

Traditional Customs of Remarriage Among Some Canadian Mennonite Widow(er)s

John F. Peters, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

"You never lose your first love."
"Of course you can love more than once."¹

Introduction

Marriage is a recognized social institution in Canada. About 90% of all adult Canadians marry at some time in their lives. It is therefore not surprising to find that when marriage is terminated because of the death of a spouse, the living member might well seek a second heterosexual partner. Beliefs in and the behavior of remarriage are controlled by societal and subcultural norms and values. In North America, marriage, family, and courtship practices among both immigrants and the non-immigrant population have changed dramatically in the past several decades.

The purpose of the present study is threefold.² First, it specifically contributes to the limited but emerging body of scholarly research related to the Mennonite family (Redekop, 1985). Secondly and more particularly, it describes the remarrying customs found among more traditional and elderly Canadian Mennonite widows and widowers found in several communities through the past quarter century. These peculiar mores and behaviours which relate to courtship, family relationships, weddings, finances, marital interaction, and church affiliation are now almost extinct. They stand in marked contrast to the marriage customs found among more

modern Mennonites or within our society in general. Thirdly, the findings of this research are compared to other North American widow(er) remarriage research.

Family has always been a near-sacred institution for Mennonites. Their writers, poets, theologians and historians have extolled the virtues of the family. Nonetheless, with the exception of the Kauffman/Harder (1975) research and a summary report on the 1982 Mennonite census (Yoder, 1985), few empirical works have focused upon the Mennonite family. Accounts of courtship, child raising, parenting, marital relations, and kinship have been written, often as a personal record, as a biblical directive, or as a byproduct of other historical information. No known research has been done specifically on remarriage after the death of a spouse.

The first Mennonites to Canada arrived in the Niagara region (1786) and in Waterloo (1800) from Pennsylvania. Over a hundred years earlier they had left Swiss and south-German regions for the Colony of Penn (Epp, 1973). Faced with growing government control in America and the opportunity for land acquisition in Canada, they migrated once again. Mennonites from Russia (originally the Netherlands) began migrating to western Canada in 1874. Other "Russian" Mennonites migrated to Canada in the 1920s and after World War II.

Mennonite theological beliefs and practices have traditionally emphasized the sanctity of the husband-wife bond, which is dissolved only by death. Marriage has been seen as the strong spiritual union of two people, just as conversion is a union with Christ (Redekop, 1985). In the turbulence of Mennonite history, it was not uncommon for community members either to be aware of, or to witness, the dissolution of marriage through death (but not divorce) among middle-aged and even young married couples in their community. Except for the aged ailing in health, remarriage of widows and widowers has long been the norm for Mennonites.

Widow(er) remarriage among modern Mennonites is not as socially visible as in the past. Several factors have contributed to this change. The hardships of disease, war, immigration, and religious persecution have drastically declined since Mennonites migrated to North America. As in all western countries, health standards have risen and health care has become accessible. The situation in which a widow with several young children was left homeless and/or poor occurred less frequently. In addition, government aid became available. The Mennonite community became more affluent, individualistic, heterogeneous, diverse, and segregated according to age. The community became less conscious of and less involved in the private lives of its members.

In Canada older Mennonites are found in large metropolitan areas as well as in ethnic towns or villages, often near the very land they once farmed. For most the church continues to be an important ideological and social focal point. Their values are best characterized as traditional. Their material possessions may have many of the trappings of modern society; however, their habits, conversation, and concerns portray a life style of a pre-World War II era, fitting the ethnic villager typology (Driedger, 1975). Driedger describes Canadian Mennonites as urban villagers because of the characteristics of territorial concentration, institutional completeness, cultural identity, and social distance (1975:228-232). I will use Driedger's

ethnic villager designation in this study, even though the greater proportion of Mennonites in this sample live in large Canadian urban centres.

