

*Maria Kennedy*

## “STRANGERS EXPECTED”: FAMILIES LIVING TOGETHER IN SCRIPTURE AT THE BEAN BLOSSOM MENNONITE CHURCH, BEAN BLOSSOM, INDIANA

Whatever road you take to Bean Blossom, you can be sure it will be winding and hilly. Layers of hills gently unfold as you bend around valleys obscured by dense trees. On Indiana State Road 45, the curl of the road forces you to slow to thirty miles per hour for much of the way, as the side of a hill drops down into a valley below. The road is only as treacherous as you make it. The bends in the road tell you to slow down, and you do. In the bareness of January, houses, cabins, barns, and trailers scattered beside the road are visible through the tall thin trees of Yellowwood State Forest.

Bean Blossom sits above a wide valley, a little strip of houses and stores at the crossroads of State Roads 45 and 135 in Brown County. Many people traveling on 135 are heading to Nashville, a constellation of tourist shops and artist galleries just a few minutes down the road catering to a steady stream of tourists looking to find a bit of old-time Indiana hidden in the hills and forests. Those who don't miss the blip of a town that is Bean Blossom on their drive will notice one trim white building that stands out from the other worn facades. The sign on the door says “Bean Blossom Mennonite Church—Strangers Expected.”



The “Strangers Expected” sign on the Bean Blossom Mennonite Church beckons visitors from the side of Indiana State Road 135. Members erected the sign to encourage visitors who otherwise might have been deterred by the Mennonite name and its association with more closed communities like the Amish.

Strangers *have* found their way into the church because of the sign. A few troubled souls have briefly tumbled in looking for shelter and comfort from tumultuous life experiences. The strangers who have stayed, though, are families from conservative Christian backgrounds other than Mennonite who have come looking for a Christian community that values family and uses the Bible as the primary guide for life. Encouraged by the sign to put aside denominational differences, these families have joined a faith community characterized by a dedication to family, service, community, and faith in Jesus as the way to spiritual salvation.

Accomplishing this unity despite the diversity of Protestant backgrounds present in the nominally Mennonite congregation is possible because members of the church share and model their lives on an understanding of their relationship to God that places absolute trust in adherence to God's word as it is written in the Bible. The art of living according to the Bible permeates every aspect of life here: it is evident in the people's worship, and in the ways in which they define and practice their relationships to one another as family members in the home and as members of the family of God.

Members of this Mennonite church live their faith through the Bible every day as they find ways to perform acts of service to each other within the families that God has directed them to foster at church, at home, and with the wider world. Prayer and scripture are always close in the minds of members of this community, lilting into conversations like old friends guiding and directing decisions, making the stranger who comes through the door seem like a natural part of life, someone whom scripture can help them welcome into the family of God.

*More Than Mennonite: Uniting Across Denominations Through Scripture*

Mennonites are a Christian denomination that emerged in Germany during the Protestant Reformation. Along with the Amish, the Brethren, and the Hutterites, Mennonites are an Anabaptist group, holding a theological position that affirms adult rather than infant baptism as a sign of spiritual salvation. Mennonites vary considerably in character and doctrine; worldwide, the denomination is composed of various conferences of churches with differing perspectives on issues of theology and practice. Some Old Order Mennonite churches adhere to communal living and a strict abstinence from modern amenities in a fashion similar to the Amish, while other churches and conferences encourage members to live entirely in the modern world and espouse progressive theological stances that allow the ordination of women preachers. Bean Blossom Mennonite Church belongs to the Conservative Mennonite Conference, whose churches encourage their members to live modestly in the modern world, forgo the swearing of oaths, and limit pastoral roles to men, though women may serve in other ministerial roles according to the customs of individual church congregations.

Mennonite congregations across the denomination are characterized by beliefs in adult baptism, pacifism, and dedication to mission and service work, as exemplified in the Mennonite Disaster Service, which sends relief and volunteers to disaster areas in the United States and Canada. Two groups from the Bean Blossom church participated in



MDS's disaster mission after Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts in 2005.

Especially, the Mennonite emphases on family, service, and mission work have permeated the character of the Bean Blossom congregation, making the inclusion of non-Mennonite families possible and giving their dedication to understanding God's message in scripture particular strength in its application to those spheres of life.

From the very beginning of its history, the Bean Blossom church sought to draw outsiders in. After the Mission Board of the Mennonite Church began offering very successful vacation Bible school programs in an abandoned Presbyterian church in the town, it decided to set up a mission church for the area, sending Charles Haarer to pastor and build a congregation. There were no Mennonite families in the area at the time, but Charles and his family were soon joined by Henry and Frances Wagler and their family, who had left an Amish congregation in southern Indiana looking for a church less focused on the rules and conventions of Amish life and dedicated to a more open engagement with God's Word.

