The family has always been of central importance to the Mennonite way of life. Mennonite writers, historians, poets and playwrights have universally extolled the virtues of the family. Yet very little has actually been written directly about this important institution. Historical accounts, for example, have been sadly lacking (J. H. Kauffman, ME, Vol. 2, 1959: 295) in terms of actual direct descriptions of the nature of family life. Even more recent Mennonite histories typically contain only passing references to family life, and these will simply state its importance, with perhaps broad references to the size of traditional families and the extent of visiting with extended kin (cf. Epp, 1974: 80–81; Smith, 1981). However, in recent years, a body of sociological research on Mennonites has begun to emerge, and many of the studies from this perspective have included at least some analysis of family life among the Mennonites. The purpose of this paper will be to bring these materials together in terms of an overview of the Mennonite family. This overview will include such topics as the nature of courtship and mate selection practices among the Mennonites, marital relationships, parenthood and child rearing, and Mennonite kinship. These are basic topic areas within the sociology of the family. More specific issues and problems will be discussed within the context of these general headings.

Before we proceed with this analysis, some of the problems and pitfalls of an enterprise of this nature need to be addressed. One problem involves the very diversity of Mennonite society. Mennonites have lived in diverse cultural settings throughout Europe, in South America, and in Canada and the United States. We can assume that, in each context, the nature of everyday life among the Mennonites, including family life, has been influenced at least to some extent by the surrounding society and culture. These differing social and cultural contexts need to be taken into account at least to some extent for the sake of an accurate depiction of the unique characteristics and qualities of the Mennonite family. For instance, the most important single aspect of social and cultural context

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has to do with the historical Mennonite preference for rural settings. As a result of this tendency, the Mennonite family has tended to share some of the almost universal features of farm families (cf. Kohl, 1976; Ishwaran, 1983). The influence of this type of context therefore requires special attention. Because of the aforementioned dearth of historical accounts of family life, much of the material relating to this point will be drawn from more contemporary discussions of rural Mennonite communities, with the presumption that family characteristics in such communities have remained relatively unchanged from an earlier era.

A further consideration which must be taken into account in any survey of the Mennonite family involves the fact that different communities of Mennonites have been characterized by a considerable diversity in the exact nature of their religious beliefs and practices. This diversity cuts across the various social and cultural contexts in which these communities have been located, and therefore increases the complexity of the kind of undertaking which forms the purpose of this paper.

While a diversity of beliefs and practices has emerged among Mennonites over the centuries, there are nevertheless a central set of beliefs which have remained remarkably constant, and which have shaped the Mennonite way of life during that time. As a general characterization, Mennonites have sometimes been described as the radical left wing of Protestantism. While embracing the more mainstream Protestant critique of Catholicism, Mennonites rejected many of the compromises which they felt other Protestants were already making with these traditions, and with society. They believed that these Protestants fell short of a truly biblical view of the church. Such a view should include such practices as a clear differentiation between church and state, and baptism only of those who had made a responsible and fully informed commitment to the faith. From the outset, Mennonites also adhered to the principle of non-resistance, based on the biblical injunctions to 'love your enemies' and 'resist not evil'. These beliefs have influenced the Mennonite family in various ways: directly in terms of their implications for family relationships, and indirectly through their impact on the relationship between the Mennonite community and the larger society.

A further point of emphasis in the tradition of the Mennonite faith is one which is perhaps more central to marriage and family life. This is the belief in the essentially spiritual nature of the marital relationship (Krahn, ME, 1959: 293). The emphasis from the outset has been on a union of heart and mind, based on common loyalty to God. Members' relationship with the body of Christ was believed to be primary, and therefore all personal matters, even those involving family life, were secondary. We shall see that adherence to this principle has had important implications for various aspects of Mennonite family life. One important manifestation, for example, is to be found in the traditional practice of shunning, which was
to be carried out by the spouse of the banned person, as well as by the rest of the community.

