts are most productive when we pause long enough from the action to understand what is happening. *Realizing that our own view of productivity is sometimes an illusion can be a helpful step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

09 Look for something bigger. Is the physical world all there is? No! Keep working to find your spiritual connection. It is real. You’ll experience it if you keep looking. *Searching for more depth is a vital step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

10 Look inside yourself. It is *not* selfish to look inside yourself for strength. Believe it or not, you’ll find treasure there! Don’t miss your beauty, your tremendous self-worth, and your closest-ever spiritual connection. *Looking inside yourself is a helpful step toward a dependable spiritual connection anytime and especially during the pandemic.*

**Finding a dependable spiritual connection is important.**

*Without it, we may struggle even more when life throws a curve like COVID-19.*

11 We aren’t empty inside. We can *feel* empty inside, but the truth is we are not. At the core of our being is the *essence of life*, what some call the Inner Guide, Inner Teacher, Holy Spirit, or Higher Mind. *Finding our essence inside is a vital step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

12 We aren’t our emotions and thoughts. Feelings and thoughts, including emptiness and fear, can *feel* real, but they will always pass by, leaving behind what is real. Many people first learn this through meditation. *Exploring our true inner being is a helpful step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

13 We aren’t our ego. Like our thoughts and feelings, believing that our ego is *us* is an easy mistake. But it isn’t. Instead, the ego is the part of us that worries about our survival by increasing our fears of dying, running out of money, and so forth. When you learn to depend on your true *essence*, you gain the ability to “talk back” to your ego and its unhelpful messages. *Rejecting your ego’s false messages is a vital step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

14 Silence isn’t scary. We can *fear* silence, but there is nothing unnatural about it. Much of nature is silent. Maybe start with just 10 minutes each day? *Learning to become comfortable with silence is a helpful step toward a dependable spiritual connection anytime and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

15 We need each other. The virus has shown us the importance of social contact. Cooperation is essential, locally and globally. *Recognizing our interdependence is a helpful step toward a dependable spiritual connection.*

16 Everyone matters. No one can be left behind if we are truly a fair and just society, yet COVID-19 has exposed social “potholes” that have left many living in dire straits. While a flurry of support has emerged (let’s build on this!), we also need new economic policies and stricter limits on corporate greed. *Providing enough for all is a vital part of a dependable spiritual connection.*

17 The planet matters. Our old way of living was harming the planet. We’ve been cutting off our life supply. With the slowdown, we see signs of how the planet could slowly recover. This restores hope and is a spiritual breakthrough. *Restoring the planet is a vital part of a dependable spiritual connection.*

This inner work is much easier for pastors and leaders to learn to do for themselves and with others using a comprehensive newer psychotherapy (and self-therapy) that encompasses the older family systems theory. This fun, new approach is called internal family systems (IFS). It has been developed for secular settings by Richard Schwartz and has been adapted by Christian IFS therapists. This therapy is getting amazing results with a range of mental health conditions, from generalized anxiety to post-traumatic stress disorder. One resource is *Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life* by Tom Holmes. The final section of the book includes illustrations of Christian applications.



**Fred Longenecker** is an entrepreneurial Mennocostal from South Bend, Indiana, where he serves as a mental health recovery coach for Oaklawn Psychiatric Center while studying at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in nearby Elkhart. A member of Kern Road Mennonite Church and a small business owner, Fred has experience in chaplaincy, research, marketing, and editing.

**LEADER TIP** *by Enten Eller*

## Leading worship online

### Considerations and strategies

The global pandemic forced worshiping communities to make huge changes within just a few weeks. Elements of worship cherished by the church have been adapted by this new virtual paradigm—or left behind—without much time to evaluate how those adaptations might reflect our beliefs and theology. It is a time not unlike the Hebrew people being taken into exile in Babylon, where they had to learn new ways of worship for their faith to survive. Those changes, however, caused the faith to flourish in new ways.

**“Spectator worship  
doesn’t work for us.”**

#### NEW WINESKINS

In the rush to get online, we have done the best we can to put our existing wine into these new wineskins, trying to fit our tried-and-true worship practices into this new online medium. But since the medium becomes part of the message, this strategy may not be the best, especially given our theological understandings of God and community. For example, the Episcopal priest who offers her liturgy to an empty sanctuary, streamed out to the faithful, may work for Episcopalians . . . but for Anabaptists? With our emphasis on the gathered community and our conviction that worship is the work of the people, community participation is not an optional component for our worship services. “Spectator worship” doesn’t work for us.

