Anti-Fashion as a Social Boundary Marker among Holdeman Mennonite Women

Linda Arthur Bradley, *Washington State University*

> There were three girls in my large Holdeman family and we learned to sew our own dresses as soon as we could hold a needle. They looked a lot like the plain shirtwaist dresses our moms and aunts had worn years ago. We had very specific rules about fabric prints, colors and trims and avoiding fashionable dress. One of our neighbors asked if we all used the same 1950's pattern. We didn't think they were that plain! Then in my teenage years I fell in love with an outsider. I was expelled in 1988, and shunned, so we married and moved far away. About ten years later, we came home to visit and I was shocked at how different the women's dresses were. Back in the 80s, if I'd have worn any of the dresses my cousins in the Church were then wearing (1998), I'd have been expelled just for that! (Vera, 2015).

After years of rigid conformity to an anti-fashion dress code, by the end of the twentieth century, significant changes were apparent in the dress of the conservative Holdeman Mennonites The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of Holdeman women's dress and to analyze potential reasons for the rapid changes. Holdeman Mennonites, formally known as the Church of God in Christ Mennonite (CGCM) [1] consider plain dress as a visual expression of religiosity. For plain people, the main function of

dress is to identify the religious group and show its cohesiveness, not to display individual differences. Overtime many Mennonites have used dress as a symbol to silently communicate their values, and often they have dressed much more simply than other Christians (Gingerich, 1966). The most conservative ('plain') Mennonites see themselves as being part of the kingdom of God, not of the kingdom of the world. They adhere to the biblical injunction that they are not to follow the fashions of the world, but must dress simply and modestly to visibly provide a symbolic boundary that separates them from the world. (Scott, 1986).

Plain dress for these groups is a form of anti-fashion, a term that was defined by Davis as a form of oppositional dress, where dress codes are created in defiance of the norms of the larger society (1992). Cunningham and Voso-Lab noted that anti-fashion visibly rejects the norms of the larger society and hence rejects the status quo (1991). In recent years the concepts of symbolic devices and social boundary markers have been important in the social sciences. The use of these markers define identity, gender, ethnicity, and class, in situations of both stability and hybridity (Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

According to Foucault (1979), the soul can be signified on the body. Douglas further argued that culture inscribes the body in terms of how it is presented (1982). In highly conservative religious groups, religious orthodoxy has a strong influence on a person's behavior. Belief is a cognitive dimension of one's religiosity, while commitment to that religion is an affective dimension. Between belief and behavior, commitment is an intervening variable (Cornwall, 1998). Some scholars suggest that commitment is made manifest in a person's level of religiosity. This is the major variable affecting such things as dress and involvement in one's religious community (O'Cass, Lee, & Siahtiri, 2013). More specifically, dress can be read to interpret levels of religiosity (Shaheen, 2015). A question arises as to whether or not women in highly controlled patriarchal religious groups have agency. Scholars have shown that in spite of such constrained environments, women can be actors with the power to affect change (Burke, 2012).

Social Roles for Mennonite Women

For Mennonite groups all across America, separation from the world became harder to achieve in the second half of the twentieth century. In a study of Mennonite women in Kansas, Loewen noted

that radical change in their social roles came after World War II. The dilution of the farm economy led many women to find work in the local towns (2002). Similarly, Schmidt found that when Mennonite women began to work outside the farm, they gave up plain dress (2002). Mennonite men dress more like men in the outside world, but the women are expected to show non-conformity to the world through their dress (Epp, 1990). These studies are pertinent to the current research on the CGCM at the beginning of the twenty first century since farming is no longer the dominant occupation. Many CGCM communities today have no farmers at all (Schrag, 2012). Because of higher land costs the Holdemans have been forced to find occupations outside agriculture, which increased relationships with outsiders. As Hiebert noted, the Holdemans have also begun to travel more and that led to more contact with non-Mennonites, resulting in a broader understanding of the world, and increased assimilation (Hiebert, 2010). Not surprisingly, the role of dress as a visible form of separation from the world became increasingly important to the Holdeman Mennonites as the twentieth century progressed.

