

# Mennonite World Review

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**Young adults in the city but not in the church**

**Pittsburgh's young Mennonites discuss church attendance**

By **Kelli Yoder**

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PITTSBURGH — Maria Bowman, 27 and Mennonite, lives in Pittsburgh but doesn't attend the city's only Mennonite church.

She represents a demographic that's drawing a lot of scrutiny. In fact, about three months ago, Mennonite Church USA moderator Elizabeth Soto Albrecht facilitated a conversation about church attendance — or lack of it — with 10 young people in Pittsburgh.

"As a church we cannot afford not to listen to that important part of our constituents," she said. "If they are discouraged, we need to hear it. If they want to do something different, we need to be open. I want to be able to include them. Is the way we do church not appealing anymore? What do they need or propose?"

Bowman can offer her experience. She's attending East Liberty Presbyterian Church.

"It's peace-and-justice-focused in a way that lives out its values more than most Mennonite churches I've attended in the past," Bowman said.

East Liberty makes good use of its building, serving as a soup kitchen and an arts school with a sliding pay scale. It holds multiple, varying services each Sunday. A welcoming service each year targets people who have been pushed out of churches in the past.

The church is also eight blocks from Bowman's home.

"I'd love to find a Mennonite church that's as welcoming and diverse as the church I'm at now," she said. "If that would be true and if it were accessible and in my neighborhood, I would love to attend."

She knows at least 10 to 15 other Mennonites who attend East Liberty. Many come or came from PULSE, a voluntary service program in the neighborhood with Mennonite roots.

Paul and Rebecca Shetler Fast are two 28-year-old Mennonites who, without knowing anyone who attended, also found their way to the Presbyterian congregation. They attended Pittsburgh Mennonite Church for three months but preferred East Liberty.

Certain things got in the way of them feeling connected to the Mennonite congregation.

"If you want a tight community, it's a great place to be," Paul Shetler Fast said. "When you're not 100 percent committed to being a part of that, it's not a great place to be."

He finds that acceptance of those who come and go in a church is something many of his peers are looking for. East Liberty allows them to be as involved as they want to be without pressure. They also prefer shorter services. Sharing or response time distracts them from worship, and they prefer it to happen during a community meal or via news bulletins.

And for the Shetler Fast and Bowman, the church they want to be part of is a church that welcomes their gay and lesbian peers.

Soto Albrecht heard similar feedback in her conversation. The next day she preached at Pittsburgh Mennonite, incorporating some of what she'd heard.

She asked them to consider: "How can they be a little more open, less institutional as a church?"

## **Barriers**

Pittsburgh Mennonite is currently without a pastor. It began a search process this summer. Jennifer Ruth, 28, is one of six people under the age of 35 on the eight-member search committee.

"I'm friends with a lot of people who don't come to church," Ruth said. "And I can be a bridge."

She and her husband, Ben Gundy, hosted the meeting with Soto Albrecht at their home. Her sense is that people came because they want church to be a part of their lives. But so far, barriers exist.

"We're not an officially welcoming church [to gays and lesbians], and that's one reason young adults don't come," she said. "A lot of people our age are just tired of the issue and want to move on, and our church is just starting to deal with it."

She said Pittsburgh Mennonite hopes to find a pastor who will consider these conversations. Until then, there are changes she'd like to help make from within.

"Attending a Mennonite church was important to me," she said. "I made an effort to get involved."

Ruth said of the 20 to 30 young people who regularly attended, about half didn't grow up in the Mennonite church.

Young Mennonites in the city are finding ways to connect with each other. There's an email list, called MennoGhetto, that goes out to 71 recipients. It's used for things like career networking and organizing social events.

Ruth and Gundy are also part of a small group that gets together and eats, shares concerns, talks theology and sings hymns. It functions like a house church, but also involves social activities like a kickball team.

"[It] is kind of ideal for people our age," she said. "It's not as intimidating."

Knowing these examples of a still-flourishing Mennonite community, the Shetler Fast aren't worried about the future of the church.

## **Shift to accommodate**

Rebecca Shetler Fast's grandparents grew up in Ukraine, where to go to church meant to be persecuted.

"They didn't worship in churches, but they were absolutely Mennonite," she said. "There have been many times in [Mennonite] history when we haven't been able to be a formal church."

The couple assumes they'll end up back in a Mennonite church at some point. "And that most of our peers will end up back in the church," she said. Friends planning for children want to raise them with a Mennonite identity.

“The church is not stagnant. It’s changed incredibly in our grandparents’ and parents’ lives,” Rebecca Shetler Fast said. “I have confidence that it will shift to accommodate when our generation starts thinking of coming back to churches.”

Soto Albrecht said another possibility for Pittsburgh could be a church plant.

“I want to empower those who are thinking of church in a different way to say, ‘Go ahead, why not?’ ” she said.

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