

An Ontario Old Order's Reflections on Being Pilgrims and Strangers in a Demanding World

Levi Frey, *Mount Forest, Ontario*

The preamble on the conference brochure states that this is an “academic conference”. This should rule me out, because this kind of analysis is not something Old Order Mennonites generally do. In 1 Corinthians 11:28, and again in 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul tells us to “examine ourselves” but that exhortation was to see “whether ye be in the faith.” We Old Order Mennonites take that on a very personal basis, before we partake of communion. Yet I feel I have obtained much value in my personal life from observing the academic research of people like my friends Donald Kraybill and Andrew Martin. They dig deeper than what we generally do and from such people I have learned reasons why we do certain things the way we do.

An excellent example is the paper by Andrew Martin in this volume. When we as Old Order Mennonites trace our history, we tend to go back to the 1500s, and stop there. I have sometimes wondered how those first Anabaptists knew how to conduct themselves and what practices to follow. Andrew’s paper is the first time I have heard

a connection made to a monastic background. It is a very plausible theory and it helps explain some things which I have wondered about over the years.

Old Order Mennonites are often accused of being shallow, of blindly following tradition, of not really being Christians. Unfortunately some may fit this description but the majority do not. Do we honestly believe that there would still be Old Order Mennonites, if someone was forcing them, generation after generation, to be someone they don't want to be? Do you think one generation after the next would voluntarily put up with all these "societal inconveniences" because of something they don't believe in? I am an Old Order Mennonite because I have *chosen* to be an Old Order Mennonite. No one forces me to remain one.

One of the main reasons why we are so often misunderstood is aptly explained in Andrew's paper. We do not know the "evangelistic language" which is commonly spoken in modern-day Christian circles; therefore people mistakenly believe we do not know the meaning of Christianity either.

There are many other challenges to being an Old Order Mennonite in today's society. It is not always easy being an intentional misfit in today's super-charged technologically-focused world. Simply venturing out onto the road with a horse and buggy seems to border on the suicidal in some people's minds. In our part of the country it actually isn't any more dangerous than going out by car because people are used to seeing us on the road and in many places the roads, (especially provincial highways), have wider shoulders so we don't have to drive on the pavement.

Because of the animal rights movement, and the way animal rightists revere animals, some people think we should not be using horses on the road the way we do. Recently a local paper, two weeks in a row, had letters to the editor expressing the opinion that using a horse until he "lathers up" a sweat constitutes cruelty to animals. Just this week there was a lengthy article in the same newspaper, where the reporter interviewed several local veterinarians who all agreed that horses are made to work and if they are properly fed and watered they get more harm from standing around than they do from working up a sweat. (It is the same with you and me!) Knowing the power and methods of animal rightists, however, we know that to be careful is more important than to be right.

We as Old Order Mennonites have decided not to allow ourselves radio, TV, other entertainment devices, cell phones, computers, fax machines, or any form of internet connections. Because we tend to be separated from society this does not create too many problems in our relationships with it. But there are two areas which do present major challenges: government and business.

Since Old Order Mennonites do not, as a matter of principle, participate in voting we are not involved in government. Right? Unfortunately, very much wrong! Every person who lives in Canada is daily impacted by, and regularly interacts with, the government in some form or another. It is becoming very difficult to communicate with the federal government without electronic means. It is possible, but difficult, to obtain forms, such as tax forms and applications forms, in paper format without ordering them online. Some of the new quality-assurance programs being brought into every sector of farming require computer monitoring and are designed to work best using the internet.

The biggest struggles with the government are with regard to their social programs. We are conscientiously opposed to accepting any form of governmental financial assistance. We will not accept Child Tax Benefits, pensions, employment insurance, or workers' compensation benefits. We believe that the Bible teaches us that it is the responsibility of the church brotherhood to take care of members who are in any form of difficulty or distress. We feel that the government is usurping the position and authority which belongs to the Christian church. If the government or an insurance company carries out those functions it diminishes our sense of Christian duty toward one another. It becomes institutionalized charity: cold and un-Christian.

We do not apply for governmental programs. We send back program cheques which are sent out automatically. We have spent countless hours trying to get exemptions from the requirement to participate in mandatory programs. In 1974 we obtained exemption from the requirement to participate in the Canada Pension Plan if we were self-employed. Because of the current economic conditions, more and more of our young people are occupied in areas other than farming. For the last twenty years we have spent many hours trying to extend the exemption to the employed workers who work for an employer within the church brotherhood. So far we have not been successful. Still, we try to remember to follow the biblical injunction to pray regularly for our government, that they may rule wisely and impartially.

