

## NEWS RELEASE

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September 5, 2001

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### **Plain Women Preserve Traditional Values**

**BOOK LOOKS AT ROLE OF WOMEN IN OLD ORDER RIVER BRETHREN**

University Park, PA—Modern women typically feel praised when they are called “beautiful,” “intelligent,” or “enchanting.” Call them “plain,” on the other hand, and they will likely take offense. But for women of the “old order” traditions of Anabaptism and Pietism, the words ring with compliment, describing followers of faith and community who live by glorified values of humility.

“Plain Women: Gender and Ritual in the Old Order River Brethren” (Penn State Press, 2001) portrays the importance of women in this religious sect, a significant branch of the Brethren in Christ located mainly in Pennsylvania. Despite the great interest in “plain” groups such as the Amish in recent years, little has been written about women and the particular role they play in preserving traditional religious and cultural values.

Members of the Old Order River Brethren, a conservative offshoot of the Brethren, are often confused with the Amish because of their plain attire. Unlike the Amish, they have made some notable concessions to the modern world—including the use of automobiles, computers, and home appliances. Noting these accommodations to modern American life, author Margaret C. Reynolds examines the ceremonies and traditions that allow the Old Order River Brethren to remain “separate” from other plain groups and from contemporary mass culture. She describes the love feast communion, a service that involves footwashing, and a breadmaking ritual that is unique to the Old Order River Brethren and solely performed by women. Reynolds focuses in particular on the gendered customs of dress, hair, and domesticity that shape women’s lives and, in so doing, preserve the minority faith itself.

“Margaret Reynolds shows us the importance of Old Order River Brethren women in the life of the group,” said Beulah Stauffer Hostetler. “In their domestic role of providing nurture in everyday

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life, and in the religious symbolism permeating their ceremonial preparation of bread for the communion Love Feast, these women act as primary bearers of meaning for the culture. Reynolds's analysis highlights how women not only maintain the group but also enrich its meaning and fulfillment for its members."

*Plain Women* is the first volume in the new Pennsylvania German History and Culture Series, published by the Penn State University Press in cooperation with the Pennsylvania German Society. This series is a continuation of the Society's annual volumes on Pennsylvania German scholarship in disciplines such as history, religion, folklore, literature, and arts.

### **THE AUTHOR**

Margaret C. Reynolds published articles in *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, *Pennsylvania Folklife*, and *Der Reggeboge: Journal of the Pennsylvania German Society* before her death in 1999.

### **THE EDITOR**

Simon J. Bronner is Professor of American Studies and Folklore at Penn State, Harrisburg. He edited and wrote a Foreword for *Plain Women*.

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Plain Women: Gender and Ritual in the Old Order River Brethren  
By Margaret C. Reynolds  
Edited with a Foreword by Simon J. Bronner  
180 pages 9 illustrations  
Publication date: November 2001  
ISBN 0-271-02138-1 \$29.95 cloth