

Doing Good to All People: Amish Relief and Development Ministries

Joseph S. Miller

Canning Relations Coordinator

Mennonite Central Committee U.S.

joemiller@mcc.org

Abstract: The Old Order Amish church is experiencing a vibrant new chapter in its American experience as it gains agency in the areas of Christian relief and development ministries. Scholars have described the energetic and highly successful entrepreneurial spirit among the Amish over the past decades. This paper documents how the Amish are building on their success as sophisticated business leaders in creating Christian relief and development ministries. The Amish community has leveraged the lessons learned as entrepreneurs toward nonprofit ministries serving people well beyond their own Anabaptist communities. Three case studies—Gifts for Relief and White Horse Relief Center, Mennonite Disaster Service and Amish Storm Aid, and Plain Community Agricultural Exchange—serve as examples of the nascent Amish agency of doing good deeds for people beyond their own Anabaptist communities and of Amish conceptualizing and actualizing Christian relief and development ministries. These three ministries are only the beginning of what likely will be many more Amish-led relief and development ministries. The paper also notes that non-Amish relief and development ministries who seek to partner with the Amish will need to move from an often-paternalistic relationship to a peer-to-peer partnership with the Amish.

Submitted February 15, 2024; accepted April 6, 2024; published December 19, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.18061/jpac.v5i1.10258>

Keywords: Amish agency, relief, development, *Gelassenheit*, Amish entrepreneurs, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Storm Aid, Plain Community Agricultural Exchange, Horse Progress Days

The Old Order Amish stand at an inflection point in their involvement with relief and development work.¹ In something of a break with tradition, they have become the driving force behind service ministries that seek to improve the lives of people beyond the Plain communities. For much of their history in America, the Amish have focused on their own material and spiritual survival. Even so, they have always been ready to help their non-Amish neighbors in times of need, such as rebuilding a fire-damaged barn.

Growing up in a collectivist society, the Amish have a deep communal orientation that provides a natural bridge to their collective approach to relief and development ministries. What is new and described later in this paper is the emergence of Amish agency to envision, create, implement, and

¹ The Amish community is not monolithic, and there exists nothing like a singular Amish community. To avoid overly cumbersome wording and syntax, this essay will often use the word “Amish” without modification, but the author is very aware of the diversity within and among Amish settlements across North America. The case studies, largely drawn from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, are illustrative and not meant to single Lancaster out as representative of all Amish communities.



manage relief and development efforts. This essay uses the term *Amish agency* in contrast to *individual agency*—in other words, *group agency* rather than *self-interested agency*—and includes three case studies that apprise the present and future of Amish relief and development efforts.

In many discussions of agency, the question is, which human agent has the power to decide and exercise control? Max Weber was an early observer of the growing agency and power of individuals during the Protestant Reformation. Weber saw how this new individual agency allowed gifted and determined people to exert their will on others, as manifested in the rise of rational capitalism. Drawing from Weberian scholarship, Colin Campbell outlines Weber's two types of agency: the power of agency, which "refers to an actor's ability to initiate and maintain a program of action," and agentic power, which "refers to an actor's ability to act independently of the constraining power of social structure."²

For Weber at least, culture is inherently related to agency. Indeed, more than that, it is specific cultural developments, in the form of identifiable beliefs and values, which, once internalized in actors, led directly to a massive extension in their power of agency. This is most obviously the case with Calvinism and the development of type 1 agency, but it can also be seen to be true of the modern entrepreneur and type 2 agency.³

This paper argues that the Amish have gained significant agency as entrepreneurs. Still, they have carefully modulated their new individual power and agency as successful business people with a desire to submit their agency to serve communal interests and values. Amish communitarianism survives alongside Amish entrepreneurial agency. I seek to make the case that Plain group agency is understood differently from individual self-interest. Personal agency is not an occasion for a power struggle. Instead—and however imperfectly—Plain people such as the Amish strive to give agency to their understandings of what their Christian faith demands of them. In short, the Amish believe Jesus rightfully is given agency through their lives, work, and doing good to all people. This phrasing may sound mawkish, but the Amish believe Jesus, as much as humanly possible, should receive agency. This is a deeply held personal and group value for the Amish.⁴

Amish Agency

The Amish community does not rely on others to define what it believes or how it should function. The Amish have long resisted allowing outside institutions or people to articulate their values and sense of calling. Agency for the Amish means they have and use their capacity as a group to act

² Campbell, "Distinguishing the Power of Agency," 407.

³ Campbell, 413. More recently, some scholars have added to Weber's thinking with an "acquisitive model" that claims agency far too often leads to unhealthy behavior that creates competitive and power-hungry systems.

⁴ See Miller, "The Peculiar Beauty."

independently of non-Amish people and institutions. Amish agency declares that the Amish comprehend, assess, and collectively act on their own behalf. The Amish community recognizes that Amish individuals and the Amish church can articulate and fulfill their calling and potential. For the Amish, and indeed for all people, agency is the ability to articulate what one is *for*. Healthy agency is more than simply demanding one's right to control things. Philosopher Carol Rovane posits that mature agency includes "a capacity for embracing commitments, and for deliberating, and for acting from such commitments."⁵

The growth of Amish agency over the past several decades contrasts with several other well-known Amish interactions with outsiders that were mediated by non-Amish people. For example, the 1972 United States Supreme Court case *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, in which the Supreme Court sided with Amish parents' desire to end classroom education for their children with eighth grade and continue education through apprenticeships, saw the Amish being represented by non-Amish actors, at least in public spaces. Lee Roy Berry Jr. summarized that representation:

When Wisconsin charged Yoder, Miller and Yutzy, no apparent consensus existed among the New Glarus Amish [Wisconsin] regarding how the accused should respond except that they should try to engage in face-to face bargaining with state authorities in the hope of reaching a compromise. Since the Amish church staunchly opposed resorting to courtrooms for dispute resolution, the defendants were not prepared to engage legal counsel. At that moment, William C. Lindholm, a Lutheran pastor from Michigan who had become familiar with the Amish struggle over compulsory school issues in Iowa and Kansas and had founded the National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom (N.C.A.R.F.), offered to provide them with able counsel and funding for their defense.⁶

Likewise, early examples of Amish service to others was often stewarded by more acculturated Anabaptist groups through organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).⁷ The Amish had been steady supporters of relief and other ministries of MCC since at least the 1940s, but until the 1980s Anabaptists who were more progressive often behaved in a paternalistic way

⁵ Rovane, "Group Agency," 4876.

⁶ Berry, "Review Essay," 385.

