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**More Than Fresh Air:
African-American Children's Influence
on Mennonite Religious Practice, 1950-1979**

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In 1971, African-American Mennonite administrator John Powell commanded respect. As leader of a group of African-American and Latino Mennonite ministers, Powell had the ear of his church. When he excoriated the implicit paternalism of the “Fresh Air” program in which rural, white Mennonites hosted African-American and Latino children from the inner city for summer vacations, adults everywhere paid attention. They listened when Powell declared, “If we are going to have a Fresh-air program, we should also have a stale-air program,” and took notice

when he proposed to send white country children to African-American city children's homes.¹ Others influenced by Black Nationalist critics expanded Powell's critique by attempting to shut the programs down entirely because they reinforced "patterns of racism in our brotherhood."²

The children who participated in Fresh Air ventures, however, opposed their community's highest profile leaders. Hailing from New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and as far away as New Haven, Connecticut, all the children participated in urban Mennonite congregations. Most were African-American.³ The hundreds who travelled to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and other Mennonite enclaves for two weeks in the country clamored to visit rural environs even as Black Nationalist foment intensified.⁴ Rather than accept their leaders' demands to discontinue or revamp the programs, the children said they wanted an "adventure" to a place they had "never been before," a place that made them so excited they "could hardly keep still."⁵

This article argues that these active, persistent children pursued their own interests between 1950 and 1979 in ways often deemed objectionable by their white hosts, co-religionists, and community leaders. Rather than adhering to the racial politics advanced by both critics and

¹ Lynford Hershey to Leon Stauffer, July 18, 1971, Archives of the Mennonite Church (hereafter AMC)- IV-21-4 Box 1, Mennonite Board of Missions (hereafter MBM) Minority Ministries, Council, Data Files #1, A-K, Folder: Education Program 1970-72, Lynford Hershey.

² Memorandum by Nelson Good et al., "Racism Is a Primary Concern ...," March 8, 1971, 3.

³ "264 Children Visit County under Mennonite Program," *Ephrata Review*, Thursday, September 5, 1974.

⁴ Memorandum by Faith Hershberger, "MCC/Black Caucus Representatives Meeting," October 8, 1979, 3, AMC I-6-7 African-American Mennonite Association, Records, 1969, 1976-91, Box 28 (Large), Folder Mennonite Central Committee 28/1.

⁵ Phillip Hargrow, "I Was a 'Fresh-Air' Child," *Missionary Messenger*, May, 1976, 15.

promoters of Fresh Air programs, the children sustained their own racial code of conduct, repurposed religious resources, and practiced their own morality. In the context of programs conceived, formulated, and administered by adults, the children altered the mission initiatives even as adults held tremendous sway over their young lives. In short, the children found a way into the center of their religious community. Rather than remain on the margins, the children helped shape religious and racial dynamics at the core of African-American and white Christian communities during the middle three decades of the twentieth century.

Background, methodology, and literature

Church leaders developed Fresh Air programs at the end of the nineteenth century to save young “waifs” from the urban threats of malnutrition, disease, congestion, and pollution.⁶ Based on a belief in the benefits of nature, late nineteenth century urban Protestant evangelists and their rural ministerial partners sent children from the city on short stays in the country. Originally focused on the salubrious benefits of rural exposure for undernourished or tubercular urban “urchins,” the vacations quickly proved popular.⁷ One of the largest programs in the nation, the *Herald Tribune*’s Fresh Air Fund, began sending children from New York City to the country in 1877. By 1896 Mennonites had begun their own program in Chicago and, a few years later, in

⁶ Alexander Hynd-Lindsay, “A Memorial Address on the Life and Work of Rev. Willard Parsons, Founder of the Tribune Fresh-Air Work,” *Sunday Afternoon* 1912, Copied from the Collections in the Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin; C. Arthur Pearson, “The Fresh Air Fund,” *Manitoba Free Press*, Wednesday, March 31, 1909; William Johnson, “Wanted-a Fresh Air Guild,” *Freeman*, Tuesday, August 11, 1896.

⁷ “Fresh Air Work Humor,” *Fitchburg Daily Sentinel*, Saturday, July 27, 1907.

Toronto.⁸ Those programs in turn sparked similar efforts among Pennsylvania Mennonites in 1950.⁹ For the next three decades, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Christian Reformed Church members, and several interdenominational agencies administered their own versions of the program.¹⁰ From Philadelphia to Los Angeles and from Seattle to Florence, South Carolina, church members supported Fresh Air interaction in both camps and homes.¹¹ Although little has been written about the programs, research conducted for this study suggests that a northern or midwestern white rural Protestant family in the 1950s, 60s or early 70s was far more likely to have come into close contact with an African American through a Fresh Air hosting program than through any social project, government initiative, or church mission. During this period, more than one million Protestant hosts and guests participated in the ventures in some form.

This study focuses on the period from 1950 through 1979 during which Mennonite-run Fresh Air programs were most active and African-American guests were most common. The

⁸ Sara Ann Freed, "Mennonites in the Fresh Air Program: An Early Expression of the Mennonite Social Conscience" (Research paper, Goshen College, 1967), 14-16.

⁹ Memorandum, "Seventh Semi-Annual Prayer and Fast Mission Worker's Meeting to Be Held D. V. At South Christian St. Mission Lancaster, Pa.," September 27, 1950, 2, Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society (hereafter LMHS) - Box: South Christian Street, Now Crossroads Cong, Folder: Programs.

¹⁰ James C. Lont, "Graafschap-Friendly Town," *The Banner*, January 13, 1961, 5; "Chicago Negro Youth in Local Homes," *The Moravia Union*, Thursday, July 15, 1965; Clarence Wittenstrom and Edna Wittenstrom, "A History of Camp Augustana," (St. Charles, IL: 1963); "Summer Youth Program Appeal Begins," *The Episcopal New Yorker*, February, 1976; Memorandum, "The East Harlem Protestant Parish: Report to the Administrative Board," March 1, 1950, Presbyterian National Historical Archives, National Council of Churches (hereafter NCC), Home Missions Council of North America, 1903-1951, RG26 Box 4 Folder 17 East Harlem Protestant Parish, Aug 1949-Dec 1950.

¹¹ Irene Park, "City Children Visit Village," *The Coshocton Tribune*, Monday, July 17, 1972; George Cornell, "Get Acquainted Process New Phase of Relationship of Negroes, Whites," *The Post-Crescent*, Monday, August 9, 1965; "Seattle Youngsters Visiting in Area," *The Daily Inter Lake*, Friday, July 10, 1970; Jimmy Ballard, "Negro Children Attend Summer Fresh Air Camp," *Florence Morning News*, Tuesday, September 29, 1964.

largest of the Mennonite-run Fresh Air ventures, Lancaster Mennonite Conference's Mission Children Visitation Program, began in 1950 with the expressed purpose of hosting "colored children of our city missions" in rural homes.¹² Although programs run out of Chicago in the first two decades of the twentieth century had focused on white ethnic communities, the programs there had "dwindled" by the 1930s and 1940s due to the increasing mobility of urban families and their ability to take vacations on their own.¹³ For the three decades following 1950, Mennonite missionaries and church administrators revitalized Fresh Air ventures as they sent children from Baltimore, Chicago, Coatesville (Pennsylvania), Gulfport (Mississippi), New York City, Philadelphia, and other locations where Mennonites worked with African Americans into rural Mennonite homes in Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Virginia. Although the Fresh Air movement as a whole included approximately twenty percent white children by the 1970s, Mennonite-run programs hosted far fewer white children because administrators vetted participating guests through African-American mission churches and programs.¹⁴ During the burst of activity chronicled here, the focus of the program remained on hosting African-American children in white homes, an emphasis that correlates with the attention

¹² Memorandum by Ira J. Buckwalter, "Colored Workers Committee Notes 1947-1953," 1947-1953, 12, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions, Salunga, PA (hereafter EMM) - Record Room: File Cabinets far wall, first cabinet, top drawer: Drawer marked: Home Missions Locations and Other General 1956-1964, File: Four numbered notebooks; memorandum by Paul N. Kraybill, "Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program," 1950, EMM Record Room - 6th Cabinet of middle row on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: testimonies and Misc.

¹³ Sarah Ann Freed, "Mennonites in the Fresh Air Program: An Early Expression of the Mennonite Social Conscience" (Goshen College, 1967), 28.

¹⁴ David Stewart Hudson, "Family Hosts Enjoyed 'Fresh Air' Visits, Too," *Daily News-Record*, Thursday, May 10, 1973, 22.

to race relations brought about by the “black freedom struggle.”¹⁵ By 1979, administrators had discontinued or scaled back the majority of those programs.¹⁶ Marked on one end by program initiation and on the other by program demise, the study taken up here explores the particular dynamics of white hosts and African-American guests in hosting programs that had become the primary means by which white rural Mennonites, like their Protestant peers, came into intimate contact with members of the African-American community.

Mennonites emerge from the many participating religious groups with an especially ready means of accessing African-American children’s religious experience. This Germanic-Swiss sectarian community, pacifist heirs of the sixteenth century Protestant radical reformation and religious cousins to the Amish, settled in the northeastern United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and quickly became known for their pacifism, communal values, separation from society, strong work ethic, and racial egalitarianism. By the middle of the twentieth century they avidly participated in rural hosting programs and came in the minds of many outside boosters to embody the Fresh Air hosting ideal. Program promoters lauded the “good and generous and kind” Mennonite hosts who impressed their young guests as “very rich”

¹⁵ Peniel E. Joseph, “Introduction,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-25.

