OPENING DOORS

Information and resources for service providers working with Low German speaking Mennonites from Latin America

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Low German New Comers Opening Doors

Best Start...Best Future

Migrations  Religion and culture  Health  Education  Relating
HEALTH IN A COLONY CONTEXT In Latin America, Low German Mennonites live in villages that are often quite remote. In some cases, horse and buggy transportation may be the primary mode of transportation and traveling to larger centres means accessing public transportation. Further, many of these countries do not have universal health insurance. These are all primary factors that result in Low German families seeking medical interventions only when home remedies or their community’s lay practitioners are unable to resolve the issue.
Migrations

A history of migrations

The Low German Mennonite migration from Latin America to Ontario is only the most recent leg of a migratory history that began back in the 1500s in Europe during the Protestant Reformation. Anabaptists, the forebearers of Mennonites, experienced the brunt of Europe’s religious intolerance because of their radical (for their time) belief in the separation of church and state expressed in their practice of adult baptism and in their rejection of military power. The religious intolerance they experienced resulted in many Anabaptists migrating across Europe and to North America in search of greater freedom. Later, some Mennonites migrated east to Russia and eventually to North America.

Preserving their separateness

The “Anabaptist tree” has many branches and the Low German speaking Mennonites from Latin America are but one.
The Low German speaking Mennonite groups that eventually made their way to Western Canada via Russia in the late 19th Century held strongly to their belief in the separation of church and state. It became an issue in 1916 when the Dominion government of Canada passed The School Attendance Act. This Act was part of the concerted effort of the Canadian government to integrate the immigrant population in western Canada by requiring all children to attend English schools that used state approved curriculum. If privately run Mennonite schools did not meet this standard, they were closed and children were required to attend public schools with state appointed teachers. Many Mennonites on the prairies considered this new Act a violation of the right they had negotiated when they first moved to Canada to educate their children in German and in the cultural and religious values of their community. They lobbied the Canadian government extensively but to no avail. When Mennonite parents refused to send their children to government run schools, they were fined and some were imprisoned. Eventually the majority of Mennonites complied with the Canadian government’s insistence on regulating education, but the most traditional groups, the Old Colony and the Sommerfelder, refused.

Living out their values meant leaving Canada
Recognizing that the education of their children was key to perpetuating their values of separateness, the Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites decided to leave Canada. Various places throughout the Americas were investigated, but Mexico and Paraguay were the only countries where Mennonites were given permission to establish colonies, to educate their children as they wished, and where they were also granted military exemption.

An overview of migrations

An overview of Low German Mennonite migrations
16th Century move from the Low Countries to Danzig
The Anabaptist ancestors of the Low German speaking Mennonites in Latin America migrated primarily from the Low Countries in Europe to the free city of Danzig (in what is now Poland) to avoid persecution. It was here that the distinct religious and cultural identity of this Mennonite group was formed.

18th Century move to Ukraine
In the 18th century, Prussia began imposing restrictions on Mennonites living in the Danzig area because of their unwillingness to participate in military life. In order to maintain their distinctive religious identity in the face of this threat, many Mennonites migrated to Russia. The Russian
empress, Catherine the Great, wished to populate Russia's newly acquired territory, Ukraine, and sought settlers to this end. Mennonites were one group among many from across western Europe to take up her offer. Beginning in the late 18th century, approximately 8,000 Mennonites moved to Ukraine. Determined to ensure their distinctive life, Mennonites negotiated military exemption, the right to continue their settlement patterns, and the right to educate their children in keeping with their culture and religion.

1874 migration to Manitoba
In the mid-nineteenth century, Russia embarked on an assimilation program of its various immigrant populations. For Mennonites, the most immediate threat lay in Russia's implementation of a universal conscription law in 1870. Once again intent on preserving their distinctive identity, 18,000 Mennonites left Russia beginning in 1874, 10,000 to the American prairies and 8,000 to Manitoba. Those immigrating to Manitoba negotiated an agreement with the Dominion government which granted them military exemption, allowed them the right to maintain control over their children's education, and allowed them to settle in their familiar patterns of village and colony.

From Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico

From 1922-27, approximately 7,000 Mennonites moved from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to northern Mexico. (Another 1,800 moved to Paraguay.) In Mexico, Mennonites established four colonies in order to maintain their separate and distinct lifestyle. Manitoba Plan, Swift Plan, and Santa Rita are clustered around the Mexican city of Cuauhtémoc in Chihuahua and Hague (now commonly called Durango) is located further south in the state of Durango.

In spite of the difficulties Mennonites encountered when they first settled in Mexico, such as having to learn new agricultural techniques better suited to northern Mexico's desert climate, they eventually established themselves. The Mennonites' commitment to an agrarian lifestyle ensured that land shortages had become a serious issue by the 1950s.

Questions about what it means to remain separate and distinct
Sharp differences also developed among the Mennonites as to what it meant to be separate and distinct. Some were convinced that the only way to survive would be to adopt modern technology to make agriculture more viable. Others were equally firmly committed to a belief that such accommodation undermined the very reason for their existence, that is, to be separate from the world.

How to remain separate from the world is an ongoing question for many Mennonite groups, not just those in Latin America.

**Migrations to Belize and Bolivia**

In 1958, some of these Mennonites established colonies in British Honduras (now Belize) intent on retaining their anti-modern lifestyle. Another 3 colonies were established in Bolivia in 1967/8 for much the same reason. Daughter colonies were also established in various parts of Mexico under less fractious circumstances in an effort to address the land shortage.

Colonies have continued to multiply in Latin America. Some are established to address the never ending issue of land shortage. Others begin, like they did in Belize and Bolivia, because the tension of accommodating or not accommodating modernity is always an issue for Mennonites who wish to remain separate from the world.

**Mennonite population in Latin America**

Since first migrating to Latin America in the 1920s, migration has been an ongoing reality for many of the Low German Mennonites. Additional colonies have been established throughout Mexico, Belize, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina. By 2010, the adult population of Mennonite descendants of the original 1920s immigrants to Mexico and Paraguay was approximately 52,000.

**Connections to Canada remain strong**

For some Mennonites who migrated from the prairies to Mexico in the early 20th century, the connection to Canada remained strong. Following the initial migration to Mexico in the 1920s, there was a steady trickle of Mennonites who returned to Manitoba and Saskatchewan. However, following a drought in Mexico in the early 1950s, the ready cash available in seasonal agricultural work attracted Mennonites to Ontario. The first
Mennonite family to arrive in Ontario from Mexico came in 1952 and stayed near Kitchener. After a summer spent working in the agricultural sector, they returned to Mexico.

**Coming to Southwestern Ontario**

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how Mennonites in Mexico first heard about the possibilities of work in southern Ontario. Perhaps they heard through their relatives in Manitoba who were also taking advantage of the opportunities of seasonal work in Ontario. In Mexico, word quickly spread that working in Ontario was lucrative and families began arriving. Most worked on tobacco, tomato, and cucumber fields. Early Mennonite immigrants to Ontario worked mainly in Haldimand-Norfolk County, Essex County, and Chatham-Kent. Initially Low German speaking Mennonites came to Ontario as migrant workers, but there were enough that settled permanently or semi-permanently so that by the early 1960s Mennonites from Mexico had organized several churches in Ontario, including an Old Colony Church.

“The first thing we remember noticing when we arrived was how beautiful the scenery was in southern Ontario. Everything was so green and full, so different from what we were used to.”

**Immigration patterns**

The first generation of Mennonites to come to Ontario from Mexico had little difficulty entering Canada. However, immigration requirements have tightened considerably since then but the flow of Mennonites from Latin America has not stopped. They continue to come to Ontario primarily for economic reasons, most often finding work in the agricultural sector. Some settle here permanently, others continue the pattern of an earlier generation and return to their homes in Mexico every winter.

**How many Mennonites from Latin America are in Ontario?**

There are currently approximately 10,000 Mennonites from Mexico and Latin America in southern Ontario. There are other sizeable communities of Mennonites from Latin America in Texas, Kansas, Manitoba and Alberta. They come primarily from the Mennonite colonies in northern Mexico but they are also come from colonies in Durango and Zacatecas. Others come from Bolivia, Paraguay and Belize.
Stories of migration

From Latin America to Ontario

Life is better in Canada

“When we first came to Canada we had just enough money to get here. We arrived in June 2008 and the beginning was very hard. I was a Canadian citizen but my wife was not. I had to find a job to earn some money, so I worked in the farming industry that first year. I am now on ODSP because I am legally blind, and finding work with a disability is difficult.

We arrived in June but it took us until November to find a place to live. Before that, we had just been staying with family and friends.

Overall we like Canada much better than Mexico. The climate is better, as it is not so very hot and dry. Going to the doctors in Mexico was sometimes a total waste of time. My health has been much better here than down in Mexico.

People always say colony life is a good community life. We find more people willing to help us out here. Many people were greedy and jealous down in the colonies. We are doing better here, even on disability, than we did in Mexico.”

John’s Story
John was born in Chihuahua, Mexico. When he was 18, he left home and decided to start a new life in Canada. John had an interesting journey. He was travelling from Mexico with a friend, who was also lending him the money he needed to make it to Canada. John's intention was to pay his friend back once he was settled and working.

John laughs now as he retells the story. "My friend didn't have the documentation he needed and we were at a border check. He got kicked off the bus and I had to go on without him. All he had time to do was pass me two 50 dollar bills as the police were taking him away!" John says he has never felt more lost and scared in his life than he did then.

Fortunately, he had gone to school in Mexico and knew enough English to get by. He was afraid though because for the entire time, he had no idea where he was. He didn't get off the bus to go to the bathroom and rarely did he get any food. He knew if he stayed on the bus it would eventually take him to his destination.

John was lucky because he had family already in Ontario, and they were able to pick him up at the bus stop. John was very relieved to see the face of his sister and brother-in-law that day.

John laughs as he recounts his story, but he also has a glimmer of pride in his eye as he tells it.

A Difficult Start

"Our start in Ontario was very hard. My husband was a Canadian citizen but I was not. This was only one of the different issues that we faced in the beginning.

We came here in February and I was in the beginning of my pregnancy. A health card can't be issued until you have lived in Canada for 3 months. Also, you need to have the proper documents supporting your status. I applied for my landed immigrant status but until the application had been processed I could not get a health card.

We had the baby, and ended up having to pay for everything ourselves. What a setback that was! I finally got my health card 2 years later, in time for our next baby.

I had a hard time cooking for my family here. The bread I baked did not turn out right and neither did the cookies. It took me a while but now I don't have any problem."

Peter and Sara's Complicated Migration Story
Peter and Sara’s story demonstrates how decisions made in previous generations affect the opportunities of present and future generations. It highlights how different family histories result in different migration stories. It is also an example of how each Low German family’s situation can be quite unique.

After 35 years of working with the Canadian government with these issues, Bill Janzen provides additional background information about why so many family immigration stories can be so complicated.