⁷ Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is an organization begun in 1920 to serve on behalf of several Anabaptist groups in offering Christian relief, development, and peace building in the United States, Canada, and around the world. One dramatic chapter of MCC relief work that Amish participated in was the movement of Mennonite refugees from communist East Berlin to freedom in the West. See Dyck and Dyck, *Up from the Rubble*. See also Mennonite Central Committee, "Berlin Exodus." In recent years, some historians have written revisionist accounts of the work during and after World War II of MCC and Peter and Elfrieda Dyck. See Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 181–187; and Epp Weaver, "MCC and National Socialism."

toward the Amish.⁸ Writing more than a decade ago, Steven Nolt addressed the nascent Amish agency apparent in Amish-“owned” Christian service, especially as it related to MCC, noting that “during the 1950s to the 1970s, an unusual dynamism in Plain group identity produced a new set of distinctly Plain institutions that sometimes displaced MCC.”⁹ A key moment in 1967 proved to be a stepping stone toward the Amish taking control of their own service activities. Although the Amish had relied on MCC to voice their conscientious objector claims to the federal government during World War II and the early years of the Cold War-era draft, during the Vietnam War, the Amish became disenchanted with the kinds of alternative service programs MCC was providing for Amish young men, such as assignments in urban hospitals where it was difficult to live by Amish values and customs. Nolt wrote about MCC worker J. Harold Sherk’s interaction with Amish leaders:

At a final meeting with Sherk in January 1967, the Amish announced they wanted to ask for Selective Service farm deferments, but Sherk was “rather reluctant” to represent such a cause, even though the “it was explained [to him] that more [Amish] churches are seriously considering taking the jail [sentence] rather than going to [work in urban settings in] hospitals.” In the end—perhaps to the surprise of mainline Mennonites—Selective Service accepted the Old Order proposal and Amish participation in [the Mennonite-designed alternative service] work ended.¹⁰

In the years since 1967, the dynamism of Amish institutions and an increasing desire to direct their own Christian service efforts have grown, as the case studies below illustrate.

Power and Agency

Although this paper argues that Amish agency is not an occasion for a power struggle, it is necessary to raise the issue of power, the wherewithal to make situations turn toward one’s desired outcome. Power is not a topic the Amish are comfortable addressing. Accurate or not, Amish self-perception is that, as Anabaptist Christians, they do not have power. Their self-defining narratives draw deeply on the suffering, forced exile, and martyrdom of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Radical Reformation. Yet the reality is that Amish today do have a significant degree of power. Their agency grows out of their ability to shape their own lives and have a significant impact on the lives of others. Power and agency are inextricably entwined.

To most Amish people, being told one has power while also being a follower of Jesus feels like being confronted by a contradiction. For the Amish who disentangle this knot, an answer lies

⁸ Under the leadership of John A. Lapp, MCC executive director, and Lynn Roth, MCC East Coast director, there was a growing respect and a spirit of partnership with the Amish and other Plain groups during the 1990s. Kenneth Sensenig, interview by the author, October 17, 2023.

⁹ Nolt, “MCC’s Relationship,” 136.

¹⁰ Nolt, 138.

in looking to how Jesus used his own power and agency. A core value for the Amish has been expressed in the German word *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness). The term refers to self-surrender to Jesus and the church. The commitment to humility and *Gelassenheit* is instilled into Amish children and has helped to maintain a communitarian value within the Amish church.¹¹ Humility is expressed in an understated approach, even when engaged in sophisticated undertakings.¹² An Amish leader from Holmes County, Ohio, observed, “We receive great joy in reaching out and helping hurting and suffering people. But we do not seek articles in newspapers or television reports about how wonderful Amish are in helping people. That is not our way. I don’t know of any service effort that Amish are doing that is called ‘Amish this or that.’”¹³

The Amish church finds these values in the Bible, especially in the life and teachings of Jesus, which the Amish see as foundational. Two biblical texts are representative of Scriptures undergirding their commitment to doing good to all people. The first is the monumental moment in the Hebrew Scriptures when God calls the Abrahamic family as a chosen people in order that they might be a blessing to *all* the nations of the earth.¹⁴ The second biblical text comes from the Christian Scriptures, in Philippians 2:1–11, a text the Amish hold as central to their theology. It declares that Jesus was in heaven reigning as an all-powerful monarch, the embodiment of power and agency, before laying aside such power in a self-limiting act of love for humanity. In this selfless and self-limiting act, Jesus humbled himself and became a servant. Through this act of relinquishing power, the Scriptures claim that God then infused the human Jesus with divine power and agency. Elsewhere, the New Testament describes the purpose of his power and agency: “to proclaim good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁵

“Let Us Do Good to All People”: The Roots of Amish Service to Others

Along with other Anabaptist groups, the Amish hold as a central tenet of their Christian faith the notion of *mutual aid*. If a member of one’s church community needs material assistance, there is a moral obligation to provide that help. The Amish point to Galatians 6:9–10: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the household of faith.” The final phrasing is a two-fold mandate: to make sure no member of one’s own church family is suffering materially, but also to assist others. Historically, the Amish

¹¹ Kline, “Gelassenheit.”

¹² Kraybill and Nolt, *Amish Enterprise*, esp. 64–66, “The Amish Difference.”

¹³ Amish business leader in Holmes County, Ohio, interview by the author, Mount Hope, Ohio, January 24, 2023.

¹⁴ Genesis 12:2–3 (New International Version).

¹⁵ Luke 4:18–19 (NIV). See also Philippians 2:10 (NIV). In every Amish worship service, there is a moment when the entire congregation genuflects when the name of Jesus is liturgically proclaimed. This is a liturgical remembrance of Jesus being honored by God: “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

response to the part of this call to do good to all people was largely indirect and via contribution to other Christian groups' institutions. What is new, noteworthy, and predictive of the future is how "doing good to all people" is being accomplished in and through Amish relief and development organizations.¹⁶

For many generations, Amish people served those outside their own church community under the auspices of more acculturated Anabaptists. A notable early example is Amish financial support for MCC work with refugees after World War II, at a time when there were no Amish-organized means of channeling such activity. In their memoir, MCC workers Peter and Elfrieda Dyck recount itinerating among Amish communities in the United States in the mid- and late-1940s, sharing stories of their work in European refugee camps, including the dramatic rescue of 5,500 Mennonites hiding in the cellars of bombed-out buildings in the Communist-controlled sector of East Berlin.¹⁷ Peter Dyck reported that, after one of his presentations, an offering for MCC was received using milk buckets brought from a neighboring dairy farm:

I...watched one of the buckets coming down the aisle. It got full and then fuller still. The young usher knew that money rolled up or folded tends to become spongy. When the bucket reached the end of the aisle, he put it on the ground, and standing on one foot, stomped the money down with the other foot.¹⁸

On another occasion, Dyck spoke for more than an hour to a large Amish group that had assembled to hear his work with refugees, and afterward he found himself

outside with men and the horses while the women stood in clusters off by themselves. Everyone was talking. After a while a man took his big black hat and was going around from one little group of men to another. Then he came to me. Holding out the hat filled with money, he said, "This is for the refugees you talked about."¹⁹

More than a dozen years after Dyck's death in 2010, Amish people who heard him continued to talk about his MCC work. These days, however, the opportunities for Amish involvement in global relief work extend to Amish-initiated and -organized efforts.

