


# Young adults, uncertainty, and a future with hope

Jessica Reesor Rempel

It is the last week of term here at Conrad Grebel University College. One by one students finish their exams, hand in their assignments, and move out. “Where will you be living in the fall?” I ask an upper year student, moving boxes in hand, as I hold open the door. His face crumples into anxiety. “I really don’t know,” he replies with a sigh, setting down the heavy box. “I’m signed up to study in Europe for the term but—you know,” he trails off. I do know. With the war in Ukraine destabilizing the region and wave after wave of COVID-19 upending travel plans, no one can be certain about something like a study term abroad scheduled to begin in four months’ time. Given the level of constant change these days, it might as well be scheduled to begin in four years’ time. This conversation stays with me long after the student loads his boxes into his parents’ minivan and drives away.

## Uncertainty for young adults

When I was a young adult, I was able to depend on things. I was able to look forward to things with some degree of certainty. I picture myself as a Grebel student fifteen years ago planning my own year abroad. Back then my mind was absorbed in packing lists and language learning with never a thought that it all might be for nothing. I knew (intellectually anyway) that sometimes unexpected things happen in life and force plans to change, but my lived experience told me that most plans could be counted on to come to fruition. I understood the world to be an orderly and predictable place with stable patterns and rhythms year to year.



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Here at the outset, I must acknowledge that my many layers of privilege deeply influenced the stability I experienced as a young adult. I am a Canadian citizen. I am a settler. I am white. I am educated. I am cis-gendered and heterosexual. I am neurotypical. My young

adult contemporaries with marginalized identities may not have experienced the world to be the stable and predictable place it seemed to me.

Many of the young adults I encounter in my ministry work at Grebel and at the young adult ministry organization Pastors in Exile (PiE), however,

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er, regardless of their levels of privilege, experience the world today as a place of instability and uncertainty. The young adults I know have stood helplessly by while one plan after another is canceled, as conflict feels heightened internationally and close to home, all the while watching global average temperatures steadily climb. Around lunch tables and over cups of coffee, what I hear expressed to me by young adults is grief for

the life they thought they would lead, worry for what the future might hold, and a deep longing for hope in these troubling times.

### **Uncertainty and exile**

Back in 2014, when my friend Chris Brnjas and I were starting PiE, we took inspiration from the prophet Jeremiah. In the book of Jeremiah, vast numbers of Hebrew people find themselves taken captive and exiled to Babylon. Understandably, the exiles are eager to return home to Jerusalem and resume the familiar patterns of their lives. Some so-called prophets tell the people what they want to hear. Hananiah, for example, has this message for the exiles:

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. (Jer. 28:2–3).<sup>1</sup>*

The prophet Jeremiah, however, has very different words for the exiles in the letter he writes them:

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build*

<sup>1</sup> All biblical references are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

*houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.*

*For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jer. 29:4–11).*

The difference between two years and seventy years is the better part of a lifetime. When Chris and I looked around at our young adult peers, when we heard their stories of deep faith and deep disconnection, we longed to be pastors to and with the young adults in our community—both those who found a home in traditional churches and those who had left church behind. We wondered what it would look like to invest in the faith journeys of young adults wherever they found themselves, rather than spending all of our energies focused on returning young adults to church pews. Inspired by the prophet Jeremiah, we sought to do the ministry equivalent of planting fruit trees in a new land.

When we started PiE in 2014, with financial and prayer support from Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC), our dual aims were to support young adults in Waterloo Region—primarily those who had grown up in a Mennonite congregation—to explore their Christian faith identities as they made the transition into adulthood and to support local churches as they strived to be welcoming places for young adults. In 2014, we were not alone in thinking about exile as being connected to the post-Christendom Anabaptist-Mennonite experience. In the discernment documents for the 2014 MCEC annual gathering, Sandy Shantz, then moderator for MCEC, wrote: “We, both as an area church and a national church, are trying to find our way in territory unknown to us since the first centuries AD. Our church is growing and diversifying. There are new issues and

new ways of being church in post Christendom society. We are exiles who are part of the national identity, leadership, and culture.”<sup>2</sup>

At that point, almost a decade ago, as I led Bible studies and retreats for young adults and workshops for churches, my perception was that

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while the church was in a post-Christendom period of instability, the world beyond the church was relatively stable. While that perception was shaped by the many layers of privilege I carry, the world has changed since that time. Privilege still distributes challenge unevenly, but no amount of privilege can take away the uncertainty and instability of being alive on this planet right now. The young adults I encounter through my ministry roles feel this uncertainty

acutely. More than ever, they identify with the Hebrew people exiled in Babylon. To some it really does feel like they have been carried far away from the life they expected to lead.

