

Graceletter

GRACE MENNONITE CHURCH
ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO

GRACE NOTES

- The Grace “pace” is welcoming, engaging, engaged.
- Pastor Darrell preaches half the time, and a lay team covers the rest. Maybe with you?
- Grace is a wide tent, practicing a generous orthodoxy.
- Grace loves fellowship, food, and fun!
- Grace is aging...like a sharp cheddar, or a tart Gewürztraminer.

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SETTING THE TABLE

I know you are asking, “Why another newsletter”? Well I am glad you asked! *Graceletter* is a way we can share “Grace stories”. Stories that encourage, inform, motivate, and even inspire **you** – someone we embrace as part of the Grace MC family circle.

Now, you may be thinking, “But hold on...I’m not a member of Grace. Grace was my parents’ church.” Or “I left Grace years ago.” Well, our records say you are still part of Grace, even if we haven’t seen you for a while.

Our decision to reach out to **all** our members came out of our two-year process of revising our constitution, its first major revision since the church was

founded in 1956. We concluded that “The constitution adopted by Grace Mennonite Church should be seen less as an order for keeping things secure and more as a process for making things new. It is that spirit of renewal and transformation—the Holy Spirit—that will bring this constitution to life in the members of this beloved body.”

And it is in this Spirit that we, the Grace family, committed to finding ways to proactively connect and communicate with everyone who has traveled with us at some point along life’s road. We committed to being a place where people feel welcome and invited to engage as they are able.

Sharing stories is one way of strengthening relationships, supporting each other, and furthering God’s love. And we want to hear **your** story, too! Please feel free to reach out to us by phone, by post, on email, on Facebook, or through our website. The last page of this newsletter has the contact details. We’d love to connect with you. Of course, if you would rather not have us keep you current with life at Grace, just let us know. We’ll remove you from our mailing list.



Holy Trinity Cathedral, Shanghai

PASTOR DARRELL WINGER: ENGAGED BY GRACE

When I started my role as the Lead Administrative Pastor of Grace on Sept. 1st, 2023 it was a new segment of a ministry journey that has spanned 35 years and taken me various places along the way: small and large congregations, and denominational offices, in Canada, the US, Portugal, Mozambique, and Malawi. I am thankful to have my wife, Anna, as my traveling partner.

While serving in the Mennonite Church is new for me, the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition is home. I grew up in and eventually served the Be in Christ Church (formerly Brethren in Christ), which is part of the broader Anabaptist family, and belongs to both Mennonite World Conference and MCC. In fact, both my mother’s and my father’s ancestors were Swiss Mennonites who migrated to

Pennsylvania and then Ontario in the late 18th century.

Grace has been a welcoming and engaging faith community for us. We enjoy being a part of this active, engaged, and warm congregation. Like many others, we have discovered this to be a safe place to pursue our faith in Christ and extend his peace, locally and globally.

BEARS AND BLANKETS (YEE HAW! ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE!)

The Bears and Blankets offering began in spring 2023 when a congregation member – Ester Funk – said she had extra crocheted small blankets. Could I (as Grace’s Pastoral Care and Community Chaplain) use them when I went visiting elders? Hmm...

Around the same time, I noticed we had lots of very cute teddy bears at MCC Thrift – where I volunteer on Thursday mornings. Hmm...

Another friend, Mary Koop, offered to make individual-

ized scarves for the teddy bears. Hmm...

Add to that a bear paw cookie – made in a commercial facility – and a “you are beary sweet” card – and the Bears and Blankets Care Kits were started. As of today we have placed nearly 700 Care

Kits in over 30 Long Term Care and Retirement Homes.

All referrals welcome!



We are fortunate to have a variety of donors: individuals and organisations including

New To You Thrift, St. Vincent de Paul, the Catholic Women’s League, and Value Village.

Every bear and every blanket is washed and then baked in the dryer.

I love that Bears and Blankets is a community effort.

Most references to bears in the Bible are not positive, but there is this note from the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Galatia:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

—Jan Steven



BRIDGE OF HOPE AND THE ALKHANNOUS FAMILY

Back in 2015, Grace Mennonite Church and the downtown mosque (Islamic Society of St. Catharines) came together in response to the plight of Syrian refugees. Thus the Bridge of Hope community (BoHC) was formed with a mandate to sponsor Syrian refugee families in order that they might emigrate to Canada. Other churches and faith organizations came to participate in this outreach.

Our first refugee family (Shadi and Sultana Alkhannous) arrived in St. Catharines in October 2016 with their two children, and attended a soup supper at Grace shortly afterwards. A son was born to them in 2017, and, in the following year, BoHC helped sponsor Shadi’s parents and family to come to Canada. In

the years since then, Shadi himself has sponsored other refugee members of his family to enter a new life here in Niagara.

