

# Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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## Living Simple and Uncluttered Lives

**MANY YEARS AGO** when we lived in the city of Harrisburg with our two children, we had a basketball hoop and backboard in the alley behind our house. One day, a couple of neighbor boys came upon it and I overheard one say to the other, “Wow, they must be rich.” “No,” the other boy said, “If they were rich, they wouldn’t be living here.” During that same time period, we traded our little blue two-door Datsun B210 hatchback for a used four-door Ford Escort station wagon that just happened to have automatic windows, a cassette tape player, and air conditioning—“luxuries” we hadn’t had heretofore. Someone at church (in wealthier suburbia, mind you!) teased us about trading simple for luxurious—and I felt vaguely guilty.

A third story from those same days: The now-classic *More with Less Cookbook*, published in 1976, was followed up in 1980 with *Living More With Less*. I contributed a brief testimony to the second book: another car story. In that testimony, I reported that the Chevy Nova we owned before the blue Datsun had recently passed the 100,000 mile mark and we were choosing not to trade it in for a new one.

Simplicity is often in the eye of the beholder. We struggled financially during some of those years we lived in Harrisburg and life was anything but simple, but relatively speaking, we were more privileged than many of our neighbors and far wealthier than many people around the world. For a variety of reasons, after more than seventeen years in the city, we moved to suburbia where we’ve been living comfortably but not

luxuriously. Life still isn’t simple, a fact of which I’m quite conscious as my husband and I clear out the “clutter” of thirty-two years in the same house and prepare to move literally next door to Messiah Lifeways.

Why do I tell these personal stories? Certainly not to brag, but to confess that I have been struggling with the Brethren in Christ core value of “living simply” since long before it became a core value. I remember that in 1999 when it was added to the list of values, there was discussion of whether we really did value living simply, and it has since sometimes been described as more aspirational than descriptive of reality. Perhaps one reason is that we often equate living simply with fewer and simpler material things, and forget that some of the clutter in our lives comes from trying to do too much, or filling our minds with so much “stuff” (responsibilities, concerns, questions) that we have no room for anything else.

What does it mean to “value uncluttered lives” so we can be “free to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully”? It’s the only core value that is instrumental. We value uncluttered lives *so that* we are free to love, give, serve. What does it look like to unclutter so we can love, serve, give? What might it mean to “live simply so that others may simply live”? This edition of *Shalom!* explores those questions and more.

**Harriet S. Bicksler, editor**

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# Leading from the Conviction of Simplicity

By Heather and Micah Brickner

**THE CHURCH IS** not a building. We don't know how many times we've heard that phrase used. But we never really understood what that meant until we started a church in our living room. In 2016, we quit our jobs as associate pastors at a large church outside of Harrisburg, PA, and moved to Lancaster City with the goal of forming a new kind of church community. We have always believed, "It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people." We came to the realization that in order to embrace our conviction of "living simply," it not only meant how we live as a household, but also in our expression of the local church.

Branch & Vine seeks to embrace and share the love of Jesus by living Jesus-cen-

tered lives, pursuing justice, and multiplying disciples. We use tag lines like: Jesus loves everyone. Kids should be seen and heard. Church should be simple. For about a year, we opened up our tiny city duplex every Wednesday night for a potluck. We met a lot of different people, all on very different journeys in life. It was a beautiful and—at times—stressful season of life. We had decided to do this bi-vocationally. We worked full-time jobs, outside of a paid church setting, not receiving any denominational funding initially, and just focusing on building relationships in our community. This often meant rushing home from work to tidy up the house, cooking the main course, and taking a few minutes to center ourselves.

While this Wednesday evening experience was transformative for us, we realized that it had a limited life cycle. We recalibrated and moved this gathering to a Sunday morning—still meeting in our living room—and calling it "Brunch Church." After the first Sunday, we realized we needed a different space to gather. The living room was packed from wall to wall, the dining room had become an overflow space, and the spare bedroom upstairs had become a quiet space for parents and babies.

It was time to find a new space, yet Heather wanted to continue to live and lead with the value of simplicity. So we reached out to a friend and neighbor who was on the board of the city cemetery and inquired about using this big, old brick house that was sitting on the edge of the cemetery. We moved all of the church's functions to the place we affectionately called "The Lemon House" on Lemon Street.

Our church community fell in love with this space. The living room was large enough to hold about 20–30 people with a mix of chair rows and coffee tables. The kitchen was always bustling with chatter and billowing with the scent of freshly made pancakes. The rooms on the second floor were converted into a nursery and a children's ministry room. This space had become a community hub: cross-cultural learning dinners, pre-

school playgroups, porch-side jam sessions, parking lot kids' games, and the list went on.

But we had a problem: we began to run out of room. We knew we had to do something when someone said, "We stopped inviting people because we've run out of space." After a bit of a stressful debacle of a new venue falling through, we began to explore where a future home base for the church might be. Fortunately, a realtor connected us with a youth center in the city called The Mix, and it seemed obvious that renting space from them was going to be a good fit. For the past six years, we've continued to rent space from The Mix, and it's given us an incredible space to connect with the community, while also financially and relationally supporting a valuable non-profit in the city.

Church planters receive a lot of spoken and unspoken expectations, and throughout the years, well-meaning people have asked when we are ever going to buy our own building. It's simple for us: to be faithful with our time and finances, along with a commitment to partner with neighbors, renting and sharing space allows us to lean into simplicity and faithfully steward time, finances, and relationships.

Busy Christians are not necessarily more effective witnesses of the good news of Jesus. Being busy with church functions does not necessarily mean that people's lives are being transformed by Jesus. Neighbors need to experience the love of Jesus, demonstrated and announced by Christians who have margin in their lives to be in relationship with people who do not yet know Jesus. Heather often encourages people that following Jesus means that the majority of their free time should be spent with people where they live, work, go to school, and hang out. Time should not be so full of church activities that they don't have the margin to follow Jesus's example of eating, blessing, and addressing injustices that people are experiencing who are not already following Jesus. This means that anything our church does in addition to our Sunday gathering at 10:00 a.m. does not



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place unhealthy expectations on people. The fruit of a church is not having burnt-out volunteers, but ministries and teams in which volunteers lean into their gifts in a sustainable rhythm. A church living simply does not create expectations of perfection or professionalism, but having the margin and practice of discerning God's leading in being the gathered and sent church.