Relatively little is known about women's lives in the CGCM. Only a handful of research studies on this group have been published. Hiebert's study focused on the history of the group through 1969 (Hiebert, 1973). The pivotal and tumultuous 1970s has unfortunately not been covered in any study. My own studies on Holdeman dress (Boynton1986;Boynton Arthur 1993; 1997; 1999) focus on the 1980s and 1990s and were all conducted in one rural community in northern California. The first was an ethnography. It indicated that by the 1980s Holdeman men were no longer distinguished from outsiders by plain dress but only by groomed beards and mustaches that they grew after being baptized. Men's clothing was no longer home made, but was purchased. On a daily basis the Holdeman men were nearly indistinguishable from their neighbors, but were more modestly dressed (Boynton, 1986). My work indicated that Holdeman women have consistently worn very simple, modest and long one-piece dresses based on the basic shirtwaist dress that was the style of their ancestors in the nineteenth century. They had high necklines, often with a collar, and with buttons down the front of the loosely fitting bodice. Skirts were loose and long, below the knee or longer. Dresses had sleeves; long sleeves were required at church. The fabrics were generally simple prints. Belts were made of fabric to match the dress and did not have buckles. Similarly, buttons needed to match the dress and be subtle. The key function of plain dress was to identify the woman as Holdeman, but not to

call attention to her as an individual. Uniformity in plain dress, generally referred to as being consistent, has constantly been required. Holdeman women's appearance standards had stayed somewhat consistent with the expected dress code and clearly did not follow contemporary fashions. Their dresses had to be sewn at home. The black head covering and kerchief continued to be worn to symbolize the woman's submission to God, to men in general, and to her husband. The cape over the shoulders and bust disappeared in the early twentieth century, but other than that, the overall design was close to John Holdeman's original dress code. By the 1980s, women and girls who had been baptized still wore shirtwaist dresses in simple prints, like previous generations in the Church. By the 1980s the length of the dress had varied a few inches throughout the decade, as had the fiber content of fabrics, however, there was little variation in the dress styles reported by the late 1990s (Boynton Arthur, 1993, 1997).

A struggle between group identity and personal identity as evident in plain dress was discussed in another of my studies; it showed how plain dress can simultaneously show compliance, resistance and agency. The minute details of a garment were examined closely. Certain things could not be changed and other details were more negotiable. Some deviation was allowed, but care had to be exercised. While women enforced the norms to protect each other from the oversight of the ministers, they banded together to push for changes in the dress code. In particular they tried (unsuccessfully at this time) to change the construction of the black head covering. The attempt showed agency (Boyton Arthur, 1993).

In a later study I found that dress was used to interpret levels of spirituality; clothing was perceived as a mirror to the soul. The social control system was examined in relation to how plain dress is enforced. Two typologies emerged. Orthodox women followed the dress code very closely, while marginalized women pushed the boundaries on smaller issues such as the fabric pattern and construction details. While both groups of women complied with the uniform requirements of the dress code, the marginalized members showed individuality in a visual way. This was seen as non-compliance by others in the community, and marginal women noted that the ministers kept a close eye on them as a result (Boynton Arthur, 1997). That the women exercised agency by banding together to make small changes was clear in this study. That exercise of group power would become more evident in the new study, reported below.

The Current Study

In contrast to the uniformity of Holdeman women's dress over the course of twentieth century, a wide range of dress styles was seen by the end of the twentieth century and even more are acceptable at present (2017). The focus of this current study is to document and examine these changes in the women's dress code for the past two decades and to analyze their dress in relation to the degree to which women adhered to the CGCM requirement to avoid the fashions of the world. The goal is also to describe and analyze the changes with regard to the socio-cultural context. George Bush and Perry London (1960) proposed a theory that changes in long-lasting modes of dress are accompanied by significant changes in the social roles. The hypothesis for this study is that Holdeman women's roles have been changing and that these changes might have led to simplification of the anti-fashion dress styles in order to speed up the process of making dresses. Female solidarity and agency with regard to making changes for the group is anticipated as a potential outcome.