Three Contemporary Amish Realities

Before looking at three case studies of Amish agency in relief and development activity, we must consider three contextual realities that help shape current Amish efforts to assist others. The first

¹⁶ For an in-depth study of Galatians 6:5–10, see Longenecker, *Galatians*, 277–283. See also Epp Weaver, *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation*. I use Longenecker's translation of Galatians 6: 5–10.

¹⁷ A fictionalized version of these events can be found in Smucker, *Henry's Red Sea*.

¹⁸ Dyck and Dyck, *Up from the Rubble*, 247.

¹⁹ Dyck and Dyck, 249.

reality is the spiritual value Amish people place on obedience to the commands of Jesus. Deep in Amish spirituality is an understanding that one of the examples Jesus set was serving others through feeding, healing, and restoring broken lives. The Amish practice a pre-scholastic view of the Bible. With little elaboration, they accept and live out what they understand the Bible requires of Christians. Additionally, the Amish, like other Anabaptists, look to Jesus's own life and teachings as the full expression of the Bible. Thus, the Amish seek to pattern their own lives and their church by what they see in Jesus.²⁰

The headwater of all things for the Amish is the Bible, especially the New Testament. More specifically, Amish faith and life are shaped by the four gospels of the New Testament. Deeper still are the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the theological center is Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5–7. For the Amish, the German word that serves as the distillation and mandate of the New Testament is *Nachfolge*.²¹ Discipleship, that is, following the path of Jesus, lies behind the Amish commitment to Christian service to one another within their own church and to the world beyond the Amish community. Harold S. Bender, in his consequential essay *The Anabaptist Vision*, describes Christian discipleship—*Nachfolge*—as being at the heart of Anabaptism. One scripture text that serves as an example of what guides Amish commitment to Christian discipleship is Luke 9:23–24, where Jesus describes what it will mean to be his disciple: “Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.’” *Nachfolge* implies the possibility of suffering and possibly martyrdom. The Amish accept the suffering and death while also realizing the joy for the followers of Jesus. They also realize that *Nachfolge* entails serving others on behalf of Jesus. In the story of Jesus's miraculous feeding of the multitude (Matthew 15:32–39 and Mark 8:1–13), Jesus looked to his disciples to do the physical work of distributing the food. For the Amish, these biblical feeding stories are a call for all Christians to serve just as Jesus's first-century disciples served with Jesus in healing and restoring ministries. Those walking the same road as Jesus will feed the hungry, give clothing to those without adequate garments, and provide for the well-being of destitute people.

A second contemporary reality is that, over the past thirty years, the Amish have moved from being an agrarian people to being an entrepreneurial people. Many Amish individuals have created and now administer sizable and successful businesses that have both Amish and non-Amish employees. Through their notable success in entrepreneurship, Amish men and women have gained confidence in their abilities to envision, develop, and manage complex systems.²² This self-

²⁰ Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus*, 12: “The Anabaptists saw Christian faith as requiring outward expression.”

²¹ *Nachfolge*, *Gelassenheit*, and *Demut* are three key German words that capture the central theological values all Old Order Anabaptists. Some scholars have proposed a variety of terms as articulating the values of Anabaptists. See Cronk, “Gelassenheit.”

²² See Kraybill and Nolt, *Amish Enterprise*, esp. chap. 3, “A Profile of Amish Enterprises.” For another Anabaptist understanding of Christian faith in tension with enterprise, see Redekop, Ainlay, and Siemens,

confidence and successful entrepreneurial experience has been turning Amish attention towards relief and development work that seeks to benefit people well beyond the Amish church. Some Amish settlements continue to be relatively isolated geographically, but larger Amish settlements in particular no longer rely on physical distance to maintain a clear delineation between themselves and the world. In his research on Old Colony Mennonites, another traditional Anabaptist group, Royden Loewen contends that physical isolation is overemphasized by scholars when they describe Old Order groups' boundary maintenance and that twenty-first-century Plain Anabaptists have found other ways to preserve social and spiritual identity.²³ The Greater Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Amish settlement is an excellent example of Loewen's research as applied to the Amish. The Lancaster Amish do not rely on physical isolation to preserve their identity, given that they are embedded in commercial networks and markets.

A third contemporary reality that contributes to growing Amish agency is money. The shift toward entrepreneurship has brought considerable liquid financial resources to Amish households. This available wealth provides immense capacity for doing good to others. In earlier generations, an Amish family's wealth accumulation was directed towards purchasing farmland for the next generations.²⁴ Today, a combination of desire to help people beyond their communal borders, new entrepreneurial skills and outlook, and financial liquidity have set the stage for Amish relief and development ministries.

Some years ago, I was standing on a loading dock with a successful Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Amish business person and an Amish bishop. The two men were having a heartfelt discussion about the shift from farming to small business ownership and how wealth once tied up in land was today available for spending. Both the business person and the bishop believed there was an opportunity for greater teaching on the importance of Christian stewardship. They agreed that business people were eager to give to causes that made a difference, including in communities beyond their own.

We now turn to three case studies that illustrate an emerging Amish reality that combines their desire to serve those beyond their own communities, their entrepreneurial skills, and their growing liquid assets in a conscious, if understated, effort to impact the world.

Case Study 1: Gifts for Relief and White Horse Relief Center

In 2010, a group of Amish young adults in Lancaster County decided to pool their efforts and funds to assemble hygiene kits for suffering people around the world. Organized by Omar Stoltzfus, one of the young adults, the group gathered basic items such as bath soap, toothbrushes, and bath towels and packed the kits during the time they would usually have been playing

Mennonite Entrepreneurs, chap. 6, "Heroic Conformity and Community Alienation": "history teaches us that Mennonites have sometimes found ways of allowing business activities and religious community values to coexist," 127.

²³ Cited by Bowen, "Preserving Tradition," 56.

²⁴ Amish bishop, interview by the author, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, August 9, 2018.

volleyball.²⁵ The kits were then sent to places where internally displaced people or refugees lived via Christian Aid Ministries (CAM), an Ohio-based ministry initiated in the early 1980s by Amish-connected individuals in Holmes County.²⁶ Packing the hygiene kits was a very meaningful experience for the participants; the activity concretely connected with their understanding of their Christian obligation and church tradition.

Sometime later, a second Amish young adult event to pack MCC relief kits—similar to the hygiene kits but with somewhat different contents—was planned. This time, Omar’s brother Daniel organized the event. As business people, the Stoltzfus brothers saw the inefficiency and the cost of purchasing the kit supplies from multiple retail stores as something that needed improvement. Drawing on their entrepreneurial experience, they knew how to solve the challenges of purchasing relief kit supplies while avoiding high retail costs. The answer was to buy the soap, toothbrushes, towels, and other items wholesale and in much larger quantities. Soon, pallets of toothbrushes, combs, bath towels, and other kit items were being drop-shipped to their Amish business in Lancaster County by freight-forwarding companies. In 2012, Daniel Stoltzfus purchased, with his own funds, supplies for five hundred MCC relief kits. With costs now at wholesale prices, they organized additional Amish groups to assemble the kits.

