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Modest Dress Practices through the Eyes of Seven Conservative Mennonite Women

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Abstract: How do Conservative Mennonite and Amish-Mennonite women conceptualize their religious dress practices? Do they unthinkingly conform to church dress practices or do they exercise some agency? Using an oral history research methodology, we explore the relationship between social structures and individual agency through the stories of seven women regarding their interaction with modest dress practices. These stories touch on the transmission of dress practices, the variety of influences that shaped their experiences, and changes in the expression of dress practices. The stories consist primarily of quotations from interviews conducted by Megan Mong, a former member of a Conservative Mennonite church; her insider status provides a rich and nuanced inquiry. Detailed excerpts from interviews are provided for the seven women. We then organize insights from the interviews around several themes: the relative influence of religious structures and the family, dynamics of change in dress practices, and the role of inner attitudes versus external practices. The picture emerging from these stories is one in which the narrators were and continue to be extensively involved in a constantly evolving set of standards. [Abstract by authors.]

Keywords: clothing; head covering; veil; oral history; cultural transmission; modesty; agency; social structures; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; Biblical Mennonite Alliance

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the seven women who gave so freely of their time. Megan thoroughly appreciated their graciousness. We are also grateful to Kim Donehower, Kim Porter, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and critiques on earlier versions of this paper, as well as to Cory Anderson, who went above and beyond normal editorial responsibilities.

Note: Figures in this article are rendered in color for the online publication and in greyscale for the print publication.

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Recommended citation: Mong, Megan L., and John M. Clifton. 2021. "Modest Dress Practices through the Eyes of Seven Conservative Mennonite Women." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 9(1):55-82.

Publication type: Original article, open access (may be freely distributed). *JAPAS* is published by the Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies Association (<http://amishstudies.org>) and the University of Akron.

INTRODUCTION

I don't really feel like everything my church asks of me is my conviction, but I feel like it's a privilege to be part of that church. I'm committed to being part of the brotherhood and therefore adhering to those things. And so, if I am going to make a big fuss about it, it's certainly a waste of time.

– Charlene Stoltzfoos, talking about modest dress practices

Charlene's comment highlights the issue of how tradition and individual decision-making interact in the maintenance and transmission of modest dress practices for Conservative Mennonites. She follows the social structures (church teachings) even when they are not part of her personal convictions. In this article, we explore the relationship between social structures and individual agency. That is, what is the experience of an individual agent making clothing decisions within social structures?

In an early study of Amish dress practices, Hostetler (1964) argues that the societal structures represented by visual symbols including dress act to constrain individual agency. In a similar vein, Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt (2013, 230) suggest that most Amish youth embrace the faith—including dress practices—because “the informal social pressures from parents, peers, and extended family are intense,” and that in some cases this decision might be “less of an actual choice than a presumed rite of passage.” However, other researchers have argued that individual agency plays a larger role in maintaining modest dress practices. Hamilton and Hawley (1999) argue that the time and effort entailed in distinctive Amish clothing means that individuals need to *choose* it on a daily basis. Graybill (2002) proposes that the Mennonite women she interviewed choose to embrace the meanings they assign to their dress practices. And Schmidt (2002) argues that agency was central in changes in dress practices in an Anabaptist community during times of economic stress.

In this study, we present excerpts of interviews with seven Conservative Mennonite women from Lancaster or Chester Counties in Pennsylvania. In doing so, we examine how modest dress practice is transmitted and maintained. We contend that

any theory that seeks to explain the relationship between social structures and individual agency must take into consideration the decision-making experiences of individuals in the context of faith, church, and family. These seven women were and continue to be extensively involved in informing and enacting a constantly evolving set of dress standards.

The interviews, which ranged in length from 90 minutes to over 2 hours, were conducted with the narrators (i.e., interviewees) by Megan Mong, one of the authors of this study. She came to each interview prepared to move the conversation in two directions: the narrator's outer experiences such as clothing styles, and inner experiences including feelings and beliefs. Instead of working from an interview schedule, most of the questions arose during the interview. The open-ended nature of these interviews allowed each narrator to record what she felt was most important about modest dress practices and the journey that brought her to her current beliefs and practices.

Megan was an active member of the Conservative Mennonites for over ten years. She entered the community as a teenager and exited as an adult. From her position inside the community, she knew the women in the community possessed a strong desire to share their lifestyle with those they felt could benefit from it. She also knew their voices were not always presented in a positive light, especially in the popular media, as in, for example, the television show *Amish Mafia*.

As a formerly active member of the community, Megan entered the interviews as both an insider and outsider (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Flores 2018). Megan selected narrators to balance the risks and benefits of her insider-outsider status. She did not interview women who were close friends from her time as an active member of the community. Megan avoided narrators where she felt personal relationships could complicate the interview process. On the other hand, most of the narrators were distantly known to Megan through her time in the church. They were friends of her family or related to her through marriage. These relationships created a relaxed social space based on many shared assumptions. The narrators recognized her insider status with phrases such as, “as I'm sure you know.” Further, in selecting narrators, Megan did not attempt a random sample. Instead, she selected narrators who would represent the

range of variation present in the communities she had chosen (Becker 1998, 121-24). Therefore, the narrators came from different churches. They varied in age, education, and marital status. Some went through periods of rebellion, others did not. The goal was to choose narrators representing a broad range of backgrounds and experiences.

The range of narrators was subject to some constraints, both intended and unintended. Megan kept the interviews local, only interviewing participants she could meet with in person. She also limited her interviews to groups of Mennonites she was personally familiar with during her time in the community. This limited the range of narrators to those on the progressive-conservative end of the conservative spectrum (Scott 1996; Anderson 2013). Lastly, while Megan intended to interview equal numbers of male and female narrators, she only secured one interview with a male narrator. This might be due to a hesitancy to discuss modesty with a female interviewer, or because it is generally more comfortable to set up one-on-one appointments with persons of the same gender. Because we only had one male narrator, in this article we focus on the women's interviews. Given that women's voices have often been neglected, this article provides another opportunity to hear them.

The narrators involved in this study ranged in age from 18 to 83 at the time of the interviews; four were under the age of 30. While the younger narrators are closer to the decision-making times discussed in the interviews, the older narrators have seen more changes in the church and community. We introduce the seven narrators here, from youngest to oldest. Each narrator is identified by first and last name with their permission, but we generally refer to them by first name only for readability.

- Amy Gingerich was 18 when she and Megan sat down to record her experiences. She was unmarried and lived at home with her parents. She cleaned houses to help put herself through college, with plans to major in social work.
- Alicia Esh was 21 at the time of her interview. She attended public school for a time before finishing high school at a private Conservative Mennonite school. She was not married, and lived

at home with her parents. She worked as a secretary.

- Claudia Beiler was 23 at the time of her interview. She was married and expecting their first child. She did not work outside the home.
- Charlene Stoltzfoos was 26 when she sat down to record. She was unmarried, lived at home, and worked as a midwife.
- Joyce Long was 46 when Megan interviewed her. Joyce was married; she ran a physical storefront connected to her home where she manufactured and sold various head coverings and accessories to Mennonites across the country through an online store.
- Elaine Yoder was 60 at the time of the interview. She was unmarried and lived alone. She worked as a full-time counselor and was completing a Doctorate in Ministry.
- Martha Nissley was 83 when she sat down with Megan. She was a retired teacher and lived with her husband in a retirement community.

Amy, Alicia, and Elaine attended the Life Mennonite Fellowship, a Biblical Mennonite Alliance (BMA) church.¹ Claudia attended an Amish-Mennonite church with her family, and then New Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, an unaffiliated Mennonite church.² At the time of the interview, she and her husband attended what Claudia calls a “community church,” an unaffiliated church that desires to include people from non-Mennonite backgrounds. Charlene attended Mine Road Amish-Mennonite Church, a Beachy

¹ Biblical Mennonite Alliance, Keystone Mennonite Fellowship, and Beachy Amish-Mennonite are all considered conservative Anabaptist groups (Scott 1996; Anderson 2013:69).

² While New Covenant is unaffiliated, it stands squarely in the Conservative Mennonite tradition. Regarding clothing, their beliefs include the following statement (New Covenant 2017): We believe the women's head should be veiled when praying or prophesying as a sign of authority in light of God's headship principle. We believe the sisters should also have long hair as taught in I Corinthians 11:1-16. We will endeavor [...] to wear simple, economical and modest clothing, to seek the ageless beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit rather than submitting to the standards of beauty that the world dictates such as jewelry and elaborate hair styles.

Amish-Mennonite church.¹ Joyce and her husband attended Bowmansville Mennonite Church, part of Keystone Mennonite Fellowship.¹ Martha attended Linden Mennonite Fellowship, a Lancaster Mennonite Conference church.³

Each of the narrators self-identified as a practitioner of modest dress. They shared two core modesty practices: each wore a head covering or prayer veil during daily life and each wore skirts or dresses to the exclusion of pants or trousers (with the occasional exception for athletic activities). The particulars of each narrator's dress or veil varied according to the community to which she belonged. For example, Charlene wore only home-sewn cape dresses, a traditional Anabaptist style with an extra layer of fabric over the bodice. Amy almost exclusively purchased her clothing at mainstream stores. Prayer veils ranged from Martha's small, lace doily to Joyce's hard net covering to Claudia's store-bought scarf. While for each narrator there was variation associated with degrees of formality, the two core dress practices, along with their strong desire to be modest, remained constant, unifying the narrators as practitioners of modest dress.