In order to get a sense of what issues were salient to the Holdemans, two print sources, published by the CGCM, were examined. The official document of the CGCM, *The Messenger of Truth*, a bi-weekly newsletter focuses on living a spiritual life, and one in which ministers and members write in to express their concerns, was examined first. Specific issues related to this study were subjected to content analysis. Editorials and commentary between 1970 -2014 showed that 28% focused on the importance of plain dress and avoiding worldly fashions,while the concept of uniformity in dress (also referred to as consistency) was a topic for 6% of the entries. In the last decade of the twentieth century, concerns about women working outside the home and the resultant changes in roles began to surface, with 3% of the entries focused on this issue. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, that rate was up to 5% .

The second publication gave voice specifically to women's concerns. In 1994, the CGCM published a book entitled *Sister to Sister: A Collection of Heartfelt Convictions by Christian Women of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite*. Edited by Stoppel, it was a compilation of writings (1980s-1992) by Holdeman women. Beyond general issues related to spirituality, specific issues were addressed: the largest issue was the need to follow the plain dress code (20%); women's primary role as wife and mother (18%); spirituality as expressed by being plain and humble (13%), the problem of women working at jobs outside of the home and the

CGCM community (5%); dressing uniformly (5%); and the 'problem' of unmarried women (3%).

In both publications it was clear that the need to follow the dress code (often referred to as 'being consistant') that was modest and humble, and to reject worldly fashion, was of concern to ministers and the women alike. Similarly, concerns regarding married women working in jobs outside the community surfaced with worries expressed as to the resultant role changes. Schrag interviewed four Holdeman ministers in 2012 and quoted Minister Becker as stating that "modesty, economy and simplicity—this covers our approach to life." Similarly, Minister Koehn elaborated on this concept as he indicated that everything that they do, purchase or wear, must fit these principles (2012). The importance of unity among the groups' members was a guiding principle in all things and was a constant issue for the CGCM throughout the past century. The principle of unity required that women must dress modestly, in ways that communicated their commitment to avoiding worldly fashions.

In addition to examining these two texts, this study also undertook ethnographic fieldwork. Because my prior research on Holdeman women's dress published in the 1980s and 1990s was all done in one community in northern California, one research question was whether that work was generalizable to the whole CGCM. I felt that examining other communities would provide a wider view and could produce more generalizable results[2]. While an outsider, I had tenuous connections to the Holdemans through a distant relative, and had spent years developing relationships with women in the Holdeman community near her home. These connections were keys to my acceptance into Holdeman communities in California, Idaho, Washington, Kansas, and Manitoba (2010-2016). Generally CGCM communities are located in rural areas, often within 30 kilometers of a small town. Observations and interviews occurred in many places: I attended church services, Sunday school meetings, weddings, pot-luck dinners, quilting bees, sewing circles and numerous informal gatherings in women's homes. Data was recorded wherever possible with a tape recorder, and the recordings were transcribed. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data. Field notes were taken by hand, and kept in daily logs. Current members as well as ex-Holdemans were interviewed (pseudonyms[3] are used in the findings below). Notes were supplemented with sketches of garments.

Finally, I also undertook a photographic survey. Wherever it was feasible, I discretely took photos myself. From that data, a

typology of dress styles currently worn was developed. Additional photos were gathered from published sources, from members and ex-members, and online through Facebook pages. Photos were restricted to those taken between 1900 and 2015 that displayed at least 75% of the figure in the shot. In order to focus on everyday dress during events when people had the most freedom in selecting clothing, photos from ceremonial events such as weddings, were excluded. In order to compare Holdeman dress to that of outsiders, a content analysis of illustrations in twentieth century Sears catalogs was done to create a typology of fashionable everyday dresses worn by middle-class women in North America during the twentieth century.

