

# **Continuity and Change in a Southern Beachy Amish-Mennonite Congregation**

William L. Smith<sup>1</sup>  
Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Georgia Southern University

## **Abstract**

Key leaders in a Beachy Amish-Mennonite church in southwest Georgia were interviewed to discuss the congregation's history and position on religious beliefs and practices, gender roles and family life, education, work life, and areas of current concern. I then use the framework of boundary maintenance to assess the congregation's viability. I conclude that while this congregation has experienced a variety of changes, its history reflects continuity rather than change.

## **Keywords**

Beachy Amish-Mennonites; Montezuma, Georgia; social change; community; education; technology

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## Introduction

The Beachy Amish-Mennonites, a conservative, plain Anabaptist ethno-religious society, are “in-betweens” (Anderson 2012; 2013). They are neither Amish nor Mennonite but their identity is partly based on each of these two diverse traditions (Kraybill 2001; Redekop 1989). Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2013) described them as “outside the contemporary Amish orbit” (422). The Beachy Amish-Mennonites are the largest group within the Amish-Mennonite movement, emerging on the religious / cultural scene in 1927 as a result of disagreements among Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania over the practice of shunning, automobiles, and electricity (Anderson 2011; Beachy 1955; Nolt 2003). Brethren who left the Old Order Amish over these issues often identified themselves as “Beachy” after Moses M. Beachy, an empathetic Old Order Amish bishop (Anderson 2011; Hostetler 1993; Nolt 2003). Beachy Amish-Mennonite churches do not belong to a conference; instead, they value congregational autonomy and are a loosely organized fellowship (Anderson 2012; Yoder 1987). As a result, congregational dispositions and practices range along a continuum from conservative to progressive.

The Beachy Amish-Mennonites have received little attention from scholars in comparison to the Old Order Amish and the Mennonites (Anderson 2011; Schwieder and Schwieder 1977). This paper will examine the issues of continuity and change within the largest and one of the most conservative Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations in the American southeast. Montezuma Mennonite Church is located in Montezuma, Georgia, a rural area in the southwest corner of the state. This paper will also discuss some of the changes which have occurred in the Montezuma Beachy Amish-Mennonite community since the publication of Yoder’s (1981) history of the congregation.

While the sign outside of Montezuma Mennonite Church does not contain the words “Beachy” or “Amish,” and the congregation is listed in the *Amish Mennonite Directory* (2011) as Montezuma Amish-Mennonite, their identity is clearly Beachy Amish-Mennonite. Yoder (1981) documented the congregation’s strong Beachy Amish-Mennonite roots, and the bishop assured me that the congregation subscribes to that tradition. The terms “Beachy” and “Amish” were left off the church sign for the sake of brevity. Down the road, not far from Montezuma Mennonite Church, is Clearview Mennonite Fellowship. Both congregations are Beachy Amish-Mennonite and share similar theological beliefs but differ on some practices. Gospel Light Mennonite Church is also located near Montezuma, but they are not Beachy Amish-Mennonite. Clearview Mennonite Fellowship and Gospel Light Mennonite Church are more progressive congregations. The presence or absence of terms like “Beachy Amish,” “Amish-Mennonite,” “Mennonite,” or even “Fellowship” on church signs or in directories may or may not be important, but it is reflective of the often blurred and complex nature of group identity and boundaries within the Amish-Mennonite movement (Anderson 2011).

## Methodology

This paper is a cultural analysis, an attempt to understand the dynamics—the social and cultural forces that produce behavior and change—of Montezuma Mennonite Church. Geertz (1973) viewed cultural analysis as “guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (20). This project is more than an attempt at guessing at meanings (intents, goals, or significances); it is based on in-depth conversations with key leaders in the congregation—bishops, ministers, the deacon, teachers, and business owners—and observations which took place over a year’s time. Geertz (1973) described culture as webs of significance spun by people. This research investigates these webs of significance: values, beliefs, rules, leadership, gender and family life, education, and work life.

An initial, unofficial, exploratory visit to the community occurred in April 2011 while data gathering began in earnest in September 2011 and was completed by late May 2012. I visited the community a total of fifteen times, once unofficially, and fourteen times officially. Thirteen brethren, who are key leaders in the Montezuma Mennonite Church, participated in ninety-minute, semi-structured, personal, face-to-face interviews.

The topics covered in the interviews varied depending on the interviewee. All of the brethren had specific occupations or were retired, so I asked everyone about their employment history / work lives and the economic health of the congregation. The teachers and school board chairman / principal were asked specific questions about the school; I asked the other brethren to reflect on their past school experiences. The two bishops (one is retired but still active in the ministry), the two ministers (a third minister was ordained during the project but he was not interviewed), and the deacon were asked specific questions regarding church affairs. The other brethren were also asked about rules and regulations, community / church life, and religious beliefs and practices. I asked all of the interviewees about family life, changes in the community / congregation, and current concerns or issues among the members.