Since its mission beginnings, Bean Blossom Mennonite Church has welcomed people from a range of religious backgrounds into its doors, and in the process, it has had to negotiate the meaning and identity of being a Mennonite congregation. Some members, including several men with military experience from non-Mennonite backgrounds, disagree with strict pacifism. Only a few of the older women wear head coverings common to conservative Mennonite women. Most dress simply and modestly, but in the fashion of contemporary secular society. In its strict interpretations of the Bible as the source of God's will and truth, family life, and restriction of women's teaching in the church, however, this Mennonite church's theological conservatism has appealed to and welcomed other Christians seeking a congregation with similar values.

Dave Deckard and his family took the invitation "Strangers Expected" to heart when they moved to the area almost fifteen years ago. "The sign on the front convinced us we could at least try the place," says Dave. "It might be a place you could at least walk into without being a Mennonite."

Dave and Laverne Deckard live in a house at the foot of the Lutheran Hills Retreat, which Dave manages year round, keeping the roads in shape and the camp facilities in order. Like several of the families who attend the Mennonite church, the Deckards moved to southern Indiana in order to pursue a quieter life where they could concentrate on raising children in a healthy spiritual and physical environment. They attended another church when they first moved to the area, but the fit wasn't quite right. Encouraged by the welcoming sign on the Mennonite church and by Dave's business interactions with Ed Wagler, a member of Bean Blossom Mennonite Church who helped with roadwork at the Lutheran Hills camp, the Deckards decided to give it a try.

In the past five years, especially, people have noted the change in the tiny church's population as people from various faith backgrounds, like the Deckards, have joined. Robb and Mary Besosa, a young couple who have attended Baptist and other conservative Christian denominations and worked in ministries for troubled youth in the Dominican Republic and in the U.S., moved to the area to help start Twelve Stones, a counseling

ministry for families in distress. They found in the church a welcoming atmosphere unparalleled by other area churches they visited. "It was the first church out of eight we had been to in the community where we got swarmed by people asking us questions," says Robb. "We walked into five out of eight of those churches and didn't get talked to once. That's why we've stayed."



Beth Borisuk (left) and Andrea Wagler stand at the rear of the church during an evening service, holding Andrea's niece and nephew. In the close-knit community, children know the care of many adults who are part of the church family.



*Gathering the Family of God in Prayer: Preparing for Scripture*

Reaching out to members of the congregation in prayer, in hospitality, and in generosity has brought new people through the doors of the church and has convinced them to stay. This welcome is not only on the surface, however. Inside the walls of the church, members of the congregation are constantly engaging in each other's concerns. Burdens and joys become the experiences of everyone who has come to listen to the Word. Once inside the church, everyone, new and old, is gathered into each other's prayers.

Inside the small church, three rows of gleaming wooden pews are filled with people. Perhaps sixty gather for the Sunday morning service. The service starts with a hymn, and the plain bare walls fill with rich, unaccompanied four-part harmony. The whole congregation becomes a choir, basses, tenors, altos, and sopranos ringing out beside one another. The congregation sits, and a man known as the Pastor of Visitation, an assistant to the regular pastor, steps up to the pulpit, reading off announcements. Two young men holding microphones position themselves at the front of the church. Prayers are offered by members of the congregation, prayers for assistance, prayers for family and friends, prayers of thankfulness.

From the pews, Rick Gillam raises his hand, and one of the boys brings him the microphone. He thanks God for his daughter Andrea Wagler's birthday, praising her adult growth and increased maturity over the past year. "That was the love of a mother," he says describing Andrea's expression as she held her first child, born dead eight months into the pregnancy. His voice shakes with the words, strong with emotion; a solemn hush suddenly drops over the congregation. I look down at my hands, and then back at Rick across the aisle, as he thanks God for the steadfast example Andrea and her husband Nathan Wagler have been to the congregation through their loss.

Prayer is often asked for people in sickness and for deaths in the community inside and outside the church. In the news media, deaths can be faceless and nameless. Here they are neighbors, friends, people more or less distantly connected to those sitting in the pews. I could see Andrea and Nate sitting across the church, their lost child hovering amongst all of us through Rick's prayer for Andrea, his daughter, on her birthday.

