

Old German Baptist Brethren: Plain but Different, Part 2

Tony Walsh

Director, Centre for the Study of Irish Protestantism
Maynooth University
Co Kildare, Ireland
Tony.Walsh@mu.ie

Jeff Bach

Director of the Young Center Emeritus
Elizabethtown College
bachja58@gmail.com; bachj@etown.edu

Sam Funkhouser

Executive Director
Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center
funkhoss@gmail.com; director@brethrenmennoniteheritage.org

Abstract: This article utilizes a narrative methodological research paradigm to explore perceived distinctions between the Old German Baptist Brethren (the main Old Order expression of the Schwarzenau Brethren) and other Plain groups. In this section (part 2 of the article) the authors explore four areas of specific distinction: (1) an array of “flat” and unusually participative church structures; (2) a particular understanding and exercise of hospitality; (3) a strong emphasis on the inner life and reflective practice; (4) a strong emphasis on particular understandings of unity and submission as essential ingredients in church life. All these, together with the three areas discussed in the first part of the article, combine to create a distinctive culture and an unusual expression of Plain spirituality and life practice.

Submitted December 24, 2022; accepted July 31, 2023; published December 7, 2023
<https://doi.org/10.18061/jpac.v4i1.9709>

Keywords: narrative inquiry, postpositive research methodology, Old German Baptist Brethren, Schwarzenau Brethren, Pietism, Anabaptism, Annual Meeting, eldership, hospitality, inner life, reflective practice, unity

Note: This is part 2 of an article examining what makes the Old German Baptist Brethren distinctive among Plain groups. The first part of this study appeared in volume 3, issue 2 of the *Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities*.

Introduction

In this article, the authors identify seven specific differences that distinguish Old Order Brethren, most particularly the Old German Baptist Brethren,¹ from other Plain groups with whom they are

¹ In this article, we use the terms Old German Baptist Brethren, OGBB, Old German Baptists, Brethren, the Brotherhood, and the Fraternity interchangeably as descriptors. In each instance, unless the context



perceived as sharing much in common. In part 1, the authors considered the interplay of Anabaptism and Pietism, the array of Old German Baptist ordinances, and the emphasis on orthopraxis over doctrinal uniformity in all cases. In this, the second part of the article, they consider four more areas of distinction:

- An array of “flat” and unusually participative organizational church structures
- A particular understanding of hospitality and its exercise
- A distinctive emphasis on the inner life and reflective practice
- An overriding emphasis on unity and submission as essential marks for membership

These impressions of difference emerged from reading, personal experience of the OGBB, and subsequent discussion among the authors. Written drafts were then offered to members of the Fraternity for comment and correction; frequently, these were followed by individual or small group meetings and discussions. Many of the members’ views and comments have been woven into the text or placed in quotation boxes scattered throughout the article. Note that the authors in no way see this article as a “last word” on the subjects involved; instead, in keeping with a postpositive research framework, they view it as containing tentative understandings, a catalyst for further reflection and discussion, both within the Brotherhood and among those with a scholarly interest in the group.

4. Structures: A “Flat” and Participative Organizational Edifice

The Old German Baptist Brethren’s understanding of church is distinctive; it is neither congregational, synodal, presbyterial, nor episcopal. Unlike in other Plain groups, decision-making is not vested in bishops or other authority figures and the ecclesiastical focus is not based in autonomous local congregations. Instead of seeing themselves primarily as members of congregations, the OGBB identify as constituents of an *overall* fraternity or brotherhood, inclusive of every baptized member. Ultimate authority, under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, is perceived as resting with the collective of the members at their Annual Meeting. This vast gathering held at Pentecost every year is constituted, at least in theory, by every member.

In reality, not every member is able to attend due to age, illness, or work and family commitments; however, each year several thousand members and their families meet together. There is a linked organizational connection in which each local district’s (congregation’s) council meeting is intimately linked to the policymaking and processes of Annual Meeting; items for discussion and policy creation, modification, or development are all proposed locally and then brought forward to Annual Meeting by these local bodies. The overall emphasis throughout the Brotherhood is on connectivity, participation, and collectivity. While overall structures are minimal, the potent grassroots culture of informal networks of connection and interaction

specifically indicates otherwise, we are utilizing the terms to refer to the largest Old Order expression of the Schwarzenau Brethren.

provide an effective (if informal) mechanism for informational exchange, influence, and control. This process is facilitated by the emphasis on cross-state and indeed cross-country attendance at love feasts, Sunday worship services, the exchange of preachers between districts, and informal social gatherings. The group's overall approach is summarized succinctly by one elder: "The historic position of the Brethren has been to lean on the wisdom of the collective—not on individual conviction." This section of the article explores the distinctively nonhierarchical, participative processes that flow from this conviction.

Local District Council Meetings. Each local OGBB district has its own council meeting, a regular gathering consisting of all baptized members of the local congregation. (Here, men and women, young and old, have an equal voice in decision-making, although a concern has been expressed that many sisters² hold back from contributing to discussion or expressing their opinions in a public context.) From the male membership, a local "official body" is appointed. The official body consists of all deacons, ministers, and elders, local members who have been elected and then appointed to their role by that district. Council meetings, facilitated by the district's official body, are responsible for local matters relating to church discipline, the recognition and appointment of ministers, deacons, and elders, and the approval of applicants for baptism, as well as for the more mundane matters of finance, administration, and property maintenance.

One member elaborates on the role of the local official body in the appointing of ministers:

The local ministers (the officials) decide when to have an election for a new minister. An elder from an adjoining district comes to conduct the election, but there is never any announcement ahead of time that an election will take place. When the congregation gathers on a Sunday morning for worship and an adjoining elder is present, the congregation knows that either he is visiting, that there is trouble in the church, or that there will be an election for a new minister following the service.

A central role of each official body and its council meeting is to attend to their district's conformity to the norms of the overall Fraternity and to share and discuss any concerns of which they have become aware regarding the wider church's practices. Occasionally, when a district is having internal problems, their deliberations may be aided by the presence, support, and advice of experienced elders from other districts. This aid may be sought by the district itself or be provided at the behest of a committee of Annual Meeting.

² Among the OGBB, women members are universally denoted as "sisters" and male members as "brothers."

Brethren are apt to emphasize the equality of “voice” in council meetings; here neither gender, position, relative affluence, ethnicity, nor years of standing has any official influence. It should, however, be noted that, while acknowledging the importance of this principle, many question its application in day-to-day practice. Nonetheless, in the words of a senior elder:

The most recently baptized young sister has equality of voice with the oldest and most experienced elder, both in discussion and in the process of decision-making.

While every district has a level of autonomy in the running of its local affairs, each is also answerable to the overall strict code of the Brethren’s norms and practices; both Scripture and tradition are significant as the basis for each of these. Each local district, through its representation at Annual Meeting, has a voice in the definition and occasional modulation of the Fraternity’s overall framework of thought and practice. In these processes, individual opinions are downplayed, and the operation of the collective is emphasized. When concerns or confusion arise regarding issues of practice or thinking, the local council meeting is responsible for sending “queries” to Annual Meeting; such queries tend to seek clarification on a particular matter or the resolution of what is seen as an ambiguity in thinking or practice. These often emanate from a concern regarding a slippage or a real or perceived dilution of standards in a particular district or in the Fraternity as a whole. Following what is often very extensive local discussion, a specific question (termed a “query”) may be framed and then conveyed to Annual Meeting by two “messengers” chosen by the local district. Such queries form the basis of the business meeting discussion at that gathering. In this way, there is a lively relationship and a modulating dynamic between the local congregation and its concerns and the wider but linked overall collective of Annual Meeting. In these processes, the Brethren’s emphasis on submission, particularly to the collective as expressed by the opinion of Annual Meeting, is central.

