

# An Overview of the Plain People

Many people looking for a church with more New Testament beliefs and values (hereafter referred to as “seekers”) are puzzled by all the different groups of Plain People and the differences between them. It is even puzzling for many people who grew up in an Anabaptist community. This document gives a brief introduction to the various constituencies of conservative Mennonites with Swiss/German ancestry. At the end I give a brief introduction to other groups of Plain people.

The pictures below are typical of the “rank and file” in each constituency. I define constituency as a group of churches who share pulpits and who might also work together on joint publications, education, ministries, etc. Each constituency is comprised of various Conferences and Fellowships that have similar non-conformity standards and a similar ecclesiastical worldview. (“Non-conformity,” among the plain people, refers to life-style standards that set them apart from surrounding culture.) Youth who stay with the plain people often marry within their own constituency. At the edges of each constituency are congregations and individuals who have more in common with the constituency next to them, than what they do with the constituency that they are formally associated with.

Conferences are a group of congregations that function as one church. Fellowships are a group of congregations who make themselves accountable to each other. In the more-conservative constituencies, being part of a Conference or Fellowship is considered quite important. In the less-conservative constituencies, there are many independent congregations who do not affiliate with a particular Conference or Fellowship.

Seekers end up in all the different conservative Anabaptist constituencies mentioned below. How strict or lenient a church is does not seem to affect the number of seekers who join a typical Mennonite church. Those congregations who are most open to making people from outside of their social circle a part of their social circle typically have a higher percentage of folks from non-Anabaptist background. However, in established churches with a high percentage of ethnic Anabaptists, the percentage of folks from non-Anabaptist background is almost always low, even if the church is slightly more welcoming than others in their constituency.

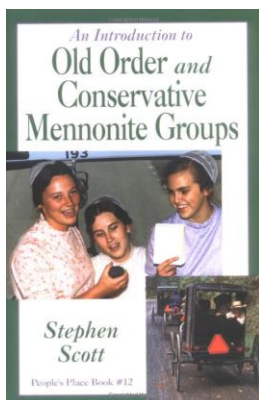
Ethnic Anabaptist churches have many cultural practices or values that make perfect sense to them because it is all they’ve ever known. But some traditional practices and values make very little sense to newcomers.

Because of this, many seekers become confused or uncomfortable with the cultural expectations of the Plain church they attend, and find it difficult to embrace the “jagged lines” that are made in relation to separation from the world. Many leave after a period of time when they become aware of the jagged lines and the inconsistencies. Some remain in the church but struggle with the church’s unwillingness to address the incongruities. “Blind spots” are called that for a reason. All of us tend to be blind to things we have grown up with or come to embrace. Because of this, most plain people without realizing it are likely to give seekers an unrealistic picture of the church or worldview that they have come to embrace. The intent of this document is to give a brief overview of the conservative Anabaptist landscape, so that a seeker can make a more informed decision about a constituency they might wish to attend or join. Hopefully this will contribute to less disillusionment, at least for some. The following thoughts are gleaned from observations, hearing the hearts of “seekers” over the years, and consulting with folks all across the plain spectrum.

Ethnic Anabaptists and those who have adopted a particular Anabaptist culture may at times cringe at the way this article describes their constituency. That is understandable. This is written from the perspective of those looking in. It is not written by “salesmen” from each of the constituencies, so please read this from that perspective. Also, realize that what is written as a general description might not apply to a particular conference or fellowship or even to a sizeable minority within a group or congregation.

Someday more could be written about the contributions that each of these constituencies are making to the Kingdom of God. More cultural comparisons could be made concerning dating practices, wedding practices, youth activities, view of education, etc. But that will need to be for another time.

If you want a more thorough overview of the conservative Mennonite groups 25 years ago, this book by Stephen Scott is a helpful resource. I will mostly be using his categories as I describe the various Mennonite constituencies. They are, Old Orders, Ultra-conservatives, Intermediate-conservatives, Moderate-conservatives, Progressive (Fundamental) Conservatives, and Theological-conservatives.



# Old Order and Conservative Mennonites

## Old Order Mennonites

Old Order Mennonites keep the old worship patterns, old style meetinghouses, older Mennonite theology and orthopraxy, etc. Three fourths of Old Order Mennonites drive horse and buggies and have services in German, the rest drive black cars and have services in English.

Old Order Mennonites have continued on with a flavor of Anabaptist theology that resembles that of the 1700's and early 1800's when Anabaptists were known as the "quiet in the land". This 'quietness' is mostly the result of pietistic influence that had permeated many Anabaptist communities centuries ago. Many Old Orders rarely vocalize their faith or spiritual experience even though many are deeply spiritual people. They hope their lives will show people a better way to live. Many see the "Great Commission" as being fulfilled in the book of Acts.