¹⁶ The Lancaster Conference program continued through the mid-1990s but had already begun to experience internal criticism and debate by the end of this period. The Gulfport, Mississippi, program run by the General Conference Mennonite continued through the mid-1970s. The program run out of Woodlawn Mennonite in Chicago had also discontinued by 1979. In Lancaster County, many Mennonites continue as of this writing to participate in rural hosting programs run by the secular Fresh Air Fund (FAF). The vast majority of children they host are, to date, African-American. FAF promotional materials likewise continue to feature most prominently the African-American children that they host. See: “Fresh Air Fund History,” (New York: Fresh Air Fund, 2010); Memorandum, “Fall 2009 State of the Agency,” 2009; “City Kids Depart for Free Fresh Air Fund Vacations,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 19, 2007.

in “farmlands, houses and livestock” as well as “emotional and spiritual value.”¹⁷ Having long cherished their racially egalitarian commitments, Mennonite leaders widely publicized their participation in the Fresh Air hosting ventures.¹⁸ Hosts expressed their interest in “overcoming prejudice” by inviting the children into their homes.¹⁹ Along with a rich offering of children’s letters, hosts’ testimonies, and photographs of the summer visits, such publicity left a clear record of the ways the children challenged their religious community.

Four bodies of evidence and three types of programs anchor the study. More than 1,500 newspaper articles from a diverse array of publications including regional weeklies, national dailies, and historic black newspapers chronicle the public story of the larger Fresh Air movement into which this particular study is situated. Over 2,000 pages of minutes, promotional brochures, correspondence, financial reports, staff memos, and photographs from more than a dozen archives offer insight into the internal workings of the sponsoring organizations. In addition, more than thirty interviews with Fresh Air hosts, guests, and administrators provide essential anecdotal material. A body of fictional literature emerging from the Fresh Air movement rounds out the evidence.

Three Mennonite-run programs emerge from these sources as having been most active and influential between 1950 and 1979. Administrators based in Salunga, Pennsylvania, ran their initiative, the Mission Children’s Visitation program, in cooperation with the Lancaster

¹⁷ “Deputy Police Chief Aids Fresh Air Fund,” *New York Times*, Sunday, May 15, 1977; “12,000 Families Aid the Fresh Air Fund,” *New York Times*, Sunday, June 25, 1978.

¹⁸ Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2010), xv.

¹⁹ Richard F. Graber, “The Christian’s Approach to the Problem of Prejudice,” *The Mennonite*, April 28, 1964, 288.

Mennonite Conference's city mission churches in northeastern urban centers and sent them to a variety of Mennonite enclaves in and around Lancaster, Pennsylvania.²⁰ Congregational leaders in Chicago sent children from Woodlawn Mennonite and other urban congregations in the Windy City to Mennonite homes in Indiana and Iowa.²¹ In the third instance, administrators of the General Conference-sponsored mission program in Gulfport, Mississippi, known as Camp Landon, sent African-American children to white Mennonite homes in Kansas and South Dakota and, on one occasion, to the Mennonite-run Camp Friedenswald in southern Michigan.²² While the primary focus of this study remains on the experience of the children in programs run and organized by Mennonites, the experiences of those children hosted by Mennonite families who participated in ecumenical and secular Fresh Air programs based out of Chicago, Cleveland, Des Moines, and New York City also inform the findings presented.

The oral histories referenced here presented an interpretive challenge. Of the thirty individuals interviewed through phone and face-to-face oral history contacts, nearly a third participated in the programs as guests. Given the period under study, none were themselves guests or children at the time of the interviews. All looked back on the experiences through the imperfect veil of recollection. As historian Richard White notes, "History is the enemy of

²⁰ Memorandum by Paul N. Kraybill, "Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program, Report of the Director," 1951, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Committee Action.

²¹ Delton Franz to Parents of Chicago Children and to the Host Parents, 1959, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 1, Folder 4, Correspondence - General Conf. 1960.

²² Percy Love, "Michigan Retreat: A Candid Look," *The Gulfbreeze*, June - July - August - September, 1969, 4, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 5, Folder 145, Gulf Breeze, Gulfbreeze 1966-70.

memory.”²³ To meet the challenge of interpreting human recollections, this study includes respondents from within and without the Mennonite church, from a variety of racial backgrounds, and from numerous geographical settings. Such a broad range of recollections helped ameliorate the vagaries of memory by offering a range of experiences that could in turn be corroborated with archival evidence.

The Mennonite children and adults with such rich memories and written accounts about Fresh Air programs challenge core assumptions within African-American religious history even though they have been rarely linked with the discipline. Attention to charismatic religious leaders, dramatic political events like the civil rights movement, and racial tensions among adult leaders within and without the African-American community have obscured the role the children played in changing the racial and religious dynamics of the black church.²⁴ As a result, historians of African-American religion have assumed children had little relevance to scholarly analysis.²⁵

²³ Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 4.

²⁴ A classic works like Albert Raboteau's *Canaan Land* (Oxford 2001) ignores children entirely. More recent texts like Wallace Best's *Passionately Human, No Less Divine* (Princeton 2005) and Barbara Savage's *Your Spirit Walks Beside Us* (Harvard 2008) likewise give children short shrift. Similarly, otherwise excellent readers such as Raboteau's and Timothy Fulop's *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (Routledge 1997) offer no commentary on children's experience. Conversely, Wilma King's *African American Childhoods* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005) gives only the briefest of mentions to children's religious practice.

²⁵ In part, this lack of attention to children in African-American religious history is also due to methodological issues related to the difficulty of identifying children's experiences. For example, children seldom leave robust written records and childhood reminiscences often reveal more about adult perspectives than childhood experiences. In the case of Mennonite Fresh Air participants, however, the children wrote frequent letters to their parents and program sponsors describing their experiences, took pictures of their host environments, and gave testimonies about their country vacations. As historians Timothy Gilfoyle and Robert Orsi have demonstrated, children's experiences become far more distinct when the direct record of their actions correct the distortions introduced through oral histories, newspaper reports, and published photographs. See: Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005),

In addition to correcting historians' assumptions by showing how African-American children complicated and challenged Black nationalist critique of the white church, used religious resources on their own terms, and exercised a distinct moral code, Fresh Air children overturned the dichotomy between racial integration and separation. They did not simply choose between one or the other. The children who travelled to rural family farms engaged in an array of racial strategies ranging from enthusiastic engagement to belligerent noncooperation. Furthermore, study of the Fresh Air children demonstrates children's influence on key theological principles. Whether transforming religious symbols into fashion accessories or dancing despite host prohibitions against such rhythmic movement, the children played a critical role in reshaping Mennonites' precepts.

This study claims specifically that African-American Fresh Air children influenced Mennonite life in ways that white Fresh Air children did not. The white children who dominated the few formal Mennonite Fresh Air programs on record during the first part of the twentieth century – those based out of Chicago and Toronto, Ontario – did engage in some of the behaviors chronicled here: adopting Mennonite dress, reveling in nature, clamoring to return to the host homes.²⁶ The experiences of children during the first five decades of the twentieth century in Mennonite and secular-run Fresh air programs contrast sharply, however, with the African-American children's experience in the next three decades. Some of the white children returned to

77-109; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes: Child Pickpockets and Street Culture in New York City, 1850-1900," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (2004): 853-62.

²⁶ Freed, "Mennonites in the Fresh Air Program: An Early Expression of the Mennonite Social Conscience," 20-21.

local communities, married, found jobs, and raised families.²⁷ The evidence examined here contains no instances of African-American children doing so. White children experienced none of the prejudice faced by a significant number of the African-American Fresh Air guests. In general, the white children hosted in the earlier twentieth century versions of the program fit into the host environment, easily imagined a future where they could adapt to the local surroundings, and had little reason to challenge the social and religious norms maintained by their hosts. Given the racialized history of the United States, the divergent approaches do not surprise.²⁸

²⁷ Bill Babel, "Off the Beaten Track..." *The Oneonta Star*, Wednesday, November 30, 1949; "A Friendly Note - to Some of the Friendliest People in the World," (circa 1953), Library of Congress, The Papers of the Reid Family D223, Helen Rogers Reid, File 12560, The Fresh Air Fund, 1953-54; memorandum by Allen Germain, "1965 Summer Camp Program," November 3, 1965, Library of Congress, Reid Family Collection, The Papers of the Reid Family D224, Helen Rogers Reid, File 12568, The Fresh Air Fund.

²⁸ For more information on the history of racial formation within and without the church see: Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas About White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Edward J. Blum and Tracy Fessenden, "Forum: American Religion and 'Whiteness,'" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 19, no. 1 (2009): 1-35; Anthea Butler et al., "Race as Analytical Category in the Study of Religion" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Montreal, Quebec, 2009); Robert T. Carter, "Is White a Race?: Expressions of White Racial Identity," in *Off White: Readings on Race, Power and Society*, ed. Michelle Fine and et al (New York: Routledge, 1997); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1998; reprint, June 1999); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Alex Mikulich, "Mapping 'Whiteness': The Complexity of Racial Formation and the Subversive Moral Imagination of the 'Motley Crowd'," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 99-122; Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" *And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997); Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problem': Extending Emerson and Smith's 'Divided by Faith,'" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 341-59.

For some readers of this essay the assertion that African-American children acted with considerable agency in the midst of adult supervision may, however, prove surprising. Since the mid-1960s, a robust body of literature has chronicled the ways in which notions of childhood have changed over time and revealed the influence children have exercised in familial, vocational, and social settings.²⁹ Such studies disrupt normative assumptions that children passively accept adult instruction but play no role in shaping their elders in return. Like the nineteenth century pickpockets who viewed themselves as wage earners, the early twentieth century child caregivers who tended to their younger siblings, or the late twentieth century altar boys and girls who ordered sacred space in Roman Catholic mass, Fresh Air children in Mennonite homes and elsewhere altered the very adults who sought to change their young guests.³⁰

²⁹ For studies emphasized children's agency, see: Geraldine M. Devor, "Children as Agents in Socializing Parents," *The Family Coordinator* 19, no. 3 (1970): 208-12; Gilfoyle, "Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes: Child Pickpockets and Street Culture in New York City, 1850-1900"; Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); Eunice G. Pollack, "The Childhood We Have Lost: When Siblings Were Caregivers, 1900-1970," *Journal Of Social History* 36, no. 1 (2002): 31-61; Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004); David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York: Anchor Press, 1985); Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*; Abigail A. Van Slyck, "Connecting with the Landscape: Campfires and Youth Culture at American Summer Camps, 1890-1950," in *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children*, ed. Marta Gutman and Ning De Coninck-Smith (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 23-41.