Each interview was exhaustively transcribed from voice recordings. A guiding principle in the transcription process was to ensure the narrators were presented with respect (Oral History Association 2018). In particular, this entailed editing out many of the fillers, repeated speech, and false starts (Mosel 2004, 2006). While these are a normal part of speech, for many readers they tend to create the impression that the speaker is either uneducated or inarticulate. This is a special issue when dealing with marginalized groups such as the "plain people," who are often portrayed in the media as exotically simple in thought and speech. The narrators we present in this study are neither uneducated nor inarticulate. The goal of the transcription process, then, was to present each narrator as the thoughtful, intelligent person she is, while maintaining accuracy and each narrator's unique voice.

³ Although the Lancaster Conference is not considered a plain Anabaptist group (Scott 1996; Anderson 2013), it would have been considered part of the conservative movement during Martha's formative years (Scott 1996, 1997).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews presented in this article consist primarily of extensive quotations organized by narrator rather than by theme. We feel this is superior to the more common presentations of thematically organized, limited quotations for two reasons. First, presenting extensive quotations gives greater voice to the narrators and allows readers to better evaluate the conclusions drawn from the quotations (Longhofer, Reschly, and Good Gingrich 2017). Second, organizing the quotations by narrator allows the reader to evaluate each quotation in the context of a narrator's overall story, and gain a fuller picture of each narrator's experience.

We suggest the usual practice of providing limited quotations organized by theme can be traced to the need to ensure narrator anonymity. Confidentiality is difficult to maintain while using quotations (Richards and Schwartz 2002; Haines 2017). This difficulty is multiplied when multiple quotations are used for a single narrator. The more information given about any given narrator, the more difficult it is to maintain anonymity.

It could be argued that the work of Good Gingrich (2016) shows that it is possible to maintain anonymity while using extensive quotations. It is important to note, however, that a large majority of the quotations in Good Gingrich are from service-providers who are not members of the Dietsche community being studied. Furthermore, most of the Dietsche who are quoted are represented by no more than three quotations each. This is not meant to detract from the outstanding use of extensive quotations in Good Gingrich (2016). Instead, it is to suggest that the use of quotations is constrained by a commitment to maintaining anonymity.

While narrators interviewed by Graybill (1998; 2002) and Schmidt (2002) wished to remain anonymous, the narrators Megan interviewed were willing to be identified and to allow their interviews to be archived for future research.⁴ This raises the question as to why the narrators interviewed by Megan were willing to be identified when narrators interviewed by other researchers have desired

⁴ The full audio files and photographs are archived in the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky (Mong 2019).

to be anonymous. One factor could be that there was an enhanced level of trust between interviewer and narrator since, as noted above, Megan already had a relationship with most of the narrators before this research began. A second factor could be that the narrators are from churches that are on the less conservative end of the spectrum of plain Anabaptist groups. In addition, at least two of the narrators had been involved in outreach to non-Mennonites before taking part in this research.

Our decision to organize the presentation of interviews around narrators using extensive quotations also allows us to address the issue of objectivity. It is difficult for researchers to accurately interpret views of narrators when the researchers and narrators do not share a common socio-cultural view (Cotterill 1992, 604). As noted above, Megan was a member of the community for over ten years. While her co-author, John, was never a member of an Anabaptist community, he grew up in a socially conservative Baptist church that shared with the Conservative Mennonite movement common core beliefs regarding the place of women in the church and in society including the belief in the “headship of man over woman” (Epp 1990). But neither author still holds these beliefs. The change in our beliefs could easily result in a subconscious misrepresentation of the views of our narrators. This possibility is minimized by allowing the narrators to present their beliefs in their own words. Our narrators trusted Megan with their stories and their voices. Presenting these interviews as much as possible in the narrators’ own words, with each narrator’s story standing on its own, honors the shared space created during the interviews.

RESULTS: THE SEVEN INTERVIEWS

1. Amy Gingerich (18-years old, unmarried, student, Life Mennonite Fellowship—BMA)

Amy’s immediate family, especially her parents, played a major role in shaping her views on modesty in clothing.⁵

⁵ The sequence at the end of each reference is a time stamp in the form [hh:mm:ss] indicating the point in the interview at which the quotation occurs. Bibliographic information for each of the interviews is under ‘Primary Sources’.

- (1) a. Megan Mong (MM): Where do you get input in your dress?
- b. Amy: That would mostly come from my mom, my dad, when I was younger and now. Outside of that, anybody in my immediate family. I will ask my brothers or my sister what they think about something. Then reading books about modesty and stuff, that would give me some ideas about it. (00:18:03)

While she mentions the role of books, their influence is clearly secondary to that of her family.

Rather than dictate standards of modesty, Amy’s parents involved her in decision-making. This is illustrated in Amy’s recollections of shopping for clothes.

- (2) a. Amy: [...]⁶ I would take her clothes or be like, “Mom, I like this, what do you think?” [...] S]he would always bring it back to me, especially now I was older, like, “Amy, essentially, it’s up to you, what do you want?” And so, through that she was not like, “You cannot wear that.” So it did come from my own decisions. Or sometimes she would say, “Let’s take it home and show dad and see what he thinks?” So, I would often do that; I would take it home and then put it on and show dad and then I’d say, “What do you think?” And then sometimes he would like it, sometimes he would be like, “Well...” and then he would tell me how he would be impacted by that outfit, just as a guy, as a dad.
- b. MM: Is there anything he would say specifically?
- c. Amy: Well, if it was too tight or something he would be like—I mean it’s a little funny because it’s your dad—so your mom would talk more openly maybe—but he’d be like, “Well, don’t you think that’s a little too tight?” or something like that. He’d be like, “I never saw you wear anything that short before.” You know... like in a nice way, just to let me know that he was aware of those things. [...] And so, I think it was good that they left it up to me essentially. Yes, good talks about why don’t we wear pants, why we don’t do all this stuff. (00:29:59)

⁶ An ellipsis in square brackets indicates material has been omitted. An ellipsis not in square brackets indicates a significant pause or a break in continuity by the speaker.

**FIGURE 1: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, AMY GINGERICH:
BLACK JACKET OVER AQUA T-SHIRT WITH BLACK SKORT**



The dynamics in conversations about clothing are interesting. Especially when Amy was older, they were two-way. Amy would ask for input from her mother, who would direct the conversation back to Amy's opinions. Amy's mother would also draw Amy's father into the conversation. While she received input from both parents, she notes that they expressed that input differently with her father being less direct. While Amy wanted input from her parents, and they were willing to give it, Amy's parents left final decisions to her. Amy continues to discuss modesty in clothing with her mother, as shown in the use of the phrase "the other day" in (3).

- (3) Amy: Everybody comes from a different place. I was telling my mom the other day that I have some friends, specifically one friend that I was

thinking of, she wears pants regularly. And I would think that she dresses very modestly and sometimes more modestly than some of my friends who don't ever wear pants. (00:37:12)

In addition to her parents, Amy discusses clothing with her brothers and male cousins. She relates a cautionary tale she heard them share about how they lost respect for a girl because of her clothing choices.

- (4) Amy: I have really good relationships with my brothers; so I talk with them about a lot of stuff. So we talk about girls. And hearing them talk, "Well that girl...", their opinions on girls. [...] I feel like they have a higher level of respect for girls who dress modestly. You know, with the combination of the spirit and the dress. So, in my talking with them, I would

definitely think that clothing impacts how they view a girl. Or I have good relationships with my cousins too, and so hearing them talk about it. I've heard them say before, "Oh I liked that girl, but then I was at Bible School with her. She wore some stuff that I was surprised that she would wear, and I was kind of disappointed." Like they notice that stuff and I was very surprised that that would actually be a turnoff for them. (00:35:28)

Just as Amy's parents and other family members tried not to dictate standards, Amy's church did not have a formal rule book. Even sermons ostensibly about modesty concentrated on general principles applicable to both genders.

- (5) Amy: We have had some sermons about modesty, [...] but all the sermons I remember I have been like, "Oh I am going to get some ideas!" But most of them were about modesty of the heart, like the spirit of modesty both for men and for women. They kind of went different ways with that then just how you live, how you dress. So it's coming across the pulpit in that way. We don't have a rule book or anything, or something like that. Something like that, where they've [mentioned modesty at a church level], [it is] just nothing specific, nothing like, "You have to do this." Our church doesn't really do that. [...] just mentioning it as being important and reminding people to put some effort into it. (00:59:32)

While Amy suggests that she personally would have liked to hear more specifics than are generally included in sermons, the lack of specifics in sermons did not mean that more specific teaching about modesty was avoided in all settings. Pastors' wives played an important role in promoting modesty in dress, privately correcting women who were wearing outfits that were considered to be immodest.

- (6) Amy: I have heard that sometimes our pastors' wives will—just on the side—just go and talk to someone, [...] bring to them that maybe they're not aware that that outfit is just not great. So I think that has happened. But publicly, no that doesn't happen. Pastors' wives distribute modesty wisdom to the women in the church. (01:08:29)

Amy recalls one specific conversation in which the pastor's wife related the "three finger rule" that dictates that a woman's neckline should never be more than three fingers below her collar bone.

- (7) Amy: We always would say, "Three fingers down from..." What are these called? Is that your collar bone? I don't know, those two bones there. We would say three fingers down from there. [...] I think [I heard that] from [...] our pastor's wife. We were talking about it one time and she said three fingers down. I don't always do that, I'm not real picky, but that's a good rule. (00:15:29)

It is noteworthy that even though Amy agrees that this is a good rule, she also indicates that she does not always follow it. Her church allows a certain level of freedom for individual members.

Amy also recalls being involved with the planning of a "modesty evening" when she was younger.