One younger member, in what amounts to a challenge to Western society’s preoccupation with individualism, notes:

It just clean beats me how I can be so convinced of the unquestioned rightness of my own opinion, of my own judgment...of what can be pure prejudice...and consequently dismiss the differing view of another brother. And that applies even more when I (or I with some of my friends) think we know better than another group...or than the rest of the church.

Annual Meeting. Annual Meeting is held every year over the long weekend of Pentecost. It consists of three days of worship, preaching, and fellowship, as well as activities for the “Youngfolks.” (Often over a thousand teenagers and young adults, members and nonmembers, will participate in organized games, singings, and other activities nightly). Only after such a

season of unworldly preparation and fellowship, when it is felt that members are spiritually prepared, does the church embark on a day dedicated to the discussion of church policy and business. Here, unlike at local district meetings, only male members have a voice in the discussion and decisions. The vast gathering involves the meeting together of members from all over the United States. (There are currently no districts or members outside the U.S.) The gathering is experienced primarily as a delightful occasion for fellowship and spiritual renewal, as well as the central locus for the Fraternity's decision-making. The huge crowd of upwards of four thousand members and their (usually extensive) families are accommodated, fed, and enabled to worship together in one vast tent (and several subsidiary ones). A different district (or, usually, a group of districts) is responsible for hosting the gathering each year and the geographical area selected varies from year to year, tents usually being erected on a member's farm. Locally elected committees see to the mountainous details of practical arrangements involved in accommodating, feeding, and toileting such a vast crowd. Local committees are also responsible for erecting tents and facilitating the provision of first aid, electrical connections, and the many other necessary services required.





Annual Meeting is held each year over the long weekend of Pentecost and attended by several thousand members and their families. The main gatherings are held in a vast tent. All decisions relating to the life and practice of the Old German Baptist Brethren are made at this great concourse. (Photos courtesy of Tony Walsh)

One of the authors describes his Annual Meeting experiences:

Annual Meeting: the very words conjure up a wealth of memories and experiences. I remember walking with a close friend, early on the Saturday morning (a little late and tired after yesterday's eight-hour drive from Pennsylvania), toward the dome of the huge brown tent. It is set this year in beautiful, rolling farmland, with a backdrop of Ohio hills and woodlands; the sounds of birdsong and the smells of the countryside envelop us as we walk. The noise of our boots on the hard ground is gradually drowned out the closer we get to the tent, and it's ultimately lost in the rich sound of several thousand voices upraised in slow, multipart song. The words of Spurgeon, the English Victorian preacher, written at a very different time and in a very different context, seem to capture the purity—almost holiness—of the moment:

*Sweetly the holy hymn
Dawns on the morning air;
Before the world with smoke is dim,
We meet to offer prayer.*

Then there is the memory of entering the huge crowded tent with its row upon row of backless benches, each one packed to overflowing. Later, as further crowds arrive, many younger men will stand at the back or just outside the tent, listening. As the lengthy morning of preaching progresses, I am conscious of the surreptitious, but continuous shifting of my limbs—an attempt to reduce the pain of an unsupported back. Gleaning from experience, I later become accustomed to arriving early for meetings, and with a group of others presumably similarly motivated, seeking a place on the board benches located beside one of the tent uprights. At a premium, these provide the luxury of some spinal support. As we search, the mingling smells of trampled grass and boiling beef, wafting from the adjacent dining tent and so redolent of Annual Meeting, envelop us.

These first three days of Annual Meeting are preparative; services follow each other as members prepare their hearts for the day of discussion and policymaking on Tuesday.

Now the preacher's voice intrudes on my reflections: "The disciples, one hundred and twenty of them, were anticipating; they were in one place; they were of one accord. I hope we are. I hope I am. We need the Holy Spirit to instruct us. Are we ready to yield to Him? Are we anticipating the mighty rushing wind of His presence, His overruling of our individual wills? We need that..." His voice continues to ring out over the heads of the huge congregation.

Later there will be fellowship at members' homes. Fifty or sixty invited back for supper is not unusual. "Have you supper plans for this evening?" is a question addressed to members and to outsiders alike. If by an extraordinary chance you don't, plans will be swiftly rustled up. (Members are nothing if not given to hospitality and to ensuring visitors are made welcome.) Sometimes there are breakfast invitations too. Gazebos are erected in gardens to extend the capacity of the house; folding chairs and tables abound. When there are particularly large numbers, guests are fed in shifts. An indication of how seriously the Brethren take such challenges is evidenced in a cookbook produced by the Fraternity, which directly focuses on how to effectively and economically feed such numbers. In addition to recipes, it abounds in guidance on how to accommodate—to sleep, feed, and manage—a dozen or more guests in one's home over the long Pentecost weekend.

One evening, I attend a games night for the Youngfolks; playing fields for team games have been marked out on an adjacent farm and over a thousand young people, many in the uniforms of members, play volleyball and other team games under bright arc lights. They are watched and cheered by older members. Another evening, choirs made up of Youngfolks spend the evening singing Gospel songs. Many of these are traditional, while some—both words and music—have been authored by young people themselves. Hundreds of older members (often eating ice cream and other delicacies on sale for the occasion) mill around or squash into the tents where the "singings" take place. It all creates the surreal sense of an alternative universe—a Brethren world—into which one has been suddenly dropped.

A particular event comes back to me from one Annual Meeting. It was a Tuesday afternoon, the day set aside for policymaking and decisions. There had been a lengthy discussion on internet usage, sparked by queries sent from a number of districts (and collated into one question

by the committee appointed for this purpose). It sought Annual Meeting's direction on this difficult topic. For several of those who had spoken, a level of passion unusual among Brethren at Annual Meeting had been evident. Many feel that if the church gives its official blessing to internet access, it would mean an opening of floodgates to the world, its temptations, its assumptions and values. But there are other views too. There were tears in one man's voice as he sought a more liberal approach. He employed six men, all with families and young children. His business was heavily dependent on the internet for advertising and orders. How could the firm continue if this was forbidden? What would become of his loyal employees if the business could no longer operate? The tent reverberated with the pain of his feelings, his sense of responsibility for his employees. Some of them, I learn afterwards, are members, others are not. Eventually, after a civil but deeply felt discussion, the matter is laid aside and a decision postponed until next year. But a very clear direction is given by the foreman of the standing committee. This was not to be a year of inactivity; instead those with particular views were to make every effort to prayerfully seek out those holding contrary opinions—and to talk and pray and discuss with them. The group would return to the topic in twelve months and trust the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit in lives and hearts, with a view to the achievement of a submissive spirit and an ultimate unity of view.

There is a brief pause as the discussion is concluded. Suddenly a vast silence falls on the huge gathering. And then, remarkably, the whole tent is suffused with golden light; the silence deepens into a sense of worship as the vast gathering centers, it seems, into the felt presence of God. The sun, previously hidden by clouds, has suddenly emerged in full strength, bathing the tent in light, but the profundity of that moment has stayed with me; it was like a heavenly benediction.

Later on, however, the faces of the standing committee members are strained as they leave the tent first, at the close of the day's deliberations. The situation has not been resolved; there are deep divisions in the Fraternity on the issue of the internet. One man wipes tears from his face as he walks. The profundity of his feelings speaks of the reality of felt pain among members when there is a lack of unity in the Fraternity.

