

Lived Religion: The Modern World and the Existential Threat to the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite

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Introduction

In this article, I explore the writings in the *Messenger of Truth* that provide insight into the lived religion of the Holdeman people, looking beyond formal congregations and policies to work, family, and the challenges of living in the world. I use *the Messenger of Truth* as “conversational space,” to employ Nancy Ammerman’s typology related to a “religion of the everyday.”¹ Here biblical messages, church policies, and daily dimensions of life are discussed and debated, seeking to provide a means by which to understand the reality of religion in the lives of Holdeman Mennonites.²

The Holdeman Church, more formally, the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (CGCM), is little known by the American public. It was founded in 1859 by John Holdeman, originally of Wayne County, Ohio, and a member of the (Old) Mennonite Church (OM). Historically it consisted of three church streams: fellow members of the (Old) Mennonite Church, Polish-Prussian immigrants in Kansas, and Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites in Manitoba who had migrated from Russia following changes to military exemption by the authoritarian government of Czar Alexander II.³ These three

branches found Holdeman's church most compatible with their beliefs and conservative, plain lifestyle.⁴ In 1903 the CGCM launched an English supplement to the church's German-language magazine, the *Botschafter der Wahrheit*. In 1906 *The Messenger of Truth* became a separate paper and was given status with the naming of Minister Frederick C. Fricke as editor, a position that he filled for 36 years. During those years, Fricke, a creative and innovative leader, guided the Church through the early transition years as the Holdeman people acclimated to living in rural communities in the United States and Canada.

Today, the CGCM is one of the most conservative among the various North American Mennonite congregations. It is also one that is growing: from 12,144 in the United States in 2000 to 14,804 in 2010, a growth of 22 percent; total membership worldwide in 2010 was 22,779.⁵ Significantly, a geographical accounting in 2010 reveals that the state of Kansas in the American heartland had by far the largest group of CGCM members in the United States; with a little over 4400 people, it comprised 16 percent of the US Holdeman people.⁶ This dominance was reflected in references in *Messenger of Truth*: the 1991–92 issues, for example, made 1482 references to Kansas, while the 2017–18 issues made 1705 such references, many more than to other jurisdictions like Manitoba, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and California.

Browsing through recent issues of the *Messenger of Truth* provides examples of the breadth and depth revealed in Holdeman thinking and offers a view of religious life outside of the formal trappings of the church. Writings in the paper address a wide range of issues related to integrity. One submission from 2018 suggests, for example, that being late for church services can lead to an undisciplined life,⁷ while in a second article, a brother muses about the city of Sodom, suggesting that immorality was only one of the problems in this ancient biblical city,⁸ and in a third a minister highlights the importance of being both a preacher and a moral watchman.⁹ Meanwhile, a member writing in 1991 speaks about growing up in the world and then joining the Church of God, and the struggle she had adapting: "At first it wasn't easy to go from blue jeans, makeup, loose hair, and fashionable dressing to a black devotional covering and plain dresses and shoes."¹⁰ These stories in the *Messenger of Truth* are richly complex, providing evidence of how life unfolds for the members of the CGCM.

While today many houses of worship in Canada and the United States are largely empty and church membership continues to decline, the CGCM wages a battle to hold onto its traditions and remain separated from the world. In an article from 1998, Minister

Joe Isaac aptly characterizes the dilemma, citing the apostle Paul's admonition to the elders of the church at Ephesus as recorded in Acts 20: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood."¹¹ The church is strong, writes Isaac, "inasmuch as the members walk in obedience to the Word and Spirit and deal with worldliness."¹² However, the threat of "Amalek" (i.e., worldliness) may be the greatest from within the church. Isaac cautions against the carnal style of life that includes fancy homes, stylish clothes, and exotic hairdos, concluding: "We are in mortal, hand-to-hand spiritual combat with this Amalek. It is a battle to the death."¹³ Here are glimpses into the everyday life of the Holdeman people as they engage in the battle against worldliness, modernity and increased secularization.

In a longer, book-length work, I have explained how the CGCM and many of their ancestral forbears, rooted in the Old Flemish Mennonites of West Prussia, adhered to Anabaptist principles for over 400 years.¹⁴ The early Anabaptists were highly political, agreeing to pay taxes but also denying the authorities the right to restrict religious practice. They called into question infant baptism, the use of carnal weapons, and the oath. And spreading rapidly throughout Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands, the emerging Anabaptist movement rejected the idea that the church encompassed the entire social order.¹⁵ Rather, the objective of Anabaptism was the resurrection of the true apostolic church focused on a genuine practice of discipleship and separation from the world.¹⁶ Finally, as historian C.H. Smith noted many years ago, the Anabaptists found their authority for this blueprint in the Bible, albeit nuanced by a more spiritual approach, as argued more recently by C. Arnold Snyder.¹⁷ When one reads the *Messenger of Truth*, it is apparent that the Holdeman people have sustained this view of biblical authority, evidenced by ordinary members' knowledgeable citing of both Old and New Testament scriptures. They use the Holy Scriptures as the guide, in Clarence Hiebert's words, "whereby all doctrines and oracles must be governed."¹⁸ As these conservative Mennonites will attest, the Bible—particularly the New Testament and the writings of the apostle Paul—governs their behaviour, culture, and practices.

