



Working with Low German Speaking Mennonites: A Guide For Service Providers

Developed by the Low German Speaking Mennonite Community of Practice of Elgin, St. Thomas, Oxford, and Norfolk

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Contact

Please contact us if you have any questions, additions, or updates to this document:

Mennonite Community Services – arc@mcson.org, 226-544-0380

St. Thomas Elgin Local Immigration Partnership – communications@stelip.ca, 519-631-9800

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About the LGSM COP

The Low German Speaking Mennonite Community of Practice of Elgin, St. Thomas, Oxford, and Norfolk (LGSM COP) is a group of service providers from across Elgin-St. Thomas, Oxford, and Norfolk who meet four times yearly to learn and share resources and promising practices about serving LGS Mennonite clients. The LGSM COP is run by a steering committee of representatives from local organizations.

Please reach out to the contacts listed above if you would like more information or would like to join the LGSM COP.

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Introduction

Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites have been settling in southwestern Ontario since the late 1950s, in areas including Essex, Chatham-Kent, Elgin, Oxford, Norfolk, and Niagara. Many are identifiable by their distinctive dress, specific surnames, and Low German (Plautdietsch) language. LGS Mennonite is a broad classification created to refer to a group of Mennonites with a common language and shared migration history. They are considered an ethnoreligious group—a group that shares both a common religious and ethnic origin. Due to their particular history and culture, LGS Mennonites often require specific considerations and accommodations when accessing community services like education, healthcare, or social services.



Figure 1: Three Low German Speaking Mennonites pose in a farm field. This is an example of clothing worn by many LGS Mennonites. (Source: Kennert Giesbrecht)

LGS Mennonites represent a subset of Mennonites, who are Anabaptist Christians. Their particular branch of Christianity originated during Anabaptist religious reform movements in 16th century Europe, in what is known today as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany. Mennonites in general are a diverse faith group; there are Mennonite churches across the world. LGS Mennonites are one particular group of Mennonites who also share common ethnic origins and have a distinct culture, in addition to shared religious origins.

LGS Mennonites have a long history of migration from their homeland of present-day Netherlands and northern Germany, to present-day Poland, to present-day Ukraine, to the Americas, particularly Western Canada, to Mexico and Central and South American countries, and then back to Canada. Their migration history is a response to the persecution, discrimination, and broken promises that LGS Mennonites have faced throughout history. In order to preserve their faith, culture, and values, LGS Mennonites have chosen again and again to migrate to new countries. For this reason, they tend to be apprehensive about engaging with any outside agency, including service providers.

However, the latest pattern of migration to southwestern Ontario tends to be because of land shortages and other economic factors. Most LGS Mennonites settling in southwestern Ontario are coming from Mexico and Central and South American countries like Belize, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, and Colombia for economic stability and opportunities. And since many of them have ancestors, like a grandparent, who were Canadian citizens, immigration and citizenship status can be quite complex and unique to this group.

Today, there are approximately 60,000 LGS Mennonites living in southwestern Ontario. They make up part of our rich and diverse communities.

Purpose of this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide service providers with information and cultural and historical context about Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites in southwestern Ontario. It also includes recommendations for working with LGS Mennonites as a service provider. By better understanding the LGS Mennonite community, including their unique history and cultural characteristics, you will be better able to meet their needs and provide a higher level of service and care.

This guide provides general information. Like any other group of people, LGS Mennonites are diverse and each person will have different opinions, beliefs, and experiences. This guide is meant to give a general overview of LGS Mennonite history and common cultural characteristics, with a particular focus on LGS Mennonites with close ties to Mennonite colonies in Mexico and Central and South America. It never presumes to speak definitively for all LGS Mennonites.

This guide is written so that a service provider with little to no knowledge of LGS Mennonites will be able to understand and use the information and recommendations contained in this guide.

This guide was developed by the **Low German Speaking Mennonite Community of Practice of Elgin, St. Thomas, Oxford, and Norfolk**. This group is run by a steering committee and made up of service providers from across Elgin-St. Thomas, Oxford, and Norfolk, who meet four times yearly to learn and share resources and promising practices about serving LGS Mennonite clients.

LOW GERMAN SPEAKING MENNONITE NAMES

Like other ethnic groups, many LGS Mennonites have distinct surnames.

Some common LGS Mennonite last names include: Bergen, Braun, Klassen, Dyck, Enns, Fehr, Friesen, Froese, Loewen, Martens, Neufeld, Peters, Redekop, Rempel, Sawatzky, Thiessen, Wiebe, and Wall.

Although, not everyone with these surnames is LGS Mennonite or identifies as LGS Mennonite.

Who are the Low German Speaking Mennonites?

Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites are one group of Mennonites, who are Anabaptist Christians and speak Low German (Plautdietsch). They are sometimes referred to as "Russian Mennonites" because they lived for a time in an area ruled by Russia (modern-day Ukraine).

Mennonites originated during Anabaptist religious reform movements in 16th century Europe in the areas known today as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany. Mennonites in general are a diverse faith group; there are Mennonite churches across the world with members from wide-ranging cultural backgrounds. Mennonites all share the same core beliefs, but different groups have different interpretations of how best to live out their faith. This is why some Mennonites might appear indistinguishable from mainstream society, while others might choose

to not adopt any modern technology, wear conservative handmade clothing, or educate their children in private religious schools.

Within the broad group of Mennonites, some, like LGS Mennonites, are considered an ethnoreligious group. This means that they share common ethnic origins and have a distinct culture, in addition to shared religious origins. LGS Mennonites originated in present-day Netherlands and northern Germany, and undertook a series of migrations to present-day Poland, then to present-day Ukraine, then to the Americas, particularly Western Canada, then to Mexico and Central and South American countries, and then back to Canada. LGS Mennonites are not the only ethnoreligious Mennonite group. Another large ethnoreligious Mennonite group who live in Ontario are the Old Order Mennonites, who originated in Switzerland and southern Germany and speak Pennsylvania Dutch.

Some Mennonite groups are more progressive, and others are more conservative. In the religious context, these designations refer to their respective church's openness to adapting and changing traditions (including adopting new technology and styles of clothing). It is not necessarily synonymous with the political definitions of "progressive" and "conservative". LGS Mennonites, particularly those who live or have lived in Mexico and Central and South America, tend to be more conservative.

Additionally, within the LGS Mennonite community, there are many different groups that attend different churches or have different expressions of faith. Each of these churches have various interpretations of how best to follow their faith, meaning they have different rules of what is acceptable, particularly in terms of adopting new technology. Some names of types of LGS Mennonite churches you may hear are: Old Colony, Sommerfelder, Reinlander, Kleine Gemeinde, Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church (EMMC), Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC), and Christian Mennonite.

Why is it important for service providers to understand Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites?

As a service provider, it's important to understand who the LGS Mennonites are because they have specific experiences and beliefs that impact their interactions with service providers. They are not exactly the same as other Mennonite or Anabaptist groups, and assuming as such could make it harder to provide service and care. For example, LGS Mennonites generally have OHIP cards whereas Amish and Old Order Mennonites usually do not. Making the assumption that they have similar healthcare beliefs (or believing all Anabaptist groups to be one similar group) has led to some LGS Mennonites having difficulty accessing healthcare despite being covered by OHIP. Secondly, it's important to understand that, like all clients, not all LGS Mennonites share the exact same values. One LGS Mennonite client may be comfortable with something that another is not, so it's important to not make assumptions, and instead ask and listen to each individual client.