- (8) a. Amy: Then when I was like thirteen, we had a modesty evening at church that my mom and Starla and another lady, Darleen Esh, put on. Myself and their two daughters, we all helped with it. So, we had meetings and talked about it, just like discussing it. And I actually talked a bit at the meeting, but just kind of an informal meeting like discussing modesty. So that would have been a big thing for me, talking about it with all those ladies that I respected.
- b. MM: Do you remember what you said at the meeting?
- c. Amy: What I said? My mom would have done the deeper stuff, and then I would have been like... Okay, we had this little fashion show thing. So we had girls come in with different outfits, and we were like, "Maybe this isn't such a good idea. How can we fix this?" So maybe they'd have another article of clothing, like a scarf or something... not to really "fix it," I don't know how we said it. Just ways that you could... creative ways that you can make your outfit more modest. And so, I think I was involved in the fashion show part of it. But then I also would have talked... I forget now... about how it, it's not a bondage. Modesty isn't about all these rules you have to do. I like modesty. So we were trying to get that across.

It can be a very feminine way of dressing.
(00:18:39)

The fact that the three mothers (including the pastor's wife) involved their daughters in the planning increased its impact on the girls. And the emphasis in the fashion show itself was on creative ways of expressing modesty rather than on a set of rules that must be followed.

While the experiences Amy relates regarding the influence of her family and church on her views of modesty are positive, she also recalls a negative experience involving her peers at camp. While most of the campers wore one-piece swimming suits, she wore a tee shirt and skort.

- (9) a. Amy: Well, I remember going swimming at girls' camp, for example, and I would be wearing that when I was thirteen. I'd hear girls make snide comments like, "Why?" Maybe out of fifty girls they'd be five or six girls who would be dressed like me, definitely standing out as more modest. And then I'd hear girls looking at us and saying something about it [...].
- b. MM: So, these other girls, who were they?
- c. Amy: So, it would have been a Mennonite girls' camp. So they would have been Mennonite, but a lot of Mennonite girls that I would know [...] they just wore any regular swimming clothes, like a one piece. But then they wouldn't do mixed swimming. In my family we would just say dress modestly and then we're fine with mixed swimming.
- d. MM: What kind of things would they tell you?
- e. Amy: Well, it wasn't like to my face, but like to other people as if, "That's so silly! Why would you have to in order for swimming?" And also, I think with the piece of it, if it was just girls that that would make a difference too. But in my mind I wouldn't want to be in my underwear with them. So I like dressing modestly when I'm swimming and I like being comfortable to go swimming with guys.
(00:04:24)

As Amy indicates in (9c), the decision to wear modest swimwear allowed for mixed-gender swimming in the family context; 'meeting guys' was not an issue. While the issue of mixed swimming was not relevant at a girls' camp, for Amy, wearing a swimsuit was equivalent to swimming

in her underwear. Although she was ridiculed for her modest dress, this choice brought with it the freedom to swim in mixed company. She made a conscious decision that the freedom to participate in mixed swimming was more important to her than the acceptance of her peers.

Wearing a veil is important to Amy.

- (10) Amy: The biggest reason I wear veiling is because I believe that God specifically said that women should cover their heads. [...] I am not sure why all God wants me to, but something I've heard [...] is] to show the spirit world that I am under the protection of God [...] There's also symbolization that I am under the headship of Christ and that women are under men. (00:41:36)

While she bases her choice to wear veiling on the Bible, she also recognizes there is significant latitude in the outward expression.

- (11) a. MM: Who decides which style you wear?
- b. Amy: Some churches tell you that you have to wear this size... or a covering, even. You have to wear a covering [instead of a veil]. Some churches tell you, but our church is left up to what you want, how you choose to live it out. It's just important that you do. So that would probably be passed down from family to family a lot. [...] The church that I go to, it's required that you wear a veil to be a member and they say to wear a substantial size, but then they don't enforce any size. So for sure there are people who have smaller veils.
(00:44:33)

In Amy's case, family members influence her choice of veil size.

- (12) a. Amy: When I started wearing a veil I had a bigger one because my mom wears a bigger one. And so, I would ask my brothers what they think about it, and it was quite a bit bigger, and I remember my brother didn't say that he didn't like it, but I could tell he didn't really like it. So I think that affected me, the fact that I knew he didn't really like it. If he would have been, "Oh, I really like it," I might have stayed with a bigger veil. I don't know that I've really thought about that before, but yes, I am sure. Within a few weeks I got a smaller veil, and since then I've maybe accidentally—because I order them online—

ordered a different size or something. I've fluctuated a little bit, bigger and then smaller veil. But it is basically the same, except when I was talking with my cousin in Greenland. We were talking about it—the veiling—and I had a smaller one. Then I was like this is it for me, I just wanted to wear a bigger veil. So I came home and I bought a bigger veil. Just a little bit—but yes.

b. MM: Because?

c. Amy: Simply because I didn't want my veiling to be a fashion thing, and I didn't want to just be trying to fit in with my group. I didn't want to be trying to be cool. I wanted it to actually be for the right reasons. (00:56:55)

The potential for humor based on this variation, especially as related to intergenerational change, is not lost on Amy.

(13) Amy: I've witnessed that it often goes from a mother to daughter that it will get a little bit more liberal. And then the veil size, [from] my grandma to my mom—my mom changed to lace and a little bit smaller, a little bit. And from my my mom to me I went a little bit smaller. [...] How it's going I wouldn't be surprised if my daughter would choose to wear a smaller one. [...] It's funny talking about it now. [...] Sometimes I have actually thought about it because I like my veil size and am comfortable with it. I've actually thought about when I have children and a daughter, or when I get married, I should start wearing a bigger veil because it might help! [laughing] (01:01:36)

The influence of her choices regarding veil size on future generations is something that Amy actively considers.

2. Alicia Esh (21-years old, unmarried, secretary, Life Mennonite Fellowship—BMA)

Out of all her family members, Alicia's mother initiated conversations regarding modesty in clothing most frequently.

(14) a. Alicia: Often if there was something that maybe was a little bit too tight or too short or something, [my mom] was usually the first one to notice, above even my dad or my brothers—or to say something about it, anyway. [...]

b. MM: What kind of things did she tell you?

c. Alicia: She would just say—it's been a while since she said it—she would say things like, "Oh, that looks a little bit too short," or "Did you ask your dad about that?" That was her common question, "Did you ask Dad about that?" She got to the point where she realized, "Okay, it's better to get a male opinion." I tended to listen to that a little better.

d. MM: Did you ever ask your dad about things?

e. Alicia: Yes, I did. (00:08:23)

Rather than use directives, Alicia's mother used comments and questions to try to draw her into a dialogue.

The fact that Alicia's mother initiated conversations, however, did not mean that Alicia's father was not involved. As shown in (14c), her mother frequently directed Alicia to interact with her father. In fact, Alicia indicates that his comments carried greater weight. The desire to get male input also extends to her brothers.

(15) Alicia: So, going by what [my dad] told me in the past and my brothers—if I ask them their opinions they are also willing to say, "Oh that looks weird" or "No, you shouldn't wear that." (00:10:05)

Later in the interview she ties the differences in input from men and women to the claim that men are more influenced than women by visual cues.

(16) a. MM: You mentioned that you listen to a male opinion better. Why do you think that is?

b. Alicia: I think part of it is because I've heard that men are a lot more visual, and so something could catch their eye a lot more obviously than it would catch my eye. I might notice things, but it's not like I'm really drawn to it. Yes, the different studies I've heard of and talking with different friends and with family, men are a lot more visual. So to get their opinion, I think there is more weight to it, because you want to honor the men in your life and where they're at. (00:10:19)

The teachings of both the Bible and the church are important for Alicia. She regularly refers to the Bible in discussing modest clothing practices, seeing applications even in passages that do not explicitly deal with clothing.

**FIGURE 2: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, ALICIA ESH:
GREY T-SHIRT OVER GREEN AND WHITE GINGHAM
BLOUSE WITH NAVY SKIRT**



- (17) Alicia: I have been reading Revelation recently and the different examples or images that God gives of a prostitute—when you think of a prostitute, you don't think of someone dressed modestly. (00:42:50)

She supports specific practices, such as wearing a veil, with teachings from both the Bible and the church. While she references specific Biblical passages about wearing a veil (18), her practice of wearing a prayer veil began after hearing a sermon about it at church (19).

- (18) a. MM: Your veil, tell me about that.
b. Alicia: Okay. Well, in 1 Corinthians 11, it talks about having a sign of submission on your head, honoring the man and then God as a sign of submission. (00:54:56)

- (19) a. MM: How old were you when you started wearing a veil?
b. Alicia: I was twelve. [...] The pastor at my church had preached a message on the veil, and I had never really heard about the meaning behind it before. So after that I went home and decided that—I didn't do it that day, but in a week or two I told my parents that I would like to start wearing it. So yes, that's where it started. (01:01:04)

Because the teachings of both the Bible and the church are important for Alicia, she experiences inner dissonance when these teachings appear to disagree.

- (20) Alicia: Often the reason in the Anabaptist circles that we don't wear jewelry is the verse in 1st or 2nd Timothy about not adorning yourself with braided hair, gold jewelry—that type of thing. But I found myself wrestling with it just because in the Old Testament God uses a lot of symbolism in jewelry, and wondering if He is using symbolism here. Paul is saying something here and then my church is saying something here, you know? What do I follow? Or what lines up? So, I would say I don't wear jewelry simply out of respect for my church, not really out of personal conviction. (00:45:10)

Alicia observes that practices in the Mennonite community are influenced by the larger society.