Old Order Mennonites gather in meeting houses for worship as opposed to Old Order Amish who meet in homes or other residential buildings.

This link will explain some of the other differences between Old Order Mennonites and Old Order Amish.

<http://amishamerica.com/whats-the-difference-between-amish-and-mennonites/>





## Ultra-Conservative Mennonites



(This constituency grew by 98% between 1996 and 2016.)

This designation includes conferences and fellowships such as:

- Appalachian Mountain Church (AMC)
- Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (EPMC)
- Cons. Mennonite Churches of Ontario (CMCO)
- Cons. Mennonite Churches of York and Adams Counties, PA (YA)
- Nationwide Fellowship Churches (NFC)
- Ohio Wisler Mennonite (OW)
- Washington Co. MD and Franklin Co. PA Mennonite Conference (WF)

Youth Bible Schools: Numidia Bible School (PA), Ashland Bible School (PA), and Messiah Bible School (OH).

Ultra-conservatives could perhaps be thought of as "the new Old Orders." Old Orders have historically been the constituency that populated most of the other conservative Anabaptist groups. In the last few decades, Ultra-conservatives have joined them in this. Ultra-conservative and Old Order Mennonites may limit certain technologies and educational opportunities for themselves while still making use of these things done by others. They are grateful to patronize Plain doctors from other constituencies, even if they don't allow or encourage such professions in their own churches. If they face perplexing human problems in their constituency for which they have little knowledge, they are grateful for the counseling resources of plain people in more-progressive constituencies. Often people in these constituencies are moved to help with the needs of people in cities or with needs in other parts of the world. They may wish to send food parcels, clothing bundles, or help with international disasters, etc. But the "permission hurdles" they need to surmount in order to get something started in their own constituency might take many years. Sometimes the vision never gets off the ground because of too many "concerns." Consequently, many Ultra-conservatives and Old Order Mennonites end up using or supporting the ministry efforts of more-progressive groups that have less bureaucracy. However, the discipline and intentionality with which these people live their lives does produce good character. Many less-conservative churches benefit from the good character that was developed in the homes, schools, and churches of Old Orders and Ultra-conservatives as individuals from these groups transition to less-conservative churches.

Ultra-conservatives dress very uniformly and have quite rigid lifestyle standards. Many have tried to maintain Mennonite church polity and practices as they were in the "Old Mennonite Church" about 1920-1930.

Most conservative Mennonites have been heavily influenced by revivalism, fundamentalism, and mission mindedness from the early 1900's and the Ultra-conservatives are no exception. Ultra-conservatives are quite glad for these Protestant influences of the early 1900's but are not open to new Protestant influences today. Any topics related to changing the polity of the church or altering the dress code of the church to be more in harmony with early Anabaptist thought or early church thought are simply not topics that can be discussed in these churches.

In this constituency, leaders of the church carry a lot of weight as to what direction the church is headed and they typically monitor very closely such things as dress guidelines, recreational activities, types of vehicles, and religious affiliations with other groups. In some of these groups, the leaders alone make the applications from Scripture and simply dictate to the

people what they should do if they want to be a part of this church. If you want to learn which way a church you are visiting may handle these decisions, you can ask them if they are a conference or a fellowship, and how decisions are made in the church.

If the ministers address a particular matter in an Ultra-conservative church, the membership generally complies with their expectations. This is not always the case in other constituencies. Ordained people and their families are often expected to lead exemplary lives which can put a lot of pressure on the children to not do anything that might bring shame to their parents. Many Old Order and Ultra-conservative settings have a strong "shame / honor culture" similar to what you might find in traditional Latin, Asian, African and Islamic cultures. Writers within and without these settings sometimes point to the high retention rate of children who stay in these churches, but what they don't identify is how many are staying with these groups because of the strong social pressure to stay.

Ultra-conservative men typically wear dark pants. Many men do not wear short sleeve shirts. The more traditional men have kept the same haircut style that was in fashion around 1920.

Ladies typically wear solid colored or small print dresses and black footwear. Older ladies tend to wear more subdued colors while younger ladies may wear more pastels. Some of the churches in this group drive black cars. When outdoors, some men wear black hats and some women wear black bonnets that cover their "headship covering." Ultra-conservatives typically have formal wear and work wear and teach against having an in between category of casual wear.

Ultra-conservatives do not allow musical instruments, even at home (with a few rare exceptions).