Figure 2: An Amish Family in Aylmer. The Amish in the area are sometimes identifiable by their bonnets for women (whereas LGS Mennonite women wear kerchiefs as a head covering), beards and wide-brimmed hats for men, solid-coloured clothing, and use of horse and buggies. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MENNONITES AND AMISH?

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MENNONITES AND AMISH?

Mennonites and Amish both have roots in the Anabaptist reform movement. The Amish split away from the main Anabaptist movement, which became the Mennonites.

Many Amish share similar characteristics to more conservative Mennonites, including not using modern technology like cars and dressing in conservative clothes, including long dresses and head coverings for women.

However, Mennonites and Amish are different groups. Although they may live in close proximity, like in the Aylmer area for example, they are not closely related and should not be conflated.



Figure 3: Low German Speaking Mennonites in Campeche, Mexico. You can see the differences in dress compared to the Amish, including patterned dresses and shirts and different style hats. Men will also wear baseball hats and women will wear kerchiefs. LGS Mennonites in southwestern Ontario also do not use horse and buggies. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 4: A group of LGS Mennonite women in Aylmer, ON. Here you can see an example of the head covering commonly worn by many LGS Mennonites. Young girls may wear a white kerchief. Women, once baptized or married, wear a black kerchief. (Source: MCS)

Summary

- LGS Mennonites are one group of Mennonites, who are Anabaptist Christians. They tend to be more conservative, meaning they have maintained many of their traditions.
- Mennonites live worldwide and are diverse. While they share the same core beliefs, they all have different interpretations of how to live out their faith.
- LGS Mennonites are an ethnoreligious group; they share both common religious and ethnic origins.
- LGS Mennonites originated in present-day Netherlands and northern Germany and have undertaken a series of migrations that eventually led many to Mexico and Central and South American countries. Since the 1950s, many have been returning to Canada.
- Within the LGS Mennonite community, there are different groups that attend different types of churches. Each of these churches have different interpretations of how to follow their faith, particularly concerning adopting new technology.
- It is important to understand who the LGS Mennonites are, and the fact that they do not all share the exact same beliefs, in order to serve LGS Mennonite clients effectively.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOW GERMAN SPEAKING MENNONITES AND OLD ORDER MENNONITES?

While LGS Mennonites and Old Order Mennonites are both ethnoreligious Mennonite groups, and many share similar characteristics like conservative dress and limiting technology, they originated in different areas in Europe.

Old Order Mennonites originated in Switzerland and southern Germany, and generally speak Pennsylvania Dutch. There are also settlements of Old Order Mennonites in southern Ontario, particularly around the Waterloo Region. These settlements are well established; Old Order Mennonites came to the area via Pennsylvania starting in the early 1800s.

Historical Context and Impacts on Service Providers

LGS Mennonite History

WHAT IS PACIFISM?

Pacifism is the opposition of violence and war. Some Christian groups are pacifists as an extension of their faith; they believe that violence and war are incompatible with their Christian beliefs.

Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites originated in present-day Netherlands and northern Germany as part of the Anabaptist Christian movement during what is called the Reformation, which also saw the development of Protestant Christianity. (Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites are all Anabaptists and share some common beliefs). Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest, became an important leader among Anabaptist Christians. "Mennonites" were named after him to distinguish this particular pacifist Anabaptist group.

Some important Mennonite beliefs include:

- A literal interpretation of the Bible
- The separation of church and state
- Pacifism
- Adult baptism (instead of infant baptism)

These beliefs—which were seen as radical—often put them at odds with other Christian groups, including other Protestant groups.

As a minority group, Mennonites were persecuted by dominant powers (both Catholic and Protestant) throughout history. In order to preserve their faith, language, and culture amid persecution and pressure to assimilate, Mennonites moved from country to country. It was especially important to them to maintain a separate Mennonite education system in their own language, a value that would cause conflict with authorities throughout history. From present-day Netherlands and Northern Germany, LGS Mennonites moved to present-day Poland, then present-day Ukraine, then the Americas, particularly Western Canada, then to Mexico and Central and South American countries, and have been moving back to Canada since the 1950s.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism is a Christian rite that uses water, either sprinkling water onto a person's forehead or immersing the person in water, to signify admission into Christianity. Many Christians practice infant baptism. Mennonites practice adult baptism (believer's baptism) and believe that a person must be able to choose to commit to Christianity before they are baptized.

LGS Mennonite Migrations

The following timeline outlines the series of migrations that Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites have undertaken since their formation in the 1500s. However, it's important to understand that, like any large group of people, this does not represent the path that every LGS Mennonite took over the centuries. During every mass migration, some LGS Mennonites remained. Nonetheless, many LGS Mennonites did follow this exact path, particularly the LGS Mennonites who are now settled in southwestern Ontario. Often, mass migration occurred when authorities began forcing LGS Mennonites to go against one of their core beliefs. This history of migration to preserve their life and values deeply shapes LGS Mennonite culture today.



Figure 5: LGS Mennonite settlements throughout history.

WHAT DOES 'OLD COLONY' MEAN?

'Old Colony' is a designation given to LGS Mennonites who descend from those who lived in the first Mennonite colony in what is now Ukraine (the Chortitza/Khortytzia Colony). Many of the LGS Mennonites in southwestern Ontario are 'Old Colony Mennonites'. Some LGS Mennonite churches are also called 'Old Colony'.

1500s - Netherlands and Northern Germany

- Origin of Low German Speaking (LGS) Mennonites.
- Mennonites began as Anabaptists. They were later named after early Anabaptist faith leader Menno Simons, who broke away from the Catholic Church during the Reformation.
- Mennonites were persecuted and killed by dominant powers throughout the 1500s and 1600s.

1600s - Present-day Poland (Prussia)

- LGS Mennonites moved to the Vistula Delta region in present-day Poland to escape persecution, practice their religion freely, and be exempt from military service.
- Low German became the dominant language of this group of Mennonites, and the unique Plautdietsch (Mennonite Low German) variety emerged during this time. Before this, LGS Mennonites spoke many different languages, including Dutch, Frisian, and different varieties of Low German.
- However, Mennonites were subject to special laws and taxes and still experienced discrimination. Eventually, they were no longer exempt from military service.

Late 1700s - Present-day Ukraine (Russia)

- LGS Mennonites were invited to settle what is now southern Ukraine by the Russian rulers who controlled the land at the time.
- Mennonites were granted military freedom and the right to self-govern and practice their religion.
- Today, when we hear the term "Old Colony Mennonites" it refers to the descendants of the first colony in Ukraine (Chortitza/Khortytsia).
- By the late 1800s, Mennonites were no longer exempt from military service and were not able to conduct their schools in their language. They were also experiencing a land shortage.

1870s - North America

- Approximately 11,000 LGS Mennonites moved from Ukraine to the USA. Another 7000 moved to Western Canada. Both these countries were actively recruiting settlers to colonize their western territories.
- In Western Canada, LGS Mennonites worked to establish their own schools.
- A growing anti-German sentiment, fuelled by the First World War, led to increased discrimination against LGS Mennonites.
- In 1918, attendance at public (English) schools became mandatory in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan. This directly contradicted the LGS Mennonites' agreement with the government.
- Also in 1918, the federal government legislated conscription, meaning that all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 45 were required to serve in the military if called, for the duration of the war.