- (21) a. MM: Do you see changes in dress in your particular part of the Mennonites?
b. Alicia: [...] I think it changes with the ebb and flow of fashion. So right now like some shorter skirts might be more popular like right at the knee. [...] Then you have also the long maxi skirts, kind of the clingier fabric. Those are coming back into style. [...] Yes, I think it feels like it kind of changes with whatever the current fashion is [...]
c. MM: Are there any controversies about modest dress that you're aware of?
d. Alicia: Yes, [...] there would be more conservative people currently coming to our church that might still wear dresses all the time. Then you have other people that will wear short skirts 90% of the time. It's not so much that they're arguing about it; it's just

there's obviously difference of opinion [...] (01:07:47)

She recognizes that these influences affect her personal clothing choices as well. For her, finding a way to dress stylishly within the overarching principles of modesty is a 'fun challenge.'

- (22) a. MM: How much does the general public influence what you wear?
- b. Alicia: For me personally it influences quite a bit because I like dressing in style and finding ways to do it modestly. To me it's kind of a fun challenge. (00:27:38)

3. Claudia Beiler (23-years old, married, homemaker, unaffiliated Mennonite)

Claudia received regular instruction from her parents regarding modesty in clothing, most commonly in the form of comments on outfits she was wearing.

- (23) a. Claudia: [...] If we came down the steps [my parents] would have said, "You're not wearing that, you go upstairs and change again." Then we'd do it again and they'd say, "You're not wearing that, so go upstairs and change again."
- b. MM: Who would usually say it, your mom or your dad?
- c. Claudia: My dad. (00:34:00)

As shown in excerpt (23), when she made decisions her parents found unacceptable, she was directed to change. There was little if any discussion of the reasons behind the rules.

- (24) a. MM: What kind of advice did your parents give you growing up?
- b. Claudia: They didn't really give advice, they just gave very, very strong suggestions or commands which we wanted to honor because they were good parents. They loved us so much and because there was a love there and a relationship there, there wasn't the resentment that I feel I could have had towards them if they hadn't loved us, if there had been only rules. (00:33:33)

Although Claudia was married and had left home at the time of the interview, her mother continued to interact with her about her clothing.

- (25) Claudia: If I can, I dress not to offend my parents. I know there are things now that

offend—maybe not offend—but she will still—even though I'm married now—she'll still say, "You know, your skirt is a little short," or "Did you notice your shirt is see-through?" She'll still not be as quick—but be pretty quick—to tell me if she sees something that I am wearing that she would feel isn't modest. (32:59:00)

Claudia noted she was still questioning the role of makeup in light of comments from her parents.

- (26) a. MM: What about makeup?
- b. Claudia: Makeup? My parents would think I wear too much.
- c. MM: Tell me about that.
- d. Claudia: My parents really would prefer that I don't wear makeup just because of the way it draws attention to my face—I guess you aren't supposed to draw attention to your face? Makeup is something I am not quite sure about yet. (00:45:00)

In addition to her parents, Claudia's husband also offers input about modesty.

- (27) Claudia: My husband would say a lot of the same things that my dad does. I've come to know the standards and my own personal standards so that it's not actually addressed very much, because I know what to put on even before I go out of the door. But he will often tell me if there's something that I am missing or if something's too tight. It's not a tension in marriage. It's not something that I resent from him. Rather I appreciate him for being willing to tell me. (00:36:43)

Claudia traces the focus on rules rather than explanation to an awkwardness her father felt in discussing concepts of modesty explicitly. He was generally reserved in the vocabulary he used.

- (28) Claudia: [My father] was very careful not to—I never really heard the words "seductive" or "suggestive" or kinds of terms the world uses or "sexy" or anything like that. He would never use terms like that. Just very normal things, "You don't want men to look at your body." And he would often say, "I can't explain it, but you just can't wear that." And so, it was more phrases, and he tried to explain himself. (00:35:54)

FIGURE 3: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, CLAUDIA BEILER: NAVY VEST AND YELLOW TOP OVER FLORAL AND BLACK CAMISOLE WITH BLACK SKIRT AND BLACK LEGGINGS



As she grew older, she realized that his use of euphemisms was meant to teach her the consequences of dress practices.

(29) Claudia: And then tight shirts were a very, very big deal with our dad. He'd say his favorite word, "eye-trap." "You can't do this, it's an eye-trap to men. It's an eye-trap to women," he says. [...] And as I grew up I see now you know he didn't want me to look ugly, but he was trying to protect me and protect the men with whom I was going to be with that evening. (00:34:48)

Claudia traced the emphasis on rules in her home to a more general lack of teaching about motivation by men in either the church or the home.

(30) Claudia: I don't like that the church tells you what to do without teaching it. I don't see a lot

of teaching anywhere about why you should dress modestly. And then from the fathers I don't see a lot of that either. I don't think they even know [how to] sometimes. They know why, but maybe they're embarrassed to say to a daughter, "Dress modestly because otherwise it is hard for us men." I never even knew that stuff until I started reading books. I was like, "So this is why I'm dressing modestly." And I think we need teaching. We need men who are brave enough to say, "You know it is hard [for us]. Dress modestly." Maybe that's why it's awkward in the churches for pastors to talk about this. So maybe it should just be smaller groups of women. (01:05:46)

For Claudia, the emphasis on rules rather than the motivation behind them resulted in her rebelling.

(31) Claudia: [T]here's an obvious pattern that I see in these [Mennonite] churches of people really focusing on the outward rather than on, as the Scripture says, "the inward adorning of the heart." So growing up, modesty was something that was an outward thing, and it was something that was never really taught about my heart necessarily. It was something that you do on the outside, but no reflection on the inside of the heart. So I really rebelled against that. I really hated it because, "What's the reason? What's the purpose?" If there is no purpose why would I even do this? Why would I live this way—fight so hard—for something if it only makes me look stupid?" (00:15:03)

When she was 13, Claudia would go with friends to parties where she would circumvent the rules in ways that would not be evident to her parents.

(32) Claudia: [U]ntil I found my security in Christ, I really wanted the affirmation of man and I thought the only way to be fashionable was to dress immodestly. "How can I do this behind my parents' back? How can I change in the car as I am driving to the party so that my parents never find out, so that I look cool at the party?" [...] What I really wanted was the approval of man, and I wanted to be fashionable. (00:16:40)

Claudia's period of rebellion continued until she had a tent meeting conversion that led her to re-evaluate the rules she had been taught.

- (33) Claudia: When I was fourteen, I met the Lord very personally. I had a tent meeting conversion. [...] From that time on is when I really began to take my life to the Scripture and say, “What [does] the Scripture say?” You know, my parents could say this, but if modesty is not in the Bible, I am not going to do it. [...] So eventually I came to see that the things they were teaching me were all in the Bible, but without the structure they were giving. They were saying, “Okay, your skirt has to be halfway between your knee and your foot.” But then when you read the Bible it doesn’t give such clear instructions, and I believe God had a reason for that, because modesty isn’t penned in religious structure. It’s not penned in a little book of rules. [...] I think it’s a boundary that each person has to have themselves, in knowing if I am doing this for myself or am I doing this to God. And so, from the age fourteen on I began to evaluate myself and to read a lot of books on this topic to see what people said. And there’s a big range of it. I came to see that if you’re playing sports that sometimes pants are more modest than skirts, definitely. Whereas my whole life I had thought that if you put on a pair of pants, that’s immediately immodest. However, there’s different standards of skirts being more modest than pants in the way you wear them. So I began reading books and I began journaling a lot about it and writing about it. And I came to have personal conviction about it. (00:22:55)

While Claudia emphasizes the central role of Scripture in evaluating rules regarding modesty, she also notes that Scripture does not give specific instructions for clothing. So other literature and personal conviction played an important role in applying Scripture to specific issues like the length of skirts.

As a result of her personal journey, Claudia has come to feel that modesty does not grow out of a rule book,⁷ but out of an attitude towards God.

- (34) Claudia: We love rules. We love things to be contained in a rule book. We’ve said a lot of things, the size and the standard, what our

view of the Scripture is—when really, I think we just need to put aside our own beliefs and say, “What does the Bible say?” Okay, wear something on your head. So stop putting—we need to be careful in adding onto the Bible and making rules about the size of things, the length of the skirt, rather than saying that this is the reason for this, and “How can we honor God in it?” (01:15:35)

This does not mean, however, that Claudia has rejected the practices of the church. Instead, she follows the practices based on her understanding of the basis of the rule. For example, she wears a veil on the basis of scriptural teaching.

- (35) Claudia: The head covering comes from a passage in Scripture that says—it’s in Corinthians—and it says a woman should be veiled when she prays. (01:12:10)

Claudia recognizes that modesty can be challenging.

- (36) Claudia: In studying, it’s been a great challenge for me to realize that there’s such a beauty in modesty and that it’s obtainable even though it’s difficult. A little slogan I’ve had is that “modesty is hot or modesty is not.” Modesty is hottest in the literal way. I was giving some speeches on modesty in my life. I tell them, literally there will be times when it’s not easy. In the summer, you will have to wear different clothes. You can’t just wear your strappy things if you’re wanting to have the title of modest. But yet so much more than just teaching the outward—like I think even for my own children—in our culture I have a burden to teach that it’s not just the things you put on, but it’s such a reflection of the heart. (00:15:33)

Claudia has moved from a position of resisting modesty to one in which she now gives talks about the importance of modesty. Her slogan “modesty is hot or modesty is not” reflects her belief that modesty may be uncomfortable. But for Claudia, the uncomfortable aspects of modesty are worth it when it is “a reflection of the heart.” Furthermore, Claudia believes that modesty is not antithetical to being fashionable.

- (37) Claudia: [...] immodesty doesn’t make you fashionable, and you can be fashionable and modest. [...] Once I found my approval in

⁷ The rule book Claudia refers to is their written church standards, like the Amish *Ordnung*, the book of rules that each member of a church agrees to follow.