Methods and Framework

Sociologists consider many different theories and methodologies in the study of religion.¹⁹ In this study of the CGCM, I analyze the relationship between social context and the transformation of an ethnic group, using a framework proposed by Donald Kraybill.²⁰ The four dimensions of change in this research framework are: behavioural, cultural, structural, and authority. The behavioural dimension deals mostly with changes that are brought about by members having to live in the world and dealing with such issues as insurance, interest, and the use of computers. The cultural dimension covers changes that are more symbolic and serve as markers that establish a boundary between the Holdeman people and worldly society. The structural dimension is described through analysis of family names and physical locations. For the authority dimension, I examine the transition from the time when the Church was led by a few charismatic individuals to the present situation, where a diffusion of contributors write in the *Messenger of Truth*.

Using these categories I compare a number of changes over time. First, from annual conference reports I look for evidence of change in the CGCM over the past 125 years (1896–2015), tracing a shift from traditional patterns and practices to greater integration with worldly society. I then contrast these reports to data taken from the biweekly newsletter of the CGCM, the *Messenger of Truth*, for the years of 1991–1992 and 2017–2018. It is expected that the practices undergoing the most change are likely the ones that have received the most discussion by church leaders in the general conferences over the years. The biweekly publication typically includes several editorials by ministers and the editor or assistant editor. A section on “Stewardship” presents viewpoints and advice from members. The “Youth” section includes letters from the younger membership, and the “On Record” section publishes obituaries, baptisms, reacceptances, and marriages.²¹ Editors and assistant editors of the *Messenger of Truth* are selected and reaffirmed at the annual general conference meetings.²² The editor or assistant is charged with submitting the introductory article to be published at the beginning of the newsletter. In addition to the editor’s contribution, since 1959 the newspaper has featured a submission by a deacon or minister, typically the second article in the newspaper.²³ Members and youth can submit letters; however, the publication reserves the right to refuse or return any submission that does not comply with editorial guidelines and standards. The

typical publication is 12 pages long; however, recent issues have ranged up to 16 pages.²⁴

The Holdeman people (including ministers, editors, the youth, and general readers) use the pages of the *Messenger of Truth* to relate events, experiences, emotions, and advice to readers. These writings involve purpose and frequently carry moral judgments that are intended to guide the members of the church in living a proper Holdeman life. The writings reveal a combination of experiences from everyday life and the messages of ministers and deacons who admonish, cajole, and inspire their people in order to keep their community intact. The sample of texts analyzed in this study were taken from issues of the *Messenger of Truth* covering some 1,500 pages, from the years 1991–92 and 2017–18. Each issue of the newsletter was scanned with optical character recognition in order to generate searchable text. All of the text for the periods in question was grouped together, and frequencies of terms were calculated to support comparative analysis.

Behavioural Change

As conservative Mennonites confront the challenges of modern society, they frequently navigate between different social worlds, and are tempted perhaps to abandon some of the traditional markers of their religion. Since early times the Holdeman people were recognized, even among other conservative Mennonites, for their beards and uniform, black-coloured devotional head covering: symbols still evident today. As with other plain people, the modern world presents the Holdeman people with challenges around maintaining their identity and nonconformity to the world. Paying interest, taking advantage of advanced computer technologies, and purchasing insurance appear to be areas in which they are making compromises.

Interest and Usury

One of the main issues of concern has been usury, that is, the charging of interest. John Holdeman wrote extensively about usury, notably citing Ezekiel 18:13: “Hath given forth upon usury, and hath taken increase: shall he then live? he shall not live: he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him.” Linking usury to nonresistance, Holdeman concluded that “to believe that Christ in His teachings condoned usury, which was so strictly forbidden in the [Old Testament] law, would be fol-

ly, over which one would be amazed, especially from such as adhere to a confession of nonresistance.”²⁵

At the 1909 CGCM General Conference in Lone Tree, Galva, Kansas, the Church stated its opposition to usury, indicating that “it is wrong to put our money into usury and gain in bank and storestocks [*sic*], and other world-like extorting ways of gain.”²⁶ This position was reaffirmed in several subsequent conferences with the further clarification that usury and interest were thought to be the same thing. At the 1974 General Conference, for example, the Church reaffirmed the position taken in 1909 that “interest as we know it today is one and the same thing as usury in the Bible times.”²⁷

It was also a position that was reaffirmed in the more recent pages of the *Messenger of Truth*. In a 1991 editorial entitled “Usury,” Editor Errol Wedel states that usury is biblically wrong and the reasons are obvious.²⁸ In an issue from 1992 he expands on this idea, cautioning that interest can take away a person’s courage and well-being, noting that the taking of interest can quickly become a trap that is difficult to reverse. He cites Proverbs 22:7: “The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.” He adds:

When a loan is sought, the attention of the borrower is seldom directed to the dangers of accumulating interest. Usually the interest is minimized so the borrower goes unchallenged and makes a loan large enough to fill the apparent need or fancied dream. One striking peculiarity—these loans always come due. Although they are made for a year or years, that time always seems so short. Interest, while it does not seem so serious at first, never works on an eight-hour system. It rather continues steady on a twenty-four-hour time schedule, seven days a week, thirty days a month, twelve months a year, for as many years as the loan is made.²⁹

In another issue from 1991, Deacon Laurence Becker writes that only the blind and ignorant can be happy with a “buy now, pay later” kind of living, implying that interest payment was an issue.³⁰ At the same time, Minister Charles Johnson addresses permissiveness and links it to the interest question: “When it comes to the material area, it seems that we have given in there also, and have lost some vision. In both paying and receiving of interest we do not have as clear a vision as we should.”³¹

More recently, in a 2017 piece, Deacon Kim Buerge offers the advice that Holdeman people do have credit cards and take loans for large purchases such as a home. Much of Buerge’s message suggests that members should acknowledge when they need help

with debts. He offers advice and counseling for those who find themselves facing large debt, writing that “the first and most important step is to admit to ourselves that we need help, followed by seeking that help.” He suggests that members can avoid interest payments by being content living with less.³² To support his view, Buerge cites the gospel of Timothy: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.” (1 Timothy 6:6–8)

As Deacon Buerge’s writing indicates, over the last several decades, the Church appears to have relaxed the position taken at the 1909 General Conference. At the 1983 General Conference, deacons were encouraged to pursue investment options for members with limited resources.³³ From the 2017 and 2018 issues of *Messenger of Truth*, however, it appears that loans and the paying of interest are no longer a major concern and are gradually becoming accepted practices. In contrast to the period of the early 1990s, when usury was referenced 59 times, there is no mention of usury in the articles of 2017 and 2018.