1920s - Mexico and Central and South American Countries

- After negotiating with the Mexican president to ensure religious freedom, exemption from military service, and the right to run their own schools, thousands of LGS Mennonites left Western Canada for Mexico.
- There are LGS Mennonite colonies throughout Mexico, particularly concentrated in northern Mexico in places like Durango and Chihuahua.
- From Mexico, others have moved to create colonies in Central and South American countries, including Belize, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, and Colombia.

1950s-present - Return to Canada

- LGS Mennonites started to return to Canada, especially southwestern Ontario, due to land shortages and for better economic opportunities.
- Unlike other migrations, LGS Mennonites did not move as a cohesive group, but on a family-by-family basis. They did not settle in a new colony, but in already established communities. As more LGS Mennonites arrived in southwestern Ontario, they were able to establish a network of LGS Mennonite churches.
- Many LGS Mennonites had family members, like grandparents, who were Canadian citizens, and therefore had claim to Canadian citizenship themselves. However, changing Canadian immigration laws meant that not all LGS Mennonites were able to get Canadian citizenship, making immigration complicated, even within families.

There are a number of patterns within the history of LGS Mennonite migrations. LGS Mennonites continued to move to escape persecution, seek new land to be able to support their families, avoid military service and preserve their pacifist beliefs, ensure they could run their own schools in their own language, and in general preserve their religious beliefs and culture.

Time and time again, LGS Mennonites believed they had settled in a place that would allow them to live their lives the way they wanted. In some cases, they had agreements with governments to ensure exemption from military service and the right to religious and cultural autonomy. But usually these agreements eventually fell through; Mennonites were no longer exempt from military service and/or able to run their own schools, and many ultimately chose to migrate again.

During each migration, LGS Mennonites often moved onto land that was not cultivated for agriculture. They worked to set up productive agricultural practices on their new land, which was often a difficult process. This practice was often appreciated by local governments for its economic and political benefits.

Today there are LGS Mennonites living in many different countries. The countries with the most LGS Mennonites include Canada (estimated over 100,000) Mexico (74,000 in 2022), Bolivia (estimated 150,000 in 2023), and Paraguay (38,000 in 2022). Even though LGS Mennonites have maintained a distinct and separate culture throughout the centuries, they have also contributed to, and been influenced by, the cultures in each of the places they have lived.

WHAT IS CULTURAL HUMILITY?

Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection, where you commit to not only learning about someone else's culture, but also examining your own culture, beliefs, and values. Cultural humility asks you to understand how your own culture shapes your interactions with others and to recognize others' culture and experiences as equally complex and individual as yours. It focuses on mutual respect, redressing power imbalances, and a lifelong process of learning.

For more information, refer to the Resources section of this document.

How does this impact service providers?

It is important to understand LGS Mennonite history because it deeply shapes LGS Mennonite culture and their interactions with service providers today. There are many reasons why LGS Mennonites, especially newcomers, may be hesitant to interact with you as a service provider, including a historic distrust of authorities, experiences of discrimination, and a culture of non-engagement with conflict.

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic response only heightened the tension between LGS Mennonites and other community members. The government-enforced health measures recalled past bad experiences for many LGS Mennonites and contributed to an increased distrust of authorities. Particularly the limit on gatherings, including religious services, was seen by some as directly pitting following their faith against following the government, bringing that longstanding and historical conflict to the forefront. Moreover, communication barriers, including the language barrier, contributed to misinformation about the pandemic being circulated in LGS Mennonite communities. At the same time, many LGS Mennonites experienced increased discrimination by their non-Mennonite neighbours, who came to unfairly view the whole group as non-compliant and more likely to have COVID-19. For all these reasons, some LGS Mennonites chose to return to Mexico (or other Central and South American countries of origin). This also contributed to workforce shortages in southwestern Ontario, especially in agriculture.

It is imperative that you approach interactions with LGS Mennonite clients with a sense of cultural humility and respect and a desire to understand and listen. Regardless of your personal

HOW DO LGS MENNONITES IDENTIFY THEMSELVES?

Faith, culture, and language for LGS Mennonites are often seen as interrelated and/or inseparable from each other. Many LGS Mennonites will identify themselves as “German” or “Dietsch” and indicate that they speak “German”. Although German, or High German, is taught in some LGS Mennonite schools and used in some church services (especially in colonies), generally LGS Mennonites are referring to Low German (Plautdietsch) when they say “German”. This can make it difficult when requesting interpretation or trying to accurately count the number of Low German speakers.

Other LGS Mennonite may identify themselves simply as “Mennonite” or occasionally “Mexican Mennonite”, although the term “Low German Speaking Mennonite” is used most often and some find “Mexican Mennonite” offensive. Some Mennonites may also identify themselves with one or multiple nationalities, like Canadian or Mexican. Others may not even identify much with their Mennonite heritage at all. Like anyone else, identity is personal to the individual. Even family members may not identify the same way.

beliefs and values, do not approach an interaction with the intent to change an LGS Mennonite client's values or beliefs. Instead, try to meet them where they are and offer the service that they want or need. Focus on building trust.

Understanding LGS Mennonite history and culture and being respectful and sensitive during your interactions with LGS Mennonite clients has never been more important.

Distrust of Authorities

LGS Mennonites have a historic distrust of authorities built by years of discrimination, persecution, and broken promises by governments. As a matter of survival and maintaining their distinct culture, many LGS Mennonites have relied only on their own communities for generations. Generally, they value separateness and see their church as the authority in their lives, not the government. Altogether, this may make it difficult for LGS Mennonites, especially newcomers, to want to engage with or trust service providers. Even if you are not directly a government employee, LGS Mennonite clients may view you as an 'authority' and see you as part of the broader Canadian social system. Furthermore, LGS Mennonites, especially newcomers, may be unfamiliar with Canadian social systems; they may not understand who different service providers are, what they offer, or how to navigate the system.

Experiences of Discrimination

LGS Mennonites have historically been discriminated against and continue to experience discrimination on the basis of their Mennonite identity in Canada today. LGS Mennonite values are often viewed as 'backward', 'stuck in the past', and/or 'undesirable' by mainstream Canadians. Moreover, many Mennonites are easily identified as 'other' by their clothing, language, and/or surnames. These 'othered' traits and values are the target of discrimination in the form of insults, derogatory language, inappropriate jokes, exclusion etc. Sometimes, the discrimination takes on a racial tone. Since many LGS Mennonites arrive from Latin American countries, some perpetrators use racial slurs and other insulting language that is otherwise usually aimed at ethnically Mexican and other Latin American people. Therefore, in addition to facing discrimination due to their status as newcomers and/or immigrants, LGS Mennonites face discrimination based on multiple aspects of their life and values. When LGS Mennonites interact with you as a service provider, they may be anticipating discrimination and judgment and are ready to walk away at the first hint of it.

GENERATIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

This quote from a young student in 1922 shares an experience that is still relevant for some LGS Mennonites today, a feeling of being caught between two worlds and having their values at best misunderstood and at worst ridiculed:

"For the child of my father's and my generation, school could be, and often was, a painful place. Everything valued by one's parents, everything that made up one's after-school life, was feared, misunderstood, occasionally ridiculed, and always subtly undermined. Everything associated with the most significant landmarks of human existence, everything that was most sacred, most poignant, most satisfying—all of that was somehow second or third-rate."