The bishop provided the names, addresses, and contact information of key leaders. The list only contained the names of brethren since this is a traditional congregation and only men are in key leadership positions. Only one man recommended by the bishop declined to be formally interviewed, but we did have several informal telephone conversations. He is not an official church member, although he and his wife are considering joining the congregation. Several brethren recommended that I interview an elderly sister who is a retired teacher. I reached her after trying several times, and she agreed to an interview, but hours before the interview she canceled it. I asked her if I could reschedule it, but she declined. She said she had thought it over and was not interested in participating. I did not pursue the matter further. The first and the last of the fifteen interviews were with the bishop. The interviews were held in the homes and/or places of business of the interviewees. Two interviews were conducted at Montezuma Mennonite School. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken after the conclusion of each interview.

While in Montezuma, I often dined at a restaurant owned and operated by a church member. On several occasions, I was invited to share the noon meal at a member's home. I attended three Sunday church services; my first official visit was in September to an outdoor fund-raiser at Montezuma Mennonite School. The first church service was shortened to accommodate the funeral of an elderly sister who was buried in the cemetery next to the church. Following the second church service, I was invited for a meal at the home of a family that owns and operates a large dairy farm. I spent an enjoyable afternoon engaged in lively conversation on a variety of topics. Thirty people were present and I was the only outsider among them, although one family was from Clearview Mennonite Fellowship and several people were visiting from out of state (they had attended the funeral earlier in the week of another elderly sister). The third service included Sunday school. Field notes were taken after each of these events. I also reviewed a large number of newspaper articles from as recently as July 15, 2008, but going back as far as May 3, 1953. Most of these articles were written by Bill Boyd of *The Macon Telegraph*. A series of articles written from October 5 to 9, 1997 were particularly helpful and provided good background information since they discussed the history of the congregation and the changes that had occurred up until that time.

## **A Brief History**

Since the objective of this paper is to examine the issues of continuity and change, it is important to mention a few pieces of historical information about the congregation. The issues of continuity and change will be discussed more thoroughly in later sections. Montezuma Mennonite Church was founded in 1953 by a group of Beachy Amish-Mennonites led by Bishop Jonas H. Hershberger and Minister Simon L. Yoder from Kempsville, Virginia. This was the first Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregation in the Deep South. Eleven families purchased 5,000 acres of farmland in Macon County, Georgia. The first church services were held on July 26, 1953 at the Montezuma Baptist Church and subsequently in the homes of various members until on October 11, 1953 when services were held in the first meetinghouse. The present meetinghouse opened on January 19, 1969. By the mid-1970s, English was adopted and German no longer used during services. By 1978, singing was also in English. German used to be taught to children during Sunday school. Sunday school then was more about learning German than a Bible lesson. One of the brethren noted, "I think the children have a greater advantage now than they did then because there's some Bible principle taught, Bible lesson in Sunday school that they're actually able to understand other than a language." Montezuma Mennonite School opened around December 7, 1953, and classes were held in the first meetinghouse. A separate school building was erected in 1960 (Yoder 1981).

The congregation grew to seventy-seven households and more than two-hundred people by 1980 (Yoder 1981). Thirty-two years later, it consisted of seventy-eight households with 165 adults and one hundred children under the age of sixteen. During the intervening years between 1980 and 2012, the number of households declined and then gradually increased. By 2012, the

number of households was the same as in 1980. The decline in households is largely explained by an exodus of members to other congregations, and the increase in members is attributed largely to high birth and retention rates. The retention of young members has improved significantly during the past three decades, such that within the past decade only two or three young members have left and joined other congregations.

The number of congregants within Beachy Amish-Mennonite churches is fluid partly because of in-migration and out-migration. Some members do relocate for personal, religious, familial, and / or economic reasons to other established Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations that are similar to or more conservative or progressive than their own congregation. Not only have they left for established congregations, but Beachy Amish-Mennonite, Mennonite, and non-Mennonite congregations have been founded by members and former members of Montezuma Mennonite Church, contributing to the decline in the household number. For example, one of the interviewees noted that in his graduating class of fifteen students, besides himself, there are only two other classmates currently members of Montezuma Mennonite Church, unlike more recent groups of young adults who have remained members. Almost all of his remaining classmates joined other Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations.

Montezuma Mennonite Church officially started congregations in Orrville, Alabama, in 1974 and Hartselle, Alabama, in 1994. Clearview Mennonite Fellowship was founded in 1989 by seven families who broke away from Montezuma Mennonite Church. The departure of these families was mainly precipitated by relationship disagreements between them and others within the church. There was also some disagreement over proposed changes regarding certain “applications of scriptural principles” (a phrase commonly used by the congregation). For example, in 1 Timothy 2:8, 9 Paul states: “that women are to wear suitable clothes and to be dressed quietly and modestly.” One’s interpretation of the scriptural principles of suitable and modest clothes can vary from member to member, congregation to congregation. Montezuma Mennonite Church made some of the requested changes, but the seven families still broke away. Gospel Light Mennonite Church was founded in 1990 by members who left Montezuma Mennonite Church and Clearview Mennonite Fellowship. Gospel Light is conservative Mennonite. Word of Life Church consists of former members from Montezuma Mennonite Church, Clearview Mennonite Fellowship, and Gospel Light Mennonite Church. Word of Life is neither Mennonite nor part of the Amish-Mennonite movement, although most of its members have Anabaptist / Mennonite roots. Montezuma Mennonite Church did not officially start Clearview, Gospel Light, or Word of Life. Some members of Montezuma Mennonite Church are moving to Thomaston, Georgia, to start a new church. This church is not sponsored by Montezuma Mennonite Church.

