

# 20 under 40

**20 Mennonites under age 40 who are committed to following Jesus and find value in Christian faith and community**

It's an old trope: the lament that young adults are falling away from the church and a sense of despair for the church's future. And it may be true: What church looks like, where church happens and how young adults engage is likely changing. But this is nothing new. Popular religious historian Diana Butler Bass describes a familiar transformative rhythm for churches that includes three phases: "letting go, letting be, [and] letting something new come."

Mennonite Church USA is full of young adults who are committed to following Jesus, attend church and find value in Christian faith and community. They may be pastors, artists, community developers, parents, educators, gardeners, writers, mission workers, musicians, advocates for justice and anti-oppression and many other things. They can be, as Philipp Gollner of Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, Ind., wrote, "folks who simply are there faithfully and, without outspoken activism or academic degrees, carry their family of faith forward."

Last November, we invited readers to nominate people in their congregations under 40 who are committed to following Jesus, attend church and find value in Christian faith and community. We received more than 120 nominations of almost 90 individuals. From that impressive list of gifted individuals, we chose 20, seeking a mix of gender, racial/ethnic identity, experiences and geography. The following pages include profiles of these. On our website, [www.themennonite.org](http://www.themennonite.org), you can find videos many of the 20 provided, plus a list of all those nominated.—*Hannah Heinzekehr, Becky Helmuth and Gordon Houser*

**Kate Lichti**

28

Charlottesville (Va.) Mennonite Church  
St. Olaf College (Northfield, Minn.), Yale Divinity School

After college, Kate Lichti spent a year with the Mennonite Voluntary Service program in Washington D.C. Her service assignment for the year was as a hospice caregiver at Joseph's House, a space for formerly homeless individuals.

"I just had a really powerful experience there. I had never really been with people who were at the end of their lives before, so it was my first time witnessing death and my first time being with so many people who were so ill," said Lichti. "It's an incredible place that nurtured deep spirituality and support of each other."

This experience led Lichti to Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, where she pursued a Master of Divinity degree. After graduation, Lichti spent six months as a prison chaplain at a women's correctional center in Charlottesville, Va., an experience that she said taught her to value ecumenical relationships with a variety of prison ministries and also to celebrate the spaces like choirs and Bible study groups where "women were able to create safe spaces to care for one another, even in a setting that didn't feel very safe."

Currently, Lichti works on a farm and is discerning what type of ministry she is called to next. She values and stays connected to the church because, she said, "I do think that the Mennonite Church is committed to the idea that on a basic level your faith changes the way that you live your life and the way that you act in the world, and even if we don't always get that right, people are serious about that. Charlottesville Mennonite is good at taking care of each other in sort of the basic, humble ways that are so important."



Kate Lichti lets chickens out of the coop at Bellair Farm in the morning.  
Photo by Max Trombly

**Allen Bohnert**

40\*

Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church  
Goshen (Ind.) College, Ohio  
State University (law degree)

After graduating from Goshen College Allen taught high school American history, but after the 9/11 attacks and our nation's militaristic response, he was motivated to go to law school and enter public life. He is now an assistant federal public defender and has been at the center of the legal battle in Ohio surrounding executions and Ohio's use of the death penalty against his clients. He is one of the people featured in the forthcoming film *The Penalty*, which focuses on the current status of capital punishment in the United States and how the death penalty affects a wide range of people beyond just the condemned inmate. He's an avid fan of Pearl Jam.

\* Allen was 39 when he was nominated.

**Natalie Becker Bott**

25

Austin (Texas) Mennonite Church  
University of Kansas

Natalie grew up as a member of Manhattan (Kan.) Mennonite Church. She is pursuing a graduate degree in counseling psychology at Texas State University. Cathy Bitikofer, who nominated Natalie, wrote: "When Natalie married her husband, Quinn, they committed to raising his much younger school-aged siblings and helping care for his mother [who recently passed away]. At age 24, she began a life most others grow into at a later age....She deals with life in a calm manner, often with a gentle sense of humor. We have a score of exceptional young people from our home church, and to say that she stands out from that crowd...well, that's really saying something."

