PRACTICING CONFLICT: WEDDINGS AS SITES OF CONTEST AND COMPROMISE

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the varieties of conflict engendered by wedding practices in twentieth-century North American Mennonite communities, and argues that an analysis of conflict that centers on ideology to the exclusion of practice is insufficient. With recourse to both historical and ethnographic evidence, I find four themes provoking conflict in weddings: contesting notions of worldliness, controlling sacred space, regulating sexuality and negotiating family relationships. Reflecting on the effects of experience and ideology on choices of research topic, I close with a call for more open and self-conscious positioning on the part of all scholars of Mennonites.

Throughout the twentieth century, laywomen's ways of organizing weddings have provoked conflict. The sites of conflict have ranged from what some might consider the mundane, such as party games and bridal wear, to concerns at the heart of any community, such as the regulation of sexual interaction. Ensconced in both the mundane and the more profound conflicts were competing ideals and practices of sexuality and gender.

In regard to the varieties of conflicts that weddings have spurred over the course of the century, I argue that an analysis of conflict that centers on abstract ideological and moral categories to the exclusion of practice is insufficient. Ainlay and Kniss's reference to church discipline as a site of conflict and power is a step in this direction, but a more overt grappling with the politics of ritual is necessary. By practice I refer to actions embedded in the materiality and temporality of social life, which are often capable of sustaining ambivalent and contested meanings. In my

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interpretation, an attention to practice calls for analysis of ritual, material culture and expressions of the body among Mennonites. Conflict is not simply rooted in theological and moral disputations but also in the "things of this world"—and even the most unworldly of Mennonites live in and among bodies, clothes and ritual gestures.

To show what an attention to practice can bring to the study of conflict, I will relate and interpret the weddings of four women. First, Susanna's 1961 wedding, in which conflict centered around the introduction of "Englisch" customs into Bergthaler Mennonite space. Second, Lillian's 1963 wedding, before which she had to return to her home congregation to confess her sin of engaging in premarital sexual relations (which led to pregnancy). Finally, the early 1990s wedding of Jane and Anne, two lesbian women who were married in a commitment ceremony that provoked controversy within their conference.

These three weddings, two from one time period and one from thirty years later, illustrate both how weddings have been an ongoing source of tension within communities and how much has changed in the way weddings ritualize the boundaries drawn around sexuality in Mennonite communities. In showing both the static and the dynamic nature of weddings, I center my analysis on four themes around which conflict hovers: contesting notions of worldliness, controlling sacred space, regulating sexuality and negotiating family relationships. The story, however, is not simply one of unresolved conflict. Partly because weddings have been at once intimate family affairs and large public gatherings, the players in the drama are tied to each other in multiple ways: through blood, community and religious identity. Hence compromise is often as much a part of the story as is conflict, especially since parties to the conflict often continue living in close relation with


3. Susanna, Jane and Anne chose to have me use their real names in this paper. Lillian's name is a pseudonym. I interviewed all of the women in their homes, tape-recording our conversations. I also looked at wedding albums and surrounding documents (invitations, programs, sermons). I interviewed Susanna in November 1992 and Lillian, Jane and Anne in June 1994.

4. I have interviewed ten women from Russian and Swiss Mennonite traditions who were married between the late 1950s and the early 1990s. I discuss the stories of some of these other women in "Queen for the Day: Mennonites, Weddings, Women, and Dress" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., Nov. 1993).
each other.

In telling and analyzing these stories of weddings, I use an ethnographic approach. I have interviewed each woman involved in her home. I aim not to provide a representative portrait of all Mennonite weddings but to offer an analysis of three particular weddings in order to show the multiple ways in which ritual can provoke and pacify conflict. To give some context for these three weddings, I briefly discuss wedding traditions among twentieth-century Mennonites.

