

HL TERM PAPER

A HISTORY OF BETHEL FELLOWSHIP

An Amish Congregation in Holmes County, Ohio

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For

Mennonite History and Thought

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May 1961

I. INTRODUCTION

In the center of the largest Amish settlement, Holmes County, Ohio, five Amish families formed the charter for a new congregation on October 12, 1958.

The first Sunday meeting was held at an abandoned school house two miles west of Berlin where the leaders were laymen in good standing in the Old Order Amish Church, mostly from the David Troyer District. The nature of this first meeting was a Sunday School and testimony meeting.

From this nucleus has grown a congregation of sixty-nine members who meet now in the new church building on State Route 39, one mile east of Berlin, Ohio. Four ministers serve this church.

Why did these people leave their "mother" church? What factors influenced the beginnings and the growth of this new church? What relations does Bethel have with the Beachy Amish or with the Conservative groups?

In this paper, I will attempt to present the facts and the personal observations of this movement. The chief source of facts are Roman and Amanda Mullet, Sugarcreek, Ohio.

II. Factors Leading to Separation

A growing restlessness has been felt in the Old Order Amish Churches throughout Holmes County the past

ten years. The influence of Mennonite evangelism in the area was felt in the Amish churches. Many bishops forbade their members to attend any revival meetings, prayer meetings and fellowship meetings, either in the Mennonite churches or any other congregation.

Many of the Amish were directly influenced by the revival efforts of the Brunk Brothers in Wayne County in 1951. Later "Crusade for Christ" near Berlin, with Myron Augsburg left its imprint on still more of the Amish. But perhaps the most extensive evangelistic preaching in the Amish churches from one end of the county to the other was done by Bishop David Miller, an Old Order Amish minister from Thomas, Oklahoma.

Miller made several trips to Holmes County and was received quite well by the Amish ministry. Special services were held throughout the community each day of the week at different homes. Later, however, Miller was no longer welcomed by some of the Amish ministers and bishops. "He preaches something new," they said.

As a result of these evangelistic efforts, many Amish people became concerned about the spiritual welfare of their children. For several years, an informal fellowship was held in the community for any persons who were interested in spiritual fellowship. Most of the people attending were from the Old Order Amish Church and from several other churches.

The seed of Bethel Fellowship Church sprung from the prayer meeting in May, 1958 at the home of Alvin Schrock. Ben Coblentz, Yost Miller and Alvin Schrock shared their mutual concern for the future welfare of their families and their convictions on missions. These three men continued weekly prayer meetings throughout the summer. Reuben Kauffman joined the group.

Out of these meetings grew strong convictions to organize in order to promote the kind of program which they wished to see. However, such a move was could not be taken in haste. Much contemplation and prayer was offered by these few men and their families.

To appreciate the step these men took, one should know their persons. Yost Miller, a contractor and a self-educated man, a father of six children, editor of Witnessing, (an Amish mission paper) and a deeply spiritual man was a peaceful minded Amishman. He lived near Millersburg, Ohio.

Ben Coblentz also is one of good reason not given to hasty action. Ben also has a family and was a farmer. Alvin Schrock has a deep sense of responsibility to his family. Reuben Kauffman, a floor sander by trade, and father of several children is interested in music as well as in spiritual things.

The annual fellowship was planned by various Amish people for August 17, 1958. Many Amish people attended from other communities. Uria Shetler, a young minister from the Beachy Amish Church in Catlett, Virginia was invited to serve on the program. It was here that he learned of the concern of the four lay members for organizing a congregation. Shetler had earlier thought of these people of Holmes County.

Later Shetler on his way to meetings in Illinois, stopped to visit again with these brethren, whereupon they invited to be their pastor.

Shetler returned to Virginia, sold his farm, and returned to Ohio with his family. By this time, steps to organization had already been taken and the first Sunday School was held on October 12, 1958 at an abandoned schoolhouse two miles west of Berlin by the name of Boyd's School. Preaching services were held the following Sunday with Ufia Shetler serving.

Meanwhile, in the Sugarcreek area, a similar group of Amishmen had been meeting in prayer regularly with similar interests and concerns. In this group were Roman Mullet, Ivan Beachy, Raymond Barkman, Roman Beachy, and Ben Mullet and their families. This group was not present when organization took place and the discipline of the church was established, which was done in a prayer meeting prior to the first Sunday service.

One of the rules drawn up by the Berlin group was that no person would be admitted into the church membership without proving himself for a period of six months. Thus the Sugarcreek group decided to also observe this rule. Hence, it was six months after the first meeting that this group joined officially with the Berlin. During this six month period, the Sugarcreek group was active and supported the church.

The school building was not large enough to serve all the people who attended the services. New people continued to step out and join Bethel. A building program started, a committee was appointed, and Yost Miller was ^{selected} chairman. The new building site is located to accommodate the entire community, the central location is one mile east of Berlin on State Route 39.

The building is large enough to accommodate the Sunday School classes and has modern equipment. It is large enough also for community revival meetings. Present membership is 69 and about 100 children who are not members.