**Andy Gingerich**

32

Albuquerque (N.M.) Mennonite Church  
Bethel College (North Newton, Kan.), University of New Mexico  
(master's in community regional planning)

Andy works with Albuquerque's metropolitan planning organization. He says he cares about the design of our spaces and how the places we live reflect our values. He recently served four years on the leadership board of Mountain States Mennonite Conference.

**Nathan Grieser**

29

Sunnyside Mennonite Church,  
Lancaster, Pa.  
Goshen (Ind.) College, Eastern  
Mennonite Seminary

Nathan is director of The Shalom Project in Lancaster, Pa., a year-long mission experience for young adults. The project, founded by several Lancaster-area Anabaptist congregations, centers around “the process of learning to love God, neighbor and self.” Nathan and Kate, his wife, are part of a dinner group with three other couples who live nearby. They eat together three times a week to “share stories, do discernment together and support each other as we raise kids.” Earlier, Nathan was youth pastor at Sunnyside Mennonite Church. He is also a songwriter; his song “Together” was sung at the 2015 Mennonite Church USA convention.

**Sarah Hooley**

28

Filer (Idaho) Mennonite Church  
Hesston (Kan.) College, Eastern  
Mennonite University, Harrison-  
burg, Va.

Sarah has designed and built (with a great deal of help from her family) a tiny house that is now a guest house and a place for personal retreat on her family’s farm. She milks and makes cheese from the cow she owns. She has served on the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference board of directors.

**Russell Johnson**

29

Chicago Community Mennonite  
Church  
University of North Carolina,  
Duke University (MA), working  
on Ph.D. at the University of  
Chicago

Russell is writing his dissertation on reconciliation and the philosophy of communication. He builds bridges between Christians of different types and between Christians and those who wouldn’t call themselves by that name. An example of one of his perspective pieces that went viral on Facebook is “An Open Letter to Christian Bakers in Indiana.” Also, he does improv comedy.

**Kevin Ressler**

32

Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster, Pa.  
Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Va.), Lancaster Theological  
Seminary (M.Div.)

Kevin Ressler is passionate about naming and understanding privilege. In his work—whether right out of college as a participant in the Mennonite Voluntary Service program, as a seminary student, or in his current role as the executive director for Meals on Wheels of Lancaster County—Ressler has explored the ways that power, privilege and leadership operate and has challenged churches to move beyond themselves.

His favorite Scripture passage? Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In his role as director of a secular nonprofit organization, Ressler finds himself interacting with people of faith who ask him to pray with them, to preach in their congregations and to provide pastoral care and counseling. “Because there are other people engaged through my organization in acting out their faith, by that definition, Meals on Wheels is a church,” says Ressler.

He also feels strongly that “buildings that happen to have Mennonite church on their marquee, but are only focused on feeding themselves... but aren’t engaged in the lives of those inside and outside their community,” are not the church.

Ressler worries that some millennial young adults are leaving faith, but he doesn’t always worry about them leaving the institutional church. “Millennials may be leaving church institutions that are prioritizing their power and ability to exploit their own membership in order to protect their institutional power in spite of the consequences to the victims of abuse,” said Ressler. “But the pertinent question is where their faith lies.” Ressler hopes that all Christian leaders will focus not on shoring up institutions but on trying to “change the world through the emulation of Christ.”



