

# Becoming and Being Single Women: Singlehood in Conservative Mennonite Communities

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**“Sara has some big news. She is planning to get married in January.”**

In November 2016 I received this message from Edith, one of Sara’s sisters-in-law. Sara and Edith are conservative Mennonites. After exchanging a few more messages, I learned that Sara, who was in her mid-50s at the time, was getting married to Glen, who was a widower and a bishop of one of the conservative Mennonite churches. Glen was 15 years older than Sara, and Sara would immediately become a wife, mother, and a grandmother after the wedding. As described in Edith’s message, Sara’s decision to get married was “big” and surprising news to me. As an anthropologist and a friend, I have known Sara for two decades. Over the years, our friendship blossomed, and she was more like one of my big sisters within the larger conservative Mennonite communities. Although I spent much time with her, it did not occur to me that she might decide to get married someday.

I grew up in Japan and I did not know any Mennonites. My first encounter with Mennonites was in 1996, when I spent a year in Ohio as an exchange student. I was intrigued by their diverse expressions and, at the same time, I wondered how they maintained

their Mennonite identities in this modern and changing world. In 1999, I visited Sara's parents' store during my trip to the United States. This visit accorded me the opportunity to learn and know more about conservative Mennonite groups. I found conservative Mennonites, who embrace some changes and innovations but not others, to be particularly puzzling and interesting. In 2000, I moved to the US to start my graduate work in anthropology.

Soon, I sensed that I—an adult single woman in her mid-20s, who was still a student and lived alone in a foreign country—was in a rather unusual position for many conservative Mennonites. Sara, perhaps partly because she was also an unmarried adult woman, provided me with excellent help and guidance as I interacted with conservative Mennonite communities. She answered all the questions I had and allowed me to accompany her to visit her friends. Eventually, as I grew older and became a more experienced single person, Sara became a close friend and mentor. To me, Sara's marriage was not only surprising but also led me to review my own assumptions about her.

This article examines the lives of single conservative Mennonite women. Previously I have written and presented a few analyses on the occupations of single conservative women and singlehood; in regard to their occupations, I discussed how single women are able to fit in their conservative Mennonite communities. However, Sara's wedding and the research that followed led me to reassess these earlier analyses. As I interacted with single women of different ages, I realized that these analyses were not nuanced enough to understand single women's lives in different life stages. They face various challenges while leading unmarried lives. Despite these challenges, they still provide multiple resources to their faith communities. By observing single women of various ages, this article discusses the process by which they become an integral part of their faith communities.

### **Gaze toward Single People**

The meaning of the term "single" varies based on the cultural context in question. Among conservative Mennonites it refers to people who are unmarried. In some societies it includes those who are technically married at present but practically live on their own (Shiino, 2014). Considering the fact that the exact meaning of the term single differs depending on specific cultural contexts, both sociologists and anthropologists examine single people based on various cultures (Shiino, 2014). According to Shiino (2014), in the

past, the primary focus of most scholars was on the maintenance and succession of cultures and societies. Inadequate scholarly attention was paid to those who were deemed to have little to do with it and single people belonged to this category of people. This does not mean that there were few cultural and social contributions by single people than others. Rather, there were fewer studies of single people's experiences in the past in comparison with other subjects.<sup>1</sup>

One example of such exclusion is the Standard North American Family model in the US (Smith, 1993). This is a family model that comprises a mother, a father, and children. This model is assumed to be a standard example of the average North American family. Individuals and families that do not fit in this model are perceived to be outside the norm. They are often required to justify or explain their situations. Although this model may seem rather outdated, Edgell and Docka (2007) argue that this model is influential, and some religious communities have taken it up to foster "the marriage culture." Forms of family and individual life that do not fit this model may be seen as "at best unfortunate states in which to find oneself, and at worst irresponsible, deviant, or immoral choices which should be sanctioned" (Edgell & Docka, 2007, p. 28).

In recent years there has been an increase in the recognition of diverse family structures and ways in which individuals live, and many academic articles and books on single people are now available.<sup>2</sup> However, the manner in which single people are portrayed, at least on the surface, suggests they still occupy social locations at the margins of their societies. For example, an edited Japanese book on ethnographic studies focusing on single people in various cultures around the world by Shiino (2014) was titled *Kyokai wo Ikiru Shingurutachi* [Single People Living on the Borders]. Although the book presents the diverse lifestyles of single people around the world, its title highlights their marginal positions. Similarly, sociological books on single people in Japan often associate them with social issues. For example, Yamada (1999, 2014) refers to single people as unmarried adults who often have full-time jobs but continue to live with their parents as parasite singles. Those singles are "parasites" in the sense that while they may earn some money, they still depend on their parents to a certain extent. Dale (2014) also asserts that even though there are many single individuals in Japan, women who are not living within the traditional marriage structure are viewed to be outside the norm.