BoHC has stayed with its original mandate of helping refugee families come to Canada. But there has been a shift. The group has brought over a total of one Iraqi and six Syrian families thus far. But there are three more in process, from South Sudan. BoHC is hopeful that one of these families will arrive soon.

In the tradition of immigrants to North America, the Alkhannous family worked hard and were eventually able to open their own business in Port Dalhousie. This was truly a family enterprise—the Castillo Shawarma restaurant—and a genuine success story.

Then, on September 12, 2024, their restaurant, and source of livelihood, was attacked by arsonists. The resulting damage meant that their business has now been closed indefinitely. During the month of October, Bridge of Hope used the services of LaunchGood, a crowdfunding tool, to assist the family.

The intention is still, through various means, to raise enough money to have the restaurant reopen. Meanwhile, the family has been forced to seek out other sources of employment.

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GRACE GROUP CONTRIBUTES TO ANABAPTIST COMMUNITY BIBLE

In celebration of the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, coming up in 2025, Menno Media undertook the Anabaptist Community Bible Project. The goal was to produce the first Anabaptist-focused study Bible.

500 congregations in North America and around the world were invited to register a study group of about 6 members. And Grace did!

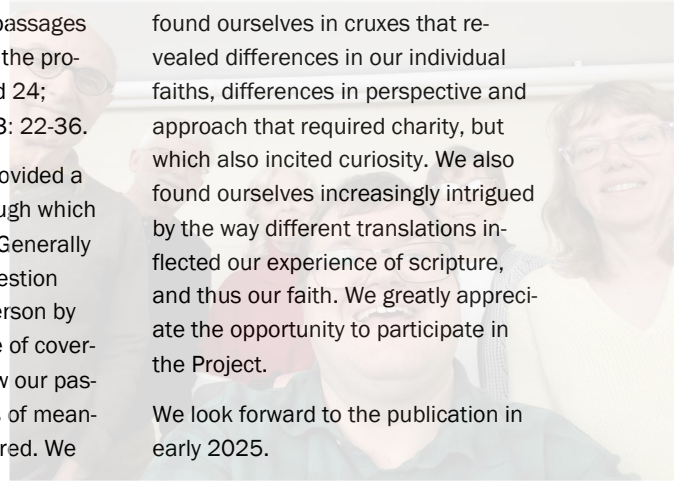
Our Grace group met 5 times from January to March 2023 to develop

marginal commentary on 3 passages of scripture we were sent by the project directors: Joshua 23 and 24; Psalm 55: 12-23; and John 3: 22-36.

We found that the Project provided a new and intriguing lens through which to focus on Bible passages. Generally we followed a provided 5-question prompt for each passage, person by person, until we had a sense of coverage. We were amazed at how our passages unfolded varied layers of meaning as we probed and pondered. We

found ourselves in cruxes that revealed differences in our individual faiths, differences in perspective and approach that required charity, but which also incited curiosity. We also found ourselves increasingly intrigued by the way different translations inflected our experience of scripture, and thus our faith. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Project.

We look forward to the publication in early 2025.



WORSHIP AND MUSIC

As a church family, Grace finds gathering together every Sunday at 9:30 a.m. provides a peaceful and meaningful opportunity to worship God with others, to cultivate a caring community where everyone can belong, and to encourage each other to

grow as followers of Jesus. We want to be a safe place for anyone to come, regardless of where they find themselves on the spiritual journey.

We express our worship through music, prayer, and reading and reflecting on Scripture. We embrace a classical style of musical worship drawing on a blend of familiar and newer hymns, an excellent choral group, and the use of gentle liturgy. Our Worship and Music Associate, Annie Schulz, explains:

“Music is essential to the life of worship at Grace, in two broad ways. First, music weaves together our well-

planned, thematically structured services, enhancing the congregation’s experience of theological and spiritual formation. Second, consistent togetherness in the ministry of music binds our musicians and singers in fellowship and spiritual care.

A meaningful, musically ‘measured’ format for worship is a prime example of our Grace ‘pace,’ serving to both



comfort and challenge believers in their middle and senior years. Music participants are blessed in being a blessing this way.”

The gifts of our diverse team of worship leaders and speakers equip and encourage us in our spiritual formation. Our preaching planning team



meets regularly to develop themes for worship, ranging from a defined series exploring a topic, through sermons

based on the yearly lectionary readings, to one-off topics of interest to an individual speaker. The team schedules guest speakers to support and enhance our ongoing themes.

And of course our commitment to build relationships is enhanced when we connect after the morning service for a time of coffee and conversation twice a month.

The Adult Study group meets regularly after church during fall and winter to reflect on the sermon and its implications and to explore a timely book.