MENNONITE WEDDINGS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Until the early twentieth century, Swiss Mennonite weddings often took place in the home since young people usually were not baptized—that is, not church members—until after marriage. Women who married before baptism wore dresses much fancier than they would be allowed after baptism, when they were to forgo worldly attire. As the age of baptism lowered, due in part to the rise of the Sunday school movement and the competition of child and youth evangelism from other denominations, weddings increasingly took place in the church.

Weddings among Bergthalers in Manitoba were usually held in the church, with the reception taking place at the bride’s home. After a shift from Thursday to Sunday weddings in the early 1900s, weddings took place after the regular morning church service, when the bride and groom moved from their respective places on the women’s and men’s sides of the church to two chairs at the front. There they would listen to relevant scripture and one or two sermons and then say their vows, which were adapted from the General Conference Minister’s Manual. Gradually, Sunday weddings gave way to Saturday weddings, partly due to the concern that people were not attending their home churches if they were going to Sunday weddings.


7. Henry Gerbrandt, Adventure in Faith: The Background in Europe and the Development in Canada of the Bergthaler Church of Manitoba (Altona, MB: D. W. Friesen), 312-13; N. B. Grubb et al, Forms of Service for the Use of Ministers (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1908), 3-13; David C. Wedel et al, The Minister’s Manual (Elgin, IL: General Conference of Mennonites Board of Publications, 1950), 1-30. The choice of marriage forms increased from three to six in the 1950 revision of the 1908 manual. Another possible reason for the shift to Saturday weddings may have been an increase in prosperity, which allowed
Women in Mennonite communities have long had the primary responsibility for planning and carrying out weddings, save for the official ceremonial duties. The role of community women in planning decreased to some extent as dresses, cakes and invitations were increasingly purchased in the city or through mail-order catalogues instead of being homemade. With increasing commercialization, however, the role of the bride (and often her mother) in planning her wedding intensified. A cyclical relationship developed between religious leaders condemning increases in "materialism" and women embracing ready-made and labor-saving clothing. In the process women made choices that demanded a new kind of decision-making skill.

Amidst the discomfort with the material components of weddings, there also lingered a dis-ease with the sexual messages inherent in wedding celebrations. In many Russian and Swiss Mennonite churches injunctions against noise-making and dancing were attempts to control the ribaldry that sometimes erupted at the weddings of "other" Mennonites. These attempts at control were not always successful, as in one instance in the Bergthaler Church where a couple who held a dance at their engagement party were subsequently denied membership. When

wedding guests to take off work on Saturdays for the day-long festivities.—Isaac Tiessen, "Some Memories of Weddings in Essex and Kent Counties from 1926 to 1946," in Weddings of Essex County Mennonite Church Members, eds. Henry N. Driedger, Astrid Koop and Martha Wiens (Leamington, ON: The Editorial Committee), Mennonite Heritage Centre [MHC] Archives, 35. Cf. also Minutes of the Bergthaler Lehrdienst, Dec. 11, 1937, Volume 716, MHC Archives, where the “problem” of Sunday evening weddings is referred to but not resolved.


their wedding guests chose not to heed the discipline of the elders and showed up at the church for the wedding, the doors were locked.\textsuperscript{10}

Rules against noise-making also alluded to the custom of the charivari, in which loud noise-making and pranks attempted to draw attention to, and at times humiliate, the newly married couple.\textsuperscript{11} A similar event was the Polterabend, which took place the night before the wedding. Among American Russian Mennonites gifts were given at this party, which "was very noisy and involved shooting guns and later fireworks."\textsuperscript{12} In Mennonite Brethren circles in Manitoba the Poltaaoent was a more sedate gift-giving affair the night before the wedding, during which joking gifts of baby bottles would provoke "a sheepish grin on the groom's face and a gentle blush on the bride's," as they pondered the monogamous sexual license about to be bestowed on them.\textsuperscript{13}

For Bergthaler ministers, as for those in other Mennonite groups, close watch over the sexual relations and marital unions of their members was a prime means to maintain group solidarity and to keep the community separated from the ways of the world—or the ways of their Mennonite next-door neighbors of another conference. But their boundary maintenance methods decreased in strength as the century progressed, and young people openly flouted their authority, whether through marrying "out" without permission, or introducing the outside world into the sanctuary within the wedding ritual.