Within Mennonite writing, single people, particularly single women, have also received limited attention. Since the 1980s, scholarly attention has been paid to the role of women in Menno-

nite communities (Buller & Fast, 2013). However, except for an article by Doreen Klassen (2008) on single Mennonite women in Mexico, most of these studies focus on women who are mothers, wives, and widows, with emphasis being put on the actual or imagined “family.” For example, Epp, one of the earlier scholars, asserts the importance of including women’s perspectives in studies focusing on Mennonites and presents a case for focusing on women who live in rather untraditional family settings because of war and other hardships.<sup>3</sup> Although Epp discusses diverse forms of family, it is still family relationships that are her major concern. *Mothering Mennonite*, published in 2013 by Buller and Fast, is another example. It explores Mennonite women from diverse angles. However, as the title suggests, it primarily explores and discusses Mennonite women’s relationships with motherhood.

Several studies, however, suggest that single people, particularly women, can play important roles in their communities. Examining single women in the US, Traister (2016) argues that single women frequently bring social changes in their pursuit of independence and of being recognized as full adults. Of course, as Lamb (2018) claims through her study of Indian single women, the experiences of single women are diverse, depending on factors such as race, location, and economic class. In the case of Mennonites, single women do not always pursue their independence and social changes. Single women and their behaviours are closely scrutinized by their faith communities. Issues such as women’s dress and the ability of women to take up leadership roles have been the focus of theological discussions within these communities (Pederson, 2002; Graybill, 1998). Precisely because of their somewhat restricted position, single women have the potential to be at the core of community concern.

These studies suggest a paradox of singlehood. Being single often puts individuals in a marginal position, but at the same time, this very position has the potential to place individuals at the centre of challenges their communities are facing. In order to explore the complexity of singlehood, this article delves into the process of becoming single for conservative Mennonite women and how individual women respond to being single.

### Conservative Mennonites

This article uses the term “conservative Mennonites” to describe the participants in my research. While many Mennonite subgroups might be considered conservative, the groups that are

my focus emerged in response to the changes that took place in Mennonite churches, particularly after the 1950s, when many congregations re-examined previous church regulations and accepted a wider range of clothing styles and recreational activities. Dissatisfied with these changes, groups who wanted to maintain and conserve many of the previously held church regulations and who considered those regulations as important and essential in maintaining their faith began to form their own congregations. These groups referred to themselves as conservative Mennonites; Scott (1996) calls them as “ultra-conservative Mennonites.” They include those affiliated with the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church and the Nationwide Mennonite Fellowship. While specific rules vary, conservative Mennonite congregations generally regulate their members’ behaviours rather strongly. Some of these regulations include the prohibition and limitation of the use of the Internet, television, and radio; the strong encouragement to wear modest clothing (including cape dresses and head coverings for women); and the strong discouragement of pursuing higher education.<sup>4</sup> These regulations are important for them as they help their members stay away from the unwanted influences of secular society.

For conservative Mennonites, appropriate gender relationships are also religiously important. For instance, men are expected to be breadwinners. In addition, both at home and at church, men are expected to fulfill leadership roles. At home, as the head of a household, a man often makes the final decision. In congregations, men are the ones who can take up important worship roles, such as being adult Sunday school teachers and song leaders. Only baptized men can express their opinions at church, vote on church matters, and take up church leadership positions. In contrast, being supportive is particularly important for women. This is based on their interpretation of biblical scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 11:1–16, Ephesians 5:21–24, and Titus 2:3–5. Married women are expected to submit to their husbands and their primary role is that of a caretaker of the home and children. Unmarried women can and do work outside home. However, once they get married and have children, they are expected to stay at home and take care of their children and households full-time.

Being unmarried in itself is not a problem. Conservative Mennonites view marriage as a religiously important lifetime commitment. While remarriage is allowed when one’s spouse dies, divorce is highly discouraged, and it is considered as a way of forfeiting one’s church membership. Consequently, getting married without serious commitment is perceived as problematic, whereas being

single is not. In many conservative Mennonite communities in the US, young people are discouraged from expressing their desire for courtship before reaching the age of 21 years.