Non-engagement with Conflict

Many LGS Mennonites prefer to simply leave or not engage when faced with conflict, or a potential conflict. As a service provider, this may be particularly confusing or challenging if an LGS Mennonite client simply ends the relationship and stops accessing your service without any prior indication of an issue. LGS Mennonites often prefer to leave than to risk offending you as a service provider. Again, this characteristic is often a result of LGS Mennonite history and pacifist values, where, historically, an effective solution to persecution, discrimination, or conflict was to move to a new place.



Figure 6 (above): Traditional LGS Mennonite head coverings. This type of head covering is often worn by LGSM living in colonies.

Figure 8 (right): An LGSM worker at a bakery, owned by LGS Mennonites, in Aylmer, ON.

(Source: MCS)



Figure 7 (left): An LGSM woman at Mennonite Community Services in Aylmer, ON. (Source: MCS)



Low German Speaking Mennonite Culture and Impacts on Service Provision

The following sections outline key common cultural values, beliefs, and experiences within LGS Mennonite communities, particularly LGS Mennonites from colonies in Mexico, and to some degree, other Central and South American countries. LGS Mennonites generally value a collectivist approach to community, meaning that they value the needs, goals, and well-being of the group over those of the individual.

Low German Language (Plautdietsch)

Low German Speaking Mennonites speak Low German, as is evident in the name for this group. The Low German name for the language is "Plautdietsch" (pronounced plöt-deetsch), and the language is sometimes also referred to as "Mennonite Low German". Low German, which is distinct from modern (High) German, originated in and around present-day northern Germany. Technically, "Low German" is a language that has many different varieties, of which "Plautdietsch" is one such variety. But functionally in the southwestern Ontario region, and in Canada more broadly, "Low German" specifically refers to Plautdietsch or Mennonite Low German.

The Low German language is often seen as a very important part of LGS Mennonite culture, and the language ties together LGS Mennonites across the world. Moreover, faith, culture, and language for LGS Mennonites are often seen as interrelated and/or inseparable from each other. It's also important to note that many LGS Mennonites will identify themselves as "German" or "Dietsch" and indicate that they speak "German". Although German, or High German, is taught in some LGS Mennonite schools and used in some church services (especially in colonies), generally LGS Mennonites are referring to Low German when they say "German". This can make it difficult when requesting interpretation or trying to accurately count the number of Low German speakers.

Impacts on Service Provision

- Because the Low German language is such an important part of many LGS Mennonites' identity, learning a few Low German phrases can help build connection and trust.
- Since there are multiple ways to refer to the language ("Plautdietsch", "Low German", or even, inaccurately, "German"), it can be difficult to accurately understand the number of people who speak Low German.
- This can also be a barrier when communicating the need for interpretation. Make sure to always clarify the language needed for interpretation and use multiple names ("Plautdietsch" and "Low German") when requesting interpretation. (Don't request interpretation in German, however, as a standard German interpreter will not be effective).

- It may be beneficial to track the number of clients who speak Low German (Plautdietsch) to get a more accurate understanding of your clients' needs.
- Not every interpretation and/or translation service offers Low German. This is an additional barrier to offering effective interpretation. Be sure to check that the interpretation service offers Low German.
- Having a Low German speaker in your organization is a great asset.

Values and Beliefs

Clothing and Modesty

Modesty is an important value for many LGS Mennonites, especially those from colonies in Mexico and Central and South America. Many LGS Mennonites wear distinct clothing that is specific to each gender. Women wear long dresses, often in a floral print, and head coverings, which are seen as a signifier as 'separate' from non-Mennonites. Young girls may wear a white kerchief, while black kerchiefs are worn by women once they are baptized or married. In LGS Mennonite colonies, women may also wear brimmed straw hats with ribbons—the colour and width of the ribbon is usually decided upon through community and church consensus. Men often wear overalls and collared shirts along with Western (cowboy) hats or baseball hats.

Religion and Church Life

LGS Mennonites attend church service on Sunday, which is seen as a day of rest—certain tasks and chores are avoided on this day. Church services are conducted either in High (regular) German or Low German. Positions of authority in the church—bishops, ministers, deacons, and song leaders—are selected by the church members. Bishops and ministers hold their positions for life, or as long as they are able to perform their duties. But they are not employed by the church; they will usually have a job in addition to their church position.

Churches are integral to LGS Mennonite communities, especially in LGS Mennonite colonies. They are central decision-makers and authorities, places of faith and meaning-making, centres of community, and, to some degree, a social safety net (churches collect and distribute funds for families in need). However, because the separation of church and state is

WHAT DO BISHOPS, MINISTERS, DEACONS, AND SONG LEADERS DO IN A LGS MENNONITE CHURCH?

Bishops are the ultimate authority within the church. They ordain ministers and perform baptisms, weddings, funerals, and communion (called the Lord's Supper). Ministers assist bishops and preach during the Sunday church service. Ministers may rotate between churches in their region. Deacons support the needs of the congregation (church members) outside of the Sunday church service, including keeping records and distributing funds for families in need. Song leaders lead songs during the church service.

valued, church services are reserved for worship only and are not a place where general community information is shared.

A person must become a member of the church, usually through attending membership classes, reciting the Catechism (memorization of questions and answers that summarize beliefs), and publicly confessing their faith. The expectation is to follow the church's direction concerning all parts of life, which ultimately ensures that their way of life is maintained. Allowed changes often happen very slowly, especially in colony churches, and only with careful consideration to ensure the LGS Mennonite way of life remains intact. Church leaders will meet with any members who do not follow their direction to try to rectify the situation. The most extreme solution for non-compliance with church direction is excommunication, which severs all ties with the community.

Old Colony Mennonite churches in Canada tend to be more progressive (open to changing or adapting tradition) than their counterparts in Mexico and Central and South America. This is partially a result of having to navigate an existence outside of a colony context in a pluralistic Canadian society. When LGS Mennonite families move to Canada, some will look to join an Old Colony Church and find that the maintenance of that tradition is important to them. Others may look for an alternative Mennonite church (or even a different church altogether or perhaps no church at all). They may even have chosen to move to Canada because of a disagreement or conflict with their local community and/or church. Even within families, family members may belong to different churches. Additionally, LGS Mennonite churches in southwestern Ontario tend to cover large geographic areas, sometimes stretching across municipal boundaries.

Religious Holidays

The following is a list of dates of important LGS Mennonite holidays. These days have particular religious significance and will be celebrated with special church services and gathering with family. Many LGS Mennonites will not attend school or work during these holidays. Some people, especially young mothers, may need more time off in advance to prepare for these holidays. While many LGS Mennonites will be used to taking three days off for Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, most will only observe two days in Canada.

Christmas	December 25-27
Epiphany	January 6
Good Friday	The Friday before Easter Sunday.
Easter Sunday	The first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox. Easter is also celebrated on the Monday (and sometimes Tuesday) following Easter Sunday, making it a two- or three-day holiday (Sunday to Tuesday).
Ascension Day	The sixth Thursday after Easter.
Pentecost	The seventh Sunday after Easter, lasting three days (Sunday to Tuesday).

Topics of Contention

The following is a partial list of topics that may make LGS Mennonite clients uncomfortable and that they may interpret as contrary or incompatible with their beliefs and values. Depending on the situation, as a service provider you may decide to avoid these topics or approach them with utmost respect and care. Remember to ask LGS Mennonites about what would work best for them in any given situation.