Up until the mid-twentieth century in most Mennonite churches,
marrying someone from another denomination, even another Mennonite denomination, was considered a violation of principles and often resulted in excommunication. As a result of this strict requirement to "marry within the Lord," Mennonite weddings did not usually incorporate many outsiders into the community—almost everybody knew each other already in the geographically specific Mennonite conferences. Brides and grooms were incorporated into other families, and might move to different towns or farms, but often weddings took place between people from the same congregation. As Mennonite colleges and Bible schools developed, however, the incidence of young people choosing spouses from other Mennonite denominations increased. Marriage, one of the main pillars in maintaining the boundaries of the faith, also became one of the foremost channels of their dilution.

Within the Bergthaler church, for example, those who wanted to marry Mennonites who were not Bergthalers had to seek the approval of the Lehrdienst (ministers' council), which was not always granted. In the case of one couple noted in the Lehrdienst minutes for 1936, Heinrich Dyck, a Sommerfelder, wished to marry an unnamed Bergthaler woman, but for some reason his petition was rejected. While the Lehrdienst told him that his affairs would have to be put in order before he was allowed to marry their sister and thus join the Bergthaler community, Dyck and his chosen partner were married by a pastor from another Mennonite church. The new bride was excommunicated from the Bergthaler Church.

"Out-marriage" today is no longer so crisply defined. The parents of a Russian Mennonite marrying a Swiss Mennonite would probably not consider such a union exogamous. Harder to predict would be the reaction of the parents of a Russian Mennonite marrying an African Mennonite. Boundaries of identity are continually constructed upon a host of categories: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion, to name several obvious ones. Perhaps the most fervently debated category for Mennonite communities at the present is that of sexual orientation. As the wedding of Jane and Anne will show, the weighing of

15. However, endogamy is still relatively high among Mennonites as a whole, especially in rural areas. See Leo Driedger et al., "Mennonite Intermarriage: National, Regional, and Intergenerational Trends," *MQR* 57 (April 1983), 132-44.
categories in constructing a "Mennonite" marriage is a highly political and potentially conflictual process.

Just as issues and practices of worldliness, sexuality and the preservation of "authentic" Mennonite identity were central to weddings of the first half of the century, so they have remained for the latter half as well. Who wears what, who seems "pure" and who marries whom are still questions that provoke discussion, controversy and even conflict.

SUSANNA'S WEDDING

When Susanna Klassen was married on August 31, 1961 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, she wore a white satin dress with a beaded front and tiny buttons running down the back. Underneath her dress a corset pulled in her waist and a wide crinoline puffed out the folds of her skirt. Entering the church behind her three bridesmaids attired in gold velvet dresses, Susanna wore a veil covering her face and walked to the front of the church to the accompaniment of the "Wedding March." Once there, she stood beside her groom John and was married in a stand-up ceremony.

Just eight years earlier in 1953 her father D. D. Klassen, a Bergthaler Mennonite minister, wrote a report on "Christian weddings." In his report he condemned worldly influences such as low-cut wedding gowns, veils, bridal attendants, nail-polish, nontraditional music and ceremonies in which the bride and groom did not "take the time" to sit down. With recourse to scripture, Klassen argued for the safeguarding of "traditional" weddings as occasions of solemnity, simplicity and worship. Joking and noise-making were not allowed, and foreign rituals were never to take the place of lengthy sermons or the word of God, he warned.18