In addition to stewarding finances and space, and people's time, we seek to live and lead simply by valuing experimenting and adapting. Jesus is good news, and we need to find creative ways to demonstrate and share the story of Jesus. During the early pandemic, Sunday gatherings were spread out in people's backyards for people to continue to gather as the church and invite neighbors.

In our city of about 60,000 people, we have experimented twice with multiplying Sunday gatherings into two different neighborhoods beyond where we gather in the southeast section of the city. During both of these experiments, people's lives were transformed, yet we discerned that these efforts were actually making the church more complex at a rate that would lead to burnout, rather than flourishing. There are times within the life of the church that being faithful to God's leading includes persevering through challenges. Yet, in our context, the answer resounded with a blessing to regather for one Sunday gathering, while also not giving up on the clear invitation to multiply mission in our neighborhoods. At times, leading simply means knowing and accepting

that it's okay to pause or stop a ministry. It's not failure, it's often faithfulness.

**Heather and Micah Brickner** live in southwest Lancaster City, PA with their energetic sons, Lucas and Levi. You can find them riding bikes or walking as a family in their neighborhood, tending to their unruly front yard garden, or spending their free time at the playground on their block playing soccer, having bike races, or throwing football with neighbors who are predominantly refugees and immigrants. Heather is the lead pastor at Branch & Vine and serves on the ministry team for the Atlantic Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S. Micah is currently the communications director for Eastern Mennonite Missions, but he is working on a master's degree in teaching so that he can become a teacher to serve students in the city.

## The Value of Small

By E. Morris Sider

**MY WIFE, LEONE**, and I were both children in the Great Depression—she in northern Saskatchewan, I in the rural village of Cheapside, ON. To survive in those years, our families lived very frugally. My mother, to cite only one example, thought that even chewing gum was too much of a luxury. I occasionally indulged in this pleasure, but certainly not where Mother could see me. Yet both Leone and I recall our childhoods with great delight. We did not need much to be happy.

After our marriage, college and graduate school enforced this simple lifestyle. We had to “pinch our pennies”; we could afford only small apartments. One of our residences during these years was a tiny third-floor apartment reached by climbing an outside stairway, under which the garbage from the large building was placed.

Early years of teaching in church schools—first at Niagara Christian Collegiate (Fort Erie, ON), then at Messiah College (Grantham, PA)—meant receiving what can only be described as miniscule salaries. This resulted in continuing to live in small apartments and old houses.

Thus, when we constructed a house in Grantham, we were well conditioned to build on a small scale. Our one-story house

is the smallest in the area; sitting between two large houses makes it seem even smaller.

### The Anabaptist House

Over the years, the small size of our house has occasioned frequent comments. We have almost come to expect that when people visit us for the first time, one of their first comments will be, “What a small house you have!” These and other instances, however, give us opportunity to testify (to use an expression of the Church in my earlier years) that as Christians, we have sufficient in this and in other ways. We call our house “The Anabaptist House” and explain that the Anabaptist tradition is to de-emphasize material things and to emphasize spiritual values.

We recently entertained two friends from outside the Brethren in Christ/Anabaptist traditions. When the conversation turned to the size of our house, we were pleased to tell our friends, yes, we could afford a much larger house but that isn't where our values lie.

A small house helps us to exercise these values. It means smaller heating and lighting bills, as well as lower real estate taxes, among other reduced expenses. Even as Leone and I grow older we can, in a small house, do our own cleaning and much of our maintenance

work. Thus again we incur fewer and smaller expenses.

In turn, this means that we can use more of our income for what we consider to be worthy causes. Beyond the traditional 10 percent tithe, we are able to give considerable amounts to charities and church activities. This also means that in retirement, we do not need to worry about continued employment to pay for a mortgage on a large house. Instead, we are free to do volunteer work—Leone among women in the community and I in my writing and editing.

Despite the relatively small size of our house, we can mostly do as much as people who live in large houses. Over the years, we have entertained many guests for meals and given lodging to many people who have come to the Grantham area for church or committee meetings. (Some people refer to our house as the Sider Motel!)

### Acknowledging abundance

In these and other ways, we do not think of our small house as being a negative factor in our lives. We have never felt cheated by our lifestyle; in fact, our convictions on the subject have grown stronger over the years because we have found simplicity to be both fulfilling and scriptural. Yet we do not judge

those Christians who live by another style. And we realize that our manner of living must be seen as being relative. Leone and I have frequently commented to each other that most people in the world would not see us as living simply.

This thought struck us forcefully some twenty years ago when we invited a family who had begun to attend our Grantham Church services to Sunday dinner. As soon as they entered our house, the two young teenagers walked throughout the rooms (including the bedrooms). When they returned to where we were talking, they exclaimed to

their parents, “We told you that they are rich!”

Their words were a reminder to us that we have little reason for self-congratulation, even when we are intentional about living simply. Such incidents have led Leone and me to talk about our lifestyle as modest rather than simple.

**E. Morris Sider** now lives in even smaller quarters at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA. His wife Leone passed away a few years ago. This fall, the Brethren in Christ Historical Society will publish the biography, *Storyteller: The Life and Ministry of E.*

Morris Sider, by Devin Manzullo-Thomas. The book will be released at the Society's annual meeting on October 4. Copies will then be available for sale at \$12.00 each; contact the editor for more information. This article is reprinted by permission from the Summer 2011 edition of *In Part*, the former magazine of Brethren in Christ U.S.