Peter, Sara and their five children entered a Settlement Office in Chatham, Ontario early on a Monday morning. Sara was visibly pregnant with their sixth child. The family had hired a driver to take them from Kansas to Ontario and had just arrived in town late the night before. They intended to settle in Canada and needed assistance from a Settlement Worker to properly navigate the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) system.

Historical factors impacting their settlement

Peter, Sara, and their oldest child, Anna, were born in Mexico while the four other children were born in Bolivia. Immigration laws pertaining to Low German families used to grant citizenship to Canadian citizens’ children born in Mexico. Both Peter and Sara’s grandparents were born in Canada but married in Mexico. Sara’s grandparents registered their marriage with the Mexican government and their subsequent children with CIC, which enabled Sara’s parents to also register her. Sara is a Canadian citizen. (Sara had previously applied for Anna’s Canadian citizenship; she was their only child with this status.) Peter’s grandparents married in the church, but only registered their marriage with the Mexican government after Peter’s father, Abram, was born. The Mexican government did not recognize the church marriage and Abram was therefore considered born out of wedlock. As a result, Peter’s grandparents could not register Abram with CIC, which also meant that Peter and his siblings were ineligible for Canadian citizenship.

Sara’s Canadian citizenship allowed her to apply for citizenship for their three middle children, Martha, Susie and Jacob. Catalina, their youngest, was not eligible because she was born after April 2009; CIC laws no longer granted this automatic citizenship to children born outside of Canada. Therefore, both Peter and Catalina needed to apply for permanent residency; Sara is their sponsor.

Getting permanent resident status

The settlement worker began the application process with the family that first Monday morning. The initial step was to identify the multitude of documentation Peter and Catalina’s permanent residency applications required. Both of them needed to complete a medical with a CIC designated medical practitioner. The closest approved doctor was an hour away, which meant that a friend or volunteer would have to take them to this appointment. Additionally, he needed to go to a local police station and get 7 sets of fingerprints. The law required that police record checks be completed in each country one lived in for 6 months or more so three sets of fingerprints were for Mexico; one set was for Bolivia; and
a set for both Kansas, USA and the West Virginia FBI because he lived in Kansas for the 7 months prior to his arrival in Canada. CIC also required one set. The fingerprint sets and accompanying 14 photographs of himself were costly. Catalina also required 7 photographs for her application. There was also the additional mailing expense to the various locations. The family left the office with the documentation necessary for Peter and Catalina to complete their medicals, obtain the photographs, and for Peter to get his fingerprint sets. Once these requirements had been fulfilled, they could begin the actual permanent residency application and the citizenship applications for the other children.

**Completing the Settlement Process**

Two months later, the family returned to the office. Sara had given birth to Aganetha since their last visit. Sara had applied for her Social Insurance Number (SIN) card when they first arrived, but was unable to work due to her pregnancy and the recent birth. She was unable to apply for Ontario Works because sponsors cannot be on social assistance. In the intervening time, she had also applied for health cards for herself and Aganetha but both had to wait three months for coverage to begin. The rest of the children had to wait for health coverage until they had documentation from the Canadian government indicating that they were applying for permanent residency/citizenship. Their application process could not begin until the family could afford the associated expenses. Because Peter was in Canada on a Visitor’s Visa, he was unable to apply for a SIN card. Peter had to wait for health coverage until CIC approved his permanent residency and gave him a work permit, which could take 10-12 months.

In the two months after they first arrived, Peter worked odd jobs for various contractors and saved up some money to start the application process. They also borrowed money from friends. He now required the settlement worker’s assistance to fill out the different applications because he was unable to read or write in any language and was unable to speak English. After becoming a permanent resident, Peter would have to wait another two years before applying for Canadian citizenship. All together, it will take him 6-7 years to receive Canadian citizenship, barring any further changes to immigration laws or other unforeseen issues.
Religion and culture

Religious and cultural understandings

Low German-speaking Mennonites who have come to Ontario from Latin America are a part of a rich religious tradition with a long history that has entailed migrations across three continents. 90% of the Mennonites that migrated to Mexico in the 1920s were part of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, so called because they had emigrated to Canada (and from there to Mexico) from the first colony established in Russia by Mennonite settlers in 1789.

Tradition and a desire to remain separate
Distinctive dress is a visible reminder to both themselves and the world around them that they do not share the values and the lifestyle of society around them. It should be noted however, that when they wear traditional dress in Ontario, it does not necessarily mean that they are attending an Old Colony church.

The Old Colony Mennonite Church is characterized by a deep respect for tradition and an expectation that its members will live in accordance with that tradition. The basis of this respect is a desire to remain separate from and different than society around them. The Old Colony Mennonites’ primary allegiance is to God, they believe, and not to the political, economic and social systems that govern the countries in which they live. Tradition—often expressed by the phrase, “we wish to do as we were taught”—is the vehicle Old Colony Mennonites use to ensure that this separateness is maintained.

I am an Old Colony Mennonite. My church teaches me that it is important to be there for my fellow Mennonite brothers and sisters and also that the Bible teaches me to remain separate from the world. One other foundational belief that I have is that my faith must be lived out in my everyday life. This is why I choose to live a lifestyle that is different from those around me and why I am sometimes wary of a lifestyle that is seemingly associated with worldly ideals.

Not all colonies are the same

Many colonies in Latin America include manufacturing businesses, often related to the agricultural sector.

Within their shared commitment to tradition and separateness, there is, nevertheless, tremendous variation between different Old Colony groups in Latin America.
At one end of the spectrum are colonies for whom being separate means rejecting aspects of modern life such as state-supplied electricity and using animal-drawn vehicles for transportation. Other colonies have loosened many of the prohibitions. The dress code is relaxed, vehicles are permitted, and colony members are not required to support themselves only through agriculture but are permitted to engage in business.

**Church life in North America**

Old Colony churches in the United States and Canada, including the ones in Ontario, tend to be the most progressive of Old Colony groups because they have had to create a religious identity in a pluralistic environment that challenges their commitment to be separate. For some Latin American Mennonites who come to Ontario, the Old Colony traditions are too restrictive so they look for alternative churches. For others, tradition remains a structure that frees them to live according to their religious beliefs. In Ontario, Mennonites from Latin America attend a great variety of churches, though the majority continue to attend the Old Colony church.

At the same time, not all Low German Mennonite churches in Latin America are Old Colony. The Sommerfeld and former General Conference churches tend to be more open to some forms degrees of cultural adaptation. When people from these groups migrate to Canada, they will adjust more quickly to Canadian norms than Old Colony members, by joining other Mennonite and non-Mennonite churches.

“The Old Colony Church is a little different (in Ontario). In Mexico, almost all the women wear the formal “cap” to church while here it is mostly the older generation. The clothing worn to church is more modern in Canada, which includes the style and colour. In Mexico, formal church clothing is worn to worship. In Mexico the service is delivered in High German and here it is delivered in Low German. Low German is better because more of the sermon can be understood.”
What's the difference between Amish, Old Order, and other conservative Mennonite groups?

Old Order Mennonites, Amish and Old Colony Mennonites share a common origin in the 16th century Anabaptist movement in Europe. While Old Colony Mennonites have a history which includes migration to Russia in the 18th century, Old Order Mennonites and Amish began migrating to Pennsylvania already in the 16th (Old Order Mennonites) and 17th (Amish) centuries. Eventually many came to Ontario. All three groups take seriously the ideal of remaining separate from the world.

Colony Culture in Latin America

In Latin America, Low German-speaking Mennonites live on colonies which are large tracts of land reserved exclusively for Mennonites. Colonies are divided into villages and villages into individual family farms. Each village has a school and churches are scattered throughout the colony. There is a high degree of organized mutual aid on colonies which is directed towards orphans, poor members of the colony and colony members who have experienced a disaster like a fire.

The fabric of life is religious

When Mennonites migrate to Ontario from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, they are leaving behind a fundamentally different way of living.

Colonies are religious communities even as they are economic and social ones. The formal aspects of religious life are expressed in church activities, but the very fabric of daily colony life is religious as well.

At the heart of religious life for colony Mennonites is a commitment to be separate from the society around them and to live distinct lives.
The colony ideal is for each family to be largely self-sufficient with a dairy herd and land on which to grow cash crops. This lifestyle that a colony sustains is the expression of colony Mennonites’ commitment to live separate and distinct lives.

However, NAFTA and other trade agreements have made the ideal increasingly difficult to achieve (if it ever was) and many colony Mennonites support their families through wage paying jobs. Dairies that produce cheese, village stores, and manufacturing companies (often related to the agricultural sector) are some of the more common employers on Mennonite colonies.

**Colony life is homogeneous**

It is common for sibling’s shirts and dresses to be made of the same fabric.

Colonies are, to a large extent, homogeneous in terms of the population. Only Mennonites are allowed to own property on a colony and very few outsiders (such as Mexicans) live on a colony. A high degree of uniformity is maintained on a colony. For example, fashion for both men and women is prescribed, the interior of houses are decorated in similar ways.
The family is an economic unit

Maintaining a subsistence agrarian and self-sufficient lifestyle is difficult without large families. Traditionally, the family is an economic unit, with responsibilities often divided along gendered lines. Women and girls attend to the domestic side of family life and men and boys take responsibility for the hard physical labour of farm life and the public aspects of farming, e.g. business dealings. Within individual families, there can be considerable flexibility in the division of labour depending on the family make up and the economic status of the family.

The role of children

Children learn the skills needed to perpetuate the primarily agrarian colony lifestyle by working alongside their parents and older siblings all the while contributing to the wellbeing of their family. This model of learning instills in children the importance of their presence in the family. In this integrated family environment, children are taught to respect their parents and older siblings.
Role of adolescence

As in North America, when teenagers “hang out” with their friends and neighbors, matches are made.

Once colony children finish school (from ages 12-14) they are given greater responsibility in the family. Most teenagers are capable of carrying out the duties and tasks that their parents do in the family setting. This is essential if they are to manage their own households and farms when they marry. Adolescence is also the time of life when most colony Mennonites meet their future spouse. On Sunday afternoons and sometimes on week night evenings, groups of teenagers socialize on the village street. As they “hang out” with their friends and neighbors, matches are made. Marriages usually take place for Low German speaking Mennonites between the ages of 18 and 22. If parents have the financial wherewithal, they will support their newly married children by providing housing, often on the parental yard or on a neighboring property.

Role of the elderly

As they age, members of the colony want to feel productive as long as possible.
Elderly parents are cared for by their adult children. The arrangements that are put in place depend on the number of children and the financial means of the children. Sometimes parents live with their adult children, even moving from child to child. Other times the family of one child will live near a parent to provide care. Grandchildren play an important role in caring for the elderly whether it is caring for livestock, keeping the house clean, or spending time with their grandparents. Several colonies in northern Mexico have established senior care homes.

The village school

Village schools are important institutions in the perpetuation of colony life. In school, children learn to read and write and do basic arithmetic. School is also preparation for the church life they will participate in as adults. It is here that they are familiarized with the three most important religious texts used by colony Mennonites: the Bible, the Catechism (statement of beliefs) and the hymnbook. As these are all printed in blackletter (often called gothic) script, children also learn to read and write this script. Learning is largely done by rote.