Salient Themes from the Data

It is clear that one of the greatest challenges to the CGCM has been to reducing worldly influences in an attempt to control assimilation. The issues of concern that arose in the CGCM publication attests to that. The socio-cultural context was the difficulty of being physically separate from the world by the end of the twentieth century. The majority of members were no longer living on isolated farms and many members had much more interaction with outsiders. In order to forestall these interactions, by the 1990s most of the Holdeman communities had built their own private schools in order to reduce assimilation for youngsters. Since the youth formally joined the church in their early teens, those critical years were under church control. 'Worldly amusements' such as owning TVs, radios, or going to theatres have been banned for years and these boundaries still hold. However the outside world was able to penetrate into the communities when the Internet was allowed for business use, although the computers were occasionally monitored by ministers. Soon, cell phones were also allowed and were quickly replaced by smart phones. Un-intended consequences followed. Through the increased use of smart phones, the Internet became increasingly accessible and young people in particular have been easily able to follow celebrities, fads and fashions. They watch films on their cell phones. Additionally, while cameras are still prohibited, members of all ages now take discrete photos on their phones, and many upload them to Facebook pages.

Changes in Holdeman Women's Roles

During the interviews, women discussed a wide variety of issues. The primary role for Holdeman women is still that of wife and mother. Single women do work outside the home, but the hope is that this employment is short-lived and they will soon marry, stay home and raise children. Traditionally spinsters taught in CGCM schools or worked in local stores, but today they may get health care jobs. Faith noted: "if they've not gotten married then the ministers might let them go to college so they can be nurses. Annie was allowed to get her LPN license" (2015).

Through much of the twentieth century, Holdeman women's lives were confined to the domestic sphere. In referring to the 1950s, Blanche stated "moms nearly always stayed home with kids – they didn't work outside the home then" (2015). With economic downturns and the increasingly high cost of farm land, many women had to find outside work. It often began with 'side work'—sewing, cleaning, or cooking for other Holdemans. This trend was not seen as a problem as it kept the woman in the community. However if it was financially necessary, then the woman might take on a full time job in town. This was not considered ideal. As one Holdeman minister said, "Married women who have real jobs outside the home only do it out of economic necessity and return home when they can afford it" (Elijah, 2015). Amelia spoke about this; she has worked and raised babies at the same time: "Moms who work outside of the home are still expected to take care of all the family responsibilities. Women juggle home and work with efficiency. Often they do side work, or work in Mennonite owned restaurants or homes for the elderly (2010)." Because changes in long-standing modes of dress are tied to changes in social roles (Bush and London, 1960), the two symbols (dress and roles) are intimately linked.

Head Coverings

Certain behaviors and symbols, though, are primary, and yield to change much more slowly (Scott, 1986). As a primary symbol for Mennonite women (Scott, 1986) the black head covering is the most crucial symbol in the CGCM that visually attests to a woman's acceptance of her social role.

Two styles of head coverings are used in the CGCM. On Sundays an older version, known as a 'tie down' is worn to church. It covers nearly all of a woman's head. The tie down is a black kerchief that originated from the fringed, printed black scarves

brought to North America by the *Kleine Gemeinde*. In the early twentieth century the fringes and print were eliminated, so today it is just a plain black kerchief. The everyday head covering is a flat square of black fabric that is shaped into a large oval as it is pleated and pinned around the bun on the back of the head. It covers the back of the head. From the 1950s until the 1990s it was uniform in size and shape. Elsie (2014) noted that "Before the 70s women only wore the head covering at church and during prayers at meals". Eloise explained that "When women started going out in public more, and getting jobs, then they started wearing the head covering all day" (2014). In the 1980s the women asked ministers if they could sew the head coverings into shaped caps that looked like the pinned coverings. That was denied at the time but was allowed by the end of the century – originally for women with arthritis.

Faith additionally observed that "many women are wearing smaller head coverings, at least one-third smaller than 10 years ago" (2014). This change was a source of friction as it was perceived as indicating a lower level of acceptance of the rules, and possibly a subsequent reduction of spirituality. The tension over this indicates the power of the head covering as a symbol of women's role in the church and gender hierarchy. It took three decades for the ministers to allow for a minor modification, and during that time women's roles and dress were changing as well.

