

Mennonite family shuns gadgets but grows GMO corn

How many days could you live without your cell phone, laptop or favorite communications tool? Modern technology has become such an integral part of our daily lives that it seems difficult, almost impossible, to spend an entire day without peeking at our gadgets.

Yet I recently met one Mennonite family in Penn Yan, New York, that entirely avoids cell phones, television, radio and even automobiles — while still using modern agricultural biotechnology on their farm.

Marvin and Maryanne Martin and their seven children are among the more than 400,000 Mennonite families whose faith does not permit the use of technologies deemed a threat to the integrity of their communities.

Mennonites are Christians who are neither Catholic nor Protestant. They believe in “re-baptism,” rejecting the baptism of young children and instead supporting the baptism of mature people who can confess their belief in Jesus Christ. Mennonites and Amish share a common belief in shunning modern technologies.

But Marvin Martin and his family have embraced the use of agricultural biotechnology, which he believes will be more effective than other technologies in preserving their culture.

The Martins and their children —six girls and one boy between the ages of 6 and 22 — keep dairy cattle and raise various crops, including Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, peas, peppers, berries and genetically modified Bt corn. My colleagues and I in the 2019 Cornell Alliance for Science Global Leadership Fellows Program recently paid them a visit to learn more about their culture and farming practices.

Judson Reid, a senior extension associate at Cornell University, has been working with farmers in New York State to help them improve their productivity. He spoke to the AfS Fellows at the Martin’s farm and explained that a key component of the Mennonite community is the belief that agriculture is the ideal way to perpetuate their faith and traditions. So while they avoid some technologies, they look favorably upon those that can support agriculture, particularly at the scale that a single farm family can use successfully.

“Biotechnology fits into the Mennonite system because it can ideally enhance people’s yields and enhance their profitability and also helps with the labor, and that is why, even though it is an advanced technology, it is not viewed as threatening to their culture,” Reid explained.

The Martins are no different from other Mennonite families living in the area who do not use automobiles to transport their farm produce to the market, but rather have the buyers come to their farms and purchase directly from them. However, they do use horse carts with steel wheels, which are again evident on their tractors.

These tractors are used to plow and harvest Bt corn fields, which are grown on a large scale to produce animal feed for the more than 50 dairy cows on the farm.

Bt corn is a transgenic maize variety that has been modified to boost its resistance to pests and drought, thus improving its quality and reducing the need for pesticide sprays. Bt stands for *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a common soil bacterium whose genome contains proteins toxic to insects. It has been used for decades in spray form as an organic pesticide.

The Martins explained that they do not view technology as evil or wrong, but instead hold the view that most modern gadgets may lead to decisions that would take people away from their traditional beliefs.

According to Marvin Martin, his children have been attending school and they do seek medical services when one of them gets sick. He insisted that they do live a normal life “just like any other person.”

“Two of my daughters are currently working, and the others are in school, so this shows you that we value education as much as anybody else,” he added.

Maryanne noted that their children have been brought up to help on the farm by doing odd jobs like cooking, cleaning their own rooms, cleaning the calf pen and the cowshed and picking fruits for the family, among other assigned chores.

This, she said, instills discipline in them and makes them responsible from an early age. However, they also get time to enjoy their childhood by making use of the farm’s trampoline, slides and swings and playing ball with their father. This builds family unity and enhances their religious beliefs, unlike allowing them to spend time alone in their rooms playing with computers or mobile phones.

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