³⁰ Gilfoyle, "Street-Rats and Gutter-Snipes"; Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 82-83; Pollack, "The Childhood We Have Lost."

Limits on the children

Prior to identifying the three primary ways in which Fresh Air children complicated the desires of their adult hosts, a discussion of the limits placed on the children makes the rigor of their actions all the more apparent. First, white Mennonite missionaries to the city frequently viewed the children as a practical means to an evangelical end. In an era when sponsoring mission boards evaluated future funding in part based on weekly church attendance, missionaries kept their sanctuaries full by appealing to children in the communities they sought to serve.³¹ As one church worker noted, “The promise of a vacation in the country has been the incentive for many a boy or girl to come to Sunday School.”³² Those who attended regularly received preference for the Fresh Air trips.³³ Those who did not participate each Sunday received the news that they were not “approved by the mission for a return visit to the country.”³⁴ Church staff enforced a “policy of not approving children for a return visit unless they are faithful in

³¹ Galen Miller, “History of Sharon Mennonite Church” (1960), LMHS - Box: Steelton Cong, Folder: Sharon; memorandum, “You Can Share . . . : Mission Children’s Visitation Program,” 1962, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet in on right side, bottom drawer, folder: Eastern Mennonite Board, Fresh Air Program 1962-1963.

³² Memorandum, Dorothy Bean, April 3, 1951 c., EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Testimonies and misc.

³³ Memorandum, “Homes Wanted . . .,” 1954, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Forms 1950-1952; memorandum by Mary E. Smith, “Minutes 1964 Friendly Town Planny Conference, February 18, 19, 20,” 1964, Marcy Newberry Collection, Box 99, Folder 1505, Fresh Air Fund, University of IL at Chicago Special Collection; memorandum by Elmer Lapp et al., “Glad Tidings Mennonite Church Program Evaluations,” 1970, EMM Record Room - 1st Cabinet of row on far left wall upon entering room, Third Drawer: Home Ministries, Locations New York City, City Wisconsin 1964-1975 (1961), Folder: NEW YORK GLAD TIDINGS 1970-71.

³⁴ Paul N. Kraybill to John H. Garber, June 25, 1952, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: F-J.

attending Sunday School.”³⁵ Mission workers intended such incentives to also draw adults to worship. Another administrator noted, “This condition [of linking church attendance with Fresh Air participation] has increased parental involvement in church programs.”³⁶ Although later mission workers denied that they used programming for children as “bait” for adult attendance, the fact remained that Mennonites grew African-American churches through Fresh Air children.³⁷ Congregations like Glad Tidings in New York City, Diamond Street in Philadelphia, Seventh Street in Reading, Pennsylvania, and South Christian Street in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, depended on children to initiate contact in their neighborhoods, fill their sanctuaries, and bring in outside financial support. Church missives and reports from those congregations overflowed with anecdotes, pictures, and articles focusing on their work with children and youth.³⁸ As a result,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Norman G. Shenk to Lancaster Conference Mission Superintendents, June 27, 1956, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet in on right side, bottom drawer, Folder: Mennonite Childrens Visitation Program (hereafter MCVP) - 1956.

³⁷ Freed, “Mennonites in the Fresh Air Program: An Early Expression of the Mennonite Social Conscience,” 6-7; memorandum, “Negro Membership in Mennonite Church,” September 1, 1953, AMC, Hist. Mss 1-566, James and Rowena Lark Collection, Negro Membership, Menn. Church, 1953, Folder 1/5.

³⁸ Ruth Ann Leaman, “Reading, South Seventh Street,” *Missionary Messenger*, December, 1963, 13, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, Missionary Messenger Volumes 39-40-41-42 May 1962 to April 1966 BX101.MM4; memorandum, “South Seventh St. Mennonite Church Annual Report 1968,” 1968, LMHS - Box: South Seventh Street, Reading, Calendars, Clippings, articles, correspondence, historical notes, history, 50th anniv’y tapes, Folder: South Seventh Street, Reading - Annual Report, 1968; Jean Sauder and Martin Sauder, “Bible School on Wheels,” *Missionary Messenger*, November, 1957, 2, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, Missionary Messenger Vol. 31-44 BX101.MM4; Esther Binkley and Ruth Peachey, “At Bethany,” *The Volunteer*, June, 1965, 4-6; Joseph S. Lehman to Virginia Weaver, 1968, LMHS - Box: South Christian Street, Now Crossroads Cong, Folder: Correspondence; Paul G. Landis, “Growing Congregations in New York City,” *Missionary Messenger*, November, 1966, 2-4, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, Missionary Messenger Volumes 43 - ; Loren Lind, “400 “Heroes” a Day,” *Christian Living*, January, 1967, 1, 3-5, LMHS - Box: Glad Tidings; Folder: [loose in box]; Eugene Shelly, “Inner City Growth,” *Missionary Messenger*, June, 1968, 17, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, Missionary Messenger Volumes 43.

missionaries made clear that the children could only attend summer ventures if they obediently went to Sunday school and cooperated during worship services.

The same administrators who required the children to behave in order to travel to the country set up one-way, short-term, often-paternalistic relationships. The hosts gave clothing, food, religious instruction, and parting gifts to the “little children” but seldom entered into authentic relationship.³⁹ Although hosts frequently claimed that they gained as much as they received—one host noting, for example, “We feel that we gained more from having this colored child than we gave”—the assertions often rang hollow.⁴⁰ Hosts could never quite articulate what they received other than general insight into city living or the good feeling of having done something to reduce prejudice.⁴¹ Moreover, the lop-sided relationships did not last long. Program designers shunted children to camp environments once they entered adolescence or, in some instance, at the age of nine.⁴² Some host families did manage to maintain contact with their city

³⁹ Jo McMeen, “Along the Juniata: Wanted: Homes for Fresh Air Kids,” *The Daily News*, Wednesday, April 18, 1962; Hargrow, “I Was a ‘Fresh-Air’ Child”; Delmer Hofer, “Towards Better Understanding between Races,” *The Northern Light*, September, 1969, 2, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 130, Fresh Air, 1969.

⁴⁰ “Towards Better Understanding between Races.”

⁴¹ “Local Farm Families Host Mississippi Children During Week-Long, ‘Fresh-Air Program’,” 1969; Elizabeth Goering and Vic Goering to Orlo Kaufman, September 17, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961; Franz to parents of Fresh Air Children, 1959; M. Arlene Mellinger, “200 Children Are Hoping . . .” *Missionary Messenger*, May, 1972, 12-13.

⁴² “200 Children Are Hoping . . .”

guests, but far more often the hosts found themselves confessing, as did one Kansas host in 1969, “Somehow, I don’t very much expect to hear” from the child’s mother or the child.⁴³

At the same time the hosts who invited the unknown children from the city into their homes often evinced sincere motives and expressed deep attachments to their Fresh Air guests. As one host noted in 1951, “It is with a sense of joy that we are looking forward to... bringing a bit of sunshine into the hearts of some of these dear little city waifs... anyone availing himself of such an opportunity cannot help receiving a real blessing.”⁴⁴ Throughout the breadth of the program hosts referred to the affection they felt for their guests and the sorrow they experienced when the children returned home. One host attested to a “dull ache” in her heart as her guest departed.⁴⁵ Many others spoke of lasting relationships that, as one host mother noted, felt “as if we were clasping hands across the miles in Christian fellowship.”⁴⁶ In the midst of a program focused on maintaining only the briefest of encounters, hosts expressed genuine love, affection, and concern for the children in their homes.⁴⁷

⁴³ Otto Voth and Marietta Voth to Orlo Kaufman, August 6, 1969, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 130, Fresh Air, 1969.

⁴⁴ “Testimonies: Mission Children Visitation Program of Lancaster Conference,” *Missionary Messenger*, May, 1951, 11, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Testimonies and misc.

⁴⁵ Janet Shertzer, “Gift from the City,” *Missionary Messenger*, April, 1968, 2-3, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, *Missionary Messenger* Volumes 43.

⁴⁶ D. J. Koehn, Mrs. to Orlo Kaufman, August 22, 1969, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 130, Fresh Air, 1969.

⁴⁷ The argument advanced in this article foregrounds the experience of the children involved in the Mennonite-run Fresh Air programs. In so doing, the voices and perspectives of the adult hosts have received less attention. The child-centered argument advanced here does not, however, aim to disparage the white hosts involved in the program as being inconsiderate or malevolent. Rather, the adults were, like the children themselves, engaged in a variety of

The program structure, however, undermined those sentiments while simultaneously making them possible. In many instances, it proved far easier to express affection for a child from a distant city when one interacted with her or him for only a few weeks a year. Reports of African-American children returning to communities or host homes as adolescents or young adults often turned sour. One young woman from Gulfport returned to Newton, Kansas, to attend college only to discover that leaders of a local Mennonite church would not extend associate membership status to her.⁴⁸ Others found their hosts reluctant to speak with them when they contacted them years later.⁴⁹ In particular, one Fresh Air guest from a sister denomination to the Mennonites realized that her hosts wanted little to do with her once she had achieved equal status to them through education and employment. She noted, “As long as I was somebody who was below them and needed help,” they were friendly with her, but once that changed, there was a permanent “strain” in their relationship.⁵⁰ The testimony of the Fresh Air guests themselves suggests that short-term relationships between adults in the position of giver and children in the position of receiver fostered warm feelings that, in at least some instances, dissipated when the children stepped out of the receiver role. In some ways, both guests and hosts thus had limits placed upon them by the program. The possibility of long-term sustained relationship remained

behaviors, some more helpful to both children and adults than others. This study does, at the same time, aim to correct the normative accounts internal to the Mennonite community that have spoken of the Fresh Air ventures in only glowing and uncontested terms.

