

**TRANSCRIPT OF MEETING HELD AT**  
**SHADY LAWN MENNONITE CHURCH, MOUNTAIN VIEW, ARKANSAS**

**Theme:** The Gospel can break down cultural walls – Eph. 2:14

*Building a fellowship that has room for people from a variety of cultures.*

**Date:** June 14, 2009 | **Planning Committee:** Ernest and Cathy Eby

Ernest:

We will begin tonight with a true story...

About 300 years ago an evangelist by the name of Ulrich Müller had a burden for some people who lived in a mountainous range called Oberland, Switzerland. I suppose we could have affectionately called these folks hillbillies. Ulrich Müller had a burden for these people, and committed himself to teaching them the Gospel, the new birth, and the teachings of Christ. Within 20 years, 200 different surnames had been added to the church. This was the result of the work of evangelist Müller and the new believers that cast their lot with the pilgrim church. As these new believers heard the Gospel, repented of their sins, and were converted, they were persecuted by their relatives and neighbors.

Some of these converts last names might be familiar to you. They were names such as Hochstetler, Beachy, Raber, Mast, Kaufman, Beiler, Yoder, Gingerich, etc. These people were imprisoned, their properties were confiscated, and the money from their properties was used to build an elaborate state church high on a hill overlooking the valley.

But the city ran out of money and didn't have sufficient funds to finish the bell tower. Not until one of the wealthy men of the community, Christian Gingerich, (the father of all present day Amish and Mennonite Gingerich's in America,) a man whose name is on the 1682 coat of arms in that town, became converted. He was imprisoned but somehow managed to escape. He and his family fled to another area of Europe. When his possessions were confiscated and sold, the town had enough money to finish erecting the bell tower.

If you were to climb up in this bell tower today and look out over this mountainous region, you would see a strip of land and villages about 5 miles wide and 20 miles long. On this strip of land is where nearly all Old Order Amish and Amish-Mennonites have their roots. Many of the people in these villages never accepted the Gospel and if you visited this mountainous range today and visited a cemetery, you would find tombstones with the same last names that I mentioned earlier. Many of your relatives with the same last names are still living in that community and are the descendents of those who never accepted the gospel that Müller preached.

So... all because of the vision of a man named Ulrich Müller, tens of thousands of people will someday be singing around the throne... all because one man had a vision for some Swiss hillbillies. (See the books *Unser Leit Volume I and II* by Leroy Beachy for more of the story.)

There is something disappointing, though, about this story. After the first twenty years, the new converts never did very well at making the gospel accessible to people other than their children. Because of persecution and a lack of burden for the lost around them, their relationship to those outside the church eventually became something similar to the gulf between the Jews and the Gentiles. The descendents of these new converts did not hike to other villages with the Gospel like Ulrich Müller had done. They did not do for others like someone what someone did for them. The result is that they formed a strong ethnic community that has been in existence now for a little over 300 years.

If we are honest with ourselves we as Amish and Mennonites are not very committed to adding new family names to our congregations. We have formed ethnic Christian groups all over North America that have tended to drive newcomers away rather than bringing them into the church. If we are in love with our Mennonite culture we will resist anything that might mess it up. This results in us not being willing to do for others what Ulrich Müller and others did for us.

Some of our friends and relatives have solved this problem by offering a watered down Gospel that allows for people to join the church who are not very committed to the Lord.

While this might look attractive at first, in the long run it's not attractive at all. The end result of a watered down gospel is that church attendance eventually dwindles down to a few old people, which after the old people are gone, the

doors are closed, and the building is either sold or turned into a museum. That doesn't seem like a very good alternative.

However, in spite of our failures and our ethnic hang-ups as Amish, Mennonites and Brethren, there are a few brave folks who forgive us over and over for our insensitive comments, our social exclusiveness, and our naïve doctrinal positions, and stick with us even though we've not made it very easy for them to join our group and really feel like they belong. We have a few of those brave folks here tonight and my wife and I thought that they might be able to help us learn a few things about interacting with the people in our community.

To help us understand what it was like for them to leave what was familiar to them and do something really strange, I'd like for us to use our imagination a bit...

