

Conservative Mennonite churches have a lot to offer those of us with a non-Mennonite background. The differences between these churches and more liberal ones are often remarkable—the sense of holiness in the service, the preaching of God’s Word, and the a cappella hymn singing are all wonderful blessings. Many of us came looking for a church without worldly influences, and we have stayed because of the blessings we have found.

But at times, we as newcomers have difficulty fitting into this blessing of a church. Issues come up that divide us from church members, and barriers seem to separate us—simply because we are different and have different backgrounds and viewpoints.

We can use several terms to describe those of us who are different; I will be referring to us as newcomers or visitors. Although I am a relatively recent newcomer with a non-Mennonite background, I also feel like a part of the church. I feel close to both groups, so I will be identifying with both. Even so, at times I have experienced barriers between myself and Mennonite church members.

One reason for these barriers is culture. But is that the only barrier? If so, what exactly *is* culture? One definition is “the sum total of

who we are.” That doesn’t narrow it down too well, but it can get us started.

No matter how we define culture, I think we can agree that it is often an obstacle. I know many with a non-Mennonite background who have struggled to fit in among Mennonite church members. For instance, one church member said this about himself: “I will probably never be a Mennonite.” On the one hand, I can understand what he meant. On the other, what he said disturbs me. Are the differences really that great? Perhaps, too, this type of thinking is part of the reason that some of us don’t stay

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to become members. That disturbs me even more.

During the time my family and I were becoming acquainted with Mennonite churches, there were a number of times when both members with non-Mennonite backgrounds and members who grew up Mennonite did or said things that contributed to this barrier. These folks were members of the same church! I’ve concluded that wall building happens from both sides.

THE GLASS WALL

One Sunday afternoon my wife and I were talking with some friends, all of whom were from non-Mennonite backgrounds. The topic of conversation was how we fit in—or don't fit in—among Mennonites. One friend felt as if there were a glass wall separating her from the majority of Mennonites. Naturally, I asked what she meant by “a glass wall.” She then said something very interesting: “You can see through it, but you can't *get* through it.” This is a profound statement, and it expresses something we all need to understand.

This is just one of many conversations I have had. These took place in different settings, with different people. And yet a common theme existed. Somehow people felt they didn't belong. They felt rejected.

I must admit that I, too, have felt left out or distant from church members at times. What was this about? Was it rejection? Where did it come from? Was there something in my heart causing this? I felt that if I could understand the cause of it, it could be dealt with in a Christian way.

So I began praying about it, trying to understand it. I gleaned insights from the Scriptures and read articles on the subject. I was also open with the church leadership, and at times asked for their help to understand things. I felt

this was important to do. After all, life in the body of Christ is important, and it's all about relationships.

As the result of prayer and observation, I realized that I could easily walk around feeling offended if others did or said things I didn't like—regardless of their background—and especially if I felt they were rejecting me. A wall could go up. God showed me that I get hurt too easily, and that I tend to carry that hurt around for too long.

So after repenting from my wrong attitudes, I made a decision to avoid that bitter road. I value my relationship with the Lord too much to allow bitterness to interfere. I also value my relationship with the church and don't want hindrances there either. So I take my concerns to the Lord in prayer. I also discuss them with our senior pastor and my family.

If I were to recount how my family ended up at a conservative Mennonite church, it would take too long. I can say that it was a process; we didn't attend on a whim. It took years of praying and seeking the Lord's will. Circumstances also played a part in leading us to where we are today.

The church we attend is a tremendous blessing for a number of reasons. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the *type* of church is the more important issue. Newcomers often

have turned their backs on worldly influences and visit Mennonite churches for particular reasons. And if newcomers are going to stay, then we need to work on the issues that get in their way.

TAKING DOWN THE WALL

So it's crucial to deal with these issues head-on. If God has called us to a Mennonite church, then here we shall be! Perhaps you have had similar experiences, and maybe you are even confused or discouraged. My intention is to offer some tips for overcoming obstacles, as I believe we can learn and grow from our glass-wall experiences.

Following are the areas that I believe affect us the most as newcomers relating to Mennonite church members. Some involve culture, but not all of them. Culture is difficult to define so I have tried to be specific, sharing some of my own experiences. I offer tips to both newcomers and church members so we can work together to help each other. We will look at these five areas: personal holiness, family background, doctrine, church practices, and heart attitudes.

PERSONAL HOLINESS

From the moment visitors walk into a Mennonite church, they will be confronted with differences between our church and other