Literature on Remarriage

Widow(er) marriage in Canada is common. Most widow(er)s marrying after age 50 choose a widowed partner (*Marriages and Divorces*, 1986). Cleveland and Gianturco (1976) show that the average interval of time between marriages is 1.7 years for widowers and 3.5 years for widows. Vinick (1978) states that because of the number of once married women there is a "society of widows," or a distinct subculture which is abandoned once a widow marries. There are five times as many widows as widowers in the 45-64 age cohort. In 1986 there were 330,000 widows compared to 72,000 widowers in Canada age 75 or over (*The Family in Canada*, 1989). This is partly due to the approximate 10 year differential in female over male life expectancy.

Jacobs and Vinick (1979:164) outline three reasons why widowers are more strongly motivated than widows to remarry. Their relationship with relatives is not as close, compared with that of widows. Widowers have acquired fewer skills in independent living. Socially men are left to initiate courtship and the actual proposal to marry. Jacobs and Vinick also state that older men have fewer friends when compared to women because men die earlier than women. Older widowers must find new roles and associations while widows are able to continue a fairly similar role.

In general, widow(er)s who remarry face unique situations when compared to those experiencing their first marriage. The marriage partners are older, which means they have had more life experience. This "maturity" undoubtedly augurs well for the second marriage. At the same time more recent egalitarian gender role aspirations, particularly by young widows, may create problems for the widower partner. Widow(er)s generally enter the second marriage with financial assets. These assets are generally recognized to be the inheritance rights of each parent's respective offspring. Adult children may show ambivalence toward a parent's remarriage because of the potential "loss" or alteration of their anticipated inheritance.

Another way in which a remarriage contrasts with a first marriage is that the remarrieds have already experienced an intimate relationship with a partner in marriage. Their love and affection are now transferred to another individual. Can the first love ever die? And to what extent are positive and negative encounters from the first marital union carried over into the second marriage? Among some widows Lopata (1979) found "sanctification," an inordinate reverence and respect for the deceased's wishes and ideals. Sanctification serves to give the widow an ideal past and increases her perceived status at a time when her morale needs a boost (Torrie, 1970:67). This marital tie impedes the possibility of remarriage (Moss and Moss, 1980).

Because of age most remarriages are not likely to last as long as do first marriages. Physical attraction may not be as relevant a consideration in the second marriage. Read (1973) found that those who marry after retirement spend more time

with one another than do partners who marry at a much younger age. Amongst those over the age of 60, considerable more thought is given to health. The courtship period of the remarrieds is briefer than for those who marry at a younger age. The age difference between the spouses is also greater for the remarrying pair. The very young and the very old may have financial stress. The remarrying widow(er) retirees have less opportunity to change their limited financial status.

Moss and Moss refer to the widow(er) remarriage as a triad relationship. For widows the deceased husband has set a standard and frame of reference. A widow may relate to the new husband in light of the earlier tie. Subconsciously (and often consciously) the new husband must meet this standard. "The widow views the new spouse through the prism of the first marriage" (1980:67). Birthdays and anniversaries as well as behaviors such as lovemaking and self-disclosure are reminders of past similar experiences of the deceased. Moss and Moss feel remarriage does not take the place of the old but rather "grows on its shoulders" (1980:67-69). Research does show that remarriage increases the chance of good health for the elderly. Companionship and mutual care for one another contribute to this health, and likely to less government health expense for the aged. Jacobs and Vinick (1979:184) state that some men would need to be institutionalized were it not for remarriage. They also found that often children of the widow(er) are relieved that a new partner has been found because the social involvement of the elderly increases (1979:187). In another study Read (1973:67) shows that some widow(er)s seek a spouse identical to the previous spouse. Men were found to be more satisfied in their marriage than were their spouses (Jacobs and Vinick, 1979:210). A good financial situation and living arrangements contribute much to a woman's satisfaction in remarriage in her later years (Jacobs and Vinick, 1979:212).

McKain's work (1969) focuses upon widow marriage satisfaction. He found that widows and widowers who marry generally adjust well. Church attenders have a higher rate of remaining together than non-church attenders. He also states that difficulties in compatibility might occur when an immigrant and non-immigrant marry because of differences in values and perspective.

A further comparison may be made between the divorced and widow(er)s who remarry. The divorced are often younger and many have the responsibility of raising children. Parenting becomes more complex because of the non-resident non-custodial parent. Most of the divorced have a memory of an unsatisfactory marriage, which is usually not the case for the widowed. The divorced may be socially stigmatized while the widowed are sometimes socially pitied.