God alone, that erased a lot of problems. Then also realizing that it's exciting—the challenge of being fashionable and being modest in a culture where fashion means taking off more. (00:17:03)

Looking ahead, Claudia emphasized the importance of her daughters choosing modesty for themselves rather than simply following rules; modesty needs to be based on the inner attitude rather than on rules.

- (38) a. MM: What would you want to pass on to your daughters?
- b. Claudia: Definitely, first of all, that modesty is an inward adorning of the heart. Modesty is your relationship with God and caring so much more about what He thinks about you than what society thinks or your closest friends or the boy you want to be your boyfriend [...] I think modesty is a hard thing to teach because you can't just force it on somebody and say, "This is the way it's going to be" or else it becomes just a rule. It has to become something that they desire from the inward parts of their heart. (00:42:09)

Claudia attributes her struggles with accepting the rules and practices her parents taught her regarding modesty in clothing to not understanding the reasons underlying them. This led to rebellion until she actively explored the basis for the rules and practices. By the time of the interview, she was passing the concept of modesty on to the next generation and looking ahead to passing it on to her daughters. Rather than couching modesty in terms of rules and regulations, however, she was attempting to present it in terms of an inner decision that needs to be made individually.

4. Charlene Stoltzfoos (26-years old, unmarried, midwife, Mine Road Amish-Mennonite Church—Beachy A-M)

Charlene recognizes Biblical teachings as the basis for her beliefs regarding modesty.

- (39) Charlene: If you are really earnest about following the Bible exactly how it says, I think you are going to [be] pretty different [in your dress from other groups] sometimes. And taking it literally is one thing that I appreciate about the Mennonites. It's not like we take everything literally; I think we have some

pretty huge weak points. But at the same time I feel like it's probably—and I don't know, this is my perspective—probably one of the cultures that takes the Bible most literally as in, "Oh, it says that, so we are going to do that." And yet there are some other areas that we're not consistent in. (01:02:10)

While she does not refer to specific Biblical passages as some of the other narrators do, Charlene is clear that following the Bible literally (even inconsistently) will result in behavior that is markedly different from that practiced by those outside the community.

Of course, interpreting Biblical teachings and applying them to daily life is not done in a vacuum. In Charlene's case, her parents apparently had the greatest influence in her understanding of modest dress. Her father took the lead in intentional teaching, especially as a part of daily devotional studies with the family.

- (40) Charlene: I feel like my dad taught us very clearly and strongly about conviction for dressing modestly and why we dress modestly. And so, I don't feel like I had a lot of questions or problems myself—and it's partially personality—with, "Why do we have to do this?" Things like that. We would have family devotions together every morning as we grew up, and he was very faithful with that. He was also very passionate about teaching us conviction about things, not just having us do something just because it is the thing to do in our church. We need to know why we are doing it. (00:16:50)

Charlene emphasizes that her father focused on the reasons behind the expected outward behavior, not just on the rules. This focus, along with her own personality, resulted in her readily accepting the expectations for modesty.

Building on these teachings, both of Charlene's parents influenced her views on modesty through informal interactions. In addition to the intentional instruction, her father would make observations about her clothing.

- (41) Charlene: I remember times when [my dad] would have made a comment, maybe if I had a sweater on that was too tight or something. And he would be like, "Maybe you should wear that a little differently" or "Maybe you

should go change” or something like that.
(17:33:00)

Interactions with her mother generally revolved around times they spent sewing together.

- (42) a. MM: Do you talk about [modesty] more to your dad or your mom? Who gives you more instruction?
- b. Charlene: It’s probably pretty equal in our family. Maybe more with mom just because she’s usually the one around when we’re sewing dresses. But yes, it just depends.
- c. MM: What kind of stuff does she tell you?
- d. Charlene: She’ll give us reminders not to make our sleeves too short and our necks too big. Or, yes, things like that. (00:55:57)

It is interesting that Charlene feels that her mother gave more instruction overall than her father, even though she recognizes that the intentional instruction was from her father (40).

Overall, Charlene feels she receives less intentional teaching regarding modesty from her church than from her family, friends, audio materials, and her Bible school.

- (43) a. MM: How often do you have teaching about modesty in your church?
- b. Charlene: Not often enough, yes. Not sure, probably not more often than once or twice a year if even that. But I feel like I have input from other places. Often either a Bible school that I’m at, or either here at home from a tape or CD or a family discussion, or with friends, with girlfriends. You’re like, “What do you think about this?” or “I think this.” (01:13:30)

In addition to the limited intentional teaching, however, Charlene recognizes that the church regulates the practices of its members regarding modesty through extensive written standards that members agree to follow.

- (44) a. Charlene: There’s quite a few different dress standards and things that we have agreed to do, so [the rule books] get pretty specific in some ways. Even down to what style of veiling we wear on our heads[...] [It] would talk about having dresses that are loose and modest which is very general. Then it explains that a little bit, and I can’t remember the wording exactly. It would talk about having sleeve length that comes close to the elbow and

FIGURE 4: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, CHARLENE STOLTZFOOS: NAVY CARDIGAN OVER WHITE CAPE DRESS



necklines that aren’t too big. Which is, I think it describes it in some way. It would talk about combing your hair modestly and not in showy ways. Which, of course, each one can interpret that in different ways. And it would talk about the size of the headship veiling as well. And it would talk about what color of footwear for church [...]

- b. MM: So it is long?
- c. Charlene: Yes. (00:39:16)

While the rules are extensive, Charlene notes that many of the standards are general, allowing members a certain degree of latitude in their interpretations of the rules.

Not only are many of the rules general, they change over time as church members decide

that standards have become obsolete because of changes in culture.

- (45) a. MM: How is your church[’s standards on dress] changing. Is it changing? Has it changed since your parents’ generation? Your grandparents?
- b. Charlene: The dress standards have, yes. [...] I don’t know always if the changes are good, and yet I think that as culture changes over time, you have to be making changes. I mean obviously, like having a standard now about not being allowed to have—let’s think of an example—VCRs. That’s obsolete because who uses VCRs anymore? We use DVDs. [...] Yes, so that changed; that’s an example. As far as dress, yes, it changes with time. (01:10:36)

Charlene uses the shift from VCRs to DVDs as an obvious example of the need for standards to change. Although she is reticent to accept all change, she acknowledges change in dress parallels this change in technology.

Change occurs in the family context just as it does in the church. Charlene recalls the switch in her home from elastic in the waist to pleats or gathers.

- (46) a. Charlene: I would have worn dresses ever since I can remember. Definitely the style has changed over the years. Sometimes of course, as a child or as a teen, Mom would want us to wear stuff that we weren’t always that excited about, because we maybe thought it looked old or out of date.
- b. MM: Like what?
- c. Charlene: Well, I don’t know if I can remember exactly, but maybe a dress. Okay—so the style had changed in our circles—the style had changed from elastic to pleats or gathers in the waist instead. I wore elastic for some time when I was younger, and it was okay. Eventually I just did not, I couldn’t stand it anymore and I thought it looked terrible. I thought it wasn’t comfortable either and stuff, and so I didn’t want to wear. And she didn’t force it on me. [...] So yes, sometimes she’ll pull a dress out of the attic and be like, “Hey one of you girls could wear this,” and we’re like, “We don’t want to.” (00:15:41)

Charlene remembers wearing dresses with elastic even though she did not like them. Ultimately, she refused to wear them, and her mother accepted her decision. But the intergenerational tension remains, as her mother sometimes suggests the girls wear a dress with an elastic waist, and the girls refuse.

Charlene presents quite a positive picture of the transmission of standards of modesty. Her father attempted to explain the motivation behind the standards rather than simply dictating them. She feels church policies allow a certain level of latitude in implementation. She has seen outmoded standards change in both her church and home. Despite all this, however, there are still practices that Charlene follows simply because they are asked for by the church, not because of personal convictions.

- (47) Charlene: I don’t really feel like everything my church asks of me is my conviction, but I feel like it’s a privilege to be part of that church. I’m committed to being part of the brotherhood and therefore adhering to those things. And so, if I am going to make a big fuss about it, it’s certainly a waste of time. (01:17:45)

Giving up the right to follow her own desires in these matters seems reasonable to Charlene in light of the privilege of being part of the church.

All these strands come together when Charlene talks about passing on notions of modesty to her future children.

- (48) Charlene: I feel like teaching them separation like I was talking about, God calling us out as a people to be set apart. I feel like teaching them that in dress. And just passing on my personal convictions to them just like my dad did a lot for me. I feel like that’s what’s going to be huge for them. Teaching them too that the [Mennonite] culture that we live in is something to be treasured and not just to be thrown away just because we don’t always agree and know why we’re doing this stuff. [...] The point is that you realize some of the protection that we have that some people don’t have. [...] We don’t have to deal with some of the things other people have to deal with. (01:15:29)

The training she foresees starts with the Biblical mandate to be set apart as a people. She intends to follow her father's example as she passes on her convictions. Finally, she intends to teach them that the culture, including the place of modesty in dress, is a treasure even in those points which they may not understand or with which they do not always agree. Modesty in dress has become a valued part of Charlene's identity, one which should be passed on to the next generation.

5. Joyce Long (46-years old, married, veil store owner, Bowmansville Mennonite Church—Keystone Mennonite Fellowship)

As a small business owner selling head coverings and accessories, head coverings have played an important role in Joyce's understanding of modesty. Like most girls in her community, she adopted the prayer veil when she was a child, before she understood its significance. It was only later that she began to understand what it stood for.