Content Analysis of Holdeman Mennonite Photos

A century-long survey of photographs with reference to fashion and anti-fashion contextualizes the changes at the end of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century everyday dress for both outsiders and for Holdeman women was long, modest and functional and in keeping with women's traditional roles as wives and mothers confined to the domestic sphere. Dress for outsiders changed rapidly and modesty was no longer a major value to the dominant culture. Throughout the century body exposure and closely fitting clothing became increasingly normalized. Meanwhile, the CGCM continued to insist on modest clothing (anti-fashion) that loosely covered most of the female body. The tension between prevailing fashions and plain dress for the CGCM became an issue and photo evidence of this disjuncture is recorded in the charts, outlining the content analysis of 1,009 photos, below.

(n=363)	Holdeman Mennonite Men		
	Fashionable	**Mixed**	**Anti-F/Plain**
1900	81	0	19
1910	53	43	4
1920	34	33	33
1930	16	26	58
1940	21	21	58
1950	20	54	26
1960	47	34	19
1970	63	31	6
1980	66	29	5
1990	84	11	5
2000	93	6	1
2010	94	5	1

(n=646)	Holdeman Mennonite Women		
	Fashionable	**Mixed**	**Anti-F/Plain**
1900	69	2	29
1910	31	49	20
1920	30	59	11
1930	1	39	60
1940	39	31	30
1950	32	38	30
1960	30	32	38
1970	41	39	20
1980	2	38	60
1990	20	41	39
2000	26	54	20
2010	24	58	18

Figures 1 & 2. Anti-fashion gives way to fashion. Percentages of the sample, by era and type.

Clothing worn in these Holdeman photos was compared to the twentieth century typology as documented in Sears' catalogs. This comparison indicated whether the Holdemans in the photos were following worldly fashions, mostly following the approved anti-fashion dress code, or strictly following it. The data from the chart and the interviews help tell the story.

It is well established that as worldly fashion became more immodest, the CGCM leadership's admonition to avoid worldly dress was followed up with a 1923 rule that members were required to wear plain dress. That was effective for a while in that most members did conform to the rule. In the 1950s and early 60s, however, the shirtwaist dress was considered fashionable by outsiders and for a while Holdeman women could actually buy

some dresses that met their needs as plain dress while simultaneously being fashionable. In the interviews, Holdeman women agreed that they dressed like the wider world in the late twentieth century. Myra said that dress styles did not change much until after the 1950s, and that she got her design ideas from Sears' catalogs (2013). However the late 60s brought in radical changes in fashion. As Eloise noted: "in the 60s and 70s our dresses were much like those of the outsiders since what was fashionable for our worldly neighbors was similar to our dress code anyway, but we just looked more plain and while our skirts were the shortest they'd ever been, they were never as short as what the outsiders wore" (2014). Enough of the young women dressed like outsiders that the ministers were worried. Compliance to the anti-fashion dress code waned precipitously at that time. In the 1970s only 6% of the men, and 20% the women were wearing plain dress (anti-fashion). Dress was seen by many Holdeman ministers as just the tip of the iceberg, indicating that the CGCM was assimilating rather than avoiding the world. In order to get this trend under control, the Church developed the panel system in which a group of ministers would examine members' behaviors for noncompliance. They expelled numerous people during what became known as the Purge of the 1970s. As Faith noted, "conformity to the dress code and other symbols were seen as a critical issue" (2014). The photograph survey indicates that after the purge, the rate of compliance to the anti-fashion dress code in the 1980s stayed about the same for men (5%), while it tripled to 60% for women. Apparently women felt the need to dress uniformly more than did the men, who enforced the rules. Since the 1980s, men have steadily avoided plain dress and today only 1% dress plain and 94% wear fashionable (but modest) men's dress. As for women, the high point of plain dress was in the 1980s (60%) but currently only 18% wear anti-fashion clothing. Judging from the photographs the majority of women (58%) wear a mix of fashion and anti-fashion at present. While their dresses are still rather plain, the women cover the dresses up with fashionable jackets and sweaters, and also wear fashionable shoes and other accessories.