Courtship and Mate Selection

A major effect of the Mennonite adherence to the view of marriage as first and foremost a spiritual union is to be found in the very strong tradition of religious endogamy: the requirement that members marry within the bounds of the community of believers. Endogamy has at times been practiced even within particular denominations. As an example of the latter, E. K. Francis (1955), in his study of Mennonite settlements in southern Manitoba, reports that at times, as a result of conflicts between the two congregations, "intermarriages" between 'Furstenlander' and 'Bergthaler' would be prohibited, despite the fact that the two churches were located next door to each other in the 'West Reserve' area. In a more recent study of a relatively conservative Mennonite community in southern Ontario, David Appavoo (1985) observed that until recently most marriage partners had been chosen from the pool of eligibles within the local Mennonite community. He reports, however, that more recently, with increased mobility and better communication, "intermarriages" with Mennonites from more distant communities in Canada and the United States have become more frequent.

The extent to which endogamy was practiced in relatively small, closed and isolated Mennonite communities may be related to the anxiety sometimes expressed in traditional Mennonite circles that marriages were in effect too close. Such concerns inspired a survey by Gustav Reimer (cited in Krahm, ME, 1959) which found that marriage among first and second cousins had been quite common in the more rural Mennonite communities. He found, for example, that of 93 young men in one rural community, 24 were related to more than half of the girls in the community, and 6 were related to more than three fourths. However, and it seems that this is an instance where it is useful to take the social context into account, he also concludes that the extent of cousin marriage was probably not any greater than among other similar rural groups. John Hostetler (1980), in his account of Amish society, whose members have continued to live in small isolated communities, indicates that strict taboos are to be found in this community against first cousin marriage, and that second cousin marriages, while they do occur occasionally, are also discouraged.

The isolation of traditional Mennonite communities, which, as it has with other groups (cf. Heer and Hubay, 1976), encouraged the strong adherence to the rule of endogamy, has of course been considerably modified among contemporary Mennonite congregations, at least in North America. Nevertheless, it can be observed that even in more liberal Mennonite congregations there remains an emphasis on the inad-
visability of intermarriage and a concern with the extent of its occurrence. Contemporary attitude surveys involving Mennonites have tended to show that Mennonites remain more opposed to intermarriage than many other religio-ethnic groups.

One study which enquired into attitudes toward intermarriage was an extensive survey of five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in the United States and Canada by Kauffman and Harder (1975). They found that 42% of their respondents believed that it was ‘always wrong’ for a Christian to marry a non-Christian, while another 45% said that it was ‘sometimes wrong’. When respondents were further asked if they thought it was important for a person to marry someone of his own denomination, a total of 53% said yes. A second survey which explored this issue was carried out by Anderson and Driedger (1980) on a more specific sample of Mennonites in rural Saskatchewan. This survey found that 56.5% said they were opposed to ethnic intermarriage, and 69.3% said they opposed religious intermarriage. Further breakdowns were provided for in this survey according to the generations included. With regard to ethnic intermarriage, it was found that 76.2% of the first generation were opposed, compared to 63.4% of the second, and 45% of the third. Comparable figures for the question of religious intermarriage were 92.9%, 69.5% and 60.9%. These figures suggest a considerable degree of liberalization of attitudes from one generation to the next. However, it should also be noted that the actual intermarriage rate found in this study was considerably lower. It was found that in fact 97.6% of respondents had married within the faith. These findings with regard to Mennonites were compared to the responses of members of a number of different ethnic and religious groups, who also lived in this part of rural Saskatchewan. These findings reveal that Mennonites, while perhaps more endogamous than most in their attitudes and behaviour, did not differ substantially from their neighbors in the extent of their emphasis on endogamy. The responses generally reflect the conservative tendencies which are associated with rural residence, and the fact that Mennonites are by no means unique in their emphasis on endogamy.

