



*Beginning with this issue and through the coming months, MESSENGER is highlighting some of the small congregations in the Church of the Brethren that aren't letting their size limit their vision for ministry. In this issue, you will also find some comparative statistics and highlights of congregations in the western part of the US, where small congregations predominate. If you have a story idea, send it to [messenger@brethren.org](mailto:messenger@brethren.org).*



Keith Hollenberg

# Outreach on 'The Avenues'

## York congregation finds joy in serving its city

by Walt Wiltschek

**D**on't let the name fool you. Madison Avenue Church of the Brethren is located nowhere near the skyscrapers and media meccas of Manhattan. The compact brick church instead sits in the smaller urban context of York, Pa. (population 44,000), and in recent years it has increasingly felt at home in its diverse neighborhood.

"The Avenues," as the area is called, stretches from the York Fairgrounds into downtown York. The blocks surrounding the church are filled with rowhouses, some stately

older homes that are now mostly apartments, a former school, and a few businesses.

Brethren came to the neighborhood in 1936, splitting off from a larger church in York. Today the congregation has about 75 members, with 50-60 attending worship on an average Sunday morning. Keith Hollenberg has served as part-time pastor of Madison Avenue since 2011, and he's delighted with the way that members have stepped up to serve.

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“We really are partners in ministry, which is what the church is supposed to be,” says Hollenberg, who drives charter bus trips for his other work. “We all have to jump in and do ministry together.”

One particularly fruitful ministry literally centers on fruit. Over a decade ago, Madison Avenue began “Fresh Fruit Fridays” each summer. A women’s group became aware that elementary school students in the area were receiving subsidized meals during the school year, but nothing during the summer—leaving many without healthful foods for several months. So the congregation stepped up to help.

Members go to pick-your-own-fruit farms in the county, doing the picking, washing, and boxing themselves. On Fridays, they set up a tent in front of the church and spread the word that free fruit is available. It started with two children, according to member Becky Rishel. Now it’s up to 30 or so.

“And it’s not just giving out strawberries and such,”

Rishel says, “but talking to the people in our community.”

On one occasion, they saw a man on a porch across the street and decided to take him a pint of fruit. As they talked, they learned that the man’s daughter had been carjacked the week before, and the emotions of that were still difficult for him. Hollenberg and others prayed for the family, and the church was even able to supply footage from its security cameras to assist with the case.

“I love that ministry,” Hollenberg says. “It tells me our congregation is really thinking about how we can minister to the neighborhood. It’s good when you know people are thinking, ‘How can we reach out?’”

There are other ministries, too. Each fall Madison Avenue holds a yard sale that includes free clothing giveaways. A weekly “Joy-El” program brings interested students from a local elementary school to the church for an hour of Bible education. It sponsors a recovery ministry for those who have been in prison, with one participant attending the church.



Keith Hollenberg

# SMALL CHURCHES BIG HEARTS



Several Alcoholics Anonymous groups use the building through the week, along with Scout groups and others.

“We’re at our best as a congregation when we’re working at service projects,” says Don Kauffman, Madison Avenue’s leadership team chair. “We’ve been able to provide a lot of support for various outreach activities, a lot of them brought to us by members of the church. There are a lot of opportunities for people to contribute in multiple ways, whether labor or dollars or whatever.”

It wasn’t always that way, Kauffman says. At one time Madison Avenue was populated mostly by members who lived outside the city but came to the church for worship. Little connection happened with the surrounding community, and the building sat empty most of the week.

And then? “There was a sea change,” Kauffman says. “We became a whole lot more intentional about trying to connect with our neighborhood.”

Madison Avenue’s ministry is also amplified by a decades-old, well-maintained endowment fund dedicated exclusively to outreach purposes. Hollenberg says the church is able to give out more than \$20,000 a year to various ministries and projects as a result. That includes strong connections to district-related ministries such as Children’s Aid Society, the Brethren Home Community, and Camp Eder, as well as other York-area ministries, disaster relief work, and supporting a mission worker in Atlanta.

“It allows us to bless other ministries and share way more than we could otherwise,” Hollenberg says. “It has become a way for a little church to do a lot of good.”

The church’s caring and energy nurtures its inner life, as well. An active youth program, the small groups, vibrant fel-

lowship activities, workshops by outside speakers, a praise team, art projects, and more infuse the life of the congregation. And they just enjoy being together to do the work of Christ.

“This is a church that cares about people,” says Bill Waugh, executive minister of Southern Pennsylvania District and a member of the congregation. “I see that almost every Sunday. There’s a genuine caring. If there’s a need, it’s met. It’s amazing. And I know if I needed it, they would be here for me, too.”

Carol Kauffman, who leads the small group ministry team, says one particularly poignant moment came last summer, when the church held a “Survivor Sunday.” It started with wanting to celebrate one couple who had been fighting cancer but, as they began planning, “We discovered that pretty much everyone has survived something.”

The team created a display with the words, “By the grace of God, I am surviving,” and people were able to write down what they had survived and add it to the display. Worship centered on the theme, and some survivors shared more of their stories during a luncheon after worship.



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“It really opened our eyes to what the needs were,” Carol Kauffman says. “And in our small groups, it gave us a lot of topics to talk about in the coming year.”

It keeps on going. And the best thing, Hollenberg says, is that much of it happens with members having the vision and leading the way.

“They’ve really gotten a fire under them,” he says of the church. “I don’t have to worry about driving the small group

ministry or a lot of the other programs, and that’s fantastic. I love that.”

“There are a lot of good things happening here,” Hollenberg adds. “I’ve been amazed at this little congregation. I’ve told others, ‘If you want a place where people will love you and care about you, come to our church.’ It’s just consistently welcoming and loving. I’m convinced that’s what makes this congregation what it is.” 