What is significant about these new churches is that they provided members (in the case of those who started the two congregations in Alabama) and former members of Montezuma Mennonite Church with a means to evangelize or to spread the good news of the gospel. Evangelization is an important dimension of the faith tradition of particular Mennonites.

However, more importantly, these new churches siphoned-off former members who were discontented, for whatever reason or reasons, with Montezuma Mennonite Church. The exodus of these former members from Montezuma Mennonite Church enhanced its stability and thus its continuity.

## **Belief System**

Continuity, not change, characterizes Montezuma Mennonite Church's core beliefs, although there have been some changes over time. The church's *Statement of Belief and Standard of Practice* (Montezuma Mennonite Church 2012), also known as the *Brethren's Agreement*, states, "We accept the Apostles Creed, the Schleithem Confession of 1527, the Dortrecht Confession of 1632, and the Christian fundamentals of 1964 as giving expression to our general Christian faith" (1). Before a member is baptized, church leaders will review with them the eighteen articles of faith in the Dordrecht Confession of Faith (1632) including beliefs such as believers' only baptism, strict nonresistance, marriage within the same church, and shunning of the separated or excommunicated.

The *Brethren's Agreement*, which is revised when needed as determined by the congregation, provides rules and regulations on personal life, the home, modest apparel, standards for young people, and entertainment. The following is a sample of some of these rules and regulations; it is not an exhaustive list of the prohibitions or approbations included in the *Brethren's Agreement*. Members are reminded to abstain from a variety of practices such as adultery and homosexuality. They must avoid tobacco, alcohol, illegal drugs, and any immoral talk. Men should exercise authority over women at home and in the church. Their behavior must reflect the Biblical principle of modesty in all aspects of life including the selection of an automobile or truck including its color. Vehicles should be of a solid color. Radios must be removed or made inoperable. Members are not allowed to own motorcycles, sports cars, or recreational vehicles. Televisions and radios are not allowed in their homes, although they can own computers, but they may not be used for entertainment. They must receive permission to use the internet and install a filter and enroll in an accountability program that is led by the retired bishop. Clothing must be plain and of a solid color, and dress shoes must be black. Members do not wear jewelry, including wedding rings, and gold and silver watchbands are prohibited. Head coverings for females should cover most of the hair, extending onto or under the ear. Members must avoid professional hair salons. Young people are not allowed to date until they are seventeen years old. No photographs may be taken during a wedding ceremony but they are allowed at the reception. Members are to avoid attending movies, playing musical instruments, and listening to music with instrumental accompaniment.

The opening sentence in the conclusion of the *Brethren's Agreement* succinctly sums up the key message of the document and its focus on restrictions and prohibitions, "The Bible is clear that conduct rather than creed will determine eternal destinies" (6). The brethren were asked if members struggled with any of the rules and regulations. Two were mentioned with

regularity: dressing modestly and women wearing the headship veiling. One of the brethren mentioned he believed that men needed to pay more attention to how they dressed rather than focusing exclusively on whether women were conforming to the dress code. He felt that men should stand out more and that it was easier for them to blend in when out in public.

Even though Montezuma Mennonite Church is a conservative congregation and its core beliefs are rooted in the Anabaptist / Mennonite / Amish traditions, some of its practices were viewed to be less important and have been changed in recent decades. Some of the changes were suggested by church members and by a committee of bishops brought in for consultation and advice. Men are no longer required to wear broadfall pants with a button fly without pockets, and no longer required to use suspenders. Now, to wear pants with a zipper and pockets and a belt is acceptable. Men's shirts can have collars and pockets. Buttons and zippers are permitted on coats instead of hooks and eyes, but suit coats are still of a straight-cut open style. The design of women's head coverings has changed slightly, becoming smaller. Cameras are now allowed but only as used in good and ethical ways. Vehicles at one time could only be black but now solid colors (except red) are acceptable. Cell phones have never been forbidden and are ubiquitously present within the congregation.

Interviewees were asked to identify what they believed to be the two or three most important religious beliefs of the church. The following beliefs were consistently mentioned by the brethren: conversion and a new birth in Christ or accepting Jesus as one's savior through believers' baptism; nonresistance; nonconformity; humility; and embracing and putting into action Bible teachings, especially the New Testament. The following statement from one brother succinctly captures the church's key religious beliefs and how these beliefs are interwoven:

So it's conversion, and new birth, and knowing Christ as my personal savior and maybe next I should mention humility as being such an important part of our life, and humility is putting to practice, it comes out in the area of nonresistance and nonconformity to the world. So I would say humility is something that's so important, too, and I see it as the virtue we really should pursue because a humble person is normally a more thankful person. He finds it easier to obey God and he finds it easier to get along with people. He finds it easier to be nonresistant. He finds it easier to be peace-loving. He also finds it easier to even live a separated unto God lifestyle.

Another one of the brethren said,

The emphasis thirty, forty years ago was not so much on being born again, and yes, that was the background of their thought. But as far as asking the question, "Are you born again? Have you accepted Christ as your Savior?" we have a stronger thrust on those two particulars today to assure their salvation, [that] they are comfortable with their salvation.