- (49) a. MM: How old are you when you started wearing a [prayer veil]?
- b. Joyce: Actually, I would have been 10.
- c. MM: The reason?
- d. Joyce: [...] We would have been church and have Christian day schools, Sunday school. We listened to the radio; so would have gotten a lot of child evangelism. Generally by the time you were ten, twelve, we would have accepted Christ, and it would have been traditionally held that the girls—when they accepted Christ—would have started wearing a head covering, not before. I mean there were some groups who put them on their very small children, but we would have only at the point of accepting Christ. That was a symbol of the submission to Christ, and to church, and to authority. Unfortunately, I can speak for myself and probably others—when you're that age, honestly you really don't understand. You knew it was something you wanted to do, but it was scary. You knew that it all went together, but really did not understand the whole principle. [...] Later, as in teens and later teens, I put it all together and understood all of it. (00:10:02)

Her interaction with the veil was part of a broader dialogue concerning modesty, or conservatism, and its relationship to joyfulness.

- (50) a. MM: You mentioned back in your teenage years, sorting through what your convictions were. Do you mind sharing whatever you feel comfortable with that sorting through process and how you came to you convictions?
- b. Joyce: [...] For myself, coming to the church at ten-years-old, not really knowing if this is what I wanted to do. I didn't understand it. When you reach about fifteen, sixteen—up to eighteen, "Is it really who I am? Do I want this for my life?" [...] I know for myself, at that point of just adopting conservatism, I guess is the best way to say it is that it seems like (and part of it again was probably my personality) the plainer the look, the plainer the face, the more sober the face. And do we have to be like that? Do you have to look sad to be conservative? You know, "If that's the way you've got to look—if that's the way that the two go together, I don't want any part of that."
- c. Joyce (continued): But it just seemed like God spoke and brought friends and influences into my life saying, "You know what? You can be simple in life, but joyful." So that was probably what I struggled through the most. Saying, "You know what? I don't need to alter my personality. I can be joyful, I can be radiant and still be simply conservative—you know if you want to term it that." That was probably the hardest hurdle. Not that I ever wanted to leave what I was taught because I did embrace it, and later in life, I have a greater understanding obviously. Hopefully I can pass that same passion on to my children, to my next generation. You know, "We can live radiantly." (01:16:57)

While she was tempted to reject conservatism due to an apparent incompatibility with joyfulness, Joyce was ultimately able to reconcile the two. Now she is committed to passing on joyful and radiant modesty.

For Joyce, the role of the veil is rooted in scriptural teaching.

- (51) Joyce: You know the question that I get asked sometimes is, "Okay, will that piece of fabric on your head save you?" No, I don't

**FIGURE 5: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, JOYCE LONG:
JOYCE LONG: PURPLE CARDIGAN OVER OFF-
WHITE CAPE DRESS**



believe it's going to save me. Your obedience is important. And if I look at Scripture in entirety, because God warns us not to take away or to add—so if I can look at Scripture, take it at face value. Unfortunately in society today, I mean churches today, there are just so many piece meals of compromise all over and what's happening? (01:06:54)

However, transmission of scriptural teaching involves the transmission of principles, not specific practices.

- (52) Joyce: We need to teach the principle and Biblically the principle. If it's not [taught], it is of no value. It's not just "what the church says I do" and that goes for clothes too. That's

modesty in general. If we don't know why we are doing it, it will be lost. It's the same as when they crossed the Red Sea, they were to put twelve stones. Why were they to put up twelve stones? [It was so that if their] children ask, they were to tell them what God did. And so some of these things that we do, we need to teach the principle. I think it's good if our children ask—or anyone asks—why do you do what you do, that you know. [...] I really caution anyone if the only answer they can give is, "It's my church." If that's all you know, it's not going to last. (00:46:59)

This emphasis on teaching principles is not limited to transmission to following generations. In her business selling veils, Joyce also teaches seekers from the outside who are deepening their understanding of Biblical passages about veiling.

- (53) Joyce: There are many who are seeking the truth of Scripture and understanding in simple, practical terms—taking at face value what the Scripture actually says. Realizing that even though they may not have grown up in a fellowship where they practiced it all their life, they find the truth and are like, "Where is somebody that practices this? Who can I find to help me?" (00:05:56)

The emphasis on accessibility to outside seekers extends to even specific terminology.

- (54) Joyce: [...]historically they would have been called doilies[...]. A doily is something you put under a lamp, or a decorative on my table. And I searched for—I felt that more passionately when we designed the web site and put it real public—I can't put it out there to somebody seeking that it's a doily. They're not going to understand about doily. "I put it under my lamp. What do you mean?" You know what I mean? So I searched for something that had a more head covering distinction to it. So that's why I called them lace coverings. (00:55:53)

Just as Joyce emphasizes principles over rules, her church encourages, rather than dictates, practices related to modesty in clothing in their rule book.

- (55) Joyce: It's not mandatory for the cape dress, for instance, or that it would need to be a one-piece dress. They would encourage. It's all

written as “encourage.” Yes, that’s the word. There are some church groups who would make it mandatory. “You may not. That’s what you do. And you will do it if you want to be a member of this church.” A lot of it in our group is left to personal choice. (00:15:08)

The emphasis on principles has resulted in changes in style over the years. While Joyce still wears the traditional cape dress, she notes that dress length has changed for her over the years.

- (56) Joyce: Modesty is the key and [the church conference] would definitely encourage longer dresses. [...] But twenty-five years ago, it was us girls, teenagers, my mother, everyone included, we wore dresses that barely came over the knee and that was normal. (00:15:36)

Similarly, the style of head coverings has changed over time. Joyce recounts the shift from the net cap to the flowing veil beginning in the late 1970s and culminating in the early 1980s when she was a teenager. The shift was rooted in practicality.

- (57) a. Joyce: Well, Charity⁸ brought it in even more and so women began to want this type of head covering because it’s practical, it doesn’t smash, all these things. Churches began to need to visit it. “Okay, what are we going to do with this? [...] Yes, it is full. It is a head covering. It’s definitely head covering.” [...] Overall it was said, “Yes, you can wear. We encourage you to be white in consistency with our white net coverings.” [...] It needs to be unadorned, which means it needs to be solid fabric—discourage the laces or lace on the edge even. So those two things in our group.
- b. Joyce (continued): [...] I would say when it first came out, there was a certain stigma that went with it. [...] “Okay, if you start wearing that, eventually you wear nothing.” [...] Today, I would say that certain stigma is probably lessening in a big way because it’s worn consistently and it’s worn longer and the girls are fine with it. (00:35:35)

While Joyce emphasizes the principles behind modest dress practices, she also recognizes the fact that these principles can be overlooked in everyday life.

- (58) Joyce: My son asked me, “Okay Mom, every time you put [your veil] on in the morning, do you think about being submissive?” Uh, good question! I think about it now that he pointed that out to me. (01:10:29)

Joyce is well aware of the fact that by wearing the prayer veil she is acknowledging her submission both to God and to men; she elaborates on that extensively during the interview. But it took a simple question from her son for her to think about it regularly.

6. Elaine Yoder (60-years old, unmarried, counselor and completing D.Min., Life Mennonite Fellowship–BMA)

Elaine’s mother relied on rules rather than explanation to transmit notions of modesty.

- (59) a. MM: [...W]as that pretty consistent over your life, that you would have had conversations about modesty?
- b. Elaine: [My mother] really focused on those kinds of rules and that emphasis; so she brought the topic up a lot. She wasn’t real discerning about bringing it up sometimes.
- c. MM: What do you mean?
- d. Elaine: Well, she could get kind of grumpy about stuff [...]
- e. MM: What kind of things would she say? If she didn’t like something, what would she say?
- f. Elaine: “I don’t like that you wear that.” “You know we don’t really approve of that.” “We don’t care for you wearing that,” kind of stuff. Something like that. (00:43:36)

These interactions had a deep effect on Elaine such that she recalls specific terminology her mother used in matters of modesty.

- (60) a. Elaine: One of my mom’s terms that she would use—and I think she picked it up from Bible school—and that’s not wanting ‘form-fitting’ clothing. So instead of tight, clothing that is more loosely fitted.
- b. MM: Any particular areas or just in general?
- c. Elaine: Well, for women it would be the chest or even the hips, yes, the legs. (00:47:55)
- Distrust of change in general was common.

⁸ Charity Ministries is a network with roots in the plain Anabaptist tradition (Anderson 2013).

FIGURE 6: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, ELAINE YODER: NAVY PLAID BUTTONED JACKET OVER NAVY DRESS



- (61) a. MM: What patterns have you seen as fashion styles come and go?
- b. Elaine: [...] Well, for example when I was just starting with the youth group, way back before the cape dresses were all one [piece]—the cape was also a separate thing that was put on top of the dress and hooked with a belt—somewhere right about the time I started with youth group they started sewing the cape into the waistline. So that it was attached instead of detached, and that was kind of a big—everything that changes is—a big deal because it is viewed with suspicion. So when I was in the youth group our skirts had pleats in them—yes, mostly pleats or maybe gathers. Then the tradition started (it was the rage for ten years) to put elastic in your waistline. Then you didn't have to wear a belt. Just little stuff like that.

- c. MM: Yes.
- d. Elaine: So now elastic is out and belts are out. I think most of the girls that wear cape dresses now make them way more long than we ever wore them. Like basically down to the ankles all the way. Yes, so there are seasons of everything. (01:10:10)

While change was eventually accepted, the suspicion that accompanied innovation led to criticism. For example, Elaine recalls overhearing her aunt criticize her mother over the issue of hose seams.

- (62) a. Elaine: When [my mom] was at Eastern Mennonite Bible School, they would have, I think, emphasized black hose a certain weight—like back in the 40s, hose had seams in them in the back. That became an issue. They considered that to be more modest, maybe because you could see that there were hose. [...] So, I remember as a child that was an issue because hose were just beginning to be available without seams.
- b. MM: You remember having discussions about this?
- c. Elaine: I remember hearing my mom talk about it, or her sister giving her grief because she wasn't wearing seams in her hose anymore. (00:38:12)

A generation later, criticism affected what kinds of socks Elaine was allowed to wear.