⁴⁸ Mae Schrag, “Mennonite Prejudice,” *The Gulfbreeze*, May - June, 1963, 5.

⁴⁹ Luis Diaz, interview with author, May 4, 2010; Glenda Adams, interview with author, March 28, 2010.

⁵⁰ Cindy Vanderkodde, interview with author, March 7, 2010.

mutually out of reach. Even later attempts in this period to foster “reverse” visits of country hosts to city homes, proved short-lived and relatively unpopular.⁵¹

The children’s parents also placed limits on their offspring’s behavior. Most commonly, the parents schooled their children to practice formal manners with their white hosts. Many of the children’s parents expressed great wariness about sending their children into white homes, a fear compounded by experiences that many of the parents of Fresh Air children had as youth in southern communities.⁵² Although they could not protect their children from every interaction with a white person, they could, like many other members of the African-American community concerned about “respectability,” inform them to be on their best behavior.⁵³ The children responded. Host after host commented on the children’s “politeness,” “good behavior,” and “well-mannered metropolitan” bearing.⁵⁴ One guest put his hosts, in their own words, “to shame”

⁵¹ For examples of some attempts at “reverse” visits within and without the Mennonite community, see: Oswald E. Klassen, “Fresh Air Visits Reversed,” *The Gulfbreeze*, January - February, 1969, 3, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 5, Folder 145, Gulf Breeze, Gulfbreeze 1966-70; Joseph Owens, “Little Town with a Big Heart,” *Afro-American*, Saturday, July 30, 1955; Jerry Thornton, “Visitors Find Warmth in West Side Ghetto,” *Chicago Tribune*, Thursday, August 10, 1972; Mary Ullrich, “Friendly Towns Spur Tots’ Holiday,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, July 16, 1967.

⁵² Delton Franz to Orlo Kaufman, February 1, 1960, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 1, Folder 4, Correspondence - General Conf. 1960; Frantz to Orlo Kaufman, September 4, 1958, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 2, Folder 30, Correspondence - non-conf 1958.

⁵³ Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “‘Dress Modestly, Neatly... As If You Were Going to Church’: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Early Civil Rights Movement,” in *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, *Crosscurrents in African American History* (New York: Garland Pub., 1999), 69 -100; Jack Allen and et al, “Peabody Bimonthly Booknotes,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 27, no. 4 (1950): 242-56.

⁵⁴ Hofer, “Towards Better Understanding between Races”; Barbara E. Shisler, “Fresh-Air Child,” *Christian Living*, July, 1969, 25; Orlo Kaufman, “A New Venture,” *The Gulfbreeze*, July - August, 1960, 1.

with his polite behavior.⁵⁵ Rather than an anomaly of children sent to Mennonite homes, non-Mennonite hosts made many similar comments about the African-American children sent to their homes during this period.⁵⁶ Interestingly, prior to 1950, hosts of the predominantly white children active in the problem rarely if ever mentioned the children's manners.⁵⁷ Post-1950, the African-American children thus entered their hosts' homes having been told by missionaries to behave, by their parents to be polite, and by the design of the program itself to be content with only the shortest of encounters.

Racial Code of Conduct

The children responded in the midst of such constraints by practicing their own racial code of conduct. From 1950 through the 1970s, participants in the Mennonite Fresh Air ventures talked more about race relations than any other element of the program. As noted above,

⁵⁵ Elmer Voth and Linda Voth to Orlo Kaufman, September 5, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁵⁶ Joan K. Kahler, "Fresh Air Child Finds Real Home with Rome Family," *Daily Sentinel*, 1961; Lont, "Graafschap-Friendly Town"; memorandum by Marchand Chaney and Mimi Vernon, "Evaluation of Newberry-Dubuque Project for 1962," 1962, Marcy Newberry Collection, Box 99, Folder 1505, Fresh Air Fund, University of IL at Chicago Special Collection; Richard F. Crandell, ed. *The Frog Log and Other Stories About Children* (New York: Herald Tribune Fresh Air Fund, 1962); Jean Stoner, "Homes Needed for Visitors," *The Coshocton Tribune*, Monday, April 20, 1964; "73 Chicago Children Quickly Make New Friends, See Fair," *Fond Du Lac Commonwealth Reporter*, Sunday, August 04, 1968; Bill Draves, Jr., "Inner-City Children from Chicago Bring Surprises to 'Friendly Town' Parents," *Commonwealth Reporter*, 1968; Irvana Wilks, "Project Friendly Town Described as Coin with Two Sides," *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, Friday, July 26, 1968.

⁵⁷ The only instance discovered in the research for this article of a host praising the manners of a guest child prior to 1950 took place in 1931 when a host noted the "excellent manners" of a "little Chinese boy." See: "Ask for New Hostesses: Some Fresh Air Children Will Remain for Longer Period," *The Portsmouth Herald*, Wednesday, August 12, 1931. The association of manners and race is again striking.

administrators of the largest of the Mennonite initiatives proclaimed from its inception in 1950 that they aimed to serve “colored children of our Missions.”⁵⁸ Within this context, as evidenced in the language they and their parents used to describe their hosts - i.e. “the whites,” “white people” - the children were highly conscious of relating across racial lines.⁵⁹ Amid such focused attention to racial dynamics, the children acted as if reading from a common script. That is, they responded to the racialized home environments in which they found themselves using a similar set of strategies, orientations, and tactics. Girls hosted in Virginia and Pennsylvania taught their hosts how to care for their hair. Boys travelling to Iowa and South Dakota stayed mum about their home environments. Although never written down or formalized, the children’s racial code of conduct can be understood as a loosely defined and at times contradictory collection of language, behaviors, and attitudes maintained by a network of rumor, formal instruction, and familial connection within the African-American community that allowed the children to thrive and enjoy an otherwise foreign and frequently unwelcoming environment.⁶⁰ Regardless of whether the children talked about it in this way, the children’s actions appear remarkably consistent across three decades within the regions covered in this study.

⁵⁸ Memorandum by Ira J. Buckwalter, “Report of the Chairman Mennonite Mission Children’s Visitation Program,” January 9, 1951, 1, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Committee Action.

⁵⁹ Memorandum, “Host Parents Summary-1960,” 1960, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 122, Fresh Air, 1960; Margie Middleton and Ruth Y. Wenger, “Fresh Air Reminiscences,” *Missionary Messenger*, July, 1977, 12-13, 21; Thomas W. Brock, interview with author, May 17, 2005.

⁶⁰ The work of historian Steven Hahn on the role of rumor in African-American communities in the South before and after the Civil War has been influential in shaping this definition of a racial code of conduct. See: Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

This code of conduct appears first in the limits the children placed on their relationships with their hosts. The young visitors, for example, rarely shared information about their home environment.⁶¹ Even when hosts peppered them with questions about their parents, siblings, and living conditions, the children supplied scant detail. One host wrote of her young charge, “It seemed a bit difficult to get too much out of him about his brothers and sisters.”⁶² Another commented, “We did not hear much of him as to his home life.”⁶³ Reflecting back on her experience as a Fresh Air child, an adult later recalled her determination, as originally prompted by her mother, not to answer questions about her home life and, if pressed, to reply, “What goes on in our house stays in our house.”⁶⁴ Through such behavior, the children appeared circumspect in contrast to Fresh Air boosters. Rather than enthuse over “lifelong friendships where children after they are grown pursue the ideals and fellowship experienced during their childhood visit,” the children put up an informational boundary between themselves and their hosts. Given that administrators usually placed single children in isolation from existing familial and friendship networks, the evidence of such determined silence surprises all the more.

The children also conformed to their own code of conduct as they negotiated racially unmapped waters. Although many children found their hosts’ homes friendly and inviting, even in these settings they never knew when or where they might run into a racial slight or insensitive comment. When they encountered overt racial prejudice, whether in the form of a racist joke or

⁶¹ Mellinger, “200 Children Are Hoping . . .”.

⁶² Voth and Voth to Kaufman, 1969.

⁶³ Voth and Voth to Kaufman, 1961.

⁶⁴ Middleton and Wenger, “Fresh Air Reminiscences.”

off-hand racial epithet, some challenged it directly. One visitor from Harrisonburg, Virginia, told his western host to “never refer to me as” the “N-word again” after the young Montanan had casually used it in conversation.⁶⁵ Others remained silent at the time, only to write about and expose the white Mennonite community’s prejudiced underbelly at a later date. One such young adult remembered being labeled as “disadvantaged” which caused those around him to “be biased and to feel sorry for me.” “In fact,” he noted, “the first I experienced prejudice was on my visit to Lancaster County.”⁶⁶ When a host mother did not know how to care for her African-American charge’s hair or, as was the case in at least one instance, could not bring herself to touch black curls, the children taught their hosts how to dress their locks and use culturally appropriate hair care products, a particular circumstance present in non-Mennonite hosting programs as well.⁶⁷ Although they often expressed deep love and affection for their hosts, the children nonetheless found ways to respond to powerful and often prejudiced adults.

The Fresh Air boosters’ claim that the children would be welcomed into safe homes ignored a variety of dangers present in host environs. To reiterate, the majority of the children did “receive the love and care of a Christian family” and regularly encountered the “enthusiasm,

⁶⁵ Brock, interview with author.

⁶⁶ Hargrow, “I Was a ‘Fresh-Air’ Child.”