As people raise their hands and offer up prayers verbally, the Pastor of Visitation notes down each prayer request on paper. Once all who wish to offer prayer have done so, the Pastor of Visitation composes a prayer aloud, incorporating all of the individual prayers together into a unified prayer offered from the congregation as a whole to God. Music follows. Changing from week to week according to who is leading, it ranges from a cappella to piano-accompanied hymn singing, to contemporary Christian worship songs led by some of the younger congregants with guitar and drums. Lastly, the service culminates in a sermon. This week, Pastor Gary Link has composed a sermon titled "The God of Second Chances and Those Who Take Advantage of Them." Before Gary begins his sermon, a man of the church, usually (as this week) the Pastor of Visitation, stands with him at the pulpit and prays over him, asking God to speak through him. After the sermon, Gary's wife Lorene leads the congregation in one last hymn, her voice rising clear from a pew close to the front, and Gary walks down from the pulpit to stand next to her.

Plain, reverent, reserved, the worship of God in Bean Blossom Mennonite Church gathers together a family of believers intimately involved in one another's personal and spiritual lives. In prayer and in music, the voice of each person bares itself to God and to each other, borne up to heaven through shared effort and concern.



After worship on Sunday mornings, many in the congregation return on Sunday evenings for additional worship or prayer. On this occasion, people were assembled for a music worship service, where individuals offered live performances, recorded songs, or requested songs from the hymnal.

*Knowing the Lord's Will in Scripture:  
Studying the Old Testament Book of First Samuel*

At the home of Rachel and Jerel Roberts, the windows glow with a warm light. Several cars make their way down the long gravel driveway that leads past the church to the Roberts's home. The group gathered around the living room spans three, and almost four, generations. Gladys Haarer, Rachel's mother, sits in the rocking chair. Dave and Laverne Deckard and Pam and Ed Wagler are present, along with their grown children, as are Michael and Jenny Webb, expecting their first child. Also here is Cammie, Rachel and Jerel's daughter, who works as a nurse in Indianapolis, commuting from her parents' home in Bean Blossom.

The group gathers every Tuesday at someone's home to study the Bible together, in order to get closer to God's word and help each other better understand it. They are just one small group among many at the church who meet weekly to discuss Bible readings and other religious issues. Each group determines its own course of study and has its own style



of discussion, but all share the purpose of bringing people in the congregation closer to the text that provides the ultimate guide for living a Christian life. It is here in these small groups that people grapple with the difficult task of trying to understand, read, and decode the Word of God in a way that allows them to apply these ancient writings to life in the twenty-first century.

When all members of the group are gathered, mugs of cider and tea are put down. Conversations close, and attention turns towards the group. Jerel, as the host of this gathering, begins to lead us in prayer. Those with prayer requests and praises speak up. Nothing is too personal, too great, or too small for inclusion. Recovery from a car crash on a local road, thanksgiving for safe travel, patience with students: Jerel writes down the prayer requests on a piece of paper, and when all are listed, he begins his prayer to God, asking consideration for each one. United in common request through Jerel's voice, the prayer composed by many becomes a common bond, approaching the Lord together in preparation to study His Word.

The group gathered at the Roberts home has been studying the book of First Samuel in the Old Testament, proceeding by one chapter a week. One passage from early in the chapter resonates with the group's approach to prayer in general:

As for me, far be it for me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. (1 Samuel 12:23)

The group sets to work at trying to make sense of the world inhabited by the young David, who in the chapter at hand is not yet the King of Israel. With the strength of God guiding him, David has bested the giant Goliath with a simple but effective weapon, a slingshot, cracking the giant's skull with the power of a small stone. The story of David's struggles and eventual rise to power include many political intrigues, battles, and temptations that look strange and confusing through the obscuring veils of distant time and foreign culture.

Saul, the king of Israel, begins to fear David's power and tries many times to kill him, chasing David and his band of followers through countryside in a fruitless and increasingly mad desperation to cling to his kingdom. In the passage before the group, David is confronted with an opportunity to kill Saul. Instead of killing Saul, however, David reflects on the scripture, recalling a passage that forbids one to kill God's anointed king:

The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD. [David to his men] (1 Samuel 24:6)

David's decision to refer to God's law rather than to the opinions of his advisors or to his own intuition is a model for how the Bible study group should also act in times of uncertainty.

"If it goes against the scriptures," says Michael, "you ought to stop and think, do you really want to be that bold." Scripture trumps circumstantial opportunity. Abiding by the law of God, David can be surer of the right course of action. Personal feelings and

interpretation are left to a minimum by relying on the scripture. Whatever the outcome of the situation, David can rest knowing that the choice was the right one.