- Scientific theories of evolution, including the existence of dinosaurs.
- Supernatural creatures like witches, vampires, goblins, ghosts, and monsters.
- Halloween.
- Magic.
- Movies and TV, sometimes in general. Particularly superheroes and other Hollywood movies.
- Sexual education.
- Pregnancy, including nursing babies.
- Atheism, agnosticism, other religious beliefs (especially the worship of other deities).
- Varying interpretations of Christianity or the Bible.
- Divorce, living common law with a partner outside of marriage, or 2SLGBTQ+ topics.
- Tattoos, multiple piercings, or revealing clothing.

Swear Words and the Swearing of Oaths

Many LGS Mennonites abstain from swearing an oath and from swearing in general. It is important to distinguish between what is commonly called swearing and making a solemn oath for the purposes of court or at citizenship ceremony.

When it comes to swearing an oath to affirm or make a declaration, LGS Mennonite faith leaders actively teach that swearing is not appropriate. This teaching is based on the Bible, specifically the verse found in Matthew 5:33-38. The need to swear an oath and add to the strength of a statement is seen as diminishing the 'yes' and 'no' as though a person is not fully truthful until an oath is added. LGS Mennonites believe that they should live honest and upright lives before God and people at all times, so there is no need to emphasize or attest to the truth of their words by swearing an oath. Most LGS Mennonites prefer to affirm a declaration rather than swear to a declaration. Service providers should offer the use of 'I affirm' whenever possible. In Canada it is their legal right to do so in places such as in an affidavit, in the court of law, and in solemn ceremonies such as taking the Oath of Citizenship.

Using strong language or swear words in conversation is not uncommon amongst LGS Mennonite peers, but LGS Mennonite groups may differ on which words constitute swearing. However, when interacting with authority figures, especially as it relates to church authority, it is considered disrespectful to swear or use strong language. Parents discourage swearing and strong language, especially in young children. For some, the use of English swear words is more common, perhaps because they are not familiar with the meaning. It is also more commonly accepted in some LGS Mennonite groups than others. But in almost all groups, the

use of phrases such as 'oh my God' or 'Lord help us' are very offensive. LGS Mennonites believe that God's name or referring to the Lord is to be taken seriously and used reverently.

Exaggeration in general is discouraged. For example, saying that you are starving should only be said if a person is actually undernourished or hungry to the point of endangering life. Similarly, referring to a person as evil and using expressions with the word 'hell' or 'speak of the devil' are not accepted. This is because LGS Mennonites believe in the being of the devil/satan and demon possession. It is not to be used as an insult, joke or to emphasize language.

Impacts on Service Provision

- Many LGS Mennonite clients may feel more comfortable engaging with a service provider who is modestly dressed (e.g., covering shoulders and knees with no low-cut shirts).
- LGS Mennonite clients may feel more comfortable with a same gender service provider. Offer this option if possible.
- Don't assume LGS Mennonites are connected to a church, or even other LGS Mennonite families in the area, and receive support from them. Similarly, don't assume that all family members are connected to the same church (or any church).
- While church leaders can be important resources to share information about resources and build connections with, they may not always have the capacity to take on additional roles and responsibilities to do with service provision.
- Most LGS Mennonites do not view a church service as an appropriate place to disseminate community information, so this is not an appropriate channel to share information about resources or services. Church leaders may be involved in sharing information with the community outside of the church service.
- Because of the value and authority placed in the church, LGS Mennonite clients may be very hesitant to do anything that their church disagrees with, or that they think their church might disagree with (or even that their church hasn't explicitly allowed). Always try to ask and work together to find solutions.
- Because many LGS Mennonites value conformity to their group and a separateness from society, a LGS Mennonite client may be unwilling to do anything that their broader community isn't doing (or that they perceive that the broader community isn't doing). Again, try to ask and work together to find solutions.
- LGS Mennonite clients may feel uncomfortable telling you about a potential conflict and may instead just disengage completely. If possible, try to anticipate and prepare for possible conflicts.
- Additionally, your agency and/or sector should work to build relationships with the LGS Mennonite community and develop strategies that consider their needs and concerns.
- Offer clients the choice to affirm when asking them to sign or verbalize an oath.

- Remember newcomer LGS Mennonites often face language barriers and service providers should be mindful to not take advantage of this when dealing with oaths.
- Be mindful around the use of general swearing as it often leads to immediate distrust or disrespect.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.

Experiences of Moving from a Colony to Canada



Figure 9: A group of LGS Mennonite children in a colony in Mexico. They are playing with a toy tractor, imitating the work they see their parents do. (Source: Kennert Giesbrecht)

LGS Mennonites are often impacted by the many cultural differences that exist in Ontario compared to life in colonies in Mexico, Central or South America. Colonies are much more homogenous—most people share similar beliefs, values, and cultural background, even when a diversity of churches or traditions is present. In Ontario, LGS Mennonites settle in established communities with a diversity of people, who have a variety of beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, LGS Mennonite newcomers encounter dominant Canadian norms and values that may differ, or even conflict, with their own. (For example, Canada tends to be an individualistic society, where the needs and wants of an individual are valued the most).

Many aspects of life are different in Canada compared to their homes in Mexico or Central and South American countries; things like healthcare, education, and other social systems are very different and can be hard to navigate for LGS Mennonite newcomers. Canada also has more government oversight, with potentially unfamiliar rules and regulations governing parts of life that, for LGS Mennonite newcomers coming from a colony, were previously the domain of church authority, not the government.

Moreover, moving to a new country means leaving behind a support system of family, friends and community. It can be an isolating and lonely experience for LGS Mennonites to settle in Canada, even in areas with established LGS Mennonite communities. (Don't assume an LGS Mennonite newcomer is automatically connected to other LGS Mennonites in the area). The isolation can be compounded by the language barrier and a lack of economic stability. Additionally, moving to Canada often brings a process of integration, or even assimilation, into mainstream Canadian culture to some degree. In Canada, families may feel alienated by relatives who have decided to integrate to more or less of a degree than them.

Impacts on Service Provision

- Because LGS Mennonite newcomers are navigating a new country and culture, they may require extra patience and understanding. As a service provider, expect unfamiliarity to some degree. Be patient and offer to explain both how things work and why.
- Double check that your clients understand the information or service you are offering. Ask questions and involve them in the process. Make sure to ask if they can explain information you provided in their own words instead of just asking a simple yes or no question (like 'do you understand?').
- Don't automatically assume that a client is neglectful if they are not following Canadian rules and regulations like, for example, car seat regulations. They may simply be unaware.
- Understand the barriers that exist for LGS Mennonite clients accessing your services and work to remove or lessen them. If LGS Mennonites are not accessing your service as you would expect, consider what barriers (financial, cultural, language etc.) may be preventing them.
- LGS Mennonite newcomers will often benefit from being connected to other resources and services. Making referrals as a trusted service provider may help reduce barriers for LGS Mennonite to access other services. Try to make a 'warm' referral and ensure the provider you've referred to is familiar with LGS Mennonite culture and needs. (Share this resource!)
- Don't assume LGS Mennonites are connected to a church, or even other LGS Mennonite families in the area, and receive support from them. Similarly, don't assume that all family members are connected to the same church (or any church).
- Understand that every LGS Mennonite's experience of moving to Canada, and subsequently accessing services and resources, is unique.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.

Health and Mental Health

Unlike the dominant western perspective, many LGS Mennonites view illness and disability, and suffering more generally, as the will of God. Rather than view illness as something to cure, or disability as something to treat or mitigate, it is often seen as something to bear. Suffering is often seen as something that builds strength, and sometimes, illness or disability is interpreted as a punishment from God for sinning. A belief in the afterlife means that, for many LGS Mennonites, hope rests on the afterlife, not on something getting better over the course of their life.