Most do not allow internet for personal use. Some allow internet for business use. Many do not buy insurance or benefit from government social programs unless it is required by law. The more-conservative folks in each of these conferences/fellowships prefer no internet at all and do not send their youth to the above Bible schools. The rest are OK with internet for business use but not for personal research, social networking, etc. Currently the groups mentioned earlier form one constituency but it will be interesting to see if this constituency eventually morphs into two constituencies over the internet issue.

Rod and Staff Publishers, Lamp and Light Publishers, Grace Press, and Eastern Mennonite Publications are all examples of organizations operated by people or churches in this network. Readers Digest is viewed by many Ultra-conservatives as having enough worldly influence that it isn't worth reading.

Ultra-conservatives will likely continue to have revival meetings, use printed Sunday school quarterlies, and start American "clone style" missions around the world for decades or centuries to come. They take their missions very seriously and rarely close one down even if the locals lose interest in the mission. Ultra-conservatives are evangelistic in their own way. (Common methods are: passing out literature door-to-door, singing in public places, and inviting people to hymns sings or revival meetings.) Many are cautious about becoming too friendly with non-Plain people but if a seeker shows interest in their beliefs, they are often quite friendly and glad to talk.

This constituency does not typically support the practice of "youth groups." Churches may plan activities that center around the youth, but the activities are typically religious ones such as singing at a nursing home or service in the community. Youth are not typically be encouraged to get together for a social or sports related activities.

"Church splitting" in Ultra-conservative settings doesn't happen very often, as most people who want something else, will leave as individuals or families and join a different constituency. There are occasions, though, when a congregation or group of congregations will leave their conference or fellowship.

Ultra-conservatives don't interact very much with Old Orders, because many Old Orders have meetings in German, they tend to allow their youth to "sow wild oats", and they don't take a firm stance against tobacco, etc.

Plainer Ultra-conservatives do not interact a lot with Intermediate-conservatives, mainly because Intermediate-conservatives are viewed as being too much in tune with the spirit of the age when it comes to fads, technology, language expressions, landscaping their properties, etc. Ultra-conservatives view Intermediate-conservatives as gradually acculturating into western lifestyles. Less plain Ultra-conservatives feel like they have more in common with Intermediates than what they do with much of their constituency.

The dominant peer-pressure in an ultra-conservative setting is to be very plain and traditional with many congregations gradually becoming more conservative over the years.

## Intermediate-Conservatives



(This constituency grew by 121% between 1996 and 2016.)

This designation includes conferences and fellowships such as:

Bethel Fellowship (BF)

Hope Mennonite Fellowship (HMF)

Northeastern Mennonite Conference (NMC)

Pilgrim Mennonite Conference (PMC)

Western Conservative Mennonite Fellowship (WC)

Bible Schools: Bethel Bible School (MO), Cornerstone Bible School (OR), Pilgrim Menn. Bible School (MS), Cornerstone Bible School (WA)

Intermediate-conservative Mennonites are much like the Ultra-conservatives but slightly less traditional. Like Ultra-conservatives, the men wear straight cut suit-coats for formal occasions. There are a few minor differences in appearance such as the men being more likely to sing at an open-air event like this with their shirt collars open. Short sleeve shirts for men are quite acceptable for non-formal events as well as light colored pants. Shoes do not need to be solid black. Ladies are typically expected to wear long socks but they don't need to be black except for formal gatherings. Ladies are also allowed to wear slightly larger plaids and bigger flowers on their dresses. You'll rarely find any of these ladies wearing strings on their head-coverings, as these folks don't believe in carrying on a tradition unless it is a direct application of a Biblical principle. There is a growing interest in this constituency to wear head-coverings that are opaque and thereby do a better job of covering.

Multi-colored tennis shoes, such as are pictured in the "Old Order" category above and in this category, can seem strange to seekers who notice the plain people's otherwise "dressed up" and non-conformed appearance.

Most churches in this constituency allow filtered internet. A minority of these folks might enjoy reading Readers Digest. These folks might allow pianos and organs but not stringed instruments or drums. These folks do not allow listening to public radio.

Intermediate-conservatives tend to be quite mission minded and don't want to be hindered by unnecessary tradition. However, like the ultra-conservatives, there are many topics related to church polity and non-conformity that church leaders often do not want to open up for discussion as they fear it may be a beginning of laying aside practices they consider valuable. When schisms take place, it is often a congregation or a number of congregations that decide to separate from a larger conference or fellowship.

These folks have limited interaction with both Ultra-conservatives and Moderate-conservatives. The dominant peer-pressure in an intermediate-conservative setting is to be conservative but more "Biblical" than Ultra-conservatives and more "consistent" than Moderate-conservatives. Younger people who have never been part of any other church might not be making their choices with these things in mind, but their leaders and sometimes parents are aware of steering the church between these two "extremes."



