

Ontario Plain People's Youth: 1969 and 2018

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Fifty years ago, when I was a teenager, I was part of the Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference. My brother's granddaughter, Janessa Frey, turned sixteen in 2018 and I want to compare her life to mine, to see what has changed in that church in the last fifty years. I interviewed Janessa and her mother recently at their farm near Elmira, Ontario.

When my brother was married in 1969, the wedding was in the bride's home. At that time, mini-skirts were the new fashion and so many girls argued with their mothers about skirt lengths. A photo of Janessa's cousin's wedding in September of 2018 shows the girls wearing skirts to their ankles and Janessa confirmed that skirt length is not an issue today. Except for the length of skirts, the style of dress has not changed much in fifty years.

When some of my friends were getting married in the 1970s, they fought with church leaders over having the female attendants having matching dresses; at the recent wedding of Karli Martin and Leo Frey, the guys even had matching ties!

One of my friends was married outdoors in a tent, sometime in the late 1970s, but then the church leaders decided tents were not appropriate. Weddings, including the meal, have always been in the bride's home, never at church. My older sister was limited to one hundred guests because that's all that could squeeze into our house. Over the years, when I've attended the weddings of my nieces and nephews, they have most often been held in cleaned-out

shops or large triple garages with the meal also served in the garage.

When I asked my niece for a photo of her daughter Karli's wedding, she commented, "We have slightly larger weddings nowadays and the conference decided it was more fitting with simplicity to allow wedding tents than to have people building shops etc. Though I'm sure there are mixed views on this. It didn't feel traditionally 'Markham Mennonite' to have a backyard wedding."

When I heard Karli was getting married I thought, "She can't possibly be old enough!" On her wedding day she was only nineteen, but she turned twenty a couple weeks later. Janessa and her Mom agreed that Karli was a bit on the young side, but twenty and twenty-one are normal ages for girls in that church to be married. This has not changed over several generations.

It seems to me the changes in dress and wedding customs over fifty years are ones of nuance, rather than substance.

Language

Janessa said she speaks at English at home, but she can also speak Pennsylvania German. Her mother admitted that she finds English easier. At church there may be occasional German phrases, but it is primarily English. When I was her age, we sang in both German and English at every service and sermons were sometimes in the German dialect. The German hymnbook was in Gothic font and used old-fashioned High German. In the last fifty years the Markham-Waterloo group has clearly moved toward using more English.

The horse-and-buggy Old Order Mennonites use more German. Their list of services, called a calendar, is quite fascinating. On the front page it has traditional Gothic font and the words are in German. Meanwhile, the back cover has English words in Gothic letters. Inside there is a mix of Latin and Gothic letters with mostly English words. They have maintained much more German than the group I grew up in.

Plain Groups and Growth

When it comes to "plain" people in Ontario, I'm looking generally at five groups. The Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites are more traditional. The Markham-Waterloo Conference Mennonites are in the middle. The Conservative Mennonite

Church of Ontario and Midwest Mennonite Fellowship are slightly less conservative in dress, primarily use English, and are more fundamentalist and evangelical.

Of these five, the Markham-Waterloo group that I was part of in my growing-up years is pretty much in the middle when it comes to things such as dress, language and technology. The Amish and Old Orders are horse-and-buggy people. They have more conservative dress and still use a great deal of Pennsylvania Dutch in their homes and sing in German for worship.

Perhaps the most significant change for all of these plain groups in the past fifty years has been their growth. All of them have grown significantly in recent decades. According to Fred Lichti, the Amish in Ontario doubled in size between 1999 and 2016. They have spread geographically to many parts of southern Ontario. We can't count their meetinghouses because they don't use meetinghouses.

The Old Order Mennonites have also grown and spread geographically. In 1970, the Old Orders had six meetinghouses, all within about ten miles of the town of Elmira. Today they have twenty-six meetinghouses. They have moved not only into Grey and Bruce Counties, they are now also northeast of Toronto near Lindsay, along the north shore of Lake Huron, and to a community east of Timmins. Within the last couple years, several families have moved to Prince Edward Island.

When I was young, the Markham-Waterloo group had five meetinghouses. Today they have twelve meetinghouses and are spread as far away as the Ottawa Valley and New Liskeard in northern Ontario.

The Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario have also grown in the last fifty years and spread throughout southern Ontario. Their churches are smaller and more scattered; they have attracted some Low German Mennonites and have some churches outside Ontario—one in Horndean, Manitoba, and mission churches in India and Bulgaria.

The largest congregations in the Midwest Fellowship tend to be among other plain Mennonites northwest of Kitchener-Waterloo. They keep building new, bigger church buildings partly to accommodate the Markham-Waterloo people who move to the Midwest Fellowship.

This level of growth shows all the groups are successful in keeping young people in the church. For young people's activities, the Amish, Old Order and Markhamers all have Sunday evening singings. As a teenager I remember weekly skating in the winter, baseball in the summer, occasional singing schools and June pic-

nics, all of which are still happening according to Janessa. What is different is that there are so many young people that singing is held at three different locations each week.

When I was young, you were expected to know everyone in the whole church and where they lived. Today these groups publish church directories listing all the members their addresses and phone numbers and their congregation. Some also publish maps, especially in less-well-known areas so people can find each other.

Transportation

At age 16, Janessa is learning to drive and she has taken driver training. Her older brother has his own car—a black one of course. I asked if she would be getting her own car; she laughed and said her brother is getting a new one so maybe she can have his old one. This pattern of young people, especially boys, getting their own cars is the same as fifty years ago. Not too much has changed. There have been some small changes among the Old Order Mennonites when it comes to transportation. In 1970, Old Orders used open buggies except for the elderly. Things changed in the 1990s and now enclosed buggies are much more common.