**Go online to**  
**[themennonite.org/20under40/](http://themennonite.org/20under40/)**  
**to view videos and**  
**extended interviews**





## Amos Shakya

30

Living Water Community Church, Chicago  
Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

Pastor Amos Shakya is a groundbreaking leader and church planter in the Mennonite church. Raised in a Hindu home in Nepal, he converted to Christianity as a young adult and came to the United States to work with the growing Nepali Bhutanese immigrant population in this country. In the past six years, while on the pastoral leadership team of Living Water Community Church in Chicago, Amos has led the growth of a small house Bible study into a thriving Mennonite congregation of 60 or 70 Nepali/Bhutanese adults in Chicago (part of a larger Mennonite church). Amos also serves on the leadership teams for church plants in Madison, Wis., and Aurora, Ill., and is increasingly sought out around the country for his expertise in discipleship, evangelism and church planting. A graduate of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary's Journey program, Amos serves as a Journey mentor for other young leaders.

Shakya says he is drawn to work with Nepalis and Bhutanese, many of whom have no English or skills for employment. "Their life is difficult," he says. However, as they've come to be involved in the church, "their perspective has changed, their hope has changed." Many have become Christians since coming to this country, he says. "I'm passionate about helping them."

His faith in Jesus has led him to reach out to these people. "Jesus spent time with people who are on the outside," he says.



## Jenna Liechty Martin

31

Cassopolis, Mich.  
Southside Mennonite Fellowship,  
Elkhart, Ind.  
Bluffton (Ohio) University

Jenna is executive director of Camp Friedenswald in Cassopolis. According to board member Phoebe Wulliman Graber, Jenna has a genuine passion for the camp's mission in serving the broader church. Staff, volunteers and board members agree that Jenna is a strong relationship builder, fiscally responsible leader and a strategic planner.



## Mike Martin

33

Beth-El Mennonite Church,  
Colorado Springs, Colo.  
Colorado Christian University,  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
(Pasadena, Calif.)

Mike is the founder of RAWtools, an organization that takes guns and turns them into garden tools. The organization draws its inspiration from Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3. Mike's work has taken him across the country, including a collaboration with Shane Claiborne of the Simple Way Community in Philadelphia. Previously, Mike served as associate pastor for youth and young adults at Beth-El Mennonite Church. He serves on the Mountain States Mennonite Conference leadership board.



## Xaris Martinez

33

Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite  
Fellowship  
UCLA, University of Mississippi  
and University of North Carolina

Xaris and her family spent nine years as missionaries in Guatemala with Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services International. She holds a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in southern studies. According to Isaac Villegas, her pastor, who nominated her: "Over the years, Xaris has moved from a visitor who slipped in and out of church to a committed member who helps sustain the common life of our community... She finds tangible ways to offer care and support for anyone in our community who could use it."

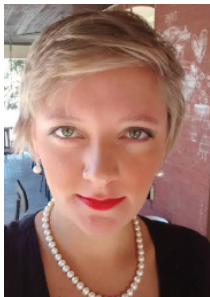
**Mike Metzler**

36

Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va.

Messiah College (Grantham, Pa.), Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Va.)

Mike Metzler is pastor of Zion Mennonite Church. He shares a birthday with his grandfather, Curt Stoudt, who taught him his love for God when they hunted and fished together. When he was born, Metzler's parents dedicated him to God's service, "much like Hannah dedicated her son in 1 Samuel 1:27-28." Metzler credits the witness of his parents, grandparents and family with teaching him "how to live well and pursue God in daily living."

**Jessie Pierce**

23

University Mennonite Church, State College, Pa.  
Gettysburg (Pa.) College

Jessie helped launch the Food Reclamation Network of Centre County and has received a sizable grant to create food centers around her community to help

with the region's population who are food insecure.

**Mary Short**

35

Yellow Creek Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.  
Goshen College

Mary teaches second grade for Goshen Community Schools, volunteers for the Center for Community Justice in Elkhart, Ind., and in a transitional coaching program. She is a church leadership board member and involved in hosting for Goshen Interfaith Hospitality Network, in which area churches host homeless people for a week in their church, providing evening meals and sleeping at the church along with them. She hosted a prisoner on house arrest in her house for 14 weeks.

She says she likes to sing when no one is around. She wanted to be an archaeologist when she was a kid and still enjoys playing in the dirt (puttering in the garden).