## Living According to My Values

By Ann Bodling

**“WE VALUE UNCLUTTERED** lives, which free us to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully.”

I am wondering what living an uncluttered life means. Is it the same as living simply? I have aspired to “simple living” for most of my adult life, having been shaped by Clarence Jordan, *Diet for a Small Planet*, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, my years with Mennonite Central Committee in Botswana, and memories of my grandparents’ life in the Appalachian Kentucky mountains when I was a child. I have had a general idea of what living simply entails. For me, it means living as closely to the land as possible, honoring the lives of animals and people, making space for the quiet that sustains me in the work I do, out in the world. As I think about the words “uncluttered life,” however, I realize I don’t know what the words mean. The Merriam Webster dictionary isn’t helpful, as I don’t imagine the writers of this core value had these synonyms in mind: tidy, neat, trim, orderly, shipshape, well-groomed, picked up. Or did they? Perhaps the Webster definition, “not cluttered” comes closest to what this core value means. What does a not-cluttered life look like in our day?

In James Herriot’s book, *Dog Stories*, there was a skilled workman who walked from village to village hiring himself out for what folks needed doing. He travelled the Yorkshire Dales with his dog, pushing an old

pram filled with his few belongings. He didn’t have a home and slept in barns or sheds and sometimes on the ground. He usually ate what he had brought for himself, sitting outside and gazing at the surrounding hills, though many offered him the hospitality of food and drink. Herriot recalls him as being the most contented man he had ever met. This man’s life was both simple and uncluttered. Are they always one and the same?

It occurs to me that some of the choices I have made in living simply have not contributed to Webster’s definition of an uncluttered life. One of my favorite books from childhood begins with this sentence, “Way out at the end of a tiny town was an old overgrown garden, and in the garden was an old house, and in the house lived Pippi Longstocking.” Because of Pippi’s influence and my love for the life my grandparents in the Kentucky mountains lived, tidy, neat, trim and orderly are not words that have described my life over the years.

Does an uncluttered life mean we expend the least amount of energy in the shortest amount of time as we go about our days so that we may be freed to “love boldly, give generously and serve joyfully?” What happens when our conscience dictates the opposite?

I believe that our food choices matter when it comes to promoting a just world. I’ve chosen to raise hens rather than purchase grocery store eggs that are supplied from fac-

tory farms where chickens live their short lives in overcrowded cages. Rather than purchase grocery store meat from animals who have been raised in conditions that conflict with our desire for a healthy life for cattle, chicken and hogs, my husband and I are vegetarians. I look for cheese and butter from cows who spend their lives grazing, and I’ve found a local dairy whose cows live outside on pasture as much as the seasons allow. When purchasing coffee or chocolate, I look for brands that stipulate that those who do the work are paid fairly, and when I can find them, for brands that are grown in compliance with the environmental integrity of the land on which they are grown.

Recently a friend who started a new job at the YMCA in Harrisburg told me about a man who has lived in one of their rented rooms for thirty-one years. I can’t think of a simpler life. As I consider my own lifestyle and how I live on our two acres, it feels like the opposite. I have to admit that it takes time and a good deal of physical and emotional energy to care for goats and chickens—feeding, carrying water, mucking out the barn, and worrying about them when predators come or their health is compromised. I have extensive gardens, planted for beauty and wildlife that, while growing happily on their own, benefit from regular attention, and any gardener knows that gardens need the most attention when other parts of life clamor. What with dirt tracked in from



the gardens and barn, the floors need to be swept more often than if we lived on a grassy plot with no animals, and our clothes need washing more often. Because we are vegetarians and because we choose to avoid many processed foods, meal times require more thought than the ready-at-hand Hamburger Helper meals my mother used to rely on.

We don't have a television, preferring to read rather than watch, but we still struggle with the allure of our always available laptops and the easy information the internet offers. We don't have a Siri or Alexa living with, and listening to, us so we need to do our research on our own and, for reasons of environmental stewardship, we don't turn to AI for our

answers, simpler though that approach might be. Do all of these choices contribute to an uncluttered, or even a simple life? In the sense that I am choosing against the easiest way to supply our needs, perhaps not. In the sense that I am living in accord with the values of my conscience and therefore living out of my integrity in the world, I will answer, yes.

I want to emphasize that the choices I have been drawn to over the decades are my way of trying to honor the gift of the life I've been privileged to live. Others make different choices and their lives might look, and be, simpler than mine in service of what God has called them to. I wonder whether, when

these core values are rewritten someday, the wording might be changed from "uncluttered" to something like, "We choose to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God, that we might love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully the world into which we have been placed."

**Ann Bodling** and her husband live in rural Dillsburg, PA where they have goats and chickens and a wild garden meant for bees, and birds, and other wildlife. Ann is a spiritual director and part of the Discipleship Learning Community at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

## Living Simply in a Foreign Land: A Reflection for the Immigrant Christian

By Aner Morejon

*Living Simply: We value uncluttered lives, which free us to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully."*

**THIS IS ONE** of the core values of the Brethren in Christ denomination. It is not merely a practical suggestion, but an invitation to live purposefully—letting go of anything that hinders us from following Jesus with integrity and wholehearted commitment.

God's Word reminds us: "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Tim. 6:8), and also, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:19-20). These verses teach us not only to avoid greed, but also to seek a life that reflects the values of the Kingdom.

But how is this value lived out in contexts where life is more vulnerable or resources are scarcer? What does it mean to live simply when you've come from a land where even the basics are lacking, and now find yourself surrounded by abundance?

As an immigrant and as someone who serves closely with faith communities from various cultures, I've seen this value expressed in many ways. However, in this reflection I will focus mainly on the experience

of the immigrant Christian living in the United States, which is the reality I know most directly.

We all understand how this value calls us to live, and there is general agreement about that. Simplicity, from a Christian perspective, is not poverty or mediocrity. It is a humble lifestyle, free of excess, centered on what truly matters: God, family, community, and service. It means choosing contentment over unchecked ambition, generosity over selfishness, and dependence on God over self-reliance. However, when we talk about living simply in the North American context, we must recognize that this practice can look very different through the eyes of an immigrant.