Interviewees were asked to discuss the congregation's position on family life and gender roles. Family life is highly valued and members take very seriously their responsibility as

spouses and parents. Marriage is for life, one man and one woman, and divorce is not an option. The seriousness of this position is reflected in the guidelines for dating. The earliest they can start dating is at seventeen; the young man should ask for permission from the young woman's father to date her. If the young man's goal is not to marry her, he should not consider dating her. Young people practice what is known as "hands-off courtship." This congregation does not condone the Old Order Amish practice of *Rumspringa*.

One of the most important expectations for parents is to teach children integrity. Parents strive to provide children with a wholesome, structured home environment where by their example they can pass on the teachings of the Bible and the expectations of the church. As one member stated, "Well the ultimate goal of family life, of parenting, is the saving of the child's soul." Children learn the values of work and discipline from their parents. Members believe that home is where children first learn the value of submission to authority. They learn the importance of obedience. Family devotions, shared meals, and working together on family chores and / or in a family business provide the opportunities where children are exposed to and learn these important values.

Regarding the importance of structure and discipline in the lives of children, one of the brethren said,

And I feel like that we as parents at home, we have our utmost responsibility to teach a child responsibility, accountability, discipline. It is not the schoolteacher that's going to do it. It's not the preacher in our church that's going to do it. They have a contributing factor to it, but my responsibility as a father is to make sure my child gets that taught. The schoolteacher and the preacher reinforces it and maybe [provides] more in-depth instruction in it, but I still think me as a parent, it is my utmost responsibility.

The Biblical teaching of headship was mentioned by some of the brethren when I asked them to discuss the issue of gender roles. In addition to feeling strongly about family life, the church also feels strongly about equality and gender equality. One of the brethren paraphrased a passage in the New Testament to highlight this point: "There's no difference between Jew and Gentile, between male and female, and so there's equality." They believe that scripture makes it clear that men and women have different responsibilities. Men are neither better nor worse than women, but they are to be the spiritual leaders of the family while women are called to "give counsel, advise, help, assist, support, and yet to be in submission." In commenting on the importance of headship, one of the brethren said,

And we believe that submission is a beautiful word and the only way that we can expect even our wives to submit is if we as men are first of all submissive to Christ, you know, our head. And that scripture makes it plain that Christ is our head and we're to come under Him. When we find our place under Christ, then that should make it easy for our wives to find their place under us in Christ. And leadership is more a responsibility than a



position, and if we see it as a position, we're not worthy of the call.

The view that leadership is more a responsibility, or in some cases a shared responsibility or mutual dependency, than a position is reflected in the following interview quote:

When it comes right down to it, the final decision, there are a lot of decisions that she makes on her own, but she's a backbone and support for me. I mean, I couldn't do it without her. We're more of a team, or she's a partner. But I still have the responsibility of the final decision when it comes, major decisions.

Johnson-Weiner (2001) suggested that gender roles for Old Order Amish women are less restrictive than they are for Beachy Amish-Mennonite women because they lack input in the selection of church leaders. Sisters at Montezuma Mennonite Church do participate in the nomination process for deacons, ministers, and bishops and vote or give voice when necessary. This is one example of the variation that occurs among Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations. Sisters at Montezuma Mennonite Church teach Sunday school for the children but not for adults. Only men teach adults, and this practice is based on Scripture.

Interviewees were asked to identify what they considered to be important about community life within their congregation. Several themes emerged from the conversations. The benefits of community life far outweigh the costs. One of the brethren stated, "When you talk about the time invested or effort invested, the things that I put in, the return that I get for what I put into it, that's phenomenal, the way I look at it." Some of the benefits of community life include: knowing there are people who will help when you are ill; struggling financially, emotionally, or spiritually; dealing with the loss of a loved one; etc. One of the brethren said,

You see how they cope with life, and it's just an encouragement to me to see others that you know haven't had a real easy road, and they're keeping on. And you see them Sunday after Sunday, you see them at prayer meetings, and they still have a smile on their face.

Not only is there comfort in knowing that someone else is there in your time of need but that brethren can offer assistance to others. Each member is accountable to the church community and the church community is accountable to each member.

There is a sense among the interviewees that the community is a support group, one that truly embraces caring and sharing, and that church life is very important in the community. They are concerned with each other's well-being, and since members do not have health or life insurance and most of them are exempt from social security, there are times when they might need the community to help them financially. A brother noted that one of the keys to community life is this:

We strive to teach a genuine love for each other and that motivates our actions. So it's a

tight-knit network, and we of course have different occupations, different activities and things, but there's still something that's very common, that kind of ties us all together in that sense of community and love for our brother is the way that we would refer to it...the sense of brotherhood. We believe it is kind of an outworking of Christ's teaching to love our brother. And so it's more than just a club or something that we are part of for the benefit...To love our brother, even if there's nothing in it for me.

One of the brethren noted that at times he has struggled with being submissive to the will of the community "because of my own thoughts or my own ideas of the way things need to be done." He viewed this as a cost of membership, "And so the cost is the giving up of myself. That's church life. That's community life." Another one of the brethren stated, "But I don't necessarily have this concept of: it costs me to be part of the Montezuma Mennonite Church. It's a privilege."