Given the highly interactive and connected nature of the Brotherhood, there are generally few surprises at the content of the queries brought for discussion. Most will have been discussed, mulled over, and prayed about in the weeks and months preceding the gathering. There is an expectation that members come thoroughly prepared through thought, prayer, and dialogue for the deliberations involved. The business meeting aims to arrive at unanimity of view on each item or query, and the Brotherhood's emphasis on mutual submission is an important element in achieving such unity. Those who find that they cannot agree with an emerging consensus on the topic of a query are invited to submit in love to the majority view. If this does not happen, an ultimate decision will usually be held over to be raised again at Annual Meeting the following year; in the meantime, it is hoped that the process of informal discussion, prayer, and the Holy Spirit's influence will have woven a unity of thought. When a spirit of unity and consensus is

achieved, leading to unanimity of view and a collective consensus, this is understood to be through God's clear guidance and intervention—and something much to be desired. Such decisions are understood as binding on members and districts. The recognition of the Holy Ghost's guidance in achieving consensus elevates both the achievement of a spirit of unity and the operations of Annual Meeting (and indeed, although perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, local council meetings) as being significant sites for divine intervention.

Standing Committee. The various worship services and particularly the policy and business session of Annual Meeting are facilitated by the members of the standing committee, a group of twelve experienced elders (aided in their work by a small number of subgroups). While the standing committee is a potent body of influence and wields substantial sway among OGBB members, it is very clearly distinguishable from the hierarchies of other denominations; it is strongly emphasized that this group does not have decision-making power. Instead, the standing committee members are to be seen as facilitators of a process, and each is as subject to the decisions of Annual Meeting as is the most recently baptized OGBB member. In theory, the standing committee is selected annually as the initial step of the daylong business meeting; in actuality, however, there tends to be little change in its constituency over years. Other than through death, retirement, or the rare event of a member leaving the Fraternity, the committee's membership remains largely unchanged from year to year. For many, this conveys a reassuring sense of stability. One former member suggests, "You need leaders and people who are experienced and know what's going on. That helps the church." Occasionally, however, concerns are expressed regarding inflexibility or the need for fresh thinking or the inclusion of younger or different voices. While the standing committee is not accorded any *formal* power or influence within the Brotherhood—either as a group or as individuals—it would be disingenuous to discount the informal sway its members exercise either collectively or individually.

During the business meeting, queries forwarded by local districts (having been processed by a committee that, to avoid duplication, collapses similar queries on the same topic into one) are presented to the whole assembly, and then discussed, often in considerable depth and usually with both moderation and charity. The process of responding to such queries involves not just discussion, but often, too, the sensitive editing of the final proposal by the chair, or "foreman," of the standing committee in response to a felt sense of the meeting; ultimately a "voice" is then taken on this proposal to confirm agreement (or otherwise). The proposal is ultimately written up as an official minute for later publication. The "voice"—rather than individual votes—is the Fraternity's historic way; it consists of a loud verbal response of "yes" or "no" to a proposal. The group expressing the minority or lesser voice (assuming it exists) is then asked to consider submitting to the greater; a voice is then again taken. Often the culture of submission is so potent that the counterview will have evaporated. Minutes of the decisions made at Annual Meeting are carefully recorded. They are collected and published; a perusal of the resultant "minute books," which cover many years of decisions, conveys a sense of the concerns that have occupied the Brotherhood over many decades. The minutes provide a map of the gradual changes taking place in the norms and practices of the group over time. Almost all queries and the resultant

resolutions have to do with matters of attitude, practice, or behavior; traditionally, doctrine occupies a much less central focus for concern among the Fraternity.

The tendency towards groupthink is, of course, a predictable danger for the dynamics of any collective. At times, the preoccupation with achieving unanimity could at least in theory be seen as tending to repress dissension or to silence marginal but timely views among the Brethren. Some of those who have left the Fraternity suggest that this is not always recognized as a real danger. Concerns have also at times been expressed regarding the exercise of undue, if informal and perhaps not always conscious, influence by groups (including the standing committee) within the Brotherhood. The elevation of OGBB traditional practices to the level of Holy Writ within the Fraternity has also been noted as a concern. These issues have been pointed to as concerns that ultimately culminated in an exodus of a large group in 2009 (becoming the Old German Baptist Brethren, New Conference) and a smaller withdrawal in 2021 (now constituted as the Old German Baptist Church).

Eldership. The role and significance of elders is a core constituent of OGBB structures. Elders are appointed from among those male members who have already been elected as ministers by local districts; in essence, such ministers are seen as being on trial for ultimate advancement to the eldership. This latter advancement must have the agreement of all members of a particular district to proceed. Such local appointments are understood to be at the behest of the Holy Spirit's influence, and a district's selection is accepted and validated throughout the wider Fraternity. What is essentially a local process thus becomes a fundamental element in the overall Fraternity structure, giving expression to that weaving together of the local and the wider collective, which is a significant component of OGBB thinking.

One member reflects:

I wonder whether the phrases “a potent body of influence” and “wield substantial sway,” used in relation to the standing committee, sound a little strong. I hope I am not sounding disrespectful here, because I fully appreciate and respect both the standing committee and the elders. We do however want to be careful of over-elevating them...personally I would say that if I was seeking advice or guidance I would tend to go to older sisters or brethren in the church, not necessarily the elders.... I suppose it would probably depend on the advice I was seeking.... Actually, I suppose I see influence as more dispersed among the Brotherhood...it's not just centered in the eldership or the standing committee.

Elders are not just an essential part of the local official body, but also part of a more informal but highly significant category within the overall Brotherhood. While, with the exception of the standing committee, there is no officially sanctioned hierarchy, upon their appointment, elders become part of a certain pyramid of influence. Each elder fulfills a preaching role and will often

become a popular and influential figure in the wider Brotherhood, invited to preside at a geographically disparate range of love feasts and special services.

A much respected elder enlarges on the role of ministers:

All elected ministers are in a progression towards the eldership; they are at the start of a journey of training and experience. Eldership is not a separate state but a culmination. All elders, while their gifts, talents, experiences may be different, are of the same status.

The interactive nature of the OGBB, with its emphasis on Brotherhood-wide fellowship and the consequent opportunities for meeting at love feasts, particular services, and, of course, Annual Meeting, provides opportunities for elders to meet informally and to bond together into a potent body of influence (or, occasionally, into distinct bodies representing a particular view). In this way, they can wield substantial sway in the overall Fraternity.

In a discussion on eldership, one younger member comments:

Elders are really at the core of the church; they form a network across the Fraternity, nurturing unity and unanimity. Of course, the very “flat” structure of leadership needs constant “oiling of the wheels.” It doesn’t just work by itself and needs constant attention and monitoring, and the elders have a central role in keeping an eye on things.

In certain (usually quite extreme) circumstances where a district finds itself in ongoing strife or facing particularly difficult circumstances, Annual Meeting (or the standing committee) will be approached for help. In such instances, an experienced elder or group of elders will be appointed to assist the local group—offering help, advice, and support. This constitutes a wider sense of sustenance and nurtures the sense of connection between the local and the wider collective.

A further distinction between the Fraternity and other Plain groups was pointed out by a member who read an early draft of this article:

I think another important distinctive that underlines the difference between the OGBB and other Plain groups is our resistance, or at least hesitancy, to form organizations or structures among—or by—members. In other Plain groups, organizations proliferate. They respond, for instance, to humanitarian difficulties. These tend to focus on humanitarian aid, emergency disaster support, lending programs, business advice, and other organized response to human difficulties. While there are a very small number of boards relating to the running of private schools or medical sharing programs among the OGBB, these are very specific and very limited. In our view, such organizations, no matter how well-intentioned,

undermine the foundations of the official structure of the church. Where the Old German Baptists have become involved in such programs, focused on resolving social, human, or technological difficulties, this has inevitably led to division and an undermining of the authority and unity of the Brotherhood. We desire the unencumbered mindset of “pilgrims and strangers.” At least some of our Anabaptist friends, as well as other expressions of the Schwarzenau Brethren, seem to have become more focused on building God’s Kingdom on earth through social intervention, rather than on creating a clearly alternative kingdom—that of God expressed through the church.