I invite anyone who has never lived this experience to imagine what it's like to grow up in a country where even basic resources are almost nonexistent—where the clothes and shoes passed down by your older siblings become your new outfits; where you eat what little you can get (often at high prices) without knowing when or where the next meal will come. Having a car is a luxury, and even if you have one, fuel or spare parts may not be available.

Because of this, what is called "living simply" here would be considered "living in lux-

ury and overabundance" in many other countries. So when an immigrant arrives in this country and encounters things they've never seen before—a market filled with every kind of food, a mall where everything is available, or the car they always dreamed of—it creates an internal tension. On the one hand, there is the natural desire to improve their life and their family's life, and on the other, there is the danger of falling into the trap of materialism.

That desire can become pressure, especially when we also feel the obligation to send help to relatives who stayed behind. This is where finding balance becomes necessary, so as not to fall into debt, and to manage a responsible, healthy budget.

It's no secret that immigrants don't always have access to the best jobs or fair wages. Because of this, immigrant church finances are sometimes strained, with challenges in meeting monthly commitments. Add to this the need many feel to send financial support to families in countries with few resources.

In the midst of these limitations, however, immigrant Christians learn something profound about simplicity: that it's not about how much or how little one has, but about living with gratitude, knowing that every good thing comes from God.

They appreciate the essentials: a roof, food, health, and the peace that the Lord gives. There's no need to impress, to compete, or to overspend to "fit in." They live with responsibility, knowing that every resource is a matter of stewardship.

I have a funny anecdote from one time when my wife and I accompanied a pastor to the mall. At one point, while she was shopping, I said to her, "Pastor, remember the value of living simply." To which she replied, "Simple, but elegant." Her comment captures a reality many immigrant Christians must wrestle with: finding ways to integrate into a new culture without losing their identity or the values of God's Kingdom.

For immigrant Christians, living in the United States is both a challenge and an opportunity. Arriving in a new country means adapting to a different culture, facing economic uncertainty, and often experiencing loneliness or family separation. Amid all this, simplicity becomes an indispensable virtue. Living simply begins on the inside. In a society marked by consumerism and appearances, Christians are called to guard their hearts. It's not about having little, but about not letting what we have control our soul. Faith reminds us that our identity is not in what we possess, but in who we are in Christ. Simplicity is also reflected in how we relate to others. Immigrant Christians are hos-

pitable, helpful, and don't think themselves superior because of what they've achieved. They seek peace, avoid envy, and bless others with what they have. In a land where many compete, they choose to build up.

This lifestyle stands in stark contrast to dominant culture and therefore becomes a powerful testimony. In a world that's fast-paced and saturated with superficiality, someone who lives with joy, humility, and authenticity makes a greater impact than a thousand words. Simplicity isn't preached with speeches. It's lived in everyday actions: working with integrity, raising children with love, helping those in need, forgiving freely.

In my visits and work with Brethren in Christ churches in Latin America and other less-resourced regions, I've seen how this value isn't theoretical. It's a lived necessity embraced with dignity. "Living Simply" is not a stylistic choice but a form of spiritual resistance: sharing the little one has, praying instead of consuming, repairing instead of discarding. In those contexts, faith is expressed through what is essential. Hospitality is generous even amid scarcity, and service to others doesn't depend on abundance, but on willingness. There, simplicity is deeply spiritual and deeply practical.

As a global Brethren in Christ family, we have a beautiful opportunity to learn from one another. In contexts of abundance, we

can rediscover the value of simplicity by observing how those from humbler backgrounds naturally practice gratitude, detachment, and generosity. At the same time, those living in more resourced settings can share tools for wise stewardship and community service. Together, we can live this value not as a sacrifice, but as an expression of freedom and love in Christ.

To live simply as Christians is to walk against the current—but with purpose. It is to remember that this world is not our final home, and that our citizenship is in heaven. In the meantime, here on earth, we choose to live with gratitude, humility, and faith.

Simplicity frees us to love without distraction, to give with joy, and to serve with open hands. In a world chasing after the unnecessary, a life focused on the eternal is of immeasurable value.

*"But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6).*

*Aner Morejon is a native of Cuba and serves as bishop of the Southeast Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S. Many thanks to his daughter for translating this article from Spanish to English.*

## A Colorful, Multi-faceted Approach to Living Simply

by Sara Cordova

**I USED TO** see the world in black and white. If something was one way somewhere, it had to be that same way elsewhere. There were only two options: yes or no, to do or not to do. Others could either love something or utterly despise it—there was no space for in between. Naturally, this applied to "deeper" issues as well: when I learned the Ten Commandments in Sunday School, there were no such things as "half lies" and there most certainly weren't countless ways to break a commandment. You either murdered someone or you didn't. Simple.

But, as comes with the process of maturation, my dichromatic world soon began changing color; gray areas sprang up between

the drastic black and white, and colors began bleeding into each other. Suddenly, the Ten Commandments didn't look as straight forward as they used to be. I no longer could be positive I'd never murdered someone because there was a high probability I had looked at them with contempt (Matt. 5:21-22). I no longer could justify half-lies as truthful, and what used to seem clear and exact seemed more faceted than ever before. And it didn't stop there: it applied to the way I viewed many other aspects of my Christian identity as well, such as the value of living simply. It didn't take much time to realize that living simply wasn't something rigidly set in stone that applied to everyone in the

exact same way. Being around people who lived simply in the United States was quite different than being around those who lived simply in Mexico. It was not only extremely un-dichromatic, but also three-dimensional.

The beautiful thing about a colorful, multi-faceted value, though, is that viewing it from every side, from each perspective, is eye-opening. When you look at each angle in conjunction with a humble posture and heart that is eager to learn, you see a mosaic masterpiece entirely representative of the kingdom to come. For, while living simply looks very different in the United States suburbs, the bustling city of Oaxaca, Mexico, and in the rural Zapotec town I grew up trav-

eling to, no one way is right or wrong. Each has its own wisdom and the invitation to embrace them all as we become more like Christ.