Computers and Technology

Another change apparent in comparing early conference reports and later *Messenger of Truth* submissions lies in the field of technology. In its 1993 conference proceedings report, the Holdeman Church acknowledged the advantages and also the dangers of modern technology, and urged caution in order to avoid promoting a “computer spirit.”³⁴ More recently, in 2018, Luke Miller explains the necessity of guidelines in technology use, highlighting the importance of an internet filter, for example, to protect against human weakness and the depravity of the flesh.³⁵ He uses the metaphor of sheep grazing peacefully in a pasture, protected and safe while also remaining within the fence or boundary that ensures the shepherd’s care.

However, church officials in recent years have also acknowledged the benefits of computers, noting that there are electronic versions of the King James Bible, such as the Online Bible (a free app for computers and smartphones).³⁶ In his 2017 submission, Alphae Friesen writes that while recognizing the importance of computers, he has many cautions: “Do not allow your spiritual life to be slowly drained away by spending hours on the computer for entertainment. I have felt the computer is a very valuable machine, but it can lead us away from God and rob us of spiritual life if misused.”³⁷ Another writer from 2018 notes that members should

“think how we can rely on God more than on technology (phones or computer).”³⁸ Regarding the use of phones for photography, Minister Conrad Barkman cautions in 2017, “If we have conviction against having them [images] on our dresser or coffee table, we should have the same direction against storing them in our phones or computers. If we are disobedient here, how will we answer the Lord when He returns?”³⁹ Finally, in a lengthy editorial from 2018, Minister Dennis Koehn asks how the computer can be reconciled with the old time Gospel: “We must hold to the old-time Gospel, the old paths, not just because they are old but because they are of God. If we turn loose of them, we are adrift on the sea of change.” He concludes by suggesting that the modern age has only brought members busyness, turmoil, stress, and unrest of mind and soul.⁴⁰

Insurance

Although few church restrictions regarding insurance are evident today, a deep suspicion of insurance companies and their perceived objective of taking advantage of people to make a profit remains. At the 1909 General Conference, the Church was clear about the policy on insurance: “We believe to insure our possessions in the insurance companies of the world against fire, storm, and hail, etc., is averse to the holy patriarchs’ and the apostles’ examples.”⁴¹ The report cited Job 1:13–21 where Job continues to trust in the Lord even when he experiences tragedies from theft, storm, and fire: “Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Reliance on insurance implied that members trusted in human endeavours rather than God, and required associating with unbelievers in a business transaction.⁴²

In the *Messenger of Truth* issues from both the 1990s and 2010s, only six references are made to the term “insurance,” suggesting that purchasing insurance is no longer the significant issue it once was. Gary Loewen seems to acknowledge this trend in his 2018 comment that “there is a proliferation of insurance and pension plans.”⁴³ This change is evident in conference reports that indicate the policy regarding insurance being discussed and gradually revised beginning in 1974, and at all the subsequent conferences through 2015. The changes reflected an attempt to construct a policy that would help farmers deal with weather-related crop failures. In a 2015 interview with the *Mennonite World Report*, Minister Dale Koehn justified this accommodation to the modern world:

“by adjusting the wording of our decisions, it just gives us the freedom to operate in a more realistic way.”⁴⁴

The General Conference of 1956 was noncommittal regarding Social Security; however, a few years later at the 1959 Conference, the Church decided that its “institutions be given the right to make these benefits available to their personnel.”⁴⁵ In a continuing trend of relaxing participation in government programs, the General Conference of 1974 left it to individual conscience whether or not to accept Medicare Plan B, a United States federal health program.⁴⁶ For medical insurance, members began contributing to Christian Health Aid (CHA),⁴⁷ a sharing ministry for members of the CGCM. In his 1998 comment about CHA, member Lester Penner notes: “helping each other with medical costs is a very worthy part of our lives.”⁴⁸ It is important to note that CHA is considered an “aid plan” and not an insurance policy.

Cultural Change

Being a member of the Holdeman Church means, for men, the wearing of the beard and, for women, the wearing of the uniform devotional head cover. In Kansas and Manitoba, elderly folk still speak Low German (Plautdietsch) and retain distinctive accents. In addition, many daily-life taboos still mark the community and help separate the group from worldly people. Competitive sports are one example, with Reuben Koehn suggesting in 1998 that football, basketball, baseball, drag races, horse races, swimming, skiing, skating, prize fights, and golf “are not of the Father but of the world.”⁴⁹

In contrast to more progressive Mennonite groups, the Holdeman people still retain these prohibitions and visible symbols of their identity. In his submission from 2017, Mervin Johnson exhibits a palpable concern for the traditions of the Church, noting that a new generation may “view the traditions as restrictions and a hindrance to their happiness.” He encourages members to follow apostle Paul’s admonition: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle,” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He expresses a concern that over time the traditions may not seem to be very important:

An example might be when men cease to think of wearing a beard to honor the Creator but do it to fit themselves into the social/spiritual status quo. Thus if two week’s stubble becomes socially acceptable as a beard, that seems to be good enough. Similarly, the real meaning and purpose of the head covering ebbs away, and it begins to be worn in a

manner more to be socially acceptable than from heartfelt understanding of the meaning and purpose taught in the Scriptures.⁵⁰

Devotional Head Covering

A comparison of conference resolutions from the past and *Messenger of Truth* submissions indicates, however, that at least the position on devotional head covering remains largely unchanged. The General Conference of 1921 asked the rhetorical question “How do we understand 1 Corinthians 11:1–16?”⁵¹ In verses 4–7 of the passage the apostle Paul clarifies the head covering practice for men and women:

Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, for as much as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Corinthians 11:4–7)

Over time the Church reconfirmed this adherence to Paul’s commandment. In the minutes of seven subsequent conference reports and the 1974 conference, the Church further emphasized the acceptance of the head covering for daily use: “the present tieback covering, with veil tucked in or out, be accepted for everyday use.”⁵² Unlike other issues, which registered recent change, references to and discussions about the devotional head covering have been quite constant over the 25 years covered by the *Messenger of Truth*, with 35 instances in the 1991–92 and 31 in 2017–18.

The Holy Kiss

Another cultural issue of great importance to the CGCM is the “holy kiss,” a teaching that originates in the New Testament, where in four letters from Paul to different churches the early Christians are instructed to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26).⁵³ In the *Messenger of Truth* issues for 1991–92, a steady stream of letters and editorials ask why members have not practiced the holy kiss. In her submission from 1991, Jacqueline Toews asks this question and cites the commandment from 1 Peter 5:14: “Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁴ The Church reaffirmed the prac-

tice of the holy kiss in the 1993 CGCM conference; however, there is very little discussion of this practice some 25 years later in the pages of the 2017–18 *Messenger of Truth*.⁵⁵ The 1991–92 *Messenger of Truth* references the term “kiss” some forty-four times, whereas it is only mentioned twice in the 2017–2018 issues. In a 2017 issue one youth writer asks why the holy kiss is not practiced more, suggesting that “it is a doctrine the Church needs.”⁵⁶ In his editorial from 2018, Keith Nightingale harkens back to the Anabaptist vision and reminds members that the doctrines of the New Testament, including the holy kiss, should be taken seriously.⁵⁷ Given the concerns expressed in these letters and the absence of discussion in the 2017–18 issues, one might conclude that CGCM members are gradually abandoning the practice of the holy kiss.

Structural Change

What are the structural features of religion for the CGCM in modern society? Although fewer and fewer Holdeman people are farmers, their social structure is still highly integrated across family, church, and ethnic community. Some of the early Anabaptists thought that a physical church was not necessary, believing that one could serve God without preachers, deacons, and a church building. However, Menno Simons and his compatriot, Dirk Philips, two writers especially respected by the Holdeman people, opposed the spiritualist movement and sought to build a physical church.⁵⁸ This idea stands at the foundation of the CGCM.

The Church

Writing in 1991, Minister Ray Frank reinforces Menno’s view of the church, citing a statement made by Harold S. Bender in *Menno Simons’ Life and Writings*: “He built no great system of theology, nor did he discover any great new or long-lost principle; he merely caught a clear vision of two fundamental biblical ideals, the ideal of practical holiness, and the ideal of the high place of the church in the life of the believer and the cause of Christ.”⁵⁹ This idea is reflected in pages of the *Messenger of Truth* examined here, with the term “church” referenced 1,861 in the years from the 1990s, and 1,947 times in the issues from 2010s. These references suggest a constancy and priority in the minds of the Holdeman people. Typical sentiments expressed by the membership include phrases such as “the one true church,” the church “as a safe haven,” “a noble institution,” and “our beloved church.”

Family and Ethnicity

One method by which to understand change in family and ethnic structures is to examine the frequency of references to surnames in the *Messenger of Truth*. As reported by Clarence Hiebert, approximately 70 percent of the Holdeman group can trace their ancestry back to the Dutch-Prussian congregations originating with the various branches of Old Flemish Mennonites,⁶⁰ including the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite immigrants from Russia in Manitoba and the Ostroger Mennonite immigrants from Poland in Kansas.⁶¹ Relatively few surnames thus comprise the majority of the membership, and can be seen in the *Messenger of Truth* sections that cover baptisms, communions, obituaries, ordinations, marriages, and reacceptances. They largely reflect the two cultural streams above. In the 1991–92 issues, the ten most frequently referenced surnames are: Koehn (1,134), Schmidt/Smith (474), Unruh (435), Toews (357), Jantz/Johnson (294), Wiebe (292), Penner (272), Isaac (238), Friesen (201), and Nightingale (200).⁶² In the 2017–18 issues there is a similar ordering, however “Friesen” drops out of the top ten while “Giesbrecht” is added: Koehn (1,727), Unruh (656), Schmidt/Smith (636), Toews (424), Jantz/Johnson (404), Penner (396), Isaac (391), Nightingale/Nachtigal (252), Giesbrecht (251), and Wiebe (227).⁶³

The frequencies with which these particular surnames arise in the *Messenger of Truth* pages in recent years suggests relatively little change in ethnic composition of the church over several hundred years. However, a perhaps revolutionary practice is gradually changing this composition. Mission work is blurring the boundaries of Dutch-Prussian ancestry by bringing in members from many countries of the Global South with radically different ethnic backgrounds. Hiebert writes that in the early 1970s the Holdeman Church “had evangelized 500 persons from outside of their own historic ethnic borders who joined their ranks.”⁶⁴