Over time, more structure was needed than the brothers could provide in their spare time. The potential for a significant ministry was emerging. A board of directors was organized from members of the Amish church and the Amish-Mennonite church (i.e., the Beachy Amish) with the blessing of both groups’ leaders. In 2016, the directors formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit business called Gifts for Relief (GFR) that would provide relief kit supplies for distribution through MCC and CAM.

Soon, groups from Virginia and across Pennsylvania were using GFR as the source for a variety of items for CAM and MCC kits. Some groups picked up the supplies at GFR while others had GFR ship the kit materials to their locations. GFR has welcomed “customers” from across and beyond Anabaptist circles. The ministry has gained momentum and is a vigorous nonprofit. The organization declares, “GFR seeks to always be guided by the principle of working together, helping others.” Its vision is to “provide relief kit supplies for Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Aid Ministries, and other similar non-profit organizations.” Beginning in 2021, Gifts for Relief has purchased over one million dollars of relief materials each year. In turn, it has sold, at just slightly above cost, the materials to people preparing MCC and CAM kits.²⁷

Another ministry that has grown out of GRF is the Gifts for Relief Sewing Room, which welcomes groups of Amish volunteers to make comforters, baby blankets, infant caps, and school supply kit bags.

²⁵ Daniel Stoltzfus, interview by the author, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, April 6, 2021.

²⁶ On CAM, see <https://christianaidministries.org/>; a capsule history of CAM is in Nolt, “MCC’s Relationship,” 145–150.

²⁷ Daniel Stoltzfus, “Gifts for Relief—From White Horse to the World,” interview by Kenneth Sensenig, sponsored by Mennonite Life at Garden Spot Village, New Holland, PA, April 8, 2024.

The warehouse soon became too small for GFR's needs and volunteers. On April 8, 2019, at a meeting near Gap, Pennsylvania, Amish church leaders, GFR board members, and representatives from CAM and MCC met to discern whether a new center for relief and development would be embraced and supported by the Amish community. A presentation sketched a vision for a new relief and development center to be built in the White Horse region of eastern Lancaster County, and each attendee was given time to respond, starting with the most senior Amish bishop. Further informal discussions took place over the next several months, and then the community decided to move forward with what will be called White Horse Relief Center.

A committee of Amish business and church leaders was formed to purchase land and hire an architect to draw up plans for the center. The building will include a 22,000-square-foot warehouse and work center housing GFR, the sewing room, and space for soap making and MCC meat canning. It will have the capacity to be enlarged by an additional 22,000 square feet when needed. The center will work with MCC, CAM, and Samaritan's Purse, a nondenominational international aid agency, and it will be used for relief ministry only, not for sports or other activities not directly connected to relief efforts. Groundbreaking is planned for the end of 2024.²⁸

Case Study 2: Mennonite Disaster Service and Amish Storm Aid

Billy McDonald was the mayor of the bedroom community of Pass Christian, Mississippi, in August of 2005 when Category 4 Hurricane Katrina struck. After the catastrophic storm had passed through the area, Mayor McDonald ventured outside. When he found one of his police officers, the first responder declared, "Mayor, you're the mayor of nothing now."²⁹

Eleven hundred miles to the north, Amish in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, followed the tragic story of Katrina in their local newspaper. The news sparked an epiphany, according to Amos Lapp: "Within the Amish community, our hearts were stirred to want to do something to help the suffering people by assisting them in putting their lives back together from the destruction of Katrina."³⁰ A group of young adult Amish men contacted Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), an organization that had many years of experience going to places of natural disaster to help clean up and restore traumatized communities.³¹ (MDS is an officially recognized partner organization of

²⁸ Stoltzfus, interview.

²⁹ Joel Anderson, "How Katrina Destroyed a Town—and Its Mayor," *BuzzFeed*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/joelanderson/how-katrina-destroyed-a-town-and-its-mayor>.

³⁰ Amos Lapp, interview by the author, Intercourse, Pennsylvania, October 9, 2023. "Amos Lapp" is a pseudonym for the Amish leader of MDS Storm Aid, who prefers not to be named and draw attention to himself.

³¹ MDS was founded in 1950 when a group of Mennonites in Hesston, Kansas, spontaneously decided to volunteer to help clean up the ravages of a flood in a neighboring community. Over time, MDS volunteers became increasingly organized and turned MDS into a more professional organization. In 1955, MDS became a part of MCC. In 1993, MCC leaders determined that MDS would flourish best by becoming its own organization once again. See Detweiler, *The Hammer Rings Hope*. See also Phillips, *Mennonite Disaster Service*. Interestingly, the journey of MDS moving from an organic grassroots Mennonite response to suffering people to a much more professional organization was itself a story of growing agency for

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency.)³² The Amish men wanted to go to Mississippi and help.

After Hurricane Katrina, MDS was selected to work in the Pass Christian community, which is how the Lancaster County Amish ended up volunteering with Mayor Billy McDonald. In a 2023 interview, Amos Lapp recalled that trip to Mississippi:

When we arrived in Pass Christian, we were surprised at the confusion and chaos of the different relief organizations. We spent several days mucking out buildings. As Amish, we were surprised to see the struggle that relief agencies had in organizing their volunteers. For Amish, we are used to organizing groups of workers and all hands pulling in the same direction.³³

Kevin King, MDS executive director, remembered that, while still working at Pass Christian, there was a call for someone who could work with drywall. With his background in building and construction, Lapp was suited not only to take on the drywall project but to lead his Amish group in the work cleaning up the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. As Lapp was working, he experienced a sense that he should keep returning to Pass Christian and continue to help. He returned to Lancaster County with the rest of the Amish group, but once home, he arranged his construction business so that others could do most of the management, and he returned to Pass Christian. MDS soon saw Amos Lapp's significant leadership skills. He was a natural leader, and MDS put him in charge of significant parts of its work in Pass Christian.

During this time, King invited Lapp to organize a Lancaster Amish disaster group that could partner with MDS on an ongoing basis. The resulting organization was MDS Storm Aid, an Amish-run unit working in tandem with MDS. It was a watershed moment. Amish participation in disaster response work grew exponentially. As Amish individuals such as Amos Lapp took more active roles in disaster relief response through Storm Aid, they drew on their own emerging experience in the wider business world. "I was familiar working with English [non-Amish] people because of my construction business," reflected Lapp. "For years I had Amish and non-Amish employees. Lots of our work as a business was with non-Amish customers. So, it was not much of a stretch for me to be a bridge between our Amish community and non-Amish people."³⁴ Other aspects of the work opened new vistas. For example, Lapp's involvement with MDS raised his awareness of the significant needs of people who experienced tragedy. He saw firsthand the reality of people

Mennonites. This Mennonite journey in some ways mirrors what Amish are experiencing today in gaining agency.