I will attempt to outline in some detail how one recent issue was resolved in order to give you a better idea of what we encounter. Old Order Mennonites have always taken a position against photographs. The stand was traditionally based on the teaching in Exodus 20:4 against making "any graven image, or any likeness of any thing." Today's arguments would include reference to this passage but would concentrate more on issues of pride and stewardship.

A few years ago, when the United States (U.S.) government legislated the requirement to have photo identification to enter the U.S., we were in a dilemma. We have sister churches in over a dozen U.S. states, so we did not want to remain at home in Canada and never

visit them again. We had major discussions, including church level discussions. Should we give up one of our ancient principles because the government insisted there simply was no other way? Solutions had always been negotiated before when legislation clashed with Old Order principles. Years ago we had negotiated a photo exemption provision on the Firearms Acquisition Certificate. But that was with the Canadian government. This time we were dealing with the U.S. government. (Canada does not have photo I.D. requirements for land entry at the present time.)

Some of us felt that maybe it would be possible to relax our position slightly and allow government-required photo-identification, while still holding our position on photographs otherwise. Some of us did not think this would be possible. It actually came to the point where church conference leaders reluctantly conceded that no one would lose his church membership if he obtained a regular passport. Some of our church members applied for and obtained passports.

Meanwhile, the Old Order Amish absolutely refused to give up. In the U.S., where there are tens of thousands of Old Order Amish, they actually have an Old Order Amish Steering Committee, a three-member committee whose mandate it is to negotiate with the government on behalf of all the Old Order Amish. Because the Old Order Mennonite numbers are so much smaller, they benefit from concessions negotiated by the Amish by default, but they are not on the Steering Committee.

The Committee wrote many letters and got their local congress representative to set up meetings with upper level Department of Homeland Security personnel. Finally, they negotiated a solution based on our exemption from the Canada Pension Plan, (and the equivalent in the U.S., the Social Security program). To obtain this exemption, a church congregation must meet certain stringent rules, after which the bishop of this approved church must then certify that a person is a member of the church. At this point the application is sent to the government for further scrutiny and approval. A copy of the approved form is sent back to the individual who applied for the exemption. Because there are American citizens who are Amish living in Canada, the U.S. government also requested information on the Canadian program. I provided numerous documents, as well as three type-written pages explaining in detail how the process works. These papers were sent to the U.S. government by the chairman of the Amish Steering Committee.

The Department of Homeland Security has determined that because of the nature of the approval process, the approved exemption forms may be used by American Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite citizens as an entry document at the U.S. border, when presented along with a valid birth certificate. In follow-up conversations, the Depart-

ment of Homeland Security has made it very clear that these provisions are only an administrative position and are only for U.S. citizens. At the present time, however, they are allowing Canadian citizens carrying the same papers to cross the border, but they have made it clear that it is only by their grace and that the policy could change at any time. We very much appreciate what they have done for us and feel unworthy of their grace. We do not want to take such things lightly or for granted.

In the 1960s, all the small country schools were closed and students were brought together by bus to larger schools. As Old Order Mennonites, our fathers did not like some things about the new system, such as the need to bring in public school teachers, (and today there are even more reasons why we do not want to send our children to public schools). This did not make sense to our fathers, so they started private schools and hired teachers from within the church group. The government has never challenged this position. This summer, we had our 46th session of summer school for our teachers. The government does not inspect our curriculum. We have written and published most of the books which we use now. As long as we put our best efforts into teaching our children, and conduct our schools in such a manner that there are no complaints from the public, the government chooses to ignore us. We regularly report on the teachers and on pupil numbers. Today we have almost 100 classrooms in approximately 50 different locations. We very much appreciate the tolerance that the government shows us by allowing us to teach our children our own curriculum, in our cultural setting, within our own communities.

Another one of the very practical aspects of brotherhood has traditionally been manifested in forms of exchanging labour and sharing machinery among neighbours. Modern technology flies directly in the face of these traditions. Everyone today is capable of doing everything himself. There is no longer a need to help the neighbour or the need to depend on him to help you. A practical aspect of true brotherhood is lost. People have become independent and do their own thing. In farming and other businesses, Old Order Mennonites have always purposely tried to avoid the latest in technology and have discouraged large-scale operations because they tend to make a person too pre-occupied with commerce and “the things of the world.”