Some of us have some preconceived ideas about the Amish. We think they are... .. One brother from non-Anabaptist background was telling me the other week that his only knowledge about the Amish prior to meeting his current pastor, was what Hollywood taught him. He says Hollywood portrays Amish as bumbling, ignorant folks that don't really know what they are doing. Hollywood use Amish in the same way people used to talk about Irish or Pollock's. After studying up on them, he discovered that he needed to change some of his preconceived ideas. If they were really bumbling, ignorant folks, there would not be over a million people each year who visit Amish communities trying to learn more about the success of their culture. Not all Amish are the same. Some are not very spiritual. Others are quite Biblical and spiritual.

Let's imagine that a group of Old Order Amish have decided to start a settlement in Drasco, AR. When we discovered that these folks were moving into our area, we immediately began surmising what they would probably be like, but to our surprise we discover after a few months that this particular group of Amish is a really spiritual group of people. Their youth are really in love with the Lord Jesus. They have a fervent zeal for Bible Study and for reaching out to the lost in the community. They don't listen to worldly music or read trashy novels. They don't entertain themselves on computers or cell phones. Their youth do not watch DVD's that are a detriment to their spiritual life. In fact, this group has decided that they are probably better off by not watching DVD's at all. (What a legalistic position!)

We soon hear thru the grapevine that the youth are regularly singing at the city park in Heber Springs. On Tuesday evenings the Amish families spread out over the community helping widows and befriending the fatherless. We are somewhat intrigued, but we keep assuring ourselves that because some of their cultural practices are completely unnecessary, they probably believe in a works salvation. But... we decide to let them live their lives as long as they let us live ours. Even though their presence in our community feels a little competitive, we are at least glad that they are an asset to the community and not a liability.

If you have allowed your imagination to actually picture this, then whatever you are feeling right now, is probably what the Baptists and Pentecostals felt when the Mennonites moved into this area. (This might not be a really good comparison because the Amish are quite familiar to many of us.) Bbut let's keep imagining this a little further...

1 year later...

We've begun to adjust to having Amish in our community. One morning after church, one of you ask me if I noticed that some of the youth from our church seem to be getting rather thick with some of the Amish youth. I hadn't noticed this, but sure enough, the next Sunday night, I notice that Kyle, Carol and Melanie are missing from church. Over the next number of months, we notice that they seem to be finding some real kinship with the Amish young folks. Most of us in our church were holding these folks at arm's length and never guessed that some of our own people would find more connection with them than they do with us.

Well... as time goes along one morning Melanie informs her family that she has decided to join the Amish. After breakfast she heads to her room to get ready for church and a little while later she comes out wearing a big white covering and a dark dress. She smiles, puts on a big black bonnet and with eyes sparkling with joy, she heads out the door.

All of us here at Shady Lawn are in a state of shock. Melanie wasn't raised this way. Is she implying that we are not good enough for her? A few days later Mervin informs us that the Yoder family have also decided to join the Amish. As we drive by their farm we notice from the road that the Yoder's are in the process of converting the one end of their chicken house into a horse barn. Later on that week, one of us sees the Yoder father and his eldest son in Concord wearing black broad-fall trousers and straw hats. The next week we notice their vehicles sitting along the highway with "For Sale" signs on them.

If some of our people were to join the Amish in a situation like I just described, it probably wouldn't be because they were in love with the Amish restrictions. It's not that they thought driving vehicles or wearing prettier clothes were sinful. The reason they were willing to sell their vehicles and wear old fashioned clothes is because they wanted to go to church with people who have similar spiritual values and with people who take the teachings of Jesus seriously. They wanted to be part of a church whose members take seriously the Biblical instruction to use one's time and money for the good of others. They wanted to be part of a church whose people took seriously the instructions to abstain from worldly music, ungodly entertainment, and other lusts that war against the soul.

If this would actually happen, I'm guessing that some of us, especially if we were their relatives, would find an opportunity to pay Melanie and the Yoder's a visit and have a talk with them about salvation and what it is really important in the Christian life. We'd have a lot of questions that we'd want them to answer. "What's wrong with us? Don't you realize how hard this is on us? Do you think you need to do this stuff to get to heaven? If you are really more spiritual, why don't you stay with us and help us?" *(Most of us don't have this kind of conversations with Amish presently. As long as they stay out of Arkansas, we let them live their own lives. But if they moved to Arkansas and our people starting joining their church, it would be a totally different story.)*

Continuing with our imaginative story...

As we try to reason with Melanie and the Yoder's, we discover that their minds are already made up. They tell us that God was leading them to take this step. They tell us that they've counted the cost and they don't plan to go back on their decision.

