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Mennonite news, inspiring stories

JOINING THE FAMILY

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path from adoptee
to mission leader*

PLUS

CONGREGATIONS CHOOSE
NEW SPIRITUAL KIN

STILL FOLLOWING JESUS:
CHECKING IN ON OLD FRIENDS

A NINE-FIGURE GIFT FOR MCC

BY **MERRILL EWERT,**
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Sixty years after enrolling at Tabor College, how had we changed?



Retired pastor Jerry Quiring leads a service of remembrance for classmates during a 50th anniversary reunion of the Tabor College Class of 1967 in 2017. PHOTO: DALE FAST

Still following Jesus

SIXTY YEARS AGO, the Tabor College Class of 1967 enrolled as freshmen. Most came from rural Midwest communities, were Mennonite Brethren and held conservative theological and political views.

Then life changed us. We wanted to know why and how. So we asked.

The authors of this article became friends at Tabor, graduated together in 1967 and then served in Africa as Mennonite Central Committee volunteers or with the MB Christian Service program. After earning graduate degrees, we went on to careers in higher education. Since then, we've often discussed the trajectory of our lives and how our worldviews have evolved.

This inspired us to create the Tabor Alumni Outcomes Survey, a study of the Tabor Class of '67. We asked our classmates to reflect on their lives, careers and values/beliefs/worldviews at three points in time: when they started college, when they graduated and now, more than half a century later.

Two-thirds of our living classmates (50 respondents of 74 alumni) responded to our online survey. The full report can be found at taos76.net.

In 1963, Tabor was a logical choice for us. Ninety percent of us grew up in small rural communities where churches were the center of social and religious life. This gave us a close connection to the denomination and its institutions. When

asked to identify their top reasons for choosing Tabor, most said it was because they knew someone who had attended. More than half also mentioned the college's affiliation with the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Tabor was our school. That's where MBs like us went, and it was good for us. Hillsboro, Kan., felt like home for many of us. When asked whether they would choose Tabor again, two-thirds said they would, though a handful said no and some were ambivalent. Those who would do it again pointed to the "strong foundation" and "good groundwork" they received. Another said, "Tabor was a place for me to understand the narrow scope of the MB world."

Many said their classes and professors helped shape their values and worldviews, different from their parents. Despite the good experience many enjoyed, only 12% of us had children who followed us to Tabor. Most of our children did not have the same connection to the college and the denomination that we had.

After college, we left both the locations and the vocations of our families. Ninety percent of us grew up in small rural communities; nearly two-thirds now live in cities over 25,000. Half of our parents were farmers, but 62% of us went into education, business or the professions. More than a third lived overseas at some point, most working with MCC or the MB Christian Service program. Several others served abroad in the military. Many referred to living

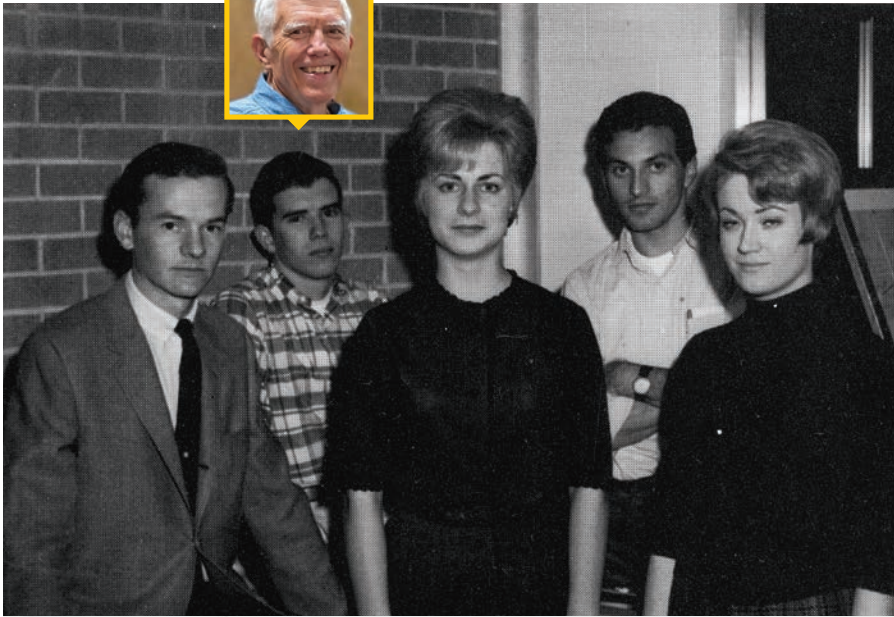


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internationally as an eye-opening and transformative experience.

We found new churches in new places, with new emphases. But our commitment to Jesus, the importance of the Bible and participation in the community of faith remained strong.

MOST OF US GREW UP Mennonite. Though two-thirds were raised MB, only 18% are today. Most of those raised MB are now part of evangelical, mainline Protestant or other Mennonite churches. Nine percent of the Class of '67 indicated they are no longer part of a church.

Prior to the pandemic when many churches went online, an astounding 94% of our classmates reported attending services at least two or three times a month. This is well above what national polls report for our age group. We didn't just attend; many held vol-

unteer or leadership positions.

When we asked how they view Jesus today, 88% said he is the Son of God, Lord and Savior. Half called the Bible the inspired Word of God, to be taken literally, word for word; 42% called it inspired but believe that not everything should be taken literally.

Our theological perspectives have become either more conservative or more liberal over the years, with fewer characterizing themselves as moderate. We asked everyone how they saw themselves on a theological spectrum at three points in time: on entering Tabor, at graduation, and today. Nearly three-quarters called themselves theologically conservative or very conservative when starting Tabor. That dropped to 60% by graduation, where it remains today.

Only 2% defined themselves as theologically liberal or very liberal on entering college. That increased to 8% by graduation and 28% today.

Our political orientations showed a similar pattern. Three-fourths of the class labeled themselves politically conservative or very conservative when starting college. That number dropped to 60% by graduation and is now down to 50%. Among the conservatives, however, the number who call themselves very conservative has doubled since graduation.

Four percent defined themselves as

politically liberal when they started college. That increased to 12% by graduation and to 28% today.

Those who became significantly more conservative politically also became more conservative theologically. Those who became more liberal politically also became more liberal theologically. This strong correlation between theological and political orientations mirrors national data.

Tabor opened the world for us and prepared us for a life of learning, work and service. We followed different paths. Our experiences shaped us in ways that led us to hold different views and perspectives. For all our differences, most in the Tabor Class of '67 remain active in local congregations and still follow Jesus. ●

1967 Tabor College yearbook photos of *Tabor View* staff.

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