However, few members prefer to remain unmarried. From childhood, both men and women in conservative Mennonite communities are taught and trained to fulfill gender roles. Since they are often tied to being fathers and mothers within families, it is expected that one would be married at some point in their life. Actively pursuing future partners, however, is only allowed for men. This is because conservative Mennonites believe that women should wait and that men should take the lead. A man is allowed to ask either the father of the woman or a church official for permission to ask the woman out on a date. The woman can accept or decline the request, and the final decision to get married is made by both the man and the woman. However, women have to wait to be asked, even if they have a strong desire to date someone.

Just like the literature on single women, books and articles published by conservative Mennonites pay more attention to marriages and family relationships than to the lives of single people. One of the few books that discuss singlehood, for example, makes the following statements:

Subjects such as dating, engagement, and marriage are more popular than singlehood. Perhaps that is because more people marry than stay single, and perhaps also because most people want to be married. But it means, unfortunately, that sometimes people find themselves in situations they never have given much thought to, and just unfortunately, situations which nobody else has given much thought to either. (Coblentz, 1992/2011, p. 1)

While the purpose of Coblentz's book is to encourage single people to live faithfully, this passage illustrates some characteristics of singlehood. The topic of single lives does not often come up in communities. Most conservative Mennonites do not aspire to be single and women often realize their singlehood position without much prior thought.

### **Becoming Single Women in Conservative Mennonite Communities**

Although Coblentz seems to imply that people discover their singlehood situations rather unexpectedly, becoming single is a process. As women grow older, they become aware that they may stay single longer than expected. The realization of being single

comes gradually. In order to explore the challenges they experience and their responses to them, it is important to discuss the growing-up processes of Mennonite men and women.

The processes of growing up and becoming adults in Mennonite communities are similar for both men and women. While religious conviction is important to become a member of conservative Mennonite communities, how these religious convictions reflect Mennonites' daily behaviours is also important. One of these convictions is financial self-sufficiency. As a result of their religious interpretation of the separation between the church and state, conservative Mennonites strongly discourage members from depending on governmental aid.<sup>5</sup> They encourage both men and women to work and be useful to society. At the same time, their religious emphasis on gender roles affects many decisions and opportunities that men and women encounter as they become adults.

Since conservative Mennonites discourage the pursuit of higher education, both boys and girls finish their schooling in their mid-teens.<sup>6</sup> With limited work experience, teenagers begin helping their parents at home or in their businesses. Others make informal arrangements to work for other members in their communities. Their jobs, for example, include cleaning up stores, factories, and houses, providing lawn care for businesses, and helping other church members at their homes and businesses. Gradually, their work arrangements become more formal and their work hours become longer. Teenage girls tend to remain engaged in informal arrangements for much longer. For example, Anna, who was 18 years old in 2019, worked for two families from her congregation. Her job was to help the mothers of these households by handling the cleaning, washing, and cooking. While she was paid per hour, her work was less structured and allowed her and her employers to accommodate both their daily needs. In contrast, Joshua, Anna's brother, began to work outside the family setting much earlier. By the time he was 17 years old, he worked at an engine repair shop. He was paid and over time his work gained a more rigid structure and formal supervision.

When they grow into their late teen years and early 20s, most young men and women become engaged in formal jobs and work for longer hours. However, there are differences in the kinds of jobs that men and women take up. Since men are expected to be breadwinners of their households in the future, their jobs are often those that can help them develop skills. Micah, for example, took care of the lawn for a few businesses around the neighbourhood on a part-time basis. After about a year, he took up a job at an engine repair shop. Unlike at his previous job, Micah was able to develop

his skills and knowledge on repairing machines. This experience helped him find a job and start a family in a new community when he got married in another state. Young men also take up carpentry, woodwork, and farming. While not all of them begin their own businesses later, several years of employment helps them acquire professional skills and expand their prospects of earning enough money. In contrast, most women's jobs lack similar advantages of long-term employment. Since conservative Mennonites expect women to be caretakers of the home and children, their jobs primarily involve supportive work. They work as retail clerks, office assistants, cleaning staff, and caretakers of children and old people. While these jobs offer important services, the women do not have much of an opportunity to enhance their skills when compared to men.

Young men and women begin dating when they are in their early 20s, and many of them eventually get married. They also begin contemplating their own future during this age. For young men, this can be challenging because they start looking for future partners and considering how to support the families they intend to have. They can, however, be more active in making decisions. They can also ask for courtship if they want to and explore occupational opportunities in which they can develop their skills further. By contrast, there is far less room for young women to be proactive. They have to wait to be asked to get married. In addition, the jobs they are allowed to take up limit their potential in advancing their occupational pursuits. As they move into the late 20s and early 30s, many women start to realize that they may stay single for longer.