⁶⁷ Rosella Regier, “Fourth Successful “Fresh Air” Year Completed,” *The Gulfbreeze*, September - October, 1963, 6; John Eby, interview with author, February 28, 2003. References to similar difficulties with hair care appeared in a set of interviews conducted at a Christian Reform Church in Michigan: James C. Lont, *Meeting to Discuss “Friendly Town” Project in the 60’s* (Graafschap, MI: 2010).

kindness, and goodwill” promised by organizers of the program.⁶⁸ At the same time, the public description of the ventures made no mention of hosts’ racial prejudice or a variety of other threats. In at least one instance, a male host molested two girls.⁶⁹ Given abuse patterns among Mennonites and in the larger society as well as evidence of abuse in Herald Tribune Fresh Air Fund programs, this one instance was most likely not a unique experience.⁷⁰ At the time, administrators in Mennonite programs as well as the larger Fresh Air movement relied on word of mouth or the recommendation of a local pastor to select host homes. As one promotional article noted, “Any Mennonite family with a definite Christian testimony is welcome to ask for these children.”⁷¹ The program leaders emphasized host recruitment far more than host vetting and seemed more concerned about tobacco use than sexual abuse.⁷² More energy went into ensuring that the children would be free of lice, contagious disease, or behavior problems than

⁶⁸ John H. Kraybill, “The Mission Field Brought to You,” *Missionary Messenger*, July, 1956, 5; Chester L. Wenger, “Home Missions and Evangelism,” *Missionary Messenger*, June, 1968, 14-17, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, *Missionary Messenger Volumes 43*.

⁶⁹ Ira J. Buckwalter to Allen Hoffnagle, August 14, 1956, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet in on right side, bottom drawer, Folder: Mission Children’s visitation Program - 1957.

⁷⁰ Author David Hechler chronicles “three civil lawsuits filed between 1981 and 1984” that charged “that the Fund’s negligence in its screening and supervision caused children to be abused. All three children named in the suits were black (over 80% of the children the Fund serves are black and Hispanic)...” See: David Hechler, *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), 30.

⁷¹ Memorandum, “Homes Wanted . . .”.

⁷² Memorandum by Paul N. Kraybill, “Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program,” 1952, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Committee Action.

that the host homes would be free of danger from prejudice, sexual abuse, or – as happened in several instances – farm mishaps.⁷³

The children's forays across racial lines into unknown and sometimes treacherous hosting environments made others uneasy as the young visitors began to show interest in the opposite sex. From the 1950s forward program sponsors claimed that the Fresh Air exchanges reduced prejudices of all involved, white and black alike.⁷⁴ Through home-based contact, both the children and adults would be helped in "overcoming...immature attitudes."⁷⁵ Such intimate relations, however, touched on an arena frequently deemed taboo in many of the host communities, interracial sex.⁷⁶ In one instance, a local Mennonite minister hinted that, in the case of repeat visits by African-American children to white families, "Familiarity in this case might lead to certain problems."⁷⁷ Others were more blunt. One host noted with concern that a visiting

⁷³ Ibid; Orlo Kaufman and Harold Regier March 2, 1963, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 125, Fresh Air, 1963; Mellinger, "200 Children Are Hoping . . ."; memorandum by Kraybill, "Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program, Report of the Director"; "What's in the Air," (Herald Tribune Fresh Air Fund, 1952), 3, Library of Congress, Reid Family Collection, The Papers of the Reid Family D223, Helen Rogers Reid, File 12559, The Fresh Air Fund, 1952.

⁷⁴ Memorandum by Orlo Kaufman, "The Gulfport Story: Accent on Challenge," February, 1966, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 6, Folder 214, Reports, misc; Graber, "The Christian's Approach to the Problem of Prejudice."

⁷⁵ ———, "The Christian's Approach to the Problem of Prejudice."

⁷⁶ Political theorist Hannah Arendt grasped the centrality of interracial romance to U.S. race relations already in 1959. See: Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 193-213.

⁷⁷ Arnold Nickel, Rev. to Orlo Kaufman, February 27, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 2, Folder 32, Correspondence - non-conf, 1961.

Fresh Air child “was much interested in our white girls.”⁷⁸ Another sponsor advised that it would “be wise if the older boys could be placed in homes where there are no girls their age.”⁷⁹

Concern about interracial sex extended to the children’s home communities as well. An African-American Fresh Air child’s mother worried that her daughter was obsessed with returning to the host community. In an effort to discourage such interest, the mother asked her daughter whom she would marry if she settled in the all-white town. The young girl replied, “They got boys there too, Mama.” Her mother just bit her lip and said nothing.⁸⁰ Regardless of such adult concern over interracial romance, the children kept on expressing romantic interest across racial lines and imagining interracial unions.

In response program promoters placed tighter restrictions on participants’ ages and sent older children to camps. Although Mennonite administrators at first set no age limits and youth in their early teens frequented the program, by 1972 the Lancaster Conference program restricted participants to “ages 6-8.”⁸¹ Camping programs for youth from the city began to record substantial growth and period observers commented on the change in racial dynamics at the retreat facilities. One church member commented, “Missions camp at Hebron is getting darker

⁷⁸ Memorandum, “Host Parents Summary-1960.”

⁷⁹ George E. Kroecker and George E. Kroecker, Mrs. to Orlo Kaufman, August 20, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁸⁰ Lawrence Wright, *City Children, Country Summer* (New York: Scribner, 1979), 23.

⁸¹ Mellinger, “200 Children Are Hoping . . .”; “Negro Youths Will Visit,” 1963; Sally Evans, “My Experience in Kansas,” *The Gulfbreeze*, Fall, 1968, 1, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 5, Folder 145, Gulf Breeze, Gulfbreeze 1966-70; Kaufman and Regier.

and darker.”⁸² In this respect, the children had little control over the age limits but still sometimes contacted hosts directly to ask their permission to come back after they passed the age restrictions. Upon occasion they were successful in doing so.⁸³

Work Responses

The children also responded on their own terms to the work ethic promoted by their Mennonite hosts. One historian described the Mennonite farmers who hosted most of the Fresh Air children during this period, whether in Kansas, Pennsylvania, or Virginia, as “hard-working inheritors of the Protestant ethic.”⁸⁴ The children quickly discovered the truth of this observation. Although described as a vacation in much of the promotional material, the Fresh Air trips often required work.⁸⁵ Norman Shenk, an administrator of the Lancaster Conference Mission Children’s Visitation Program, held impromptu orientations for the hosts in which he countered the common assumption that the children were “cheap hired help.”⁸⁶ Despite his and other administrators’ chiding, children and hosts alike reported on the amount and variety of work the

⁸² Memorandum by Paul N. Kraybill, “Paul Kraybill’s Handwritten Notes from Visit to Steelton,” 1963, 3, EMM Record Room - 1st Cabinet of row on far left wall upon entering room, Third Drawer: Home Ministries, Locations New York City, City Wisconsin 1964-1975 (1961), Folder: PENNSYLVANIA STEELTON.

⁸³ Marjorie Graber to Orlo Kaufman and Edna Kaufman, August 29, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁸⁴ James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America 1890-1930*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach, 4 vols., vol. 3, *The Mennonite Experience in America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 137.

⁸⁵ “A Fresh Air Program,” *Missionary Messenger*, July, 1957, 11; Clayton Shaub, Mrs., “An Unfinished Story,” *Missionary Messenger*, June, 1965, 14-15, LMHS Stacks - Bound Volume, *Missionary Messenger* Volumes 39-40-41-42 May 1962 to April 1966 BX101.MM4; Mellinger, “200 Children Are Hoping . . .”.

⁸⁶ Norman G. Shenk, interview with author, March 22, 2005.

children encountered during their trips. From gathering eggs to feeding cattle and from stacking hay bales to plowing fields, host families expected their guests to join in the rhythm of farm life.

In the vast majority of cases the children participated without hesitation. One child reportedly “enjoyed rounding up cows and sheep [and]... baling hay.”⁸⁷ Another delighted in learning how to drive both a tractor and a car as well as “how to milk cows with a machine.”⁸⁸ A host mother from Hillsboro, Kansas, listed the many work activities in which her guest engaged as he “went to plow..., helped stack bales, helped chore calves, helped run errands [sic], helped set table [and] wash dishes.”⁸⁹ Other children reported picking apples, watering livestock, feeding pigs, pulling weeds, and even killing “the flies so we can eat.”⁹⁰ Another guest taught her host mother and sisters new “cleaning tricks.”⁹¹ The children consistently impressed their hosts with their work ethic and, although rarely paid for their contributions to the family farm in anything other than room, board, and small gifts, prompted some Mennonite and Amish farmers to take on older Fresh Air children as hired hands.⁹²

⁸⁷ Orlo Kaufman to Andrew Shelly, August 10, 1960, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 1, Folder 4, Correspondence - General Conf. 1960.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Randolph Flaming and Laura Flaming to Orlo Kaufman, August 1, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁹⁰ Chester Klinger August 1, 1951, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Testimonies and misc; Betty J. Klinger July 30, 1951, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Testimonies and misc.

⁹¹ Walt Juhnke and Esther Juhnke to Orlo Kaufman, August 20, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁹² John C. Devlin, “Farm Jobs to Aid City Youngsters,” *New York Times*, Sunday, July 4, 1976.

Other children challenged their hosts' work expectations. Alanzo, a child hosted in Hesston, Kansas, confronted expectations that he labor in his hosts' store. Even though his hosts referred to his trip from Gulfport, Mississippi, as a "vacation," they apparently understood the term differently than did Alanzo.⁹³ They gave him an apron and put him to work. Rather than conform to his hosts expectations, however, Alanzo took the apron off and left the store. In the words of his host mother, he refused to "fit himself into the program."⁹⁴ Another host complained of her guest, "We did not get her to work."⁹⁵ Although rare, other instances of overt refusals to cooperate are likely given the high contrast between the host's work ethic and the children's expectations of going to the country to swim, ride bikes, and pet animals.⁹⁶ Host references to "lack of cooperation," for example, may indicate instances of children refusing to work as much as hosts expected.⁹⁷

That so many children agreed to work on their vacations may in part be due to the children's desire to counter racial stereotypes. In early 1951, a long-time mission worker encouraged teaching Fresh Air children to work "lest we encourage laziness, which I have learned since the New Yorkers are noted for."⁹⁸ Such stereotypes had not dissipated a decade

⁹³ Winton Stucky, Mrs. to Orlo Kaufman, August 12, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2-4.