## **Education**

Montezuma Mennonite School opened its doors in December 1953. By the late 1980s, enrollment in grades one through eight was slightly over 100. These students were taught by six teachers. The school building, which is the current facility, was at capacity. During the late 1980s and early 1990s Clearview Mennonite Fellowship and Gospel Light Mennonite Church started. Montezuma Mennonite School officials approached these two new congregations and inquired whether they wanted to continue sending their children to the school. Since the school had reached its capacity, an addition would be needed if the two new congregations were to continue sending their children to Montezuma Mennonite School. Both congregations decided instead to start their own schools. By 1992, enrollment at Montezuma Mennonite School declined to between 50 and 60 students. By 2010, enrollment had declined to 35 students, but by 2012 had rebounded to 41 students. Within the next five years, enrollment is anticipated to increase to at least 50 students due to a demographic shift in the membership at Montezuma Mennonite Church. After the Clearview / Gospel Light divisions, Montezuma Mennonite Church consisted of a larger number of older families whose children had already graduated; thus, there were fewer school-age children at that time. Now the children from these families are marrying and having children.

One of the more significant changes at Montezuma Mennonite School in the last several years has been the retirement of several beloved teachers who had spent the majority of their adult lives at the school. Presently, there are four teachers (two women and two men), three of whom completed their first year in May 2012. The fourth teacher completed his second year in May 2012. One of the four teachers has a college degree and all of them have received training regarding the curriculum.

Montezuma Mennonite School is governed by a board consisting of three men from the congregation, one being the bishop. The school board chairman—who is also acting as the

school's principal—is chosen from and by the three board members. Usually a senior teacher—in addition to their teaching assignments—assumes the duties of principal, but since the four teachers are new to the school, the board decided that this arrangement was best for the time being. Parents pay one-third of the cost of each student's tuition and the congregation assumes responsibility for the remainder. A fairly recent addition to the church / school social agenda has been a fair held in late September on the school grounds. Its primary purpose is to raise funds for the school. The main event is an auction.

The school has adopted a Biblically-based curriculum designed by Christian Light Education of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Science is included in the curriculum. It is a workbook-based curriculum that has been in use at the school for over 25 years. The school adopted the A Beka math series rather than the one provided by Christian Light Education. The A Beka series is created by Pensacola Christian College of Pensacola, Florida. The teachers and school board members are very satisfied with the curriculum, and the students perform well on standardized tests. A recent addition to the curriculum has been a keyboarding class.

The school's educational philosophy is geared to preparing children to be of service in God's kingdom. This is the school's most important objective. On this point, Montezuma Mennonite School is not different from most Amish and Mennonite schools (Johnson-Weiner 2007). One of the advantages of congregational autonomy is that Montezuma Mennonite Church has local control over their school's objectives. This congregation takes very seriously the following biblical passage from Proverbs 22:6, "Instruct a child in the way he should go, and when he grows old he will not leave it."

All school-age children attend the school; no children are homeschooled or enrolled in public school. There is no kindergarten. The summer before a student begins first grade, parents are provided with workbooks to help prepare their children for classes in the fall. The school year begins the first week of September and ends in mid-May. The school day starts each morning with devotions, including singing, Bible readings, and sharing. Classes begin at 9:00 a.m. and are dismissed at 3:00 p.m. Hot meals are provided on most days except for Monday when students bring a pack-lunch. Students' families take turns providing the hot meal. Recess is after lunch.

One significant educational change within the past 25 years has been the number of church members earning a G.E.D. (general equivalency diploma). Typically, formal education in the past ended with eighth grade graduation, but there have been church members who pursued further education. Some members went to the local technical college to learn welding or enroll in other technical courses and a few earned bachelor degrees. Several members became nurses. In past years, most congregants did not earn a G.E.D. because the church did not encourage it. The church now strongly encourages—but does not require—members to pursue a G.E.D.

A former teacher and principal noted that some years ago approximately 40 church members took the G.E.D. test on the same day and all but one passed. Some years later, groups

of 20 and 25 church members took the test, and eventually the majority of the congregation had earned diplomas. Nowadays, graduates usually take the test when they become 16 years old. They normally score very high, and one of the young men earned the highest score ever achieved on the exam at the local technical college. Nationally, approximately 800,000 people take the G.E.D. test annually and 500,000 (63%) pass (Success and Failure on the G.E.D. 2010). What then explains the phenomenal success rate among Montezuma Mennonite Church members? In part, it can be attributed to the school curriculum, which provides students with a sound grounding in the basics (reading, writing, and arithmetic) and largely to the cultural capital of this group.

Kraybill, Nolt, and Wesner (2011) defined cultural capital as, “the values, predispositions, orientations, and habits of mind engrained in a particular society’s way of life” (116). In a study of children in an Amish-Mennonite school in South Carolina, Waite and Crockett (1997) concluded that, “the strength of their education lies in the coordination of all the social agencies of which the children are part—home, church, school, culture, and community. Each reinforces the other” (120). Reinforcement is the key factor in explaining the role cultural capital plays in enhancing the G.E.D. success rate. Children learn the expectations that their parents and others in the congregation have. Since this is a close knit, value-oriented congregation, it is not surprising that children hear consistent messages from their parents, grandparents, teachers, ministers, and others about what is expected.