Changes in Authority

In the early years of the Church, leadership, influence, and authority came from a few charismatic leaders. John Holdeman anchored the doctrine of the CGCM in the writings of Menno Simons and Dirk Philips and outlined his reasons for taking up the pen to establish a new church. Holdeman writes with a rhetorical flourish: “An apostasy has set in on account of laxity and drowsiness of the ministry, caused by their love of this world.” He continues,

hoping that the “reader may better differentiate between truth and falsehood, light and darkness, the sweet and sour, righteousness and iniquity, the true doctrine and unclean or false teachings.”⁶⁵ With the death of Holdeman in 1900, the Church turned to Frederick C. Fricke to assume leadership for all congregations in the United States and Canada.⁶⁶ Fricke seems at first to be an odd choice, having been born in Germany and converted from Lutheranism in 1882. However, Fricke had established himself as an innovator, administrator, and able thinker who brought the two main fractious Holdeman groups together: the Kansas Ostroger and the Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde. At the time, Fricke was also the editor of the *Messenger of Truth*.⁶⁷ Today, leadership and expertise is diffused throughout the various congregations as can be seen by the knowledgeable writings and advice proffered in the *Messenger of Truth*. Editors and ministers writing in the newsletter continue to express concern about the “drift toward worldliness.”

Avoidance and the Ban

Although the ban might be considered a cultural trait, this practice is more properly placed under the authority dimension. Avoidance and the ban are practiced to preserve the integrity of the church, as Menno Simons eloquently explained:

Even as a city without wall and gates, or field without enclosure or fence, or a house without walls and doors, so is also a church without the true apostolic exclusion or ban. For it would be open to all deceiving spirits, all godless scorners and haughty despisers, all idolatrous and insolent transgressors, yes to all lewd debauchers and adulterers, as is the case with all the great sects of the world which style themselves, although improperly, churches of Christ.⁶⁸

John Holdeman was more specific about the practice, indicating that excommunication involves separation of the offending member in order to “keep the congregation pure from willful, heinous sinners.”⁶⁹ Once one is excommunicated, church members are faced with a dilemma in how to approach the fallen-away person. An excommunicated member cannot be greeted with the holy kiss or a handshake, nor can this member be allowed to eat with members in the Church. Minister Milton Koehn clarifies the policy in a submission from 1992, indicating that the church is responsible for maintaining purity, and referencing Matthew 16:19: “The church is Christ’s authority on earth, and she has been given the keys to loose and bind.” He asks, “Why is there a breakdown in the keep-

ing of the avoidance?”⁷⁰ Avoidance has been reaffirmed in many of the general conferences, but there is a deep appreciation of how difficult it is to carry out this practice, and members are advised to use “wisdom to avoid unnecessary offense.”⁷¹ There is much discussion in the 1991–92 issues about the continuing need for avoidance and the concern that members are not properly carrying out this practice, with 34 references. However, only 2 references appear in the 2017–18 issues, suggesting that this issue has decreased in importance over the years.

Nonresistance

The issue of non-resistance has always been of great importance in the CGCM. Indeed, it resembles the first codification of the teaching in the 1527 *Schleitheim Confession*: “Separation is needful from all evil and wickedness which Satan has planted into this world. This includes abstinence from all use of un-Christian, yea, Satanic weapons of violence, such as sword and armor and the like.”⁷²

A few hundred years later, John Holdeman made clear his position regarding nonresistance: “I find the ground of nonresistance so clearly and distinctly recorded in God’s Word that dangers of misrepresentation are less likely to occur than on any other Gospel principle.”⁷³

As with other Mennonites, the practice of nonresistance has caused the Holdeman people much grief and difficulty, especially during the wars of the twentieth century. During those wars, many citizens considered the nonresistant stance naïve, dangerous, and possibly a threat to the nation.⁷⁴ The Holdeman people cite Matthew 5:39 as biblical support for their position: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” The nonresistant stance affects many aspects of daily life, and includes the refusal to vote and reluctance to enter a court of law. Yet, as a 1983 conference report notes, the Church holds “deep appreciation to this nation for the generous consideration that this government has continually extended to us, particularly in times of war.”⁷⁵ The attention to the nonresistant policy has been constant in the references to “nonresistance” in the *Messenger of Truth*, with 9 references in 1991–92 and 10 references in 2017–18.

Nonconformity and Drift

An editorial by Milton Koehn in 1992 examines the issues related to separation, indicating that the world from which Christians are to separate themselves is a realm where lust reigns: “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (1 John 2:16)⁷⁶ Koehn continues, stating that members are witnessing the falling away from true faith and sound doctrine of which Paul spoke in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.⁷⁷ Minister Charles Johnson earlier spoke about this theme in his 1991 editorial on permissiveness, defining this behavior as “unbelief” and citing 1 Samuel 15: 13–17, in which Saul did not obey the commandment of God.⁷⁸ In 2017, Gladwin Koehn echoed his concern about the continuing drift:

There appears to be less settled direction relating to the application of basic doctrine today. Justification by faith that produces works, defenselessness (nonresistance), separation from and nonconformity to the world, the pilgrim and stranger status, the sisters’ devotional head covering, brethren growing the beard, and modesty and simplicity in dress and possessions can all be admitted as being a part of the fathers’ faith. But light and direction as to how these matters are evidenced in one’s person and walk of life too often are deficient. Sparing the flesh relative to these doctrines indicates that the heart is not fixed.⁷⁹

The battle against worldliness and the concern by ministers regarding members drifting away from the traditions of the church is a reoccurring theme in the editorials of the *Messenger of Truth* and in the minutes of the annual conferences. As their people emerged from the depression years and World War II, CGCM ministers expressed concern about the “drift toward worldliness” in the General Conference of 1950 and vowed to study the cause and seek remedies.⁸⁰ During the 2015 General Conference, ministers acknowledged that they had not addressed similar concerns that had been raised in the 1993 conference, stating that “we are not clearly identifying and dealing with the spirit of pride . . . in our personal lives, our homes, and congregations.”⁸¹ My frequency analysis of the *Messenger of Truth* also shows that the term “nonconformity” is referenced as often in the period from 1991–92 as in 2017–18 (15 instances versus 16), suggesting a continuing concern about upholding this practice.