Introduction of Design Changes through Female Agency

A significant change happened in the 1990s that allowed women to avoid wearing stockings (previously required), and that was the introduction of very long dresses. Eloise lived in California and Canada. She introduced longer dresses first to the Canadian community, then later to one in California, and the trend took off.

She said that by dropping the hemlines people considered the dresses more modest. A side benefit was that women could quit wearing stockings in the summer (which had been required), as legs were then hidden. Additionally, because people saw the longer dresses as more modest, she was able then to bring in new design ideas for the rest of the dress that were not commented on until she made one particular dress that drew entirely too much attention: Eloise remembered this as probably occurring in 2000, and reflected that:

> I made a long dress of camouflage fabric with buttons from the neckline to the hem, with short sleeves, a belt and epaulettes. It had two patch pockets with flaps at the chest and was quite militaristic in style. The guys in Canada joked about that, since we're pacifists, and said, 'what war are you fighting?' I could wear it in Canada, but not in California where I was called out for it (2014).

Current Dress Styles

Today, judging from my photographic survey, only 18% of the Holdeman women wear strictly anti-fashion styles, and 58% wear mixed fashion styles. The dresses are definitely plain, but many women, generally younger women, add fashionable accessories to the ensembles. This would not have been allowed 30 years ago. An expelled man who still lives in a Holdeman community observes that "for the longest time, the test of loyalty for Holdeman women was to wear humble, less fashionable dresses compared to the world. This differentiation was less important after worldly women switched to wearing jeans a generation ago" (Asa, 2013). The fact that Holdeman women wear homemade dresses sets them apart since most women in the outside world regularly wear pants or jeans. While the official anti-fashion dress code has remained constant, in that the head covering and plain dress are primary symbols, how those are constructed has changed. Sewing the head coverings into caps speeds up getting dressed in the mornings. Faith observed: "We spend less time sewing because dresses are now simple, but very long and tubular. Elastic waists and short sleeves are OK for daytime, but for church we still wear belts and long sleeves. Buttons are generally just for decoration now" (2015). After the purge of the 1970s, ministers more strictly enforced the dress code and this led to a limited range of styles allowed for women. There were three basic styles from the 1980s to the 1990s (Boynton Arthur, 1997). Since then women have joined together to introduce changes. Currently there are at least six major styles

and as many sub-styles of dresses. The drawing below illustrates the basic dress styles found in the US and Canada in 2016. Dresses numbered one and three were approved dress styles throughout most of the twentieth century and are still worn, mostly by older women. They may be dresses actually made in earlier decades, in which case they will be shorter, at about knee length, which was common in the 1980s (Boynton, 1986; Boynton Arthur, 1993). However, styles one and three are still being made at present, but the new versions of these styles are much longer than before. What has stayed consistent as primary symbols are the high neckline, limited body exposure, a waistline and long skirt length. Carla tested this in the 1990s by making a long dress similar to number five, but without a waistline. She was immediately criticized for her design and was no longer able to wear it (2016).

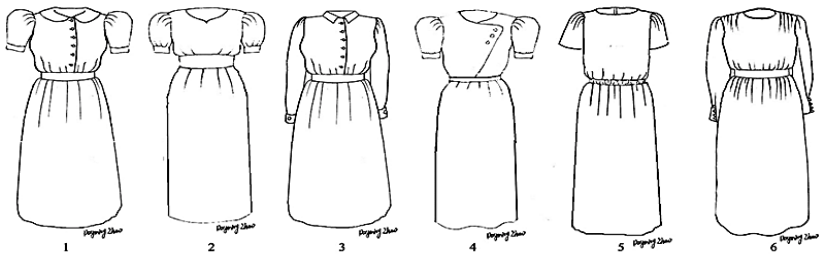

Figure 2. Most Common Holdeman Dress Styles in 2016

Most dresses today are long (mid-calf length, or longer) with narrow skirts. Functioning buttons and buttonholes, once required, are now only found on these two older styles (numbers one and three). Buttons are merely decorative when found on the newer styles. The stiff belt is now only worn to church, and elastic at the waist is the norm. Any of the dress styles above can be worn to church, so long as the sleeves are long. The most significant changes are that the garments are now tubular, and fit much more closely to the body. Zippers, if used, are usually in the back of the dress, unless the woman is breast-feeding, in which case dress number two is used with a horizontal zipper at the top of the waist yoke.