This divergent occupational trajectory is encouraged by parents and other church members. Many young people find jobs through words of mouth. The different types of jobs suggested are based on conservative Mennonite views of appropriate gender roles. To some extent, finding appropriate work is difficult for both men and women belonging to conservative Mennonite communities. Older church members, particularly those who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, remember how their work environments could bring about religious challenges. For instance, they could be teased at their workplaces because of their avoidance of television, drinking, and smoking. Based on their past experiences, some jobs, such as working in stores where televisions and radios are constantly on, are avoided because of too much exposure to secular influences. Similarly, because coworkers may hinder their efforts in deepening and following their religious convictions, conservative Mennonites avoid jobs where coworkers' choices of clothing and language contradict their religious views on appropriate behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Howev-

er, it is even more difficult to find appropriate work for women in their late 20s and beyond. These women are old enough to have work experience and may have some idea of their preferred occupations. However, without education and training, they may not be able to pursue such occupations. The following story, for example, highlights some of the challenges of conservative Mennonite women at this age.

On a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 2019, a group of women (aged over 40 years, married and unmarried) were talking after a meal. They were discussing Elizabeth, one of the daughters of Grace, who was one of the women at the table. Elizabeth was in her early 30s and unmarried. At the time, she was serving in a medical mission in a Latin American country. Since all the women knew about Elizabeth, they began to discuss how she was doing.

Even though Elizabeth did not have a medical degree or training, she helped provide some basic hygiene for refugees who came to a clinic. From the photos and the detailed written accounts that she sent from the field, it was clear that her job was demanding both physically and mentally. It also suggested that Elizabeth had a strong dedication to assist those who needed medical help. Rhoda, another mother at the table, then commented that her daughter, Lucinda, who was in her early 30s and single, also wanted to engage in such work. Lucinda lived by herself, away from her parents, and engaged in a variety of work that included cleaning houses. Previously, she took care of aged people and enjoyed working with the elderly. Like Elizabeth, Lucinda was interested in the medical and nursing fields.

Knowing both Elizabeth and Lucinda, the women at the table nodded. Then Grace asked what Elizabeth could do after her mission service. While Grace acknowledged Elizabeth's talents and interests in taking care of the injured and the sick, she was not sure what Elizabeth could do next. Grace, along with others, knew that becoming a nurse or a nurse's aid was almost impossible as these roles required special training. Another woman suggested working at a local medical clinic, where many conservative and Old Order Mennonites and Amish visited. Grace expressed her concerns and said that if Elizabeth was going to work, she did not want her to work with a male doctor or work in a situation where she would be the only conservative Mennonite woman. Rhoda also agreed and said that she would not want Lucinda to work in that kind of situation, either. A few others expressed their opinions about the clinic, but they were not sure about it, and the conversation shifted to another topic without finding any viable solutions for Elizabeth.

As the comments at the table suggest, the women recognize that having fulfilling occupations is important for both Elizabeth and Lucinda. At the same time, they are also concerned about possible dangers and practical difficulties that such pursuits entail. Unlike men, women's jobs do not provide opportunities for them to develop their skills or knowledge and, as a result, such jobs may not be satisfactory. On the other hand, even if they find jobs that they consider satisfying, their work environment may pose another challenge because it has to be religiously appropriate.

In her analysis, Pederson (2002) points out that the religious significance of gender differences tends to be more pronounced among conservative Anabaptist groups than Old Order and liberal groups. Her insight is applicable to the conservative single women examined in this article. Since their options are particularly limited, these women face a lot of challenges, and their responses to those challenges are closely watched by their church community. While the solutions are not easily found, as this Sunday conversation implies, how they manage their challenges is often interpreted to reflect their religious commitment. Ironically, as suggested by Pederson (2002), Graybill (1998), and Klassen (2008), this places single conservative women at the centre of their faith communities' discussions.

### **Being Single Women: Challenges and Responses**

Being single can be a difficult journey. As they lead their unmarried lives, single women try to find ways of dealing with the challenges they face. Their accounts suggest that they frequently relocate and change their jobs in their late 20s and 30s. These moves are associated with single women's responses to the challenges they face at this age. Bethany's account offers an example of how women in this age range respond to their challenges.