The differences between this father and daughter in the perception of what a wedding should be exemplified a tension widespread among Mennonites in the early to mid-twentieth century. Many ministers and laymen saw worldliness—in the form of fashionable clothing, jewelry, dancing and movies, among other things—as the greatest threat to Christian faith and morals and to relatively culturally enclosed Mennonite communities. Their admonitions and, in some cases, regulations against worldliness were often directed at women and were often concerned with dress. In an age increasingly open about sexuality, and in which women were questioning conventional gender roles, Mennonite women were told to dress modestly to avoid enticing men

18. Klassen, "Wie denken wir uns eine christliche Hochzeit?" and "Referat über äußere Gebräuche bei Hochzeiten in unseren Gemeinden."
and to show their submission to men’s headship.\textsuperscript{19}

The elders of the church in Winkler, Manitoba responded to the increase of worldly wedding practices with the publication of “Wedding Regulations.” In 1953 these regulations, based on D. D. Klassen’s report, were accepted by Bergthaler churches throughout Manitoba.\textsuperscript{20} For Susanna, the Berghthaler wedding regulations did not hold sway over the choices she made in planning her wedding. She knew there were limits, but she pushed them:

I did all the planning . . . but I liked doing the planning. I was quite happy being in charge of all of it. And I think the most important thing was I knew exactly what I wanted and I went for whatever I could manage to have.

Exercising choice, albeit a choice circumscribed by the market, was a form of resistance for Susanna, who was not content to do things the “simple” Mennonite way if that meant suppressing aesthetic desires.

Unhappy with “the lack of appreciation for aesthetic things” among Mennonites, Susanna had a profound desire to be a beautiful bride in a beautiful setting:

What I remember most is . . . going to the church before to see that everything had been done exactly the way I’d imagined it to be. Instead of having the traditional bride and groom on the wedding cake I had wanted a liqueur glass with roses in it, and somebody had done that and it was just perfect.

Susanna’s desire to supplant the “traditional bride and groom” shows that “traditional” wedding cakes were not so simple to begin with. She was transforming already “anglicized” traditions. In the context of a tradition decrying attention to “the things of this world,” Susanna’s memories are rooted in tactility, contrary to the prediction of the minister at her wedding. At the time he said:

You have spent much time in preparation to prepare for this, your wedding day. The invitations, the procuring of dresses and suits and gowns, the preparation of the food. We even practiced the entry into church. But all this belongs to the passing things of

\textsuperscript{19} On Mennonite women and dress see Marlene Epp, “Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity: Ontario Mennonite Women and the Dress Question,” \textit{Conrad Grebel Review} 8 (Fall 1990), 257-58, and Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, “Defensive Structuring and Codification of Practice: Franconia Mennonite Conference,” \textit{MQR} 60 (July 1986), 429-44. Women’s potential to inspire men to lust and to subvert patriarchal norms through immodest dress was an issue not only for Mennonites but also for many conservative Christian groups in North America. For instance, see Betty Deberg, \textit{Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

\textsuperscript{20} Gerbrandt, \textit{Adventure in Faith}, 314; Friesen, \textit{Where We Stand}, Microfilm #00139.
Memories of God and prayer are absent from the accounts of most of the women from this period whom I have interviewed. But they did gather meaning from the things of this earth: dresses, music and flowers created the environment in which to make the passage from girl to woman.

Though Susanna succeeded in introducing many "Englisch" customs into her wedding, there was one custom she did without. Ironically, since now she condemns the meaning within this custom, she very much wanted her father to walk her down the aisle to give her away. Her father refused, saying that he had already given his children to God and that she was no longer his to give. He remained steadfast in his refusal, despite Susanna's pleadings. However, once the wedding was over, her father had a change of heart and apologized to Susanna for not agreeing to walk her down the aisle. The bond between this father and daughter, though not enough to convince him to change his views before the wedding, was eventually enough to soften the rigor of his views.