Although the exact ways by which we all live simply vary from place to place and from era to era, one thing many of us can agree on is that the idea refers to not storing up fleeting perishable earthly treasures, but storing up treasures in heaven that will last for an eternity to come (Matt. 6:19-20). Living simply means ridding ourselves of excessive material possessions in order to prioritize actions, thoughts, and words rooted in love, service, and generosity (or “treasures in heaven”).

Going back to the image of a three-dimensional figure bursting forth in color, I notice that one way in which Mexican culture embraces this value is through the importance it places on family. Most grandparents are cared for and looked after by their family; they live together, eat together, laugh together. On Sundays, most local establishments are closed as people take a rest from work and are with those they love. It's a simple way of living not because it is rudimentary and minimalistic, but because more importance is placed on time spent with others, reflecting Christ's love to those family members who might not know him personally and sharing generously with one another through meals and fellowship. It means not worrying excessively over material

things like having the best TV to watch Sunday Night Football or having perfectly matching and color-coordinating dishes, but putting others first in humility.

I also note what American culture can teach us about living simply. In the United States, I see great generosity, whether by pay-it-forward chains started on seemingly uneventful days, friendly smiles and jokes from customers at a McDonalds, or the simple magic of thrift stores and libraries. This is a simplicity that, once again, puts God first by recognizing him as the owner of all that we have and giving back to his creation in response. It's a simplicity that means uncluttering pantries in order to provide for those who have less, and limiting impulse purchases in order for others to be able to purchase essentials.

Finally, in the rural Zapotec town of San Francisco Ozolotepec, where my parents help with Bible translation and I've grown up visiting annually, I notice hospitality so deeply engrained in all I meet. There are plastic bags filled with gifts given at every party; these bags are later returned with new gifts of thanksgiving. There are enthusiastic invitations to visit and no one lets you leave without being fed. This is a simplicity that gives and welcomes without holding back, that isn't afraid of setting hours aside to help a neighbor build a new house, that doesn't need flashy possessions in order to recognize blessings.

Just as a diamond glitters a bit from every angle, yet glitters the most when it's seen completely, living simply is done best when we embrace the many ways in which vastly different cultures do it best. Some prioritize time spent with others over time spent in the hustle and bustle of work; some greet everyone with the love of Jesus without worrying about what they get out of it; and some welcome everyone into their homes as if they were Christ themselves.

Of course, we have all messed up multiple times and prioritized the clutter of material things, fancy positions, and impressive relationships over living a freedom-filled life as Jesus would. However, we would do well to remember that so much is to be gained when true humility is learned and when the way others live simply, glittering with his love and reflecting his generosity, is recognized and embraced. As we take the time to reflect on and appreciate these new perspectives and challenge ourselves in the way we live simply, we can build each other up as the church, the bride of Christ, made up of such diverse colors and shapes and united in our mission to glorify he who made all things.

*Sara Cordova is a high school student/missionary kid living in Oaxaca, Mexico. Her parents serve as Bible translators associated with Brethren in Christ World Missions.*

## Simple Church

*By Luke and Christina Embree*

**WHEN WE PLANTED** Plowshares Brethren in Christ we wanted it to be a network of home churches that shared a common life of discipleship and sense of devotion to Christ. In order to anchor our home churches in rhythms that would produce this type of life, we established a few fundamentals.

First, place was less consequential than time and space. In other words, while we were calling our gatherings “home churches,” we recognized that meeting in homes wasn't always viable. Just as our pred-

ecessors met in barns and outbuildings, sometimes we would need to as well. One of our first home churches met in a coffee shop rather than a home. Our home churches today meet in homes, restaurants, online, and even the church building.

Second, we established a collaborative form of leadership. When we officially launched in September 2018, we had a lead pastor, a home church pastor, and a youth pastor. Each home church then had a shepherd who served as leader and guide for the home church, a host who served as the cu-

rator of the space and meal, and an apprentice, a person who was learning how to be a future home church shepherd. These roles were crafted to allow the sort of communal leadership and sharing of God's gifts as demonstrated in the early Brethren in Christ churches.

Third, we adopted the “in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things, love” approach. In order for a gathering to be considered a Plowshares home church, three essential things needed to be experienced:



1. *A shared meal*: An important part of community-building as experienced by our Anabaptist and Brethren in Christ foremothers and fathers was the love feast or shared meal. All of our home churches shared a meal in some fashion.

2. *The reading of Scripture in community*: Rather than each home church just “doing their own thing,” Plowshares pastoral staff provided each home church with a communal Scripture to read and questions for the shepherd to ask in order to facilitate a group discussion. This evolved into what we call the “Seven Minute Sermon” which is a video sent to all the home churches to watch and discuss so that all home churches, while unique in their population and location, are reading and studying the same portion of Scripture.

3. *The celebration of communion*: This is the highlight of the home church gathering, a time where the body and blood of Christ is shared among the members

and a nod to the customs of the Anabaptist love feast where communion was part of the shared meal. In most home churches, the members serve one another the elements as a reminder that we are a kingdom of priests unto the Lord and the body of Christ for one another.

Beyond these essentials, each home church was able to take on the characteristics best suited to meet the needs of the participants. The timing of the meal, the discussion, and the celebration of communion was left to the shepherd and host. Where and when the home church met, what additional liturgical elements might be used, and how they would communicate throughout the week was decided by the home church itself.

Fourth, we encouraged regular service in the community and a rhythm of monthly all-community gatherings. The challenge of maintaining a network of separate, small home churches is finding a way to maintain a common mission and vision, especially if members rarely see others from outside their

home church. Once again we looked to our ancestors who would regularly host opportunities to gather in larger meetings, even if it was just once a year, a practice the Brethren in Christ maintains with its annual meetings for each conference and its biannual General Assembly for all Brethren in Christ U. S. For Plowshares, this looked like Fifth Sunday Service Sundays, where we asked home churches to forgo their regular meeting and instead join in serving the community together, and All Community Gatherings,



*Home church celebrating communion.*

which ended up being quarterly times of all the multiple expressions gathering as one for worship and celebration.