## Moderate-Conservatives



(This constituency grew by 42% between 1996 and 2016.)

This designation includes conferences and fellowships such as:

Cumberland Valley Mennonite Church (CV)

Mid-Atlantic Mennonite Fellowship (MAF)

Midwest Mennonite Fellowship (MW)

South Atlantic Mennonite Conference (SA)

Southeastern Mennonite Conference (SMC)

Keystone Mennonite Fellowship (KMF) [Perhaps half of KMF lean Progressive-conservative]

Bible Schools and Post-Secondary schools: Maranatha Bible School (MN); Heritage Mennonite Bible School (GA); Sharon Mennonite Bible Institute (PA); Faith Builders Educational Programs (PA)

Moderate-conservatives are positioned about half way between the Ultra-conservatives and Theological-conservatives when it comes to non-conformity. Because of this positioning, they are able to access broader education, which in turn enables them to provide health, educational, pastoral, and inspirational resources to more-conservative groups.

For many decades Moderate-conservatives and Progressive-conservatives have been very transitional. Both rely on many men from more-conservative churches to serve as their leaders in the next generation. Many congregations and some constituencies are often in flux with many people joining and many people moving on towards more evangelical-style churches. This migration includes a sizable percentage of youth and young married families.

These folks allow use of radios, and there is little discouragement for reading something like Readers Digest. However, these churches do not allow TV.

The men in these groups might wear plain clothing on Sunday morning and a Hawaiian party suit that evening at a social. A young man might wear a straight cut (plain) suit for his wedding ceremony and then leave the reception on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. Blue jeans are allowed for most any event except formal meetings. Neck ties are not permitted. During the week, (when the weather is cool) you probably could not distinguish the men from any other decently dressed men in town.

As compared to Intermediate-conservatives, these ladies wear even bigger flowered dresses, brighter colors, and smaller head coverings. The designs of their dresses tend to change based on the styles at *GAP* and *TARGET*, however, the majority of these churches still require the ladies to wear cape dresses at all times, even when the weather is cold or when doing dirty work. The ladies might wear a dress based on a 16th century pattern yet wear high heels and comb their exposed hair similar to the current Hollywood styles. When compared with Intermediate-conservatives, Moderate-conservative dresses are sometimes

less modest, however they are typically home-sewn cape dresses. Modesty emphasis is often on wearing a long skirt, and less emphasis on whether dresses are more form fitting, more intense color, whether they have lower necklines, shorter sleeves, etc. Women always wear dresses even for active and dirty work, which is also true for any women more conservative than Moderate-conservatives.

These folks are allowed to participate in various types of sports such as skiing and golfing at public recreational places. Youth spend a lot of time socializing and playing volleyball together and do not have the social regulations that Intermediate-Conservative youth groups have. Moderate-conservatives typically allow contemporary music and most any kind of musical instruments at home.

Youth groups are generally well accepted in this constituency and provide the primary social life and peer pressure for most youth 16 and older. Many parents have some apprehension when their child turns 16 and begins spending evenings away from home and staying up late with friends.

Internet is generally accepted and members are typically encouraged to have guidelines, accountability, and/or filters in place, especially in their homes. The reasoning is that people will find junk or porn if they really want to, and so it is better to teach people how to use the internet responsibly than to restrict access to it. Some seekers find it a big question why TV is not allowed if so much of the news and sports can be watched via internet instead.

In Moderate-conservative churches there is generally an element in the group who feel that there should be no extra-biblical standards. (e.g. straight cut coats for men) In contrast to Ultra-conservatives and Intermediate-conservatives, Moderate-conservative churches typically have an element within the church that does not follow the church standards and/or an element that votes in favor of removing standards that are deemed legalistic or out of date. Over the decades there is a slight tug of war between the traditionalists and the progressives until one segment of the congregation gets some momentum going and starts dragging the other segment with it. This often results in a schism within the congregation.

In spite of many Moderate-conservatives being in transition, there is a sizeable minority who are very content with preserving and maintaining the status quo as described above and they believe it to be the best Christian “package” that can be found.

Moderate-conservatives have some interaction with both Intermediate-conservatives and Progressive-conservatives.

The dominant peer-pressure in a Moderate-conservative setting is to be Biblical first and to have limited extra-biblical requirements.

## Progressive (Fundamental) Conservatives



This designation includes church affiliations such as Biblical Mennonite Alliance (BMA), Martindale District of Lancaster Conference, Mountain Valley Mennonite Churches, and conservative congregations within Conservative Mennonite Conference.