Dress and sexuality were intricately woven in Bergthaler Mennonite weddings. With the preparations a woman made for her wedding, she adorned her body for the ritual that would allow her to engage in full sexual relations. Given the ambivalence and sinfulness surrounding sexuality among Mennonites, and the preoccupation with modest Christian attire, it is not surprising that weddings provoked such conflict over the clothing of the bride—a woman supposedly in transition from chaste virgin to sexually active wife.

LILLIAN'S WEDDING

When I interviewed Lillian about her wedding, she did not have the same detail of recall that Susanna did. For Lillian, her wedding in 1963 was now a "foggy" memory of a ritual in which everything more or less went according to plan. However, when Lillian began to speak of the church ritual that preceded her wedding, namely her "confession of gross sin" for her prenuptial pregnancy, Lillian's memories became

22. For more on Mennonite weddings from this era, see Klassen, "Queen for the Day."
significantly clearer. My discussion, then, focuses more on the rituals leading up to Lillian's wedding and less on the wedding itself.

Having moved to Winnipeg after high school, Lillian worked for a while, met a Mennonite man, and they decided to marry. Her fiancé's family was of a more worldly bent than her own, but in her case it was not events like the dance at the reception that caused controversy. Instead, her pregnancy was the source of conflict. Even though Lillian was to be married in a General Conference church of urban Russländer in the city, she had to return to the rural church where she had become a member to make her confession. Her husband did not need to confess in his home church—premarital pregnancy was disciplined on the woman's terrain:

So anyway, we had to go out to [my home church], and in front of the church there. And they got together one Sunday night because we came in especially for that. So we went up to the front there and you know how when you go up in front of somebody and you don't see anybody. You see a lot of faces . . . I don't remember what I said but I remember I had it down on paper and I memorized it. So I don't know if it meant a whole lot you know, but that I knew that this was the wrong thing to do, but would they please forgive me.

And what was uncomfortable was that after I finished saying that, everything was dead silence, and the people would just sit there. I think the thing at that time was if they would say yes they would stand up. And I saw one person stand up, and that was Mr. David Rempel... and he stood up right away. And he was actually a man that I admired. I really liked him and his family . . . and he was the first one to stand, and then it seemed liked everyone else sort of slowly stood up. Then, that was it. I think then they told us that we were excused and that was it, we went back home, all the way to Winnipeg.

This ritual of humiliation, as Lillian called it, was rife with conflict, but not of the overtly polarized sort. Lillian did what her pastor requested of her by driving several hours out of the city to stand up in front of a church congregation she no longer attended to confess her sin. She recalled, however, that she felt no "remorse" for having had sex with her fiancé. Outwardly she adhered to the rules, but inwardly she held a different interpretation: "I had no remorse. But I felt between myself and God, he had forgiven me, so why shouldn't anybody else? I felt quite comfortable with that." Although Lillian took the steps that were meant

23. Not his real name.
to resolve the conflict between her behavior and the norms of the church, she did not emotionally or intellectually assent to what the church was demanding of her.

Public confessions of "gross sin" on the part of women who became pregnant before marriage were common to many Mennonite churches, both Russian and Swiss.24 Confessions of gross sin most often took place at the woman's church if the couple were from different congregations, and in at least one case a Mennonite man was not required to confess his sin when his pregnant bride-to-be was not Mennonite.25

Though she submitted to her pastor's requirement of confession, Lillian maintained a sense of the rightness of her relationship with God. Her confidence was such that when her pastor in Winnipeg suggested that she not wear a veil because of her pregnancy, Lillian clothed herself not only in a gown of white satin but also wore a short net veil over her hair. Her memories of the wedding itself were vague, but she recalled that it proceeded smoothly despite the conflicts that preceded it. Lillian did not—and still does not—see herself as a rebellious or angry person, but as a woman forgiven by God, and a bride about to marry a man with whom she was very much in love.