³² David L. Myers, a Mennonite pastor in the 1980s, served with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) during the Obama administration. Myers shared that, among FEMA staff, the joke is that FEMA stands for "Find Every Mennonite Available." This was a tribute to the high view within FEMA for the work of MDS. David L. Myers, email message to the author, November 22, 2023.

³³ Lapp, interview.

³⁴ Lapp, interview.

living in poverty and experiencing the effects of structural racism. One native Mississippian remembered with gratitude his interaction around a discussion on racism: “The Amish girls asked about racial interactions in the area, and about skin color. The client said the exchange resulted in an ‘open discussion’ which he appreciated, as they [the Amish] were ‘eager for knowledge.’”³⁵

As the Amish become active agents in carrying out and directing relief work rather than simply volunteers for other agencies, those non-Amish agencies that wish to partner with the Amish are learning to change as well. Lapp remembers that his first impression of the relief work happening at Pass Christian was that is needed stronger leadership and organization. The Amish also were taken aback by the short workdays. Observed Lapp:

Amish are accustomed to long workdays. We want to be up for breakfast well before sunrise, then on the job early and stay late. When we have taken time away from our work at home, we want to get lots accomplished. We are “aggressive” in how we organize ourselves and tackle a project. It is who we are. At Pass Christian, our English supervisor had us on the job, in our opinion, too late in the morning and by 3 p.m. he was telling us to start cleaning up to finish the workday. We found that very frustrating.³⁶

MDS saw the possibilities of leveraging the Amish energy combined with their unique communitarian structure for disaster cleanup and home rebuilding. MDS also saw that, as an organization, it would need to be culturally sensitive if a partnership between a predominantly Mennonite organization and the Amish was going to flourish. Lapp noted how MDS exercised cultural awareness toward the Amish:

[Executive Director] Kevin King and I developed a practice for how we would offer an informational meeting about MDS and invite Amish wholehearted participation. The informational meetings consisted of Kevin welcoming people and saying a little about MDS. I’d follow with how Amish can be involved. My sharing included how MDS was offering Amish people the opportunity to put into action our Christian faith. I’d share the ways that we could feel MDS adjusted their practices to accommodate the Amish ways of living and working.

We kept the meeting short so that time was available for informal sharing. We offered some refreshments and Kevin intentionally would stand off from the group. He made space for us as Amish to discuss among ourselves.

I’d find the Amish would crowd around me. In our circle of just Amish, we switched from speaking English to Pennsylvania Dutch. That change to Dutch was very important. We Amish can move between English and Dutch seamlessly. When

³⁵ Phillips, *Mennonite Disaster Service*, 81.

³⁶ Lapp, interview.

there is a person in the circle who we know doesn't speak Dutch, the whole group, without batting an eye, can switch mid-sentence to English.

With Kevin off to the side, we Amish just naturally would use our mother tongue of [Pennsylvania] Dutch. On our own and speaking Dutch, the Amish questions flowed, and I could answer the Amish questions in an Amish way. Kevin and I have used this model of inviting the Amish community into deeper and deeper relationship with MDS across the United States and Canada.³⁷

For non-Amish partners, respecting Amish agency means accepting the Amish as equal partners in relief and development work, which in turn means recognizing and understanding what at first blush seem like contradictions among Amish values and behaviors. For example, Amos Lapp describes Amish people's strong work ethic as "aggressive" in the areas of business, farming, and getting things done. Alongside their practice of yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*), an "aggressive" cultural reality also animates Amish ways. There is a low tolerance for people inside and outside the community who do not share this work ethic. The "aggressive" Amish cultural norm is one in which people will get up at four in the morning and work steadily all day. Creating new products and making things work are valued within the Amish community. Herman Bontrager, who grew up in a Beachy Amish home in Indiana, reflects on this Amish paradox. In one sense, he observes, there is a deep commitment to humility and self-effacement.³⁸ But there is also instilled in Amish children a sense that they have the ability to meet challenges if they set their mind to it. It is a kind of can-do spirit. Likewise, Marion Bontrager, who grew up in an Amish community in northern Indiana, learned that exhibiting a can-do attitude was actually a way to gain approval.

My father was not one to give us much verbal approval. We were expected to work hard, be obedient, look for work on the farm, and not think too much of ourselves. We did know we were deeply loved. I am now in my 90s, and I remember well one of the only times my father verbally praised me. It was when I was a teenager. I was out with the manure spreader when it broke. I turned the horses back to the barn. I worked and worked at figuring out how to fix the manure spreader and did get it fixed. Later when I shared with my father how I fixed the spreader, I could see he was pleased with me. He said to me, "You did good work today."³⁹

This phenomenon of humility mixed with an "aggressive"/can-do attitude likely grows out of a longstanding need to refashion things that are not permitted by the Amish *Ordnung* to fit within the communal standards. This process, known as *Amishizing* a product or way of functioning so it serves their needs and fits within the *Ordnung*, takes place every day.⁴⁰ A farm-related example

³⁷ Lapp, interview.

³⁸ Herman Bontrager, interview by the author, Lititz, Pennsylvania, January 11, 2018.

³⁹ Marion Bontrager, interview by the author, Hesston, Kansas, November 31, 2023.

⁴⁰ Kraybill, *What the Amish Teach Us*, 81.

of Amishizing is adapting a hay baler designed to be pulled and powered by a tractor to be pulled and powered by horses.

The line between what is seen by the community as undue pride and unhealthy individualism and the highly valued drive of a can-do attitude may be unperceivable to an outsider, but those within the Amish community generally know intuitively how to work within Amish communal expectations while innovating. Such dynamics can even cross gender lines, as sometimes happens among volunteers. I remember attending a volunteer work event where an Amish woman was giving leadership to a group of Amish men and women. When an Amish bishop and I were driving out the farm lane, the bishop reflected about the woman's leadership: "I have great appreciation for [Sadie]. She leads the volunteers of our people in a wonderful Amish way."⁴¹ Growing out of their highly functional communitarianism, Amish bring together a wonderful mix of clear and strong leadership combined with a readiness to follow a leader's direction. They know innately how to give and receive direction. They recognize when to step up and lead and when to humbly serve for the greater good. Malcolm Gladwell describes participating in a barn raising and observing this Old Order way of working together as a "marvel of improvisational coordination, a communitarian ballet."⁴²

The combination of personal initiative and collective, group-interested behavior is a mark of Amish agency, one noted by no less than the *Harvard Business Review*, which in 2016 declared "To Innovate, Think Like a 19th-Century Barn Raiser." The article does not use the term *Amishizing* but the message is the same. Building community that simultaneously is innovative, focused on productive work, and collectively reviewing together as a work team is the goal.