A more recent and more inclusive survey (Driedger, Vogt and Reimer, 1983) of endogamy and intermarriage among Mennonites in Canada examines national and regional trends, with special emphasis on the relationship between intermarriage and urbanization. The first part of this paper examines national trends among Mennonites in comparison with other religio-ethnic groups. This analysis is based on census data obtained from Statistics Canada, dating back to 1921. These data show that, while the extent of marriage within the group has declined for all religious and ethnic groups included in the census, the rate among Mennonites has remained among the highest. The data indicate that the percentage of endogamous marriages among Mennonites was 93% in
1921, second only to the extent of Jewish endogamy, which was 98%, and followed by Roman Catholics, who were found to be 84% endogamous. By 1981, the proportion of endogamous marriages among Mennonites had fallen to 61%. However, Mennonites still remained more endogamous than most. For example, the Jewish rate of marriage within the group had also declined by 1981, to 70%, but it still remained as the highest rate among the groups included in the census. As a point of contrast, other religious groups, such as Presbyterians and Lutherans reported rates in 1981 that were under 30%.

Further analysis of endogamy and intermarriage within the province of Manitoba provides additional support for the association between intermarriage and urbanization. For one thing, increases in the rate of intermarriage between 1921 and 1981 seem to parallel the rate of urbanization among Mennonites during this time. As well, according to 1976 figures, the rate of intermarriage was 43% in the city, compared to 10% in rural Manitoba. Finally, an analysis of intermarriage by congregation was also carried out. In 1976 the two most urban Mennonite conferences, Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites, also had the highest rates of intermarriage: 35% and 32% respectively. In contrast, more conservative conferences like the Old Colony Mennonites and the Sommerfelder, which remained primarily rural, reported little or no intermarriage.

The nature of the courtship process among contemporary Mennonites probably varies considerably, from the kind of very restricted contact between young men and women which characterize the more traditional communities, to full adoption of the kind of open unrestricted system of dating that has become the norm among North American youth (cf. Hoult, Henze and Hudson, 1978). Examples of more traditional kinds of practices may be found among the Amish, for example, or among Mennonites now living in South America. Among the Amish, young people get together on Sunday evenings for singing (Hostetler, 1980: 148). This usually involves the youth from a number of districts, who come dressed in their very best attire. Although hymns are sung, the singing is apparently quite spirited, and only the liveliest numbers are selected. A young man may bring a young woman to these occasions, but will usually come with his sister or sister's friend, and meet "his" girl there. Other occasions for meeting include husking bees and weddings.

In Mennonite communities in South America it seems that groups of young men and women meet in the village streets and get to know one another there. There is an absence of a formal dating system until courtship is quite advanced (Redekop, 1980). Similar patterns of interaction were observed among 'Old Colony' Mennonites in Mexico (Redekop, 1969: 70). Groups of young men and women would gather separately in the street. If a young man was interested in a particular young woman,
his group’s interaction with hers would provide him with the opportunity to talk to her:

Then soon you are able to see her alone somewhere and then the personal courting starts. When you are interested in a girl, you just let the talk go around that you are interested in a certain girl and the informal gossip takes care of the rest. The girls do the same thing, and we fellows soon know who is interested in whom. When you are seriously interested in seeing a girl, you go to her home and visit with her in the house. The parents will not allow you to take her out in a buggy. Not until you are engaged are you able to go out together. After you are engaged, then you can do what you want to, since you are getting married soon anyhow. (as quoted in Redekop, 1969: 72)

Another feature of courtship among Mennonites in South America, as with the Amish (Fretz, 1953), is the tendency for it to be focused to a large extend around weddings, funerals, and other church-based occasions.

Recent observations of a semi—rural Mennonite community in Southern Ontario (Apavoo, 1985) indicate that while courtship practices here approach the North American norm more closely, the influence of parents and the Mennonite community on courtship and mate choice continues to be important. Young people from this community were asked to fill out a standardized test designed to measure ‘ideal expectations’ in mate selection. The same test was also given to a sample of non—Mennonite youth residing in the same general area. A comparison of the two samples revealed differences related to economic and moral concerns. Mennonite youth were found to be relatively less concerned about economic attributes than their neighbors, but more concerned about the ‘religio—moral’ attributes of a potential spouse. The author of this study concludes on the basis of these findings that Mennonite youth were generally more concerned with ‘spirituality, chastity and humility’ than were the others (1985: 80). He feels that the emphasis on these dimensions is a factor which also serves to further reinforce the tendency toward endogamy within the group.