We conclude that they are not able to be reasoned with and that we are just wasting our time. We leave their house and drive away. Deep within us, we admire their courage. Yet we know they are doing the wrong thing. We know they are headed down a path of legalism that *can't possibly* be compatible with the Gospel.

What I've just described to you is what most non-Anabaptists experience when they join a conservative Anabaptist church.

A few weekends ago my wife and I were visiting with a couple families from non-Anabaptist background in Louisiana and Texas. These are the kind of stories they were telling us. Aaron's parents told Aaron, "But you weren't raised this way.

How would you like it if your children left your church and joined some other strange group?"

People who leave their backgrounds to join a more biblical group, get asked questions from their friends and relatives that those same people wouldn't dare ask us who are ethnic Anabaptists. Our neighbors mostly leave us alone, but they don't leave their relatives alone if they decide to join a conservative Anabaptist church. Here is an example that one of our panel members shared with me. "My relatives ask me why I wear that thing on my head. When I try to explain I Corinthians 11 and its' instruction for women to cover their heads they say things like, "Well that cap doesn't cover your head and you can see straight through. What's the point in wearing a headcovering like that if it is supposed to cover!"

Folks who join the a more conservative church like the Anabaptists are some of the bravest Christians around. Some of them get rejection from both directions. The ones they are leaving give them all kinds of flack for leaving, and the ones they are trying to join sometimes don't do very well at making them feel like they belong.

Recently a young lady told us that in general American society it is perfectly acceptable for a youth lady to talk freely with youth fellows after church. When she began attending an Anabaptist church, she discovered that it is not acceptable for her to cross the aisle after church on Sunday morning and talk with the young men about upcoming youth activities, etc. Some ladies from her church approached her and suggested that she is being flirtatious. All the while, the ethnic Anabaptist young ladies in this church are reading romance novels, day-dreaming about the young men, or dressing to attract certain young men, but because they don't actually talk to the youth boys after church on Sunday morning, they are supposedly not flirtatious.

Is that fair? I think not, but this is the kind of things people have to put up with if they want to join us. These kinds of inconsistencies make it very difficult for people who attempt to join our churches.

In some settings, it is generally believed that unless a person adopts the Anabaptist beliefs, their chances of making it to heaven are really slim. Most of us here probably don't believe that. However, I also meet conservative Anabaptists who believe that no matter what church a person attends, he should probably not change. If a person is raised Mennonite, he should probably stay Mennonite. If a person was raised Baptist, he should probably stay Baptist. This is the opposite

extreme. I don't think it was God's idea that we have a variety of denominational 'dealerships' in every town, for people to choose from. God wants believers to be of one heart and mind.

However, not all roads lead to the same destination. If an individual or a family is pushed out of a church because they want to take Jesus seriously, shouldn't they have the freedom to fellowship with those who at least try to take the teachings of Christ seriously?

The folks that have agreed to share with us tonight are people who have weighed their options long and hard and have decided to cast their lot with our particular group of Amish-Mennonites. With the risk of sounding arrogant, I can understand why they have made this decision. In spite of our failures and our hang-ups, there are many things that we still believe, that these folks' grandparents and great-great grandparents believed. For instance, all Christians used to believe that divorce and remarriage is sin. All Christians used to believe that it was sin for people to dress immodestly. All Christians used to believe that women should cover their heads. If you go back far enough, you discover that all Christians believed that Jesus teachings about loving enemies, not swearing, and living simply are all commands that Christians should take seriously. Many churches don't believe this anymore and because of that, there are many people like our panel members this evening who are seeking truth and fellowship among Christians who want to take the Bible more seriously. (even though there are some parts of the New Testament that we don't take very seriously such as Luke 14:12-14.)

There are other Christian groups these folks could have joined, but these folks decided to associate with the Anabaptists and I am grateful to have some new family names in our churches. Because these folks have persisted in being part of us, in spite of the hurdles they needed to cross, they have some things to teach us... if we will listen.

## **Panel Discussion:**

How can ethnic Mennonites do better at breaking down cultural walls, without losing the good parts of their heritage?

**Moderator:** Mark Gingerich

## **Panel Members: (and length of time with conservative Anabaptists)**

Daniel and Lena Heft – 14 years

Charles and Kerry Hamilton – 22 years

Jacky and Mishelle Edwards – 15 years

Debbie Fletcher – 20 years since I attended VBS; 10 years as a member of the church

Sierra McDonald – 2 years; 1 ½ years as a member

Here are the questions that the panel members were given ahead of time as they prepared for the panel discussion.