The Brethren in Christ core value of Living Simply is described in this way: “We value uncluttered lives, which free us to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully.” In leaning into the memory of our roots, gathering in homes and workplaces and even in church buildings, we have come full circle, as T. S. Eliot proposed. We have found that by being one church with multiple expressions, we have actually embraced simplicity in a new way, one that doesn’t place the load of “church” onto one space, one place, one time, and one shepherd but rather distributes the liturgy, the work of the people, into the whole community, engaging all as a kingdom of priests in the ministry of reconciliation.

In this scenario, the pastoral staff is free to exercise within their giftings because others are empowered to serve within theirs. Our home church shepherds are free to love boldly without worrying about whether they

are seminary-trained or gifted at teaching. Our hosts are able to give generously even if they don’t feel called to lead or teach. Our members are able to serve joyfully within their own neighborhoods, communities, and city. Uncluttered lives focused on presence rather than being present at one building one day of the week.

It has not come without its challenges. But tracing this back to our Anabaptist roots, we find that we are not unique in our experience. In the seventeenth century, Anabaptist leader Menno Simons wrote about his experience with his community stating that members have divine love among them and that “one member cares for another, for both the Scriptures and nature teach this. They show mercy and love, as much as in them. They do not suffer a beggar among them. They have pity on the wants of the saints. They receive the wretched. They take strangers into their houses. They comfort the sad. They lend to the needy. They clothe the naked. They share their bread with the hungry. They do not turn their face from the poor nor do they regard their decrepit limbs and flesh.”

As Anabaptists and, more specifically, Brethren in Christ, our familial heritage draws us into the place of shared mission, simple gatherings, and sacred service. In our case, this approach has allowed us to meet where people live, work, and play and to invite all ages and stages into community together, experience anew what has been before and will be again—the gathering of the body in worship of Christ who is our head.

**Luke Embree** is a pastor, church planter, and entrepreneur and serves as Lexington Parish Pastor with the Great Lakes Conference of the Brethren in Christ. **Christina Embree** serves as the Minister of Generational Discipleship for the Great Lakes Conference and as NextGen pastor at Open Door Church in Lexington, Kentucky. This article is excerpted from “Anabaptism and House Churches,” published in the August 2025 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life.



# Simply Living Uncluttered Lives

By Les and Curtis Book

**WHAT DOES SIMPLE** living mean anyway? We propose that simplicity is not just what we do, but who we are, being birthed from a focus on God and his kingdom. Having said that, it is true that many who do not claim God as center, live simple and uncluttered lives. However, we believe the closer one is to Creator God, the more the outward life exemplifies “holy minimalism” for the sake of the kingdom.

About two years ago, our youngest daughter decided to streamline and organize her home. Her husband refers to that time as “the great purge.” Many trips to the thrift store and many small, labeled bins so the useful items could be stored and easily found were the result. One day about six months after the purge, my son-in-law asked if I had an extra micro cable as “all of ours disappeared in the Great Purge.” So, thinking of this article I (Les) asked my daughter what has been the benefit of the purge and organization of her home. She said she feels less stressed, it is easier to keep the home tidy, and her husband and son know where to put things. They do not make such a cluttered mess. Simplicity and uncluttering help us see things, stuff, activities for what they are meant to be—a means to enhance life, not oppress.

Richard Foster in his book, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*, says we have bought into the idea that more is better, but accumulation overwhelms us. A quick perusal of books related to decluttering and minimalization show that there are over 340 on this popular subject. For example, there are Marie Kondo’s *Japanese Art of Decluttering* and the book *Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning* so that your family doesn’t have to deal with your hoards of stuff after you pass.

What is driving this accumulation in our Western culture? It appears to be focused on possession-based contentment, rather than embracing the gospel of Christ which is only Jesus. The challenge is that we slip into this cultural habit without forethought believing that it makes for a better life.

One of the challenges is that simplicity is difficult to define. A quick search comes up with “a state of being simple,” “uncomplex.” But what does that mean? In our individualized society, each person has their own idea of what simplicity looks like. The tenth commandment is an imperative “do not covet” which I believe means do not desire the position, power, prestige, and possessions we do not have. However, as is true of other addictions, one can have the “covetous disease” without being aware of it.

What prevents us from uncluttering our lives whether from material things, a need for personal recognition, or the abundance of activity? What role do stuff, business, activity, and clutter serve that make it so hard to control? For example, a report by StorageCafe.com in 2019 said that 25 percent of Americans rented a self-storage unit because they have run out of space in their home and garage. Now as of April 2025 that number has increased to 33 percent.

Esther Spurrier in *Focusing Our Faith: Brethren in Christ Core Values* proposed that accumulation of things is driven by three possible motives:

1. To gain comfort, control and/or convenience;
2. To find significance, to fulfill the need to appear to be productive, to be as good as whoever it is we are looking to.
3. The large number of choices and opportunities.

I wonder if all of that can be boiled down to accumulating to fill the “holes in our souls.”

When we lived in Colombia people talked about the need to *aparantar*. This literally means to appear as if you are richer, smarter, more important than you are so others notice. Much effort and thought is given to how one dresses, talks, and interacts in order to either keep up with or surpass others. We call this “keeping up with the Joneses.”

In Ephesians 4:28, when Paul acquired money, it was not to build a nest egg or secure a future, but to share with those in need. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul encouraged the

church to develop a relief fund and practice hospitality. Simple living enables us to give more to those in need and to care for God’s creation. Jesus lived simply and contentedly, his center built on the intimacy with the Father and the “need” for power, prestige, possessions diminished. Admiral Richard Byrd, an explorer in very barren conditions in both Antarctica and the Arctic remarked, “I am learning that a man can live profoundly without masses of things.”