⁹⁵ Memorandum by Mary Rohrer and Anna Rohrer, "Mennonite Mission Children's Visitation Program, Visitation Record," 1951, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: F-J.

⁹⁶ Voth and Voth to Kaufman, 1961.

⁹⁷ Memorandum by Kraybill, "Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program," 5.

⁹⁸ Memorandum by Rohrer and Rohrer, "Mennonite Mission Children's Visitation Program, Visitation Record."

later when another host acknowledged her surprise at how hard her guest worked. The host had been “of the opinion that most under privileged people are slovenly.”⁹⁹ By the early 1970s, white Mennonites in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, continued to lament that many members of their community failed “to recognize the God-given worth and capabilities” of people of color.¹⁰⁰ The children often countered such stereotypes by working hard and without complaint, a strategy consistent with the choices made by some adult African Americans to prove their worth in a society that devalued their labor.¹⁰¹ The young boy who prompted his host to comment, “Whenever we told him how to do something he did it,” also demonstrated his intelligence. “He is a very smart boy,” added the farmer.¹⁰² Whether choosing to work in order to counter racist assumptions or refusing to work so that they could achieve their vacation goals, the children challenged their hosts’ assumptions.

The apparent vagaries of the children’s actions appear to challenge the central contention that the children acted in concert. Some worked hard. Others did not. Some responded by challenging their hosts’ racial assumptions. Others refrained from doing so. The children’s actions could be interpreted as the normal responses of children from a racially oppressed community placed under the supervision of adult members from a racially dominant community. From this perspective, the children had no clear or guiding principle to order their actions in an

⁹⁹ Goering and Goering to Kaufman, 1961.

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum, “Of All Nations One People: A Study Guide on Race Relations,” 1972, 4.

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁰² Kaufman, “A New Venture.”

alien and unfamiliar environment. They simply did what they could to make their stay as pleasant as possible.

That impulse to make the best of an at times uncomfortable situation, however, demonstrates the validity of their concerted action. The racial code of conduct held by the children required no central committee, demanded no official signature, proffered no founding document. Yet it did stem from a common desire to make a Fresh Air visit enjoyable and sustainable. As such the children spoke, acted, and displayed remarkably similar emotional stances during their Fresh Air stays. As they gossiped together about their white hosts before and after visiting in the country, listened to their parents instruct them on how to behave before leaving, and learned from siblings, cousins, and fictive kin about how to respond to unfamiliar norms and standards, they subsequently acted in much the same way.¹⁰³ That some chose to work hard and others did not is less important than that the children consistently found ways to make their visits enjoyable despite barriers of race, class, religion, age, and homesickness. To be certain, many adult hosts and sending parents joined their young charges in desiring positive Fresh Air encounters. Yet none of the visits would have been positive in the end had not the children worked so hard to make them so.

¹⁰³ For a discussion of the dynamics of fictive kinship in a much earlier African-American community, see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 22, 119-20. For numerous examples of children talking with each other about their hosts, see: Wright, *City Children, Country Summer*.

Black Nationalism and religious resources

The children's racial code of conduct appears most distinct when put in the context of their elders' critique of the Fresh Air program. Even a powerful and articulate African-American leader like John Powell, the church administrator who called for an end to the one-way ventures and the start of "stale-air" vacations, could not convince the children to stop going to the country. From the 1950s forward, program administrators complained that the number of children asking to participate in Fresh Air trips far exceeded the number of rural and suburban residents willing to host urban guests.¹⁰⁴ Missionaries attested to plaintive appeals heard from young boys who asked, "Don't you have a place for me? Why can't I go out for vacation too?"¹⁰⁵ Many of the children asked to stay for longer periods of time than the standard two-week vacation. Said one Mississippi child upon his return from Kansas, "We should have stayed four weeks."¹⁰⁶ The children also welcomed and sought out such interracial contact, regardless of the paternalistic attitudes excoriated by Powell and his colleagues. One child expressed the simple "joy of being received into a white house and having white friends."¹⁰⁷ In the face of the children's enthusiasm, the administrators ignored criticism that their programs harmed the young guests.

The children followed the example set by many of the adults around them in their eagerness to continue travelling to Fresh Air vacations. As historian Felipe Hinojosa has demonstrated, adults from communities of color during this period frequently accepted the

¹⁰⁴ Martha L. Buckwalter, "The S. Christian Street Work Opened," (Lancaster, PA: 1977), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Roy H. Wissler April 3, 1951, EMM Record Room - 3rd Cabinet of second set in on right side, bottom unmarked drawer, Folder: Testimonies and misc.

¹⁰⁶ Kaufman to Shelly, 1960.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum, "Host Parents Summary-1960," 1.

demands of white missionaries in exchange for access to material resources and social status.¹⁰⁸ The children followed suit. They, too, accepted the temporary demands placed upon them by their hosts because, in return, they ate delicious meals, played new games, received fresh gifts, and swam to their heart's content.¹⁰⁹ Some learned how to drive tractors, operate milking machines, and ride horses.¹¹⁰ To a degree, the "family-to-family relationships" sought by Fresh Air organizers depended on material provision to continue.¹¹¹

The young visitors also used religious resources on their own terms. In addition to responding to their hosts with a set of behaviors widespread and consistent enough to act like if not formally consist of a racial code of conduct, the children made careful decisions about how to respond to their host's religious garb. Mennonites in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s espoused belief in separation from the sinful influences of secular society. Conservative Mennonites - a disproportionate number of whom hosted Fresh Air children - expressed their fidelity to this doctrine of nonconformity through distinctive dress.¹¹² For women, local communities

¹⁰⁸ Felipe Hinojosa, "Making Noise among the 'Quiet in the Land': Mexican American and Puerto Rican Ethno-Religious Identity in the Mennonite Church, 1932-1980" (Dissertation, University of Houston, 2009).

¹⁰⁹ Orlo Kaufman July 6, 1960, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 122, Fresh Air, 1960; Misc Correspondence Concerning the Camp Landon Fresh Air Programs 1966, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 127, Fresh Air, 1966; Voth and Voth; Mellinger, "200 Children Are Hoping . . .".

¹¹⁰ Kaufman to Shelly, 1960; Regier, "Fourth Successful 'Fresh Air' Year Completed."

¹¹¹ Mellinger, "200 Children Are Hoping . . .".

¹¹² "Fresh Air Fund History"; Wright, *City Children, Country Summer*; Helen Busuttill Regenbogen, interview with author, March 10, 2010; "Six Chinese Children Due to Visit Here: Fresh Air Kids from New York Sponsored by Peta," *Evening Times*, Thursday, July 10, 1958; E. J. Dionne, Jr., "The Fresh Air Fund: 100 Years of Success," *New York Times*, Sunday, May 8, 1977.

determined the shape, size, fabric, and color of dresses designed to obscure the female form, but all ensured that the women's attire marked them as a member of the Mennonite church.¹¹³ In some communities, men wore collarless plain coats or suspenders rather than belts, but in general they received far less scrutiny in their apparel than did the women.¹¹⁴ In those regional settings where white Mennonites expressed religious fidelity through dress, the decision of when, how, and whether to wear the distinctive Mennonite female prayer covering, a lace doily or mesh, usually white, cap, drew consistent attention.¹¹⁵ For church members, the prayer covering not only represented separation from nonbelievers but also devotion, faithfulness, purity, and submission to church teachings about male headship.¹¹⁶ Upon reaching their destination, many of the children encountered a parking lot or waiting room filled with white-capped women eagerly awaiting their arrival (see photo 1).¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Beth E. Graybill, "'To Remind Us of Who We Are': Multiple Meanings of Conservative Women's Dress," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, ed. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly, *Center Books in Anabaptist Studies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 53-77.

¹¹⁴ Linda Boynton Arthur, "Clothing Is a Window to the Soul: The Social Control of Women in a Holdeman Mennonite Community," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 15 (1997): 11-30; Kimberly D. Schmidt, "'Sacred Farming' or 'Working Out': The Negotiated Lives of Conservative Mennonite Farm Women," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001): 79-102; Beth Graybill, "Mennonite Women and Their Bishops in the Founding of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, no. 2 (1998): 251-73.

¹¹⁵ John C. Wenger and Elmer S. Yoder, "Prayer Veil," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/p739me.html> (accessed May 8, 2007).

¹¹⁶ John A. Hostetler, "The Historical Development of the Devotional Covering in the Mennonite Church," in *AMC* (Goshen, IN: 1956), 6-9; J. C. Wenger, *The Prayer Veil in Scripture and History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1964), 25; Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, PA: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1970), 118-20.

¹¹⁷ John Bolls, Child Being Picked up at Train Station, EMM - Record Room: File Cabinets middle isle, Drawer marked, Information Services Picture File, File: Archives - Home Ministries, Children's Visitation Program.