1. What was your first introduction to Mennonites or Amish (plain people)?
  - a. In contrast to us, there is a point way back in your life when you didn't even know we existed or didn't have a name for us. What is it like to not know plain people at all?
  - b. Did you see them at a store, read about them, see them on a film?
  - c. Were you initially attracted, intrigued, scared of them, bewildered, scornful?
  - d. Did you assume that Plain People probably didn't want to be bothered by the outsiders? Did you wonder if you would be allowed to visit them or visit their church?
2. What were some of your first interactions with Plain People?
  - a. Was it business related or religious related?
  - b. Did the Plain People make the first contact with you or did you look them up?
  - c. Were there things about their lifestyle or spiritual testimony that you found immediately attractive?

- d. Were there aspects of their lifestyle or religion that seemed really strange or that raised big questions in your mind about whether they were truly spiritual?
3. Can you tell us a bit about your spiritual journey and what it was that made you increasingly attracted to the Plain People?
  - a. The obvious peculiarities about us are our clothes and our partial isolation from society, etc. Many people are intrigued with this but would never join us. What made you move past the point of intrigue?
  - b. Were you particularly attracted to the Mennonites, or would you have been open to joining any other Christian group that loved the Lord and were seriously committed to following Him and His Word? (Assuming one of these groups would have been located in your area.)
4. What were some of the hurdles that you needed to cross as you started moving in the direction of joining the Plain People?
  - a. Did the Plain People's way of relating to you cause you unnecessary hurdles?
  - b. What hurdles did you face with your relatives and friends?
5. After you had lived with us a few years,
  - a. What about us felt really right that made you decide to stay?
  - b. What about us did you notice that you didn't like so well?
6. We as a congregation are looking for ways to interact with our community that will break down the barriers between "us" and "them".
  - a. What are some important differences in mentality between Plain People and our Protestant friends?
    - i. Theological, Sociological, etc.
  - b. What barriers would you advise us to keep intact?
  - c. What unnecessary barriers could we work at dismantling?
  - d. Are there parts of our culture that you would definitely advise us to keep?
  - e. What parts of our culture would we be better off without?

- i. Habits
  - ii. Things we do that make non-Mennonites feel like leaving
7. What else would you like to say to us who have strong ethnic roots while you have the chance?

**Moderator:**

**Some of you can point to the time when you found out Mennonites existed. How was that for you?**

Debbie: My mother grew up where she was one of 2 non-Mennonite families. From little up I heard stories from her about the Mennonites. There were Mennonite Brethren and Holdeman Mennonites in her community. So I knew it was a Christian group; I knew they were different. But you were storybook characters; just stories that my mother told. I remember reading books about Quakers & Amish. I was sick a lot as a child, and went to a hospital where there were Catholic nuns who wore these beautiful, long-flowing habits. I put all that together as you being Christians who were different but I didn't really know why. I was attracted and intrigued, but it was just storybook to me.

Jacky: I guess for me it was great. I didn't know the difference anyway. I was raised up on a farm down in Texas about 2 hours straight west of Fort Worth. How was it for us? We had never met anybody like this. We grew up in our culture knowing certain people, just like you grew up in your culture knowing certain people. Until '94 we didn't know anyone like this existed.

Daniel: After we married and started having children we felt like God wanted us to homeschool our children. It was through that we used Rod & Staff curriculum. It was through that we learned about Mennonites.

Sierra: I didn't know anyone that was Mennonite before I became friends with a few. I guess the only time I would've seen Amish or Mennonites was in Wal-Mart and the first time I saw them, I laughed. My initial reaction was "what are they doing". It wasn't really a real question. I was confused...didn't know who they were and what they were doing. Once I met people and actually had a

relationship and friendship that's when the questions really started for me. That's when I was drawn to them.

### **What was your first impression or reaction to your first encounter with Mennonites?**

Charles: Our initial reaction was a lot of unsureness. We had been praying and seeking and felt like maybe the Lord was giving direction this way. All of this was very brand brand new to us. It's kind of like me asking "do you know who 'rocoe' is?" How is to not know about him? We didn't feel real sure about all that. Walmart is a great place to come by Mennonites. That's where we caught our first one too! There was just a lot of unsureness, a lot of caution. The women we actually talked with us told us that "yes, we could come to church, but they preach in German, so". Well that's good we thought, but we weren't interested in learning a new language to find out what this is about. Almost as an afterthought she told us she thinks there is a church in Harrison that preaches English. So we were interested in going, talking and observing. We were just pretty cautious.