Church participation

Formal participation in church life begins
Formal participation in church life begins when children complete school (between the ages of 12 and 14). In most instances, individuals are baptized once they are ready to marry. Baptism is an important religious and social ritual for colony Mennonites. By being baptized, Mennonites express their commitment to the values, beliefs and practices of their community and are deemed ready to contribute as adults to that community.

**Diversity among colonies**

Some colonies, particularly those in northern Mexico, have modernized significantly in the last few decades.

While most colonies espouse more simple technologies than Canadians are accustomed to, colony life is not static; colony Mennonites are not stuck in the past. Some colonies, particularly those in northern Mexico, have modernized significantly in the last few decades. As part of this modernization, the influence and authority of the Old Colony Church has diminished as other groups, often more evangelically-minded Mennonites, have established churches that are more open to progress. These colonies are now more diverse than they used to be. Other colonies resist embracing advanced technology and other aspects of modern life because they know that such changes will fundamentally alter the fabric of colony life and the values and beliefs that sustain it.
Cultural shifts in moving to Ontario

When Low German speaking Mennonites move from Latin America to Ontario, they are faced with the challenging task of establishing themselves in what is a foreign world for many of them. Adapting to a new climate, a new language, strange food, and unfamiliar neighbors are a part of any immigrant’s experience but coming from a Mennonite colony to southern Ontario poses some unique challenges for Mennonites.

“The food is very different here in Canada. I don’t know if it is the preservatives or that the food is processed differently but it seems the food in Mexico just tastes better.”

From a close-knit community to neighbours who are strangers

When moving to Ontario, colony Mennonites encounter a highly individualized society. On a colony, they are linked to their village neighbors through school, church, and community meetings. They know what their neighbors are up to, when they are sick, when they travel, when they buy a new tractor. In Ontario, chances are, their neighbors will be strangers.

From value within a family web to individual autonomy

When moving to Ontario, colony Mennonites encounter a society in which individual autonomy is highly valued. On a colony, an individual is valued in a web of family and community relationships. In Canadian society, the accomplishments of an individual are prized above relationships.

From parental/colony authority to state authority

When moving to Ontario, colony Mennonites encounter a society that is highly regulated and monitored. Everything from driving to health care to
education is regulated. These regulations invade and alter their private lives in ways they are not accustomed to. On a colony, parents are the final authority in raising children. In Canada, a higher authority tells them how to discipline their children, insists that they send their children to school, and requires that physical needs be addressed according to commonly understood standards within the Canadian context.

**Adjusting to an inter-cultural society**

When moving to Ontario, colony Mennonites encounter a diverse, inter-cultural society in which religious pluralism is celebrated. On a colony, values, beliefs and a lifestyle are shared with fellow colonists. People dress alike. They share a history. They speak the same languages.

Susie came to Canada when she was 12 years old. When she recounts this experience, it brings back many painful memories, as it was a difficult time in her life. Born in Durango, Mexico, she has 7 siblings and is one of the oldest in her family. She remembers her time in Mexico as being one of poverty and abuse.

When Susie’s parents decided to come to Canada, she was excited because she had heard that it was a good place, one where people didn’t have to be poor if they worked hard. She pictured it as a place that was kind of like Beverly Hills, where there was cement everywhere and very little grass or wildlife anywhere.

When she arrived, Susie was faced with a much different world than she had imagined. Life was just as hard in Canada as it had been in Mexico. Her parents expected all the children to work, whether in factories or on fields, to help provide for the family.

Susie attended school but it was hard for her because she hadn’t gone to school very much as a child. She was pulled out of school according to the rhythm of the agricultural seasons to work on the fields. She vividly remembers being bullied at school for being Mennonite. This was a very hard experience for her. Susie had a much different cultural identity than her peers and was often teased for who she was.

Susie remembers her childhood as a dark and sad time, a time she never wants to return to. However her life is now “much better, much different.” She is happy to be the mother of five children and always tries her best to provide for, love, and give her children a better life than she had.
Religious holidays and practices

Religious holidays
- Christmas
- Epiphany – January 6
- Good Friday and Easter
- Ascension Day - the 6th Thursday after Easter
- Pentecost - the 7th Sunday after Easter.

The celebration of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost is often 3 days long. These days are referred to as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd day of the holiday. They are important times for church services, travel and family gatherings. For this reason, Low German families may miss school, work and other appointments on these days.

Church affiliation in Ontario

When they arrive in Ontario, many Low German-speaking families will choose to participate in the Old Colony church, while others may continue to live according to many Old Colony ways and attend other (usually Mennonite) churches or sometimes no church at all. Their distinctive dress is, however, a visible reminder to both themselves and those around them that they do not share the values and lifestyle of mainstream society.

Service providers may encounter some Low German Mennonites who seem to have adjusted to and/or integrated Canadian norms and mores.
more quickly than others. This often occurs when Low German Mennonites are part of less conservative denominations in Latin America that have already undergone some significant cultural shifts which are expanded upon within the Canadian context.

Service providers should not assume that Low German families are deeply connected with and supported by a church. There are many reasons why some families may not be involved in their church communities. The assumption that entire family systems (ie, adult siblings with their own family units) belong and/or are involved in the same church denomination is also inaccurate.

While Low German church leaders are keen to support their congregants, they have responsibilities within large geographical areas (ie, the Aylmer area is Tilsonburg to Drayton). Additionally, unlike many other religious leaders, they are not employed by the church and perform their leadership duties in addition to their personal family obligations. Though it is good for service providers to consider and include church leaders in supporting Low German families, it may be difficult for these leaders to provide the necessary levels of ongoing support that some families will need.

Most Low German Mennonite denominations do not view the church as an appropriate place for disseminating information regarding community events and services. The church building and the corporate gathering of the church are entirely for the purpose of worship.
Health

Health in a colony context

When Low German-speaking Mennonites from Latin America arrive in Ontario, there are huge cultural shifts that need to be made. They bring with them an understanding of how things were in the colonies they left behind and soon learn that the Canadian medical context is quite different. For service providers, accompanying the Low German Mennonites as they adapt often requires much sensitivity and understanding. The following outline hopefully helps to set a context for how this group of people has been used to approaching issues of health and well-being.

Accessing health services

In Latin America, many Low German speaking families access formal health services only when home remedies or their community’s lay practitioners are
unable to resolve a medical issue.

In Latin America, Low German Mennonites live in villages that are often quite remote. In some cases, horse and buggy transportation may be the primary mode of transportation and travelling to larger centres means accessing public transportation. Further, many of these countries do not have universal health insurance. The result is that many Low German speaking families access formal health services only when home remedies or their community’s lay practitioners are unable to resolve a medical issue.

“The process for medical appointments (in Ontario) is sometimes very frustrating. We come from Mexico and my wife is pregnant. We know we need to see a doctor that will deliver the baby but now we have to go to our nurse practitioner and then she has to send us to the obstetrician. It would be so much easier to just go to the obstetrician without all these extra appointments. In Mexico, there are not these constant appointments at doctors until the baby is born. These procedures are strange to us.”

Since there are very few educated and licensed Low German speaking health care providers in Latin America and since the women do not speak Spanish, their husbands will often accompany them to appointments and translate for them.

**Universal health care in Ontario**

When they arrive in Ontario, Low German families value and appreciate the health care system. To be able to access medical care 24/7 is seen as a privilege. However, some have expressed frustration that several appointments and referrals are required for addressing one issue. Often, the expectation is that the medical practitioner should prescribe medication for one’s ailment and if this does not occur, the person may leave the appointment feeling that the consultation was a waste of time and resources.

“Our start in Ontario was very hard. My husband was a Canadian citizen but I was not. We came here in February and I was in the beginning of my pregnancy. A health card can’t be issued until you have lived in Canada for 3 months, but before getting a card, you need to have the proper documents supporting your status. I applied for my landed immigrant status but could not get a health card in time. We ended up having the baby and had to pay for everything ourselves. What a setback that was! I finally got my health card 2 years later. I had it when my next baby was...
Common health practices and understandings

Access to health information

Science and health are not taught in the Old Colony schools in Latin America, thus people learn about health related issues from their parents and peers. The Low German Mennonite culture is predominantly oral; books and magazines are not readily available in village communities. Learning about health related issues usually occurs through experience.

Practitioners in Ontario rely heavily upon print/pictorial material to educate individuals about health issues. Relying on these resources to educate Low German populations is usually ineffective because the population often does not have the necessary literacy skills to understand health related content. Additionally, many of the pictures may be culturally inappropriate. It is important to engage in alternative forms of education in order to increase the ability of the Low German people to follow through on necessary health plans.

The booklet *A Trip to the Doctor* may be a helpful resource as you support families preparing for doctor's visits. See Resources for teachers. See Resources for teachers.
Health histories
Medical diagnoses and family medical histories are often unknown within Low German families, especially if the issues involve the reproductive system. It is common for adult children not to know the cause of death for their parents or grandparents. Some adults are hesitant to share their medical status with even their closest family members. At the same time, stories of extreme events such as losing a limb, major treatment interventions and invasive procedures will often be repeated with regularity, even in the presence of children.

More info: Low German words for conditions and diseases (PDF)

Home remedies and prescription medications

The use of home remedies is common.

The use of home remedies for common symptoms such as headaches, fevers, infant colic, skin abrasions, abdominal discomfort and injured limbs is a common practice in Latin America. This practice continues in Southwestern Ontario. These inexpensive remedies are carried out by lay practitioners and family members. Positive personal anecdotal reports are usually the key factor in the continued use of these products. These products may or may not be in the original labelled containers.

More info: Popular home remedies (PDF)

Prescription medications are readily available from pharmacies and lay community health practitioners even without prescriptions. Pain and anti-anxiety medication, antibiotics and diuretics are often purchased by Low German people on the recommendation of family members. There is strong support for using medicinal products to reduce or alleviate undesired symptoms.

Household cleanliness

A clean home is a highly valued sign of being a good mother and house wife. The women have daily and weekly house cleaning routines (washing dishes after each meal, washing floors,) as well as spring, fall, and special holiday house cleaning activities (washing walls and ceilings 2-3 times per year).
**Immunizations**

Within the Low German colonies in Latin America, immunizing children for communicable diseases has become a more readily accepted practice in the last decade. However, upon arrival in Ontario, there may be gaps in their immunizations, especially if they have relocated several times. One pattern frequently noted by Ontario health care professionals is that children from Latin America have often received a greater number of vaccines for polio than is recommended in Canada. Adults who received vaccinations in Latin America as children may be missing their TB booster.

**Medical procedures**

Medical checkups/physicals are not routinely practised and preventative practices such as breast exams, pap tests, TSE or prostrate exams are unknown. Therefore, these procedures need to be explained and taught before they will be practised.