Less obviously—but perhaps more importantly—it [barn raising] leverages community intelligence to produce the best barn design possible, and also creates and reinforces collaborative connections crucial for success in farming communities. At the end of the process, the family that initiates the activity not only has a new barn to use, with the wisdom and insights of the broader community baked into the design, it also has new and stronger ties to the community that will help ensure its future activities are fruitful.⁴³

Has this Amishizing of MDS's disaster relief efforts worked? The explosion of Amish participation with MDS across the United States and Canada indicates the institutional wisdom represented by the level of Amish participation. The demand within the Amish church in Lancaster County is instructive. When the Amish secretary of MDS Storm Aid opens the sign-up calendar for the next year, there is a stampede to claim volunteer slots. After the sign-up process opens at

⁴¹ The conversation took place in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during the summer of 2021.

⁴² Malcolm Gladwell, "Lost in the Middle," *Washington Post*, May 17, 1998.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1998/05/17/lost-in-the-middle/56214443-b634-4f81-a6ca-a42b145cae8a/>.

⁴³ Geraci and Chavez, "To Innovate."

midnight, the secretary's voicemail mailbox rapidly fills with calls from Amish groups seeking to reserve spots for the coming year. The secretary gets up at 2:00 a.m., copies down the voicemail messages, puts the callers on his list, erases the messages, and goes back to bed. He gets up again at 4:00 a.m. and repeats the earlier pattern. The calls keep coming until all the open volunteer spots are taken. Amish groups who called too late will need to wait until the next year to serve with MDS Storm Aid.⁴⁴

Case Study 3: Plain Community Agricultural Exchange

For Herry Charles Kirimbai and Naomi Motica Lukumay, it was a very long journey from Arusha, Tanzania, in East Africa, to their Amish host family's home in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. For five weeks in the summer of 2022, Herry and his wife, Naomi, lived with their Amish hosts in an arrangement termed Plain Community Agricultural Exchange (PCAE). They joined in Amish community events and attended Amish worship services. The experience offered incredible mutual learning, reported Dale Stoltzfus, one of the facilitators of PCAE, which has created a small but growing network of connections among North American Amish farmers and agriculture development experts from the Global South.

Herry Kirimbai works with ECHO: Hope Against Hunger, a Christian ministry that introduces sustainable farming techniques to farmers around the world. Central to the five weeks that Kirimbai and Lukumay spent with the Amish was an effort to refine a Tanzanian Maresha plow-planter for increased productivity. "We always saw this Plain Community Agricultural Exchange as a time for an African agriculturalist and an Amish implement manufacturer to create together," said Stoltzfus. "We were convinced that both Herry and the Amish farm implement manufacturer [in Lancaster County] were going to discover together new ways to use animal power in farming. The promise in the Bible that God will do more than we can ask or imagine became deeply real in this shared project."⁴⁵

PCAE has been supported by other agencies, namely MCC and Tillers International,⁴⁶ but it would not exist without Amish agency—Amish farmers desiring to share their knowledge of animal farming techniques and technologies with others while also learning themselves. PCAE emerged from the contemporary Amish realities noted above, namely, the entrepreneurship and organization seen among Amish small business owners who manufacture cutting-edge, horse-drawn and -powered small-scale farm equipment. These business people were at the forefront of the establishment of Horse Progress Days, which in turn birthed PCAE. Horse Progress Days is an annual gathering, hosted by Amish settlements on a rotating basis, that highlights companies and technologies powered by horses and mules. Its aim is "to encourage and promote the combination of animal power and the latest equipment innovations in an effort to support small scale farming

⁴⁴ Lapp, interview.

⁴⁵ Dale Stoltzfus, interview by the author, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, September 15, 2022.

⁴⁶ Tillers International (<https://tillersinternational.org/>) is an organization whose mission is "preserving heritage and artisanal skills to promote fully self-sufficient, ethical, and sustainable farming practices."

and land stewardship. To show draft animal power is possible, practical, and profitable.”⁴⁷ Nearly 35,000 people attended the 2023 Horse Progress Days.

When Horse Progress Days began in 1994, Amish organizers assumed that the people interested in a commitment to farming and working with animals would be others within the Plain community and a handful of non-Amish farmers using horses.⁴⁸ But they soon realized that people with an interest in agricultural development, including academics from Oklahoma State University, Louisiana State University, University of Oklahoma, Texas A&M University, and Sam Houston State University, were making their way to Horse Progress Days, and so too were agriculturalists from the Global South. Asked why they made the significant investment of time and money to attend, the global guests reported that Amish commitment and cutting-edge innovations in farming with animals was the draw. The fact that Amish farmers, situated in the ultramodern, factory-scale agricultural environment of North America, intentionally choose to farm with animals intrigued international attendees and the academic community. These interactions allowed the Amish to see their own farming practices in a new light. Through the eyes of the international guests at Horse Progress Days, Amish farmers and farm machinery manufacturers realized that Amish insights into animal power and small-scale farming could be shared with the world beyond Amish communities.

In 2007, Bob Okello from Uganda, who was then an intern with Tillers International in Scotts, Michigan, attended Horse Progress Days, held that year in Arcola, Illinois. Okello operated a farm machine manufacturing business in Uganda that was dedicated to animal-powered equipment. Okello was not the only outsider intrigued by what was happening at Horse Progress Days. James Hynes, a professor at Sam Houston University in Huntsville, Texas, had started attending Horse Progress Days a few years before Okello. Based on his familiarity with farming in the Global South, Hynes realized he had come across something agriculturally significant at the gathering, namely, “scalable innovation particularly as it pertains to animal-powered implements.”⁴⁹ Along with Hynes, Dale Stoltzfus served as a bridge between the Amish and the international guests who began frequenting Horse Progress Days. Stoltzfus, whose forebears were Amish, has been one of only two non-Amish people to serve on the Horse Progress Days board over the course of its thirty-year history.

The Amish leaders of Horse Progress Days, with input from Stoltzfus and Hynes, began planning how to formalize the connections between Amish and African farm interests and to extend them beyond the two days each year that Horse Progress Days convened. The result was that, in spring 2010, four agriculturalists from Mali arrived at the Amish-owned Pioneer Equipment Company in Holmes County, Ohio. The visitors wondered if Amish people could travel

⁴⁷ “Our Mission Statement.” At the 2020 Horse Progress Days, held that year in Mount Hope, Ohio, the author observed thousands of Amish adults watching children expertly driving carts and miniature horses, as the announcer commented, “Our children don’t watch television and aren’t on the internet. They are having much more fun learning to handle draft animals.”

⁴⁸ Stoltzfus, “Thirty Years of Horse Progress.”