### **We sometimes wonder if when people see us, they think about us being a Christian or are we just weird...**

Charles: We had done some reading but it was actually a billboard that we realized that these people professed to be Christians. We had met some (Amish). The Bethel church from Seymour had put out this billboard. "Ye must be born again" and we realized that these people were supposed to be Christians. So if they're Christians and we're Christians what's the deal.

Mishelle: The first time I saw Mennonites we were going to our first Book Fair. We really weren't saved yet. We just wanted to actively teach our children better. At this Book Fair, an older model station wagon pulled up beside me. I was just waiting for the Book Fair to open, I had gotten there pretty early. The car had a trailer, a Rod & Staff trailer, with lots of Scripture on the back of it. They started unloading with their 3 little boys. It was Chester & Barbara Weaver. I just watched them and wondered "what are they?" I had never seen anything like them before in Texas. My ladder was on a completely different wall than theirs. I was a

hairdresser, big hair, and everything else that goes with hairdressing. I was actually intimidated, not at all interested in that. As the years went by we had gotten some information about modesty and covering. In '94 we had a Book Fair and my husband told me I need to go and talk to those people and see if they have anything for us. Chester loaded us down with stuff I took home to read & listen to. We got a phone number because they were going to start an outreach from Lott in Grandview and we wanted them to let us know when they had their first meeting. Grandview was about 1 ½ hours for us. They did call us! Before that Book Fair, I had always gone way around them, but I would always look. I had a lot of baggage I knew they wouldn't approve of me.

**And you knew that just by the way they looked?**

Yes, but I wasn't ready to change. It's a Holy Spirit thing, because once we got saved and got on the right road and started reading, that's when we realized those things were holy and precious and right. We wanted it then.

**So, is it common, do you think, that people think they can't measure up?**

Jacky: The thing that drew us was something that we didn't understand, but was different from anything we'd seen before. It was precious.

Daniel: Rod & Staff sent tracts with all their curriculum. That was really a blessing for us. We were attracted by what we read in that material about what Mennonites believe.

Charles - One thing I would add is one of the things that was a real question for us. As far as what you believed all we had read was the Dortrecht Confession of Faith. That was what actually compelled us to start doing some seeking. The very first Sunday we were at church, Bro Elmer preached. We left then and went to one of the families' homes for dinner. Kerri was pretty interested in some things like "do these people drink coffee" and "do they have a microwave". Much to our relief both of those things were in place! We were just tickled pink! One of the things I had as a primary question was "what does this church do or have for missions?" I remember we sat there in Elmer Gingerich's living room and asked what you all do for missions. What I was really asking was not for the people in Africa, I was asking for me. If these people said they don't have missions, or we

don't do that, then I knew they wouldn't have anything to offer me either. When they answered "yes, we do. We have missions in Belize, Central America, South America, etc.," I knew they had something to share. I felt like their answer would give insight into what they had to offer even more than if they drink coffee or not!

Daniel: We moved to Harrison. My wife and her mom were shopping and found out something about a bakery there in Harrison. It was run by Mennonites. We had moved into the area and were just searching for churches; something we could feel comfortable with our own belief. We had some things we saw in a lot of other churches that we just couldn't agree with. I asked my wife to contact the bakery and see if they allow people to come visit the church. That's how we began.

**What were some of your hurdles as you began to relate? Maybe some of the things you realized you would have to change, curiosities, how you'd be accepted, some of your disappointments as you got to know us, etc.**

Sierra: The initial hurdles were probably that my family wasn't interested in it. Should I go against my father in this or should I submit to him? (About that time I was learning about submission.) Should I keep doing something I didn't think was right but was okay with my dad?

And the wardrobe... I wore pants, tee shirts, and stuff like that, so I didn't even have skirts or dresses. I was still young enough that I needed my dad to buy me stuff. It was hard, how do you go about doing something if your resources aren't there. I went to a public school, everything I was used to was totally foreign to my friends. I would say something to my new Mennonite friends about TV and they would say "um...what?". I wondered if I would even be able to talk with them... have any kind of conversation with them.