**Modesty and language**

Low German Mennonites from Latin America are generally very modest and often feel very uncomfortable when they need to reveal specific body parts. This is reflected in the fact that the Low German language has few biological terms and people often know only the slang terms for body parts or functions.

More info: [Low German words for Body Parts (PDF)]

**Nourishing meals and eating**
Low German families value nourishing meals and eating together as a family. Providing substantial meals that are made from basic ingredients (flour, eggs, milk, potatoes and meat) is very important to the identity of being a good mother and wife. However, understanding the nutritional value of food items is minimal. Chips are equated with potatoes and soft drinks are equated with water; this demonstrates a lack of understanding about the effects of processed foods (high fat/sugar and low nutrient value).

“I was raised to be self-sufficient and made most food from scratch at home. In Canada, making bread with the same recipe that I used in Mexico just does not work. The texture and flavour are just different. Buying bread in the store is adjustment as well. It is very hard to get used to.”

**Sexuality**

Sexuality is a very private matter and the maturation of boys and girls is not discussed in family or church settings. Low German families are often offended when their children receive information on reproduction/sexuality in school or community settings. Discussion of sexual matters in adult groups is considered inappropriate and will create much embarrassment, especially if the practitioner does not have a trusting relationship established with the group members.

**Understanding of germs**

Concepts such as germ theory are relatively unknown in this population, especially if their education occurred outside of Canada. Though cleanliness is valued, the understanding of what makes something clean or dirty may differ from current Canadian norms. For example, multiple people may use the same bath water and towels or share utensils while eating or drinking. As long as the child is clean (has had a bath) it is common for a child with a contagious illness such as chicken pox to be taken along on family visits.

**Use of lay health practitioners**
Self-trained midwives and other lay practitioners are common within the Mennonite colony context. Within the colony setting, self-trained midwives, chiropractors, massage therapists, herbalists, dentists and other unlicensed workers are accessed in times of need. The chiropractor or the massage therapist is usually the first practitioner to be consulted by Low German newcomers, even in Canada.

Maternal and child health

Pregnancy and birthing
Pregnancy is generally viewed as a private topic and is something that is not discussed with children or with unmarried people. Some pregnant women will not participate in their community’s social events.
Typically, prenatal care within the Latin America colony is only initiated in the last trimester of pregnancy or when the woman is experiencing serious prenatal complications. Use of labour augmentation is a common practice with village midwives.

Anna has 5 children and had a nurse practitioner (NP) when they were born. However, she felt that her NP did not quite understand her because the NP did not have children of her own. When Anna finally unregistered her children with her old NP and signed up with another NP who did have children, she felt the new NP understood her situation better. Anna was simply more comfortable with her.

In Canada, the frequency of prenatal appointments and laboratory testing is often perceived as being unnecessary and an interruption in their busy home life. Husbands find the frequent appointments to be inconvenient because they need to take time from work. Time away from work usually means loss of income and they may fear negative repercussions from their employers.

As a service provider, you may find that prenatal instruction is more acceptable on a one to one basis. Couples are often reluctant to watch birthing videos as they may be understood to be pornographic. Drawings are often more culturally acceptable than photographs. You may find it helpful to refer to Low German Words and Phrases - Maternal health and midwifery as you communicate with expectant mothers.

After the birth of a new child, many fathers take time off work to assist in the integration of the new family member. They take on many of the household duties and provide primary care to the older children for the first few days after a new birth.

Breastfeeding

Because of extreme modesty, new mothers may find it difficult to allow a health care provider to assess the actual feeding of a baby at the breast. The women also often indicate that they would like to begin supplementing breastfeeding with formula very early as they tend to perceive that they are not producing enough milk for their infants.

“I have struggled to breastfeed all of my children. I usually give up after 5 weeks. All the things that help other women don’t seem to work for me. I have tried natural remedies and prescriptions. The prescription might do a little bit but my baby still isn’t getting enough.”

Birth control and reproduction
Breastfeeding and the rhythm method are used to assist with spacing pregnancies. Many couples experience moral and ethical dilemmas when they are encouraged to consider birth control methods and/or consider surgical sterilization interventions. Some women have experienced significant emotional turmoil and/or clinical depression after tubal ligation.

The Low German population often doubles in less than 20 years. In Canada, families with more than 4 children are considered large whereas within the Low German population, families with 8 children is quite normal. A woman’s identity is deeply embedded in childrearing, thus pregnancies and having many children is highly valued. Miscarriages and premature births are common. Couples may be unaware of the risks involved in closely spaced pregnancies.

**Child safety**

Safety standards in Latin America differ significantly from Canadian standards. In some regions, people can still purchase baby equipment and toys that are no longer available in Canada. Some fathers build cribs for their children while other families purchase cribs that are built within the Low German community. Therefore the cribs do not necessarily meet safety standards. It is quite common for parents to make modifications to cribs to meet the safety requirements such as using a wire or metal link to prevent the mattress support from shifting. It is also common to bring baby items such as soothers with them when they return from visits to Latin America. These may not conform to Canadian standards.

Seat belts and car seats are not necessarily required in Latin America however, some families will continue to use their Canadian car seats when they return to Latin America for visits. Infant car seats are often used beyond the recommended height or weight standards because infant seats are so much easier to use than the next level of car seat. Parents may not be aware of the potential danger of this practice.
Dental care

Preventative dental care such as annual check-ups, regular scaling, and daily tooth brushing has not been practised by many Low German people in Latin America. Fathers often remove loose teeth for children and if children experience dental pain (especially if they still have their baby teeth), the tooth is usually extracted by a lay dental worker.

As with other medical concerns, accessing qualified dental practitioners is usually only done if/when lay dental workers have not been able to mend the situation. Many Low German families in Latin America do not have the financial ability to utilize qualified staff and/or the families live prohibitively far from appropriate dental clinics.

“We didn’t all have toothbrushes - there were 16 of us.”
“I saw one (toothbrush) and asked my mother for one. She bought the cheapest one. I had it for many years. I didn’t know what to do with it.”
“I wanted to clean teeth, so I would clean them on a Kleenex.”
“When you were grown up you would get a toothbrush - but we never had toothpaste.”

Oral hygiene practice and dental treatment in Ontario

Low German communities continue to have limited oral hygiene practices in Ontario. Dental care professionals who work with the Low German population consistently describe the obstacles these communities face in accessing appropriate dental treatment as complex challenges that include cultural differences, language and literacy barriers, (ongoing) migration between Mexico...
and Canada, poverty and immigration issues. Dental care practitioners are often limited in their ability to address these various barriers and to therefore see improved oral health in the communities.

“It is too far for me to go and drive to take all the children to the dentist.”
“We don’t have coverage, so we don’t go.”

Low German women generally state that all their children have toothbrushes and toothpaste. Some children reportedly brush at least once a day and a few have access to regular cleanings. However, most parents in Ontario still only take their children to the dentist when the children are in pain and eligible for Children in Need of Treatment (CINOT). Some newcomer Low German families return to Latin America for Christmas, Easter or Pentecost holidays and will address dental needs such as dentures, crowns, and sometimes even root canals during those visits. Others will request that dental practitioners extract problematic teeth in Ontario if they are unable to afford the required dental procedures and/or cannot wait until the next visit to Latin America. This request is often surprising to dental practitioners if they are unaware of how prohibitive the financial costs of alternative dental care can be. Additionally, some Low German adults believe that the benefit of dentures (no more dental pain) makes them a preferable alternative to maintaining one’s own oral health.

“I learned about toothbrushes and toothpaste when I first came to Canada from the Christmas baskets.”
“We went to the dentist only when we had a lot of pain. Mostly teeth were extracted. I was terrified of going to the dentist and today it still scares me to think of going.”
“If I had dental coverage, I would go more often and not drive to Mexico for dental work.”
“I have never been to a dentist in Canada, neither has my husband, we go to Mexico.”

Low German families in Ontario are beginning to access preventative dental care for their children when barriers to dental services are addressed (dentist provides this care for large families at a reduced cost, community based dental clinics are easily accessed in rural areas, community workers liaison with families and dental services, Ontario Healthy Smiles programs are available, access to Children in Need Of Treatment, etc.).

“My daughter is three, should I take her to the dentist? I didn’t know baby teeth were important.”
“I can’t pay to get my teeth fixed. Can I call you?”
“If I could pay $50 for a cleaning, I would go.”

Nutrition and diet in relation to oral health
Low German people experience significant differences in diet and eating habits between Latin America and Canada. Many Low German people are not aware of how food habits affect oral health. Because oral health is not emphasized in their Latin American context, and because foods eaten there contain much less sugar, Low German people tend to be uncertain about why they seem to have more dental troubles in Canada even though they are engaging in more personal care (daily brushing) than they previously did in Latin America.
Foods in Latin America are often simple and unprocessed, with minimal sugar content, whereas in Canada there is a much greater variety of a food available. This includes nutritious and healthy food, but also pop, candy and chips. Packaged snacks were special treats in Latin America due to limited incomes. Typically, the only daily sugar intake would have been jam for breakfast with candies and pop shared on special occasions. Like many immigrant groups, Low German people eat more highly processed and sweetened foods in Canada compared to their Latin American diets. This is in part perpetuated by their feeling pressure to buy packaged snacks for their children's lunches to help them fit in. Low German mothers often describe wanting to provide their children with signs of affluence such as pop and sweetened milk. A practice that has become common in Ontario is to add strawberry or chocolate syrup (or other sweeteners) to milk. Some parents are coming to realize that providing packaged snacks and sweet drinks are not healthy habits.

“My husband never went to the dentist or had a toothbrush in Mexico - it was only here that his teeth became bad.”
“In Mexico we shared a pop on Sundays.”
“We didn’t eat sugar except in jam for breakfast or in baking on Sundays. We drank water and didn’t eat snacks. We just ate our meals.”
“Our children eat so many snacks here; they are not hungry for food.”
“I don’t want to buy those snacks because they have no taste and they are expensive, but my children want it.”
“Here I add chocolate to their milk because I never had that.”
“They won’t drink the milk here unless it is pink (strawberry syrup added).”
“I used to give my children a lot of pop, but now I stopped. I found out that I didn’t feel so good when I drank pop and my children were cranky and angry. Now I am encouraging them to drink more water.”

**Feeding babies**
Many Low German women breast feed but then use sweetened milk in bottles when the children are weaned. Bottle-fed babies will often be introduced to sweetened milk at 4-6 months of age. Mothers often seem convinced that children will not drink milk unless it is sweetened, even if they have heard that it is not healthy for their baby’s teeth.

“I add sugar to get them to drink milk at night.”
“I just add a little (strawberry) syrup to give it colour.”
“When I learned at the Wednesday program that pink milk in bottles hurt their teeth, I stopped.”

“All above quotes were compiled by The Smiling Project, a Low German dental assessment delivered by a service provider collaborative.

Coping with life and death

Low German families have experienced many challenges through their migration to Latin America and return to Canada. Drought, crop failure, limited income and making do with whatever is immediately available has often been their lot. Limited access to health services and information, limited awareness of safety standards, frequent highway collisions and farm injuries are all factors that have contributed to premature and untimely deaths. Traumatic events are understood as part of the course of life, and yet there are times when this trauma impacts the person’s
ability to cope and be resilient.

