

PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

History of the Valley View Amish-Mennonite Church

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Class II

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One thing that impresses many people who visit Kishacoquillas (Big) Valley is the scenic beauty of this peaceful spot nestled between two mountains in Central Pennsylvania. One would hardly suspect that the history of the "Plain" churches in this modest community has been so stormy. John A. Hostetler says, "It contains the largest number of cleavages in North America.... Here there are five Amish groups and five additional Mennonite related groups.¹ These ten clans of Amish and Amish-Mennonite in a single community represent the most divergent expression of Amish culture anywhere in North America."²

I grew up in this community and it seems almost incredible that all of these groups with their many distinctions have sprung from one Amish Church in less than 125 years. (Since 1850). In this valley, 30 miles long and 4 miles wide, there exist today two branches of the Nebraskan Amish who drive white top buggies, the Beiler Amish who drive yellow tops, the Reno Amish who use black tops, the Valley View Amish-Mennonite who drive black automobiles, the Holderman Mennonite, the Conserervative Mennonite, the Mennonite, and the Brethren-in-Christ churches which all have their roots in this one Amish Church. "The story of the Amish and Mennonites in Mifflin County is both thrilling and distressing."³

In this paper I want to trace the historical development of the Valley View Amish-Mennonite Church from the first Amish settlement to the present day. Since each Amish group derives its name from the surname of the presiding bishop, the name of the group frequently changes. It becomes a bit confusing to distinguish between the various branches. ~~The accompanying chart should help to make the distinctions.~~

The group under discussion has been called the Zook Church after Bishop John P. Zook, later the Peachey Church after Bishop John B. Peachey, and more

¹Hostetler, John A., Amish Society, p. 235.

²Ibid., p. 241.

³Hostetler, John A., "Life and Times of Samuel Yoder," Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol. 22, 1947-48, p. 226.

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recently it has been called the Speicher Church after the present bishop, Jess Speicher, although some of the members are now referring to their church as the Valley View Amish-Mennonite Church. (This group is not to be confused with the Reno branch which is also sometimes referred to as the Peachey Church.)

The Amish who settled in Kishacoquillas Valley came from the Amish communities of Southeastern Pennsylvania. The first Amish name to appear on the official records of Mifflin County is Christian Zook known as "Long Crist" who warranted land in 1792. The following year quite a few Amish names appear.⁴

It is generally accepted that the first Amish Church was established in the early 1790's. Israel Rupp records a document entitled Education, Religion in Mifflin County that says "The prevailing religious denominations are Presbyterians, Methodists, German Reformed, Amish, and Dunkards."⁵ Unfortunately this document is not dated but it appears with other documents and incidents dated around 1790.

Christian Zook was also the first Amish preacher in the area and Hans Beiler the first Bishop. Beiler moved from Lancaster County in the late 1700's. The congregation was already established at his arrival. He served the church for 35 years until his death in 1842.⁶

Presumably for the sake of convenience, the church had divided into three districts: upper, middle, and lower. Bishop Beiler and his successor, Bishop Samuel King, apparently presided over all three districts. By 1846 Bishop King had lost the support of many of his members. The real cause for the dissension^s is not known but according to tradition King used seventy-two unnecessary words in a sermon. At any rate several Amish preachers from the "outside" were called

⁴Hostetler, John A., "Life and Times of Samuel Yoder" Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol. 22, 1948. p. 227.

⁵Rupp, I. D., "Education, Religion, etc." History of Northumberland, Huntington, Mifflin...Counties, p. 237-238

⁶Hostetler, John A., Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol. 22, p. 227-228.

in to investigate. They decided King should be silenced. The King sympathizers were, of course, dissatisfied. In 1849 a second ministerial committee met to reconsider the matter. Finally a congregational vote was taken as to whether King should be reinstated. The count showed 121 opposed and 92 in favor. As a result the Lower District, which supported King, withdrew and formed a separate congregation.⁷ King was assisted by two other bishops, Christian Zook and Shem Yoder, who presided over the Lower District prior to and during the break. In time this branch developed into what is known today as the Nebraskan Amish Church and the Beiler Church.

No sooner had this schism taken place when a controversy arose between Bishop Solomon Beiler of the Middle District and Bishop Abraham Peachey of the Upper District. Hostetler points out that there were perhaps several things involved: the dress question, the meetinghouse question, and a clash of personalities. A major cause of friction had to do with baptism. Beiler "insisted that applicants be baptized in the creek." Peachey objected and held to the traditional house baptism. "Outside" ministers who were called in to arbitrate recommended a compromise where there could be either house or creek baptism. Beiler agreed to house baptism and both parties were to some extent reconciled having confessed their stubbornness.

For a short time therefore the breach seemed to be healed until one Sunday morning in 1863 Beiler mentioned creek baptism in his sermon. Hostetler writes, "Bishop Abraham Peachey turned to him and said, 'In God's Name if you don't like the way we do it, go and do as you please.'"⁸ Beiler did just that and took ^{with} him a large share of the membership which laid the foundation for the Mennonite and

⁷Hostetler, John A., Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol. 22, p. 229-231.