Bethany, who was in her 30s, told me how she felt about her work in 2019. After helping on her parents' family farm in Ohio, she moved to Pennsylvania, where her brother and his wife lived. She helped her brother for a while, but he moved to another state to start his own business. Bethany stayed back and found a job at a printing press. After working there for several years, she handled tasks of editing and checking on the printing process. Yet, she was not sure whether she wanted to continue working there. She was so unsure of her job that she decided to consult her boss, who did not want her to leave. They decided that she could try a somewhat flexible working arrangement for three months. While she worked

for certain hours each week at the press, she could also take some time off either to rest or to try her hand at different types of work. By the time her first month lapsed, she was still unsure. She, however, said that if she did not find the arrangement workable, she would look for another job.

Though Bethany did not change her job, she was serious about her possibilities. It is likely that her uneasy feeling did not come from her job alone. Most of her friends, who were of the same age, had begun to lead lives as wives and mothers. That may have prompted her to review her own situation. While her unease about her current conditions may have been triggered by various reasons, changing her job was an option for her to cope with the situation. Her boss's unwillingness to let her go suggests that Bethany was a good worker. Like many young conservative Mennonite women in the press, she had begun with an entry-level job, such as helping to collate printed materials and prepare the products for shipment. As she continued working there, her position changed to one that involved more responsibilities. However, since the remaining positions were managerial positions that are often held by men, she may have felt that she only had two options: remain in her current position or leave the job altogether.

Other women around this age had similar experiences. For example, Kimberly, who was in her 30s in 2005, expressed similar sentiments. She said that she needed "some change." Like Bethany, she was away from home, supporting herself financially. She was a former teacher and she had a full-time job at an office where she had worked for several years. While she did not elaborate why she felt this, she said that she had prayed for "the Lord's leading." After a year, she took up a job as a teacher at a conservative Mennonite school and relocated.<sup>8</sup>

As seen in Kimberly's case, the jobs that women select may not be so different from their previous ones or offer higher income than their previous ones. Despite the fact that Kimberly was a teacher before, her previous experience did not necessarily provide any more advantage than the other returning teachers' experience did. In church schools, male teachers often take supervisory positions, while female teachers, no matter how experienced they may be, tend to take informal advisory positions at the most. Their move has more to do with finding their own places where they can come to terms with their jobs and their lives in such church communities.

Sara, whom I introduced earlier, is an illustrative example of how single women relocate and eventually settle in one community. Since she was a teenager she had held many jobs, such as office

assistant, farm worker, and helper at various households. She then became a teacher in a church school that was away from her home. Since then, she had worked as a teacher at several schools in a few different states. After several years of teaching, everyone, including Sara herself, found out that she enjoyed teaching.

When Sara was in her late 30s, her parents became ill at home and she decided to return to live with them. She might have needed some time off from teaching, but the fact that she was the youngest in her family and the only unmarried child played an important role in her decision. Also, the fact that the teaching position was offered annually may have made it somewhat easier for her to decide on her return at the end of the school year. While taking care of her parents, she took up a variety of jobs such as being an office assistant and a helper at produce stands and fields. As a former teacher, she also occasionally worked as a substitute teacher and a teacher's aide, when church schools nearby needed support. However, she was not able to take up a regular teaching position as her parents' condition was not certain. Her jobs were temporary, although they provided her work and income.

After her parents passed away, she decided to move to one of the church communities where she had worked earlier. The community began as a mission church and was actively engaged in recruiting members from non-Mennonite backgrounds. As she had lived there and taught at a church-related school previously, she knew the people there, and liked the church. Some of her relatives could also visit the community, and with their help, she moved there. Soon, a teaching position at the church school in this community opened up and she became a teacher again. With her savings and estate from her parents, she purchased her own house.

As Sara is much older than Bethany and Kimberly, she had more experience with relocation and job changes. While Sara's passion for teaching was clear, her relocations were not necessarily occupation-oriented. Rather, they were responses to a variety of needs, including those that pertained to her family, church communities, and her own desires. Her return home is one example. Her siblings lived close by and were always willing to help their parents. Despite this, Sara made a decision to live with her parents. Although she knew the people and the local community because she had grown up there, the decision to return home after being away for decades was not always easy. Each relocation presents its own challenges, considering that single women have to quit their jobs and church communities and try to find their own positions in different communities.

These job changes and relocation, on the one hand, put single women in a transient position in their faith communities. On the other hand, they allow single women the chance to explore other opportunities that they may not be able to find through other means. Taking up new jobs in new communities presents them with the opportunity to meet and interact with other people. Through these new encounters, many single women, like Sara, find communities to live in and engage with on a long-term basis.