Viewing illness or disability as something to bear, often silently, combined with a culture of non-engagement, a distrust of authorities, and a hesitancy to advocate can result in healthcare providers having difficulties understanding a LGS Mennonite client's experience and symptoms. This can also lead to misdiagnosis.

Mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression, may be understood together as the concept of "trouble with their nerves" (*Narfen Trubbel* in Low German); however, this is a wide-ranging concept that includes everything from typical emotional responses to more severe mental health conditions. Many LGS Mennonites, particularly those from colonies may not share a dominant Western understanding of addictions; they may understand that if a body craves something, it needs it. Although it should be noted that there are LGS Mennonite Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centres in Mexico and Bolivia.



Figure 10: LGS Mennonites marking the 100th anniversary of their settlements in Mexico (1922-2022). (Source: Abe Wall)

Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that LGS Mennonites don't experience health issues, both physical and mental, nor does it mean that they are averse to accessing healthcare. Many LGS Mennonite newcomers indicate that they value the healthcare offered in their new home in southwestern Ontario. Most LGS Mennonites in Ontario have OHIP cards and access the healthcare system (unlike the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, who often choose to abstain from obtaining OHIP coverage). But LGS Mennonite experiences, culture, and values can complicate the process of providing healthcare, and, as always, each individual will have their own unique beliefs around making sense of health and illness and accessing healthcare.

Healthcare Context in Colonies

LGS Mennonites who move to Southwestern Ontario from colonies in Mexico and Central and South American countries generally have a different understanding of healthcare and are used to a different healthcare system, which can make it more difficult to effectively access healthcare in Ontario. Many LGS Mennonites view health as the lack of illness; there is often very little concept of healthcare as preventative. As a result, some LGS Mennonites have a view of healthcare that centres only on accessing medicines, and they may only access healthcare when they have a serious health issue. To add to this, many medicines that require a prescription in Canada can be purchased over-the-counter in Mexico (and other origin countries). The existence of multiple appointments and referrals within the Canadian healthcare system may be frustrating and confusing for newly-arrived LGS Mennonites.

LGS Mennonites living in colonies also tend to rely on informal health providers, sometimes referred to as "Mennonite Chiropractors" (although they are not usually licensed chiropractors) who provide a range of home remedies. Informal health providers may also be consulted in Canada. This is not to say that LGS Mennonites don't access formal or Western healthcare, but

they do face barriers due to a variety of factors, including poverty, language barriers, and lack of education, in addition to cultural values.

Moving to Canada

Additionally, the experience of moving to a new country brings additional health risks—increased experiences of isolation, loneliness, and stress, which can contribute to both physical and mental health issues. Simultaneously, settling in a new country brings new language barriers and an unknown healthcare system to navigate. Women, in particular, tend to bear much of the weight of immigrating and settling their family in a new country, and may be particularly at risk for health issues and for facing barriers to accessing healthcare.

Lack of Health Education

A lack of health education or understanding about health-related topics also impacts many LGS Mennonites. This lack of health education is compounded by poverty and communication barriers. In particular, there tends to be much less understanding about nutrition and dental health and oral hygiene. For example, there may be an understanding that sugary, fruit-flavoured foods are healthy because they contain (or taste) like fruit. Diet changes that occur as a result of moving to Canada, for example more access to sugary or corn-syrup filled snacks, can also have adverse health effects.

Similarly, while tidiness and cleanliness are highly valued, some LGS Mennonites may not have as much of an understanding of germs. This can lead to beliefs such as thinking a sick child, who is potentially contagious, can be taken to visit family as long as they are clean (have had a bath).

Health standards like those for car seats, cribs, and other children's materials are different in Canada compared to Mexico and Central and South American countries and may come as a surprise to LGS Mennonite families.

Many LGS Mennonites may also be unaware of their family medical history, which is an additional barrier. If LGS families have been transient between Mexico and southwestern Ontario, for example, their children may have gaps in their immunizations or poor immunization records. Opinions on immunizations vary, but may have been negatively impacted by the rising anti-immunization sentiment across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impacts on Service Provision

- Be aware of how an LGS Mennonite's cultural understanding of health, illness, and disability can create difficulties in understanding a client's experiences and symptoms and in diagnosing a client. Ask specific questions about their experiences to gain as full a picture as possible.
- Understand that many LGS Mennonites may not seek healthcare until a health issue is serious.

- Provide culturally-sensitive health education, if appropriate.
- Don't automatically avoid testing for sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) if it may be needed. Work to ensure the client understands and feels comfortable. Be aware that many LGS Mennonites don't know the names of STIs.
- Poverty is a barrier to accessing healthcare, impacting ability to take time off work to attend appointments, have transportation to appointments, pay for additional costs or medication etc. If possible, provide transportation, extended hours, or reduced-cost services.
- Provide interpretation services if possible.
- Provide educational materials in plain language with descriptive pictures. (With sensitive health subjects, for example pregnancy, drawings as opposed to pictures may be better received). Since Low German is predominantly an oral language, written materials translated into Low German have limited effectiveness.
- Explain how the Canadian healthcare system works, particularly the process of referrals to other providers, if clients are unsure, confused, or frustrated with the process.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.

Family Planning

For the most part, topics of human growth and development are not taught or discussed in LGS Mennonite communities, including puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Pregnancy may be referred to as being in a "different time" and is only discussed with the direct service provider. Children will often be told that babies are bought at the hospital. Reproductive and sexual education is not allowed by some LGS Mennonite churches. Birth control is similarly not permitted by some churches; however, families may be willing to use birth control if recommended by a doctor for health reasons. (Note that these topics would not be talked about during a church service, but church members would be aware of their particular church's stance on reproductive and sexual education, use of birth control etc.)



Figure 11: A young LGS Mennonite girl in Aylmer, ON. (Source: MCS)

LGS Mennonite families are generally large, and having children is seen as a very important part of life. Mothers, in particular, often find a lot of worth and value in having and raising children. Consequently, LGS Mennonites may find it

offensive to hear jokes or comments about their large families made by outsiders. Many LGS Mennonite communities also collectively provide extensive postnatal care to new mothers.

Impacts on Service Provision

- LGS Mennonite clients usually don't want to talk about pregnancy in front of others, particularly children. Offer a private space if you need to discuss topics like pregnancy.
- LGS Mennonite clients may feel more comfortable with a same gender service provider, particularly in the case of sexual healthcare. Offer this option if possible.
- A lack of education or understanding about reproductive and sexual health, combined with a lack of terminology for these topics in Low German, can result in barriers for accessing reproductive and sexual healthcare.
- Don't automatically avoid testing for sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) if it may be needed. Work to ensure the client understands and feels comfortable. Be aware that many LGS Mennonites don't know the names of STIs.
- Acknowledge the strengths of LGS Mennonite communities as well, like a strong culture of collectively supporting mothers after giving birth.
- Approach topics of family planning and birth control with sensitivity, since opinions on its usage vary and it is generally not allowed by some churches.
- If you are providing services to children, for example as an educator, let parents know if you are going to be teaching about reproductive or sexual health ahead of time.
- Avoid making jokes or comments about the size of LGS Mennonite families, even well-meaning ones like "I don't know how you do it!" or "I could never have that many children, good for you!". Since many LGS Mennonites, especially mothers, find worth and value in having and raising children, this can be seen as offensive.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.