Data Source for Mennonite Remarriages

Over a period of 18 months widows and widowers were interviewed in several key Canadian Mennonite centres: Kitchener (including two adjacent towns), Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Clearbrook (British Columbia). I approached one or two ministers in four of the five areas and asked for the names of remarried widow(er)s in the church membership. This list was augmented by the interviewees themselves or through my friends living in these communities. Interviewees were members of

the General Conference, Ontario Mennonite Conference, and Mennonite Brethren churches. This research pertains to marriages where one member is at least age 40 and to those who have been remarried within the past 25 years. The data includes 52 persons involved in a widow(er) marriage (Table 1). I make no claim of sample representativeness.

In most cases, the husband and wife were interviewed simultaneously although some individuals were interviewed alone. Interviews lasted about one hour and used an open and closed ended questionnaire. Subjects were almost always initially contacted by telephone at which time the purpose of the interview was outlined, and a time and date for the interview to take place were arranged, usually within a day or two of the call.

Table 1
Region and Church Membership of Widow(er)s

Church	Region				Total
	Kitchener	Winnipeg	Saskatoon	Clearbrook	
Ontario Mennonite Conference	11				11
General Conference	-	10	-	-	10
Mennonite Brethren	2	2	8	19	31
					52

A rapport between the interviewer and interviewees was established quickly, possibly because of the interviewer's grey hair, facility with the German language, and Mennonite name. Even though most of the interviewees did not understand the purposes of the research, most wanted to "help in any way they could." Some were intrigued with the topic. Many welcomed the opportunity to speak to me about this very personal matter; some found a release, an almost cathartic experience, in discussing widowhood and remarriage. Several of those interviewed augmented the specific concern of the interview with personal stories of an emotional nature. I was refused entry into one home.

Findings

At the time of the interview, the average age of the subjects was 68 1/2 years for the women and 75 years for the males. The average age difference between the spouses in these remarriages was 6.9 years (a range of 1-16 years), and husbands were always older than their wives. The average duration of the remarriage at the

time of the research was 10.3 years. Twelve widowers had married women who had never been married before, and all of the bridegrooms had been widowers (Table 2). None of the sample had been divorced. One male had married three times. Six of the women and one of the men were widowed a second time at the time of the interview. Three widowers had married relatives of their first wives: one a first cousin, two to second cousins. One third of all of the subjects were not born in North America. Of the Mennonite Brethren group, 66% were born in Russia (one in Poland). There were no civil marriages and virtually all of the weddings took place in a church. In a large number of cases, the death of the first spouse came after a lengthy illness.

Table 2

Marriage and Partner Status, Current Marital
Status, Ethnicity of Partner and Place of Birth

Widowers marrying singles		12
Widows marrying singles		0
Married for the third time:	men	1
	women	0
Currently widowed:	men	1
	women	6
Non-Mennonite prior to marriage:	men	1
	women	3
Born in Russia/Poland:	men	17
	women	13

Four of the women said they had refused opportunities to marry earlier in their widowhood. Reasons given for such a response included the fact that they felt "no love" or that they were "too busy to marry at that time." Some widowers had had their proposal of marriage rejected. Once the decision to marry had been made, the time until the wedding was not lengthy. In several cases another key person such as a friend or another family member was involved in the matching.

Men identified a desire for love or companionship as their reasons for remarriage more often than did women. In a couple of cases the widow felt sorry for the lonely state of the widower. In most cases, children of the previous marriage approved of the new marriage (88%). In a few cases it was known that friends disapproved of the remarriage. These widowers simply stated that it was none of other people's business. A high percentage (78%) claimed to have good or very good health. Because of marriage, a large number had to change churches and in a few

cases their Mennonite denomination. It was always the women who made the denominational change. One woman who prior to her marriage was not a Mennonite, did not feel accepted by her new church. The only non-Mennonite widower in the sample who married a Mennonite widow continued to attend his own church 50 kilometers away while she attended her church located within the town of their residence.

