



Conference Minister's Corner

Of Hot Pockets, Pandemics, and Pastoring from Scratch

By Amy Zimbelman, Conference Minister



In the humor section of a recent Beloved Community church newsletter, it read: "I miss precedented times."

I laughed and said to myself, *Wow, amen to that.*

In my first couple months as Conference Minister, I've been focused on immersing myself in the lives of our churches in these unfortunately unprecedented times of global pandemic. I've been meeting with pastors and passion ministry directors, virtually visiting congregations, piecing together how the past and present are interwoven to shape who we are as a people. And while most pastors would say they're some version of exhausted/frustrated/over it when it comes to the pandemic, I am amazed by the creativity and resiliency of both our pastors and congregations, even as we deeply miss precedented times.

It feels a bit like our churches are channeling a *More With Less* mentality right now. We are, collectively, starting from scratch. None of us has done life or church in a global pandemic before. We can't look to precedent; we can't get comfortable in a rut and do things in ways that are easy or convenient—we can't warm up the proverbial liturgical Hot Pocket from last year and call it dinner...or Communion. We're beginning again with the basic elements of our communities: prayer, fellowship, preaching, music, service, celebration, grief, and we're doing *more with less*. Less energy, less sense of security, less actual human interaction . . . now ready? Be the church anyway.



And we're doing it. I'm seeing how resourceful and nimble our churches are and it gives me great hope. Take the passing of the peace. Our usual peace-passing activities (i.e., handshake, hug) could pass pathogens which would bring anything but peace to the receiver's life. And so, our churches have gotten creative. At Boulder Mennonite, congregants are invited to unmute their microphones, look into the camera, and speak a word of peace or offer a gesture of hands extended. Beth-El and Mountain Community both have time after the service set aside for congregants to chat and get caught up virtually. My favorite idea? First Mennonite has a pause in their service to allow members watching in their homes to text greetings to one another.

Other parts of the service have made adaptations in many and varied ways. For music, churches like Glennon Heights played pre-pandemic recordings of their own congregants singing/playing instruments in their annual Hanging of the Greens service. Pastor Chaiya at Colorado Hmong Mennonite shares his own guitar skills as he leads congregational singing over Zoom.

And some wonderful videos are making appearances in our churches as well. A video from Albuquerque Mennonite of a Tolstoy short story based on Matthew 25 was so popular with my 3-year-old he watched it 10 times straight. A Fort Collins Mennonite Advent service shared a video of a Ghanaian choir singing part of Handel's *Messiah* and then mixed it up and featured a *Godspell* clip complete with John the Baptist's disciples singing and jumping around in a public fountain (two distinct and wonderful ways to "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord"). And Merv Birky and I are videoing ourselves to welcome Pastor David Darling to Emmanuel Mennonite (Fun fact: churches even find ways to welcome new pastors during pandemics! Welcome, Pastor Dave D.!).

And for the sermon time, Pastors Nick at Carlsbad and Vern at Beloved Community have both said that their services include less traditional sermonizing from them and more brief meditations with time for congregants to verbally reflect together. A new way for the Spirit to speak, perhaps?

This is just a small representation of the many many ways our churches have changed in the last 10 months. Every pastor, every church has gone back to the basics and figured out for themselves what ministering from scratch looks like.

But do all these successful adaptations diminish how hard it's been? By no means! It's a ridiculously painful process for our souls to learn (remember?) how little we control, that our bodies are interconnected in times of health and times of disease, that we are contingent and mortal beings. It's even harder to part with people we love. And that's not to mention the economic, academic, and social fallout this thing is causing. It feels like the solemn truths we repeat on Ash Wednesday are being rehashed throughout the year. Over and over again. Even Christmas was no escape.

And yet. Here we are. Still doing church. Unplugging and re-plugging in the modem to get the Internet back. Preaching in bare feet. Singing our hearts out off-key or in four part harmony (depending on if you were raised in the vicinity of a Mennonite choir or not). Loving and grieving and celebrating together in spite of everything.

So as your new Conference Minister, I'd like to say not that we *will* get through this, but that we are getting through this. And we're doing so with some serious grit, some legit grace, and a good deal of tech support. And—can you believe it?—not a Hot Pocket in sight.

And so, while we're talking about doing church, I'd like to take this moment to pass the peace your direction. Here it goes: *Peace be with you.*

And hopefully, whether via Zoom, phone, text, email, or shouting 6 feet from my front door, you'll be creative and resourceful and find a way to reply: *And also with you.*

Amen.

Note: Please know that I love all 17 churches in our conference equally even if I couldn't mention them all here. :)

Public Health Note: The vast majority of churches in our conference are exclusively meeting virtually. For any in-person meetings, universal mask wearing and social distancing are the best ways to love and protect ourselves and our neighbors. The CDC also recommends that all adults get the vaccine when it becomes available to them. Check out [MCUSA's COVID-19 resources](#).

Installation by Zoom, all are invited! Conference Minister Amy Zimbelman's installation is scheduled for Saturday, January 16, 9:30 am. Zoom details: Meeting ID: 895 5563 8166, Passcode: 450135, and [direct link](#). Please join us!