Living simply with uncluttered lives may not mean purchasing the cheapest items, but selecting quality items that last. It may mean making meals from scratch and natural ingredients which can be more time consuming than using ultra-processed fast foods. I (Les) used a rotating menu of meals ready in thirty minutes for our family of five when we were in language school. Our first missionary assignment was in London, United Kingdom. We stayed for a few months in a furnished home of a family that was abroad. When the agent walked through as we were handing the house over, she remarked to me, “American? Oh, Americans are so wasteful. You would rather throw away a toaster than try to repair it.”

The nitty gritty applications are where many of us get stuck. How can we implement simple living on a busy schedule? Here are some practical ways Curtis and I have learned to live uncluttered lives, both externally and internally:

1. Be fully present with our Creator and fully present with the community of faith and family.
2. Have conversations about the attraction of power, possession and prestige.
3. Minimize the use of plastic, reuse tin foil, try out bees wax reusable covers for food storage, use unpaper towels.
4. Have more family time and less screen time.
5. Test our motives for the sneakiness of seeking fame, power, prestige.
6. Appreciate beauty without feeling like you need to possess it.
7. Maintain a spirit of humility and willing-

ness to learn from others.

8. Walk or bike instead of driving.

The parable of the sower in Matthew 13 explains that when the good seed falls on rocky soil, it begins to sprout but it does not thrive. The seedling withers when we allow the urge to accumulate power, prestige, possessions to dominate our lives.

Finally, here are some suggestions for

family or small group discussion:

1. What motivates you to unclutter or live simply?
2. Why is living simply difficult?
3. What are some ways we can make changes?
4. How can being more focused on God as center help you in this process?

**Les and Curtis Book** attend the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. Curtis serves with Brethren in Christ World Missions as the regional administrator for Southern Africa. Les is a mostly retired licensed clinical social worker providing part-time clinical supervision at Union Community Care Clinic.

## A Colt for Jesus

By Esther Spurrier

**EARLIER TODAY, I** read the story in Mark 11 of Jesus preparing to enter Jerusalem on the Sunday before His death, and I found myself captivated in a new way by the willingness of the villagers to lend their colt for Jesus to ride. Did they worry about when (or whether) it would be returned? Would Jesus be too heavy a load for a colt that had never been ridden? Scripture doesn't tell us. We are also not told how many colts the owners had. Did they have a large herd of animals, or was this their only one? What we do see here is a simple and willing response to a direct request from Jesus.

Over the past decade, my life situation has changed from that of a North American physician's wife to an overseas worker to a semi-retired, elder-caregiver. Whereas I used to be sensitive to using our excess in ways that honor God, I am now more concerned about having enough for day-to-day needs. Heating oil and electricity costs are going up and up; the house needs paint; the barn roof has holes in it; window screens and floor carpets are worn out. And driving to visit my grandkids is getting more and more expensive!

I know I'm not the only one with such concerns. The economic downturn has created fear and uncertainty for many more people, with loss of jobs, loss of income from investments, and loss of confidence in government and financial institutions we once thought we could trust.

It's not surprising that many who are wealthy struggle with holding on tightly to money and possessions, but as I'm learning, it's very easy for anyone's life to become clut-

tered (consumed?) by worry about how we're going to manage—or what further hardship the future might hold. Will we be able to put food on the table or pay the rent? Will we lose our jobs? Will we be able to send our kids to college? Will our pension fund or the Social Security system still be viable when we retire?

Yet our consuming anxiety over these questions can actually reveal what we really believe to be the sources of our stability. As one of our Zambian friends, a medical professional who came to the U.S. to attend a conference, observed, "North Americans don't need God." We appear to be putting our trust in our possessions, our resources, our abilities and education. This prompted me to ask the question, Where does our ultimate trust for life and well-being lie?

Jesus may not need our colts today, but He is making a direct request to us: Put away your worry and have faith in God. Jesus worked continually with His disciples to move them from the grip of fear to an attitude of faith—faith in the goodness and provision of God. We are also Christ's disciples and need to operate from a foundation of faith, no matter what our economic situation. If we can choose to hold loosely to things, then we'll be more able to hold tightly to God.

*Esther Spurrier now serves as pastor for congregational care at the Dillsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and lives at Messiah Lifeways. This article is reprinted by permission from the Summer 2011 edition of In Part, the former magazine of Brethren in Christ U.S.*

## Thoughts on Simplicity

Our life is frittered away by detail. . . . Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. . . . Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.

—Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*  
([www.walden.org/work/walden/](http://www.walden.org/work/walden/))

Sometimes I feel life would be much simpler if I didn't have to think very much. But then I ask myself whether simplifying your life doesn't involve as much thought as leading a complicated life. It's quite an effort to clear your mind, I believe.

—Isabel Dalhousie in *The Conditions of Unconditional Love*, by Alexander McCall Smith

Always remember that simplicity is both a discipline and a grace. It is a discipline because we are called to do something. Simplicity does not just fall on our heads. We are to take up a consciously chosen course of action that involves both group and individual life. It is also a grace: a grace because the life that comes from our efforts is given to us by God.

—Richard Foster, "Understanding Simplicity," [renovare.org/articles/understanding-simplicity](http://renovare.org/articles/understanding-simplicity)

# In Plenty or in Want

By Perry Engle

**THE RUNNING JOKE** about living a simple lifestyle is that every time you find yourself in a situation where there is even a hint of extravagance, you open yourself up for criticism, or at the very least some snide comments.

I expected as much last summer when my rental car selection in Kansas took a turn for the better. I was at a car rental counter in the Wichita airport, and the lady ahead of me couldn't figure out how to shorten the restraint straps on the infant seat that came with her car. The agent couldn't figure it out either, so I took a couple of minutes and helped her adjust the seat.

As I approached the counter to pick up my reserved *economy* car (note the emphasis), the agent thanked me for helping the woman. He said, "Our company would like to give you an upgrade for your help."

I responded suspiciously, as I usually do in these kinds of situations, and said, "How much will it cost me?"

"No extra charge," he replied.

"What do you have?" I asked.

"We have a new Camaro that's pretty nice."