**View of death and funerals**
Death of infants, children, youth and young men is a common family experience and as such is accepted as part of life; untimely deaths are interpreted as part of God’s plan. A strong belief that God does not make mistakes sustains individuals and families during their times of grief. It is common for entire families, including toddlers and preschool children, to attend funerals. Parents will keep their children home from school to attend funerals.

**Disabilities**

The Low German people have become very innovative people. Over the years, access to medical equipment and devices has been limited or too expensive so Low German men have built wheelchairs, motorized ambulation devices, crutches, and other equipment to assist individuals with the disabilities.

In Latin America, families are often not aware of or able to access resources for developmentally and/or cognitively disabled individuals. Thus, families usually provide for individual’s specific needs on their own; they feel this is their responsibility. Many individuals with developmental and cognitive challenges participate in manual labour if they are able while others may be hidden from village life. Speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and counsellors have not traditionally been accessible in Latin America. Consequently, the relevance and benefits of these services within the Canadian context are unknown; families may be afraid to accept support services and therefore decline the services.
without comprehending the potential benefits for themselves or their children.

**Mental well-being**

Shyness, difficulty separating from mom, or being a timid child is often viewed as the child having “weak nerves”. It is considered appropriate to treat these behaviours with vitamins. Although vitamins can be obtained by eating fruits and vegetables, they prefer to treat weak nerves with vitamins pills.

“Weak nerves” in adults can also be attributed to broad range of emotions from the feelings one experiences when aware of gossip about oneself to clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is all explained as weak nerves.

Because of the lack of awareness regarding mental health resources available in the Canadian context, Low German Mennonites who struggle with emotional/psychological issues often do not access available supports/resources. Further, Low German Mennonites are often unaware of the benefits of non-prescription interventions such as counseling (addictions, financial, mental health etc.) and that these interventions can promote and lead to mental health well-being. Therefore, in situations where individuals are hospitalized due to emotional distress and/or when suicide is experienced within a community, individuals and families directly affected by these events often experience compounded isolation. It is helpful for service providers to share information regarding the resources available to Low German individuals through these times of distress.

“I moved here from Durango, Mexico about four years ago. Life is very different here than it was in Mexico. When I was in Mexico I lived in a Colony, where I had the close support of my family and friends around me all the time. I am grateful that life here is better, because my husband now has a good job and he can provide for our family, but I have been experiencing feelings of sadness and loneliness because I no longer have the support of my family and friends nearby.”

“I live in a rural area and I find it hard because after my children go to school and my husband goes to work I am home in the house alone all day. I am afraid to get my driver’s license and therefore have a difficult time accessing services that could help me.”

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**Addictions**
Alcohol use, smoking and drug abuse are present within the Low German population. Low German leaders are concerned about addiction issues in their communities and participate in educational seminars regarding addiction. However, in southwestern Ontario, access to culturally sensitive and language appropriate services are not readily available.

**Alcohol**

In Latin America, alcohol is readily available from a variety of outlets and youth often have easy access to it at an early age. The beginnings of alcohol addiction can manifest early in a youth’s life and has unfortunately become more common in these Low German speaking populations. Many families are affected by alcohol addiction.

**Smoking**

Traditionally, smoking has not been viewed as a health concern. Many men and some women do smoke.

**Illegal drugs**

Some Low German men have become addicted to illegal drugs, often as a coping mechanism for symptoms of depression and the despair they feel about their lack of employment opportunities. A small number of Low German men may get involved with the drug trade due to poverty issues and the perception that one-time involvement in transportation of illegal substances will erase their unmanageable debt.

**Drug rehabilitation**

An Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation Centre for both men and women has been established and organized by the diverse Low German Mennonite communities in Mexico. This faith-based, 3 month program is accessed by some Low German individuals from Ontario. The Low German congregational leaders support this centre and will visit their congregants during their stay at the centre.
Education in a colony context

In the Latin American Mennonite colony, the village school is an important institution in the perpetuation of colony life. Each colony village typically brings all the students together in one-room classrooms with one male teacher where they learn to read, write and do basic arithmetic. Learning is largely done by rote. Children will generally start school at age 6-7. Girls finish school at age 11-12 while boys complete school at 12-13 years. The school year is based around seasonal farm work and is approximately 7 months long.

3 important texts

School is understood as preparation for the church life
that students will participate in as adults. School is understood as preparation for the church life the students will participate in as adults. It is here that they are familiarized with the three most important religious texts used by colony Mennonites: the High German Bible (Old and New Testaments are studied), the Catechism (statement of beliefs) and the hymnbook. In many cases, these books are the primary texts used for learning to read. Additionally, the Fibler (a primary reader) is used in traditional, Old Colony schools. As these are all printed in blackletter or gothic script, children also learn to read and write this script. Good penmanship is valued and therefore practised regularly.

Classroom structure of a colony school
As in Canada, resources available in schools differ from region to region throughout Latin America. Some schools continue to use chalk and personal slates, while in other schools parents provide notebooks, pens and pencils. Typically, boys sit on the right and girls sit on the left (just as in church) with older students at the front of the class and younger students at the back. Children who excel sit in aisle seats while seats closest to the walls are for those who have more challenges.

In regions where a variety of Mennonite denominations are present, the parochial schools operated by these churches provide a broader range of curriculum in addition to religious instruction and arithmetic.

**Teacher training**

There are areas in Latin America where the Old Colony church is providing more ongoing teacher training, which allows the teachers to more effectively teach basic reading and math skills. In these areas, some new multi-room schools are also being built where children are placed in classrooms according to age and ability.

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**Transitioning to Ontario's school system**

**Language skills and translation**

In Ontario, Low German families will have varying degrees of English skills depending on how long they have been here. Students who have recently come from Latin America may be able to converse in English at a basic social level (e.g. Good morning. How are you?) but may not have an understanding of classroom instructions or vocabulary. Those who have been in Canada longer may know how to read and write in English. As a teacher, you may find this list of Low German educational words and phrases helpful.

Your school board may have names of approved translators, though some may not be certified. Other professionals (e.g., Child and Youth workers, outreach workers, nurses) are sometimes able to provide translation services. When asking someone to translate, it is important to consider both whether they have the necessary vocabulary for the topics to be discussed and whether they will recognize and understand the importance of confidentiality.

Parents will often need help reading and understanding newsletters as well as other school forms that are sent home with children. It may be
necessary to use translators for parent interviews.

Students who have been educated in High German using books with Gothic text may have difficulty recognizing some English letters. Some letters look quite different. It is important to acknowledge that some Low German speaking students enter the Canadian education system with pieces of up to four languages (High and Low German, Spanish, English). Focusing exclusively on English can be difficult.

Suggestions for helping students adapt

**Starting school:** Low German parents are used to children starting school at age 6 at earliest. Even then, some parents struggle with sending their children full days, five days a week. Ontario's Junior Kindergarten (age 3, 4) is therefore particularly difficult for both the parent and child to adjust to.

**Classroom expectations:** Children are used to being in the same classroom with their siblings and can be surprised and/or upset when they learn that they will be in separate classrooms. Providing a school tour where children are familiarized with the location of their siblings’ classrooms may help to ease their anxiety. Enabling children to meet up with siblings for snack breaks may also help with this transition.

It was 1980 and we had just moved to Ontario from Mexico. Life here was very different than what we were used to. I was six years old and had never gone to school. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but from what my older brother Neil and sister Sarah had told me, I thought we would all be in the same classroom - just like in Mexico.

On that first day of school, my older brother, sister and I were brought all together to the first classroom. That’s when I found out I was the only one staying there. It was all so strange. I didn’t know anyone, I didn’t speak English and I had no idea what to do. I remember thinking that it wasn’t fair Neil and Sarah got to go together. Why did I have to be all by myself?

I found out later that Sarah and Neil did not stay together but were also in different classes. But in my mind, because they left together, I assumed they were staying together when they left my classroom on that first day of school.

**Instructions:** Children are often used to copying and colouring but may need additional instruction to complete other classroom tasks. English/Low German educational phrases

**Clothing:** Low German speaking children may be identifiable in school through their traditional clothing. Sameness is valued within many Low...
German communities; brothers often have shirts made of the same material and sisters often have identical dresses which they all wear on the same day. The newcomer family may not be aware of the variety of clothing, such as boots and snowsuits, that is necessary for local weather.

**Gym wear and school supplies:** Children may not initially come prepared for gym class as they may not have gym clothes. Some girls may also be reluctant to wear shorts or sweat pants. A possible solution for this is to ask the parents if the girls can wear these items under their dresses for physical activity. Supplies such as backpacks, indoor shoes and lunch boxes may also be unfamiliar.

**Lunches:** It may be important to acknowledge that Low German student's lunches often look different but that they contain foods familiar to everyone (such as bread, cheese and slices of sausage in a dish rather than a sandwich in a plastic bag).

**Homework:** Some families will welcome homework while others will find it too difficult to manage. Be flexible and open minded, remembering that some students find homework challenging due to daily chores, family size, space, and an understanding that school is for academics while home life involves other tasks.

**Funerals:** It is common for entire families, including toddlers and preschool children, to attend funerals. Parents will keep their children home from school to attend funerals.

**Seasonal labour:** Low German Mennonites from Latin America are often not well off economically. They come from rural areas and work together on family farms. In Canada, the spirit of collaboration and support remains important within the family. Families often continue working in rural agricultural work and therefore require the assistance of their children, especially during busy times such as seeding and harvest.

“Being in school is hard work. My school is a good school because I never usually see anyone getting bullied who is a Mennonite.” - 7 year old girl.

**Curriculum concerns**
Canadian curriculum incorporates a much more broad range of subjects than the Low German schools in Latin America do. Music, Art, Science and Physical Education are a few of the subjects that will be unfamiliar to Low German students upon their first entry into the Canadian education system. Subjects that discuss the formation and history of the universe, biology, and human reproduction may be considered inappropriate for a child’s education. Some parents will be concerned that their children are exposed to these topics at too young an age, or even at all. Teachers should therefore be mindful of the topics that guest speakers will cover in their presentations and should work to ensure that the presentations do not address these culturally inappropriate topics.

Engage parents in what their children are learning. A parent council that has a say in what their children are being taught empowers families and helps service providers understand the parents’ needs. Try to be open to parents’ concerns in an understanding, non-judgemental fashion, as this will build trust and rapport between parents and teachers.

“We are very willing to adjust our curriculum in order to meet the needs of families. We have made many adjustments over the years and parents have been appreciative of it.” - Teacher at an Alternative Learning program

### Schooling options
In addition to ministry funded schools, some Low German Mennonite children are educated in parochial and homeschooling systems.