Discussion

As the Holdeman people battle the Amalek monster and struggle to retain their traditional faith practices, change will be inevitable. From the analysis conducted in this study, we can categorize Holdeman practices according to a progressive scale: constancy (little or no change), accommodation to the world (visible, incremental change), and abandonment (policies that are being dropped by the wayside).

Constancy

What appears not to have changed, according to the writings of the *Messenger of Truth*, is the CGCM's relentless zeal to hold on to their traditional practices as dictated by the apostolic scriptures and later clarified by their founder, John Holdeman. The results of this zeal are religious and symbolic markers that will likely continue to define Holdeman identity. Foremost are the devotional head covering and the wearing of the beard, among the only remaining visible markers of Holdeman life. These practices are actually quite easy to continue and do not create any conflicts with non-Mennonite neighbours and the secular world. The outward expressions of their identity also serve each member as a reminder of their religious obligations in other domains.

Accommodation to the World

Change is perhaps most evident in the behavioral and cultural dimensions. Accommodation with pervasive communication technologies, the use of insurance, and benefitting from interest, are examples of what is likely to be a continuing trend. Artificial intelligence and robotic innovations will dramatically transform agricultural methods in the next few years. Autonomous tractors for seeding and spreading fertilizer are already in use. It will be difficult for the church to ignore many of these conveniences, suggesting that computers and related technologies are becoming an accepted part of Holdeman life.

Cultural markers that emanated from the Holdeman people's shared history as Kansas Ostrogers and Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde, including their common ethnic origins in the Dutch-North German communities of the sixteenth century, have largely disappeared. Few members have much knowledge of their immigrant origins. Although many attempt to recover their ethnic connections through genealogical research or discussions with elderly grand-

parents, these pursuits are finding less traction with current generations.⁸² The declining use of Low German and identification with Dutch-German ancestry suggests a gradual disappearance of an ethnic identity. As noted earlier, the CGCM focus on mission work is bringing in many adherents from countries in the Global South. These changes portend a gradual end to the Holdeman traditional ethnic identity, or what sociologist Herbert Gans refers to as the “twilight of ethnicity.”⁸³

Abandonment

Given the tone of specific letters urging members to return to traditional practice, it is likely some practices will disappear. The holy kiss, for example, seems to be gradually disappearing from personal greetings. Although there are pleas to continue this practice, it appears that many members find it difficult to carry out.

The issue of nonresistance may also be tested. It is difficult to practice nonresistance when there is nothing to resist, in today’s relatively peaceful Western democracies.⁸⁴ Many accounts describe how American Mennonites were treated in the United States during the world wars. As Perry Bush argues, those who attempted to remain faithful to their pacifist ideals were sometimes tarred, feathered, smeared with yellow paint, and even convicted under the Sedition Act.⁸⁵ Although the doctrine of nonresistance is likely not to be abandoned by the Holdeman Church, non-participation in government at all levels is another question. Significant discussion in recent decades in the *Messenger of Truth* highlight members becoming politically active and voicing opinions. In his 1990 piece, Rene Penner comments: “What do our neighbors think when we can hold our own in any political discussion or even argue and voice strong opinions and yet we do not go to the polls?”⁸⁶ And Albert Peachey suggests in 2016 that the concept of committing adultery in our hearts can be applied to politics, suggesting that voting for a person “in our hearts” might be a violation of the nonresistance doctrine.⁸⁷

The nonresistance doctrine comes into question when members personally experience the chaos of war. Mennonites who chose to remain in Russia after the 1870s were sorely tested to remain non-resistant as chaos ensued with Lenin’s revolution of October 1917. The lessons of the Mennonite self-protection units (the *Selbstschutz*) and their questioning of their ancestors’ pacifist ideals is not lost on the Holdeman people.⁸⁸ Although this type of chaos is unlikely to occur in the United States and Canada, it is possible that Holdeman Mennonites in the Global South may find them-

selves in similar circumstances, forced to choose between protecting family and following a traditional practice. As in early twentieth-century Russia, these chaotic conditions can create divergence between stated policy and the actual practice of members. When survival is in question, the doctrine of nonresistance becomes much more difficult to follow.

Conclusion

The articles in the *Messenger of Truth* reveal an intense focus on living according to the apostolic writings of the New Testament and adhering to the policies espoused by John Holdeman. Incremental and gradual change is evident in the accommodation with modern conveniences, the slow abandonment of some traditional practices, and the loss of the Dutch-Prussian ethnic identity. In what it sees as the miasma of pluralism and tolerance of modern society, the Church is finding it more difficult to translate New Testament doctrines into clearly defined policies and practices. However, it is likely that the Holdeman people will continue to maintain a certain “distance” from the world, compromising, but also retaining a significant degree of separation.