⁸Ibid., p. 231.

Conservative Churches of Mifflin County. The number that remained with Bishop Peachey was so small that for a time there was some question as to whether services could be continued.⁹ The group did, however, rally and by 1900 had been divided into Upper and Lower Districts with a total membership of 250.¹⁰ It became known as the Peachey Amish Church, dating its beginning to 1863.

At the turn of the century the Upper District was in charge of Bishop David C. Peachey and the lower in charge of Bishop John P. Zook (Father of Kore Zook, Goshen, Ind.).

Up to this time the Amish of Mifflin County did not practice the "sterng Meidung" or strict avoidance but by 1910 it had become a serious issue in the Peachey Amish Church. Bishop Peachey ~~wanted to follow~~^{ed} the example of the Amish Church in Lancaster County and adopt^d the "meidung" policy.¹¹ Bishop Zook, whose views were less rigid and restricted, was opposed. In 1911 "when a seceding group in Lancaster County applied for ministerial help in Mifflin County and Bishop Zook came to their assistance the division was initiated."¹² Later that same year three preachers who had seceded "united with the Zook followers bringing with them forty members who had withdrawn."¹³

Feelings ran high between these two groups, each claiming to be a continuation of the old Peachey Church. It is interesting to note that Preacher Samuel Peachey who united with the Zook branch calls this the main body. On the other hand, Bishop David Peachey held that he and his followers represented the main line and the Zook branch was the splinter group.¹⁴ John A. Hostetler who comes from the David Peachey branch also holds to the latter view. Since this split each group

⁹Hostetler, John A., Mennonite Quarterly Review, Vol. 22, p. 231.

¹⁰Hartzler, Jonathan K., "Gains and Losses," Herald of Truth, June 11, 1902.

¹¹Zook, Kore, Goshen, Ind.

¹²Hostetler, John A., Amish Life, pp. 239-240.

¹³Peachey, Samuel W., Amish of Kishacoquillas Valley, p. 39.

¹⁴Zook, Kore, Goshen, Ind.

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is entirely independent of the other. There is no "working together" in church matters. The after affects are still evident today. The progressiveness of the Zook branch in recent years has greatly widened the breach.

The Zook group has not had any major schism but by 1950 there was considerable unrest within its ranks. Fortunately this no longer exists thanks to the able leadership of Bishop Jess Speicher. During the war he served in *Civilian Public Service* ~~C.P.S.~~ which undoubtedly helped to prepare him for his important role. He has won the respect and support of the entire brotherhood.

Prior to 1950 the church permitted some modern conveniences but these were slow in coming. In 1932 tractors were accepted and in 1948 electricity. The automobile did not come until 1954. Just prior to this the church lost many of its youth, especially boys who joined the Mennonite churches because "I wanted a car." Quite a few families also left for the same reason. With the coming of the automobile this is no longer the case.

One of the more serious threats to the brotherhood came in 1948 when some wanted electric lights for their homes. Several members were strongly opposed. When a few went ahead and had electricity installed and others expressed their intentions to follow suit, six families including Bishop Jake Peachey and two preachers, Jess Peachey and Yonie Peachey, withdrew from the church and moved to the vicinity of Selinsgrove, Pa., where they formed a separate congregation.¹⁵ Since then Yonie Peachey has reunited with the brotherhood.

The automobile was introduced rather suddenly and came as a surprise to many. Steve Zook, a young married member, bought a car and kept it in the nearby town of Belleville. When this was discovered, ~~some wanted him excommunicated while~~ others were sympathetic. Fortunately, under Bishop Speicher's leadership harmony was restored and the transition made without any serious consequences. A few of the older members withdrew and joined the much stricter Reno Church. Preacher ¹⁵ Levi S. Yoder, Belleville, Pa.

John Y. Peachey and Deacon Noah Peachey were among these. The latter has since come back to his former congregation.

More recently the church lost twelve of its members to the Brethren-in-Christ who held revival meetings "across the mountain" which attracted them.

Up until the building of their meetinghouse in 1962 the congregation held church services in the member's homes and served the traditional noon meal. There were two districts with services alternating between the two. Since they are holding services in the building, the distinction between the two districts is not so clear cut. Services are held every Sunday for both. Meals are no longer served. The first service to be held in the church building was Aug. ^{next} 26, 1962. ~~Preacher~~ ^{Bishop Speicher} Daniel King "had the opening" and ^{Pre. Daniel King} ~~Bishop Speicher~~ the main sermon. There is no Sunday school at the present time but the congregations with which they cooperate do, and it is expected Sunday school will become a part of the church program in the near future. Evening services are held "when we have visiting preachers." The building seats 380. Membership is estimated at 250.