Family Dynamics and Gender Roles

Within LGS Mennonite culture, marriage is seen as strictly between a man and a woman. There are clearly defined gender roles, which particularly dictate the types of work and household responsibilities for each gender. Schools and churches are also divided by gender. Like many people, LGS Mennonites place a lot of value on succeeding in their roles and supporting their families. Women are generally in charge of child-rearing and domestic work. Men are generally the ones to work outside of the household. Although with agricultural work, sometimes the whole family works together. Generally, a messy household or unkempt children will be interpreted as a sign of distress, so a lot of value is placed on caring for their families and households.

Within a household, the man is seen as the head and the major decision-maker. Although decisions may be made in collaboration with his wife, the husband is seen as having the final authority. Children are often expected to help with taking care of their siblings and other household tasks and often take pride in being able to help their parents. Learning to work is generally highly valued, and many children living in colonies leave school around the age of 13.



Figure 12: A traditional colony school in Bolivia. Here you can see the boys sitting on one side of the class and the girls on another. (Source: MCS)

There is often a strong sense of community with LGS Mennonite communities, with many families living in close proximity to both immediate and extended family, especially those living in LGS Mennonite colonies. This sense of community is often lost when LGS Mennonite families move to Canada, which can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Additionally, moving to Canada often brings a process of integration, or even assimilation, into mainstream Canadian culture to some degree. In Canada, families may feel alienated by relatives who have decided to integrate to more or less of a degree than them. It's also important to note that, sometimes, families who choose to move to Canada may do so because they find themselves in disagreement or conflict with their local community and/or church. On the other hand, choosing to move to Canada may bring on tensions within the community they are leaving, because of the perceived changes in values and lifestyle the move may bring. Each person will have slightly different experiences, beliefs, and values, even within the context of a collectivist LGS Mennonite community.

Impacts on Service Provision

- LGS Mennonite clients may feel more comfortable with a same gender service provider. Offer this option if possible.
- Since many LGS Mennonites view the husband as the ultimate decision-maker in the family, understand that a LGS Mennonite woman may be hesitant to make decisions without discussing with her husband. Allow time for a husband and wife to make a decision.

- The importance of work (especially physical/manual work) and supporting their family means that LGS Mennonites often value this over other things, like education or individual aspirations. Understand that, even though this may be contrary to dominant Canadian values or even your own values, it doesn't necessarily make it wrong or bad. Work to accommodate an LGS Mennonite's schedule, for example, if a client can't come to appointments during harvest seasons or if children miss school to support their family.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.

Education and Work

Education

Education in a LGS Mennonite colony context usually focuses on reading, writing, arithmetic, and religious studies. Children generally leave school at the age of 13 and are eager to start working to support their families. Schools are run by the community and are often one-room schools. Generally, the classroom is divided by gender. Learning is often done by rote. However, education offerings do vary by colony, and some have multi-room schools and more opportunities for teacher training. Nonetheless, there are many differences between the Ontario public school system and education in a LGS Mennonite colony.

LGS Mennonite students and families who have moved from a colony to Ontario may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with some of the subjects taught in public schools. They may be unused to having to split up from siblings into different classrooms. Different types of instruction may likewise be unfamiliar, in addition to instruction being in a new language. There may also be school supplies that are unfamiliar or a financial burden to families, like indoor shoes, gym clothes, or lunch boxes.

Because many LGS Mennonites value being able to work, some students will choose to leave high school to start work. Younger children may also miss school at times to help their family. Although, there does seem to be a growing value for education that is necessary to obtain certain jobs, like trades training. Alternative high school programming has been successful in



Figure 13: Boys at a traditional colony school in Bolivia. (Source: MCS)

meeting the needs of LGS Mennonite students, emphasizing hands-on learning and work experiences and offering more flexibility in schedule.



Figure 14: A more modern-style school in a LGS Mennonite colony. (Source: MCS)



Figure 15: A young LGS Mennonite student. (Source: MCS)

Work

Generally, LGS Mennonites place a lot of value on working to support their families and communities. Work is seen as something manual or physical; there is generally less of a need for white-collar type jobs in LGS Mennonite colonies, and these jobs are often accordingly not as highly valued. Historically, LGS have valued agricultural work as a means to self-sufficiency and supporting their community. When choosing a place to settle, access to land to cultivate was often an important consideration. LGS Mennonites have also historically been very good at cultivating productive agricultural land, even in harsh conditions. Agricultural work continues to be very important to many LGS Mennonites, both in colonies and in Canada; however, poverty, land shortages, droughts, and other challenges mean that self-sufficient agriculture is not a reality for every LGS Mennonite family.



Figure 16: Two LGS Mennonite women working in a food truck. (Source: MCCO)

Since working is so highly valued, many children choose to leave school to work. Within colonies, most LGS Mennonites leave school around the age of 13. Even in Canada, some LGS Mennonite students choose not to complete high school to instead work, although alternative programming that emphasizes the trades and hands-on learning is often successful in meeting the needs of LGS Mennonite students.

Younger children also often take pride in being able to help their parents with household tasks, agricultural work, or taking care of their siblings. It's not uncommon for LGS Mennonite children to miss school to be able to help their families.

Impacts on Service Provision

- LGS Mennonites may need English language and literacy support.
- Because education often looks very different in Mennonite colonies, communicating how the Ontario education system works to LGS Mennonite families can help put them at ease.
- Let LGS Mennonites know ahead of time if you will be sharing information about a topic that may make them uncomfortable (refer to Topics of Contention in the Values and Beliefs section).
- Adapt education to LGS Mennonites if possible. Alternative education programming can help meet LGS Mennonite students' needs and values, like supporting their families, while allowing them to remain in school.
- Understand that even though an LGS Mennonite's values concerning education and work may be contrary to dominant Canadian values or even your own values, it doesn't necessarily make them wrong or bad.
- Accommodate children who miss school and other commitments to help their family.
- Work requirements are different in Canada compared to Mexico or Central and South American origin countries; some jobs that didn't require certification or education in their origin countries, do require this in Canada. For this reason, many LGS Mennonites increasingly value formal education systems, especially when alternative programming is available that specifically meets their needs.
- Always ask, don't assume an LGS Mennonite's values or opinions. Everyone's experience is different, particularly in the context of adapting to life in Canada and the degree to which someone chooses to integrate, or assimilate, into Canadian culture.