Foundations of the Structure. The OGBB’s unique understanding of the church is expressed in the distinctive organizational structure that flows from these convictions. Perhaps the most noteworthy feature is that decisions are not made by an elite individual or group (or indeed by some form of specifically appointed advisory committee) and then handed down to a waiting membership. Neither pope, bishop, nor select hierarchical group is responsible for the definition of policy, practice—or indeed doctrine. Instead, there is a conviction that the Holy Spirit is operative *through members* in forming church thinking and practice (albeit always in conformity to scriptural standard and traditional practice). This distinctive view of the church emerges from four interlinked and interdependent conceptualizations that relate to the nature of the *ekklesia*, the nature of God, and the nature and role of individual members:

- The Holy Spirit is understood as being an immanent as well as an agentive presence in the affairs of the Brotherhood. The Spirit’s influence is seen as being in active operation in the dealings of the Fraternity, in district council meetings, and particularly when the church gathers at Annual Meeting.
- The church is understood to be a living organism, and the Holy Spirit is operative directly through its members and officers when they are meeting in collective process.
- The Holy Spirit’s influence is dependent upon, or at least most effectively made real, when a deep sense of unity characterizes the activity of collective decision-making.
- Such unity is only possible where members come as near as possible to consciously laying aside ego and the drives, opinions, and preferences of individualism, replacing these with an active spirit of *submission* to the whole church and to one another. Such a submissive attitude is enjoined by the Apostle Paul, particularly in Romans, Chapter 12, where each one is commanded “not to think of himself more highly than he ought...in honor preferring one another.” The Apostle Paul’s directive is taken quite literally by members and constitutes a central precept informing members’ attitudes toward one another.

This underlying conceptual framework results in a number of significant differences that distinguish Old German Baptist decision-making processes from that of other Plain groups. For the Fraternity, church and members are a coterminus reality. Unlike their Amish neighbors (and indeed most other Christian denominations), decisions regarding behavior, practice, or doctrine are not handed down by a hierarchy. Instead, such matters are discussed, modulated, and ultimately decided at the OGBB Annual Meeting—the collectivity of members. This highlights how the OGBB understanding of church—and authority—differs from Amish and Plain Mennonite groups who emphasize an independent and purely local or congregational entity with rights and privileges of decision-making. Other groups also privilege the role of recognized authority figures such as bishops—a form of “priestly class”—in creating policy or making decisions that affect the life of members.

The Brethren, on the other hand, believe that God works directly through the cognitive and emotional processes of members, thus elevating the role of ordinary members. While recognizing the fallibility and the contingent nature of human decision-making, they believe that when the church gathers in a spirit of humility, of openness to God and to one another, and where the drives of ego are owned and regulated, the godly collective can come closest to discerning God’s will. For the Brethren, it is ultimately the experience of unity of thinking that betokens the seal of God’s guidance. This view at once elevates the concept of church and the role of fallible human members. It highlights the former as an organism where the Holy Spirit is directly accessible, immanent, and active. And it emphasizes the latter, where they are in love and unity with one another, as conduits for divine operation.

This understanding implies a reverence for tradition, and for traditional practices and ways of doing things as emanating from a Spirit-inspired unity. The Brethren consequently are very slow to create change. They do, however, recognize that there have been many (usually quite gradual) shifts in thinking and practice over the years and that these are reflected in the collected minutes of Annual Meeting. Embodied in this recognition is an understanding that even when unity prevails, the church can still misunderstand the nuances of the Holy Spirit’s guidance; it is recognized that Annual Meeting is, after all, made up of all-too-fallible human beings, where ego, despite best efforts to put it aside, is still an alarmingly potent influence. Despite such a caveat, there is a strong conviction that the Holy Spirit is operative in molding the Brotherhood’s thinking and in guiding members “into all truth” *over time*. Weaving in the variable of time acknowledges the complexity of achieving God’s will. In that process, there may well be a variety of false starts or cul-de-sacs encountered. The journey into all truth is understood as a complex business. The achievement of ultimate unity (and the Holy Spirit’s guidance), particularly within the church, and on any topic, is understood as a *process*, one that may, at times, take years to fully achieve. Such a recognition provides a further catalyst towards humility and an openness to differing views.

A senior elder makes the following statement, which seems to form a summary of attitude or aspiration:

When I go to Annual Meeting and I see a brother who I know has very different views to my own on a topic that we will be discussing later, that is the brother I need to sit with, to listen to—not with the aim of convincing him of my views but to enjoy his fellowship in the Gospel. To listen to. That is the brother I need to be beside at the love feast, that I need to allow to commune me at the table. That will help me to recognize that he may have a far better hold on truth than I have.... I need to school myself to be submissive to him, to learn from his wisdom and experience.

For some observers and commentators (although, in our experience, rarely members), the reality that women have a limited role at Annual Meeting in particular, where they are not permitted to participate verbally in the official business or to vote, is problematic. One participant in the research, a longtime OGBB member who has recently transferred to a more liberal group, suggests that “the extent of equality of the Holy Spirit’s action in all members at Annual Meeting is constrained by the restrictions on women members’ participation and ability to speak at the Meeting.” This view is contested by members—including many women—who feel that (a) the restriction is in line with scriptural teaching and (b) that the Holy Spirit is in no way constrained by the observance of such directions. Two sisters, commenting on this, stated that they “see the unrestrained action of the Holy Spirit in all the activities of the Brotherhood—and particularly at Annual Meeting—as working through the prayers (rather than the spoken participation in discussion) of the sisters.”

The achievement and maintenance of overall unity is a treasured outcome, the core of the Old German Baptists’ relationships with one another and with their Lord.

5. Hospitality: A Particularity of Understanding and Exercise

Hospitality is a normative feature of all Plain groups; meals eaten together on Sundays after the church service are, for instance, commonplace practice. The entertaining of extended family, members of the community, and friends in homes is also a central part of life. The *Dawdi Haus*, where parents are accommodated and (when necessary) cared for when a son marries and takes over the main house and the running of the family farm, is a central part of Amish life.

Among the Old German Baptists (as with other Plain groups), the culture of hospitality differs markedly from the broader American prioritization of autonomy and privacy. Their exercise of welcome, however, tends to distinguish them from other Plain groups. This section explores three sites of distinction: hospitality toward fellow members, hospitality toward outsiders, and “spiritual” hospitality.



Extending hospitality toward visiting members is perceived as an important part of both Annual Meeting and love feasts. Here, Annual Meeting attendees chat before supper is served at a local home. (Photo courtesy of Tony Walsh)

Hospitality Toward Fellow Members. Brethren demonstrate hospitality to one another in a variety of ways. One very common practice of showing hospitality is hosting another family—or, usually, several other families—for meals. Mention was made earlier of the presence of an extending dinner table in each Brethren home, and members often joke that the ownership of such a table is a “test of fellowship,” but the ubiquitous presence of such generously hospitable furniture speaks volumes about the cultural norms of the group. Hosting several families after

worship on Sunday for a shared meal is the weekly norm in all areas of the Brotherhood, but shared meals often occur on weeknights as well. While many Americans might prefer to meet at a restaurant to eat a meal with friends or family, or to socialize by going to public places and events, Old German Baptists will instead invite friends and family to their home for a meal and fellowship.³

Brethren hospitality involves more than shared meals, however. Old German Baptists often host visitors overnight in their homes—another practice that is at odds with American norms of travel and lodging. The Fraternity’s culture, as we have seen, offers many opportunities for travel and consequently for overnight hosting. Unlike many other Plain groups, Brethren frequently journey across the country to attend worship services and love feasts in other congregations and stay in the homes of local members while they do. Annual Meeting also presents members of the hosting congregation(s) with the logistical challenge of providing lodging for thousands of visitors from across the Brotherhood. Each year, the overwhelming majority of conference attendees are provided with room and board by the local members for the duration of the event. Members offered hospitality on such occasions as Annual Meeting or at love feast are often completely unknown to their hosts. It is no wonder, then, that the keeping of a guestbook for out-of-state visitors to sign is almost as common among the OGBB as the ownership of an extending dinner table, an array of folding chairs, and copious amounts of extra bedding. The emphasis on welcome, a genuine interest in people, and the equipping of each household with the means to provide for guests combine to reinforce the culture of hospitality; the first major gift for many newly married couples is that extending table, capable of seating twenty, or frequently thirty, guests.