⁴⁹ Stoltzfus, “Horse Progress Days,” 84.

to Mali to share about farming and equipment manufacturing skills and thereby help improve rural living standards.⁵⁰ The vast majority of Amish churches forbid air travel, but the Amish were more than ready to host international agriculturists on their farms, in Amish manufacturing companies, and in their homes. The *2103 Horse Progress Days Information Guide* recalled the moment:

The country of Mali according to Professor [James] Hynes has a long history of using livestock as a power source for transportation. The country has limited natural resources and almost no oil, but a very strong village identity and community cohesiveness...[that] life for Malians would be enhanced by demonstrating to them the benefits of utilizing their animals for crop production with some improved animal power implements demonstrated at Horse Progress Days.⁵¹

Growing out of Horse Progress Days, PCAE has become a genuine experience of mutual sharing.⁵² Hosting international visitors is a cross-cultural experience, expanding Amish understanding of the world. Nick and Fannie Marie Graber, an Amish couple from southern Indiana, hosted Joseph Kavuma from Uganda in the summer of 2012. Nick recorded the highlights of the days spent together and then their final goodbyes:

When it came time to say goodbye to me and Fannie Marie, he gave me his hand, and thanked us for hosting him, and with tears in his eyes thanked us for the privilege of working, living, eating, and worshipping with us. “When I get home,” he said, “I will tell my people we have brothers in America. Thank you and I will be back.”⁵³

Leon Wengerd, an Amish leader from Ohio, addressed his Amish community in the *2016 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, under the headline “Changing the World”:

If you are a farmer or business person and believe that you are powerless to make a difference for people around the world—think again. The skills and the knowledge of the horse farming community are very rare in most of the world. People like Mbaidiro, coming to our community to learn, can take home a wealth of information to teach their people how to improve their standard of living.

By welcoming these people into our homes and communities, we are making an impact that can be more far reaching than we ever imagine. Today, you and your

⁵⁰ Stoltzfus, “More Help for Africa,” 84.

⁵¹ Stoltzfus, 84. See also W. Wengerd, “The Mali Connection,” 88.

⁵² Dale Stoltzfus, conversation with the author, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 2020.

⁵³ Graber, “Horse Progress Days,” 103–104.

family have the opportunity to change the world at your home, in your business, or on your farm. It will take time and it will take sacrifice. Are you willing?⁵⁴

An Amish leader within PCAE observes that, for the Amish community, it is very important that this exchange have excellent follow-up. What are the short-term and long-term impacts on farming in East Africa and animal-powered farming among the Amish? There was a commitment by all the participants to stay in touch as colleagues and friends but also as farmers.⁵⁵ The Amish see partners who, like themselves, have a history of relying primarily on human and animal power in farming. Questions about how African farmers work with their animals in the shared task of tilling the soil were central for the Amish. Additionally, the Amish were interested to learn how African farmers not only raise crops, but also the ways Africans market their harvests. But personal connections are central, too. A minister in the Amish church district that hosted Tanzanians Herry Kirimbai and Naomi Lukumay while they were in Lancaster County observed, “Now when I see something in the news about Africa, I pay attention. That is because I now have friends from Tanzania in East Africa. My world has grown bigger since I’ve learned to know Herry and Naomi.”⁵⁶

People-to-people exchanges are small-scale ways to change the world, but in that sense, they reflect the humble but determined expression of Amish agency.⁵⁷ In 2024, PCAE is exploring an exchange with agriculturalists from Burkina Faso.

Will the Amish Survive Their Growing Agency?

Amish agency seems set to grow in the future. There are few occasions today where Amish look to others to articulate for the Amish community what Amish people should believe or need. Old Order Amish leaders travel often to Washington, DC, and to state capitals to discuss their concerns with elected officials. Amish leaders bring to these interactions remarkable knowledge and sophistication, and members of the National Amish Steering Committee are frequently on a first-name basis with many people in government, to the point that today Anabaptist groups that are more acculturated are learning from the Amish about the machinations of state power.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ L. Wengerd, “Changing the World,” 113.

⁵⁵ Amish business leader, interview by the author, Gap, Pennsylvania, October 2018.

⁵⁶ Amish minister, conversation with the author, White Horse, Pennsylvania, August 15, 2022.

⁵⁷ Herry Kirimbai recalled going to the capital for a visa interview and being asked the purpose of his and Naomi’s time in the United States: “When Naomi and I said we would be living with an Amish family and that I’d be working with the Amish at developing farm equipment, the U.S. official was very surprised. Then we pointed to the letter that outlined the Plain Community Agricultural Exchange. With that the embassy official took his stamp and gave us our visas!” Herry Charles Kirimbai and Naomi Motica Lukumay, interview by the author, Montgomery, Indiana, July 1, 2022.

⁵⁸ The National Amish Steering Committee works with the federal government while each state or set of regional areas has a state or regional steering committee. All these committees work in tandem. Olshan, “Amish Steering Committee.” In a meeting of fifteen different Anabaptist groups on how Anabaptists should speak to the United States government, held on April 14, 2020, in Akron, Pennsylvania, the Old

Time will tell how increasing agency in the areas of relief and development will impact the Amish. The Amish might take with a note of caution the experiences of some of the more acculturated Anabaptists who have been affected by their own institution-building a century ago. Some Mennonite scholars have argued that Mennonite institution-building in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century led to rapid acculturation and the replacement of community agency with individual agency.⁵⁹ Edward Yoder, a Mennonite college professor, writer, editor, and one of the few Mennonites to have earned a PhD in the early twentieth century, found himself at times exhausted by Mennonite institutionalism. He admitted in his diary, “For myself I shall hesitate to pour a great deal of my energy into such channels just at this time. As for running hither and yon to attend conferences, I am frankly not interested.”⁶⁰

To date, the Amish have been remarkably adept at negotiating change while remaining faithful to core Amish values. As Amish people have become active in building their own relief and development ministries, they appear to have figured out how to Amishize these institutions. This has made it possible for the Amish to remain Amish.

In her research on Old Colony Mennonites, Dawn S. Bowen highlights economic development, public education, evangelistic impulses, and community innovators as four key forces that lead Plain groups towards acculturation. In all these points of potential movement towards acculturation, Bowen argues that, when Plain groups feel they are in control of the change (i.e., have agency), it is less fraught theologically and communally.

Although the Old Colony tended to reject any innovation, they were usually forced to tolerate, if not accept, modernization. Other Mennonites, including those belonging to the Sommerfelder and Bergthaler churches, were far less reluctant to accept change, particularly if they had some control over what innovations would be introduced. Initiatives taken by community members also brought about change and served to transform the traditional foundations of social and economic life.⁶¹

Regarding the issue of group agency, thus far the Amish appear to have been finding ways of Amishizing the ministries they have created to “do good to all people.” Philosopher Carol Rovane of Columbia University has written extensively on individual and group agency. She describes a mature and productive individual agency as needing to avoid “rational fragmentation.” A person can only achieve personal/individual agency when they clearly discern their core values and then make coherent and consistent choices in line with those values. Mature individual agency, Rovane argues, exists in people who have achieved “rational unity” by consistently embracing what aligns with their core values.⁶² So, too, for group agency. A group such as an Amish relief ministry board

Order Amish representatives were at times instructive to the more acculturated participants on federal policy regarding peace and nonresistance to war.

⁵⁹ See Liechty, “Humility.”

⁶⁰ Yoder, *Edward, Pilgrimage of a Mind*, 203.

⁶¹ Bowen, “Preserving Tradition,” 71.