Bible School: [Elnora Bible Institute](#)

Progressive (Fundamental) Conservatives are sometimes folks who have separated from churches who are becoming Theologically-conservative. However they are also the logical next step for folks who grew up Moderate-conservative. If the Moderate-conservative goal is to not have too many extra-Biblical standards, why not have fewer yet? Progressive-conservative is often the last stop for individuals and families who are transitioning out of the plain Anabaptist faith tradition. In this constituency there is a sizeable percentage of 18-30 year olds who leave the church of their parents for a more-progressive one. (This same age group dynamic can also be found in some Moderate-conservative churches.)

Progressive-conservatives require little more than what can be extracted from scripture. Stephen Scott used the term “Fundamental-conservative” to describe this group since they typically hold to “Biblical Fundamentals.” This constituency (as well as some moderate conservatives) likes to use the word “Bible” in their fellowship names, their school names etc. I’m using the word “progressive” since the word fundamental can be confusing to anyone who thinks “Fundamentalist” when they hear this word.

Men in many Progressive-conservative churches are permitted to wear suits and ties. Men do not dress much different from general society.

These folks do not typically require a uniform dress style for the ladies. Ladies are generally allowed to wear store-bought skirts and blouses. Ladies wear some kind of doily or small head covering that is often trimmed with lace. The focus of head-covering is on the “piece of cloth as a symbol” and not the “covered head as a symbol”. (This is true for many Moderate-conservatives as well.)

Some Progressive-conservatives send their children to public schools. (This rarely happens in the more-conservative constituencies.) Some have TV in their homes.

Some people transitioning from a Protestant or Catholic church into the conservative Anabaptist world (especially middle-class seekers) may start their journey by attending a Progressive-conservative church. The changes required to be part of this constituency are not as drastic. Some decide to stay. Others notice that the values in Progressive-conservative churches are not much different from where they came from and so they begin looking for a church whose values are less conformed to the world.

The dominant peer-pressure in a Progressive-conservative setting is to have church with no extra-biblical requirements.



## Theological-Conservatives



This designation includes conferences such as the majority of Conservative Mennonite Conference (CMC), the majority of Lancaster Conference, Alliance of Mennonite Evangelical Congregations (AMEC), etc.

Schools: [Rosedale Bible College](#)

Theological-conservatives do not typically dress differently than general society and do not have different music styles than general society. However, they still have only male pastors and tend to be “conservative” in the same way that Southern Baptists are conservative. A few ladies might wear a small head covering which puts them in the Progressive-category even if they function in a different constituency. Divorce and remarriage is tolerated in certain situations. Many Theological-conservatives lean conservative Republican and many vote. Some salute the flag.

The dominant peer- pressure in a theological-conservative setting is to have church much like the conservative Protestant evangelicals in North America while retaining a few Anabaptist distinctives.

Anabaptists who are more progressive than Theological-conservatives are sometimes referred to as “mainline Anabaptists.” Mainliners allow divorce and remarriage as well as women pastors, etc. Their emphasis is often on peace & justice rather than on evangelism, non-conformity, and non-resistance. The most progressive mainliners have embraced homosexuality. Mainliners are at the far end of the spectrum from “the quiet in the land,” the Old Orders. Mainliners may feel a responsibility to influence society in a political way, such as participating in pro-life marches, peace and justice efforts, etc. Mainliners typically embrace pacifism, whereas the conservative-Anabaptists embrace “non-resistance”.

---

## Other Conservative Anabaptists

What you have read so far describes the spectrum of conservative Swiss/German **Mennonites**. There is also a spectrum of **Amish-Mennonites**, **Russian Mennonites**, and **Brethren** that parallels the spectrum described in the pages above. There is often some interaction between these groups with other groups who practice a similar level of separation from the world.

**Amish-Mennonites** (This constituency grew by 49% between 1996 and 2016.)

Most Amish-Mennonites are from Amish background but have church similar to Mennonites. Most Amish-Mennonites don't wear printed (plaids or flowers) shirts or dresses. The men typically wear beards. There are Amish-Mennonite congregations who fit in each of the above constituencies from Old Order to Progressive-conservative.

## **Russian Mennonites**

Russian Mennonites originated in Holland and Germany and from there they moved to Prussia and Russia in search of freedom from persecution. Before and after the Russian Revolution they began moving to the new world. Russian Mennonites in the more-conservative groups often live in colonies. The Church of God in Christ Mennonite (Holdeman Mennonites) is a branch of Russian Mennonites who separated around 1875. Holdemans are quite evangelistic and can be found in many states. But they do not interact much with other Anabaptists since they believe their church is the true church.