Therefore, as I craft online worship services, questions that are never far from my mind are these: How can I foster community? How might I engage participants? Specific answers

may vary for different faith communities, but the concern is still valid.

#### USING THE CHAT BOX

For Living Stream Church of the Brethren, a completely online congregation that has streamed worship each Sunday since 2012, one of our answers was to intentionally engage worshipers in the chat—not just for greeting each other or sharing prayer concerns, but for contributing to our worship in real time. We craft services that invite interaction and set aside time for questions and comments after the message. Participants interact with the presenter and one another. Once a month, we have fellowship time after worship, so that our whole congregation—from half a dozen countries, from the Northwest Territories to Quebec, and from dozens of states in the US—can gather by video conference (using Zoom) to chat with each other face-to-face,





albeit digitally. (We tease that refreshments are even provided; just bring your own!) This fellowship time is not just for fellowship but is an extension of worship. It functions as pastoral care. As we strengthen our bonds with one another, we deepen our worship life together.

### INTENTIONAL OR MAKING DO?

Other worship questions include: How are we communicating our faith in this new medium? How might we involve all generations? What beloved worship practices might we lay down, and what new forms or styles might be possible in this new medium? Given that visual and audio arts are so easy to share online, how might a renewed emphasis on art and audio-visuals enrich our worship (while still observing copyrights)? Are we intentionally crafting online worship services or just “making do” until we can “get back to normal”?

**“Choosing a platform  
where we could be together  
was paramount.”**

### WHICH TECHNOLOGY?

Another consideration is the choice of technology, as the medium affects the message and how it can be presented. Even though I have streamed worship services for years, as the pandemic hit, our Ambler congregation made the strategic decision to *not* use a streaming service, but to hold church via video conferencing (again, using Zoom). Yes, services are not as polished, and it is messy to share your online worship space with everyone attending—dogs barking, audio feedback, attendees not muting their mics appropriately—but it is *authentic*. Choosing a platform where we could be *together* was paramount, especially as we moved into social isolation. Simply put, the congregation’s theology and pastoral care needs dictated the choice of online platform. Volunteers now assist by helping others

connect, muting mics, even serving as “meeting guardians” to quickly usher out pranksters (Zoom-bombers).

**“Do our capabilities match our  
theological convictions?”**

Additional technology questions include: Is our technology serving us well? Do our capabilities match our theological convictions? What do the trade-offs between what we can or cannot do tell us? How might we creatively use this platform? Who is included and who is excluded?

### SURPRISING GIFTS

That last question leads to my final thought. This pandemic, as difficult and devastating as it is, has nevertheless given us gifts—gifts to reflect, reevaluate, make different choices—for renewing and revitalizing our worship practices. We at Ambler, along with many other congregations, were surprised that our attendance significantly increased as we moved online! People who are housebound and distant members who have not attended for years are now able to be present. By moving worship online, we discovered how exclusive our worship had been previously. So I’m now asking these questions: What can we learn from this pandemic experience? When we return to worshipping in our building, how will we not shut out the shut-ins?

May these new wineskins free us to think about our worship in new, faithful, and creative ways, sharing ever more deeply and widely the good news of our God who loves us, so all members of our communities can grow in faith and service, especially during these difficult times.



**Enten Eller** is passionate about using technology to serve the church. He is a tri-vocational pastor, serving Ambler (Pa.) Church of the Brethren and Living Stream Church of the Brethren. He also owns a small computer business and has worked in peacemaking and conflict resolution.

**LEADER TIP** *by Mary Nitzsche*

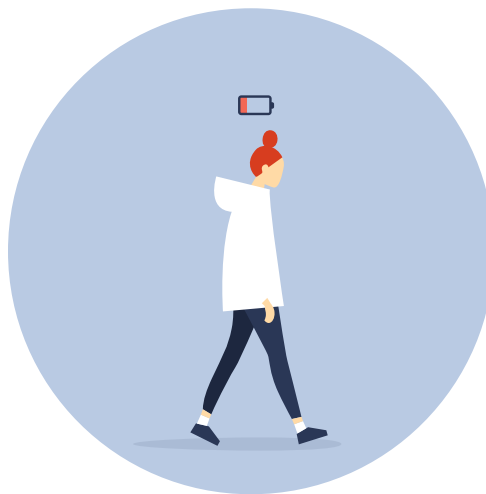
## Take care

Since the end of March, I have been leading several groups of credentialed leaders via Zoom. We gather for conversation on a variety of topics and to support one another during the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-care and boundary considerations have been discussed. At the beginning of each pastor group meeting, I read Scripture and pray to remind us of God's presence, faithfulness, wisdom, and guidance. We remind one another to "take care."