As with other Plain groups, caring for members in need is also a strong imperative. It is common practice to take into their own homes (even where there are no kinship ties) single or solitary members, particularly those unable for reasons of health, economic stringency, age, or disability to continue to live alone. This can be for a temporary period or often for life. Such “visitors” become de facto members of the hosting family.

Hospitality Toward Outsiders. Even more remarkable, particularly to non-Brethren visitors who are not familiar with the group, Old German Baptists’ hospitality is not limited to members and their families. The reflexive instincts formed by their hospitable practices, combined with the generosity of spirit that the Brethren often show toward nonmembers, can result in a dinner invitation or even the offer of a place to stay extended to “outsiders” as well. All three authors of this paper have experienced such generous hospitality. The following vignettes illustrate this.

I distinctly remember the first two visits my wife and I made to an Old German Baptist Church. At this point in time, I was a seminary student interested in Brethren history and curious about the Old Order Brethren. I was attending a school in New Jersey, so the closest OGBB congregation was one in eastern Pennsylvania. I obtained the contact information of one of the elders in the church, who when I called him invited us to join them for worship, shared with me

³ A changing trend in this practice was referenced by a number of participants: in certain areas of the country, it is becoming more acceptable to host visitors at a meal in a restaurant rather than in the home.

the time and location of the service, and arranged in advance for us to visit with a number of families over lunch afterwards.

Of all of the unique experiences we had and memories we made on that initial visit—and there were many!—what has stuck with me the most was the extremely warm welcome we received. We felt as if every person in the (fairly large) congregation made an effort to introduce themselves and welcome us, but even more remarkable to us, having no familiarity at the time with Plain culture, were all of the dinner invitations. There must have been at least half a dozen different members who invited us to come home with them for lunch! Of course, we declined these offers, sharing with each that we already had lunch plans, but these gestures of hospitality were unforgettable.

Later that year we visited the same congregation again, this time for a love feast weekend. Once again, our elder contact in the congregation had arranged in advance for us to spend the night with one of the member families. However, once we arrived and conversed with various brethren and sisters over the course of that Saturday, we were stunned to receive several invitations to “stay with us tonight if you don’t have a place already”! Despite our experience earlier that year, we were unprepared for this kind of invitation. Here we were, complete strangers and clearly not members of the church, and yet this offer of welcome was unquestioningly extended to us. Because we observed the communion service that weekend but were not given an invitation to participate in it, one could argue that we were not offered “Eucharistic hospitality” (to use the term that is common in ecumenical circles). Nevertheless, we were shown actual hospitality in a powerful way and experienced a deep feeling of spiritual hospitality as well.

What is more remarkable (and less common with other Old Order churches) is when OGGB members offer a home to troubled young people, or others in difficulty, who have no connection with the Brotherhood. A particularly significant example illustrates this: an OGGB family took in an unrelated family of six young children who had experienced a major tragedy in their family life. These children had no connection whatsoever with the Brotherhood, and the commitment of care was made for long as was needed—into adulthood should this prove necessary. It ultimately lasted for two years. Remarkable under any circumstances, the level of generosity was underlined by the reality that the hosting family already had a large family of its own.

Spiritual Hospitality. The nature of hospitality among the Brethren also seems to exhibit another significant element, distinguishing it from the physical hospitality common in some other Plain circles. There is often an element of what could be termed as the extension of a “spiritual hospitality” involved. While boundaries of *insider* and *outsider* are clearly demarcated among the OGGB (clearly underlined in limiting the holy kiss to members only and in the practice of “close” communion), there is at times a softening that runs parallel to these practices. This is particularly noticeable where relationships develop and elements of a shared faith are perceived. The following examples illustrate this nuanced reality.

Some years following my first introduction to the Old German Baptists, I was again staying with members who had become valued friends. By this time, I had attended many Sunday

services, singings, the love feast, and even Annual Meeting. We had engaged in numerous discussions and had shared many elements of our faith journeys. One Sunday, as we gathered at the meal table following the morning church service, our host, having given the customary little speech of welcome to the twenty or so guests (most, but not all, of whom I knew), invited “a brother to give thanks.” As is customary among the Fraternity, this invitation was passed from one to another in the line of men sitting on one side of the table—“extending the liberty” as it is termed. The elder on my right “passed the liberty” to me and, accustomed by now to this ritual, I turned to the man on my right, another elder, passing the invitation to him. In turn, he passed the invitation on down the line to three or four younger men, all deacons, on his left. Ultimately, having reached the end of the table, the invitation was passed back up the line. I was suddenly surprised by the elders between whom I was seated turning to me: “Tony, we would be thankful if you would pray.” Startled, I looked to our host who nodded and looked me straight in the eye. “We’d appreciate it,” he said. I suspect the thanks I offered that day for the bounty laid before us was particularly heartfelt.

This experience has been repeated on a significant number of occasions since then. It speaks to me of an acknowledgment of common faith, recognized outside the striations of rigid conformity to group norms.

The following vignettes, while more nuanced, also communicate this reality.

In the past few years, I have had the privilege of observing a number of love feasts in various parts of the country. While often deeply moved by the symbolism of the service, I have often had a degree of ambivalence about being a mere observer and never a full participant in the proceedings. This has been particularly marked for me in the communion service, as I come from a church background that emphasizes that “all who love the Lord, or who feel their need of Him” are invited to take the elements. My feeling of marginality has often been mitigated—at least to some extent—by a species of symbolic inclusion in one or another element of the proceedings. On each occasion, when I have attended a love feast, the hosts with whom I was staying very deliberately prepared a light supper for me (and on two occasions for my wife as well) to eat outside, while the holy supper was being taken in the meetinghouse. This “picnic” was left in their car for which hosts gave me the keys. Eating that supper in the car, I have always had a strange feeling of engaging in a “holy meal,” one prepared with love and thoughtfulness. There is a strangely ambiguous sense of being simultaneously both excluded and included.

While hospitality is part of the culture of almost every Plain group, the Old German Baptists extend the breadth and scope of welcome in a variety of ways. The closing vignette highlights something of its transgenerational potency.

On one of my first occasions attending a love feast, I was feeling somewhat marginal to proceedings; sitting apart from the main body, in an alcove of the meetinghouse reserved for onlookers underlined this. There were two or three other adult observers present, together with a group of as yet unbaptized “Youngfolks.” When the white-clothed tables were being set for the Lord’s Supper (that light, shared meal taken as part of the proceedings and separate from the

later communion service), I had been warned that young people would probably leave and go to a local McDonald's or a nearby gas station for their own supper, some returning later to the love feast. I was unsurprised then, when the Youngfolks, after several whispered conversations, began to move toward the door. One young lad—he couldn't have been more than sixteen or so—suddenly looked back; then, leaving his girlfriend, he came over to me. "You wanna come with us to McDonalds?" he inquired. I was very touched by this level of thoughtfulness to a complete stranger and thanked him but declined. He nodded briefly, made for the door again, but then turned once more. Leaning over the intervening seats, he whispered, "Well, you want we bring ya back some fries?" In Ireland, "fries" are invariably doused in pungent malt vinegar whose odor has an ability to permeate everything; I had a momentary image of the solemn gathering being enveloped in this smell of vinegar. Alarmed by this vision, I thanked him but again refused. Looking back, it still seems remarkable that an adolescent boy would have such an innate sense of hospitality towards a complete stranger. I afterwards learned that he came from a family long steeped in the culture of the Old German Baptists; I'm still unclear whether the whole incident speaks most strongly of boundaries, breadth of hospitality, or the transgenerational effects of a cultural imperative—or perhaps all three!