Generally, couples do begin to emerge more clearly even in traditional communities as the relationship moves toward marriage. In some congregations engagements are announced from the pulpit during the Sunday morning worship service. Apparently others, including the Amish and most Mennonites of Eastern European origin, adhere to the practice of “publishing the banns”.

Marital Relationships

There is general agreement among a variety of sources that Mennonite marital relationships have consistently tended to be of a patriarchal nature. Writing about Mennonite communities in South
America, J. Winfield Fretz stated that: "A North American visitor is likely to be impressed with the way the woman of the house plays the role of the servant" (1953: 64). Fretz observed that when he visited Mennonite homes, the woman was seldom present during the visit. When the visit took place over mealtime, only the husband and guest would be seated at the table. The wife would usually serve the food, but only in a few instances did she take part in the conversation. Similar observations were made by Redekop (1969: 68-69) in a study of 'Old Colony' Mennonites in Mexico. Redekop noted that in addition to her responsibilities within the household, the wife was expected to tend the garden, and to help with the farm chores during the harvest or in her husband's absence. Other authors (cf. Francis, 1955) have also tended to verify that, in the various agrarian settings in which Mennonites have found themselves, child bearing, child rearing and homemaking have been the principal objectives of a woman's life.

The tendency toward patriarchy is of course typical of agrarian societies (cf. Stephens, 1963; Lenski, 1978), and its prevalence among Mennonites is a reflection of the extent to which Mennonites have continued to reside in agrarian communities through most of their history. Patriarchy can also be seen as a reflection of the extent to which kinship has remained a principal basis of organization among Mennonites, with its corresponding emphasis on extended kin networks. Given the context of Mennonite marital relationships, it is not then surprising that family relationships tended to be patriarchal. More surprising is the extent to which traditional Mennonites appear to have adhered to what was in fact a modified patriarchal system. The modified nature of Mennonite patriarchy is indicated in two ways. The first has to do with the degree of respect maintained for each member of the family, and the general regard for the rights of each individual within the context of formally defined patriarchal authority. The second involves the practice of very egalitarian rules of inheritance.

The degree of regard maintained for each individual member of the Mennonite family derives from the broader emphasis, identified at the outset of this paper, on the essentially spiritual nature of marriage as first and foremost a union with God. This emphasis demands limits on the authority of the husband. The point is made by Fretz (1953: 62), quoted above with regard to the retiring nature of Mennonite wives in South America, who goes on to say that limitations on the extent of the husband's authority were defined by orientation to biblical passages such as: Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them" (1Colossians 3:19), and: "Likewise, ye husbands dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (1 Peter 3:7). Similar observations were made by E. K. Francis
who suggested that, within the patriarchal framework, a high degree of respect for democratic organization and the human personality was to be found within Mennonite families.

The conclusion that Mennonites in fact practiced a modified form of patriarchy has been put forward by Lynn Bender (1971) in the context of an historical survey of Mennonite settlers in Elkhart County, Indiana. This conclusion is based on a review of factors typically associated with patriarchy, such as late marriage of sons and a tendency among sons to follow in their fathers’ vocation. Bender found in contrast that nineteenth-century Mennonite sons had tended to marry relatively early and also displayed a greater tendency to pursue different occupations. These tendencies indicate a modification of patriarchy because they suggest that sons had a degree of freedom in these major life decisions not generally found in highly patriarchal societies.

A practice which may have contributed to Bender’s findings, and which in and of itself suggests a sense of equity in Mennonite family relations, is the practice whereby all sons and daughters inherited equally upon the death of the parents. Bender found equal inheritance to be the norm in an analysis of the wills of early settlers in the Elkhart area (1972: 80). This practice was also followed by Mennonite settlers in southern Manitoba, and is described in considerable detail by E. K. Francis (see also Redekop, 1969: 70). The rule of inheritance practiced here would give half of the value of an estate to the surviving spouse, with each of the children, both male and female, receiving an equal share of the other half. In the meantime, the family homestead would be taken over by the surviving spouse or by one of the adult sons.