David's situation is simpler, perhaps, than the many decisions made in the course of everyday life, where God simply has not left clear directions, which is why, Michael says, it is good to ask other people's opinions when in doubt. However, the message embedded in the story is clear to the group: God's word is a better tool in decision making than personal feelings.

### *Strengthening the Family of God: Performing the Gospel*

For members of this congregation, God's word has left instructions on many issues regarding how the family of God should act towards each other; some of the most important instructions come directly from Jesus himself, through his example towards his disciples of humility and service. Members of the church strive to perform acts of service to each other and to others as often as possible, and twice a year, they perform this belief in a particular ritual act of service following Christ's example.

It is the Thursday evening before Easter, the day when Christians commemorate Christ's Last Supper with his disciples before being led to the crucifixion. The members of Bean Blossom Mennonite Church gather for a special service, where the gospel from John is read:

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. (John 13:14)

After a brief sermon, and communion, the women file into the small room adjacent to the church, and the men to the basement. In the meeting room, the women begin to take off their shoes. Three tin buckets full of water rest in front of three chairs, towels neatly folded over the chair backs. Sun streams in through the windows, falling in long yellow strips over the chairs and bathing the room in the soft light of the lengthening spring evening. An atmosphere of joy and intimacy circulates as the door closes. From the back of the room, a hymn rises in a steady modest tone. It is Pam, gathering us together in worship, voices joining together in melodies and harmonies learned over years of church services.

Lisa, a middle-aged woman, turns to me and asks if I'd like to have my feet washed. She leads me to the first chair and kneels in front of me, dipping my feet into the tin pail, pouring water over them with her hands, drying them with the towel. "I think it's harder to have your own feet washed than to wash someone else's feet," she says, smiling in a warm, friendly way. We trade places, and I do the same for her, washing and drying her feet. When it is done, we share a hug and kiss each other on the cheek.

I slip back into my sandals and try to pick up the melody as other pairs of women go to the washing. Women I had come to know as quiet leaders in the church lead those who are old, shy, or—like me—new, welcoming them into worship through this act of service. This act of humility and servitude is based on the example of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, an act that he commands them to practice with one another.



At least twice a year, one of the occasions being the Thursday before Easter, members of the Bean Blossom Mennonite Church gather to take communion and wash the feet of their fellow worshippers.

While the women are washing the feet of fellow women in the meeting hall upstairs, the men have gathered in the church basement to perform this act of service for each other. Though they worship together as families during church services, men and women separate for the foot washing service to avoid impropriety. In this room, where women are ministering to each other, where some women reach out to welcome and serve others, one voice, steady, sure, and though of no striking talent, clear and tuneful, leads others into a communal voice of prayer. The women of Bean Blossom Mennonite Church share not only their Christian faith but also their role as women in the church.

In matters of doctrine and family life, Bean Blossom Mennonite Church is still very conservative and bases this conservatism on a close reading of the Bible. Women do not serve as pastors. It is considered against God's will for a woman to instruct a man in religious faith. Wives are expected to defer to their husbands in all matters, and women are discouraged from working outside the home, especially if they have children to take care of. However, despite these restrictions, or perhaps because of them, women in the church are bonded together through their shared roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. In their own way, they reach out to one another and assume roles as teachers and leaders through service to each other and to the church.

At the foot washing, Rachel Roberts, whose father founded the church and pastored it for twenty-five years, takes the hand of Alice and walks slowly with her to the chair, taking off her shoes and gently placing her feet in the basin of water. Alice always has a smile, but is forgetful. She is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease and has recently come to live with her daughter and son-in-law, Rick and Sherry Gillam, members of the church. As Rachel washes her feet, Alice flutters about how friendly everyone is.

"She's a nice lady, but she probably won't remember it tomorrow," says one of the women standing next to me, smiling kindly. Frances Wagler, mother and grandmother of many members of the church, one of the women who still wears a cap over her grey hair, replies to the comment with gentle seriousness, saying, "He'll remember it," speaking of God, "and that's all that matters."

#### *Marriage, Family, and Women's Roles: Scripture as the Guide for Domestic Life*

Service and humility are the principles that guide the lives of many people at Bean Blossom Mennonite Church. Living in service to others is accomplished not only by one's good intentions, however. For these people, the Bible, the inspired Word of God, is not only a guide or a suggestion, it is a rulebook for life that defines the proper relationships between God's people. It shows how adherence to God's structure of the world explains God's purpose in the concrete terms of everyday life. The Bible shows people just how God wants them to serve each other, and, they believe, the structure of the family is perhaps the most powerful model of and opportunity for service that most people will ever experience.