In sharing and discussing these and many other examples of OGGB hospitality, the authors acknowledge that most if not all Plain churches place a strong emphasis on hospitality; it is a central part of their resistance to the norms of Western culture. The OGGB emphasis, however, appears wider and at once more inclusive in its scope than that of the other groups. This seems particularly so in its exercise towards outsiders and in its manifestation of spiritual inclusivity. While the boundaries of insider/outsider are remarkably clear and at one level quite immutable, the unusual depth of hospitality has the effect of diluting—or at times transcending—what can appear to be the harshness of such striations. Perhaps, however, it is the clarity of such boundaries that allows for such a simultaneous sense of inclusion.

6. Boundaries: The Inner Life and Reflective Practice

Every society or cultural group operates within a conceptual boundary (and the allied range of practical and behavioral limits that flow from it). This boundary distinguishes and separates the group from the wider environment (society, other groups, etc.).⁴ All such boundaries have behavioral, emotional, cultural, psychological, and ideological components. Plain groups share this experience of boundary that separates them (and identifies them as different) from the rest of society. Such boundaries tend to differ in detail, in degree of visibility, as well as in scope, quality, and intensity.

The degree of permeability characterizing such boundaries is particularly significant. For instance, the ingress of external norms and practices that are allowed to penetrate the "wall" and function to influence and change the identity, particular practices, and norms of a Plain group are significant and are directly related to the permeability of the group's boundary. For the Amish, as well as for some other groups, the use of Pennsylvania Dutch, strict dress codes,

⁴ Walsh, "Seeing the Wood *and* the Trees."

rejection of many forms of mechanization, and exclusive use of horse-and-buggy transportation constitute very specific boundaries, obvious and visible ways in which they define their identity and through which they differentiate and separate themselves from the wider world. The Hutterites live in self-contained, clearly separate communities; this and other distinctive practices—essential parts of their group identity—constitute a different range of tangible boundaries, albeit of a very particular nature. The Old German Baptists’ exchange of the salutation solely with peers, and their practice of “strict” or “close” communion constitute arguably less obvious and differently enacted boundaries. Such practices or boundaries both emerge from and function to define a group’s particular identity and difference. All tend to flow from a group’s historical background, as well as from their trajectory in the wider society.

Of course, all of the Plain groups allow a degree of carefully modulated interaction with their “worldly” neighbors; this may involve the sale and buying of goods, the exchange of neighborly help and support, or, increasingly, working with non-Plain colleagues in factories or workshops. All of these involve interaction and communication. And to a greater or lesser degree, they imply a consequent sharing of conversations, thoughts, and ideas. Some groups are open to at least discussing fresh ways of looking at life. And, of course, all groups experience a (sometimes quite minimal) degree of change over time, often imported from the wider society.⁵ As noted in earlier sections, the Old German Baptists do allow for a carefully modulated degree of change in their practices. Their ultimate decisions—after much discussion and the passage of significant amounts of time—to accept the use of the telephone, and the ownership and driving of cars, vans, and trucks constituted significant and often both difficult and painful shifts in thinking. However, they also preserve a variety of clearly marked boundaries. Their commitment to nonconformity and nonresistance as defining principles are immutable; how these are expressed over time may vary. The wearing of a prescribed uniform and a variety of other practices constitute clearly demarcated boundaries that define them as members of an Old Order church.

The OGBB do, however, lack some of the specificity of visible borders that divide other Plain groups from “the world.” The Brethren don’t live communally as do the Hutterites and, despite their name, most have not spoken anything but English for generations. An increasing number of their members work as carpenters, nurses, builders, or assembly line workers beside members of the wider society. Small-scale carpentry businesses and agricultural service firms serving the wider community are common. Often these are Brethren-owned but employ both members and nonmembers. Members also use electricity, drive cars and vans, and travel widely. Their homes, while generally not luxurious (although there are indicators that this may be changing), are comfortable, equipped with microwaves, dishwashers, and washing machines (but not televisions, radios, etc.). Other than incorporating an emphasis on the inclusion of workrooms for sewing or carpentry, they are not dissimilar to those of middle-class America. A significant number of young people have traditionally attended public schools (although, again, this is changing with an increased emphasis on homeschooling). Traditionally, the Brethren felt it was important that their young people understood the world of which they are opting out if

⁵ Stoffer, *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines*, 2.

they choose the pathway of baptism and church membership. Post-high school education and entry into the “traditional professions” (with the possible exception of the caring vocations) is discouraged. Many of the external boundaries—distinctions that define and identify other Plain people—are missing for the Brethren. Conversely, however, there exists a distinctive *assumptive* world (constituting what could be termed a range of *internal* boundaries) that, while less visible, is a significant marker of a mindset or way of being. This internal set of boundaries appears to be fourfold:

1. The OGGB place considerable stress on the need for constant critical reflection—both personal and group—on the quality of commitment to Christ and on the pureness not just of actions but also of the motivations that underlie them. This emphasis is strongly echoed in the love feast, with its focus on preparation and self-examination. In preaching, there is a constantly reiterated stress on *personal reflexivity* and on a consistency of practice with belief. Reflection, self-examination, and the discipline of critical reflexivity⁶—even at times a marked degree of introspection—are central elements of Brethren practice.
2. The Brethren (as do most other Plain groups) nurture a *hope* rather than a *certainty* of salvation. Through the experience of conversion, including baptism and church membership, one experiences the strength and motivation to live a renewed life. Conversion is only made real in a life of obedience to God, and faith is manifested in a transformed life and in behaviors that are consistent with the example of Christ. To be real, faith must be expressed in the behaviors and attitudes of lived life.
3. Both these factors tend to nurture a certain *spirit of humility* regarding their walk and their view of the church. While they trust the church to be as close to the teachings of New Testament Christianity as possible, they tend to see this as an aspiration; there may be room for improvement, for slow change and development towards a closer alignment to the model of the early church. The influence of the Holy Spirit and a constant *sensitivity* to the Spirit’s influence is vital in this. Such a view, at its best, engenders a humility and an openness to others not always evident in other denominations (where there is a sense of having already “arrived”). Such a humility manifests itself in an attitude markedly at variance with the brashness and certainty often exhibited in the American evangelical world.
4. Perhaps most significantly, the OGGB see the marks that distinguish themselves from the world—and the practices of nonresistance, non-swearing, and nonconformity that are so central to their identity—as having a clear superordinate function (and not solely for their own sake). They are there to

⁶ Ryan and Walsh, “Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy.”

nurture an in-depth spirituality. Members seek the grace for a submissive disposition to God, to the church, and to each other. They work hard for a spirit of nonconformity that resists the very essence of the wider society's assumptions and values. These factors are at the core of their distinctive embodiment of, and rationale for, a Plain lifestyle. While there are clear external boundaries to be observed, perhaps for the Brethren the less obvious (but palpably distinctive) internal boundary of motivation is a most significant emphasis. While less visible, it is vital to their way of being.