### Religious holidays and Grant days
- Christmas – December 25
- Epiphany – January 6
• Good Friday and Easter
• Ascension Day - the 6th Thursday after Easter
• Pentecost - the 7th Sunday after Easter

Christmas, Easter and Pentecost celebrations are often continue over 3 days and are referred to as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd day of the holiday. These are important times for church services and family gatherings. For this reason, Low German individuals may miss school, work and other appointments. It may be helpful to recognize these days as Grant (“G”) days on the attendance register like one would with holidays for other religious groups.

Medical concerns

Parents may address medical referrals from the school through a chiropractor or naturopath given that this is how medical issues have traditionally been attended to. Parents sometimes need support in understanding how to deal with common communicable diseases and infestations such as head lice, impetigo and Fifth Disease; they may not be aware that their traditional resources will not be effective against these sorts of concerns. Additionally, due to the time it takes to complete settlement documents, some students will not be eligible for health care coverage.

Students may have gaps in their immunizations and parents may express hesitancy in updating these because they will be of the understanding that medical appointments require payment. To avoid difficulties that may arise regarding immunizations at school, when the consent forms are sent home to the parents, it is imperative to communicate that these immunizations are a free service regardless of health coverage but that they do require written consent. If a student is absent or has not provided a consent form on the day that immunizations are administered at school, parents may not have access to a family doctor or be aware of public health services where these immunizations can be administered. It will therefore be difficult for parents to follow through on the expectation that they take their children to a clinic to receive the missed immunizations. It is beneficial to directly communicate with the parents (phone call) and inform them of immunization options that will not incur fees. Suspending students for incomplete immunizations is counterproductive.
High school and beyond

Reasons why students leave school

Low German speaking Mennonites have a strong work ethic. At home, self-worth is traditionally developed by finding a job and saving money to buy a house or a car. Therefore, if a student does not feel like finishing high school there is often not much objection from parents. They may even encourage their children to quit school due to concerns regarding curriculum content. The combination of strongly valuing work, uncertainty about what youth are being taught, and sometimes knowing of job openings can result in parents deciding to allow or even encourage their children to quit school and begin work.

15 year-old Susie and her 9 siblings moved to Canada with their parents 6 months ago. They had been in a remote village in Durango with a high rate of poverty. In order to survive economically, the older children must now work in factories or fields in the summer while the younger children stay at home and help their mother with household chores.
Parents tend to place the responsibility of choosing to continue with high school on their children. Because of the strong cultural expectations in the community and at home, it is logical that many youth will choose to enter the workforce. Low German parents have different values and purposes for education (see Religious and cultural understandings) than those of mainstream Canadian parents and these values sometimes clash with educational expectations in Canada.

**A growing recognition that education is important**

Overall, there seems to be a growing recognition that school is necessary, but there is still resistance to it as part of the culture/world that should not be engaged with. However, this issue is loaded with cultural, social, and economical contexts; there are many variables that can cause a family to recognize education as important. For example, Low German families that have been settled in Canada for many years are more apt to see education as important, but those just arriving from Latin American countries are still in the process of understanding the culture and way of life in Canada and how education impacts opportunities. Those who are no longer part of more conservative traditions may also have a greater understanding of the importance of education and encourage their children remain in school.

“I have seen a growing realization of the importance of education over the years... There are good things happening--our participation rate has increased in the last five years, and I have noticed that more families seem to be settling in the area, rather than having ‘two worlds’ (Mexico and Canada), in which they are constantly moving back and forth. Our program has really been able to focus on technical work (shop work, machine work, etc.), so that also helps parents to see that education is an important step along the road to getting a good job.” -Teacher from an alternative learning program

“I'm going to own and work at a restaurant. I will have to take business and cooking classes at college.” - Low German Jr. High student

**Alternative learning programs**

In several areas within Southern Ontario, there are alternative learning programs that youth can enrol in. These programs are great for Low German families because they consist of only Mennonite youth and there is a strong emphasis on work. Students are able to obtain the necessary credits and receive a high school diploma in 4 years while working and doing co-op placements. Parents often feel at ease placing their youth in these programs because youth get an education while maintaining their commitment to work. They also like these programs because placement employers will sometimes hire the students after they have completed the educational component.

**Available Programs:**

Valley Heights’ Turning Point Program (Launched in 2006 in the Grand Erie District School Board)
Turning Point is a program designed for students who work to achieve their Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Of the 30 credits needed to graduate, students can earn 18 required credits by working on independent study courses provided by a teacher. Students can work at jobs that are full-time, part-time, seasonal, paid or volunteer, to earn up to 14 co-operative education credits toward their diploma.

Students get help as they complete their assignments in a few different ways:

- Students can come to class that is available five days per week, or teachers go to students' homes, or, if feasible, teachers will go to the students workplace and tutor during lunch breaks.
- A homework club has been established on Tuesday evenings from 6:00pm - 8:30pm at the Turning Point office in Fairground, ON to help those who are unavailable during the day.

For more information about the Valley Heights Turning Point Program, please contact the principle, Mr. DeGroote @ 519-586-3522 ext 509001

Click here for more details about this program

**A.S.P.I.R.E. (Arbeit Schule Program in Rural Elgin, Thames Valley District School Board)**

- A Secondary School program for 14-21 year olds, funded through alternative education
- Operates out of Summers’ Corners Public School; is linked to East Elgin Secondary School
- Uses a self-study model and leads to an Ontario Secondary School Diploma
- Teacher support is primarily delivered at home; classroom time is also available. Tutorial support from 6-8pm Mon-Thurs
- Offers co-op credits and academic credits
- Prepares students for the workplace, college or university
- Communicating (phone/email) every 15 days with students during their time in Mexico keeps students enrolled
- Adult classes and physical education classes held Tuesday and Thursday evenings
- Regular social nights are held to build community/relationship
- Free

Contact: Catarina Vindasius
226.268.8059
Abe Wall Vice Principal, EESS
519.773.3174 ext. 67354

**CASE (Community Based Alternative Secondary Education, Avon-Maitland District School Board)**

- Established in 2006.
- Combines academic learning with co-op work placements, leading to an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).
- Emphasis is on providing a solid academic background that addresses the needs and concerns of families, and practical skills to prepare students for work and learning after high school.
- Graduates have entered the workforce, the skilled trades through apprenticeships, and have continued to post-secondary training at the college and university level.
• Classes are held separate from the mainstream program at Listowel District Secondary School on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, with optional extra teacher support on Mondays.
• Classes are taught by teachers in a traditional classroom setting, using activity based learning, rather than independent learning.
• Co-op work placements on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays for school credit. Teachers can arrange specialized placements in business, education, and healthcare settings, but most students choose to find their own placements. There is growing interest in apprenticeship through OYAP (Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program).
• Technical training is available in welding and fabrication, machining, CAD (Computer-aided Design), CNC Operations (metal and wood), woodworking, electrical, and automotive on a rotating basis.
• Social sciences classes include food and nutrition labs and parenting.
• Accounting, business and entrepreneurship courses.
• Strong science program with hands-on lab work that has allowed CASE students to enter health-related fields such as nursing, etc.
• Safety and certification courses are offered each year in a wide variety of areas.
• CASE has a history of offering night classes in Listowel and Milverton and independent learning for students who otherwise cannot participate.

Please contact us for details regarding other options for students who cannot participate in our day school program at our LDSS site.

We are committed to serving families and students in our area and welcome comments and feedback!

Attendance and participation in the CASE program is free, and bussing is available within LDSS area.

Brochure and other information is available at tinyurl.com/caseldss
Contact: John David Kuepfer, Program Coordinator
519.291.1880; jdkuep@fc.amdsb.ca
155 Maitland Avenue South
Listowel, Ontario N4W 2M4

ELAWS (Elmira Life and Work School, Waterloo Region District School Board)
• Blend classroom instruction with valuable work experience
• Earn OSSD while gaining hands-on experience in the workplace setting
• Aims to develop skills that enable youth to enter the workforce (emphasis on math/technical skills/writing), strong interest in apprenticeship
• Teachers are sensitive to values of students and their families
• Classes are held at the main campus but separate from the mainstream high school population
• Grade 9-10 students attend classes on Monday and Tuesday
• Grade 11-12 students choose either Monday or Tuesday (remainder of week is spent at co-op placements and completing homework)
• Certification programs available: Safety, CPR, First Aid, Food handling, etc.
• Free

Contact: Jeff Martin
Elmira District Secondary School
The ULearn model is built on flexibility in order to meet the needs of the community it serves. Students have access to independent learning resources and teacher support in a variety of subjects. For example:

- High School Credit Courses (Math, English)
- Co-operative Education Credit Courses
- English Language Learning Courses

ULearn students participate in a variety of ways.

**ULearn Linwood**
- Tuesday evenings 7-9pm
- Linwood Public School
- Partner with Linwood English School

**ULearn Elmira**
- Weekdays (am or pm)
- Elmira Lions Hall

**ULearn Distance**
- Home study with teacher support through electronic communication and home visits

Contact: Ryan Gingerich
Elmira District Secondary School
4 University Ave.
Elmira, ON N3B 1K2
519.669.5414 x480
ryan_gingerich@wrdsb.on.ca

**Centre Peel Secondary School (Upper Grand District School Board)**
- Grade 9-10 courses are taught in a portable behind Centre Peel School
- All compulsory core courses offered as well as Learning Strategies; Visual Arts; Food and Nutrition; Individual, Family, and Social Living; Exploring Technology, Transportation, and Manufacturing
- Program runs two days per week with a third day available for tutoring
- Free
Strengths and challenges of alternative learning programs
These alternative learning programs are geared specifically to Low German individuals. The separation from mainstream schools eases fears for parents who are concerned about the effect of outside influences on their children. Teachers in these programs adapt their teaching strategies so that students can engage and overcome language and systemic barriers. The experience, practical skills, and potential for paid employment post co-op placement usually increases the perceived value of the program for families. The flexibility of the program and the collaboration with other service providers strengthens the support Low German families feel in these programs.

However, these programs still face the challenge of competing with the ongoing lure of work. Even when students are enrolled in these programs, work can take a high priority and threaten to pull students away from the programs completely. Additionally, because of strong values regarding all family members contributing to household functioning, homework and assignments are sometimes challenging for youth to complete. Physical constraints in the home such as the lack of study space and materials and/or internet access may contribute to the student's difficulty in finishing alternative learning programs.

Opening closed doors
Many Low German parents state they want a better life for their children than they had for themselves and there is growing understanding about how education fits into that picture. When parents see other Low German children attending high school and emerging with their cultural integrity intact, it puts them at ease; they are then more likely to encourage their children to complete high school as well.
“When my daughter first went to high school I knew she was a good girl, so I was confident that she would not become involved in dangerous activities. I really encouraged her to sit and be friends with her youth group instead of the kids she went to grade school with, as I believed her youth group friends would be a better influence on her.” (Daughter later went to university for Social Work and is currently working in her field.) - Low German Mother

Grassroots efforts within the Low German community to raise awareness about school are encouraging because others can then see the importance its own members are placing on education.