When women were asked about why these changes happened, many referred to the length of time that it would take to make the older style, more complex dresses. Rebecca said "I don't know anyone who's got much time to sew- we've all got other jobs to handle along with managing the family" (2016). For an avid

seamstress, it could take three days to make dress number three as it has at least seven pattern pieces and about seven buttons and buttonholes. However a less complicated dress, such as dress number five, is a long straight sheath with only three basic pattern pieces, and a piece of elastic sewn in at the waist. This could be made in just about two hours. Interestingly though, just as many women attributed the changes to fashion as they did to the desire to simplify garment construction. As Samantha stated, "Well, we get tired of the same old thing. To keep dresses from being too boring, we find beautiful buttons or ways to sew them to be a bit more interesting. It's just fashion – it changes" (2014). Holdeman women seemed comfortable with using the word fashion, and often used it in relation to secondary symbols such as fabrics, buttons and accessories. Deborah said:

> Our younger folks are more likely to bend the rules and adopt fashion. They buy fashionable jackets, sweaters, scarves, shoes and boots. Women get away with it because they're doing it in great numbers. The Ministers are watching dresses but haven't caught on yet to the store-bought garments and accessories (2015).

In a focus group interview, the women discussed how fashion ideas come in through women's magazines, shopping in department stores and traveling. One woman will introduce something new then it is replicated by others. As Margaret said, "the new idea will catch on like wildfire" (2015). This practice shows women's agency at work. Women collectively incorporate small changes and eventually the norm itself has changed. The ministers don't challenge these variations so long as many other women are making the same changes, therefore altering the norms. Elijah (2014) noted that recently Holdeman women have more exposure to outside world with women's magazines (such as *Good Housekeeping*, which were formerly prohibited) and the Internet. Women in the focus group agreed that while there is some consistency with the acceptable dress styles across the CGCM, regional differences in clothing are seen in details, in the secondary symbols. Alice noted (2015), "some allow bold or fancy fabrics compared to others and different materials too. Velvets, suedes, shiny taffeta even. Now there are some really tight skirts that wouldn't have been allowed a few years ago."

Store-bought dresses can cost significantly less than those sewn at home. Wilma (2014) reported that she spends about $90 on fabric and supplies for the dresses she makes and if she has a friend make one for her, the labour is an extra $45. Lately

Holdeman women have been buying maxi dresses. These are long dresses that generally cost under $30; they are made of synthetic knits that hug the body. Mostly these are worn outside of the CGCM communities. Carla, a woman who had left the church in the 1970s, said "I was in Costco on an extremely hot day. I saw a Holdeman woman in a maxi-dress covered by a sweater that was buttoned up!" (2016). Jackets and sweaters are often worn primarily to cover the tightness of the bodice.

Modesty

In shifting from loose shaped dresses to tubular dresses, Holdeman women have followed the current body-conscious dress styles in the outside world. However those who were interviewed explained that the longer dresses are more modest and cost less to produce. Some of the men and many older women are concerned about the close fit. Marlene stated "We tell the girls to make the dresses wider to be modest" (2012). Her friend Iris followed that comment by saying the tight dresses are an issue throughout the CGCM conference and that the various congregations are not consistent in regulating problem. Marlene said that "A few communities actually require that dresses have at least six inches of ease" (2012). Elmer stated that "Our boys have learned to avert their eyes around outsider girls, and now they have to do the same with our girls" (2015). Modesty is an issue conference-wide, said Elijah, a minister who is in a leadership position in the CGCM's main office in Moundridge, Kansas; he stated: "there's a lot of discussion of how tight the dresses are getting. If you can see underwear lines, the dress is too tight" To explain the change, he reflected that "Maybe there's more variety now because the ministers are trying not to be legalistic and are allowing some freedom within the bounds of modesty. It's up to the women to regulate this" (Elijah, 2015). According to an expelled man, "Now the Holdeman establishment yields ground on simplicity in women's dress and fights the perpetual battle against assimilation on different fronts" (Asa, 2014).