The Mennonite system of property transfer was, then, characterized by the principle of equality; equal rights of husband and wife in the family farm, and equal inheritance by the children. Abstract equality, as advocated in many contexts in contemporary society, was not, however, the objective of this system of inheritance. Its purpose was to help establish young couples in their own households, and encourage further colonization. This fact is indicated by a number of related practices. One of these involved each child’s right to a ‘Zugabe’, or ‘extra’, which took the place of the usual dowry they would receive if both parents were alive when they married. This Zugabe was made up of specified items, different for males and females, but including items such as livestock, clothing and household goods. The purpose of this practice was of course, as with a dowry, to ensure that a young couple would have the basics required to set up their own household. At the same time, the shares they would receive from parental estates would contribute toward the capital required for the purchase of their own farm or enterprise. If the parents were both still alive at the time of marriage, advance payments would be made against what they would eventually inherit when the estate was divided.
It should be noted here that, in the meantime, every effort would be made to keep the parental estate intact. A number of related practices contributed to such preservation. For example, a distinction was made between major and minor children. The latter would remain with the household, even if the surviving spouse remarried, while their share of the estate remained an integrated part of it. Major heirs were entitled to ask for a cash settlement after a period of grace, but usually waited until they were married. In the meantime, estate values were usually set relatively low.

There is evidence that more contemporary Mennonites still tend to practice a modified form of patriarchy, and a more marked division of labour between the sexes (Apavoo, 1985). However, at the same time, there is very clearly a movement toward the more contemporary North American norm among contemporary urban Mennonite couples. It has been found, for example (Kauffman and Harder, 1975: 182), that contemporary Mennonite women are more likely than the average North American woman to be employed outside the home. Further to this (Yoder, 1985: 322–23), a very high proportion of these women are employed in professional occupations. If we view these findings from the point of view of contemporary analysts who see a close relationship between employment status and feminism (Scanzoni, 1981; Harris, 1981), then Mennonite women appear to be on the forefront of the feminist revolution.

Child-Rearing

One way in which the Mennonite family has differed from the outset has involved approaches to child-rearing. These differences are described in an article by Hillel Schwartz (1973), who demonstrates that the Mennonite insistence that understanding must be achieved before baptism could take place led directly to the emergence of a distinctive set of ideas about the nature of the child. The emphasis on understanding required that thought be given to the nature of understanding, and to how and when it was achieved. This led early Mennonite writers to formulate some fairly sophisticated concepts of the nature of the child. Various writers (cf. Schwartz, 1973; also Klassen, 1980) asserted the innocence of children, who 'knew neither good nor evil', and 'could neither believe nor disbelieve'. This view of the innocence of the infant was in direct contrast with the view of infant depravity (requiring therefore that they be baptized immediately), (Klassen, 1980: 18–19) or the preformationist views which still predominated in the sixteenth century (Aries, 1960), whereby children were perceived as miniature adults. The early Anabaptist perspective on the nature of childhood in fact sounds remarkably similar to the views of John Locke who, writing toward the latter part of the seventeenth century, is popularly credited as a pioneer proponent of the more contemporary view of childhood innocence, and the concomi-
mitant importance of environmental influences. The fact that this kind of concern with child-rearing was at odds with the more typical sixteenth-century Weltanschauung is indicated by Klassen’s observations that Menno Simons, in an essay on the subject of child-rearing, seems conscious of the possibility that some might resent his writing on this subject. He justifies this essay on the grounds that he has seen so many homes where the children are misbehaved and disobedient.

The concern with adult baptism also led Anabaptist thinkers toward a developmental model of childhood, long before this sort of model became extant in the larger society. The central assumption of a developmental approach is one which fits very well with a commitment to adult baptism. This assumption is to the effect that children are different from adults, not just less competent, or "incomplete" adults. As Jean Jaques Rousseau, who is generally credited with the first explicit and forceful expressions of a developmental approach, put it: ‘‘Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling . . . ‘’ (1762: 58, quoted in Crain, 1980: 14).