- (63) Elaine: I wore anklets—like stockings—little socks—and I really liked them. Mom bought them for me. Another lady at church was offended that I was wearing anklets and talked to Mom about it because she didn't want her daughters to wear them. So then Mom didn't want me to wear them anymore. (00:40:33)

This narrow view of modesty is supported by Elaine's church. For example, the church expects women to wear only natural looking makeup.

- (64) a. MM: What about makeup?
- b. Elaine: [...] Yes, I wear little bits if it can stay real natural looking, yes.
- c. MM: Is staying natural looking important to you?

d. Elaine: It is, yes. To me personally it is, and our church actually asks for that. (00:58:27)

The church also has expectations for the veil.

(65) Elaine: The church standard is to wear a veil that has some flow or hanging quality to it. And that's been a tough one for some women to follow. They like just a doily [...] (01:07:35)

At the same time, Elaine recognizes that other churches have even stricter expectations on other aspects of dress.

(66) Elaine: I know that in a lot of traditional conservative Anabaptist settings there would be rules against [high] heels. (00:56:35)

Elaine's interpretation of the Bible undergirds her beliefs regarding modesty in dress. For Elaine, modesty is a reflection of the renewal of the mind.

(67) Elaine: You know, [Romans 12:1 is] an interesting Scripture to me. There would be other scriptures that would be stronger about women being modest in 1 Peter, and Paul would talk about modesty in a couple of places. [...] I've heard whole messages, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that you present your body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service and not to be conformed to this world." That's where they stop. But if you stop there, you miss the whole thing, or you miss the heart of it, because it says, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." It's really more about mind renewal than it is about [non-conformity], or they go hand-in-hand. (00:51:58)

While it is not unusual for Conservative Mennonites to appeal to Romans 12:1-2 as a basis for their views on modesty, Elaine bases her views on a considerably broader range of Scripture, including passages from the Old Testament.

(68) Elaine: In the Old Testament, in Isaiah and Jeremiah and in Deuteronomy 32, there are scriptures that describe the feminine aspects of God. In Deuteronomy 32, God is the mother-God who is taking her children through the wilderness and feeding and protecting and guiding them. In Isaiah and Jeremiah, the imagery is used of God as mother, God as

the womb who is birthing these children and nourishing them. So the whole concept of God as mother as well as God as father... So if you're taking that back to the 1 Corinthians 11 passage, then a woman as she is veiled is—it says it's a sign or a symbol—it gives her power. (00:10:13)

This understanding is playing out in Elaine's doctoral studies.

(69) a. Elaine: I've been working on a Doctorate in Ministry with the emphasis on leadership and spiritual direction or formation. [...] As a counselor woman in conservative Anabaptist settings, this degree fit well because I had an interest in exploring, "How does the feminine reveal the glory of God?" and writing and doing work on it. That's why I decided to do this program, actually. [...]

b. MM: Your dissertation is?

c. Elaine: On the image of God and how women reveal the image of God. (00:27:31)

While the rule-based system that Elaine grew up in has affected her view of modesty, her view has developed over time to be tied to her interpretation of a network of Biblical passages.

7. Martha Nissley (83-years old, married, retired, Linden Mennonite Fellowship—Lancaster Mennonite Conference)

Martha attends a church in the Lancaster Conference. Although the Lancaster Conference is no longer considered part of the plain Anabaptists (Anderson 2013), some members such as Martha still practice the veiling. Many of Lancaster Conference's modest clothing practices did not change until the 1970s (Scott 1997:44). When Martha was in her teens in the 1940s, the Lancaster Conference observed strict modest clothing practices.

The story Martha shares is more focused on the past than are those of the younger narrators. Unlike the younger narrators, Martha is no longer actively evaluating what she will wear. Now in her eighties, she has made her decisions. When she sat down with Megan, Martha reminisced about the ways Lancaster Conference changed over the years, and the way that she personally approached

the changes. She offers a sweeping view of eight decades of modest dress.

- (70) Martha: I think I started wearing a covering in 5th grade and then 6th and 7th and 8th. And I even wore cape dresses to school then. I was probably looked at as an oddball in public school. There were some other Mennonites in our school, but I don't think they all dressed as plain as I did. So I got used to being different. (01:04:08)

In subsequent decades, Martha has observed many changes regarding modest clothing practices, and the responses to these changes.

The rationale behind a number of practices was to guard men from lustful thoughts.

- (71) a. MM: You've mentioned your sex appeal and preachers a bunch of times. Is that part of modesty, not having that kind of appeal?
 b. Martha: Yes, I guess so. I think you're supposed to dress so that the men don't have lustful thoughts when they see you. Yes, that's the way that preachers preached. (00:58:18)

For example, women were expected to cover their legs.

- (72) Martha: It was supposed to be immodest to show your [bare] legs. (00:44:20)

So when nylons first appeared, women could only wear black nylons.

- (73) a. Martha: See, first when nylons came out, these thin nylons looked like you didn't have any stockings on. They were pretty 'sinful.'
 b. MM: Tell me, what are nylons? You mean like this?
 c. Martha: Yes, nylons like you have on and like I have on now. [...] There was a time when I was quite young when nylons came out. Then when they wore these thin nylons, it was the church—somebody got the idea that women ought to wear black stockings. [...] The preachers used to talk about the silk or nylon stockings that didn't look like there was anything there. It was supposed to be a no-no. (00:42:15)

The cape dress served a similar purpose, in this case, obscuring the outline of the chest. Martha

recalls the gradual shift away from cape dresses as a result of individual decisions.

- (74) a. MM: Tell me more about the transition away from cape dresses, was that a big thing at the time or...?
 b. Martha: Not so much. It just kind of went gradually, and I sort of went along with my social group. Other people were not wearing cape dresses all the time and I wasn't the first one or the last one to change, I think. I think I changed as other people were changing. But still some of my friends wear cape dresses—not very many—but there's one of my high school classmates I think that still wears plain dresses and my sister in law still wears plain dresses—my first husband's brother's wife. So you know there's some, but they don't seem to feel really bad about other people not wearing [them]. (00:17:33)

While the transition began with Martha's generation, in time it spread back to her mother's generation.

- (75) a. MM: When you made the transition away from cape dresses, was it your parents' generation, your grandparents' generation changing with you? Or was it your generation?
 b. Martha: My generation first, but eventually even my mother was not always wearing capes as I recall. Many of my parents' generation are not wearing capes anymore. (00:19:21)

By the beginning of the 1960s, skirts and blouses were becoming acceptable.

- (76) a. Martha: I don't know if we made any big decision, "Now we're not going to wear cape dresses." I don't think so. I think it was just decided it's okay. You know maybe I probably wore cape dresses for church and not for work for a while. I don't remember those details, but it was kind of gradual.
 b. MM: What about switching from dresses to skirts and blouses? Was that another...
 c. Martha: That was another thing. To wear a skirt and blouse was just a little more away from the real plain thing. [...] I was teaching school and I have a picture somewhere of a group that was out on a field trip [...] and here I am with a skirt and a blouse. That was probably one of the first public situations

where I wore a skirt and a blouse. [...] that would have been when I was in my late 20s or early 30s. (00:20:15)

The shift from cape dresses to skirts and blouses did not entail controversy. However, even though Martha no longer wears cape dresses, she maintains conservative personal standards in line with the concerns that originally motivated the cape dress.

- (77) Martha: Well, I don't like to have low necklines that show the crevice between your breasts and I would keep them a little higher than that and I don't wear sleeveless things. [...] I like them to be not too tight straight skirts. I want them to be a bit flared so that they don't show—when I sit down I don't want them to go up. I like to have them about a couple of inches below the knees, mostly a little longer. (00:16:26)

Martha ascribed a number of practices to authority figures in the church. For example, she remembers pastors' expectations regarding how hair was to be parted.

- (78) Martha: When I was younger I had [my hair] parted in the middle, and then later on I had it parted on the side. Later on I would do it this way, but it's not a Scriptural matter to me. I think the preachers, when there were strict dress codes in the church, they wanted you to wear your hair [parted] in the middle. But that's all by the wayside a good while ago. (00:56:00)

Martha also remembers how an elderly woman at her church obliquely corrected her clothing choices.

- (79) Martha: I do have one red suit which I want to wear now for Christmas, which is red and then I wear it with a white blouse, a jacket and a skirt, which is sort of unusual. One time I wore that to my church where my husband was a pastor—at Linden Mennonite, he was a pastor—and one of the elderly ladies didn't like me wearing red. That was not a good color for Christian women, especially for the pastor's wife. She didn't say anything the Sunday I wore it, but then I wore a plain, solid blue dress. She thought that was pretty and she mentioned that it was better than that red one I wore. That's probably something interesting to

FIGURE 7: INTERVIEW DAY OUTFIT, MARTHA NISSLEY: WHITE TURTLENECK WITH DARK GREEN PAISLEY SKIRT



add, because the older people thought red was a harlot's color or something. (00:04:55)

Martha felt free during the interview to disagree with the dictates of authority figures she felt were not grounded in Scripture. She questioned the logic of a visiting pastor who urged the men of the church to shave their beards.

- (80) Martha: One preacher came to our church at Linden and preached about being worldly. They do this, "because they want to look like something"—I don't know what—and he made as if it was really bad to wear beards. Yet the Amish wear beards and they think it's right. So I am not sure why he has such a thing about beards. (01:09:00)

Similarly, she disagreed with those who taught that women should not wear pants.

- (81) a. MM: At the church, what was being said about women wearing pants at that time?

