



FAITH IN ACTION

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you ... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” —John 14:27

Brooklyn Peace Center sits on Marcus Garvey Boulevard in Brooklyn, New York. Photo provided by Brooklyn Peace Center.

Responding to a renewed peace commitment

By Laurie Oswald Robinson

When they launched the Brooklyn Peace Church and Center in New York City this past January, Jason and Vonetta Storbakken and Ruth Yoder Wenger did not know that two months later a pandemic and protests would threaten to stop them in their tracks.

Rather than stopping them, however, the COVID-19 lockdown and protests over the violence and discrimination against Black people are demonstrating a greater-than-ever need for the initiative. In response to that need, the Mennonite leaders are ramping up long-held Anabaptist peace witness in NYC.

With support from Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), an area conference of Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Mission Network church-planting coach Mauricio Chenlo, and the New York City Council of Mennonite Churches, the three leaders are finding promise amidst clouds of pain.

“No one knew what would follow so quickly on the planting of these new ministries,” Jason Storbakken said. “The slowdown, while causing us to postpone our May 31 launch celebration, has had some silver linings. It has given us more time to do fundraising, strategic planning, and online programming.”

Online programming includes a virtual art gallery with Common Humanity and a weekly online webinar series, Teaching Peace, which features interviews with prominent peacemakers. Storbakken is helping to guide this online program as he leads the Brooklyn Peace Church launch team and is a member of the Center’s

transitional board. He is also pastor of Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship.

The Peace Center plans to offer conflict mediation and classes and workshops for the community. A large immigrant population, public housing projects alongside development and gentrification, and a public hospital signal the variety of people surrounding the Peace Center.

Several other groups contributing to the peace witness are based out of the Peace Center. They include the New York Mennonite Immigration Program, the Radical Living Youth Program, directed by Vonetta Storbakken, and Believers Mennonite Garifuna Ministries.

Jason Storbakken said Chenlo’s guidance is a huge catalyst for forward movement. For example, part of his coaching has involved connecting the Peace Center to other similar initiatives around the world.

“People often perceive Mission Network as only doing international work, but we are also engaged in the United States, where peace witness can bring together people of different cultures,” Chenlo said.

And the local support of Yoder Wenger, a longtime leader in NYC, is helping to root today’s initiative in the soil of a half-century of Anabaptist peacemaking in the city.

“A peace witness has been bubbling in our NYC churches for many years,”



Jason and Vonetta Storbakken are developing and directing programs at the Brooklyn Peace Church and Center in New York City.

Ruth Yoder Wenger is pastor of North Bronx Mennonite Church and the New York City conference minister for the Atlantic Coast Conference.



said Yoder Wenger, the ACC conference minister for NYC, and pastor of North Bronx Mennonite Church. “Now we have a new opportunity. The Brooklyn Peace Center adds a fresh and necessary voice to the mix of our national discussion right now.” ■

PRAY that the God of peace will help us persevere in our peacemaking efforts during these perilous times.

Photo by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Photo provided

Together, partnering for peace

Michael Danner, Mennonite Church USA's associate executive director for Church Vitality, shares his gratitude for how Mennonite Mission Network and its Sent Network are growing a movement of peace churches.

I was drawn to the Mennonite Church in the late 1990s. What attracted me? A community of people who believed that Jesus' invitation to follow him is not about where you live after you die, but how you live before you die! Jesus' teaching was meant to be embodied, and when it was, it was transformative — not just for individuals, but for whole communities. This is a message with which many people resonate today — even though they may not associate it with Mennonite Church USA.

In my view, we need more peace churches! That's why I'm excited about the movement of peace church planting that is growing within our denomination through the work of Mennonite Mission Network. Mission Network is perfectly positioned to equip our congregations and conferences for this important work. We have already witnessed the way the Sent gatherings and Sent Network have equipped church planters and church plants to thrive in ministry. We are excited to see how this movement grows! ■

Action steps

How you can help the peace church movement grow

- **Apply for a church-planting grant:** Mennonite Church USA has created the *Thrive: Church Planting Grants*. These grants are for new churches, which can take many different forms. If you are involved in a new church, have a new idea for a church — especially in places where there are not currently Mennonite Church USA congregations — please e-mail Michael Danner at michaeld@mennoniteusa.org.
- **Enroll in Sent Network:** If you want to explore your call to a peace church-planting initiative, consider enrolling in the next Sent Network training, which begins Sept. 8, 2020. Please contact Mauricio Chenlo, minister of church planting, at MauricioC@MennoniteMission.net.

Cut out or fold over, post, and use this verse for contemplation and prayer over the next month.

Peace I leave with you,



my peace I give to you.
—John 14:27

Be the Gospel.



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