Early Mennonite writers were particularly concerned with the nature of the transition from childhood to "youth" (Schwartz, 1973). Some of the distinctions they formulated sound remarkably modern. For example, Menno Simons himself (as quoted in Schwartz, 1973) identified rationality, defined as the ability to choose between alternatives, as an aspect of this transition. He stated that: ‘‘If (children) cannot be made to understand anything visible, how can they then prematurely, that is, before they can comprehend things, be taught and instructed in invisible, celestial matters of the spirit?’’ The distinction here between comprehension of the visible and ‘‘invisible’’, i.e.,, abstract, suggests an implicit recognition of the distinction elaborated by Piaget (cf. Piaget and Inhelder, 1969) four centuries later, between the ability to perform "concrete operations" with solid objects and "formal operations" in the abstract. The other two criteria for the transition to youth, as described by Schwartz (1973: 107), are self-will and a conscience. These criteria can be compared to distinctions which are made in contemporary theories in the areas of ego development (cf. Loevinger, 1976), and moral development (cf. Kohlberg, 1966) respectively.

The emphasis placed on environmental influences in relationship to the young child in turn led early Anabaptists to a concern with childrearing and an emphasis on the responsibility of parents in raising their children properly which itself has quite a contemporary ring to it. While the child was regarded as originally innocent, it was also believed to be born with the capacity for evil. A great deal of responsibility was therefore seen to fall on the parents to be vigilant and strict toward their children, and not to let their "natural" love for their own offspring interfere with their Christian duty as parents. For instance, Menno Simons admonished
parents as follows: "Teach (your children) and instruct them, admonish them, threaten, correct and chastise them as circumstances require. Keep them away from good-for-nothing children from whom they hear and learn nothing but lying, cursing, swearing and mischief. Direct them to reading and writing. Teach them to spin and other handicrafts suitable, useful and proper to their years and persons. If you do this, you shall live to see much honour and joy in your children. But if you do not do it, heaviness of heart shall consume you at the last" (1956: 951-52).

More recent references to childrearing, especially in rural environments, tend to leave the impression that, of the various concerns expressed by early Anabaptists, the one which has received the greatest emphasis is the requirement of obedience from the children (cf. Redekop, 1969). However, here again, as with marital relationships, the formal authority relationship between parent and child appears to be modified by attitudes of love and respect. Fretz, describing Mennonite family life in Paraguay, states very directly that "Mennonite families are definitely not child-centered" (Fretz, 1953: 65). Children are described as having many chores to do and routine duties to perform. At the same time, they were not given the opportunity to participate in family decision-making, and tended to be pushed into the background when visitors came; for example, they were not usually allowed at the table when meals were shared with adult guests. Other descriptions of Mennonite children under similar circumstances, while also recognizing an emphasis on strictness and discipline, indicate a lack of harshness or severity in this relationship. For instance, Francis (1955: 272) states that: "The children themselves appeared docile and well behaved, yet without servility or shyness."

More contemporary observations of childrearing in Mennonite families indicate a substantial movement toward a closer approximation to contemporary norms and standards. However, here again some areas of difference can be found. Mennonites in southern Ontario, for example, were found (Apavoo, 1985: 82-83) to use more direct and straightforward methods of discipline with their children than their neighbors. Mennonite parents were more likely to scold, spank or strap their children. On the other hand, while they were strict, they seldom used techniques of manipulation with their children, and rarely used withdrawal of love, or isolation. Another study involving Ontario Mennonites, whose main purpose was to compare Mennonite with Japanese children (Maykovich, 1979) did find, as the most significant feature of Mennonite children to emerge from the study, that parents, rather than teachers or peers, were particularly important to the children, indicating a continuing emphasis on parental involvement and responsibility.

**Family Size**

One cannot really discuss the Mennonite family without addressing
the question of family size. The tendency toward large families is a characteristic among Mennonites which has been noted by numerous authors. We learn for example (Bender, 1972: 75-76) that Mennonite families in Elkhart County, Indiana in the 1860's had an average of 5.6 children, which was 1.3 children more than the average rural Indiana family during that decade. Further estimates based on census data indicate that the average size of Mennonite families from 1860 to the 1940's ranged between 7 and 9 members. In Whitewater, Kansas there were an average of 7.45 children per Mennonite family between 1876 and 1884. Data available on Mennonite families in Russia indicate that there were about 7 children per family between 1890 and 1910 (Krahn, M.E., 1959: 294). Large families are also reported to have been the norm in rural Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Francis, 1955; Anderson and Driedger, 1980), with many families having 10 or more children, and a good number having 15 or more. Finally, it is also indicated that, as recently as the 1960’s, ‘Old Colony’ Mennonites were averaging 8 children per family in Manitoba, and 9 children per family in Mexico.