## **Brethren**

"There are several things that distinguish Brethren from other Anabaptists. Baptism is by immersion and communion is part of a meal called a "love feast." Church government is historically democratic. There are Brethren or Brethren background churches that range all the way from a lifestyle that is similar to the Amish (a few congregations who drive buggies) to churches that are indistinguishable from mainstream society. Brethren roots parallel the Mennonites but go back to a restoration movement in 18th century Germany that originally came out of the Lutheran church and was influenced by Pietism. The Brethren category includes the Dunkards and German Baptists.

## **Amish**

The Anabaptist world also includes Amish with the majority living in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. However, about half the states now have Amish settlements. Some are quite spiritual and others are not very spiritual at all. Amish often end up in the same geographic areas as Mennonites and will sometimes partner with Old Order Mennonites in starting schools and counseling facilities. There are also New Order Amish whose doctrine is similar to Amish-Mennonites, yet they retain much of the Amish culture including driving horse and buggy.

## **Hutterites**

Most Hutterites live in Northwestern United States and South Western Canada. They live communally (common purse) and tend to not interact much at all with other Anabaptist groups. Their communal approach often makes them quite wealthy as a community. A similar but separate group of communal Anabaptists are the Bruderhof found in many Northeastern US states. These groups have limited interaction with other Anabaptists.

## **Apostolic Christians**

Apostolic Anabaptists are a unique group that was organized by a convert to Anabaptism around the year 1847. The Apostolic spectrum ranges from Progressive-conservative to Theologically Conservative. Their "one true church" beliefs have historically isolated them from other Anabaptists.

## **Renewal Groups**

People in "renewal groups" do most everything by intention. Their intent is to follow the New Testament pattern as closely as possible and they are typically interested in how the Early Church did things. (This is actually how all the historic Anabaptist groups began, however, the historic Anabaptist groups have developed a large body of traditions that they look to for guidance and by which they are more or less restricted.) Renewal groups are interested in gleaning from historic Anabaptist churches and learning from them, but they feel freedom to accept or reject any tradition based on their understanding of scripture.

Renewal groups can be **Mennonite, Brethren, Amish or Hutterite** (or a combination) who want to see the church restored to an earlier time period or want a church life that is more vibrant and authentic. Since renewal groups are not bound to the ethos of a particular faith tradition, they have the freedom to discuss any topic and/or chart a course that more closely resembles the early Anabaptists or the early church. Sometimes renewal groups simply use the word Anabaptist instead of identifying with one of the four traditional denominations mentioned above. Renewal groups span the complete spectrum from Order to Theological-conservative.

The renewal group category also includes the "Remnant churches" (such as Charity Christian Fellowship in Lancaster, PA) and "Kingdom Christian" churches (such as Followers of the Way that is headquartered in Boston) that aren't part of any of the four historic Anabaptist traditions. However, even these groups of Christians have been influenced by historic Anabaptism and a sizeable portion of their group comes from folks with Anabaptist upbringing.

Renewal groups sometimes attract a high number of seekers because they are more flexible and not as fond of keeping Anabaptist cultural traditions. (e.g. An renewal group might typically “pour” at baptism, but they might use immersion if requested by the applicant).

Many renewal groups tend to be less stable due to unaccountable leaders, incompetent leaders, questionable doctrine or church polity, relational immaturity, internal disagreements, lack of unified vision, individuals leaving because of offenses, and at times the complete melt down / disintegration of the group. (Not all renewal groups have these problems but many have one or more of them.) Sometimes renewal groups struggle among themselves to identify which early church and early Anabaptist beliefs and practices should be made normative in the church and which ones are unnecessary or a deviation from what God intends to be normative for the church today. If leaders in these types of settings are not uniquely suited for the job, the church tends to flounder and eventually dissolve. Some seekers, after having experienced such instability in a renewal group, will join a more traditional Anabaptist group. They are willing to put up with some unhandy cultural traditions in order to have a more stable environment for themselves or their family.

Some renewal groups think of themselves as offering one of the best church experiences a person could wish for, and they are glad to take members away from churches they deem less scriptural. In contrast, peacemaking renewal groups are glad to recognize any Christian’s attempt to follow the teachings of the New Testament, and their goal is to encourage even greater obedience to Christ. Peacemaking renewal groups are typically interested in seeing the Kingdom of God expand and encompass the earth, and they are not eager to draw people and talent away from other churches, missions, or ministries. While they may draw lines for who they allow to be in position of influence in their congregations, they do not condemn or isolate themselves from those who take a different stance on issues.

**“Kingdom Christian”** is a new buzz term among renewal groups. The term has become popular in recent decades through the writings of David Bercot as a way to picture something larger than Anabaptists but be a term that still includes Anabaptists.