SUMMER 2024 FUN, FOOD, AND FELLOWSHIP

As usual, the 2024 summer social sea-

son at Grace was “glittering and gay”. It began on May 6th with the Grace Women’s High Tea (sandwiches, scones, and sweets), catered by Erika Klassen. Not to be outdone, the Grace men held a Men’s Breakfast on the morning of



June 29th in the church hall, which was also well attended. Meanwhile, the Niagara Region Mennonite Church Outdoor Service and Picnic, scheduled for Sunday, June 23rd, turned out to be an indoor service at Niagara United Mennonite Church.



The church picnic, or Grace Church Social, was held on Sept. 1st at the farm of Doug and Ester Funk—a beauti-

ful day in very pleasant surroundings. Attendance was good, the food was excellent, and proved a happy social event. Three kinds of rollkuchen!

GRACEFUL GARDENING

Grace’s gardening baton, formerly held by Elizabeth and Ernie Janzen, has been passed on to Bob and Irene Dell. Beginning in early spring and running into the fall, the Dells have been carefully caring for the gardens around the church building. And the results speak for themselves, as the photos also demonstrate.

Bob picks up the story:

“Gardening is like Farming with a whole lot of extra TLC thrown in for good measure. It’s really the quality of the Bloom at the End of the Stem that makes the entire season’s effort worthwhile. No Bloom generally means that you and the Master Gardener above just didn’t get everything right.



Our collective horticultural efforts here at Grace came about for mainly two reasons: our love for plants and flowers *and* our love in providing them (at least trying to) with the conditions and the TLC so that everyone will have the enjoyment of seeing

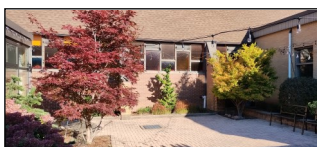
the beauty of that Bloom at the End of the Stem.

Considerable time is spent (yes even over the winter) in planning what to plant, where to plant it and overall maintenance. Gardening can at times be somewhat expensive and often quite labour intensive. Through plant splitting, natural reseeding, along with various plant varieties, we try to be as frugal as possible, while at

the same time hopefully displaying pleasant surroundings. In addition to the foliage we often enjoy being accompanied by butterflies, bees, rabbits, praying mantis and many birds.

We enjoy all that we grow. However, the large pink rosebush (Belle Danielle) at the main entrance to the Church can probably be accepted as one of the prime attractions as it blooms across many months.

Our overall enjoyment comes from hearing that you like what you see!”



GRACE PEACE GROUP

The Grace Peace Group was born in February 2023, about one year into the ongoing war in Ukraine and out of our sense of anxiety and helplessness. Here are thoughts on our journey thus far.

Anita: If you want a good night's sleep, avoid watching the news. Vivid and relentless images of war, destruction, and suffering world-wide can surely keep you tossing and turning. What can one person do? Well, here at Grace MC you can join a small group who feels compelled to do something, and has been responding to this suffering in various ways. We've written letters, invited speakers, marched in protests, spoken with MPs/MPPs and their staff, organized with Mennonite Action, and shared prayers. We invite your participation, support, and suggestions as we encourage our leaders to put down their arms and bring peace and healing to the

nations.



Diane: Visiting the local MPs and MPPs—and bringing them Palestinian gifts of olive oil, or date squares baked by Anita with quality Palestinian dates—was a chance to meet politicians (or their assistants) face to face and see that they are just ordinary

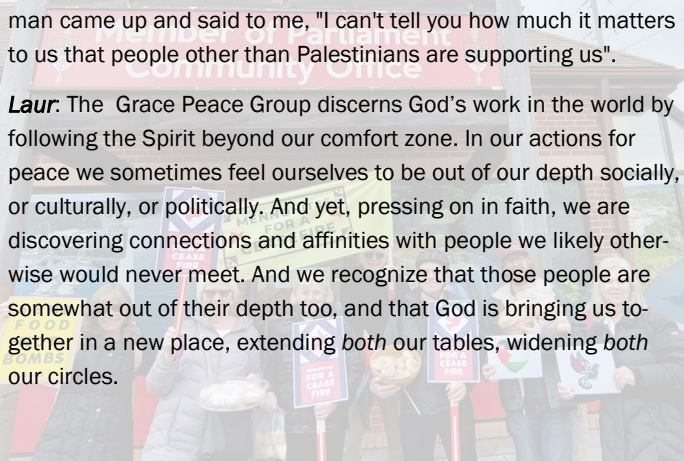
people with various priorities and responsibilities who can be influenced by our actions and comments. They received us surprisingly cordially. By visiting them at their offices, at the very least we are reminding them of the many people whom they may never see that depend upon them to make choices which promote peace.