Some Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations have added a high school curriculum and others like Montezuma Mennonite Church are supportive of those pursuing further education. Stevick (2007) acknowledged that a few Amish communities allow their members to earn a G.E.D. if it is truly needed for something important such as a job requirement. McConnell and Hurst (2006) found that among a group of 23 Amish students from an Ohio church district who took the G.E.D. test, nine scored at the equivalent of either the junior year of high school through almost the end of the freshman year of college and ten tested at the equivalence of either the freshman year of high school through almost the end of the junior year of high school. Growing numbers of Hutterite youth are taking the G.E.D. test and some of them proceed to college and major in education, often returning to teach in their colony school (Janzen and Stanton 2010).

Interviewees were asked to identify their most vivid memories of Montezuma Mennonite School and whether they were prepared by the school for life after school. Several had not attended this school, but for those who did, the general consensus was: this was a happy and enjoyable time in their young lives, although several mentioned that they could have been more serious about their studies. While one of the brethren said his memories of school were “uneventful” and another one remarked he “did not enjoy it” although “he learned a lot,” others stated that they appreciated the closeness they experienced with their classmates and teachers. One of the brethren noted, “I’ve come to appreciate the quality of education [received at Montezuma Mennonite School].” Most of them believed that they were adequately or more than adequately prepared for life after school, but some indicated that they actually learned more

practical skills by growing up on the farm. One of the brethren commenting on whether he was adequately prepared for life after school said,

So specifically for what I'm doing, no, probably not. But there's underlying principles that I would say, yes, helped. As with any business there's probably, there's certain things that are principles that are more important than maybe specifics like integrity and hard work, determination, staying focused, discipline. Those kinds of things kind of carry over into business as well and in, you know, so I would say, yes, it definitely made an impact.

One of the brethren mentioned that he was glad the congregation had a school and that their children were not homeschooled. While he was not degrading homeschooling, he argued that children learn valuable lessons in a school setting that they would not necessarily experience at home. Several of the brethren believed it was time for the school to add a formal high school curriculum. One of them stated, "But honestly, you know, I wish that our children would at least go through high school...Some of the hindrances that I've experienced from not having that is why I say that." Another one of the brethren noted that further education is needed beyond eighth grade, particularly in acquiring "work-specific trade skills." Vocational training is now necessary since more members are working outside of agriculture.

## **Work Life**

Macon County is the leading milk producing county in Georgia, and dairy farming is still a mainstay among members, although one of the significant changes in the last thirty years has been a gradual shift out of dairy farming and into other enterprises. Economically, the congregation is a lot more diversified today than it was in previous years. When Yoder (1981) did his landmark study, 39 brethren were dairymen; by 2013, the number was 17. As one of the brethren noted, "In the 1980s, we had these couple of years that we were really hit hard with drought. We didn't have irrigation...It really put a crunch on some of the farmers." Another stated,

There was a time when agriculture was really devastated...A lot of people lost their farms. Not just our people but in the wider community...banks used to be so eager to loan money, but then things tightened up and people lost their farms.

The cost of land, feed, cows, and the fluctuating price of milk have forced some dairymen to leave the business and for other church members to abandon hopes of dairy farming and move into restaurant / food services; contract poultry production (raising broilers); meat processing; equipment sales and repair; equipment trailer manufacturing; metalworking; oil seed processing; woodworking; and gazebo, dairy, and storage barn construction. A few members still raise beef cattle, and one member is tending 120 acres of pecan trees. Cotton and peanuts, but particularly peanuts, were staple crops on most regional farms, but no one in the congregation is currently growing either of these crops.

The gradual shift in occupations within the community has not negatively impacted its employment rate. There is no unemployment among church members. This is in stark contrast to what the country experienced during recent years. One reason for the high employment rate is that most are self-employed or employed by fellow church members. Like a growing number of Amish (Kraybill, Nolt, and Wesner 2011), members have developed microenterprises with less than five employees and small businesses with between five to 30 employees. The largest small business owned and operated by a church member is Yoder's Deitsch Haus Restaurant and Bakery, which employs around 25, the majority of whom are part-time. All but three of the employees are members of Montezuma Mennonite Church, Clearview Mennonite Fellowship, or Gospel Light Mennonite Church.

In conservative congregations like Montezuma Mennonite Church, members still believe in the importance of maintaining some degree of separation from the world and thus prefer, if possible, to work in their communities with others from their congregation or other nearby congregations (Naka 2008). In addition to maintaining some degree of separation from the world, Redekop, Ainlay, and Siemens (1995) noted that historically Mennonites "have developed a disquiet about business activities and economic success more specifically" (27). This notion of anxiety or aversion to business matters had its origins in the practice of being separate from the world and with Anabaptism's embrace of *Gelassenheit*. A humble person should not be self-aggrandizing nor materialistic, both of which were thought to be the outcomes of engaging in business and of being economically successful. While members strive to be humble, non-self-aggrandizing, and non-materialistic, they are not adverse to engaging in business and being economically successful. They are realistic about what it takes to survive in modern American society and support their families and church. Like the Amish, they have engaged in some degree of cultural bargaining (Kraybill and Nolt 2004). They are aware of the potential pitfalls that may accompany the accumulation of wealth, but they do not retreat from economic success.

The growth and success of members' business enterprises like those of the Amish and Mennonites is a result of "the values of hard work and frugality, as well as entrepreneurial skills honed over centuries in farming" (Kraybill and Nolt 2004, 15). Hard work and frugality are examples of cultural capital that, when combined with their shared German ethnicity and religion, "intensify the effects of dense social networks, trust, reciprocal expectations, shared values, and a common religio-cultural outlook in ways that magnify and increase the enterprise-building capacity—the social capital of a group" (Kraybill, Nolt, and Wesner 2010, 4).

