

October! It's time for Pastor's (wife) Appreciation (of her church!)

by **Brenda Eby Zook**

I don't know how I could put everything I love about my church in twelve hundred words. If I'd just write one sentence about each person, that would be five hundred sentences, with, say, 20 words per sentence . . . voilà: 10,000 words. And I've already used 48 writing an introduction. So, I'll just write and see what happens.

When I say I love my church, I mean the people who worship, serve, pray, eat, give, play, laugh, work, and care together as an extension of the body of Christ through Locust Grove Mennonite Church.

Who are these people? We are a mixed and motley Jesus-loving congregation in the middle of nowhere. Our pews are full of single moms and kids, ex-Amish families, college educated professionals, farmers, stay at home moms, large extended families, single individuals, retirees, blue collar workers, recovering alcoholics, teachers, widows, and little ones. Lots of little ones—maybe 110 kiddos between two and twelve. Let me tell you about these friendly, compassionate, welcoming, generous, praying folks.

Locust Grove is a friendly, not-so-little country church. Our town is so small, we don't have a traffic light. Nor do

we need one. When I “go to town,” meaning, I drive a mile from my home further out in nowhere to buy groceries, do banking, or make a quick stop at the pharmacy, I always run into someone from church in the process. Always. These friendly people wave, smile, beep, chat.

“ I have been drawn in to the heart of this body of Christ. I am accepted for who I am and for who I am not. ”

◀ The annual treat of custom-made party mix!

Photo credits, Brenda Eby Zook

If nothing else, I meet them on the road, which I may or may not notice, because I don't have a file in my brain that remembers vehicles, and honestly, when I'm driving I need to pay attention to the road, not the people in the oncoming traffic. But mostly, my church people accept that about me. No one (I should be honest and say hardly anyone because there was that one time) gets their shorts in a knot if they pass me and I don't wave.

My husband, on the other hand, waves at everyone. I discovered when we moved to the valley that he always drives with one hand at the top of the steering wheel for the express purpose of waving at everyone he knows as he drives along. Which is a lot of waving. I always wave BACK if I notice someone waving at me, but I don't often initiate waving because my hands are at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel just as I was taught in the driver's education class which my husband never had (but that's another story).

Oh, this is a friendly group of believers. Just today I stopped at the post office, and across the parking lot, a pixie of a girl stopped to smile and wave. I didn't hear what she said, but soon her mom had turned around and was smiling a greeting too. Locust Grove is a friendly congregation, and today I noticed the training starts young!

The people at Locust Grove are deeply compassionate, which means that making a quick trip to town always takes more time than I'd planned. Inevitably I will meet someone from church in the aisle of the Dollar Store or beside the frozen peas at the bulk food store, and life is happening fast and hard for one or both of us, so we connect for three minutes or 30. I've walked some challenging stretches of life in the past few years, and these people, “my people,” have cried with me standing in the little country store that's almost in my backyard. They've showed up at the door with a gift pack of my favorite chips or a loaf of homemade bread for no reason but love.

I'm part of a Sunday school class called the Family Circle, and we've been present for each other through some difficult paths with our parents, children, friends. Around that plain brown table, through the years, I believe I've seen tears of personal pain or shared pain on every face. And it's not just my





▲ Locust Grove Mennonite Church in Belleville, Pennsylvania.

Sunday school class. In the women's restroom at our church, I've been part of some very precious conversations. I've been well cared for through dark days, and I see it happening for others as well. Even when people don't understand, they still care. Recently I had a conversation with a newly single, struggling mom. "I can't begin to tell you how loved and supported the church has made me feel with all the prayers and gifts. (They have) definitely made this trial so much easier for me and the kids." My heart swelled with joy at her words. That's my church; I love how they love people.

The people of Locust Grove have been an extremely accepting and welcoming bunch. I'm not "from here" originally, which is true of more and more people in our congregation. But I have been drawn in to the heart of this body of Christ. I am accepted for who I am and for who I am not. I honestly don't spend a lot of time thinking, "Oh, I'm the pastor's wife" when I'm at church. I'm mostly just me. I teach an adult Sunday school class because after some early decades invested in teaching little ones, I finally discovered that this is my niche. I do it because I'm a teacher, not because someone leaned on me and said, "Well, since you're the pastor's wife, you should . . ." Likewise for my involvement on the worship team. After a long hiatus from playing piano at church, I'm back doing something I really love.