In our response to these traditions and philosophies, we make church rules and regulations, some of which do not make sense to the casual bystander. A few of the rules to curb bigness include: no ownership of a tractor with more than 100 horsepower; the hauling of farm products on the road with your own equipment is strictly forbidden, (such hauling can only be done by hiring a non-Mennonite with a truck or tractor); a maximum tractor speed limit of 10 miles per hour is permitted for farm-to-farm travel; self-propelled combines are

forbidden; and owning a round or large square baler is forbidden, and bale throwers are discouraged, because this equipment reduces the need for neighbours helping one another. Modern machinery in general is discouraged, especially automated versions. In spite of all this, I observe with sadness that Old Order Mennonite farmers are definitely “cabooosing” along behind the world in farming technology.

Young farmers no longer require a full-time hired man. This means that our traditional “apprenticeship” programs are being lost. In times past, teen-aged boys would be hired to young farmers on an annual basis. They would move in with the host family and help out with the farm work. In exchange they received a nominal pay and invaluable experience in alternative methods of farming, which would prove them in good stead once they started their own farming operation. Many invaluable friendships were formed through this practice and, in many cases the young man may have even received low-interest or interest-free loans from former employers when starting up his own farm later in life. Young people often started into farming dependent almost entirely on such loans from family or other community members, which made it possible for them to set up a farm even if they had little equity. In times of higher interest rates this practice helped a young farmer work himself into a better financial position in a more timely way. It also helped to further the brotherhood by making people dependent on each other.

Today’s economic climate is different. It requires vast amounts of capital to start farming, especially in the sectors which are supply-managed. Because of the ever-increasing number of Old Order Mennonites, money is in shorter supply within the community. At present, interest rates at banks are such that it is very tempting for young farmers to use bank loans. By using a loan from the bank instead of from family or community members, Uncle John will not be watching as closely either, because his money will not be involved. Both young Joe and Uncle John, however, lose out with a reduced level of brotherhood dependence. Young Joe does not participate in the farming apprenticeship experience. Instead, at sixteen he goes to work with a construction crew, which gives him a higher level of income, making it easier to demonstrate the required equity to obtain a loan from the bank to purchase his own land. He will not have experienced the value of the brotherhood apprenticeship program, so he will not realize its importance for his generation and the next. As he continues in his career, he might make other non-traditional choices, like installing automated feeding equipment and hiring a custom operator to do some of his crop harvesting, vastly diminishing his dependence on the brotherhood for assistance in his life. In this way, more traditions are sacrificed to the economic world.

Because of the current economic conditions in farming, more and more young people are taking to non-farming occupations. It seems the only place where you can make money in farming is in the supply-managed industries. The only people who can afford to start their children off in these industries are the ones in my generation who have themselves been involved during their farming career. The rest of us just have to sit back and watch. These young people may have an investment of up to \$3 million, but they have a guaranteed income. This whole scenario is severely testing the bonds of community and brotherhood. It is creating a wide gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. Remember, Old Order Mennonites are merely humans, too. We dare not let ourselves think too deeply of the future when the Canadian government will sacrifice supply-management on the altar of world trade. Remember, even if the government would offer some form of compensation due to the loss of a guaranteed income, Old Order Mennonites do not accept financial assistance from the government. Would the “have-nots” accept their responsibility of Christian duty and brotherhood, and help to rescue the “haves” from their tens of millions in losses? The mere thought of this definitely tests the humanness in our sense of brotherhood.

So what does a young Old Order do if dad does not own any milk quota, and he does not want to throw himself to the mercies of the livestock markets? Many of them work in the construction industry and some of them build a shop on the farm. So far, most of them still have at least a small farm to come home to, but the days are fast approaching when young people will look only to the economic side and realise if they only had a house mortgage they could spend more hours on a job that makes real money; however, they would spend even less time at home. No farm duties in the evening seems like a good way to spend more time with the family, but it also brings with it the temptation to go away in the evening. More traditions lost!

How do you operate a construction crew today without a truck and cell phone? It is pretty difficult. Of course you can hire a crew member who has a truck and a phone, but what does that do to brotherhood and “separated-from-the-world” thinking. It definitely brings its challenges. So why not work for a non-Old Order with a construction crew? General attitude and atmosphere of construction crews in general is not conducive to traditional Old Order thinking. Coarse language, loud music, bad attitudes, etc., seem to be commonplace. It does not promote peace, brotherhood, and *Gelassenheit* (humility).