Church attendance was viewed as important. Many couples attended at least three times a week, although others attended less frequently due to health reasons. Church had a social function. It reinforced the couples' beliefs and was a stable social and ideological base. It was the source of almost all their friendships. It was often within the church circle that people found a second (or third) partner to marry after being widowed. A few widow(er)s were assisted in the search for a spouse by a minister, church friend, or missionary acquaintance. Potential candidates were sometimes chosen through the use of pictures in the church directory. A few elderly widowers had such faith in their own church membership that, at the recommendation of a minister or friend, they sought and acquired a wife from within the same denomination in a distant city.

Belief in God was important to these widows and widowers. Most had individually prayed fervently concerning the loneliness of widowhood and the possibility of finding an acceptable new partner. Most voiced gratitude to God "for His leading" in the partner selection, and then for the subsequent marital years. When asked what advice they had for younger people who were seeking marriage, several responded with, "Put God first."

The church also helped to shape the individual's values. The majority of those studied did not believe in divorce should their marriage or someone else's be unsuccessful. Some were obviously torn because they had children who had married, divorced and remarried. The idea of divorce was not compatible with their religious and traditional values. The "no divorce at all cost" principle appeared to be practiced by at least two troubled couples. One widow indicated that her first marriage was not good, and another who was widowed for the second time claimed her second marriage was terrible. Despite the difficult experience the marriages were not terminated until the partner died.

Traditional views of the family were also evident in the areas of decision making and finance. In a few marriages, the men had unmistakable control. Traditional views were also evident in that one widow found it easier to remarry because her first husband had given her permission to do so before he died. Besides the patriarchal marriage relationship there were also junior-senior partner relationships and equal-partner relationships. The financial independence of each spouse (usually the result of family money from the earlier marriage) undoubtedly influenced the new relationship toward greater equality. In at least two cases, remarrying husbands felt a little uneasy because their second wife had more assets than they did. One husband seemed to feel that his masculine dignity had decreased because he now lived in a home his second wife had purchased. In addition, if the wife had greater facility in driving a car and was in better health than the husband,

the relationship was likely to be more equal. Equal partnership also appeared more likely if the wife had previously been a non-Mennonite; had not been previously married; had been a widow for a number of years; or had been socially active prior to the marriage. In one case the wife did most of the decision making and felt guilty about it. About half of the couples practiced joint decision making.

In general, widow(er)s had experienced a lengthy, intimate, and good wedded life in the first marriage. A large number of those interviewed had been close to their former spouse through months and, in a few cases, years of illness. Many had found the transition to the widowhood role difficult; some widowers found it almost impossible. Widowers often married within a year, and some indicated a much greater and more urgent desire to marry than did widows. They reported their loneliness to be unbearable. Only one or two of the widows had young children and so concerns by women in the sample for someone to fill the father role were few.

A few widowers found it difficult to initiate a new relationship. Undoubtedly they wondered how their family and friends would perceive their remarriage. And how would a male at age 60 or 70 feel about having his proposal refused? Courting behavior differed greatly from the premarital behaviors currently found among younger Mennonites. For many, the courting norms of earlier decades meant that one "dated" only the partner whom one would most certainly marry. A high percentage of the sample found a partner in a distant city. How would living arrangements be made during such visits? (Motel lodging was not even considered.) Obviously the intent of such a visit became public to the church community immediately! The widower proposed marriage on the first or second visit. Some married a person unknown to them, but recommended by a friend or relative. In numerous cases (39%), however, the potential partners had known one another since early adulthood or childhood. Would this lengthy knowledge of him or her be an asset or barrier to marriage? Any proposal for marriage would have to include discussions on such topics as finances, housing, and possibly church transference: no small matters for people aged 65 or 75.

Letters or telephone conversations were the means most commonly used for initiating the contact or for proposing marriage. A few couples arranged to dine together in a restaurant. One marriage was the result of a blind date; another was the product of a meeting arranged through a dating club. On the average, widowers remarried within 2 years (a range of 2 months to 6 years), and widows remarried within 6 years (a range of 2 months to 20 years) after the death of their former partner.