I said, "Cool, I'll take the Camaro. And,

oh, by the way, so I'm not wandering all over the parking lot looking for it, what color is it?"

"Don't worry, you'll see it right away," he answered. "It's the bright yellow one that looks just like Bumblebee in the movie Transformers."

I replied, "I didn't see the movie, but I'm looking forward to the car."

I'm really not a fast-car kind of guy. My vehicle life has centered mostly around old Volkswagens, low-end Hondas, and minivans. So when I hopped in the Bumblebee and buzzed out of the parking lot, I felt strangely conspicuous—and more than a little bit extravagant.

My friends at the conference I was attending had a good laugh when I pulled up. More than one asked if the car was in keeping with my commitment to simple living. The requisite photos were taken and promptly posted on Facebook.

The Camaro got me to thinking about what Paul said in Philippians 4:12 about being content "in any and every situation . . . whether living in plenty or in want." I often find myself worrying about what people will think about this, that, or the other thing. Am

I being frugal enough? Am I drawing too much attention to myself? Am I properly stewarding the Lord's resources? Are my actions becoming those expected of a church leader?

As I tooled around Wichita in my hot rod, I decided that I could either live my life worried about what everybody thinks about me, or simply embrace the fact that God had blessed me with 48 hours in a brand-new Chevy. I determined that my commitment to a simple lifestyle has a lot more to do with the state of my heart than with the kind of car I'm driving.

At the end of the day, I'm no less a follower of Christ in a bumblebee yellow Camaro than I would be in the beat-up Honda that I drive every day. The main difference is, in the Camaro, I'm just a whole lot faster off the line.

*Perry Engle was bishop of the Pacific and Midwest Conferences of Brethren in Christ U.S. when he wrote this article, which is reprinted by permission from the Summer 2011 edition of In Part, the former magazine of Brethren in Christ U.S. He is now the teaching pastor at the Upland (CA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

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material and spiritual beings. We do not negate God as both forms of materialism do. Nor do we negate the value of our created bodies in a way that can be self-abasing and even self-abusing. Yet neither is Living Simply only a virtue in and of itself. Our core value calls us to unclutter our lives so that we can "love boldly, give generously and serve joyfully." Our right relationship to the material world helps shape our right relationship with God and our neighbors. It is good to evaluate how we live, to examine our habits to show us what we value, and to make changes to live more simply to serve God and our neighbors more fully.

*Lois Saylor is a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and is an editorial advisor.*

## Editor's Notes

### 2025 subscription renewals:

If you haven't yet renewed for 2025, you can do so by sending a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S. to the address on page 2 (note the change) or online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/](https://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/). Thanks to everyone who has already renewed and/or contributed generously.

### Potential upcoming topics:

*Communication:* New and old ways to communicate our message (written, oral, social media, video, podcasts, etc.); communication that is honest and fair.

*Political but not partisan:* Navigating Christian faith and kingdom values in a polarized political atmosphere.

Contact the editor if you're interested in writing or if you have other ideas for topics.



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## A Happy Medium: Living Simply

By Lois Saylor

**WILLIAM BARKLEY, THE** Scottish theologian (1907-1978) first introduced me to the Aristotelian paradigm that a virtue is the happy medium, or golden mean, between two extremes – the extreme of defect (or deficiency) and the extreme of excess. So, I thought it would be an interesting exercise to place Living Simply into the formula as the desired virtue and see what may be learned.

The first step was to decide what the two extremes would be as a contrast to the virtue of living simply. As the extreme of defect, I choose materialism. Materialism has two aspects: the first is the philosophy that only the material or physical world exists; and second is the mindset that acquisition is the main goal of life which we call being materialistic. On the other side, the extreme of excess, I put asceticism. I'm using a definition of asceticism that understands the material world as evil and that by severe self-denial one can reach a higher spiritual plane, often accompanied by the idea of obliteration of the self into a universal oneness. So, we have the extremes of materialism and asceticism set against the virtue of living simply.

The first thing I noticed was that the paradigm was also a sliding scale. One could live at any point on the line between the middle and one of the extremes without being fully

engaged in either. This also means that Living Simply holds the middle ground not just a single point on the scale; there is margin for people to hold the value but not hold to the exact same practice. Recognizing this margin helps us give each other room to live out this core value as our individual lives unfold; and underscores that this scale, while helpful for our self-evaluation, is not a measuring tool to judge someone else.

In looking at the scale further, I also saw how other Christian values are embedded in Living Simply. For example, we believe in a personal God, as opposed to an impersonal universal oneness with which we will merge someday. We also believe in a creator God, so we are products of intent not materialistic chance; and since God called creation good, it is not an evil to be escaped. Life was created to be enjoyed within God's design.

Another example of an embedded value is humility. We value ourselves because God values us, but we do not elevate the self above God nor above our fellow human beings. We do hit the "happy medium" of holding the self appropriately valuable and rightly humble before God. Living simply encapsulates living rightly before God, living rightly with material resources, our attitudes and desires, and living rightly with our neighbors.

Living Simply also holds the idea of trust-

ing God to provide. We can easily think of Matthew 6:25-34 where Jesus tells us not to be anxious. He draws our attention to the birds of the air and lilies of the field saying God knows what we need to live. We neither run after these things like the materialist, nor deny ourselves what our material bodies were designed to need. In fact, God calls us to days of celebration and feasting where material goods become a way to enhance community and praise Him. This is a middle way between unneeded extravagance and unwarranted deprivation.

Submission to God is another aspect. A materialistic mindset sets self above all else, the goal being to feed the wants and desires of the self. And asceticism in denying the self wants to be released from self. But in submitting the self to God, the self is being redeemed. We can use Paul's words of dying to self, but it is a death unto resurrection in Christ. We are seeking our true selves in Him. We lose our selves to save ourselves, not annihilate them.

Living Simply, placed in the middle between these two extremes, highlights the idea of living rightly in our material world. We are called to a balance, to have a right relationship with the world as we live as both

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