In response Fresh Air girls shaped pious faith into glamorous fashion even as they adopted their hosts' dress patterns. Although Fresh Air boys seldom sought to dress like their male counterparts, their sisters and female friends chose carefully whether they would dress like Mennonites. Many decided to adopt the prayer covering and wear it for at least a short period upon their return home.¹¹⁸ At least one girl received a re-invitation to a Mennonite home because she had begun wearing the covering. Her best friend, who had also been hosted by the same family but chose not to wear a covering, received no such re-invitation.¹¹⁹ Yet, host responses aside, the children's reasons for adopting the covering prove far more interesting. The desire to please hosts or fit in motivated some girls to adopt conservative Mennonite dress.¹²⁰ Others, however, made fashion choices. According to a reporter, at least one Fresh Air girl knew that "the long dress favors her figure, and with the deep maroon color against her dark skin, her almond-shaped Polynesian eyes, and her hair gleaming in tight braids under the bright white covering --- she seems the essence of glamour."¹²¹ Far from an anomaly, mission workers reported that other young African-American converts requested prayer coverings with strings, a traditional symbol of fidelity to core nonconformity beliefs, because they thought they looked "pretty."¹²² In another instance, a member of a Mennonite congregation in Wichita, Kansas,

¹¹⁸ Paul G. Landis, interview with author, April 28, 2005.

¹¹⁹ Middleton and Wenger, "Fresh Air Reminiscences."

¹²⁰ "Lancaster Helps Needy Children," *New York Times*, Sunday, June 13, 1976, 53.

¹²¹ Wright, *City Children, Country Summer*, 80.

¹²² Robert W. Good, "Forty Years on Diamond Street: A Historical Research of Diamond Street Mennonite Church and Mennonite Mission to Philadelphia" (Paper, Eastern Mennonite College, 1982), 22-23, I-3-3.5 JHMHEC 1985-6 35/5, Good, Robert W., "Forty Years on Diamond Street: A Historical Research ..."

came to church wearing a covering and sporting long, dangling, gold earrings.¹²³ Through actions such as these, the young girls joined older converts to the church in morphing the meaning of devout dress. In response, at least one bishop relaxed the covering requirement because the symbol's meaning had been altered into a fashion accessory.¹²⁴ Although increasing access to higher education, growing economic stability, urbanization, assimilation, and intergenerational conflict within the Mennonite community also played roles in diminishing the practice of wearing the prayer veil, the children's contribution cannot be discounted.

Few adult Mennonites grasped how children from the city had influenced their community. Most focused on the number of children hosted, the growth of missions from which they came, and the naiveté of youngsters unfamiliar with agrarian life. Reports on youth “escape[d] from the asphalt jungle” who often “had never seen a cow milked or known where milk came from except from a bottle” drew far more attention than did accounts of changes to church doctrine prompted by the children.¹²⁵ In the adults' minds, they participated in the “church's witness to the city” by bringing “the mission field” to their own backyards and thereby introducing the children to homes “where Christian principles are followed in a practical way in every-day life.”¹²⁶ During a period when church leaders often struggled to protect nonconformity practices as returning missionaries from Africa testified to the spiritual dangers of “the false notion of salvation by works,” the children amplified the challenge to clothing strictures by

¹²³ Lynford Hershey, interview with author, March 2, 2003.

¹²⁴ Miriam Stoltzfus, interview with author, March 15, 2003.

¹²⁵ Jerry Zook, “Christian Life and Action,” *Gospel Herald*, June 18, 1968, 551; “Couple Recall Their Early Days as Fresh Air Fund Hosts,” *New York Times*, Sunday, April 30, 1978, 55.

¹²⁶ Shertzer, “Gift from the City”; Kraybill, “The Mission Field Brought to You.”

infusing sartorial symbols with secular significance.¹²⁷ Beneath the leaders' ecclesial radar, the children helped destabilize a long held doctrine.

Practicing their own racial code of conduct and transforming religious symbols was not enough; the children also pushed back against their hosts' moral standards. Testing white Mennonites' worth ethic may have prompted rebuke, withholding information about home lives may have invited scrutiny, and challenging racial naiveté may have provoked correction, but practicing a moral code of conduct foreign to Mennonite religious sensibility risked opprobrium. The doctrine of nonconformity called church members to refrain from association with a host of practices including the "holding of life insurance, membership in labor unions, immodest and worldly attire (including hats for sisters), the wearing of jewelry (including wedding rings), (and/or) attendance at movies and theaters."¹²⁸ Even as dictates about distinctive clothing began to erode in the wake of increasing urbanization, strictures against dancing and other "worldly" practices retained a hold on many of the Mennonites who hosted Fresh Air children.¹²⁹ The children entered homes where anyone could run barefoot through the grass but none could dance barefoot in the barn.

¹²⁷ Richard K. MacMaster and Donald R. Jacobs, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 184-86.

¹²⁸ Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*, ed. Theron F. Schlabach, 4 vols., vol. 4, *The Mennonite Experience in America* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 76.

¹²⁹ Memorandum, "1966 Annual Conference Report," March 16, 1967, 12, AMC II-8 Box 4, Lancaster Conference, Reports, 1963-67, Folder: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions, Annual Report 1966; Steven M. Nolt, "Church Discipline in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference: The Printed *Rules and Discipline*, 1881-1968," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* (1992): 2-16; Harold S. Bender et al., "Nonconformity," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/n651me.html> (accessed September 18, 2007).

Nevertheless children consistently challenged the dictates placed upon them. One former Fresh Air child makes the case. Upon her return from a two-week vacation, one of many that Margie Middleton took to the country, the young girl danced with her mother. She danced while listening to the radio even though her hosts in rural Pennsylvania had told her it was sin to do so. During her two-week stay with white Mennonites in the early 1950s, she had been told that many things were sinful: wearing earrings, putting on a pretty dress, swimming in the pool with boys. Of all these forbidden activities, dancing received the greatest censure. Yet Middleton chose to dance because her mother assured her that rural Mennonites did not understand everything. Her mother explained, “What’s okay for some people, maybe isn’t for others.”¹³⁰ Despite their big cars, big houses, and big lists of reprehensible behaviors, white Mennonites from the country did not crowd out her moral agency. Middleton reserved the right to decide what was right and wrong.

Other children joined Middleton in challenging church doctrine. Some danced at their hosts’ homes.¹³¹ Others delighted in telling ghost stories at bedtime, a practice that not only kept host children from sleeping but also smacked of the occult practices frowned upon by church leaders.¹³² Middleton and her best friend Pat disrupted a worship service to greet each other with hugs, kisses, and “jumping up and down,” behaviors anathema to the attitudes of humility and

¹³⁰ Middleton and Wenger, “Fresh Air Reminiscences.”

¹³¹ Memorandum, “Host Parents Summary-1960,” 1.

¹³² Ibid.

modesty implicit in nonconformity doctrine.¹³³ Such actions stemmed as much from crossing cultures as from disputing dictates but resulted in the same outcome, an affront to church precepts. Although hosts extended a measure of grace to guests who had not yet joined the church, baptism being offered at an “age of accountability” roughly analogous to adolescence, the adults expected the children’s behaviors to cease immediately when reprimanded.¹³⁴ When children continued to dance, tell ghost stories, or disrupt worship decorum, the adults not only grew frustrated but also concerned about maintaining church teachings. They feared that outsiders tramping on forbidden floorboards might crack their faith’s foundation.

The children also interfered with their hosts’ approach to private property. In short, hosts claimed the children stole things. Most accused their charges of taking small symbolic items: a handkerchief, a tie clasp, or a silver dollar.¹³⁵ Charges of full-scale robbery rarely surfaced.¹³⁶ In at least one instance, hosts contacted a Fresh Air administrator to partially retract their accusation after they found the missing item, their son’s tie clasp, on the front lawn. They realized belatedly

¹³³ Middleton and Wenger, “Fresh Air Reminiscences”; Mennonite Church, “Mennonite Confession of Faith,” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M4663.html> (accessed June 28, 2010).

¹³⁴ Keith Graber Miller, “Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurture, and Parental Vigilance: ‘The Child’ in the Work of Menno Simons,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2000), 194-226.

¹³⁵ Memorandum by Rohrer and Rohrer, “Mennonite Mission Children’s Visitation Program, Visitation Record”; Harold Regier to Ervin P. Krehbiel, September 23, 1963, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 125, Fresh Air, 1963; Ervin Krehbiel and Melva Krehbiel to Harold Regier, October 27, 1964, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 2, Folder 36, Correspondence - non-conf, 1964.

¹³⁶ Memorandum by Kraybill, “Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program,” 5; Wright, *City Children, Country Summer*, 45.

that their guest had borrowed the clasp before church one morning, and it had apparently fallen off in transit to the car. They insisted, however, that he had stolen a silver dollar.¹³⁷ Although not universal, the accusations about children stealing items from their hosts' homes persisted through the 1970s and beyond.

Such instances indicate a predisposition on the part of the hosts to accuse their guests before considering other explanations. As in the case of hosts who raised questions about the children's intelligence, work ethic, or spiritual condition, the same white Mennonites who prided themselves on separation from "Satan's kingdom" nonetheless held prejudicial opinions about their guests before they ever stepped off the bus or train.¹³⁸ Of those intrepid travelers, some children confessed to stealing.¹³⁹ More commonly, the children had themselves been robbed. One girl brought home a bicycle given to her by her hosts only to discover that someone had stolen it three days after she returned to the city.¹⁴⁰ Other Fresh Air children expressed amazement that their hosts left toys and other personal possessions outside at night with no fear that someone would steal them.¹⁴¹ Many hosts failed to recognize that, missing silver dollars, handkerchiefs, and tie clasps aside, the children they brought into their homes came from environments where they faced theft daily.

¹³⁷ Krehbiel and Krehbiel to Regier, 1964.

¹³⁸ Church, "Mennonite Confession of Faith."

¹³⁹ Memorandum by Rohrer and Rohrer, "Mennonite Mission Children's Visitation Program, Visitation Record"; Diaz, interview with author.

¹⁴⁰ Molly Wiseman, "Kids Are Kids - 'Friendly Town' Message," *Paddock Publications*, Wednesday, July 24, 1968.