Some weddings were frequented by as many as 300 children, grandchildren and friends. The reception was almost always held in the church. In some cases the event also served as a family gathering, particularly for those in western Canada, and the wedding was therefore scheduled on a weekend. More than half of all couples had a honeymoon. However it did not necessarily take place immediately following the wedding. In some cases, couples went away a few weeks after the wedding and often took this opportunity to visit relatives in another part of Canada.

Fifty percent of the newly married couples moved into the wife's residence, and 32% into the husband's residence. The remainder chose a "new" home. Several

of those interviewed were sensitive about remaining in a home environment that would engender frequent memories of the deceased partner. There was considerable variation as to whether the earlier marriage was discussed between the remarried pair. Some refused to discuss events in their earlier marriage. Other individuals recognized that their first marriage was part of their past and, therefore, felt that being unable to discuss their earlier marriage with their new spouse constituted a restriction of their personhood. A few had pictures of their first spouse conspicuously placed in their home. Such liberal behaviors were more likely to be found among spouses in the following circumstances: both became widows later in life, both had families, and the partners had known one another in their earlier years.

The financial costs of daily living were handled in a variety of ways. If both partners had financial resources, the costs of living were equally shared including food, housing, and utilities. In one case every piece of furniture in the house was individually owned. Estates were generally arranged to be passed on to children from the first marriage, but in some cases the second spouse was also a beneficiary. With respect to their own death and burial, three-fourths of the widows and widowers had already made plans to be buried beside their first spouse.

The data also revealed some differences between the western and central Canadian samples, or more specifically between the Russian and Swiss Mennonites. Marriage with a non-Mennonite was more likely to occur amongst the Swiss (27%) than with those with Russian roots (2%). In the western sample, a high proportion (70%) were born in Russia, showing that language and ethnic or community customs were important considerations. The western group therefore sought social interaction with other Mennonites, particularly of their own church. Because the ancestors of the Swiss Mennonites began coming to North America over 200 years ago they were more acculturated to Canadian customs compared to more recent immigrants.

Discussion

It is evident that some traditional values of Mennonite courting and marriage will soon become history. In this limited nonrandom sample of widow(er)s who married after age 40, primary relationships were found within the family and among church members. In most cases the church was focal: for friendships, social events, values, and even a marriage partner. The wedding was held in church to which, in most cases, the Mennonite community was invited. Most had arranged their burial in the church cemetery beside their first marriage partner. The loneliness of widowhood and the hope of finding a second marriage partner were matters of much prayer. For some this concern was shared with a minister, unlike a finding among the more conservative Old Order Mennonites (Peters, 1984). Divorce or separation was not an option, even for those in unsatisfactory marriages. Their beliefs and values show a sacred rather than secular orientation to life. This sample has an ethnic-religious characteristic, with a seemingly greater importance of the role of the church in the rematching or remarrying process.

Traditional values were found in gender roles. Part of the widower's loneliness stemmed from his inability to adapt to his new role of being single. His

earlier marriage life-style included a female companion who fulfilled traditional female functions: cooking, housekeeping and emotional support. Only the male could initiate a new relationship, and his ego was marred when a woman declined his marriage intentions. When a widower initiated contact with an unmarried woman, the possibility of a marriage union was understood. In this sample few had friends of the other sex. Neutral or platonic encounters were unlikely and unthinkable.

Traditional values were also evident in the new-formed marriage. In a few cases the wife felt guilty when she found herself in the primary decision-making role. In an interchurch marriage, the bride invariably made the change to the bridegroom's church community. Traditional values were also seen in that only one-half of the sample had a honeymoon, sometimes months after the wedding. The honeymoon was often spent visiting friends and relatives, rather than in a region void of acquaintances, as is the practice among most North American first marrieds!

The ethnic villager type (Driedger, 1975) is justifiably applied to the non-Swiss Mennonite sample. Patriarchal forms of family in gender roles were practiced unless by default. Individuals found their spiritual and social support from within the Mennonite community. Their identity was unmistakably found among their ethnic group despite their urban residence. Their own burial was to be beside their first spouse.