Notes

- ¹ Nancy Ammerman, “Finding Religion in Everyday life,” *Sociology of Religion* 75:2 (2014): 189–207.
- ² For this study, I have arbitrarily chosen articles from the *Messenger of Truth* for the eras of 1991–1992 and 2017–2018.
- ³ C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publishing Office, 1957), 602–603.
- ⁴ Clarence Hiebert, *The Holdeman People: The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, 1859–1979* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973), 203.
- ⁵ “Church of God in Christ, Mennonite,” Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), <http://www.thearda.com/>; *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), s.v. “Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (CGC),” by P.G. Hiebert and Clarence Hiebert, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Church_of_God_in_Christ,_Mennonite_\(CGC\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Church_of_God_in_Christ,_Mennonite_(CGC)).
- ⁶ “Church of God in Christ, Mennonite,” ARDA.
- ⁷ Mark Isaac, “Integrity,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:13 (2018): 3–4.
- ⁸ Barry Rolin, “Fullness of Bread,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:13 (2018): 7, 9–10.
- ⁹ Minister Patrick L. O. Enike, “Being a Preacher and a Watchman,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:12 (2018): 2–4.

- ¹⁰ Mrs. Richard Ramos, "True Non-Conformity," *Messenger of Truth* 90:10 (1991): 5, 7.
- ¹¹ Acts 20:28. In this text, we follow the standard used by the Holdeman Church and the *Messenger of Truth*. All biblical quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.
- ¹² Joe Isaac, "Take Heed Therefore," *Messenger of Truth* 97:4 (1998): 2–4.
- ¹³ The Amalekites have been characterized as the archetypal enemy of the Jews and "Amalek" is considered to be a symbol of evil, representing atheism and the rejection of God. See Wikipedia, s.v. "Amalek," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amalek>.
- ¹⁴ Ronald C. Jantz, *Living in the World: How Conservative Mennonites Preserved the Anabaptism of the Sixteenth Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020).
- ¹⁵ J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origin and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2005), 45–62.
- ¹⁶ Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism: Origin, Spread, Life, and Thought, 1450-1600* (The Hague, Netherlands, Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 258.
- ¹⁷ Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*, 21; C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1995).
- ¹⁸ Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 606. See also "1946 General Conference," in *Conference Reports, 1896–2015* (Moundridge, KS: Gospel Publishers, 2016), 46–54.
- ¹⁹ Gerardo Martí, "Present and Future Scholarship in the Study of Religion," *Sociology of Religion* 75:4 (2014): 503–510.
- ²⁰ Donald B. Kraybill, "Modernity and Identity: The Transformation of Mennonite Ethnicity," in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Calvin Wall Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 153–172.
- ²¹ Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 235–36. See also GAMEO, s.v. "Messenger of Truth (Periodical)," by P.G. Hiebert, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Messenger_of_Truth_\(Periodical\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Messenger_of_Truth_(Periodical)).
- ²² "1939 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 39.
- ²³ "1959 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 84.
- ²⁴ Quotations used here are identified as being submitted by a minister, deacon, or editor. If not identified as such, the writer is a member who has typically submitted a letter to the section entitled "Stewardship".
- ²⁵ John Holdeman, *A Mirror of Truth: A Treatise for the Instruction and Comfort of the Just and for the Conversion of the Unsaved* (Hesston, KS: Church of God in Christ, Mennonite Publication Board, 1956), 446–448.
- ²⁶ "1909 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 15–18.
- ²⁷ "1974 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 106.
- ²⁸ Errol Wedel, "Usury," *Messenger of Truth* 90:15 (1991): 5.
- ²⁹ Errol Wedel, "The Interest Trap," *Messenger of Truth* 91:5 (1992), 4–5.
- ³⁰ Deacon Laurence Becker, "The Tragedy of the 'Now' Society," *Messenger of Truth* 90:9 (1991): 5–6.
- ³¹ Minister Charles Johnson, "Permissiveness," *Messenger of Truth* 90:8 (1991): 2–3.
- ³² Deacon Kim Buerge, "Credit: Service or Master?," *Messenger of Truth* 115:9 (2017): 4–5.
- ³³ "1983 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 114.

- ³⁴ “1993 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 121–130.
- ³⁵ Luke Miller, “The Fulfilled Life,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:21 (2018): 6–7.
- ³⁶ “Why I Believe the AV (KJV) is the Most Trustworthy Translation,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:10 (2017): 5, 7.
- ³⁷ Alphae P. Friesen, “Dear Brothers and Sisters of Like Precious Faith,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:9 (2017): 5–6.
- ³⁸ Mrs. Scott Eason, “Dear Brothers and Sisters,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:15 (2018): 11.
- ³⁹ Minister Conrad Barkman, “Should We Hold Fast or Let it Slip,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:13 (2017): 2–4.
- ⁴⁰ Minister Dennis Koehn, “The Old Time Gospel Versus the New,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:4 (2018): 5–7, 9–10.
- ⁴¹ “1909 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 17.
- ⁴² Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 479.
- ⁴³ Gary Loewen, “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:19 (2018): 3–4.
- ⁴⁴ Tim Huber, “Holdeman Mennonites Discuss the Challenges of Entertainment,” *Mennonite World Review*, 14 December 2015, <http://mennonworld.org/2015/12/14/news/holdeman-Mennonites-discuss-challenges-of-entertainment/>. The 2015 General Conference provides what might be the best definition of the term “realistic.” Church leaders have acknowledged the materialistic pressures of modern society, stating that it is important to distinguish between necessary levels of insurance, such as crop insurance, and insurance that seeks advantage for gain. See *Conference Reports*, 144. In other words, being realistic is an acknowledgement that the Church will have to make accommodations with worldly society.
- ⁴⁵ “1956 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 74, and “1959 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 86.
- ⁴⁶ “1974 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 107.
- ⁴⁷ “Welcome to Christian Health Aid,” The Aid Plans USA, <https://theaidplans.us/cha/>.
- ⁴⁸ Lester Penner, “A Tribute to Christian Health Aid,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:13 (1998), 3–4.
- ⁴⁹ Reuben J. Koehn, “Love Not the World,” *Messenger of Truth* 97:14 (1998): 1–3.
- ⁵⁰ Mervin Johnson, “Traditionalism versus Spirituality,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:9 (2017): 7, 9–10.
- ⁵¹ “1921 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 28.
- ⁵² “1974 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 106.
- ⁵³ “Holy Kiss,” Third Way, archived at http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://thirdway.com/glossary/holy-kiss/.
- ⁵⁴ Jacqueline Toews, “Dear Readers,” *Messenger of Truth* 90:11 (1991): 6–7.
- ⁵⁵ “1993 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 121.
- ⁵⁶ Shaun Isaac, “Dear Fellow Youth,” *Messenger of Truth* 115:17 (2017): 9.
- ⁵⁷ Keith Nightingale, “Vital Signs,” *Messenger of Truth* 116:5 (2018): 1–2.
- ⁵⁸ N. Van Der Zijpp, “The Early Dutch Anabaptists,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 77–78.
- ⁵⁹ Minister Ray Frank, “The High Place of the Church in the Life of the Believer,” *Messenger of Truth* 90:13 (1991): 2.
- ⁶⁰ Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 36.