**JANE AND ANNE'S WEDDING**

Three decades later in the early 1990s a wedding took place in the United States between two Swiss Mennonite women, Jane and Anne. Though separated from my earlier examples by thirty years, a border and ethnic identity, the wedding of Jane and Anne carried some of the same themes found in Susanna's and Lillian's weddings: regulation of sexuality, control over sacred space and family maneuverability in the face of church dogma.

When Jane and Anne decided to commit to each other, they wanted to mark it with a formal, and religious, ritual. They held an initial ritual gathering at their home, when Jane first moved in. In addition, they also decided they needed a more public profession of their love and commitment, one that included their families.

For their commitment ceremony, Jane and Anne chose to have a weekend-long celebration at a state park. Before the ceremony, their minister (who supported them) was very strongly advised by her conference to keep from speaking at their wedding, even though it was not in official church space. Instead of speaking, the minister had her

husband read a blessing she had written, and she gave a sermon the day after the wedding.

The muzzling of their minister, while it made plain the conflict swirling in their district conference over their plans to commit to each other, did not seriously disrupt Jane’s and Anne’s plans for their day. Theirs was a very self-consciously planned ceremony, which, in Jane’s words, tried “to bridge the gap from traditional rituals to us.” In making such a bridge, they took total responsibility for the wedding themselves—and in the process they crafted a ritual that proclaimed them to be fully Mennonite, fully human and fully in love. As Jane explained:

You know the difference between a traditional worship service and a really well-planned ritual, where it’s integrated. . . . So many weddings feel like a production, and nothing about this felt that way. It felt like, well, a confession. Our speaking was a confession of our fears, and still a readiness for commitment. I think there was also a different sense of vulnerability, not found in most weddings. I felt really nervous before the worship service, because what I was saying felt really intimate and vulnerable. And I think we probably set that tone, and then the sharing that people did was also very intimate. There were also moments of [the minister’s] blessing and the music, and the best way I can describe it is the Spirit’s response. That the confession has been made and the fears have been laid out. We made our commitment to each other. And the response was, through the music . . . very joyful.

Contrary to Lillian’s experience of confession thirty years ago, for Jane, self-chosen confession relieved a burden. Openly stating her fears to a community of friends and family helped Jane to banish self-doubt: “If I ever in the back of my mind had any leftover thought that this could be wrong or not normal, that just disappeared. And it was so holy. It was a very holy event. And that also gave me courage.”

Jane had good reason to have fears. Even before the ceremony had taken place, the mere possibility of it had spurred acrimony and discord in Jane’s and Anne’s lives, including both the fury in their conference and the retraction of an invitation to Jane to participate in a Mennonite church-sponsored conference. In the midst of such conflicts, their commitment ceremony created a sacred and safe space for their relationship, as Anne commented:

And it just felt like God was there and God smiled on the weekend and God smiled on the ceremony. And it also felt like a group of people who have all and do all struggle with [gay and
lesbian] issues and other issues, came together and found incredible strength from one another. And we all just lived in that for two and a half days and then left. The music was incredibly powerful. . . . Wonderful acoustics . . . really talented musicians. Good Mennonite four-part harmony. And when the choir that my brother directed got up to sing the first song, the first note, I just felt tears rush to my eyes. It was so pure and so beautiful and harmonious, it was very moving.

Contrary to the memories Susanna and Lillian held of their weddings, God was a very active presence in Jane’s and Anne’s recollections. They strove to acknowledge their love before God in a Mennonite way: they were not willing to let go of being Mennonite, of being in relationship with God or of being in relationship with each other. Their tenacity in holding on to their Mennonite identities and their lesbian identities in this public declaration of love has caused both tumult and concord. Among the wider Mennonite community the public connection of lesbian and Mennonite provoked controversy, but among Jane’s and Anne’s families their common Mennonite identity made their love more fathomable.

According to Jane and Anne their parents have become supportive of their relationship, although they are not sure that this would be the case if they were not both Mennonite and if their parents had not already known each other. As Jane said to Anne, “You didn’t know what was worse, marrying a non-Mennonite man or marrying a good Mennonite woman. And I think there’s some truth to that. I think for both sets of parents it has been easier that they know each other.” All of their immediate family members came to the ceremony, as did some extended family members.