**So, you begin to see that this is an ethnic group you are interacting with... they have a different kind of language... they don't even understand your world. Any more comments?**

Debbie: I had a lot of ambivalent feelings. I was attracted, but yet I was really overwhelmed. Mennonites put such a perfect face to the world. And that is so

intimidating. Even if you want something different, it looks like you could never do that, it could never work for you. There were a lot of those conflicting feelings. We only had 2 children at that time. And it was difficult for them, as Sierra described, to make friends here.

I think we could do better in helping our children reaching out to visitors. [Ethnic] children can be shy because they aren't used to being around people that are different. Even my children that have been born here...

Example: Someone starts rattling away in Pennsylvania Dutch and they don't understand what's going on. Some more sensitivity to things like this would be good. But I do want to say here too, that speaking Dutch is something you ought to keep...just be sensitive to those who don't understand and maybe help them learn the Dutch.

I really felt so bad for one visitor we had here at Shady Lawn. It was a woman who came with 3 children. I saw the hurdles for her and I didn't do anything. I have just felt so bad. She was sitting there with children who looked like they probably hadn't been in church before. I could see as the service went on, she was getting frazzled, the children didn't know what to do. I don't know what we should've done. People probably thought it would probably be best to just let them wander around. By the time the service was over, the tears were just streaming down her face. I've always felt like that was a failure on my part. I know I talked with at least one of the ladies this week and she didn't see how the lady cried.

**Thank you Debbie. I realize this is hard for you. You can't escape after this evening is over [like the rest of the panel members]. One thing I have noticed to your credit is that your children reach out to the visitors.** Debbie – My children get questioned afterwards! [laughter]

Jacky: I think Ernest hit on that a whole lot in the beginning. For us to come this way our parents don't understand it. They don't know why you're doing this. It throws up a wall because you're either going to go on with how you've been raised... or...

When we met the Mennonite people, that was a group of people that at least looked they were doing something different, that's godly. You start reading your Bible and you run across this head covering - That was something that was never taught in our church. Feet washing, modest dress, all that stuff was foreign to us. The hurdles...yes, you just start all over. It's like walking off your farm and starting another one. You start off from the bottom again. You meet more people, you get new friends, because you lost the old ones you had. You don't go to the movies anymore, you don't hang out in town at all hours of the night anymore... you start all over. That's a real hurdle. After awhile, you feel like you're never going to make it here. There's no way we can do all this stuff. We got rid of everything we owned, and yet we still didn't get rid of enough! That's the way it is, really. But when the Holy Spirit is working in your life and you see the bigger picture, then it's okay to start over. It's worth it. One thing we would say for you all is "don't make it easier, don't make it wider, keep the truth of the Gospel and live it out. Be a light to those who are seeking."

Daniel: One thing I thought of is it's very important that you know what you are doing. When we talked to people we wanted to know, like head-covering... what's that all about? It's very important that when you reach out to people you know exactly why you're doing what you're doing.

**So how does it affect you when you begin to realize that we're not as excited about these things as you all are? Sometimes we don't have good answers. All you had read, Charles, was the Dortrecht Confession of Faith, and probably a large percentage of us haven't even read that!**

Charles: You ought to—it's good reading!

**So how does it affect you? After you've finally found this quaint little group and have found it so inspiring and refreshing...**

Mishelle: When we got into this... we got in with all four feet. Something that was pretty shocking for me... the people at Grandview were very, very much a blessing in our lives. They put lots of blood, sweat, and tears in us, and lots of hours. They

would sit up with us every Friday night. The love we felt from them was tremendous even though while we were leaving it was so hard.

As you come into this culture, there are things that make you think ‘this is so quaint and everything’ ... but you do find that people do have a few little things... But where we come from, the mainstream churches, they don’t have any standards. We were basically pew warmers all our lives. Yes, we walked the aisles, got baptized when we were young, but there was no change in our heart and the Holy Spirit didn’t come in and change anything. It helps to have others to walk this road with you. In our case there were 6 other families that were visiting at the same time. Today, we’re the only ones left of these 6 families who are still plain. I am so thankful the Mennonite church poured themselves into us all. It was worth it. So even if you lose all of them but two or three it’s still worth it. But don’t change! At first we pushed back against the changes. “Can you all give us a little room here, a little room there?” You know when you’re trying to fit in. They would sweetly say “we can’t do that”. It helped us understand why they did what they did. That was such a blessing to us.