The term “conservative Anabaptist” is several decades old and was made popular by folks such as Stephen Scott and Faith Builders. This term was an attempt to picture a worldview that included conservative Mennonites, conservative Brethren, and conservative Amish-Mennonites. It also included congregations that simply referred to themselves as Anabaptists and who didn’t really wish to be identified with a particular sub-category of Anabaptists.

People who grow up in Ultra-conservative and Intermediate-churches, are often privileged to hear teaching on Anabaptist history and thought. In the 1980’s and 90’s, there was renewed interest among Plain people to rediscover what was commonly believed and practiced among the early Anabaptists (1500’s). This interest continues on in Ultra- and Intermediate-conservative Mennonite churches.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is a new interest among some conservative Anabaptists and similar groups to rediscover what was commonly believed and practiced in the early church (AD 30-300).

Some folks who are inspired by the early Anabaptists (but aren’t particularly interested in being identified as Anabaptists) have started referring to themselves as “Kingdom Christians.” However, it is important to differentiate the use of this term as a proper noun vs. the use of this term to describe anyone who believes in the importance of following Jesus, entering His Kingdom, and keeping His commands. There are Christians around the world who practice some measure of non-resistance, non-conformity, and non-accumulation who may or may not have and connection with Anabaptism. These folks can be referred to as kingdom Christians, even if they are not accustomed to using this term.

Some Ultra-conservatives and Intermediate-conservatives are interested in reading kingdom Christian books, but these folks don’t really have the option of influencing their churches in a direction that is more like the early church. In these churches many topics are not open for discussion, since it is deemed more important to maintain or freeze the church polity and standards of the early 1900’s, than to return to older ways of thinking and practice.

In Moderate-conservative and Progressive-conservative settings, there is budding interest in learning about the early church and how they thought about church but again there is only limited interest. There is more room in these churches to chart a more “early church” path, but because most are ethnic Anabaptist and many want to be more “modern,” there is typically not a lot of interest in reverting to something more “old fashioned.”

When it comes to family and mission values, Kingdom Christians are probably closest to Intermediate-conservatives. However, the non-conformity standards of Kingdom Christians are similar to those of Progressive-conservatives on matters such as the variety of clothing and educational pursuits they allow.



The difference between Kingdom Christians and Progressive-conservatives is that Kingdom Christians are often headed in the direction of more modest clothing, larger head coverings, less sports, less entertainment, etc. while many Progressive-conservatives are headed in the direction of less modesty, smaller head coverings, more entertainment, etc. So while these two groups seem to have somewhat similar minimum standards, their constituencies are headed in opposite directions.

---

**Some concluding thoughts for people searching for a church that is more in tune with the New Testament ideal:**

David Bercot in his message, Finding Fellowship in the 21st Century, gives advice along this line.

"Become a person who loves well and is living a holy life. If you aren't that kind of person, you will only make life difficult for your family and the church you attempt to join." He then suggests these three basic options for seekers... 1) Attend a conservative Evangelical church and try to be an influence for good even if the rest in the church do not uphold Kingdom teachings. 2) If you are a mature Christian, consider helping to organize a small fellowship of folks who are interested in Kingdom teachings. 3) Join an Anabaptist or similar fellowship.

I will expand on this last suggestion and describe three options under it.

1. If you want a stable church fellowship and want to stay with a church long term, join a church that is part of a Conference or Fellowship on the more-conservative end of the spectrum - one that has demonstrated little transition over the decades. You might have to give up a lot of freedoms, and put up with some unhandy and really difficult cultural expectations, and you may be limited in the ways you can serve the Kingdom of God. But at least you are part of something that will likely be at a similar place 50 years from now. Your children may or may not decide to stick with this church. Much of this will depend on your attitude toward the church.
2. If you want a church that has a high moral and spiritual standard, yet one that allows lots of room for people to fulfill their calling in the Kingdom of God, you will likely end up in a church that is not as stable. You will need to be prepared to keep changing churches if the church you are part of eventually heads in a direction that isn't good. Along the way you can teach your children to stand for what is right and how to grow in their love for God and others. If you do this well, they will thank you for teaching them how to live by principle. However, if you change churches too often, your children may prefer to stay at one church when they grow up (which is very understandable). This could end up being a spiritual detriment for them or their posterity.
3. If you want all your freedoms and you don't want to change churches periodically, you can plug into a less-conservative church and be the person you want others to be. When the church drifts in an unhealthy direction, you just stay there and keep being a good example. If you do it well, there is a chance your children will choose a church that more accurately reflects your values when they become adults. However, more than likely, some of your children may find it easier to fit in with the crowd than to go against the flow, and they may wash out spiritually. Because of this, I can't recommend this option for a family, but sometimes joining a more disciplined church is not an option for one reason or another and God gives people grace to be role models for Christ in less than ideal situations.