Just as it did for Jane and Anne, the process of ritualizing their commitment to each other made the unconventionality of their relationship easier for their parents to bear as well. Commenting on the slide show prepared by their fathers, one of Jane’s friends told her,

“I think your dads forgot in the middle of that slide show that this was a lesbian commitment ceremony. I think they were just showing slides of their daughters and their daughters’ friends.”

And that’s right! That’s exactly what happened. That people forgot all the stereotypes.

Although in the course of the ritual the censure of the wider Mennonite community could be held at bay, returning to their everyday lives demonstrated that traditional convictions were still in force. Anne described her parents’ experience upon arriving home after the weekend:

Things got really messy while they were gone, because my father
is a Mennonite minister and people found out that they were not just visiting Anne, they were at her commitment ceremony. Fuss, fuss. There was confrontation about, "Are you theologically sound. This sounds like new age." Mom wrote a letter about what it was like to be there and then come back into this really antagonistic, unsafe, fired-up energy. She says that she finds herself every now and again just humming to herself, "We are marching in the light of God" and going back to the weekend for strength, and saying that the weekend, for her, is a place that she can go in her head to get some of that strength back to go ahead and fight the next fight, and stand in solidarity with us. And so for my parents [the ceremony] is very powerful in being a sort of refuge, both figuratively and literally. Part of that spiritual dynamic, what makes it so powerful, is that it is inexplicable.

The practice of wedding, then, for Jane and Anne and their families, provided a space for conflicting emotions—fear, joy, glee, love, defiance—to come forth. In singing, vowing, eating and praying together with their families and friends, Jane and Anne considered themselves well and truly married.

I did my original interview with Jane and Anne only two weeks after their ceremony. Since then, the conflict has escalated. Someone acquired a copy of the order of service from their wedding and proceeded to send copies of it—anonously—to every GC Mennonite church in a five-state region. As a result, the conference funding for their church was withdrawn. Jane and Anne's fellowship put out a mailing of their own requesting help and funds, and the money they received exceeded the amount the conference gave their church.

Despite this show of goodwill, the approach to conflict embodied in the anonymous mailing still had its bitter effects. In Jane's words, the mailing was "particularly wounding, because [the ceremony] was a very sacred weekend for us, and it was like somebody spit in the face of that sacredness." Contrary to the theme of Jane and Anne's ceremony—"Walking in the Light"—much of the conflict around their wedding was obscured. Very few people who opposed their wedding talked to them directly but, instead, condemned them from a distance.

CONCLUSION

Ritual is truly a site of conflict in a way that written tracts are not. The placement, adornment and actions of people engaged in transforming their lives through ritual—whether in a funeral, a worship service or a wedding—are negotiations of power rooted in tradition and change. The power at work in ritual is not simply a Weberian carrying out of one's
will but a complex, sometimes hidden, and always embodied deployment. The conflict stirred up by these three weddings was largely, if not overtly, centered on these women’s bodies: how they chose to dress them, carry them and love with them. In paying attention to the bodily dimension of conflict and power, Michel Foucault can be of some help. Though Ainlay and Kniss read Foucault as a theorist who understands power in terms of ideas, I interpret him as having a much stronger analysis of the effect of “micropowers” of everyday life on our social bodies: for example, on the ways we relate to authority, family and sexuality.26

Conflict embedded in ritual and practice, unlike more purely discursive conflict, does not necessarily beg for the same overt resolution as a polarized ideological debate. As Catherine Bell says, “Ritualized practices, of necessity, require the external consent of participants while simultaneously tolerating a fair degree of internal resistance . . . . Ritual symbols and meanings are too indeterminate and their schemes too flexible to lend themselves to any simple process of instilling fixed ideas.”27 Theology, ethics and dogma are one grammar for the practice, or resolution, of conflict. In many cases, however, ritual practice is a more productive means of moving through conflict, instead of clearly resolving it.

