

Poverty and Wealth

We shouldn't be this wealthy," I thought. I was sitting in Halsey Mennonite Church gymnasium with 450 other Oregon Anabaptists, listening to reports about the astonishingly varied and vast work of Christian Aid Ministries and its new satellite program, CAM-West. Medicines, hygiene kits, food boxes, clothing, wells, blankets—the list seemed endless and included, of course, reports of the large financial donations that make these projects possible. There were a lot of deep pockets in that room. Everyone seemed to be listening intently and—I assumed—evaluating whether this cause was worthy of a financial gift, and if so, how much it should be.

For the most part, Anabaptists in Oregon are financially successful. Many families own their own homes and, often, farms and rental houses besides. Mennonite-owned businesses—most of them related to agriculture—abound and thrive. They are also generous. Fundraisers for Gospel Echoes Northwest or a medical emergency are well-attended and raise many thousands of dollars. According to the prevailing theories of poverty and wealth found in financial articles such as *The Atlantic*, and in books such as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, we should not be doing this wealthy. What is it about Anabaptists that turns the American economic charts upside down?

For one thing, we are primarily rural; rural America is declining in opportunity and struggling to survive. Also, probably less than half of the conservative Anabaptist adults in Oregon have finished high school, and all the experts agree that lack of a high school diploma is a key precursor of poverty. Yet, Mennonites are able to support their families and fund CAM-West, as well as many causes and charities besides. Why has this community turned the economic tables upside down? Here are some likely factors:

1. While not nearly as long-established as Lancaster County or Holmes County, the Willamette Valley Mennonite community is over 100 years old. The first Mennonite settlers bought farmland that is, in many cases, still in the family. Farming expertise and equipment were also handed down from one generation to the next.
2. Mennonites have been quick to recognize opportunity. They were among the first to recognize the suitability of this climate for growing grass seed. Frank Kropf, one of the

patriarchs, was the first to import a hardier perennial ryegrass from New Zealand. When a harsh winter killed the other ryegrasses, his seed stock became the standard. Frank and his sons invented machinery to harvest grass seed, and many Mennonite farmers established their own seed cleaning businesses. Later, when burning the straw off the fields was outlawed, Mennonites were among the first to bale the straw and ship it overseas, which led to employment opportunities in baling crews, hay presses, and trucking.

3. An old-fashioned work ethic has prevailed. From teenage girls putting in 12-hour days driving combines during harvest, to men who manage large acreages and pastor a church besides, hard work is expected and honored. Being willing to work hard and learn as you go is considered of more value than formal education.

4. Traditionally, practicality was encouraged and foolishness was not. Money was re-invested in farms and equipment rather than in ostentatious houses, travel, or possessions. This factor is gradually changing with young people buying lattes and new pickup trucks. But much of the underlying tradition remains.

5. Connection is important. Nepotism, some would call it. Fathers hire their sons, nephews, and their friends. If you can prove a connection to a potential employer, he is likely to trust and hire you. This means that any local young person with a desire to work can get a job and, if he or she does well, work their way to a better position.

6. Anabaptists recognize that money is not the only, or even the most important, type of wealth. Perhaps it was the isolation of the early settlers, and the vast distance from communities in the East, that made them recognize that people are of enormous value, and they created large families and tightly-knit communities. Today, we still tend to have lots of children, live close together, and show up by the hundreds for weddings and funerals. Spiritual resources are also of more value than money, exemplified by church attendance and lifestyle choices such as taking Sunday off, even when the weather is perfect for harvesting ryegrass. Both of these would no doubt seem, to a secular economist, like a drain on finances. Paradoxically, both have led to an increase in financial wealth.

7. In another seeming paradox, generosity has not depleted financial resources. Tithing is encouraged, and many give above 10%, funding church programs, schools, prison ministries, CAM-West, and much more. Ultimately, of course, wealth and poverty defy simple explanations, and all that we have is a gift from God. It is His choice to bless or withhold. Living by Christian

principles and valuing people, wisdom and the Gospel over money can lead to resources that secular economists will never understand or quantify.