Kerry: I’m going to jump out on a limb. One thing that is really different, and it’s taken a lot of years before I’ve understood this. Ya’ll are peer dependent and we’re real loyal, we have loyalty. We [seekers] have left everything and we’re not looking for acceptance. But there’s a loyalty to God, there’s something inside us that longs for things that are concrete. Ya’ll are peer dependent - and I don’t mean this bad - but you’re not quite loyal. You’re nice to each other’s face but you stab behind the back. I think that’s why we’re here—we’re loyal. I think that’s what you don’t understand about us. There’s a loyalty inside of us that can be cultivated, that’s good, that God can use. That hurdle is hard whenever you don’t have loyalty. When we see you aren’t loyal to what you’ve been taught, you’re not loyal to the Lord - we don’t understand that.

Mishelle: We didn’t know what it would cost us really. We just didn’t know. I don’t know if I’d known...I don’t think we’d have done any different. We had come to a place where we had to go on with God and we knew too much beyond your mainstream. We weren’t satisfied anymore. Looking back, one of the hardest

things for me was that everyone was willing for us to pay that price but it wasn't very many months that we saw that didn't apply to everybody. If you can think in your own heart and own life where you are today, what it has cost you. As Christians, all of us, it should cost us something. If it hasn't cost you anything, you need to look a little deeper. There isn't any pride in that it cost you. Another thing too, when you make that step, even if you keep your family relationships, they are strained. We taught our children to build their lives around the church. For you, church means family. When we're grandparents, by God's grace it's going to mean that for us too. It didn't mean that for our children. Those are good things, hard things and they're worth it. But it is costly. When you ask others to share in your faith, you need to be willing to share in that price too.

Sierra: On the whole family thing, it sounds like all of you (to the panel) had someone else coming in with you. For me personally, I was the only one so I can't speak for what it's like to have another family with you doing it. I think that is something that you might want to be sensitive about too. People that aren't coming in with a family, or another relative, or a friend; if they're by themselves...I'm not saying it was harder, but. For instance, I didn't have my parents behind me, we're okay now for the most part. My other family relationships are pretty strained. My grandparents, my grandfather won't talk to me, aunts & uncles joke about it, my cousins are pretty worldly, so they're like "what is she doing?". I basically don't have family relationships to fall back on. So I have some families in church that have been very, very good at, not adopting me, but still making me their daughter. I think that's very important to have someone to mentor, to bring them into your family....My father isn't living for God. So it's nice to have men in the church who are ready & able to be like my dad. It's nice to have women teaching me to sew or can, all those things you might take for granted. It's things I had no idea how to do. Be willing to take people like me under your wing and say "we'll take care of you if everyone else leaves you."

**Here's a scenario. There was a girl from non-Mennonite background here recently. She said that now that her church "has her" she's not really a project anymore. Loneliness has set in and she is finding it difficult to make deep**

**relationships. We really don't understand what it's like to not have family. Is this typical? Has it happened in your experience?**

Jacky: That is a real thing. We faced that. We felt like after a couple of years the project was over, let's find somebody else. So yes, it is one of the hurdles that we need to get over. It comes back to, if the Holy Spirit is leading you that way, there are things that you are just gonna have to rise above to be a part of a body of believers like this. You probably would face that if you came to church where I was raised too. I just really feel like the main thing is...it's good for all of us to have a check & balance on our lives. Look back and say "all right, what we're doing today, where we doing that 5 years ago? Is there things that we're putting off that we had 5 years ago?" You folks were all raised in this type of setting. Where we come from, they said "What ya'll are doing is traditional, you don't need to do that anymore." Many things we came across we ask our elders about and they say, "It's traditional, we don't do that anymore." Our families all agree that it is "traditional". Now when we come into a setting like this, we've been here for 15 years, and ya'll start putting off stuff because "that was tradition". Now don't tell me that, that's where I came from! There may be some things that Grandpa did that weren't scriptural. But if it's truth, if it's laid out in truth, you don't want to get rid of it 5 years from now. That's the thing that will really draw someone that's seeking. The plain people carry out the Bible the best they know and they've been doing it for years! They don't just throw off these traditional things because it's not the thing to do today. This is much better in the long run than trying to make exceptions for this & this & this.