“I want my children to have a better life than I did.” - Low German parent

“I want to be a kindergarten teacher.” - Low German Jr. High student

“School is important because if you don’t go to school then you don’t get very good jobs.” - Low German Jr. High student

Many parents feel anxious as their children enter high school and it is no different for Low German parents. They are often concerned about their youth engaging in elements of adolescent culture that they cannot support. It is helpful for service providers to acknowledge these fears and to encourage parents to remain/become involved in this stage of the education process (see: A strategic plan for welcoming Low German Students into your school). Youth may also lack necessary peer support, given that for many Low German families, completing high school is a (relatively) new endeavour. It is therefore that much more daunting a task for youth to undertake. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, lack of knowledge about options, and isolation sometimes prevent youth and/or parents from seeking out help and becoming aware of the options available to them.

“George was a student who sat on the bus alone everyday in high school. He would often get mocked and verbally or physically beat up because he came from a large Mennonite family. Examples like this often caused other children to dissociate themselves from their Mennonite identity, for fear that they would also get made fun of.” - Recounted by a 23 year old Low German woman

Jake does not really associate himself as a Mennonite, as he sees himself as the same as his mainstream Canadian peers. But he does remember that when he was in grade school he saw the Mennonite kids being “pushed around” and called names such as “stinky”. He says that
now, in high school, he doesn’t see as much outright bullying, but notes that there is a definite physical separation of those who are newer to Canada or are from families that are more conservative (in terms of their the way they dress and carry themselves). -18 year old youth

A story of transition
Isaac and Mary moved to Canada just over 18 years ago. Their first two children, Peter and Sarah were born in Mexico. John, Philip and Martha were born in Canada. Peter already had one year of education in Mexico but when they arrived in Canada, Sarah was only 5 and seemed especially young to be going to school. Isaac and Sarah found the school system to be very different and were initially hesitant to send their oldest two children to school.

Eighteen years later, Peter has earned his GDP and is working as a welder in a shop while continuing to help his father and uncle farm. He hopes to take over the farm one day. He continues to speak Low German at home with his wife and family as well as at work, but is also fluent in English.

Sarah recently graduated from High School and is now enrolled in a homecare diploma program. She is also fluent in both Low German and English but only uses Low German within her family context. She is the first person, even within her extended family, to pursue post-secondary education. It came as a surprise to her parents that she did this and they experienced those familiar hesitancies from so long ago when they first sent her to elementary school. But they understand that this will open up opportunities for Sarah to have a good paying job in the future and are tentatively supportive of her.

John is currently in high school. Though there are many Low German youth in his school, he neither explicitly identifies with them nor avoids them like some of his peers do. He sees how the Low German youth are sometimes treated differently but does not experience this himself. Sometimes he helps newcomer students as they first settle into school because he can speak Low German and thinks it is a nice thing to do but this has not produced many long-term friendships. He is not sure what he wants to do after he graduates but is not interested in farming.

Philip is in Junior High. He does not identify as a Low German Mennonite and most of his peers do not know he can speak another language. Sometimes he worries that his older brother’s helpfulness will result in him being asked to help out as well. He uses English at home even though he is able to speak Low German. Sometimes his parents feel this is disrespectful but he insists that it just happens naturally. He thinks in English and it comes more naturally to him.

Martha is proud to call herself a Mennonite. Her friends are impressed with her ability to speak another language and sometimes they spend recesses learning different phrases. Martha wears pants or dresses to school and is comfortable with the other girls who do not wear pants. They remind her of some of her cousins. She says that no one bullies her in school for being a Mennonite and that everyone in school treats the Mennonites well. She knows English better than Low German and it is a bit of a game at home between her and her parents to keep learning Low German so she speaks both languages in the home.

Isaac and Mary can see the cultural shifts that are happening even within their own family. On one hand they are pleased with how their older children maintained important cultural and religious values as they went through high school, while on the other hand they worry that adopting some of the Canadian cultural values will inevitably lead to losing the Low German values completely. Nevertheless, they know their lives in
Canada are much more economically stable and are relieved to have been able to provide for their children in ways that their parents never were able to provide for them.

**Resources for teachers**

The following documents are helpful for teachers in their work with Low German speaking Mennonites:

- [English/Low German educational phrases (pdf)](#)
- [Initial classroom observations checklist (pdf)](#)
- [Initial impression observation checklist (pdf)](#)
- [Suggested ways to help other class members integrate a new student (pdf)](#)
- [Considerations for working with beginning English language (pdf)](#)
- [A strategic plan for welcoming Low German students into your school (pdf)](#)

**Literacy resources available**

The following storybooks are written at a very basic English level and reflect Low German Mennonite life and culture. They are available for purchase from:

*Haldimand-Norfolk Literacy Council.*
*519.428.0064.*
Relating together

Relating with Low German Mennonites

Low German speaking Mennonites from Latin America who have recently arrived in Ontario are adjusting to major cultural shifts. Adapting to the large number of government and social services available takes a great amount of time and energy on their part. As service providers, you can help with their transition by being sensitive to this reality. Following are some suggestions and considerations pertaining to relating with clients from Low German speaking Mennonite colonies in Latin America.

Programs available in Ontario

When Low German speaking Mennonites come to Southern Ontario from Latin America, they usually settle in communities where other family members and acquaintances have already established themselves. As the Low German communities grow, so too do a wide variety of supportive programs. MCC Ontario provides settlement and family support services in Leamington and Chatham-Kent. Mennonite Community Services (MCS) provides settlement, employment, and family services in Aylmer. The following provide programming particular to the Low German population: Woolwich Community Services, Woolwich Community Health Services Norfolk Community Help Center Drayton Newcomer Program (Wellington County) Poole ESL Program (Perth County).
Other applicable issues
Often times, Low German Mennonite parents are uncomfortable with ministry funded schools and will opt to educate their children in parochial or homeschooling systems. Many Low German Mennonite families reside in rural areas. Therefore, even if they are made aware of resources, they will often struggle to access them. Because of low literacy levels, it is important to provide resource information both orally and pictorially, when possible. Due to financial constraints, especially upon initial entry to Canada, adults (women in particular) do not obtain driver's licenses and other typical documentation that is helpful to the settlement and employment process.

Helpful tips for relating with Low German Mennonites
Coming to Ontario from a largely self-sufficient agrarian context where an important value continues to be that families work together on the farm for family sustainability, one of the first major challenges for these families is understanding the different values in Canadian culture. These differences are most evident regarding education, paid employment outside of the family context, and the role of children in/for families. This clash of cultural values may be expressed in responses such as: “Why would I go to school when I can help my family have a better life?” or “If you live under my roof, you will help the family”.

**Adjustments to government involvement:** Colony Mennonites encounter a Canadian society that is highly regulated and monitored. Everything from driving to health care to education and how to discipline children is regulated. This level of regulation is something they are not accustomed to. Learning about, understanding and adapting to these new regulations takes time.

In Old Colony communities in Latin America, social issues such as poverty, abuse, conflict, alcoholism and youth troubles are issues to be dealt with by the church whereas in Canada these are often the responsibility of the state. Thus Low German Mennonites can be surprised when government agencies become involved in these issues. While new to them, Low German individuals have stated that they appreciate Canada’s social framework.

**Are you speaking from experience?** When giving advice, you may find Low German individuals will want to know if you are speaking from personal experience or from “textbook knowledge”. Advice and other information will often be better taken if you can express that you have personal experience regarding the issue.

**Asking for signatures:** Because of their oral culture, Low German Mennonites are sometimes confused about the purpose or importance of signatures. You may encounter individuals who are reluctant to sign any document or conversely, are willing to sign any document that you put before them. Families may be aware of situations that have resulted in harm due to people signing documents while not understanding what they were signing or the implications of the signature. Naturally, this increases their uncertainty.

Some individuals may print their name when asked for their signature. This may be because they think it is neater or can be read more easily
Reasons for initial transiency: Upon arrival in Ontario, families may initially be very transient because they are searching for year-round employment, for housing that has lower rent and heating costs, and/or for homes located in rural areas.

Connecting to other Low German families in their community: If Low German families are not already connected by family ties when they come to Ontario from Latin America, they may not be aware of other Low German families living down the road. When they do encounter other Low German Mennonites in their communities, they may not necessarily initiate contact with one another due to a general sense of timidity that many feel.

Cultural shifts: Resettlement in Canada always results in some degree of cultural shift, but the evidence of this shift is largely determined by the cultural starting point that each family begins the resettlement process at.

Looking at our own value systems: Service providers may expect Low German families to adapt to Canadian culture in very particular ways, especially when it is noted that some families do/can take on mainstream cultural values. Our expectations for their change is rooted in our own value system and when we are faced with families who choose not to live according to our values (i.e., continue to wear traditional clothing, have large families, not pursue post-secondary education) it is important that we do not take offence to their choice to live within a value system that is different from our own. Value systems change within culture and over time (our own included) and therefore should not be used as barometers of right and wrong, good and bad, or healthy and unhealthy.

Academic research: Many Low German Mennonites do not understand the interest that their alternative ways of being generates and are therefore confused when people want to conduct research on/in their communities. As service providers, we feel we benefit from research because it guides our practice. Low German Mennonites do not understand how or what this means because, for them, tradition guides their practice. Life is taken at face value and the meaning making that coincides with research does not often translate to practical realities for them. It is partly for this reason that academic research regarding Low German Mennonites is limited. Also, Low German communities are often hesitant to agree to participate in research because they are particularly concerned about the perpetuation of stereotypes and of being misrepresented in mainstream society; it sometimes seems better to say nothing at all than to be misunderstood.

Language and communications

Newsletters, brochures, websites: If your organization relies on newsletters, brochures, websites and other forms of print communication, it is important to be aware that the Low German population often does not have the necessary literacy skills to understand and interpret the content and/or access to online resources. It is best to consider forms of face to face communication as you will be more successful in ensuring your
message is understood.

Translation: Consider arranging for a translator to be present when meeting with families whose English skills may be limited. Relying on children/community members for interpretation may be inadequate as these individuals may not have the necessary vocabulary for your area of expertise and the nature of the conversation may be considered inappropriate for children and other community members to hear.

Confidentiality: It is important to explain confidentiality to Low German Mennonites because as an oral, communal culture, they have different understandings of privacy and individuality which may result in their sharing information amongst themselves that breaches our confidentiality standards. Further, they really value when service providers promise to keep their personal information private but to say that you are “bound by confidentiality” is often not understood, which is why it is important to explain what exactly this means in any given context.

Low German phrases: Try to learn Low German phrases such as “Good morning”, “Good bye” and “How are you?” as this demonstrates your desire to engage with them and to learn alongside them.

Low German educational phrases
Low German words for anatomy
Low German words for conditions and diseases
Low German midwifery words and phrases

Telephone voice mail: If your organization uses voice mail, consider helping clients learn how to use it by doing practice calls in your office or during home visits. They may initially be hesitant to call agencies or leave messages as they fear they will not understand the phone message or because they feel insecure about their language skills. Many Low Germans have call display and will attempt to return calls.