### **Being Settled**

Multiple reasons explain the eventual settlement of single women. As with Sara, it can be prompted, at least partially, by the illness and loss of parents. Finding good friends and church families may be another factor. Finding a more permanent living arrangement, such as an appropriate house or apartment, and in some cases, appropriate company (such as other women) to live with, can also influence the decision to stay or relocate. Younger single people often live with church families.<sup>9</sup> As they age, they move away from such living arrangements and live by themselves or with other single people. By this time, they are generally in their late 30s or older. For the sake of convenience, this article refers to these settled single women as “middle-aged singles.”

Mary is an example. For over a decade she took care of children with special needs in the foster care system. She lived with another single woman, Ester, who was a teacher at the local church school. At their house, Mary and Ester frequently provided lodging for other church members. For example, the children of church families whose mothers were pregnant or had just given birth recently were welcome to stay at Mary and Ester’s house for several days. As fellow church members, the children and the families knew Mary and Ester well enough to trust that their children would be in good spiritual and physical conditions. Other church members could also offer similar assistance, but their busy family situations could sometimes limit them from doing so. Visitors from other congregations who visited for weddings and other events were also welcomed to stay at their house, especially women and children.

Occasionally, middle-aged singles also provided rooms for younger single women such as teachers who were from other church communities. For instance, Sara had a house by herself. At the request of her congregation, she housed a younger woman who had come to work at the local bakery from another state.

Being a good mentor and advisor is another important role that middle-aged singles play in their church communities. They often provide informal consultation for other young women who, as mentioned earlier, are wondering about their lives. For example, Bethany, who was in the process of reviewing her job situation, mentioned that she spoke to Mary about her situation. According to Bethany, Mary was a good person to seek advice from. Not only was she single like herself, she was also “stable” and “reliable.” Mary was successful in managing her finances. She was also a good church member and participated in a range of activities at the church.

Consultations among single women can take place in various contexts, but they frequently happen over conversations held during causal interactions. Mary and Ester, for example, often asked other young single women for help around their household and in attending to other tasks. Bethany periodically helped Mary in taking her foster children to school and to other appointments. These occasions helped Mary and Bethany to get to know each other well and were an opportunity for Bethany to seek advice from Mary whenever she needed it.

In addition to helping young single women make important life decisions, middle-aged singles provide informal and formal advice to those who want to join their faith. Many conservative Mennonites, who are interested in reaching out to people from non-Mennonite and non-Christian backgrounds, sometimes encounter people from outside who are interested in their faith. Unlike married women, working outside allows single women the opportunity for such encounters. Furthermore, middle-aged singles, who have extensive life experiences of living in diverse communities while maintaining their religious beliefs, can find a variety of ways to connect with others. For example, Lucy, a middle-aged single woman, started visiting Sara’s congregation after learning about conservative Mennonites when Sara visited her store.

Anderson (2016), who presents an analysis of religious seekers who are interested in the so-called plain Anabaptist groups, provides an interesting perspective to understanding such encounters. He claims that one of the major factors that attract these seekers to these communities is their somewhat idealized views of these women’s attire and demeanour, and their actual encounters with the women from these religious communities. Since conservative Mennonite single women work outside, they can meet a variety of people from outside communities. As in the case of Lucy, such encounters can prompt others, particularly those who have some interest in conservative Mennonites, to visit their congregations and

learn more about them. Beyond such initial contact, middle-aged singles frequently play a crucial role in introducing female newcomers to their way of living according to their religious beliefs. The case of Janet and Carolyne illustrates this.

Janet is a single conservative Mennonite woman, and she is several years older than Carolyne, who is also single. Carolyne came from a non-Mennonite Christian family. They have lived together for several years. Since Carolyne's parents were missionaries in Latin America, she grew up abroad. Through books written and published by conservative Mennonites she became interested in the faith. Eventually she visited a conservative Mennonite congregation. While living with Janet, Carolyne gradually deepened her understanding of conservative Mennonites and their religious views. She found that daily devotion and attending worship services were important in deepening her understanding. Following the daily practices of conservative Mennonites also played a significant role in that process. She learned how to sew her cape dresses and began to wear a head covering and socialized with others in their community. Since they lived together, she had many opportunities to consult and seek religious advice from Janet. Slowly but steadily this helped her grow more comfortable in the conservative Mennonite community.

Even though not all cases may be as successful as Carolyne's was, middle-aged singles often provide short-term or long-term lodging for single women from outside. Other families may also provide such lodging and care, but individuals in the middle of their spiritual search often need much care and attention. For instance, they may feel insecure and mentally troubled. Those who have much interest in reaching out to such people may not be able to do so because they may have their own children and families to support and it may not be possible to provide care and attention like single women are able to.