John: The world is so full of sorrow these days that it can paralyse us. Two moments supported by Grace's Peace Group come to mind. The first happened during Tom Yoder Neufeld's visit to Grace. In the midst of his deep digging analysis he stopped and said that what ultimately matters is what God is doing in the world. Our task is to discern



that. A second moment: at one of the rallies for Gaza in St. Catharines where almost all the people were Middle Eastern, a young man came up and said to me, "I can't tell you how much it matters to us that people other than Palestinians are supporting us".

Laur: The Grace Peace Group discerns God's work in the world by following the Spirit beyond our comfort zone. In our actions for peace we sometimes feel ourselves to be out of our depth socially, or culturally, or politically. And yet, pressing on in faith, we are discovering connections and affinities with people we likely otherwise would never meet. And we recognize that those people are somewhat out of their depth too, and that God is bringing us together in a new place, extending *both* our tables, widening *both* our circles.



Jan: It has been said that "Peace and Justice are like the two wings of the bird, who cannot fly with one." So it's no great surprise that our Grace Peace Group has brought forth a Grace Justice Group. Its focus will be on issues affecting our region. After all, the storms raging beyond our gracious harbour at 677 Niagara St. are not simply the military conflicts around the world, but also the ravages taking place on the mean streets of our own city. Deputy Mayor Bill Phillips calls the number one problem "homelessness/addiction/mental health/poverty." (They are linked.) In future issues of *Graceletter* you'll hear more about what we're getting up to in the spirit of Matthew 25: 44-45. Stay tuned!

MY WALK TO FREEDOM MOLLY ENNS

As I walked along the Camino de Santiago this fall, I found my thoughts going back to my own childhood and our walk to freedom. Pilgrims have walked El Camino for the past thousand years. I wondered, though, how many were fleeing from persecution, from tyranny, for a better life for themselves and their children. Although my walk to freedom was short, it remains forever etched in my memory.



It was January 1945 when my mother with three young children, and twenty-seven of our fellow Mennonites, were in one room of a Russian camp, behind barbed wire and armed guards, fearing the forced return to the Soviet Union. A German electrician came to our room one day to do some repairs. When Mr. Regenbergh heard our story he offered us his cottage in the country as a hiding place if we were able to escape. The situation seemed hopeless, but my mother was determined to try.



The day came. An armed Russian soldier paced up and down the platform where we waited for the order to board the train. When the soldier turned his back to us, my mother told me, a seven-year old, to take my five-year old brother by the hand and slowly walk a block, turn the corner, and wait for her. If she did not come, I was to return to the platform with my little brother. She waited until the guard had walked the other way again, then, carrying my baby sister she joined us. We took the streetcar to the Regenbergh cottage. That was our first walk to freedom.

After we had been in hiding for several days, Mr. Regenbergh took us to the mayor's office where we received identity papers under assumed names. A few days later we boarded the train for the border to West Germany. Armed Russian guards walked up and down the train looking for escapees. At the border the train stopped and we walked across the border into West Germany. Our second walk to freedom.



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**"I do not understand the mystery of Grace —
only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us."
— Anne Lamott**

Grace is engaged in a season of discernment with our new pastor, Darrell Winger, discernment which is helping us recognize opportunities for service that are fitting for our Grace pace. We know it is unlikely that we will grow our congregation by attracting young families. But we are attracting older people (and somewhat younger too) who are seeking a more familiar form of worship, within a welcoming and engaged church family. These new folk may well only offset the passing of our even older saints, but as we discern our appropriate mission God may lead us into avenues of service that attract more folks than we lose. There are a lot of lonely seniors who might find worship with us congenial and spiritually nourishing.

GET IN TOUCH!

As you read through *Graceletter* we hope you note we are an engaged congregation! Engaged in the worship of God, caring for each other, and compassionately reaching out to the community and beyond.

We welcome your engagement, too! Come for a Sunday morning worship service (or our Christmas Eve service), participate in peace activities, support refugee families arriving soon, or share a financial gift this coming Christmas season to support the "relief, development, and peace" work of Mennonite Central Committee, or perhaps the ongoing work of Grace Mennonite Church.

And we'd also love to hear from you about what you'd like to see in future

issues of *Graceletter*, or about possible submissions you might make to those issues! Perhaps you have a poem or a photo or a drawing or a short-short story or a piece of flash fiction or creative non-fiction that evokes something in our lives of faith and spirituality. Or maybe you just want to write a Letter to the Editor.

Submissions and queries can be sent to the *Graceletter* Editorial Team c/o

gracemennonite@bellnet.ca

or to the mailing address above.

So please, get in touch!



P.S. Grace's new constitution is available on our website. If you need a printed copy, please email the church.