Profanity: Using profanities and phrases that use God’s name in vain, such as “Oh my god” is quite offensive to Low German Mennonites.

Taking an oath: When Mennonite people are expected to “swear” or “take an oath” for legal purposes, it is best to offer that they can “affirm” rather than swear or take oaths because these actions are understood as rejection of their religious values and are therefore wrong to do.

Children not kids: Refer to children as “children” and try to avoid the word “kids” as this may be offensive to parents.

Computers, internet and electronics: Some families who have lived in Ontario for an extended period of time may have computers, internet and television while other families make a conscious choice not to have radios, television, videos and other electronic equipment in their homes.
Mutuality within social systems

Developing trust of authorities: Compared with Latin American societies, Canada has a significantly larger number of officials and/or professionals who take direct interest in our personal lives. As there is not an equivalent experience for most Low German Mennonites from Latin America, these professionals and officials are usually understood as synonymous with the authority figures they are accustomed to and are therefore not to be trusted. Low German Mennonites do not trust police and military personnel because military corruption has been prevalent in their Latin American experiences. Given this history, it should not be surprising to service providers when they feel they are met with resistance from community members.

Respect: Low German Mennonites desire respect, but many anticipate they will not receive it due to their lack of education, their religious beliefs, or their cultural norms. Feeling disrespected produces resistance.

Developing a spirit of collaboration: Fostering a sense of mutuality with Low German Mennonites is integral to the work service
providers do. When the purposes, mandates, or goals of service providers are in apparent conflict with Low German Mennonite paradigms, it is helpful to approach these situations with a spirit of collaboration and understanding. Ask questions that allow individuals to explain their positions; demonstrate an interest in learning and understanding. After this, explain your own position. Even if agreement is not reached, it is helpful to come to an understanding about the nature of future interactions. This fosters the Low German Mennonites’ sense of freedom to make their own choices as well as an understanding of what affect their choices will have in their interactions with the broader society. Though disagreement may remain, the potential for conflict is decreased when mutuality is fostered.

Understanding Low German “authority”: Low German Mennonite cultures are traditionally patriarchal with much deference given to the authority structures within their culture. The ultimate authority is God’s authority and, as the Mennonite tradition exemplifies, when government or political authority is perceived to contradict God’s authority, they are committed to adhering to God’s authority. Adults have authority in their homes and church leaders have authority in their communities. Therefore, when service providers engage with Low German Mennonite communities, we may run the risk of offending the communities because we represent what is perceived to be illegitimate authority, making demands and expectations.

**Gender and parental roles:** Traditional gender roles and respect for/deference to elders are maintained within many Low German families. This is often notable in children accepting direction from parents and older siblings without question and in women seeking men’s approval before making decisions. This social order is another reason that some Low German Mennonite people feel that service providers give directives and have disrupted the social order within the family and community. Service providers may be viewed as positioning themselves in the parental role, leaving adult Low German Mennonites to feel as though they have been placed back in the role of a child.

### Suggestions for interviews and home visits

**Personal appearance:** Be aware that heavy make-up, tattoos, jewelry, piercings, clothing that comes above the knee or shows any amount of cleavage, or close fitting clothing may be a detriment to establishing a positive working relationship with Low German individuals.

**Meeting deadlines:** For some, strict adherence to gender roles can be important. Service providers may find that Low German individuals are hesitant to meet with individuals of the opposite gender if another adult is not present. Service providers may also notice that women will want to receive their husband’s approval before committing to plans. Service providers should take this into account when considering the deadlines we need to meet.

**Distinguishing between service providers:** Low German families may have heard that nurses and social workers remove children from homes and may therefore have been advised that it is best not to allow these service providers into their homes. Since they may
It is sometimes assumed that all home visitors may remove their children. It is helpful to provide concrete examples of the types of assistance you give to other clients in order to facilitate understanding of what is available for the Low German person.

**Understanding the need for referrals:** Referrals for further medical or educational testing/procedures may not be understood. You may need to take additional time to explain their importance/how the system works.

**Taking notes:** If you plan to take notes, ask if this is okay and perhaps mention that the notes help you to remember details. It may be better not to bring paperwork or laptops into Low German homes upon the first visit.

**Medical histories:** When taking medical histories you may need to explain certain illnesses and their symptoms as these illnesses may not be known or have corresponding Low German names.

**Use analogies:** Using analogies and agricultural examples often aids in understanding health principles.

**Sexuality is private:** Sexuality is considered a private matter and as such, discussion of sexual matters will create much embarrassment, especially if a practitioner does not have a trusting relationship established with the individual(s). When children are present, it is best to refrain from talking about reproduction or sexuality. Parents often believe it is morally wrong to talk with children about basic reproductive information and are often offended when their children receive information on reproduction/sexuality in school or community settings.

**An orderly house:** Personal cleanliness and an orderly house are highly valued. Women may spend hours cleaning the house before you visit and will be embarrassed if their children’s toys are scattered on the floor.

**The presence of children:** Low German children are often initially shy but still curious about strangers in their home. They then tend to stand on the periphery to observe you. At the same time, parents may assume that service providers will find children’s presence disruptive and tend to shoo their children away. It often puts the parents at ease to hear you state that it is fine to have the children around. Service providers who engage positively with children will often bolster parents (especially mothers) pride in their children, especially because positive affirmation is not a strong cultural practice.
Children's Services, Citizenship and Immigration, Ontario Works

Children's Services

Awareness: Like many other immigrant and refugee populations, Low German speaking Mennonites from Latin America have often heard that in Canada, one's children can be removed from the home without warning or cause. This understanding is perpetuated, in part, when children's services becomes involved in a family matter and this family's community remains uncertain and/or unconvinced about the reasons for this involvement. Different understandings of privacy that originate from within the colony life context mean that negative experiences are quickly passed throughout Low German communities. These experiences become the basis for beliefs and understandings about the roles that various service providers undertake.

Factors: When a family becomes involved with the child welfare system in Ontario, it is usually because a variety of factors regarding social norms have converged to result in a referral. These factors include: lack of knowledge about Canadian norms and laws regarding corporal punishment, lack of knowledge regarding the Ontario primary school system or choices to engage in homeschooling/private schools, culturally different understandings of adequate care for children (i.e. supervision at play, child appropriate work), inability to access to health care services, lack of knowledge regarding appropriate winter wear, and various service provider's unfamiliarity Low German cultural practices (food, health, family roles). Additionally, community members may refer a family if they are concerned about something but uncomfortable with addressing it themselves. For further reading: Child Welfare: The Need for Education and Advocacy (E. Schneider).

Established Protocol: Children's services staff should be aware that in Elgin-St.Thomas and Windsor-Essex (and being developed in Chatham-Kent), protocol particular to work with Low German Mennonite families has been developed and is successfully being used. The purpose of this protocol is to ensure that the existing cultural differences between Low German communities and children's services providers are appropriately navigated to ensure the best interests of children and families are met. A highlight of these protocol is that, upon the involved family's consent, Low German religious leaders are involved in the process. This helps enhance communication, collaboration and coordination within and between the Low German community and children's services. Spanking is an area of particular religious concern. Low German Mennonites often use Bible verses to explain why they choose to use this form of discipline, and when they are told they cannot use this, they lose what they view as an effective parenting tool and also feel as though they must choose to obey God's law or Canadian law. For this reason, it is helpful for children's services workers to have conversation around other forms of discipline and parenting with the family and religious leaders.
Citizenship and Immigration

Applicable Legislation: Because of the unique migration history of Low German Mennonites from Latin America to and from Canada, there is a fair bit of legislation that directly impacts these families in ways that are often unique to these communities. For instance, though a married couple may have both been born and raised in Latin America, one may have Canadian citizenship while the other may not. This depends on the choices their parents and grandparents made. Additionally, this couple may have some of their own children who are Canadian citizens (born before a certain date) while their younger children may not be. An example of this type of scenario is provided here. The following documents will be helpful to you in understanding some of the legislation that is particularly pertinent to Low German individual's claims.

Legislated citizenship changes as of April 2009
Quick Reference of Canadian citizenship rules that affect Low German Newcomers

Ontario Works

Challenges regarding employment: As a whole, Low German Mennonites from Latin America are keen to work and will often take any job that is available to them. However, this often means that they are employed in labour intensive jobs and run increased risks of injury. Sometimes this is due to lack of knowledge regarding Canadian and Ontario labour, health, and safety standards. Low German Mennonites also often have limited formal education and/or low literacy skills. Therefore, when they are unable to find employment due to injury, inability to do physical labour, or due to being a newcomer who has not yet entered into the labour market, it may be challenging to find appropriate services to address these difficulties. Some clients will benefit from the following alternative education options, while many will benefit from the ESL classes specifically tailored to Low German communities. Due to the combination of levels of schooling, the traditional gender roles of the culture, and the types of work that are available to low literate individuals, men are predominantly the wage earners in a family unit. When men are unable to work, women may seek employment outside the home, but this tends to cause major stress of the family. Therefore, this is often seen as a last resort.

Bibliography and additional resources

The information and material provided within this website has been compiled through networking with various service providers, years of partnership with Low German communities, and through some of the following materials listed below. We hope that these materials may open doors for you on your journey of learning:

General Resources
Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO). Available at: http://gameo.org/
Increasing Cultural Proficiency in our Workplaces
Journal of Mennonite Studies.
Kjenn jie noch Plautdietsch?: A Mennonite Low German Dictionary (Herman Rempel).
Las mujeres flores (Eunice Adorno). Available through your local bookstore.
"Intimate portrait of Mexico's Mennonite community", a BBC News Magazine video clip.
Preservings: A journal of the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation.
The Mennonite Historian.
The Mennonites (Larry Towell). Available for order online.

Migrations/Mennonite History
"Government Pressure, Mennonite Separateness and the 1920's Migration to Mexico and Paraguay" (Bill Janzen)
Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s (Royden Loewen).
"Personal Reflection on 35 Years of Migration Work" (Bill Janzen).

Mennonites in Canada series:

Mennonite Experience in America series:


Global Mennonite History series:
Latin America: Mission and Migration. 2010.
Asia: Churches Engage Asian Traditions. 2011.

Religion and Culture
One Quilt Many Pieces: A Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada (Margaret Loewen Reimer).

Health
"Familial and cultural perceptions and beliefs of oral hygiene and dietary practices among ethnically and socio-economically diverse groups" (Adair, Pine, Burnside et al).
"Health and Illness Beliefs Among the Southern Alberta Kanadier Mennonite Immigrants" (J. Kulig & B. Hall).
"Religion, Pain, and the Body: Agency in the Life of an Old Colony Mennonite Woman" (K. L. Fast). Available at:
"Transcultural Nursing Care with Old Colony Mennonites in a School Context" (K. Edmunds).

Education
Called to Mexico: Bringing hope and literacy to the Old Colony Mennonites. Available through Old Colony Mennonite Support. PO Box Office 150. Nappanee, IN 46550. PH 574.773.2565.

How to Relate Well