Since their religious belief is central to conservative Mennonite communities, being able to support others' journey to conservative Mennonite faith is of utmost importance. Their experience of being in a somewhat marginal and transient position, in this respect, provides them—particularly those in their middle age—with unique opportunities to contribute to their faith communities. Still, limitations and challenges remain. For instance, Mary, who was mentioned earlier, wanted to adopt a child who was formally in the foster care system. Other members of the congregation knew the child very well and Mary had been a member in good standing. The congregational approval of her adoption seemed to be easily granted. However, due to the fact that Mary was a single woman

and without a husband, her ability to provide adequate spiritual support to the child became the topic of a church meeting. Although her request was eventually approved, she was frustrated because she could not explain herself at the meeting.

### **Community Members' Views toward Single Women**

The contributions that single women make do not go unnoticed. The speeches at Sara's wedding are an illustrative example of how community members view single women and their contributions. Four church officials, John, Luke, Martin, and Richard, were asked to speak at Sara's wedding and reception. They were from different congregations, but since they were church officials they were respected by the audience. Their speeches had an authoritative quality. Since they were all male members, their speeches are important means of demonstrating men's perspectives about single women. As discussed below, their speeches reveal similarities and differences in their views toward Sara.

All of the four church officials' speeches emphasized Sara's transition into her role as a wife and related this transition to her spiritual commitment. John, who spoke first, mentioned that Sara had been successful and faithful in her life. He mentioned that as a single woman, Sara had made several wise decisions, although some of them may have been difficult ones. While John did not provide specific details of Sara's life, he was skillful enough to lead people in the audience to remember all that Sara had done thus far. He then shifted his attention to her new role as that of a wife. He said that Sara's life would now change completely. As a wife, Sara would have to learn how to submit to her husband, Glen. While she was capable of making wise decisions, because of her faith, Sara had to give up that decision-making power to Glen. Therefore, through submission to and support for Glen, Sara would lead a new life as a faithful believer.

Luke, who spoke second, also emphasized Sara's new life as Glen's second wife. Luke knew Glen and his first wife, Martha, quite well and shared his appreciation of how Glen and Martha helped him through his spiritual journey. He mentioned that he could imagine how Glen and his family would continue missing Martha. He then turned his attention to Sara. Sara was also a person with strong religious beliefs, but they needed to remember that Sara was not a replacement for Martha. The memories of Martha were important, and with such memories, Luke encouraged Glen and his family to welcome Sara as herself. Martin, who spoke third,

addressed the same theme. He recounted his own experience of welcoming his second mother. He was happy to have his second mother but also mentioned that it took a while for his mother and his family to adjust to their new family situation. Martin asked Glen's family and friends to welcome Sara, while also reminding them that the process of welcoming her would require some adjustments and efforts to be made.

These speeches highlight the importance of marriage. They suggest slightly different views on the way each speaker recognized Sara's transition from being single to becoming a married woman. John strongly emphasized that becoming a wife is a form of religious commitment. He then explained that this commitment requires a woman's submission to her husband, although he also recognized all that Sara had done so far as and the wise decisions she had made. In comparison, the speeches by Luke and Martin depicted Sara as a devoted person. Through their speech, Luke and Martin emphasized that Sara should be treated as an individual and not just as a new wife who was going to fill the gap left by Glen's previous wife. They stressed the importance of remembering Sara's individuality even after her marriage.

The last speaker, Richard, was even more outspoken in his appreciation for Sara and her work in his church community. Richard was from Sara's congregation and had known her for decades. Since he was one of the first people whom Sara consulted on her courtship with Glen, Richard reflected on some of the thoughts that she may have had when she made her decision to reply to Glen's request for courtship. Richard mentioned that by that time, Sara was a well-integrated part of the church community. As an experienced teacher, she was respected and trusted by many children and their parents. She participated actively in many church activities, including outreach and mission projects. Richard said that Sara's decision to date and eventually get married to Glen must have been a difficult one to make because this was a decision that had a major impact on her life. Richard said that he was happy that Sara had made her own decision after overcoming various worries she might have had. Richard finished his speech by noting that he and his congregation would miss Sara because she was going to move to another state with Glen. Compared to the other three speeches, Richard's speech suggests that Sara's position was not marginal, but rather established. According to him, with Sara's exit, the congregation was going to miss something.