## **Current Concerns**

The final topic of discussion with the interviewees was about the current concerns they or their fellow members had about the state and health of the congregation. The number one current concern among the interviewees is the impact that technology has on their personal lives and the life of the church. In most cases, when the brethren mentioned technology, they referred directly to cell phones and the internet. One of the brethren stated, "The cell phone is probably the

greatest threat to undermining a life of holiness than just about anything that we're going to face." Another one of them, in responding to the issue of cell phones and internet usage, noted, "I wish we could do something to curb that, to control it." They acknowledged that cell phones, texting, e-mail, and internet usage have negatively impacted social interaction among church members and that this change in behavior reduces social cohesion. Ironically, this is occurring among a group of people who for generations have valued and encouraged face-to-face interaction. Another one of the brethren said, "And a lot of this technology today is a downfall, ruination really...it has a grip on our young people."

It is not uncommon for youth within the congregation to have *Facebook* pages, which is of great concern for some brethren. One said, "See, cell phones are doing one thing to society, including us. It's causing us to be very impatient." One brother mentioned that in the future the congregation needs to be more proactive in trying "to anticipate issues before they make, you know, before they become an issue in the church." This sentiment was echoed by several others, and the interviewees acknowledged that the congregation was slow to react to regulate cell phones and internet usage. Some brethren implied that regulating cell phones was a "lost cause," even though they were concerned about the negative fallout from using them.

Several of the interviewees were deeply concerned about what they perceived to be a growing sense of independence among members in the congregation. One said,

Well, some of the older people, the old-timers, are saying that, they said 50, 60 years ago, there was more work bees, helping each other in the farms or building a house or building a barn. And their cry today, it seems like we are wealthier, we are, financially, we are better than we were 50 years ago, and it almost seems like there is concern now that we're more independent.

Continuing along this same line of thought, another said,

Like when it's time to put up hay, you called all your brothers and everybody put up hay because you had little square bales. Well, when the round baler came out, it was a lot more convenient. You didn't need all this help...you slowly become independent...And my burden is that independency can slowly work into our spiritual life and we'll find ourselves in a congregation still being independent. We don't need each other, and I don't want that to happen.

Members also mentioned that in the not too distant future, there will be the need to start a new church. This outreach church would not be located in Macon County or in an area where there were other Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations. There has been some discussion about the need to start a new church, but the congregation has not made any definitive plans about it nor have they set a time table when this might happen. One of the brethren said, "I would prefer to raise my family in a community where there's a one-church setting." He further indicated that in communities like Montezuma, young people are often tempted to (and some do) switch to

churches that are more progressive, which might create tension and heartache for them and their families as well as the congregation. For some of the men with whom I spoke, this was truly an emotional issue. While not elaborating on it, they were worried about the salvation of those who left the fold.

Another concern that was interspersed throughout the conversations was the issue of minimizing the influence of American culture on their lives. One of the brethren noted, “Living a life of integrity—and one that’s accountable—is so much to me, in my mind, it’s becoming more and more difficult with the connections that we have to the outside world.” This brethren’s comment reflects the church’s belief in separation from the world, worldly influence, and sinful practices. Connections to the outside world are potential sources of cognitive dissonance or anxiety for members, since these connections put them in situations where their beliefs may be compromised.

While the congregation provides disaster assistance and is involved in prison ministry and passing out religious tracts elsewhere in the state, one of the brethren reflected on the issue of whether or not the congregation has made an impact spiritually on Macon County,

Macon County is one of the poorer counties in Georgia. And so my goal or my vision would be for the church in the future to be able to respond to needs even right here in Montezuma...these years that we have been here, it doesn’t appear that we have made too much inroads.

Technology, independence, multi-church settlements, and separating oneself from the world are important issues of concern within the congregation. Technology’s tentacles are far-reaching, encroaching on members’ relationships with each other and with those outside of the congregation. Technology is not only a force in and of itself, such as in the case of cell phones and the internet, but even more importantly, advances in technology have made farming more efficient and less labor intensive. Brethren who are farmers are now more independent and less reliant on their fellow church members. Advances in technology, particularly in electronics, have also made it more difficult to remain separate from mainstream society. For example, repairs to equipment that in the past were done by a member within the congregation now are often done by an outsider with a specialized expertise. These concerns, including the church not having had much impact on Montezuma people’s needs, are really in one way or another boundary issues, a topic.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Berger (1969) visualized religion operating as a “sacred canopy,” providing believers with an all-encompassing meaning system, while Smith (1998) argued that religion survives today because of “sacred umbrellas” that are “small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—‘under’ which their beliefs can make complete sense” (106). For the faithful of Montezuma Mennonite Church, their blend of Amish and Mennonite beliefs and



traditions is a “sheltering canopy” which provides them with a “culturally coherent way of life” (Ammerman 1987, 193).