Family size is another variable which is strongly associated with the difference between rural and urban residence (cf. Pool and Bracher, 1974), and as Mennonites have become more urbanized in recent years, there appears to have been a concomitant decline in the birth rate. This trend is demonstrated, for example, by age distribution data on the Mennonite population of Manitoba (as quoted in Francis, 1955), which by 1941 had begun to show a significant shrinkage in the proportion of members ten years of age and under, indicating the beginnings of a decline in the acquisition of new members through birth. The more recent Mennonite census (cf. Yoder, 1985: 335-38) traces further declines in the birth rate among Mennonites. These findings indicate that ever-married Mennonite women who were over the age of fifty in 1982 had an average of 3.5 to 3.9 children. In contrast, married women between thirty and thirty-nine in 1982 had an average of only 2.3 children. The survey indicates that contemporary Mennonite family size is very close to the average for the U.S. population, and that large families are therefore no longer the norm among contemporary Mennonites in North America.

Marriage and Divorce

The Mennonite view of marriage as an essentially spiritual union, in which one’s obligation lies first and foremost with Christ, has perhaps nowhere been more clearly manifested than in the area of divorce. The stress on the spiritual nature of the marital bond has been accompanied by the expectation that it be permanent. In consequence, the only grounds for divorce which has been considered acceptable historically is adultery. The essential Mennonite position on divorce is contained in the following statement by Menno Simons: "And also, that the bond of
The centrality of the concept of union with Christ to marriage is further demonstrated by the position taken by early sixteenth century Anabaptists to the effect that members be allowed, and in some cases even expected, to separate from, or divorce, those spouses who refused to accept the Anabaptist faith (Friedmann, 1959: 75).

As a consequence of the traditionally strict opposition to divorce, it seems to have been a relatively rare phenomenon throughout Mennonite history. This fact is indicated for the largest part of Mennonite history by the sheer absence of references to the occurrence of divorce. More concrete information concerning the incidence of divorce has only recently begun to emerge (cf. Driedger, Yoder and Sawatzky, 1985). Surveys of General Conference Mennonites in the United States and Canada carried out by Leland Harder (as summarized in Driedger, Yoder and Sawatzky) show that the rate of divorce for North America was .6% in 1960, 1.0% in 1970 and 1.7% by 1980. While different types of rates are difficult to compare, it may safely be said that these rates are substantially below North American averages for these years. Further analysis of these data reveal a substantial difference between General Conference Mennonites in Canada and the United States. For example, in 1980 the U.S. rate was 2.4% compared to .6% in Canada. This difference parallels general differences between the divorce rates in Canada and the United States. A further comparison of divorce rates by religious group carried out by Driedger, Yoder and Sawatzky (1985: 374) found that the Mennonite rate ranked among the very lowest, with only 'Reformed Bodies' and Hutterites having lower rates, and such bodies as the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church and Baptist churches having divorce rates among their members twice or more as great as the rate among Mennonites.

Kinship

It was stated at the outset of this paper that there has been a tendency, in historical accounts, and in general descriptions of Mennonite life, to assert the importance of the family to this way of life with little further said about the nature of family life. Nowhere is this more true than with regard to kinship among Mennonites. Typically authors will assert the importance of the family to the Mennonite way of life, and then support their assertion with some brief anecdotal remarks regarding
family size and the importance of kinship. The former has already been discussed here at some length. Perhaps the most frequent type of anecdotal remark, used to support the assertion of the importance of kinship, will refer to the tendency in gatherings of Mennonites to attempt to determine whether they are related to one another. The other frequent anecdotal remark will refer to the Mennonite penchant for visiting among relatives. For instance Frank H. Epp, in a very brief reference to family life in his otherwise comprehensive history of Mennonites in Canada, states that among Mennonites: "Social conformity came easily because socialization itself was a happy occasion, especially on Sunday afternoons when it was customary for relatives and friends to gather for storytelling and otherwise catching up on the events of the past week" (Epp, 1974: 285). In another example, Redekop (1969: 73) describes kinship relations among 'Old Colony' Mennonites in Mexico in similarly perfunctory terms: "The only real relaxation, recreation or social activity in which the Old Colony member engages is visiting with friends and relatives, sometimes in other villages". A third source is only a little more specific. This is the study by Anderson and Driedger (1980: 171) of Mennonites in rural Saskatchewan, wherein it is indicated that 'visiting with cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents is popular' and that most rural Mennonites in Saskatchewan still keep track of, and visit with, first and second cousins.