Since only a few occasions allow many people to speak publicly about another person, these comments offer important insights on how conservative Mennonite men view single women; they open a

window of opportunity to understand Mennonite men's views. While not everyone is as expressive about the roles of single women as Richard, his comments suggest that single women and their contributions are, to some extent, recognized. The manner in which conservative Mennonites put emphasis on gender hierarchy is clearly illustrated in John's comments. John's comments also suggest that single women are often seen as people capable of making wise decisions concerning their religious journeys. Whereas middle-aged singles may get married, their marriage does not take away the contributions they made prior to it. The speakers in Sara's wedding also suggest that even though single women may learn to adjust to new positions, their experience of being single continues to be a part of who they were.

### **Becoming and Being Single Women**

This article has explored single women in different stages of their lives. Single women in conservative Mennonite communities face various difficulties and limitations. As their religious interpretations of proper gender roles dictate, young single women cannot actively pursue partners for marriage and their occupational pursuits are limited. Without clear paths to becoming singles, they need to find their own ways to move on with their lives as unmarried women within conservative Mennonite communities. As Coblentz (1992/2011) and other studies of single women from other countries assert, single conservative Mennonite women, particularly those who are in their late 20s and 30s, may feel that their situations are the ones that "nobody else has given much thought to" (Coblentz, 1992/2011, p. 1) and are marginal. A close examination of conservative Mennonite women's lives, however, suggests that their positions are not always at the margins. As they grow older, middle-aged women play important roles by providing advice and guiding young people within and outside their church communities. Unlike the examples of single women in the US given by Traister (2016), single conservative Mennonite women do not aim at gaining independence and social changes. Instead, they continue facing the challenges of being singles. However, their assistance and contributions are recognized by other church members, even those who are in leadership positions, as portrayed by the speeches in Sara's wedding.

The examination of conservative Mennonite single women, thus, suggests that a static view of single women's experiences cannot sufficiently capture their experiences. Responses to chal-

lenges and contributions that single women make differ as they lead their single lives. To fully understand the experiences of single Mennonite women, it is important to pay attention to the process of becoming and being single. Furthermore, as in the case of Janet and Carolyne, single women, particularly those who are middle-aged, play an integral role in supporting others' religious journey into their conservative Mennonite beliefs. While conservative Mennonites are just one of the many subgroups of Mennonites, this suggests that exploring the experiences of single women at different life stages can illuminate one aspect of the characteristics of Mennonite communities with regards to their religious and social dynamics.

Since I decided to study Mennonites over twenty years ago, some of my Mennonite friends have asked me why I study anthropology. In their view, Mennonites, who fundamentally share religious beliefs, cannot be classified as a cultural group, which is one of the traditional subjects of anthropological studies. However, anthropology has always attentively examined the diverse ways in which people live. As such, I believe that Mennonites can be a good topic for anthropological studies. Being Mennonite takes many forms and expressions, considering that their religious beliefs are shared by people around the world. Therefore, anthropology can provide important perspectives to aid the understanding of Mennonites, including the tensions arising from specific cultural and social contexts.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A similar claim is also found in Engelberg (2017). He says that single people in conservative religious groups are understudied.
- <sup>2</sup> Shiino's book (2014) mentioned above compiled more than ten ethnographic studies on single people around the world. Traister (2016) published a book about single women in the US. One of the most recent monographs in this field focuses on elderly single people in Finland (Takahashi, 2019).
- <sup>3</sup> For example, in 1987, Epp published an essay on Mennonite women titled, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'" in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5, 90–107. In another publication, she emphasized how family is an important element for Mennonite communities and their development (Epp, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> For more discussions on the development and practices of conservative Mennonites, I suggest reading Scott (1996).
- <sup>5</sup> See Scott (1996) and Naka (2008), for example, on how conservative Mennonites value working hard and not being dependent on the government as much as possible.

- <sup>6</sup> Some may quit school as soon as they reach the legal age to be able to do so, whereas others remain in school until they finish the school year. In some cases, teenagers may continue studying from home through correspondence courses. Once they are out of school, they are expected to start working and earn an income.
- <sup>7</sup> See Naka (2008), for example, on how the work environment matters for conservative Mennonites in choosing their employment.
- <sup>8</sup> There are also a few women who relocate with clear occupational goals in mind. Naka (2013) discussed a few examples of how some conservative Mennonites pursue specific types of jobs that they desire while dealing with challenges.
- <sup>9</sup> This is a convenient arrangement for many conservative Mennonite single people as they can stay at relatively inexpensive and safe places. Such arrangements can provide church community members with opportunities to know how single people are adjusting to a new community. As they can live with single people, families can provide informal advice when they see that they feel lonely or have any difficulty following their religious convictions. Please also see Naka (2013) for more detail.

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