Kraybill and Bowman succinctly summarize this distinctive stance:

Brethren struggle and pray for a “deeper work of grace in the heart.” The Holy Spirit’s inner voice, they believe, whispers to every believer, but it can only be heard by those who willingly sacrifice self-will to God’s will.... Rejecting worldly habits is well and good, but if not inspired by the right spirit, it is only “dead works.” To be credible in Brethren eyes, a peculiar practice must spring from God’s work of grace in the heart.⁷

In all this, the Old German Baptist Brethren are attending to another vital component central to their balancing of the group and the individual. They see a submissive spirit (to God, to the church, and to one another) as a central element of Christian discipleship. But that submission in order to be real and valid is neither, on the one hand, the result of coercion nor, on the other, the outcome of a shallowness of thought or a lack of critical awareness. Real submission in Brethren thinking does not come from pliability, mental laziness, or an “anything goes” attitude. Here the influence of Pietism, which privileges individual spiritual experience, is manifest. But it is accompanied by an Anabaptist emphasis, which implies a willingness to surrender individual conviction to the wisdom of the other or to the collective of the church. It is a complex ideal and an even more complex process, one that distinguishes the group at a core level from most Christian groups—Plain or otherwise!

⁷ Kraybill and Bowman, *On the Backroad to Heaven*, 146.

Something of the nuanced and complex nature of submission is illustrated in the following quote from a younger member:

For Brethren, submission is not about lack of conviction. And it's not just about the cold analysis of a situation. It's about trying to feel your way into the convictions of the brother who differs from you...trying to understand their perspective, to live as if you were in...praying your way into...their shoes. It's a process of listening, of hearing...and you are changed in that process. And an important part of all that is to recognize who has the power in a situation. The individual, the group with power has the responsibility to back off, to be reflective and compassionate. Submission should never be about force or the unequal use of power. Getting this right can be very challenging.

7. Unity and the Dynamics of Submission

All Plain groups place a singular emphasis on acceptance and yieldedness; a form of the *Gelassenheit* identified by Kraybill, Johnston-Weiner, and Nolt⁸ and Martin⁹ is central to the assumptive world of Amish and other Plain groups. At times this is to a bishop or group of bishops, a range of traditions or, as in the case of the Amish, to the *Ordnung*, that traditional oral (or occasionally written) blueprint for life and behavior.¹⁰ As suggested in preceding sections, the Old German Baptist Brethren emphasize both submission and unity of thought as central to their way of being. In this section, we explore the reciprocal links between the two. Submission delineates a foundational principle central to their spirituality and life. For members, submission encompasses their attitude to God, to the Fraternity, and particularly to the decisions of Annual Meeting. Mutual submission, member to member, is also encouraged. Both the principles and the practices that flow from this central precept are profoundly at variance with the individualistic discourses of Western society with its emphasis on the dominance of the individual and stress on individual rights and entitlements. Submission, or yieldedness, among Plain people encapsulates the surrender of individual rights in response to the greater communal good.

It seemed to the authors, however, as we listened to the experiences of OGBB members, that their concept of submission differs from that of other Plain groups in a variety of essential ways. For the Brethren, submission constitutes both an attitude of mind as well as a way of being. It is both particularly stringent and rigorously comprehensive—affecting all of life. One particular distinctive is that for the OGBB, submission is allied to (and often has as its central aim) the achievement of unity, which is at the core of the Fraternity's value system. And unity, to further emphasize its significance, is *the* incontrovertible mark of the Holy Spirit's unction and favor. Submission in the service of unity is hence particularly privileged and involves more than an element of divine approbation. Indeed, it is when the decisions of Annual Meeting are blessed

⁸ Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 98.

⁹ Martin, *Distinctive Teachings*, 45.

¹⁰ Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 69.

with an experience of union expressed in harmony and unanimity that the presence and benediction of the Holy Spirit is seen as most evidently at work.

Among the Old German Baptist Brethren, it is understood that unity is largely achieved through the very conscious suppression of the drives of the ego and of individual opinion or aspiration. Personal conviction or ambition should always be subordinate to the will and to the perceived wisdom of the collective. Earlier we quoted a member who was unable to understand how an individual could view the validity of their own personal view, or sense of individual conviction, as being superior to that of the collective of the church, or indeed to that of another individual. That notion is key.

In an earlier section, we also noted that in OGBB thinking submission is not a mere acquiescence to the view of the majority or a thoughtless or passive conformity. To be real and valid, true submission only takes place after informed thought, prayer, and discussion. It is seen as most valid when it takes place *because* an individual (or group), after much thought, disagrees with a policy of the church and yet submits. While the Brethren recognize that mere acquiescence can be a reality, this is something of an aberration and not true submission.

One sister's comment on her struggle is particularly revealing:

Frankly I intensely dislike the prayer covering that we as sisters are expected to wear. It is cumbersome, stiff, and very difficult to launder. Personally, I feel the "handkerchief" or "doily" covering worn by many Mennonite sisters is simpler and just as effective. However, I accept that the wearing of our kind of covering is at the direction of Annual Meeting. While I personally struggle to submit to this, I believe it is in this struggle and the disciplining of the self that is involved that there is true submission, and that's as it should be. Often it is the learning and the growth that emerges that is of value in that difficult process of submitting.

Submission is seen as a process, as an engagement with a topic as well as with those who differ. It is seen to be most authentic when it is most costly. This is not unlike the process of obedience that is part of the discipline of many of the more conservative religious orders of nuns or priests in either Roman Catholic or Anglican religious orders. Among the German Baptists, submission is seen as operative in four specific areas:

- Submission to the decisions, procedures and views of Annual Meeting.
- Submission to the practices and decisions of the local district council meeting and its officers, when operating in agreement with Annual Meeting.
- As an approach showing others (individuals or subgroups) where a divergent view is evident; submission is expected to be an active component in members' relationships with each other.

- While it is anticipated that members will frequently hold views divergent to the opinions of others, often on matters of significance, it is expected that such differences—and those who hold them—will, at the very least, be treated with a spirit of respect and humility.

In the group's thinking, submission and unity cannot be separated. One is inextricably linked to the other: submission enables unity. The mutual connection of the two reinforces a sense of overall accord and an interdependency among members, weaving the body together into a tightly woven whole. Participation in the rituals of baptism, the love feast, and the holy kiss, with their reminders of mutuality of commitment and their emphasis on commonality of belonging, reinforces the emphasis on both unity and submission through engagement in powerful ritual enactments. The symbolism of the common uniform and the sharing in a variety of common practices reiterate and reinforce this commonality.

It might, of course, be important to suggest that perhaps not every member adheres to this rather stringent definition of submission. An elderly and deeply respected sister seemed to imply this as she quoted her late mother when we were discussing the topic. "My mama used to say, 'When Annual Meeting says it, ya just gotta do it. Ain't nobody sayin' ya gotta like it. And that's all there's to it.'" Nothing in her mien (or in that of the other sisters involved in the conversation) suggested disagreement with "mama's" view.

The strong emphasis on unity and submission does, in some ways, have a significant downside. From time to time, as one would expect, issues of difference arise in the Fraternity around which groups coalesce, and where little compromise is found. In recent years, internet usage has been one of these. There has also been a recurring—albeit minority—questioning as to whether the decisions of Annual Meeting are to be viewed as binding or as more advisory in nature. Both concerns have led to strong feelings. In the past, unresolved differences around telephone and automobile usage led to ultimate fracture—leading in one instance to the formation of the Old Brethren German Baptists (or the "Deer Creekers," as they are known) in the early decades of the twentieth century. A desire for more liberal attitudes regarding internet usage (as well as concerns regarding the status of Annual Meeting) led to a hemorrhage of members in 2009 and the resultant formation of the OGGB, New Conference church. Conversely, 2021 saw the exodus of a smaller group concerned at what they saw as liberalizing tendencies in the original group. This led to the formation of the Old German Baptist Church. These splits, with their attendant ruptures in family and friendship relationships, have caused untold pain. While various Amish or conservative Mennonite groups are far from unaccustomed to internal differences and the resulting splits in congregations or overall bodies, they seem far more able to deal with them with a degree of equanimity, preventing or at least minimizing a spirit of division or lasting bitterness. In OGGB circles, however, the premium placed upon unity and on submission to the collective is so strong that an ultimate break in agreement becomes an issue of major impact. The formation of a new group—defined as a schism—is perceived as a contradiction of the very essence of OGGB thought and practice, and the resulting wounds run

very deep. The sacred bonds of fellowship have been broken, the holy kiss is withheld from those who differ, and the feelings of hurt and desolation take years if not generations to heal. Unity has a finite limit.

