

A HISTORY OF THE
AMISH MENNONITE CHURCH
RADIANT, VIRGINIA

Course - Mennonite History & Thought

Instructor - Irvin B. Horst

Date - May 7, 1958

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On December 24, 1956, the first trip was made to the community of Orange, Virginia by a group of five men, to investigate the area as a possible location for colonization. The party consisted of the brethren, Moses Shrock, Noah Keim, Sanford Yoder, Ervin Miller and Perry Nisly. The brethren were all from the Amish Mennonite congregation at Stuarts Draft, Virginia, located near Staunton, Virginia, except Perry Nisly who was from Hutchinson, Kansas.

The committee had three main qualifications in mind to determine whether the community would be suitable for colonization or not. These were: 1) There should be an open and needy field for the gospel; 2) It should be a place where there was not already a Mennonite witness, and 3) A place where they could be self-supporting. This community seemed to meet all these conditions, so plans were made for families to move from Stuarts Draft in the spring of the coming year. They settled in both Orange and Madison Counties, close to the county line. The locality is situated about twenty to twenty-five east of the Blue Ridge Mountains and approximately fifty miles south-east of Harrisonburg, Va.

The main reasons for making this move was because of the conviction on their part that the church should preach the Gospel to all--thus fulfilling the great commission. Their desire was to start a church as a mission outreach in a needy field, not only to teach but also be able to bring into church fellowship and baptize those who obey the Gospel through their testimony.

Another reason for this move was because of difficulties concerning this conviction, with others in their home church. Rather than forcing it into a church where it was strongly opposed by those in charge, they endeavored to maintain Christian love and move to a place where they can practice their convictions.

However about one-half to two-thirds of the church approved of the move. But at present they are not in full fellowship with the congregation at Stuarts Draft.

The Sanford Yoder family made the first move on March 9, 1957. Three children were in the family. On March 19 Noah Keims moved in with eight children in the family. Noah is the presiding pastor there. On March 25 Enos Schrock and wife moved. Perry Nisly, wife and two children came on April 15, from Hutchinson, Kansas. Then it was not till September that the next family moved in--Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Shrock and baby.

Their occupation at present is as follows: four of them are working on dairy farms, one on a beef farm and one of them at a feed mill. Only one of the families own their home at the time of this writing. Their employers range from the moderately well to do to the rich bracket. The employers are very well pleased with the work these brethren do and some highly praise their work.

The group as a whole has been very well accepted by the community, and much is expected of them. The confidence of the people has been quite easy to gain for it is taken for granted that they are honest. Children are also well accepted in the public schools.

One incident as related by one of the brethren¹ shows the idea that many people have concerning Mennonites. A local farmer was speaking to a

¹Sanford Yoder

lady who was from another community concerning "us" Mennonites saying we are working for others; she replied, "those aren't Mennonites or they would have bought nice large farms."

The first church service was held at the home of Sanford Yoders on March 24, 1957. At present they are renting a building which they are using for their regular services.

Because the church at Stuarts Draft did not have a mission outreach program it was necessary to make some changes in practice without violating principles. Some of the major changes were changing the German language to English; having Sunday School and church each Sunday instead of alternating them each Sunday. And also they have regular Sunday and Wednesday evening meetings. One Sunday evening they have a sermon and children's meeting and the next Sunday they have Bible study topics and singing. The Wednesday meetings are alternated by prayer meeting with a study in Old Testament History, using the lessons from Eastern Mennonite College.

As an outreach to the people this group has pretty thoroughly covered the community by house to house visitation and inviting people to their services. They also invite them otherwise as opportunity affords. The majority of the people are "churched" but many do not go to church. Colored people have been invited but this is being strongly discouraged by the owner of their church building.

There have been a few local young people who attended the youth meetings at various times.

Harry and Elva Ness and family started coming to church and after receiving a warm welcome and fellowship applied for membership. They were taken in as members on April 6, 1958. Although they live close to Orange their church membership was at the C. F. Mennonite Church at Marietta, Pa.

Four of their children have been baptized, but the church did not consider them qualified for membership, so at present they are being instructed more fully in the Christian life. Only one other person--Mrs. Davis is attending regularly at present.

The young folks are distributing "The Way" in the city of Orange, monthly, covering approximately 25 percent of the city. They have at times, during the summer, distributed tracts on the sidewalks on Saturday evenings.

A project was taken up mostly by the sisters to visit the aged, sick, and widowed folks one day a week. This however was not especially organized and was not done much during the winter months.

Summer Bible School was held in 1957 with a good attendance--thirty-nine being enrolled. Plans are to continue this program in following years. Evangelistic meetings are also a part of the churches' program. During the week of July 14th through the 21st of '57 a series of meetings were conducted with various ministers taking part. Norman Beachy of Myersdale, Pa. brought the first message; Urie Shetler of Catlett, Va. preached five evenings and Dan Nisly of Catlett and Noah Keim, the pastor of the congregation, both had charge of one evening each. Quite a number attended from the community, but no open commitments were made.

Since the five families moved in 1957 there have been two more families added to their number, namely the aforementioned Harry Ness family and Leo and Mary (Shrock) Yoder. Leo was taken in by letter on April 6.

There was one wedding in the church--the marriage of Leo Yoder and Mary Dorothy Shrock. This took place on April 24, 1958. Bishop Elam Hochstetler² of Goshen, Ind. officiated in the ceremony. A reception was held at the Enos Shrock home in the evening. A light lunch was served, and

²Bishop in charge.

after receiving of the gifts and singing hymns Brother Hochstatler closed the meeting with Scripture reading and prayer.

One member was added to the group by birth, namely, Vera Ruth, to Enos and Nora Shrock in September of '57.

To date there are seven families in the church group; eighteen members in the church and a total of thirty-nine persons.

The group feels that there would be an advantage to have several more families, especially some with children and young folks as a means for more youth fellowship and possibly have a school of their own. But they do not think it would be practical for a great number of families to move in.

Rather they should start a new mission outreach.

They highly recommend colonization as a good approach to evangelization. By having the pure Gospel to present to the world and living with the people is one of the best methods of making the Gospel "live" so others can see. They are challenged by the many opportunities for witnessing and by the apparent results so far. "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few." Matthew 9:37.

The greatest challenge as they see it is to be a church that stresses holy living, separate from the world. They feel the importance of unity and brotherly love--offering to men the message of life daily, in a community where people have become unconcerned because the sins are in the church as well as outside. And as a separate people they need to remember that unsaved church members are also in need of Christ. And also there is the great challenge to live up to what the community expects of them, that is complete honesty in every dealing in business, etc.

Some disadvantages in this as they see them are, 1) the young folks do not have sufficient fellowship; 2) there is no longer the protective environment of the large church community in which to raise their children; 3) a separation from the material advantages of larger groups, with limited time and money where none are well to do. However they find that the Lord always will provide in a wonderful way.

Some practical suggestions given by the pastor, Noah Keim, in reference to groups moving out with mission interests are the following:

A work of this kind should be started with much prayer, and discussion leading to agreement on the part of those involved. It seems best that those beginning such a work should have a common background, although this is not the most essential thing. There should be no less than four families in such a move, and one minister is essential. Unless those going into such a venture are able to finance everything themselves it would be well to have some backing from other groups.

After having visited the community several times personally, I have been greatly impressed and challenged with the work that is being done and the consecration of the group there. With God's blessings the future holds great possibilities for the church.

All information was received first hand from the first two settlers:
Noah Keim, Box 89, Aroda, Virginia; Sanford Yoder, Box 327, Woodberry Forest,
Virginia.