



Mennonite  
Disaster  
Service



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Mennonite  
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Committee

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## **Caring for each other through crisis**

*How one church in the epicenter of the crisis offers support, connection and hope*

GOSHEN, Ind. – “I’m running low on food. Is there anything you can do to help?” said a text message to Pastor Elvis Martinez from a woman who attends Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan, a Mennonite congregation in New York.

Pastor Elvis starts his car, makes a trip to the grocery store to help pick up some food essentials for the woman and her three children, and delivers them to her apartment.

A core ministry of the church, with between 180 to 250 members, is supporting immigrants as they build new lives in New York City. Now, the leadership is working hard to support their community’s financial, emotional and physical health in the midst of the [worst COVID-19 \(coronavirus\) outbreak in the United States](#).

“We’ve always helped people in need with food, water, clothing, bills - this is part of what we do,” said Pastor Elvis. But with strict stay-at-home orders, layoffs and reduced hours, more people now find themselves struggling to make ends meet.

Adding to the stress, people who are undocumented are wary of accessing public services and resources like food banks, food stamps and other relief programs out of fear of being turned away or deported.

“For some people, this difficult situation just brings back the trauma of immigrating here,” said Pastor Elvis. The church keeps a small fund for helping people and has utilized the [Everence® Sharing Fund](#) program. But with so much need, sometimes the pastors take money from their own pockets, or food from their pantries to support church members.

Throughout the pandemic, the church’s 30-person leadership team has met regularly to decide how to distribute the funds in the church’s account to help those who need it.

“It’s been challenging to have limited funds,” said Nubia Herrera, Finance Administrator for the church. “We want to do as much as possible to help so many people. If one of us has something to share, we share it with those who have less.”

When the [COVID-19 Congregational Relief Fund launched in April 2020](#), the Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan applied for a grant in the hopes of getting more support for their church members, and to help with rent so that the congregation would have a church to come back to.

“We’re so thankful for organizations sharing their money in this way to support others,” said Nubia. “Our church feels a huge responsibility to go through this moment together and not leave anyone behind.”

The fund was started through a partnership between [Mennonite Disaster Service \(MDS\)](#), [Everence](#) and [Mennonite Central Committee \(MCC\) U.S.](#) to help [Anabaptist and related churches](#) facing financial crises due to COVID-19. Since its launch, the Fund has received more than 340

applications, and distributed more than \$715,110 out of the original \$800,000 committed by the three organizations. An additional \$17,000 has been added to the fund through private donations.

### **A crisis like no other**

As the people on the front lines of caring for the Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan family, the leadership team carries with them the weight of the loss and grief experienced by church members during this crisis.

"It has been hard to sleep at night sometimes," said Pastor Elvis. The image of three children weeping after their mother passed away from COVID-19 sticks with him. At the time of this story, the church had 17 in their faith community pass away from the virus, and many more across the congregation's extended community and family networks. Others within the church family have had the virus and recovered.

"There has been so much loss in such a short amount of time, it's been really challenging," said Nubia. "Sometimes I have to take a minute for myself before making a difficult phone call to someone who has lost a family member recently. It's so much bad news, it's heavy for everyone."

One pastor was sick for almost two and a half weeks, isolated in a bedroom to keep from getting her husband and children sick.

"She's doing so much better now," said Nubia. "She can hug her kids and is recovering."

Another church leader and husband both tested positive for COVID-19, making it impossible for them to care for their children while also staying isolated. The couple had no choice but to send their children to a relative's home.

### **Caring for each other through weekly calls**

With face-to-face meeting restrictions in New York City, the leadership team tries to intentionally follow up with church members each week, taking special care to call new attenders.

They check in and see how each member is doing, how they're managing being at home with their children all day, if they know someone who has passed away, and what is on their minds. At the end, they pray together.

"We try to hold each other even while far away," said Nubia. "We try to be someone they can share news with and connect with."

### **Glimmers of hope**

During their online church services, the lead pastors offer encouraging messaging to keep spirits up. They also take time to allow group sharing and check-ins, giving space for each household to share.

In addition to Sunday services, the church holds virtual small-group services for young adults, youths, children, and new members, as well as women's and men's group meetings.

"The most adorable thing (during the children's service) was listening to the kids singing gospel songs and clapping," said Nubia. A few weeks ago, the children's group also prepared drawings and thank-you messages for church members serving on the front lines of the medical field or civil service.

Pastor Elvis noted the stark contrast between messages of hope at the beginning of the year with the start of the new decade. The coronavirus epidemic wasn't what anyone envisioned for 2020.

"This is tough as a pastor, as a husband, as a father, but I know that God is with us," said Pastor Elvis.

### **Donating to the fund**

Individuals can give online to the COVID-19 Congregational Relief Fund through MDS' website at [mds.mennonite.net/covid-19-donations](https://mds.mennonite.net/covid-19-donations). Checks may be mailed to Everence Foundation, Attn: COVID-

19 Congregational Relief Fund, PO Box 483, Goshen, IN 46527. More information and application instructions may be found at [everence.com/COVID-19-congregational-relief-fund](https://everence.com/COVID-19-congregational-relief-fund).

### **About Mennonite Disaster Service**

Mennonite Disaster Service is a volunteer network of Anabaptist churches that responds in Christian love to those affected by disasters in Canada and the United States. While the main focus is on clean up, repair and rebuilding homes, this service touches lives and nurtures hope, faith and wholeness. To learn more, visit [mds.mennonite.net](https://mds.mennonite.net) or call 800-241-8111.

### **About Everence**

Everence helps individuals, organizations and congregations integrate finances with faith through a national team of financial professionals. Everence offers banking, insurance and financial services with community benefits and stewardship education. To learn more, visit [everence.com](https://everence.com) or call 800-348-7468.

### **About Mennonite Central Committee**

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, sharing God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. In 2020, MCC commemorates 100 years of relief, development and peacebuilding work, today in more than 50 countries including the U.S. To learn more, visit [mcc.org](https://mcc.org) or call 717-859-1151.

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Captions:



Caption: The Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan has been dedicated to serving their community since they started. Pictured is the 2019 Thanksgiving meal for church attenders and the wider community around the church.

Even though the church is not meeting in person right now due to COVID-19, the leadership team is helping provide groceries and support for rent and bills to those who need it.

Image provided by Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan.



Caption: A prayer during a 2019 Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan church service.

Lately, the church meets digitally via video conference, hosting singing, sharing time and a pastoral message.

Image provided by Evangelical Garifuna Church of Manhattan.