In order to maintain a culturally coherent lifestyle, congregations, like other social organizations, must routinely deal with a variety of circumstances that confront them from within and without. The circumstances that they encounter facilitate or obstruct, reinforce or weaken their ability or their will to institutionalize their ideas by embodying them in routine practices. Through such processes, ideas may be modified or maintained, strengthened or discarded. In either case, a lot of ideological work seems necessary to keep a group’s convictions in some viable relationship to its interests and circumstances (Berger 1981, 18).

Montezuma Mennonite Church’s culturally coherent way of life is fortified by ideological work and the use of boundaries that symbolically separate them from the secular world and assist them in regulating social change. Boundaries and the act of maintaining them provide the congregation with an “increased sense of efficacy” or effectiveness (Ammerman 1987, 209). Change within the church is driven by external forces (less available farmland, the cost of land, and rising cost of feed) and internal forces (personality conflicts or disagreements about religious beliefs and the application of scriptural principles). “These external and internal forces interact in complex ways” and create “border work” for the church (Hurst and McConnell 2010, 20-21).

Kraybill (2001) writes that, “The Amish view social change as a matter of moving cultural fences—holding to old boundaries and setting new ones” (297). The Beachy Amish-Mennonites operate in a similar way. The metaphor of moving cultural fences is a useful analytic tool. Fences or boundaries are seen as free-floating but grounded in the moral order of the community, and social change emerges out of a lengthy process of resistance and negotiation. Flexible, yet grounded, boundaries allow groups to protect their identities while incorporating manageable and acceptable amounts of change in beliefs and practices. Such has been the case with Montezuma Mennonite Church. Members meet regularly to discuss the *Brethren’s Agreement* and whether elements within it need to be modified. At one point some years ago, an outside bishop committee was consulted at a time in the congregation’s history when there were questions about the church’s identity and future direction. Groups that maintain rigid boundaries often do not have mechanisms in place to allow for orderly change and are susceptible to fragmentation (Hostetler 1993).

Since this paper has focused on only one southern Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregation, readers are cautioned against generalizing the findings from this study to all Beachy Amish-Mennonite congregations. By using cultural bargaining (negotiated agreements and accommodations) wisely, Montezuma Mennonite Church has preserved its conservative Beachy Amish-Mennonite identity and values at a time when Anabaptist / Mennonite identity is “becoming increasingly tenuous” (Kraybill and Nolt 2004; Roth 2011, 20). Certainly, the congregation has experienced its fair share of changes initiated from both external and internal forces, but nevertheless, continuity prevails particularly in its core beliefs. A key aspect of Amish

life that remains an important part of this congregation's identity is that individuals are subordinated to the will of the community (Kraybill 1994). Compliance with this practice further solidifies the congregation's identity.

What do all the changes that have occurred since the founding of this congregation mean now? In other words, what impact have the changes discussed in this article had on the life of this particular congregation? It appears most changes have sustained the church. Switching services from German to English made the church accessible to a larger audience. Changes in clothing, camera use, and more choices in vehicle colors have not negatively altered everyday life. Allowing congregants the ability to pursue additional education has given them more economic options, especially in an era when dairy farming has become a more volatile enterprise. Changes in technology have been embraced in the work life of the congregation, such as the recent addition of a modern oil seed processing plant.

What about the future of Montezuma Mennonite Church? This is a vibrant and apparently healthy congregation, one that has successfully engaged, "in the cultural activity of expressing and transmitting religious meanings" (Chaves 2004, 8). It is a congregation that has weathered change well while holding to its core beliefs and worldview. Sometime in the near future, members will need to be sent somewhere to start a new church and that will provide the congregation with room to grow. The congregation will have to continue to do border work as they confront the ever expanding influence of the modern, outside world on their way of life. They will have to find ways to minimize the negative effects of American culture while continuing to engage with the outside world by sharing their spirituality and worldview.

The impact of technology on their lifestyle must be addressed in a more systematic manner. Access to cell phones and the internet pose certain deleterious risks for the well-being of the congregation. While there are some restrictions in place for internet usage, none at present exist for cell phone usage. Advances in technology will confront the congregation with new challenges as will the diversity of options within the local religious marketplace (Stark and Finke 2000). The congregation needs not only to be concerned with the external forces of social change that impact their lives, such as technology and competition for their members within the local religious marketplace, but also internal forces of social change such as an attitude of independence that may erode what they have worked so hard to create.

If these brethren are correct in their assessment—that members are becoming more independent—what impact will this have on the social cohesion of the congregation and on the willingness of its members to submit to the will of the church?

This paper has provided a brief glimpse—a one-year snapshot that is far from a complete picture—into the life of a Beachy Amish-Mennonite church. More research is needed on how congregations, like Montezuma Mennonite Church and other in-betweens, create and maintain their identities and how they are similar yet different from their Amish and Mennonite relatives.

In other words, more research is needed on the viability of the Amish-Mennonite system. Schwieder and Schwieder (1977) predicted that eventually the Beachy Amish-Mennonites would attract fewer and fewer Old Order Amish. Scott (1996, 1996) noted that “Most Beachy Amish churches have become more and more like conservative Mennonites and have identified less and less with the Amish.” Is there evidence to support these positions? Researchers need to continue to investigate the various ways in which congregations like Montezuma Mennonite Church employ ideological and border work to sustain their identities.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Contact information: William L. Smith, Georgia Southern University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Statesboro, GA 30460-8051 wmlsmith@georgiasouthern.edu; 912 478 0255

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