What is lacking in the literature on the Mennonite family is any sort of systematic documentation of the actual extent and importance of kinship among Mennonites. This kind of research would include the collection of information with regard to such questions as the actual number of relatives the typical rural or urban Mennonite is able to identify, the actual frequency of visiting, with what range of kin, in the context of what kinds of kin relationships. As well, the practical implications of kinship, in terms of various kinds of mutual aid and support, need to be investigated. Models for this kind of research are available from studies of various populations and groups in the United States (cf. Adams, 1968) and Canada (cf. Piddington, 1965; Garigue, 1956; Wellman, 1979). Some indications of what this kind of undertaking would reveal are suggested by previous research. For instance, it has generally been found that ties with relatives do tend to survive in urban environments, despite the greater competition with other forms of association (McGahan, 1982). On the other hand, it has also been found, for example among French Canadians (Garigue, 1956), that kin relationships are strongly associated with family size. Large families provide for a large selection of kin of the same generation: siblings and cousins with whom one can associate in adulthood. When family size declines, this selection is also reduced, and association with kin declines accordingly. Since, as we have seen, Mennonite family size has been declining, there may be similar effects on kinship association.
Implications for Further Research

This survey of research into the nature of Mennonite family life has shown that a considerable amount of work has been done in this area in recent years. At the same time, a survey of this nature is useful for the identification of areas where further study and research of Mennonite family life would be helpful. The need for further research has been identified most specifically in the area of kinship networks and relationships. Other areas which could bear further investigation include issues such as the influence of feminism among modern Mennonite women, or the influence of social class within the Mennonite community. Problem areas, involving for example the occurrence of violence and abuse within the Mennonite family also need to be explored.

There is a growing body of Mennonite literature in which depictions of various aspects of family life are to be found. Such a list would include *Lost in the Steppe* (1974), by Arnold Dyck, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) by Rudy Wiebe, *The Salvation of Jasch Siemens*, by Armand Wiebe (1984), the short stories of Sandra Birdsell (1982; 1984), Patrick Friesen’s narrative poem, *The Shunning* (1980), and *My Harp is Turned to Mourning*, by Al Reimer (1985), as well as quite a substantial number of other, perhaps less well known works. This literature reveals a great deal about family life. However, the descriptions they contain should not just be used for illustrative purposes in a paper such as this one. Rather, this literature deserves its own treatment, in the form of a thorough and thoughtful thematic analysis which would take account of such considerations as the intentions of the authors and the contexts in which depictions of family life are presented. It should be noted that a thematic analysis of this type, dealing specifically with images of women in Mennonite fiction, has recently been carried out by Katie Funk Wiebe (1985).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the Mennonite family. This overview has included such major aspects of family life as courtship and mate selection, marital relationships, parenthood and childrearing, divorce, and kinship relationships. In each instance, an effort has been made to identify unique characteristics of Mennonite family life, while at the same time relating these characteristics to relevant social and historical circumstances. These relevant circumstances have for the most part been related to the fact that, while Mennonites have been a predominantly rural people throughout most of their history, recent decades have seen a substantial movement toward urbanization, especially among Mennonites in North America. It has been demonstrated that this transition has had, and continues to have, important implications for Mennonite family life. However, the other major theme
which has guided this overview of the Mennonite family has had to do with the influence of the Mennonite faith on the nature of family life. It has been found in this regard that tenets of faith have been very important to the determination of the nature of family life among Mennonites in a number of important ways, and in some instances have served to modify and even counteract major social-historical influences.

References

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