When it comes to the young people, the biggest change among the Old Orders has been the increase in use of bicycles. While the Amish do not use bicycles, through the twentieth century, the Old Order Mennonites considered bicycles as something to be used by children. But these days I often see young Old Order men on the way to work or even to church on their bicycles.

A few weeks ago our local newspaper carried a story featuring Stuart Frey, an Old Order young man who runs a bicycle shop. According to the article, six years ago Stuart and his brother rode their bicycles from Ontario to Portland, Oregon, in order to take a two-week course on building bicycle frames. In the last twenty-five years many such shops have popped up in the countryside and bicycles have become an important mode of transportation for Old Order Mennonite young people—especially young men.

Diversification beyond Farming

Plain Mennonites believe farming is the best occupation; it keeps your life simple and protects you from some of the temptations of the world. But as cities and towns have grown, farmland has become very expensive. It remains common for parents to help

the next generation get established, but the high price of local farms has been a major factor in establishing new communities. Work in agriculture-related industries or construction is now common across the plain groups.

In the last fifty years on-farm manufacturing and other entrepreneurial ventures have been a growing phenomenon. In 2003 when the BFC scare resulted in the U.S. closing its borders to Canadian beef, some farmers suffered enormously. The Old Order Mennonites looked around for some solutions and decided to try something done by similar groups in the U.S. The Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative was one attempt at diversifying. It gives local farmers the opportunity to bring bulk produce to be sold to retailers or restaurants. Other farms have moved to using greenhouses.

Unlike fifty years ago, stores in small settlements are now often owned and operated by Old Order families. The villages of Floradale and Wallenstein have small stores, owned by Old Order Mennonites, that sell everything from groceries, to baking to fabrics.

Busy Bee Quilts in downtown Elmira is owned and operated by three single sisters from the Markham-Waterloo Conference. As well as quilts they sell fabrics, books and parochial school resources. Across the road in Elmira is Kitchen Cuttings, also owned and operated by single women who belong to a plain group. Over the years they have provided employment opportunity for others.

I can't think of any single woman entrepreneur from my teenage years, but today it is common. For example, the owner of Bonnie Lou's Café in Floradale grew up in the Old Order church, then her family joined the Markham-Waterloo group. She worked in the kitchen a local restaurant for some years and now owns this popular café. Another single Old Order woman grows and sells flowers from her home and at the Elmira farmer's market.

Young people in these plain groups have a broader range of employment opportunities. Instead of only working on farms, many of them work in construction or in other rural small businesses.

Education and Technology

Young people in plain Mennonite groups mostly end their schooling with grade eight. That is the expectation for the Amish, Old Order Mennonites and Markham-Waterloo Mennonites. The Conservative Mennonites also have their own private schools, but they generally go up to grade ten. Many Midwest Fellowship schools go to grade twelve.

I asked Janessa how she felt about being finished with school. She said she missed seeing her friends, but otherwise she was happy to be finished. When I was Janessa's age, I was attending high school, even though I was part of the same church as she goes to. I spent my elementary school years at St. Jacobs public school because those were the years before Mennonite private schools were established.

I've often wondered how my self-image was different from someone like Janessa because I attended a public school with eight classrooms. In the past fifty years, since the plain people moved from public to parochial education, they have maintained more of their young people. Janessa didn't seem to chafe at all at the restrictions she lives under. Did I do so more because I was exposed to more "worldly" ideas? I'm not sure; that question needs much more thought.

Janessa did admit that she was looking forward to getting her own cell phone and I got the impression that this was a point of some tension with her parents. Fifty years ago, it was television, radios and recorded music that were the issues. Young people back then often had clandestine record players in their homes or 8-track tape players in their cars. Today, the internet causes all kinds of headaches for plain groups.

Janessa and her mother said that many families in their church have computers in their homes and use email, although they are not supposed to use it for entertainment. The Markham-Waterloo group has tried to compromise with the internet. They recognize that small businesses need websites so the church has its own internet server that only functions during business hours. The intent is to limit the temptation of internet exploring at night and on weekends.

The Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites do not use the internet or computers, but they have an amazing capacity to publish their own periodicals and books using old-fashioned typewriters. Of course, some of the work, such as printing the books, is done by hired companies. There is an amazing entrepreneurial spirit, but sometimes they struggle to know how to limit the impact of things such as business cell phones.

Over the last fifty years the Old Orders have accepted some technologies such as landline telephones, electricity from the grid, and tractors, as long as they are not too big or fancy. These days the sight of horses working in the fields is less common although the Amish officially do not allow tractors. But it is hard for young men to spend days doing by hand what a combine can do in a few hours, and sometimes you can afford to hire the neighbour to do it

for you without officially transgressing the rules. Some families deliberately chose to move to a more remote community to avoid some of these dilemmas.

Like the rest of us, Old Order Mennonite houses are bigger than they used to be. In the late 1970s when my aunt and uncle moved into the doddyhouse where my grandparents had lived, they built an addition. As people are living longer it is not uncommon to have a house trailer beside the main house to accommodate the great-grandparents.

Things have changed in fifty years, but these plain groups are still quite isolationist. Their business ventures bring them into contact with the wider world, but at their core, they know who they are and that they are not part of "the world." Their distinctive "plain" dress and restrictions on how they live are constant reminders that they are called to be "separate."

Many of us wonder about the future of young people in plain Mennonite groups. How they can be happy within the restrictions of their churches? Of course, some of them leave, but compared to other Mennonite churches, their young people seem to be doing well. Certainly their churches are growing.