Outside the church, after the foot washing service, Dave Wagler, who has grown up in this church, raised a family here, and still lives within a few miles of his parents' farmstead, begins talking to me about his daughter's upcoming wedding. He is looking forward to giving her a festive send-off as she leaves his protection and responsibility, or 'headship' as it is called in the Bible, for that of her husband. Headship refers to the passage in First Corinthians that people in this congregation reference when they explain the relationship God has mandated between men and women, which is modeled on the relationship drawn between Christ and God, and Man and Christ:

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

"She belongs to me," he explains with fervent emotion. Dave understands the headship of his role as a father and husband as a gift of service to his family in emulation of Christ's service and sacrifice to the Church.

For Dave Wagler, there are layers of meaning in the biblical instruction that husbands should be the head of their wives. Not only does the Bible command that this is the proper order of things, it also explains that the structure of the family mirrors God's relationship to Christ and Christ's relationship to the Church. By following God's plan for family relationships, believers can better understand how they relate to God and see what Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross means. "A Christian today has to realize that they are under the headship of God," says Dave. "A Christian is a person that is being taught or that is under the supervision of their head, Christ."

"When you think about the headship of Christ and the Church . . . Standing even close to a mirror of that role is a blessing," explains Dave. "His role of servanthood is the ultimate goal for all of us. I am supposed to love my wife as Christ loved the Church. My role to my wife is to be an example of Christ by my servanthood to her." In Dave's view, it is not his place to be a burden or a taskmaster to his wife as the head of their household, but to direct their family matters in a way that shows his willingness to serve, and if necessary, sacrifice, for the good of the family.

Robb Besosa has a similar view and wants to emphasize that in order to properly understand the biblical verses that advise submission, you have to understand that how a husband treats his wife will be accounted for when he confronts God himself. When God considers a husband's spiritual requests, he will say, "If you're not listening to her, I'm not listening to you," demonstrates Robb. If a husband isn't being attentive to his wife, attentive to her needs, Christ will be less attentive to a husband's requests. The leadership role assigned to the husband doesn't give him ultimate and unmitigated control. "You can have two basketball players equally as gifted, but they both can't play center," says Robb. Though a husband takes the lead in decision making for the family, the wife should be able to appeal, and Robb is adamant about his spiritual responsibility as a husband to respond to his wife, Mary Besosa, saying, "Every time I hear the word appeal, my antennas go up, cause if I don't listen to her, He (God) won't listen to me."



Sherry Gillam has been studying the Bible with her husband Rick Gillam for at least thirty-five years, and their study has slowly reshaped some of their convictions about life while affirming others. "I wanted to be the Proverbs-31 lady and my girls to be Proverbs-31 girls," says Sherry one sunny spring afternoon after clearing away the dishes from lunch. Beginning at verse 11 in chapter 31 of the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, the verses praise the favorable attributes of a good wife:

A wife of noble character who can find?  
She is worth far more than rubies.  
Her husband has full confidence in her  
And lacks nothing of value.  
She brings him good, not harm,  
All the days of her life.

Proverbs 31 describes a woman whose work centers around the maintenance and fruitfulness of her household. She gets up before dawn, provides food for the family and servants, buys land and plants a vineyard, spins wool and flax, provides for the needy, makes garments for sale, and cares for her husband and children. She is wise, hardworking, and has a sense of humor.

Such an example might seem hard to follow. Laverne Deckard admires the passage, but thinks it paints an unrealistic expectation of wifely duties: "How could anyone live up to that? She was letting her lamp burn all night." Laverne, like some other women in the church, agrees with some principles on women's roles and disagrees with others. "I feel very strongly that mothers should stay home and take care of their kids," she says, noting that she and her husband helped each other alleviate work burdens. "I did a lot of physical work to relieve him of that, but on the other hand, he didn't mind getting in there and changing diapers. I think it helped build a stronger relationship between him and the children." Later on, when the children were grown, she took a job as a music teacher at the local junior high school and received some criticism from other members of the church.

Laverne points out, however, that even though many women in the church don't work outside the home, they do still work. Besides the work of keeping house, caring for children, and in some cases, supervising homeschooling curricula, several wives help in substantial ways with their husbands' businesses, doing bookkeeping and even driving trucks when necessary.