III. Order of Service

From the beginning the nature of the services was informal and an atmosphere of liberty prevailed. Sunday School was held the same day as preaching. After each service opportunity was given for anyone to give a testimony or confession. People felt at home

with each other. Shetler provided good leadership, not so much in abilities, but in his open and sincere manner. He preached with vigor, but always with a love and without reserve. He was much concerned that the church grow and that each member be a vital Christian.

The order of service was easily changed. Nothing was to be stereotyped, but each service was a fresh experience. The Sunday School period was followed by preaching. Singing was mostly in English. The Church and Sunday School Hymnal was used. Reuben Kauffman was elected songleader.

Roman Mullet was ordained by lot May 3, 1959 to assist the pastor, Uria Shetler. The ordination was held in the Zion Conservative Church to accommodate the crowds of Amish friends and others. David Miller, the bishop of the Beachy Amish Church in Oklahoma, ordained him. The language problem was solved by letting it up to the minister in charge. If any English speaking person were present then English would be used. And many were the times this occurred. Otherwise German or Pennsylvania Dutch were used or a mixture with English.

It is to be observed that even though Uria Shetler is a member of the Beachy Amish and also David Miller the bishop is Beachy, the congregation at Bethel does not belong to the Beachy fellowship nor to any other conference.

Bethel is Beachy in appearance but more Mennonite in application of faith. They maintain good relations with the Beachy, Conservative and Mennonite churches

of the community and others in various states. It is as Shetler/once said, "I want to fellowship with anyone who loves the Lord." The church, being liberated in a sense from legalism, does not wish to become subject to such restrictions as would prevent them from witnessing to the world.

Communion services are held twice a year. Bishop David Miller has been serving the congregation in this area.

A typical church service - April 30, 1961
at 9:00 a.m. Ervin Miller opened the service with a few remarks in Dutch, then led in three songs. Singing is in four parts.

Ben Coblentz read I Corinthians 14 in English and introduced the Sunday School, "...to help each other to a higher standard in the knowledge of God."

After Sunday School, Raymond Barkman reviewed the lesson and led discussion. The congregation participated freely.

Ervin Miller led the song "Sweetly Resting" while the ushers took the offering. The offering went for the support of the ministry.

At 10:20, Jacob Yoder, a minister from the Old Order Amish Church and better known as "Orpha Jake", gave his testimony, read a Scripture and led in prayer. Jacob is a peace-loving Amishman, but because of his evangelistic emphasis in preaching, he has encountered difficulties in his relationships with his bishop.

Yoder's testimony was about an experience he had with the Lord.

Someone led in singing "My Faith Looks Up to Thee."

Sermon on Faith preached by Roman Mullet. Mullet preaches in a conversational tone with a note of urgency. He pointed out the need of justification and sanctification by faith, of being established in the faith and not tossed about by every wind of doctrine.

His concern for witnessing to the world was expressed thus, "I'm afraid we isolate ourselves too much from the world," People listened with rapt attention; there was no whispering nor dozing.

Mullet led in the song "Harvest is Passing" then opened the meeting for testimonies and confessions. Fifteen people responded.

Another song, "Winning Souls" was sung.

Announcements and business meeting . The announcement was that a Beachy Church in Indiana needs pastoral aid. Bishop David Miller of Oklahoma has asked Bethel to send a minister there to help for a year or two. (Later it was decided that Uria Shetler should go).

Roman Beachy led in a closing prayer.

IV. Mission Outreach

The chief mission interest of the group is to win their Amish friends to the Lord. Several families from Bethel started a Sunday School and weekly services at Maysville in neighboring Wayne County in the spring of 1960.

This outpost has reported several conversions.

Other mission activities are tract distribution in cities of Akron and Cleveland, visiting convalescent homes, and visiting friends and neighbors. One man, Pete King, who had cared little about his spiritual life, went to his neighbors who were members of the Bethel Church and desired peace with God. After this experience Mr. King, who understood no German, attended church at Bethel.

For two weeks in January 1961, an adult Bible school was held at Bethel for the first time. Members of the church served as instructors: Uria Shetler, Roman Mullet, and Ura B. Miller. No summer Bible school program has been organized yet. The children attend other local Bible schools.

Several members are in I-W alternative service and in voluntary service. Another member, Mabel Miller is serving as dietitian at the Wennonite Hospital in Aibonito, Puerto Rico.

The heart of the program at Bethel is centered around the Wednesday evening prayer meeting. "This is where the church receives power," says Shetler. In a typical prayer meeting, small groups are formed and each group prays around the circle, thus everyone has time to pray. Teen-age boys remain with their fathers during prayer session.

To meet the needs of the growing church, a deacon was ordained March 20, 1960. Roman Beachy from Sugarcreek was chosen by lot and ordained by Bishop David Miller of Thomas, Oklahoma.

Yost Miller, Millersburg, Ohio, was ordained to the ministry, April 24, 1961 by David Miller. He also was chosen by lot.

V. Conclusion

Uria Shetler with his family moved to Daviess County, Indiana, May 25, 1961, in response to their plea for help. This is only for a period of a year or two.

A bishop will be ordained in the near future. Those eligible for ordination will be Yost Miller and Roman Mullet, the ministers, and Deacon Roman Beachy. Uria Shetler will also be included.

The church is earnestly fasting and prayer in behalf of this event.