Self-care and living with boundaries point to several biblical understandings. Following Jesus reminds us of the self-sacrificial life of service and witness that Jesus calls us to with the words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus was clear in the Sermon on the Mount that our faith needs to be lived. Menno Simons, one of our Anabaptist founding leaders, said, "True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowful, shelters the destitute. It serves those who harm it. It binds up that which is wounded."<sup>1</sup>

As we accept Jesus' invitation to deny self and follow him, as well as Menno's challenge to serve those in need, we are not promised a life free of pain and suffering. Jesus told the disciples before his death, "I have said [these things] to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33). We are promised peace as we follow Jesus—even when persecuted for our acts of love and service.

1. Menno Simons, "Why I Do Not Cease Teaching and Writing," *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), 307.



Pastors are essential, and many are sacrificing their time and health to serve others who are hungry, mourning, sick, and in need of shelter. Setting clear boundaries is difficult. They are respectful of government regulations and take safety precautions to care for those they serve as well as volunteers and themselves. Leaders consider the community needs, risks, and Jesus' call to serve.

### **"Jesus modeled self-sacrifice and self-care."**

While Jesus modeled self-sacrifice, he also modeled self-care. The gospel accounts tell of Jesus taking time to have a meal with friends, with those who were rejected, and with those who rejected him. Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick. He wept with those who mourned. Jesus knew leaders had limits and needed to rest. It was his practice to go away to a quiet place to pray, trusting God and others to lead in his absence.



Jesus' model of self-care is holistic and includes caring for our spiritual, social, emotional, and physical well-being. While all these elements of self-care are important, how a person applies them will vary depending on one's personality, interests, stage of life, and context. From my conversations with other pastoral leaders, I share a variety of self-care practices.

### SPIRITUAL CARE

Nurturing one's faith is essential for sustaining ministry during a time of uncertainty and change. Pastors are better able to nurture the faith of those in the congregation when they tend to their own spiritual well-being. I have found it helpful to keep a journal listing the things I am grateful for and the losses I am lamenting during this time of sheltering at home. I am reading biblical stories of uncertainty, fear, loss, and courage. Like other pastors, I continue meeting (by phone or Zoom) with my spiritual director or a trusted friend to help me listen for God's presence and guidance as I process thoughts, feelings, and situations during this uncertain time. All these practices help me trust our faithful God who promises peace in adversity.

**“I am better connected with family and colleagues now as my schedule has cleared of other commitments.”**

### SOCIAL CARE

During a pandemic when we are instructed to shelter in place, limit group meetings to under ten people, keep physical distance, and wear masks, we recognize our need for meaningful relationships. Social media keeps us socially connected to family, friends, church members, and colleagues. It seems I am better connected with family and colleagues now as my schedule has cleared of other commitments.

### PHYSICAL CARE

Eating a healthy diet, getting adequate sleep, and exercising are more of a challenge when we are stressed. Other challenges include inadequate resources to purchase healthy food, living in a densely populated area, or pastoring a congregation with overwhelming needs. But tending to one's physical well-being is essential. I enjoy walking. I know of others who bike, run, do in-home exercise or stretching programs, or nap.

### EMOTIONAL CARE

Lamenting and grieving losses and encouraging others to do so is a necessary part of healing. Maintaining a sense of joy and humor is also important. For some, laughter is the last thing they can do right now. What brings you joy even as you lament? Creation has been a source of joy for me and others: bird watching, noticing blooming trees and bushes, and planting flowers, vegetables, and herbs. I have noticed the desire of many to be creative. I have enjoyed cooking, knitting, making stuffed bears, and creating a music playlist. Others do woodworking, paint, or play a musical instrument.

May we leaders be faithful to our call in the context in which we serve while also being mindful of our limits during this time of uncertainty, adversity, and change.



**Mary Nitzsche** serves as associate executive minister of Mosaic Mennonite Conference. Previously, she pastored the Blooming Glen (Pa.) Mennonite Church, and was a regional pastor in Ohio Conference. Mary is a member of Perkasio Mennonite Church, where her husband, Wayne, serves on the pastoral team.