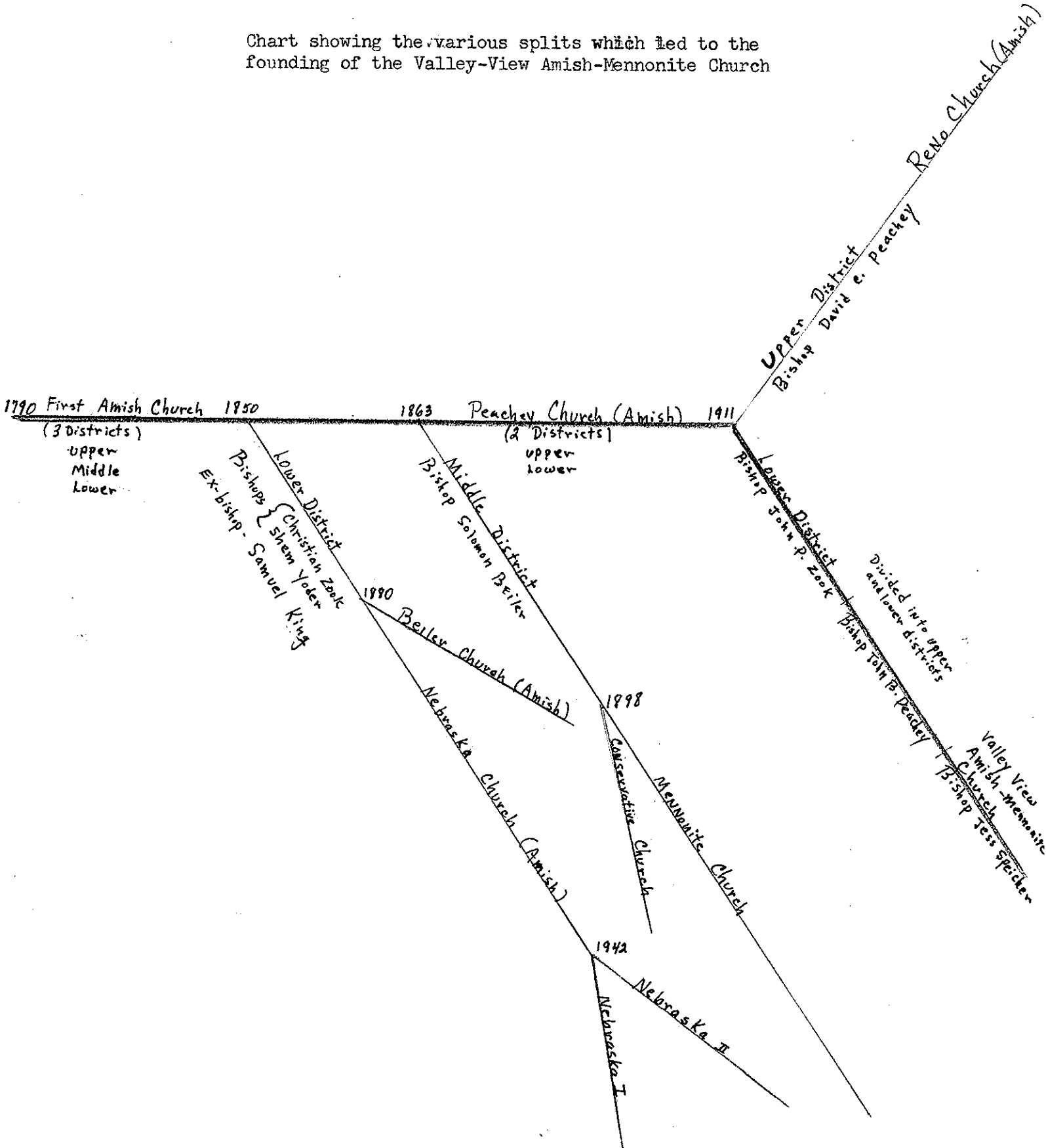
In January, 1940, a monthly sewing circle was begun. An average of 20 women attend during the day and that many single girls in the evening. As many as 72 comforters and quilts and 100 garments have been made in one year.

Other youth activities include regular Sunday evening hymn sings, singing at the county home, and preparing Christmas baskets. These young people are to be commended for their moral behavior. None of the boys drink or smoke.

Preaching is in German with a mixture of English. Preachers do not use notes. Their style is similar to our present day evangelists.

The church uses the lot in choosing their leaders. Since the 1911 schism the following bishops presided: John P. Zook (1901-1936), John B. Peachey (1913-1952), Jake Peachey (1942-1948), Enos Kurtz (1948-1950), Jess Speicher (1950-), Present ministers are Dan King, Christ Kauffman, Alvin Peachey. There are two deacons, John D. Yoder and Noah Peachey.

Chart showing the various splits which led to the founding of the Valley-View Amish-Mennonite Church



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- (Kore Zook, Goshen, Ind., contributed some information. I am indebted to my father, Levi S. Yoder, for much of the information on page six.)