For some women, however, working is necessary for the family's well-being. Lorene Link, daughter of Frances and Henry Wagler, teaches music in the Brown County public schools. Her children are grown, and more importantly, her husband, Gary, the current pastor of Bean Blossom Mennonite Church, has been battling cancer. Though Gary runs his own business, Lorene's income and health insurance benefits are an important part of their support. "There are some who feel so strongly about mothers working that they think I should stay home and the Lord will provide," says Lorene. "If you work in public schools, you work in a mission field," says Gary of her work, commenting on how it contributes to the work of God in society as well as helping with their family circumstance. In addition, Gary feels that there are more important things to speak about from the pulpit,

such as getting along as a church family, rather than on declaring hard-and-fast rules for personal family life. "You have to do what your family needs to do to get along," he says.

Like Lorene, Rachel Platter served in the field of education, but she has left the working world to be a full-time mother. "I worked for six years as a teacher and always knew that I would quit when I had kids," she says, though she doesn't believe the Bible necessarily requires women to stay home. "I'm still developing my opinion on it." Rachel is happy to be able to stay home, and her husband Guy does everything he can to make sure she can do what makes her and the family happiest. "I'd much rather work three jobs and know that she is going to be home and that's where she wants to be," he says, noting how much more smoothly their family life runs without the harried atmosphere of two people coming home tired from work to a household that gets pushed to the back burner behind work obligations.

Hints of differing viewpoints among the women sometimes arise during the women's study group on Sunday afternoons. Led by Beth Borisuk, women in the church are studying a book by Debi Pearle titled *Created to Be His Helpmeet*, a self-help book that addresses issues of women's roles in the family through relevant Bible passages. This congregation of Mennonites adheres to the directive from the Book of First Timothy in the New Testament, which says:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. (1 Timothy 2:12)

Thus, women are not permitted to teach or preach to the congregation. However, guided by a directive from the Book of Titus, these women are taking the initiative to minister to each other and teach the Bible's values of Christian womanhood:

Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God. (Titus 2:4-5)

Though Pearle's book takes a very conservative hard line, advising women that patience and prayer are the best methods of dealing with a husband in deference to his leadership of the family, members of the study group use the book as a guide for discussion, criticizing it at times and praising it at others.

"If you are a Christian wife with children, your place is at home," says Sherry Gillam. She believes that Proverbs 31 and other passages in the Bible set the standard for a wife's proper sphere within the family, and has brought up her daughters to be women who will consider the home their first priority. "We prayed that they would marry men who loved God and would want to worship God's law," she says of their expectations for their daughters. "[Rick] tactfully told each of these guys, he wanted them to know that we had trained our girls to stay at home."

While acting as missionaries and living in South America, California, and Indiana, Rick and Sherry turned away from family expectations and society's norms to educate their five children in a way they saw fit: at home. When they began homeschooling in the seventies and eighties, it was unconventional, not the phenomenon it is today. Rick's



college-educated family had high standards of education and was skeptical about their choice to educate the children outside the school system. They were even more incredulous about their decision not to send the children to college.

"We told them [their daughters], if you want to do something and you want to go to college to do it, we will send you," says Rick. However, Rick and Sherry did not want to waste money to send their children to college if they didn't have specific career goals, or prepare a daughter for a career if she found herself more inclined to marriage.

Instead, they encouraged their daughters to be like the woman in Proverbs 31 who made garments to sell and grew a vineyard on her land—to develop talents and skills that they might be able to use to make money in other jobs or side businesses while attending to the primary and full-time job of being a wife and mother.

Sherry's daughter Allison Braden wrote and delivered in church a testimony of faith commenting on how her parents' approach to education spared her from the conflict experienced by many of her peers. "I was constantly questioned and challenged when I



Allison and Chuck Braden and their seven children (not all of them visible in this photograph) sit quietly near the back of the church. Family ties bind many people together in the congregation. Here, Allison's sister Andrea sits with her husband, Nate Wagler, in the pew across the aisle.

would state my desire to have a family and stay at home, but my parents continued to encourage me to develop the 'skills' I would need to someday effectively take care of my home. I did have friends who had the same desire as me, but the majority had parents encouraging them to go to college and develop independence, so they would not have to rely on their husbands in case they died or left them.

"As a result, these girlfriends of mine are now guilt-ridden and torn because they are now married and having children, but they spent so much time and money on school and career that they feel it's a waste to just 'stay at home.' So they either go to work and feel guilty for having someone else raise their children, or they stay at home and feel guilty for not contributing to society at large."