The ethnic villager characteristic was also seen in the interview process. I was accepted into their homes and lives, in part because of my Mennonite roots. The interviewees responded in a subjective manner.

The remarrying couples found themselves in a social system radically different from that of their childhood or, for some, their rural eastern European ancestry. They now functioned in a heterogeneous, complex, secular, urban, *Gesellschaft* society. Most were receiving pension payments. None were financially struggling to survive. In a few cases the wife had more assets than the husband.

A minority of those studied demonstrated values of the modern era. Several once-married or single women had developed a strong sense of their own unique separate identities apart from a male, and this quality was carried into their marriage. A few women had declined earlier opportunities for marriage/remarriage since they preferred their single status. Modern forms of courtship were emerging. One couple met on a blind date, and several dated in restaurants. Several of the unions included a non-Mennonite partner. In one union the individuals continued to attend the church where each had had their membership prior to the marriage. In two instances, the church community did not play a primary role in their lives. Seeds of secularism are evident.

Traditional customs in dating and marriage for Mennonite widows and widowers are changing. The emerging modern group, evident by the Swiss Mennonite people in this sample are a case in point. Influences from the larger society are affecting individual and family life-styles, attitudes and ideals. Several subjects reported the difficulty of conversing with their partner about their deceased spouse, a matter which should be of concern to the minister or counselor.

This study is consistent with much of the literature on widowhood and

remarriage. Individuals had difficulty in the role exit from marriage. In some cases the role transition was anticipated due to a partner's illness. In general, couples adjusted well to remarriage. Almost all those interviewed were church attenders, and this propensity enhances the marriage success rate (McKain, 1969). A few widows showed sanctification for their deceased husbands' wishes (Lopata, 1979; Moss and Moss, 1980). The reasons for remarriage varied: love, companionship, sympathy.

Differences found in gender confirms Bernard's thesis of a "his" and a "her" marriage (1973). Initiating courtship was a difficult experience for many widowers. They feared rejection. Courtship was less lengthy when compared to first marriages. A good percentage of the spouses had known or knew one another from childhood and youth. The period of widowhood between marriages was much briefer for the widowers as compared to the widows, a pattern found in other research as well (Cleveland and Gianturco, 1976). The larger proportion of single females over single males in the sample who married later in life shows that widowers have a greater probability to remarry than do widows (*Marriages and Divorces*, 1986). Family wills of Mennonite widow(er)s were arranged before the marriage and were based upon the previous marriage. None of the remarried couples were in financial need.

One might justifiably ask whether the remarriage of Mennonite widow(er)s will remain as high in the future as it has been in the past. Several social realities support a negative response. Certainly the courtship and marriage norms described in this paper are now almost extinct. Religious norms and church loyalty are not as strong as they once were. Widow(er)s will not be as inclined to be directly assisted in the spouse selection by a minister. Urbanism and individualism have the effect of making marriage behaviour (and possible sexual relations) somewhat independent of community values. Heterosexual intimate relations may take place without sexual intimacy. Feminine values will have the effect that widows and older women will be cautious of a potential patriarchal relationship. Widowers may be more likely to handle domestic duties themselves.

At the same time there are social indicators which suggest a continued high rate of remarriage among the widowed. Increased longevity is a first consideration. Furthermore, aging widow(er)s are less likely to reside with (and be in the care of) a married or single daughter. The aged are less likely to expect this care. There is a greater emphasis upon interpersonal relationships than in the past. Both public and private affectivity has become more acceptable. The stigma against older people marrying (McKain, 1969) may be diminishing.

It is evident that the Mennonite ethnic villager finds himself or herself in a changing social environment. He or she does not find family relationships to be as focal as once experienced. Church activities are not as central to life's values and actions. In the past marriage was seen as sacred and therefore divorce within and outside the church were unacceptable.

The ethnic villager now functions in a society where heterogeneity, affluence, materialism, social health care and individualism are pervasive and prominent.

The Mennonite minister and counselor, as well as the middle-aged son and daughter of the more elderly ethnic villager, are challenged to empathize with these widow(er)s caught in changing customs of gender roles, relationships and marriage.

Notes

¹ Comments made by interviewees in the study.

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