Ritual practice, like practice more generally, can hold ambiguities and muddy the clear waters of disagreement by bringing people together in spaces where they enact their complex relationships and feel conflicting emotions. Susanna’s father regretted his refusal to walk her down the aisle and, once her wedding was over, was moved to tell her so. Lillian, though enacting a ritual of remorse, felt no remorse for her actions. Jane, in confessing her fears in front of family and friends, felt fear change to joy and courage.

In focusing on practice, I also argue that family links can sometimes blur the boundaries of moral and ideological conflict. As Royden Loewen has shown in his work on Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites, kinship and family are strong factors in the construction of Mennonite identity—equal to if not surpassing those of theology and ideology.28 Relations of love and loyalty may often turn conflict into compromise, especially when people enact their relationships in the practice of ritual.

27. Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 221.
28. Loewen, Family, Church, and Market, 32.
Given the ambiguities that can arise when we look at conflict as it is actually practiced, I question the usefulness of metaphors of culture wars and battlefields. Certainly, conflict can breed violence between nations, in neighborhoods and in families, but to adopt the language of violence as the dominant metaphor for our scholarly inquiries seems narrow and overly prescriptive to me. What would it look like to be a conscientious objector to the metaphor of culture wars?

I fully agree with Ainlay and Kniss that James Hunter's dichotomies are misleading and am led to wonder why scholars of Mennonites need to give such attention to Hunter at all. Hunter disingenuously frames his narrative by claiming Americans are blind to the conflict in their midst. It seems to me, however, that as scholars or citizens we do not need to turn to Hunter to tell us conflict exists. In the scholarly arena, for one, various traditions of feminist, Marxist and postmodern theory have long pointed to the power and conflict woven into our lives.

All this is not to argue that ideology is not important to the fostering and resolving of conflict, but to urge us to attend to less discursive habitats in which contest and compromise reside. Certainly, my own choices of research interest are guided by a blend of experiential practices and ideological commitments. Susanna, who grappled with worldliness in her wedding, is my mother. The conflict and compromise she experienced with her minister father and her intellectual brothers over issues of ritual, material pleasures and aesthetic choices—Ike whether to have a Christmas tree, whether to plant a flower garden, whether to keep the house neat—were not limited to weddings. As I grew up, and still today, I heard much of this conflict between the sensual and the "sensible" in Mennonite ways of being. This legacy of my mother's musings, dreams and critiques has done much to guide my exploration of things Mennonite. In some ways it may have limited my perspective, in other ways it has allowed me to see things not always plain in the sources. Similarly, my own sense that gay and lesbian Mennonite weddings are as ritually legitimate and authentically Mennonite as heterosexual unions guides my understanding of Jane and Anne's ceremony.

I close with this situating of myself because I think that a greater degree of self-conscious positioning is essential to the study of Mennonites. Phrases such as "Mennonite scholars" and "students of


30. James Stayer calls for a similar self-positioning—though without regard to gender—in working from a sociology of knowledge approach. Perhaps being a non-Mennonite studying Mennonites was partly what spurred Stayer to this perspective.—
Mennonites" are often used interchangeably, as they are in Ainlay and Kniss's paper, without a clear discussion of who these "students" are. For the most part Mennonites study Mennonites, and those who do so are often in the employ of Mennonite-sponsored institutions. What does this do to a recognition of conflict among Mennonites? How does it shape how gender, sexuality and race are seen or not seen by scholars, and how theological and ideological issues are treated in comparison to issues of everyday practices—of dressing, of wedding, of lovemaking? In order to ask questions of our sources about conflict and its consequences, we must also ask questions of ourselves: Who are we in relation to things Mennonite? And what stake do we have in telling the stories that we tell?