If you've lived in a pastor's household, you know that Sunday mornings might comprise our least godly moments. Last minute announcements to organize, equipment malfunctions, crises that won't wait—anything can happen, and that's just with Pastor Dad. If Mom is invested in another set of activities, chaos rules the day. I usually didn't do "extra" bits on Sunday mornings when our lives were focused on little ones, which, if you know our family, was quite a few years because of our commitment to foster care and adoption. Once I remember being pressured by a well-meaning person that I should be playing the prelude regularly. "People need to see you up there," she insisted. I demurred because I knew that the people who really needed to see me those Sunday mornings were my kids. (And we didn't have a shortage of prelude musicians!) But the reason I remember that conversation so clearly is because it was such a rare occurrence. At Locust Grove, I have been

surrounded by acceptance, not expectation.

Another way I've experienced that acceptance has been in the area of hospitality, as in—I'm not good at it. My expression of hospitality has included drawing the circle of our family wider to include numerous foster kids through the past 20 years, mostly "stray boys" who gathered around our table and crawled into our hearts, bringing along their issues and their friends. I fed a lot of kids through those years, and during some seasons it was not unusual to have to pause and rethink the number of plates at the dinner table. But hosting overnight guests? Inviting a tableful of people over for Sunday dinner (see above paragraph about Sunday chaos)? I feel anxious and stressed as I'm typing the words. Please, count me out.

Imagine my amazement when I released the sense of "guilty ought" about hosting out-of-town speakers, traveling choirs, etc., and discovered there were people in our congregation who really loved doing that?! I remember a time when someone's feelings were a bit hurt when they weren't asked to host, because someone else had beaten them to it. That's just not how I think, and it seems like the people of Locust Grove are fine with that. I hear them saying they love my writing and editing of the church newsletter, I find fulfillment and encouragement when I teach, and I even get positive feedback when I help on the worship team (just when I was thinking maybe I'm too old to be doing this!) I am affirmed in the gifts I have been given, and seldom are my glaring inadequacies mentioned. What a gracious group.



▲ The church celebrated and honored the 30-year milestone of our involvement at LG in 2014 with money to be put toward "a trip." By 2016 we were able to take the trip to Israel Max had always dreamed of, and I was pleasantly surprised at the way God also showed up for me in a place I had never really wanted to visit! This picture was taken with our guide, Itai.

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handed congregation. My favorite “Pastor Appreciation” gift happened a few years back when we were in the throes of parenting boys, ours and some extras, and food just flew out of the house. I like to cook, but keeping ahead of all that hunger was a challenge. One Sunday school class created a stockpile of freezer meals. I think I had twenty meals, frozen, labeled, and ready to eat! I used to say that a meal in the freezer was as good as money in the bank, but I’ve changed my mind. It’s better, because you can’t eat money! I felt loved every time I pulled out one of those containers to thaw for supper.

These people know that Max gets a salary, but still they do not hesitate to send a Christmas card containing cash or a gift card to a local restaurant or store. The annual treat of party mix in separate containers for each family member is something we always look forward to finding on the office table! (There’s a reason she does that.) Our local butcher shop calls us annually to remind us to pick up our meat; some secret giver has kept us supplied in ground beef for years. Years. Everyone in there knows who it is, but in over a decade, no one has spilled the secret. So, we just say thank you, and they pass along our gratitude! We are the smiling recipients of plates of cookies, homemade bread, jams and jellies, bologna made from venison, homemade candy and fudge and all manner of canned goods. So much delicious

And generous? This is where my church family shines. I could have written the entire article on the generous nature of the people with whom I do church. I don’t know how to talk about all the ways that our family has been blessed by this open-

generosity! I often need to write at least 40 thank you notes in January . . . which I didn’t do this year due to . . . circumstances. And no one raised an eyebrow or said “tsk-tsk” (that I heard).

When Max had back surgery a few years ago, the youth raked and seeded a huge section of our backyard where a sewage “situation” had brought chaos. One couple used to take our (younger) family on hiking adventures, creating a sort of treasure hunt with clues they had placed along the trail earlier in the day, and ending in a snack! When we had a fire on our property, our people showed up with alternative heat sources, took off work for the day to sort out re-wiring adventures, and sat with me as the shock wore off. When I was suddenly in need of a pair of dark shoes for my mother’s funeral, a kind woman shared a pair with me, and then told me to just keep them. It seems that whatever people have, they share.

I’m at the end of my word count—way over, and I feel awkward having talked about such a narrow slice of what makes this group amazing. But this wasn’t an article about the solid theology of our church, or their amazing missional perspective. I didn’t describe the way our people take care of the children in our church and community, or how generously they support our youth in their annual mission adventures. I have seen how these people are friendly, compassionate, accepting, and generous in all manner of needs and situations. But my goal was to express my gratitude for the ways they have been friendly, compassionate, accepting, and generous to me. October is a time for churches to express appreciation for their pastors, but this year I want to say how much I appreciate my church! I love you, Locust Grove; thank you for loving me.

Brenda lives in Belleville with her husband Max, and their family has been involved at Locust Grove since 1984.



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