And while the pandemic is certainly one cause of upset and grief among today’s young adults, it is certainly not the only one. I bear witness to worried conversations around the lunch table about the carbon impact of the burgers we are eating and whether the planet will be livable for future generations. I listen to nervous peace and conflict studies students who wonder whether Russia’s attack on Ukraine will lead to nuclear war. I hold space for tearful couples who are deeply conflicted about whether to bring children into a hurting world. Now in my mid-thirties, I no longer consider myself a young adult, but I do share their fears. Who among us who is paying attention doesn’t worry about these things?

### **A future with hope**

As in challenging times throughout history, the church has a unique role to play today. When Jeremiah writes his letter to the exiles in Babylon, he describes what it will take to thrive in that place, not just for a year or two but for a lifetime: “Build houses and live in them; plant fruit trees and eat what they produce” (Jer. 29: 5). What will it look like for our

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2 Sandy Shantz, “2014 Discernment Documents: On Holy Ground,” Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, March 2014, [https://mcec.ca/sites/default/files/2014\\_discernment\\_docs.pdf](https://mcec.ca/sites/default/files/2014_discernment_docs.pdf).

churches to show up with and for young adults in this ongoing period of uncertainty? I think it will look like those of us in older generations embracing some of the uncertainty and instability young adults experience while also showing up in the lives of young adults with a calm, non-anxious presence. At a congregational level, this means engaging the work of advocacy for peace and justice while also maintaining worship practices that ground us all in the constant, steady, hopeful love of God. Very practically this means continuing to invite young adults to preach, teach, and take on leadership roles in our churches, even if their work or study plans might change their church involvements with inconveniently short notice. While church involvement might be sporadic for many young adults, I have heard many stories of how their home congregations are a place of rooting and grounding for these same individuals. In uncertain times it becomes even more important to have places where we connect as an intergenerational community and engage with the rituals and traditions of Christianity.

Furthermore, while it might seem a little scandalous for some of us more progressive Mennonites who are typically suspicious of many kinds of evangelism, I think now more than ever we have something good to share with our neighbors. In times of crisis and uncertainty, humans

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crave ritual and places to feel connection and support. I make no promises that they will say yes, but this might be the moment to invite your young adult friend from work to your church potluck or the prayer service before the climate strike. I sense a new openness to faith and spirituality among young adults in these uncertain times. When calendars get upended and the future is full of uncertainties, we need something to cling onto that cannot be taken away. We

need something to keep us deeply rooted. In the depths of the pandemic, when indoor gatherings were off limits, PiE gathered a group of twenty young adults for a “Night Church” gathering in a city park. Wrapped in blankets to protect from the cool fall air, participants sat cross legged on the concrete of a courtyard, spaced six feet apart. The darkness was lit only by the light of the candles that each person had brought with them. We read the sacred words of the Last Supper. We took communion with

small loaves of homemade bread and grape juice boxes placed on the concrete next to each person. We listened to the aching melody of a cello for as long as the player's fingers could keep from stiffening in the cold. In that hour we felt connected to Jesus and his beloved friends, gathered in

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the upper room for a ritual meal while, beyond those walls, the future seemed anything but certain. Challenging and uncertain times take religious practices from being what we *ought* to do to what we *long* to do.

From the young adults I work with, both at Grebel and at PiE, I hear a new longing for ritual, tradition, and connection in this time. While young adulthood can sometimes be a time for questioning the faith we are born into, for some young adults the pandemic led to greater connection with their communi-

ties of faith. Around the lunch tables at Grebel, I hear stories of young adults continuing to connect through Zoom to the congregations they left back home. What started as a lifeline in the pandemic has opened new possibilities for connection from a distance. Every congregation has the potential to be a Spirit-inspired oasis of ritual, calm, and connection. For churches that can stay rooted in tradition while being willing to adapt to these changing times and stay nimble as the times change still more, I believe that a “future with hope” (Jer. 29:11) will come to pass.

## Conclusion

It is the May long weekend, and I am far from home when a storm hits suddenly and with intensity. As I wait out the storm in my car, I call my neighbor, who performs a daring rescue operation, bringing my fragile tomato seedlings into the safety of the shed. As I drive home, the streets are littered with fallen branches and downed power lines. Left outdoors in the elements, my precious seedlings would have been blown about and battered in their little plastic pots. I cannot help but think on this stormy day about the climate crisis, about resilience. Those dainty seedlings are deeply planted in the garden now, their roots stretching down a foot or two into the rich soil, their stems strong and flexible from a summer spent acclimatizing to rain and wind. I think about my hope for the young

adults I work with and for all of us seeking to be God's church in these uncertain times: not that we might avoid facing storms but that we might have deep roots and thick stems with enough give to sway in the wind.

### **About the author**

Jessica (Jessie) Reesor Rempel currently divides her time between serving as the interim-chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, and as the executive director of Pastors in Exile (PiE), an organization that provides community based spiritual care to young adults. Jessica was ordained by Mennonite Church Eastern Canada in 2019.