¹⁴¹ Catherin M. Troost, *Catskill Mountain Memories* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008).

The decisions made by children to disobey moral instruction appear all the more deliberate given that program administrators vetted them so closely. Administrators diligently eliminated all children that they deemed “unworthy.”¹⁴² Those labeled “trouble makers” might, according to some program promoters, cause white people to “turn against the colored people.”¹⁴³ Those children who did steal small items or created havoc by “pestering cows in the milking parlor, ... breaking things, ... getting in fights, ... setting fires, [or] throwing tantrums” stood out because program promoters denied vacations to those children prone to such mischief.¹⁴⁴ Separation anxiety, culture shock, homesickness, or desire for attention may have precipitated some of the misbehaviors. Given how carefully administrators vetted the children, however, it is just as likely that some also deliberately chose to misbehave. These were children who had sat through many a Mennonite worship service, Sunday school class, and vacation bible school program centered on the Ten Commandments and a host of other moral directives. They understood the implications of their actions.

Such intentional resistance marked the children’s actions across a long span of time. Although racial labels shifted from “Negro” and “colored” to “black” and “minority,” the principal concerns remained consistent from 1950 through 1979.¹⁴⁵ Adults accused children of

¹⁴² Memorandum by Kraybill, “Mennonite Mission Children Visitation Program.”

¹⁴³ Memorandum, “Host Parents Summary-1960,” 2.

¹⁴⁴ Wright, *City Children, Country Summer*, 45-46.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Stoltzfus, “A Short History of Mennonite Work among the American Negro,” *Missionary Messenger*, October, 1950, 12; Dwight McFadden to William T. Snyder, June 14, 1979, AMC I-6-7 African-American Mennonite Association, Records, 1969, 1976-91, Box 28 (Large), Folder Mennonite Central Committee 28/1; memorandum by Faith Hershberger, “MCC/Black Caucus Representative Meeting,” December 4, 1979, AMC I-6-7

dancing, interrupting church services, and stealing small objects throughout the thirty years. Other aspects of the program did change. Bell bottomed pants appeared, Afro hairstyles became popular, and soul music began to fill the children's favorite radio stations. Yet the basic code continued. Children transformed religious symbols, exercised their own morality, and promoted their own form of interracial contact in much the same way.

This consistency stemmed primarily from the marginal space in which the children operated. As James C. Scott and Walter Johnson have demonstrated in their studies of subtle forms of peasant and slave resistance and as Robin Kelley has shown in his work on the quotidian struggles of working-class African-Americans, historical actors can bring about significant change outside protest politics and governmental relations.¹⁴⁶ Subtle actions taken in backyards, farmyards, and schoolyards also play a part in shifting power relations, forming political consensus, and molding religious practice. As evident in the often-severe power imbalances between adults and children, the agency of children and other marginalized members of society had limits. A child, for instance, had few options in response to an angry black power advocate or a disapproving Mennonite bishop. The children's disfranchisement, exclusion from the workforce, and intellectual and physical immaturity barred them from written rebuttal,

African-American Mennonite Association, Records, 1969, 1976-91, Box 28 (Large), Folder Mennonite Central Committee 28/1.

¹⁴⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), 3-33; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Scott, "Resistance without Protest and without Organization: Peasant Opposition to the Islamic Zakat and the Christian Tithe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 3 (1987): 417-52; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

violent attack, or organized lobbying. They could, however, dance, act out, clamor for Fresh Air trips, and treat sacred symbols as couture whether or not parents, bishops, or black nationalists approved. The children acted in such similar ways over time because they had so few options from which to choose.

Complicating African-American History

A racially complex picture of African-American history nonetheless emerges amid this truncated agency. Historians have already unearthed the diversity of religious practice and racial struggle during the middle three decades of the twentieth century.¹⁴⁷ The children featured here deepen and advance those findings by demonstrating how even those African Americans who worshipped with white people and, as in the case of Fresh Air children, lived for awhile in their homes complicated the “Uncle Tom” stereotype.¹⁴⁸ Rather than assimilationists who appeased the white man’s desires, Fresh Air children revealed little about their home environments, countered black power critics who threatened to shut down the programs, demonstrated their intelligence, spoke back to stereotypes, and made friends in foreign territory. Some children did all the above on a single trip. The racial complexity of the Fresh Air participants’ responses to

¹⁴⁷ Joseph, “Introduction”; Barbara Dianne Savage, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and J. Kameron Carter, “Following the North Star: Charting New Directions for African American Religious History” (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Montreal, Quebec, 2009); Edward Curtis, E., IV, *Black Muslim Religion and the Nation of Islam: 1960-1975* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2006); Albert J. Raboteau and David W. Wills, “Rethinking American Religious History: A Progress Report on ‘Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary History Project’,” *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 20, no. 3 (1991): 57-61.

¹⁴⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Introduction,” in *The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), xi-xxx.

their host environment proves stunning. No wonder children often found themselves exhausted in the midst of a Fresh Air vacation.¹⁴⁹ Even when inserted into racially homogenous communities, isolated from racial peers, and placed under powerful representatives of parental, religious, and racial authority, the children confounded the idea that they would follow one racial agenda. Instead, they established their own.

The children also deepen historical understanding of moral formation during this period. Seldom accepting without reservation their hosts' dictates, Fresh Air visitors carefully evaluated the moral framework they encountered. Prohibitions against dancing, for example, afforded the opportunity to seek out parental reinterpretation at home. After talking with her mother, Margie Middleton decided to dance, wear lipstick, and listen to the radio because, whereas humans judge "the outside appearance," she determined "God judges the heart."¹⁵⁰ Pressure to wear a cape dress or prayer covering made symbolic negotiation possible. Girls who made fashion statements from conservative dresses foretold the 2006 *Harper's Bazaar* photo spread featuring models dressed in Mennonite and Amish-inspired frocks.¹⁵¹ Even accusations about stealing opened up a discussion of varying attitudes toward private property. Whether the Fresh Air visitor charged with stealing a silver dollar understood it to have been a gift rather than a purloined treasure

¹⁴⁹ Elmer Goering and Gladys Goering to Orlo Kaufman, August 1, 1961, Mennonite Library & Archives, Bethel, Kansas: MLA.VII.R GC Voluntary Service, Series 11 Gulfport VS Unit, Box 4, Folder 123, Fresh Air, 1961.

¹⁵⁰ Middleton and Wenger, "Fresh Air Reminiscences."

¹⁵¹ Larry Alexander, "Bazaar but True Amish-Inspired Fashions Grace Renowned Magazine," *Intelligencer Journal-New Era*, Saturday, September 23, 2006.

remained unclear several weeks after the child's departure.¹⁵² Fresh Air participants demonstrate that children helped form and articulate community values within and without their racial group. Scholars would do well to bring them into their analysis of cultural relativism, intercultural relations, and religious pluralism.¹⁵³

Such discussions of moral formation nonetheless take into account a wide variety of ethical conduct. Many hosts did indeed act in a prejudiced and discriminatory manner toward their guests. Many children offered grace in response. Yet not every white host displayed overt racism. Not every child responded kindly. A simplistic description of bad hosts and good children offers little insight into this racially charged historical moment. Rather, the Fresh Air children and their hosts challenge prevailing assumptions about all participants. Whereas period and subsequent accounts present the hosts as only being good and entirely in control and the children as only being innocent and devoid of all agency, research into Fresh Air accounts reveal a far more complex story. Hosts and children displayed their full humanity. Both influenced and acted upon the other. By emphasizing the children's particular role and racial code of conduct,

¹⁵² Regier. Again, African-American children in the wider Fresh Air movement replicated this pattern of asserting their own ethical perspectives. As one host mother noted, her guest children "had very different ideas about the meaning of words such as 'cheat' and 'fair' and 'share' and 'lie.'" See: Joan M. Jacobus, "Our Summer House Guests," *Redbook*, July, 1964, Library of Congress, Reid Family Collection, The Papers of the Reid Family D225, Helen Rogers Reid, File 12572, The Fresh Air Fund 1965.

¹⁵³ The following scholars, for example, ignore or underplay the particular contributions of children in their discussions of cross-cultural interaction: Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964); MacMaster and Jacobs, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival*; Alemu Checole et al., *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts*, ed. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, Global Mennonite History Series: Africa (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006).

the adults' role does not disappear. A corrected narrative emerges in which children, most surprisingly, claim their place.

The young residents of Harlem, the Bronx, Queens, Newark, Baltimore, D. C., and many other urban communities affected history most directly when they demanded that they, too, be allowed to take a Fresh Air vacation. Despite the church's racial homogeneity of the 1950s, racial flux of the 1960s, and racial adjustments of the 1970s, the children kept the programs going by declaring their interest. Former vacationers watched their offspring clamor for the same sojourns they had once demanded even while wondering whether the country junkets achieved their publicized ends. Outside the Mennonite community, the Fresh Air din only redoubled as promoters bemoaned a lack of hosts and children eagerly queued up to claim their chance at a vacation. Many organizers thought they held the reins, but, without the children pressing their demands, the programs would have skidded to a halt. The children who could "hardly keep still" in anticipation of the trips ahead of them held no honorific, spouted no doctrine, carried no status.¹⁵⁴ Yet they made their marks as historical actors every time they set foot off a Mennonite farm and said, "I would like to go back."¹⁵⁵ Such sentiments kept funds flowing, programs pumping, and hosts re-inviting. Most importantly, the children's demands allowed them to refresh the religious environments that purportedly refreshed them.

¹⁵⁴ Hargrow, "I Was a "Fresh-Air" Child."

¹⁵⁵ Kaufman to Shelly, 1960.

Photo 1:



Credit: John Bolls, Child Being Picked up at Train Station, EMM - Record Room: File Cabinets middle isle: Drawer marked: Information Services Picture File, File: Archives - Home Ministries, Children's Visitation Program