Discussion and Implications

Dress can be a primary symbol of religiosity and has been used by religious sects as a visual marker of their focus on spirituality and separation from the world. Like other plain groups, the Holdeman Mennonites traditionally employed a number of social

boundary markers that kept them at arms' length from the outside world. Inevitably however, increased assimilation occurred in the twentieth century. Currently the only clearly obvious symbol of that separation is in the use of plain dress by Holdeman women. Anti-fashion rules were formalized in 1923, and reiterated after the Purge of the 1970s. The dress code showed unity and remained strong until economic issues drove many Holdemans away from isolated farms and into working with outsiders. Holdeman women began to leave the home to work outside of the CGCM communities. Assimilation and role changes in women's roles were the result. Consequently, Bush and London's (1960) hypothesis was supported by this study.

A change in roles was not the only factor leading to this change. The Church still enforces a ban on worldly entertainment, however the adoption of smart phones allowed the Internet and all forms of entertainment, and the World, into the Holdeman communities. Fashions and fads were easily accessible through the smart phones. As Marlene said, "Fashion just keeps creeping in" (2012). These changes allowed increased stimulus to fashion change that was implemented through female agency.

My previous work on Holdeman women's dress focused on one community and a narrow era (1980s-1990s) that followed the Purge. It was characterized by rigid conformity to the anti-fashion dress code that had only three approved dress styles. In my work (1993, 1997) I referred to briefly to women's agency. This current study builds on and expands on that notion through research in several locations. It shows unity across the western portion of the CGCM church network. It is clear that the final social boundary device, dress, has changed in some significant ways through women's agency in adapting worldly fashion into the anti-fashion requirements. The changes were effective in that they successfully negotiated change within the larger values of the Church. There is currently much greater variety of dress styles; they are much easier to sew and more comfortable to wear. While on the surface it may seem that the patriarchal social control system is weakening, that is not the case. Women always have been empowered to effectively re-negotiate the norms that guide their lives. As one of the CGCM church leaders told me, ministers learned a lesson after the Purge of the 1970s and no longer want to be so legalistic. In essence, members need to stay consistent with the values of modesty and simplicity. Women have changed the dress norms. By working collectively, they show unity and consistency while upholding the spirituality that underlies their religion. Burke (2012) and Avishai (2008) both studied women's

agency in conservative patriarchal religions. They both concluded that in these cases we can find women are not necessarily enchained, but instead can be empowered to effect cultural change. As Avishai noted, women's agency is often found within the context of threatened symbolic boundaries (2008). The current research on Holdeman women's dress substantiates Avishai and Burke's assertions. This case of Holdeman women's dress attests to the power of female agency as women work collectively to change the boundaries within which they must live. Instead of changing the rules, they used women's agency to change the norms. That comes from a sense of empowerment.

The implications of this study include a need to go beyond functionalist approaches to the study of gender in conservative religions. A qualitative symbolic interactionist approach, even at the micro-sociological level, is better suited for analysis of studies that need to examine deeply held beliefs regarding the role of women in situations that may not seem to allow much agency. The assumption that women in patriarchal religious groups, including plain Mennonites, are enchained by the male power structure is common among outsiders. Yet this study shows that female agency can be used to effectively make changes that are empowering.

Notes

[1] The use of the term "Mennonites" refers to the wide variety of Mennonite groups, from liberal to conservative. The "Holdeman Mennonite Church and CGCM" both refer to the church itself, throughout the US and Canada. The use of the term "Holdemans" refers to the peoples themselves.

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[3] Names of those interviewed are not used in order to preserve confidentiality. A random name generator was used to obtain the pseudonyms used in this paper.

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