**Chantelle Toddman-Moore**

34

Oxford Circle Mennonite Church, Philadelphia

Oral Roberts University (Tulsa, Okla.), Eastern University (St. Davids, Pa., MBA)

Chantelle works for Mennonite Central Committee East Coast (until June 9), attends Oxford Circle Mennonite Church and is involved in organizing urban Anabaptist leaders. She is passionate about racial justice and reconciliation in the Philadelphia area and beyond, and she helped organize an MCC learning tour on mass incarceration last fall.

She says she understands why young adults may distrust the institutional church, but the local congregation? "I don't get that. That's where we live out being a faithful community" and "practice being a reconciled people." Her experience at church spills over into her other contexts.

"Faith is everything....We can't fix things on our own, and we need each other....Faith is the lynchpin, the X-factor that creates the possibility for transformation."



Sam, Maia, Sela, Audrie and Chantelle Toddman-Moore. Vicki Liantonio, Piccolo Takes All

**Jay Yoder**

33

Pittsburgh Mennonite Church  
Ohio State University

Jay has been involved in justice work within and outside Mennonite Church USA for the past decade. They\* have a particular passion for justice for LGBTQ folks and other marginalized peoples. Their work has included a focus on those impacted by sexualized violence. Jay works with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) to help oppressed peoples around the world and with Pink Menno to support welcome for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer) people and to acknowledge the intersection of oppression experienced specifically by queer people of color. They and Matt Dean co-pastor a church plant, Pittsburgh Peace Church, that focuses on peace and justice. The church, which includes a dozen or so people, is part of Central District Conference and meets monthly.

Jay says church is the first place they learned to be in community. "It's a place where you see people every week who ask how you are and care about you," Jay says. At different times, they have left the church, then come back. Working for peace and justice draws them back.

Jay's grandfather was a Mennonite pastor. Working for peace and justice was ingrained in Jay from an early age. At the heart of CPT and Pink Menno is taking risks for peace and justice, they say.

\*Jay does not want to be referred to by gender.



Jay writes: "I'm with my nephew, Timothy Yoder. I was about to leave, and he was listening to Joan Baez's version of 'The Cherry Tree Carol,' the song that I always sing him when he feels a little sad." Photo provided

**Jason Storbaken**

38

Radical Living Christian Community, Brooklyn, N.Y.  
University of Wisconsin, Union Theological Seminary, New York (M.Div.)

Jason is chapel director of Bowery Mission, New York City and author of *Radical Spirituality*. His forthcoming book on The Bowery Mission will be published in 2017. He founded the Radical Living church/intentional community in an eclectic neighborhood in Brooklyn. In August, he will begin a Doctor of Ministry in Transformational Leadership at Boston University.

**Rosemary Till**

27

Mountain View Mennonite Church, Kalispell, Mont.  
Pacific Lutheran University and University of Montana

Rosemary doesn't come from what she calls "a traditionally Mennonite family." She was 5 when her family began attending church, and she isn't "sure if she'd ever been inside a church before." She holds a bachelor's degree in French and global studies and a Master of Public Health degree. She spent a year with Mennonite Central Committee in Chad and recently spent six weeks in Guinea, Africa, with a Center for Disease Control and Prevention Ebola Response Team. She also serves on the board of elders at Mountain View.

**Jerrell Williams**

24

First Baptist Church of Garland (Texas) and Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, Kan.  
Bethel College (North Newton, Kan.)

Jerrell was born and raised in Garland, Texas, in a Baptist church. He still claims a non-Mennonite faith heritage but is active at Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church. He is director of prison ministries for Offender Victim Ministries of Newton, Kan., a nonprofit organization that addresses crime and justice. Jerrell has educated himself about mass incarceration in the United States and works for justice for those who are incarcerated.

In his spare time, Jerrell loves to listen to and analyze music. He says: "Music isn't just words with a beat to me. Everything from country to hip hop has some sort of message for the listener. I get so much from listening to music. I would even say that it is the way I experience God."