My four sons are in the construction industry. It is with sadness and reluctance that I observe this, because I know it is not good for the future of the Old Order church. But I have no better option to offer them. In the days when my friends were setting up to milk

cows, I became one of the few Old Orders to follow a different path. I taught school for seven years, then became involved in the farming equipment industry for a number of years, (I even paid 24% interest on the operating loans). Later on, I felt I could serve the community more if I left the equipment industry. I have spent countless thousands of hours helping people in the community to better understand “our” ways of doing business, assisting in church and school administration, etc. Would I have followed a different path 30 or 40 years ago if I could have seen how much of a difference it would have made financially? I do not know. It is too late to change all that. In the meantime, I have made myself feel happy and fulfilled because I have helped others in the brotherhood throughout frustrations and difficulties, while doing something which I love and feel strongly about.

But I digress. I was speaking about the challenges of being an Old Order Mennonite in today’s world. Because we depend so heavily on farm equipment in our daily work, it would seem that there would be room in that industry for some of our young people. It would be an honest occupation, required in the community, and an honourable business. There are many smaller welding shops where farm equipment is repaired and manufactured. These are important in the community and offer employment to some young people, (of course, with the usual problems surrounding Canada Pension Plan, Employment Insurance, and Workers’ Compensation). It is impossible, however, to be a full-line farm equipment dealer today without a full-scale computer system, therefore, it is impossible for an Old Order Mennonite to be a farm equipment dealer.

It should be possible for an Old Order to repair tractors, lawn mowers, and chainsaws. It is possible, as long as you don’t require information other than what you already have. Parts and service information today is dispensed via e-mail bulletins, CDs, or a direct internet connection. Parts books are no longer printed on paper. So how does a tractor-fixer obtain parts when he has no computer? Telephone orders are not accepted and how would an Old Order know what part numbers to order anyway? He has no fax machine and in many cases fax orders are no longer accepted. Does he go to the local dealer whose repair work he is competing for, and get them to look up and order the parts for him? We have no solutions at present, and what seems to be an honourable, honest, reputable, work-with-your hands community service is really no longer possible for a true Old Order Mennonite. I could go on all day with more examples of the challenges of being an Old Order in a fast-paced world.

You ask what I do for a living? Any money that finds its way into my bank account comes as a result of using my pen and my calculator. I have been doing income tax for over 35 years. About 500 people depend

on me to do their annual financial statements and/or income tax. I have no computer or fax machine. I love what I do!

Do we have issues and challenges regarding our youth and the Old Order philosophy? Are our children human?! Of course, we all know that young people are largely a reflection of what they observe during their growing-up years. Therefore, they are not all the same, because parents have various interpretations of Old Order philosophy and practices.

Old Order young people have more access to cash than they did in times past and to an array of electronic entertainment devices, for a surprisingly small amount of cash. Of course this is a problem. Some young people of Old Order parentage seem to have a very poorly-developed sense of conscience in this area. I will not go into further detail here, but I will state that I consider the cell phone as the single biggest threat with regard to our youth.

Why do I drive a horse and buggy? Do I consider a car an evil devise? No, I don't. The reason I drive a horse and buggy is because I feel that if my children don't have ready access to a motor vehicle they will have less opportunity to experience the temptations of the world. If we have to hire a car to travel farther than the distance a horse will go, it gives us reason to pause and re-consider the actual necessity of the trip. If my children have to hire a car for travel, there are places where they will not go.

The same philosophy applies to our relationship with the computer. Could I use a computer in my business and volunteer work? Of course I could. (Even speeches would be easier to write and edit!) Can I get along without one? So far it has worked surprisingly well. Several times a year I hire my neighbour to drive me to the local library and I will sit at his elbow and tell him what I need off the internet. Several times a year I drive to town with my horse and buggy to send faxes, if it becomes absolutely necessary.

As I said, I could go on all day. But I won't. I'm sure when you saw the title of my presentation you wondered what I would come up with. So did I. And especially because, until a few days ago, I had decided not to come to this conference. So my presentation was written on the train and in my hotel room after arrival. It was written with no reference materials. It is my life. It comes straight from my heart; parts of it hurt.