Though their home education was academically thorough, its emphasis on preparing the girls for their lives as Christian women foregrounded what Sherry and Rick felt were other, more important aspects of growth and work. "Rather than school, school, school, all the time, they wanted to give us more opportunities as far as serving," says Andrea Wagler, daughter of Rick and Sherry. (Andrea is married to Nate Wagler, son of Ed and Pam Wagler.) Helping others in the community by being available to babysit, serve a meal, or talk to someone who is feeling depressed—small and common acts of kindness—are important ways of contributing to society that Rick and Sherry's daughters learned to practice and carry into their adult lives.

Andrea and her husband Nate had hoped to have children early in their marriage. They lost a child late in the pregnancy over a year ago but are now expecting again. She has not worked during their five years together, despite the fact that she has no children at home. "I wouldn't want to get into that rat race," she laughed one evening when we were talking in the church. Later she explained her decision more seriously: "I'd rather live on less and be able to help people in the community and the church and be there for my family," she said.

Every Wednesday, for example, Andrea plays Scrabble with Gladys Haarer. Though Gladys has nine children and over thirty grandchildren, only her daughter Rachel Roberts and her family live in the area. The rest travel long distances to visit regularly, but Andrea thought it was a shame that a woman with such a large family couldn't see them more often and wanted to help fill the gap with the companionship and time she could offer, a contribution that perhaps wouldn't have been possible if she was tied to an eight-to-five job.

Gladys Haarer is hesitant to speak of her own history. She doesn't want people to think she is boasting. As she smiles, rather embarrassed, across the table, her daughter Rachel Roberts tells me of the comforters and blankets Gladys makes for the Mennonite Central Commission, which sends them to relief services around the world. "I think, now there's going to be one person in the world that's going to be so happy to have this blanket," says Gladys of the brightly colored simple quilts she pieces. "That's just what one person can do to help in the world." The work of charity she so enjoys reminds me again of the scripture from Proverbs 31 so often mentioned by women in this congregation as their guide:



She opens her arms to the poor  
and extends her hands to the needy

She makes coverings for her bed;  
she is clothed in fine linen and purple. (Proverbs 31:20, 22)

Gladys's sanguine modesty hides a history of hard work and dedication not just to the church, but to her family. She moved with her husband, Charles, to Bean Blossom to help found the church in 1945. Money was tight, and with a family that would eventually grow to nine children, Gladys had to run a household with hard work, cooperation, and economy. Rachel remembers spending summers weeding and hoeing in the garden, a garden that produced enough beans one year for Gladys to can one hundred half-gallons of them for the winter to last the rest of the year.

"We didn't have much, but I didn't recall feeling poor. And we ate . . . we raised gardens like you wouldn't believe," says Rachel. "We always had fun. We had enough people to play a baseball game."

### *Expecting Strangers: Creating Families of God*

Gladys and Charles Haarer raised a large family together based on the principles of family life set out in the Bible. Frances and Henry Wagler, who moved to the area and joined Bean Blossom Mennonite a few years after its founding, also raised a large, close-knit family based on biblical teaching and influenced by their Amish upbringing. Most of their six children live within a few miles of the family farm and have raised their own children and grandchildren. Family ties are strong, but the relationships created with people in the church can be just as meaningful, or even more so. Rachel Roberts found the church family an essential support when her mother and father left to pastor another church in Michigan just after she married her husband Jerel. "That church family became very important to me, cause they were like my support system," she says of the Bean Blossom family.

Rachel and Jerel Roberts got married after his second year at college, at the tender ages of nineteen and twenty. Rachel acknowledges that it was a young age to get married, but as she describes their relationship, it seems like it was meant to happen just that way. "We finished growing up together," she says of the seven years they had together before becoming parents. They went hiking and camping together. In her words, they played together.

Before they had their son Matt and daughter Cammie, they lost a baby daughter and miscarried another child. Looking back, Rachel wishes she could have had more children but knows that it is the Lord's will for some families to have many children and for some to have few.

"Mom said to me, 'God saw you would be needed for other things.'" She has taken on the care of her parents in their old age. People call her when they need help with a meal or a babysitter. She was a class mom when her children were in elementary school. With Jerel, she acted as groundskeeper and janitor for the church, since it was so close to them, just at the end of their driveway.