**One of the struggles we have, when we look around on society, is wondering if this is even practical for people. Our next-door neighbors have no shame - there is a vastly different worldview - children don't need to hide stuff from their parents. So, how practical is this for the average sinner out there? Like the canning, sewing - in general the men know several different trades, etc. Which of these really is important? What kind of adjustments should we make and what adjustments shouldn't we make?**

Charles: We three families got together last night and went through some of this. Believe it or not we were quite a bit more dynamic than we have been here this evening! For a couple of reasons... One is we wanted to come here and be a blessing to you. As I look out here and see some familiar faces that I've known all my adult life since I was 25, we love you. The work God has done in our lives, through you, we bless you. There were a couple of themes that emerged as we talked last night that were pretty clear. As we talked there wasn't any of us that were looking for an ethnic group. As we looked over this list of questions... Our answer was "welcome to the club". Everyone of us has strong ethnic roots. We weren't in need of that. We were looking for something entirely different than that. We were looking for the church of Jesus Christ. That's what we were looking for. That's what was driving us. We all agreed on that. We had family, friends, church, revival, all that stuff. One of the frustrations that was expressed in our group last evening is that we have sensed over the long haul that there is a readiness to see positive change take place in people lives when they come into the church, which is legitimate. But we also all felt resistance to positive change among the Mennonites. There were things that were asked of us, that I would say "Well, Mama & Daddy wouldn't be happy with that. Grandpa wouldn't appreciate that." The sum total of there response to us was "that's tough". Later when you something comes up in church life, and we hear the same thing from you, (that your parents wouldn't be happy with you making certain changes in a positive direction) our initial response is "Well, tough!" But that doesn't seem to go over very well with you. That is a hurdle for us to overcome. How often is it that the church needs to keep the reins tight on the seeker who has come into the church to keep them from throwing out what they've been taught? It usually feels like it's the other way around. That can be a hurdle for us. When people come into our midst they want the confidence that what we are teaching them is what we believe and live and practice. When we give people that confidence that I'll be practicing tomorrow what I'm preaching today, we're building stability. That's what people are looking for.!

**Question from the floor:** “What’s the main reason some people come into the church and then leave?”

Debbie: I’ve got 2 stories about that. There is one time since I joined the church that I thought about leaving. It was because there was a season of gossiping & backbiting about something that had happened.

The other time was a friend’s experience...(I knew I would cry). I don’t want to say this is typical or that these things happen often. There have been times when I have felt a prejudice. I’m not sure if people are afraid of us or what it is. I want to tell you this story. A lady joined the church and was so excited about her son being able to go to Bible School. Then someone said to her “oh, but that’s for our youth”. She said “do you mean that he needs to be a member of the church?” “No, no, not that necessarily, but, it’s just for our youth” “Well, would both parents have to be a member of the church”.

“No, no, that’s not it. It’s just for our youth”. You just need to be very careful not to think in your own minds that it’s us & them.

Sierra: That does bring back some memories. Especially to the youth, I can’t relate as a married person joining the Mennonites. There’s a lot of stuff that people coming in don’t know, don’t realize and I think it’s really important that you’re patient. For instance, something as silly as not knowing the rules of volleyball, or we might not know a verse in the King James version. Or it might be more complex such as not knowing a certain doctrine really well or not knowing the Bible really well. If you come when you’re older, you just don’t know everything as if you had been taught and raised here. Just try to be patient with those that haven’t been raised here. We’re not trying to disregard or be rude, we just don’t know. If youth feel accepted and you’re willing to be patient and teach them, they’re more apt to stay instead of leave.

**Anyone want to say something yet before we close?**

Charles: In our years in the church, we have had our sweetest & best of experiences of our life. We’ve also had some of the hardest experiences of our life. It’s not really the church, it’s life. We thank God for the privilege of being God’s child and being part of His church.

Kerry: It's a wonderful experience to be part of a fellowship where every single family comes from a different background. You're constantly pulling, you learn to love in such sweet ways, and God is always calling us to love in new ways. Loving others takes us beyond ourselves. Love the Lord, love others, etc. The church works beautifully when we all think it's our job to love them! Charles & I are in the ministry. It's not fun to invest in people, we want to stay at home. We don't want to invest in non-Mennonites or Mennonites! It takes up your time! We love y'all and were still learning about love.

Lena: Is the Mennonite way of life practical? God's way is practical for everybody. He brought me out of the mire and he can do that for anybody. We can put up roadblocks and make it too hard. If God is working in someone's life He will make a way for them. You're going to get to be the tools for that and it will be a tremendous blessing for you. Elmer & Lavina invested tons of time in us and that will be jewels in their crown someday. Hang tight to Jesus. Don't give up anything. That's what the world needs. We're going to try to hang tight too.