Keep in mind that doing anything with the wrong spirit can have a disastrous affect no matter what church you are in, so attitude is very important for yourself, your children, and your friends. May God bless you with wisdom and light on your spiritual journey!

Please contact Ernest Eby to submit additional information or corrections. | [ernest.eby@gmail.com](mailto:ernest.eby@gmail.com) | Updated September 2022.

## Appendix:

Here is some advice from Dan Ziegler who along with his wife Wendy found their way into the Plain Anabaptist world.

1) Look for churches that have a track record of welcoming those from non-plain backgrounds. Not all plain churches are the same. We have found this to be especially the case among a number of non-conformed groups including the River Brethren, some German Baptists, some Beachy congregations, some Charity/Remnant congregations (which were started as a joint revival effort when plain and non-plain background folks joined forces), some Neo-Hutterite groups, and groups such as the Biblical Mennonite Alliance. In my experience, the fundamentalist/separatist groups and the groups with a strong German dialect still in use are the hardest to assimilate into - for different reasons. If all else fails, the house church option is out there, where you can gather for fellowship and accountability with like-minded folks who share your lifestyle convictions - our family is currently in this situation. Remember, Anabaptism started as a house church movement. 😊

2) Give yourself and the group plenty of time to get to know each other - by choosing to be a part of a plain group, you are stepping into not just a set of beliefs, but a faith-based high-expectation culture that is likely very different than what you have grown up with. This is probably what drew you in the first place, but understand one does not just flip a switch and know everything right away. Most of the folks you will fellowship with have grown up in this context - and they don't think twice about much of what they do. Things that you have to deliberately and sometimes self-consciously decide to do are second nature to them. If you have chosen the right group (see #1 above) they will be patient with you, understand your dilemma, and extend grace as you learn to assimilate. And try not to read too much into things or take things too personally - in any cross cultural situation, grace should rule the day.

3) Embrace your role as "Ausländer" - Come to terms with the fact that you are not, nor will you ever become a Yoder or Miller, Friesen or Stoltzfus - and that's OK. Jesus doesn't care about surnames. Believe it or not, many conservative Mennonite churches (see #1 above) long to find a way to welcome seekers into their midst - they just want to do so without losing what is important to them. They recognize that seekers bring in new conviction, passion for things that have become common-place for them, fresh perspective, and ultimately, that Jesus calls us to make disciples of all nations. You may have a unique voice within the group as one who has deliberately chosen what they were born into - many plain folks will find it affirming that you have chosen to align with their convictions. And you may even be used to help the group see and understand perspectives that they may have been otherwise cut off from.

4) Understand plain folks care deeply about the stability of the church and the influences on their youth - It's not about you personally. They are concerned about the world and its influences, and experience has taught them that sometimes seekers may stir the pot and raise questions in ways that may be unhealthy for the church - especially for their young people. Respect that - you may share the same concern someday.

5) Don't try to Reform the church to your expectations - Sometimes seekers join a plain church that is close to their ideals...but not quite there. So they try to agitate and push to "fix" it. Plain folks place a high value on Gelasseheit (surrendered-ness to Christ and his Church), and before you can speak to what the group is not, you need to show a strong willingness to give yourself to what it is. Seekers are often independent-minded folks who have spent a lifetime following their own instincts. This is perhaps the toughest transition to make - but if you want to truly be a part of a plain group, you will need to set aside your individualistic bent in deference to the body. Recognize that you are now linked to something larger than yourself - and that discernment is a collective process (which often means it is a rather slow process). I'm not talking about disregarding sin here - but understanding that you may need to set aside some of your preferences in deference to the group's understanding, and for the sake of fellowship.

6) Serve the Church in Mission - For a seeker coming into a plain community, especially after they have become established a bit in the group, spending time, or even a few years serving the church through mission is a great choice. This may be through short-term mission trips or disaster relief, or service in foreign missions. Service is a core Anabaptist principle and the mission context is a great leveler, where the most important things matter and much of the cultural baggage that keeps us apart falls away. In a mission setting (for us it was 5 years in Haiti) you can build deep relationships

with a wide cross-section of plain folks, share a common bond of mission and purpose, and build credibility with those back at home as you show your commitment to the work of the church. You will also build life-long friendships that will help you feel more connected and make connections with others who know people who know you.

7) Remember - it should ultimately be about Jesus and his Kingdom - This is the most important thing...our motivation should be about obedience to Christ and service for his Kingdom. This is the holy calling for all who choose to follow him - it is in Christ that we find our motivation, our courage, our affirmation, our purpose. Anything else - lifestyle, pet doctrines, personal acceptance, culture, clothing styles, canning beans, whatever - may be important, but it's not the main thing.