In conclusion, the OGBB preoccupation with unity through submission draws heavily on the Brethren's Anabaptist legacy while taking this conviction and its attendant practices further than many other groups with a similar heritage. The emphasis on unity also draws heavily on the group's historical roots in Pietism. The stress on the unity of spirit, which was so significant particularly in Radical Pietism, continues as a potent strand in OGBB thinking. The emphasis on reflective examination of the self, so characteristic of the group's piety, and the emphasis on an internal world of spiritual development that questions any tendencies toward the development of ego perhaps acknowledges the legacy of both Anabaptism and Pietism. And it constitutes a definitive boundary with the culture and assumptions of the wider Western society.

Conclusion

Identity, the question of how we are seen by others—or how we see ourselves—is significant for any group. The differing identities of national or cultural groups, of political alliances, churches, or other collectives, even of Old Order groups, are expressed through their differing combinations of unique practices, beliefs, and internal cultures and values. Some of these are visible and explicit, such as the varying dress worn by different Plain groups or the rich range of ritual practices that are part of Brethren life. Others, such as motivation or variations of belief or behavior, are subtle and much less obvious. The distinctive collections of customs, practices, and ways of seeing the world, which go toward making up identity and distinguishing one group from another, tend to have a significant source in the group's unique origins, experiences, history, and cultural legacy.

Identity always has a substantive affective or “feeling” component that members—and indeed outsiders—may find difficult delineate or to put into words, but it is nonetheless a very significant facet of a group's sense of selfhood.

Among Plain groups, including the Old German Baptist Brethren, identities are grounded in

- a particular outlook that views the wider society, its attitudes and behaviors as inconsistent with New Testament teaching
- a range of beliefs, practices, and behaviors that prescribe lifestyles that are both alternative to and resistant to those of that wider world
- an understanding that their beliefs and practices make for a more valid and vital expression of New Testament faith

Identity describes what a group is, but it also prescribes what it is not. The notion of “identity in opposition,” the experience of being clearer on “who or what we are *not* as much as who we feel we *are*,” is always significant too. Identity is continuously shifting, albeit sometimes very slightly, in response to both internal group dynamics but also in terms of what it is describing

itself against. For instance, to take an example from one of our backgrounds, the largest of the Protestant minority churches in Ireland, the Church of Ireland (making up only 2 percent of the population), unlike the rest of the Anglican communion to which it belongs, has until very recently, stridently avoided candles and crosses in its churches. This is to clearly distinguish it from the Roman Catholic Church, which until recently made up 95 percent of the Irish population. The wider environment, then, is always a significant factor in the defining of identity. In a Plain context, this relates to the changing norms of the broader society or of other groups in the wider world or milieu. Changes in the wider social environment always impinge and raise new questions for minority groups. So expressions of identity, rarely static but always slightly shifting, have their source not only within the internal world, culture, and power dynamics of a group, but also in its relationship with the changing realities of the broad social environment in which it exists. And with the negotiation of boundaries between internal and external environments, Plain cultures, including the Old German Baptist Brethren, “are not static entities but are constantly shifting and reformulating themselves.”¹¹

The Brethren “claim a mixed parentage,”¹² as Kraybill and Bowman put it, which draws on a legacy of both Anabaptism *and* Pietism. Significant strands drawn from both these movements continue to inform the identity and assumptive worlds of individual members as well as of the collective. The OGBB are quite unassailably “Plain” in their core convictions and practices; these realities they share with other Old Order groups. They are however also quite distinctive, clearly different from the Amish, from conservative Mennonite groups, and from others within the Plain fold.

In this article, the outcome of a research inquiry that has drawn on discussion, engagement, autoethnography, and personal experience, we identify seven particular emphases that distinguish the Old German Baptist Brethren from the majority of Plain groups. Of course, their marriage of Anabaptist with Pietist principles—sometimes complimentary, sometimes somewhat conflicted—is core to this. Their emphasis on the significance of the collective is pure Anabaptism; their coterminus privileging of the individual has its roots in Pietism; the complex balancing act is a central component of this difference. So is their emphasis on being part of an overall Brotherhood with its stress on flat and participative structures. Their observance of a rich, collective ritual life that repeatedly engages members in enacting the core priorities of their understanding of Christian discipleship is foundational to their way of being. Orthopraxis, with its stress on conformity to practice rather than a rigid preoccupation with doctrinal detail, is distinctive. And their emphasis on extending welcome to outsiders as well as to members, with the accompanying practice of spiritual hospitality, seems quite unique. Ultimately, the Old German Baptist Brethren privilege individual spiritual experience, reflexivity, and submission, in a combination that is both arresting and exceptional. Their emphasis on unity attained significantly through submission is also central. All these, when taken together, make for a quite particular assumptive world.

¹¹ Mackall, *Plain Secrets*, xx.

¹² Kraybill and Bowman, *On the Backroad to Heaven*, 137.

We are indebted to the work of Donald Kraybill and Carl Bowman, particularly their book *On the Backroad to Heaven* (2001), in which they contest the tendency to see the Plain world as homogenous and unnuanced. While limiting our focus to a more detailed study of one Plain group, the Old German Baptist Brethren, we highlight areas of difference to other Old Order groups. Unlike Kraybill and Bowman, we utilize a postpositivist methodological framework of inquiry which, using (among others) such methods as narrative and autoethnography, privileges the subjective, the tentative rather than objective claims to understanding. This allows something of the textured nature of members' faith to emerge—"to penetrate somehow to the heart of something both elusive and important."¹³ It also (we hope) communicates not just with the intellect, but also with the hearts and spirits of readers. In doing so, we emphasize the storied, complex, and sometimes contradictory nature of human faith and meaning making. Even in a group that privileges unity and submission, there are differing shades of view and of experience. Homogeneity *within* a group is as elusive as it is *between* groups; the quotations of members that stud the article, as well as the narrative pieces included, emphasize the highly subjective nature of human meaning and belief. Recognizing this adds richness to the multi-textured tapestry that is at the heart of the description of any people, a description that will always remain partial, contingent, and incomplete.

As suggested at the outset and in keeping with a postpositivist outlook, the reflections or understandings at the core of this article are not in any sense the final word on the distinctions that characterize the OGBB. Instead, as authors, we hope that these reflections will act as a catalyst for further thought, discussion, narratives, and sharing—both among members as well as among participants of the academic community interested in the study and appreciation of Plain cultures.

Bibliography

- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Kraybill, Donald B., and Carl Desportes Bowman. *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Kraybill, Donald B., Karen M. Johnson-Weiner, and Steven M. Nolt. *The Amish*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421409146>.
- Mackall, Joe. *Plain Secrets: An Outsider Among the Amish*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.
- Martin, Donald. *Distinctive Teachings of the Old Order People*. Ontario: Vineyard Publications, 2007.
- Ryan, Anne, and Tony Walsh. "Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy." In *Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Anne Ryan and Tony Walsh, 1–14. Leiden: Brill Sense, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004384507_001.

¹³ Hempton, *Methodism*, 7.

Stoffer, Dale R. *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines, 1650–2015*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 2018.

Walsh, Tony. “Seeing the Wood *and* the Trees.” In *Reflexivity and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Anne Ryan and Tony Walsh, 43–66. Leiden: Brill Sense, 2018.

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004384507_004.