- b. Martha: They would have said that the woman is not supposed to wear what “pertains to a man.” There’s a Scripture in the Old Testament that says that, and at this point I don’t think that we can use that to say that pants for women are wrong because in those days men wore robes too. (00:29:54)

The controversies over the changes in modest clothing practices outlined thus far are largely resolved in Martha’s church and family. There was, however, one change that is still controversial: the shift away from wearing the veil. While Martha continues to practice the veil, her sister does not.

(82) a. MM: What about your veiling?

- b. Martha: Yes, that was always taught to me as being the Scripture in 1 Corinthians 11, that the woman should have something on her head for prayer and prophesying. So therefore, if you pray anytime then you should wear it all the time so that whenever you pray, you have it on. That’s the way I was taught, and I still wear it. I know there’s an awful lot of people that don’t, and I have a lot of respect for a lot of people that don’t wear it because I think they’re very, very fine Christians. My one sister, she just thinks that it has to do with the culture at that time and what Paul was writing doesn’t mean that we have to wear something on our heads today. [...] Now my brother, oh my! He thinks that it’s terrible that my younger sister doesn’t wear a covering.

c. MM: Really?

d. Martha: Yes.

e. MM: What does he say about it?

- f. Martha: Well, he just wishes she would. Then I think he thinks she might not be saved because it’s rebellious not to listen to what the Bible says. (00:52:06)

There are no Biblical passages specifically mentioning practices such as the cape dress or hair parts. Instead, these practices are based on more general texts dealing with modesty or separateness. Head coverings, on the other hand, are explicitly mentioned in 1 Corinthians. So the dispute is with how that passage should be interpreted. Martha’s brother views their sister not wearing a veil as a sign of rebellion, while her sister interprets the Scripture as being tied to a previous culture.

DISCUSSION: UNIFYING THEMES

In the introduction, we stated our research question: What is the experience of an individual agent operating within social structures? In this section we answer that question by organizing insights from the interviews around several themes: the relative influence of religious structures and the family, dynamics of change in dress practices, and the role of inner attitudes versus external practices.

While all seven of our narrators came to a belief in modest dress they consider their own, their paths to choosing to dress modestly is not uniform. Claudia actively rebelled against modest dress practices (31, 32), while as a teenager, Joyce wrestled with whether or not to adopt modest dress practices (50). Even Charlene, who embraced modest dress practices from an early age (40), rejected specific styles like elastic-waist dresses (46). Whatever their path, by the time of the interview each of the women considered modest dress a desirable choice for herself. Most importantly, this is a choice in which she felt actively involved.

We conclude from our narrators’ experiences that the transmission and maintenance of modest dress practice is not a solely top-down command from church authority. As Charlene (44) and Claudia (34) both note, modest dress practices are covered in detail in church rule books. In this light, it is perhaps surprising that for some of the narrators, there was insufficient formal teaching about the subject in the church. Although Alicia traces her desire to wear a veil to a sermon on the topic (19), Charlene feels modesty is not covered frequently enough in church (43), Amy wishes that the preachers gave more practical direction during their sermons (5). Claudia also found sermons lacked the depth she required to understand modesty and raised the possibility that the sensitive nature of the subject makes it difficult to address in a mixed-gender setting (30).

More commonly, transmission takes place informally, even within the church setting. Older women and pastors’ wives take women aside before and after the service. This instruction is done privately, “on the side” (6). Even compliments can be used to indicate disapproval of dress choices that were made at other times (79). Sometimes older women bring their complaints to a girl’s mother instead of directly to the girl (63). Even the

“modesty evening” held at Amy’s church was described by her as “just kind of an informal meeting like discussing modesty” (8), in which even Amy, at the age of thirteen, was given an opportunity to speak about modesty.

Including the opinions of a thirteen-year-old is indicative of the largely conversational transmission of modest dress practices. Most transmission occurs outside the church setting. Modest practices are discussed proactively with family and friends. Amy seeks input from her siblings (1), especially her brothers (4), and her cousins (4, 12a); Alicia also seeks input from her brothers (15). Martha, even at age eighty, is aware of her sibling’s current views on veils (82). Claudia gets input from her husband (27). Charlene gets input from girlfriends (43). And Joyce even gets input from her son (58). In addition to these conversations, some of our narrators found guidance in books. Charlene talks about listening to recorded teachings and reading books about modesty (43), while Claudia also notes the important role books played in her journey (33).

The greatest source of input for our narrators, however, was their parents. Elaine recalls input from her mother (59). Amy is aware that her veiling practice was passed down to her from her mother (12) and looks forward to passing the practice on to her own daughter (13). Charlene received input from both parents but felt her mother gave a bit more since her mother was around when she was sewing (42)—an activity intrinsically associated with modest dress practices. At the same time, Charlene traces many of her convictions regarding modesty to her father’s teachings during family devotions (40) and remembers how her father would comment on specific outfits (41). Similarly, Claudia remembers her father suggesting she “go upstairs and change again” (23). While Amy’s mother would give advice when shopping, she also had Amy ask her father for input when they returned home (2a). And while Alicia’s mother initiated conversations more frequently than her father, Alicia accepted advice from her father more readily (14). Both Amy (2c) and Claudia (28) note that as their fathers gave guidance, they were careful to use appropriate language with their daughters.

Our narrators are keenly aware of the impact their clothing choices have on their relationships. A number of the narrators give greater weight to

advice from their fathers or brothers. Alicia observes that she gives more weight to men’s opinions because men are more visual than women and so immodest dress practices affect them more (16). Amy continues to discuss modesty with her mother (3). Claudia, married and in her early twenties, still dresses so as not to offend her parents (25), although she is aware that they think she still wears too much makeup (26). Our narrators often check in with the important people in their life. They seek their approval and make sure their status as a godly woman is strong.

Claudia recognizes that modesty in dress comes with a price: in the summer, it may be less comfortable to dress modestly (36). At the same time, Amy notes that dressing modestly opens doors that might otherwise be closed: wearing a tee shirt and skort instead of a one-piece swim suit allowed her to participate in mixed-gender swimming (9).

Our narrators recognize that change is natural and are aware of the internal dynamics accompanying change. Elaine shares that waistlines for cape dresses shifted from pleats to elastic, then back to pleats (61). The switch from pleats to elastic could have been tied to convenience: it is quicker to sew using elastic as opposed to pleats. According to Charlene, the shift back to pleats was due to elastic being less comfortable than pleats (46). But even this change is not entirely due to comfort. Charlene also notes that elastic “looked terrible” and gives it as an example of a fashion that looks “old or out of date.”

Our narrators are occupied with modesty, not with holding on to the past. They are willing to change even when the change involved style, not greater convenience. Martha (73) and Elaine (62) remember the tensions introduced by nylon technology. The community wrestled with it until coming to a compromise. Alicia notices changes in skirt lengths and fabric in her church (21). Similarly, both Joyce (56) and Elaine (61d) remember changes in length in the traditional cape dress. Both Alicia (22) and Claudia (37) embrace the challenge of dressing stylishly but modestly. Elaine’s experience is that innovation is first viewed with suspicion, but that ultimately “there are seasons of everything,” and styles change (61). These observations agree with those of Graybill (1998), who shows that changes in modest dress practices in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference

did not come from church authorities but from individual lay women. Changes in the behavior of individual women ultimately led to the acceptance of those changes by the church as a whole.

Each of our narrators agree that one modest dress practice, veiling, has Biblical significance and therefore cannot be eliminated. As noted by Graybill (2002) in her study of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, veiling symbolizes the submission of women to male authority. Veiling is discussed by all seven of our narrators, frequently in the context of a specific Biblical directive. Furthermore, our narrators agree that veiling symbolizes submission to God and to men. In spite of this theological underpinning, however, our narrators note that change occurs. Joyce notes that the older net cap has given way to the flowing veil (57), while Amy notes the fluctuation in the size of the veil in her own life, even using it as a source of humor (12-13).

Writing as a practicing Amish man, Coletti (2014) points out that Anabaptist life and practice are based on three principles. One of these, “non-conformity” (outward forms that differentiate these communities from their neighbors) underlies specific external practices. The other two principles, *Gelassenheit* (one’s relationship in submission to God) and “separation” (rejection of the world’s system) underlie inner attitudes. Claudia emphasizes that modesty is a practical application of an inner attitude (38) and a “reflection of the heart” (36). This inner attitude is unchanging. According to Elaine, modest dress practices are fixed in eternals such as the nature of men and women, and the nature of God (68, 69). Transmitting the inner attitude is “the whole thing” (67).

Our narrators believe that if the inner attitudes are not transmitted, the external practices will be lost. Joyce (50) and Claudia (33) were not motivated to enter the conversation about modest dress practices until they found the inner motivation to do so. A personal, inner faith experience brings conservative Anabaptists like Claudia to the table (38). As Joyce says, “If we don’t know why we are doing [modest dress], it will be lost” (52).

CONCLUSION

A full understanding of modest dress practice will consider an individual’s decision-making experience as she relates to her faith, church, and

family. It will also account for the expectation that church practice will change from generation to generation, along with the individual’s felt responsibility of shaping the practice for the future. In the light of insufficient formal teaching in the area, the narrators frequently mention active steps they took to develop their approach to modesty. While most parents took active roles in transmitting modest dress practices, some of them encouraged their daughters to truly internalize the community’s motivations for modest dress. Change was a common theme, with individuals evaluating change in terms of their conception of modesty. Their primary concern was with the transmission of attitudes, not external practices. Some of the women struggled with modest dress practices before finally embracing them. Further research should document the experience of those who remain in the community without adopting the community’s motivations for modest dress. As we indicate in the introduction, these seven women were and continue to be extensively involved in a constantly evolving set of standards.

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