⁶¹ The Kansas Ostroger were descendants of the Dutch-Prussian Groningen Old Flemish, a congregation of conservative Mennonites that originated in the Dutch province of Groningen and had three settlements along the Vistula River in Poland. In the early nineteenth century, these people settled in the region of Ostrog, near Volhynia, now part of the modern state of Ukraine. The Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde's history dates to the early nineteenth century when Klaas Reimer led a group in Molotschna Colony (Russia) to separate from the larger Mennonite Church, having found fault with laxity in church discipline. After this group emigrated to Canada, many members joined Holdeman's church.

The first group of immigrants to be baptized by John Holdeman in 1878 immigrated from Antonofka, a community associated with the Karolswalde circuit near Ostrog in the region of Volhynia. Many of the Antonofka villagers traveled together on the S. S. *Vaderland* and settled in the Lone Tree community of McPherson, Kansas.

⁶² Note that of these names, Koehn, Schmidt/Smith, Unruh, Jantz/Johnson and Nightingale relate to the Ostroger group, and Toews, Wiebe, Penner, Isaac, Friesen and Giesbrecht to the Kleine Gemeinde group.

⁶³ Looking back some 300 years to the Mennonite village of Schönsee in Prussia, we find a significant overlap with modern surnames and the names of residents in the land leases of 1695: Buller, Jantz, Koehn, Nachtigal, Nichol, Penner, Unruh, and Voth. GAMEO, s.v. "Schönsee (Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, Poland)," by N. van der Zijpp, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Schönsee_\(Kuyavian-Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Schönsee_(Kuyavian-Pomeranian_Voivodeship,_Poland)).

⁶⁴ Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 369.

⁶⁵ Holdeman, *A Mirror of Truth*, 21–22.

⁶⁶ John Holdeman died March 10, 1900, and is buried in the Lone Tree church cemetery in Galva, Kansas.

⁶⁷ Hiebert, *The Holdeman People*, 234–35.

⁶⁸ Harold S. Bender, *Menno Simons' Life and Writings: A Quadricentennial Tribute 1536–1936* (Moundridge, KS: Gospel Publishers, Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, 2004), 86.

⁶⁹ Holdeman, *A Mirror of Truth*, 476.

⁷⁰ Minister Milton Koehn, "Avoidance of the Apostates," *Messenger of Truth* 91:1 (1992): 2–4.

⁷¹ "1959 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 83.

⁷² John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1950), 70–74.

⁷³ Holdeman, *A Mirror of Truth*, 399.

⁷⁴ In this article, "nation" is considered to refer to the United States. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to consider policies of governments in other countries where Holdeman congregations are located.

⁷⁵ "1983 General Conference," in *Conference Reports*, 116–117.

⁷⁶ Milton Koehn, "Separation from the World," *Messenger of Truth* 91:4 (1992): 1–3.

⁷⁷ Minister Gladwin Koehn, "A Proper Covering for Nakedness," *Messenger of Truth* 90:7 (1991): 1–2.

⁷⁸ Minister Charles Johnson, "Permissiveness," *Messenger of Truth* 90:8 (1991): 2–3.

⁷⁹ Minister Gladwin Koehn, "A Heart Fixed," *Messenger of Truth* 115:8 (2017): 2–3.

- ⁸⁰ “1950 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 58.
- ⁸¹ “2015 General Conference,” in *Conference Reports*, 144.
- ⁸² Hans Werner, “Peoplehoods of the Past: Mennonites and the Ethnic Boundary,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 23–35.
- ⁸³ Herbert J. Gans, “The End of Late-generation European Ethnicity in America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38:3 (2015): 418–429.
- ⁸⁴ Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast, “Towards a Radical Postmodern Anabaptist Vision,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 13 (1995): 55–68.
- ⁸⁵ Perry Bush, “The Solidification of Nonresistance: Bluffton and World War, 1917–1945,” *Mennonite Life* 55:1 (March 2000), https://mla.bethelks.edu/mla-archive/2000mar/bush_article.html.
- ⁸⁶ Rene Penner, “Nonresistance Today,” *Messenger of Truth* 89:16 (1990).
- ⁸⁷ Albert B. Peachey, “Our Place in the Separation of State and Church,” *Messenger of Truth* 114:18 (2016).
- ⁸⁸ Cornelius F. Klassen, “The Mennonites of Russia, 1917–1928,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 6:2 (1932): 69–80.