Trust in the family of God has also caused Rachel and her family to bring people without family of their own into their hearts. Her own son and daughter-in-law have recently brought a new child into their home. Toddling around the house as we talk over tea and cookies is a little brown-skinned child with curly black hair. Brady, a boy of mixed race, is adopted. "You can't possibly love an adopted child less than a flesh-and-blood child. It is just the same," she says. Brady is clearly the apple of everyone's eye, bouncing between mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

In a church that serves just around sixty people on Sunday morning, it is somewhat remarkable that not just one, but two families have recently adopted children. Guy and Rachel Platter have been trying to adopt for several years. An earlier adoption attempt fell through, but soon after the disappointment of losing the adoption, they found they were expecting their own child, whom they now call Little Guy. Now three years old, he is adjusting to the novelty of having a brand-new baby brother. Like Rachel Roberts's new grandson, he is not the same race as his adoptive parents, since the Platters wanted to provide a home for a child regardless of race. "We thought we wanted to provide an opportunity for some kids who needed it," they say of their decision to adopt, referencing passages from the Book of James in the Bible that entreates believers to look after orphans:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

Though they are not Mennonite, the Platters found the church in Bean Blossom came closer to meeting their spiritual needs than any other local churches. They are just one of many new families who have made the church their home, finding its dedication to family, service, and life guided by biblical teaching coherent with their own values. The Platters struck a friendship with another young family in the church from a non-Mennonite background, Chuck and Allison Braden. Other young couples who have dedicated their lives and work to God have also found fellowship with each other at the church, despite the variety of their religious backgrounds. Robb Besosa grew up with a Catholic background but came to a new knowledge of Christ as a young man during a time of intense family struggle.

Nate and Andrea Wagler both have extensive family in the Bean Blossom Mennonite Church but are in some ways just as new as these other young couples. Andrea and Allison, daughters of Rick and Sherry Gillam, moved to the area with their non-Mennonite missionary family. Nate, grandson of Henry and Frances Wagler, has numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins in the church, but he did not follow a religious life as a youth. His return to the Mennonite Church was inspired in part by Andrea, in whom he saw a reflection of true Christian living.

Nate, Robb, Chuck, and Guy share histories of conversion, of finding their way into the family of Christ through difficult life-circumstances or periods of doubt and questioning. Andrea, Mary, Allison, and Rachel have all grown up in Christian homes, but have had to renew their dedication to living as Christian wives as they confront new financial, spiritual, and social struggles. These young couples have found at Bean Blossom



Mennonite Church, and in each other, an adopted family of Christians who share a desire to understand and live God's will through the Bible.

Together, they have formed an intensive Bible study group to look more deeply into the methods of studying and interpreting the Word that rules their lives. Their guiding text, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, introduces scholarly principles of interpretation to lay readers, offering them the tools that will help them read and critically assess the ancient texts to ascertain the rules set down for believers. In many ways, their challenges parallel those of the early Christians whom they are studying in the New Testament book of First Corinthians.

These young couples are self-consciously searching for the best way to incorporate Christian values into the ways they raise their growing families in the midst of modern America. They seek to determine how to relate to the diverse range of interpretations of Christianity with compassion, while still adhering to those principles that they believe form an absolute moral code within the Bible. "In our culture, we have to speak the Truth lovingly," says Robb Besosa. "We want to be more like Jesus, who is a perfect embodiment of Grace and Truth."

### *Stranger No More*

The road winds through the hills as I make my way toward Bean Blossom for the Sunday evening Coffee House at the church; the light is fading into a shallow winter grey through the bare trees. I slow down at the crossroads, turn into the parking lot of the church, sit in my car, holding the program from Sunday morning service, wondering what I will find inside, whom I will meet. I am a stranger here.

The sweet smell of caramel corn wafts out of the church kitchen on a cold January night. Twilight is falling outside. Inside, a young man trims the wicks of small oil lamps that will be set out on the tables around the activity room. People begin to arrive, family by family, and soon every table is filled with parents, grandparents, and children. Babies are passed from table to table, bounced on the knees of friends and family. In a room where everyone is family by blood, marriage, or by church, children run from one group to another. I don't really know who belongs to whom in the gregarious mix of conversation, board games, and music gathered around the soft orange light of the oil lamps. A yell rises periodically from the banter when someone rolls a lucky hand at Yhatze.

I am welcomed into a table of young people who are playing a game of cards called Dutch Blitz. Nate Wagler teaches me the rules, and soon my hands are full of old cards, cards that belonged to his father, bearing pictures of ploughs and farmers rather than kings and jacks. People ask if I am someone's cousin or girlfriend, or a friend from school. I have no family here, but soon, I expect, I will no longer be a stranger.

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### *Further Readings*

#### *Books:*

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#### *Official Web sites:*

- Conservative Mennonite Conference. <http://cmcrosedale.org/index.shtml>.
- Mennonite Disaster Service. <http://www.mds.mennonite.net>.
- Mennonite World Conference. <http://www.mwc-cmm.org>.