*Figure 17: Three LGS Mennonites living in a colony in Mexico.
(Source: Kennert Giesbrecht)*

General Recommendations and Tips for Service Providers

- Use meaningful metaphors to help explain concepts. Agricultural metaphors may be particularly helpful.
- Focus on client strengths and avoid focusing only on challenges, weaknesses, or things they are doing wrong.
- Connect with clients as a peer, not solely as an expert or authority. Many LGS Mennonite clients will be assured to hear that your advice or direction comes from personal experience (as opposed to only from what they might refer to as "textbook" knowledge).
- Try to avoid making clients feel as if they are the "children" having to follow you as the "parent" in authority.
- Provide programs or information in a hands-on manner, if possible.
- Present information orally or in an audio format instead of, or in addition to, written materials.
- If using written materials, providing pictures or illustrations may aid in understanding. For healthcare-related concepts, especially related to pregnancy, LGS Mennonite clients may find drawings more comfortable than pictures.
- Offer interpretation in Low German (Plautdietsch).
- Focus on respect and building trust. LGS Mennonites may start to come to you or your organization if one family has had a good experience and word travels that you or your organization can be trusted.
- Understand how experiences of poverty and cultural differences shape many LGS Mennonite experiences in southwestern Ontario. The previous sections of this guide can help you with this. Additionally, many LGS Mennonites may view wealth as prideful and against their values and may prefer to appear poor.
- Understand how common LGS Mennonite cultural characteristics might impact their perception of your organization and the way they interact with your services and you as a service provider. The previous sections of this guide can help you with this.
- Focus on meeting the client's needs where they are, not trying to change their opinions or values.
- Ask questions and show that you are willing to listen to LGS Mennonite clients' concerns and adapt to their needs. Remember that each LGS Mennonite client may have slightly different experiences, opinions, and things they are comfortable with.
- Try to "read between the lines" and anticipate possible conflicts as much as possible. Many LGS Mennonite clients may be extremely hesitant to advocate for themselves or bring up something that has bothered them. They may instead disengage from you completely or only hint at what they want.
- Use the resources available to you. There are many different Low German Speaking Mennonite resources that can help you. Refer to the Resources section of this document for some of these resources.

Conclusion

Low German Speaking Mennonites who live in southwestern Ontario often have particular cultural characteristics that necessitate specific considerations, accommodations, or understanding from service providers. This guide has given a brief overview of LGS Mennonite history and culture and the ways it often impacts interactions with service providers, as well as recommendations for service providers.

However, the most important takeaway from this guide is that, perhaps contrary to neatly summarized topics contained in this document, each LGS Mennonite has a unique collection of experiences, values, beliefs, and opinions. Above all, it's important to ask questions and listen to understand how best to meet the needs of your clients. Remember to approach every interaction with a sense of cultural humility—to be as curious about how your own cultural perspectives shape your interactions as you are about LGS Mennonite perspectives. Don't judge or seek to change your clients' perspectives, but instead work together to meet their needs.



Figure 18 (left): Lily Hiebert Rempel, at the time the Low German liaison at Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, holds a creatively designed floor mat made by LGSM women living in a colony. These floor mats are a common item in traditional Mennonite homes.

Figure 19 (above): Students at a traditional colony school in Bolivia.

(Source: MCS)

Resources

Local Agencies

Mennonite Community Services (MCS)

Address: 16 Talbot St. E., Aylmer, ON, N5H 1H4

Phone: 226-544-0380

Website: <https://www.mcson.org/>

MCS provides direct services for the community, predominantly LGS Mennonites:

- Employment services
- Settlement services
- Social services and government application assistance
- Information, orientation, and referrals
- Interpretation services
- Family education and support (FESPA)
- Commissioner of Oaths
- Small bookstore with books to purchase, including Low German dictionaries

MCS also operates a Low German radio station (De Brigj 105.9 FM), a thrift store, and various other projects to support the community (e.g., Mom and Baby program).

MCS provides service in Low German (Plautdietsch), English, and Spanish.

Norfolk Community Help Centre

Address: 22 Albert Street, Langton, ON, N0E 1G0

Phone: 519-875-4601

Website: <https://www.norfolkhelpcentre.com/>

Norfolk Community Help Centre offers services for the community, including LGS Mennonites:

- Employment assistance
- Settlement supports
- Social services and government application assistance
- Referrals
- Interpretation services
- Pre- and post-natal family supports
- Commissioner of Oaths

Norfolk Community Help Centre provides services in Low German (Plautdietsch) and English.

Additional Resources

Title	Author	Link	Notes
Improving Accessibility of Health and Social Services for Low German Speaking Mennonites in Elgin, Oxford, and Norfolk Counties	Rob Haile and Linda Funk, Southwestern Public Health (SWPH)	https://www.swpublichealth.ca/en/reports-and-statistics/resources/Evaluations-and-Situational-Assessments/REP-Improving-Accessibility-of-Health-and-Social-Services-for-LGS-Mennonites---201909.pdf	Overview of the collaboration between SWPH and community partners to improve access to healthcare for LGSM.
Opening Doors website	Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Ontario	http://openingdoors.co/ MCC website: https://mcc.org/	Information and resources for service providers working with LGSM clients.
MCC Ontario resource videos	MCC Ontario (the links are also available on the Opening Doors website)	Consent - www.vimeo.com/218064878/a9883cc8f8 Confidentiality - www.vimeo.com/217902082/b2611a3a66 www.vimeo.com/217852508/d05e1f511a Important Cards - www.vimeo.com/217907714 www.vimeo.com/217916886/0462a4ba82	These Low German videos (with English subtitles) cover basic information about consent, confidentiality, and identification cards.
Working with Low German Mennonite Students: A Resource Guide for Educators	Abe Wall, with support from the Ontario Ministry of Education	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-ZLsLNYdJ0sv0MjXTGxkCVuZyoq1FkI2/view	Resource for educators about Low German history and culture as well as tips for supporting LGSM students.

Mennonites: Values, Perceptions, and Current Trends	James Schellenberg, posted by MCC Ontario	https://vimeo.com/283788275/794a6d07e7	This presentation from the 2018 Low German Networking Conference covers LGSM values, perceptions, and trends.
Low German Mennonites	Suzie Wiebe	http://mennoniteeducation.webly.com/	This website provides information and resources about working with LGSM, aimed primarily at educators working with LGSM students.
Plautdietsch Wedabok Wörterbuch (Dictionary)	Jack Thiessen	Available for purchase online: https://tweeback.com/katalog/w%C3%B6rterbuch	
Ons leeschtet Wieedabuak (Dictionary)	Ed H. Zacharias	http://plautdietsch.22web.org/home/index.htm?i=1	
Plautdietsch Wieedabuak App (Dictionary)	Artem Tykhoniuk	Free to download. Search for “Plautdietsch Wieedabuak” in your device’s app store.	
Mennonite Community Service Bookstore	Various	Various books about Mennonites available for purchase from Mennonite Community Services.	
Mennonite Community Services Website	Mennonite Community Services	https://www.mcson.org/resources/	Links to various resources including a basic medical dictionary and a Low German lexicon.
SAKA resource videos	Southern Alberta Kanadier Association (SAKA)	https://www.youtube.com/@plautdietsch_SAKA	These Low German videos cover various health topics, including immunizations, safe food handling, hand washing, and disease transmission.

Guide for Teachers New to Working With LGS Mennonite Students and Communities	Alberta Teacher's Association	https://teachers.ab.ca/sites/default/files/2023-05/AR-LGM-1_LowGermanStudentResource_2019-04.pdf	Resource for educators about Low German history and culture as well as tips for supporting LGSM students.
What is Cultural Humility? The Basics	University of Oregon, Division of Equity and Inclusion	https://inclusion.uoregon.edu/what-cultural-humility-basics#:~:text=	Overview of the concept of cultural humility.
Cultural Humility	Culturally Connected	https://www.culturallyconnected.ca/#cultural-humility	Overview of the concept of cultural humility. Check out the references for more information. This website also provides information about cultural safety and health literacy.
Low German Networking Conference	MCC Ontario and MCS	<p>There are three Low German conferences: two annual, regional conferences in the Aylmer and Leamington area; and one provincial conference held every three years.</p> <p>Contact the MCC Ontario Low German liaison for more information: (519) 745-8458 x258 mcco.ca/lowgerman</p>	A conference for service providers looking to learn more Low German Mennonite culture and history, as well as how to better support LGS Mennonite clients.

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Photo Sources

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