⁶² Rovane, “Group Agency,” 4880.

of directors must work toward rational unity even as they each bring their individual agency (based on their core values) to board meetings.

Rovane discusses how the Enlightenment era challenged how an individual's agency functions in relationship to a group's agency. In the Enlightenment, a focus of concern moved from a primary concern for the welfare of the group to the agency of individuals. How can the individual assert their personal rights? There was a movement to ensure that the individual did not get lost in the group's expectations for unity of purpose. Rovane asks, "Can the rational unity of a group agent be constituted in the way...so that it does not occasion rational fragmentation within the lives of its human constituents, but preserves their individual rational unity?"⁶³

Here is where it seems that the Amish have an advantage as they continue to gain agency both as individuals and also as a group. The Amish, who largely remain a communal society and, in some respects, still function in a pre-Enlightenment context, are less likely to struggle with how to keep the focus on the group/community. Amish children are inculcated with a can-do spirit and even "aggressiveness" in achieving individual and group goals. Yet this can-do spirit is tempered with an abiding commitment to always place the community ahead of the self. Children regularly observe their parents and grandparents yielding to the wisdom of the group. This joyful yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*) to the church community/group is the special quality of so much of Amish success.

While in my work with the Mennonite Central Committee's relief ministries, I was preparing to partner with an Amish bishop to begin a relief ministry in his community. The bishop was deeply committed and had invested considerable time, energy, and money to starting the project. Then, in a meeting with his fellow bishops, they recommended waiting to start the project until other community commitments were finished. The bishop called me to say that we would need to wait several years before revisiting the project. He was disappointed but revealed no bitterness. Rather, he assumed that the wisdom of the group was to be trusted above his own individual perspective. That is the power of commitment to group agency over individual agency within the Amish church.⁶⁴

Robert Putnam, a long-time professor of sociology at Harvard and the author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2001), declares that American culture has become increasingly isolated and lonely. Individual agency has too often proven to be a deeply lonely state of being. In a recent interview, Putnam stated:

What I wrote in *Bowling Alone* is even more relevant now. Because what we've seen over the last 25 years is a deepening and intensifying of that trend. We've become more socially isolated, and we can see it in every facet in our lives. We can see it in the surgeon general's talk about loneliness. He's been talking recently about the psychological state of being lonely. Social isolation leads to lots of bad things. It's bad for your health, but it's really bad for the country, because people

⁶³ Rovane, "Group Agency," 4880.

⁶⁴ Amish bishop in the Midwest, phone call to the author, November 16, 2023.

who are isolated, and especially young men who are isolated, are vulnerable to the appeals of some false community.⁶⁵

Amazingly, in a time when individual agency has too often turned into an unfulfilling and lonely individualism for many contemporary Americans, the Amish, with their hard-to-comprehend mix of individual and group agency, are thriving. For the Amish, there are incredible opportunities to be creative and take risks but always under the protective, wisdom-laden community.⁶⁶

How Should Relief and Development Organizations Relate to the Amish?

In the three case studies above, the non-Amish organizations partnering with the Amish were able to recognize, respect, and welcome the Amish people's growing expectation for true partnerships in "doing good to all people." The other side of Amish agency is their ability to end a partnership. Non-Amish partners have not always been attuned to such dynamics. Amos Lapp, the Amish MDS Storm Aid director, notes,

If a situation starts to feel uncomfortable for Amish people, they will not tell you they are feeling ill at ease. An "English" person might say to an Amish individual that they should let them know when something isn't working. But the Amish won't say anything. What they will do is just disappear.⁶⁷

Non-Amish organizations that are not willing to make meaningful adjustments to their ways of doing things will find that the Amish "just disappear," either going to other partnerships that have made such adjustments or creating their own new structures that reflect their way of doing ministry.

Non-Amish relief and development organizations that make surface changes to their organizational culture will be disappointed when they realize that Amish agency has taught the Amish that they have options as they work at relief and development. For example, the Amish are working with the nondenominational Christian organization Samaritan's Purse. Which non-Amish organizations will be enthusiastic about allowing parts of their work to be Amishized when doing so will entail stretching and sometimes remaking the bureaucratic categories assumed by human resources, financial, and communications departments? The Amish will often experience rational

⁶⁵ Lulu Garcia-Navarro, "The Interview: Robert Putnam Knows Why You're Lonely," *New York Times*, July 13, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/13/magazine/robert-putnam-interview.html>.

⁶⁶ Vivek H. Murthy, "Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It's Time to Fix That," *New York Times*, April 30, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html>: "This week I am proposing a national framework to rebuild social connection and community in America. Loneliness is more than just a bad feeling. When people are socially disconnected, their risk of anxiety and depression increases."

⁶⁷ Lapp, interview.

fragmentation rather than rational unity when non-Amish organizations ask Amish persons for too much accommodation. And with such rational fragmentation, the Amish may quietly disappear.

For some non-Amish relief and development organizations, the Amish will seem too traditional and conservative and not a comfortable cultural fit. These organizations will be tempted to demand certain communication styles from Amish volunteers or employees. Evangelical Christian agencies may find the Amish are not “Christian enough” in the ways that the organizations expect Christians to verbalize their faith. These ministries will be tempted to demand certain evangelical code words from Amish volunteers or employees for the Amish to be considered full partners.⁶⁸

A non-Amish friend remembers being the only outsider at Amish meetings and making what he thought was a good suggestion. He observed that all the Amish people slowly lowered their heads and stared at the table. He realized he had proposed a very un-Amish idea, but that the Amish would not tell him so. My friend followed up by dismissing his own proposal as not a good idea. It was then that the meeting continued.

Kenneth Sensenig, a long-time MCC leader directly engaged with Plain people’s partnerships with MCC, notes that much depended on the organization’s top leaders. With the coming and going of different top leaders, MCC at times found it difficult to remain connected to the Plain community.

In some cases, executive directors took direct interest in Amish intersections with MCC. In other cases, there was minimal interest in Amish support. At one time or another, those areas with an Amish presence had MCC staff who bore primary responsibility for relationships with Amish. In the East Coast region, two long term staff, one a Beachy Amish member, cultivated interest among Old Order Amish.⁶⁹

Are non-Amish organizations willing to at times play the role of junior partner to an Amish relief and development organization? This would involve serving rather than being the lead organization. How much are non-Amish relief and development organizations willing to hand over the keys to at least a portion of what they do as an organization to Amish leadership? Will leaders be as ready as Kevin King of MDS to stand back while the Amish shift from English to Pennsylvania Dutch and to welcome the Amish to manage their own parts of MDS’s ministry?

For over half a century, the Amish community has demonstrated agency as successful entrepreneurs. They have cultivated confidence in their abilities to envision, create, construct, and manage complex businesses and systems. Now, the Amish are extending their agency by engaging in relief and development ministries that benefit all people. Their uniquely Amish approach offers valuable lessons for non-Amish relief and development organizations seeking collaboration with the Amish. These external ministries must learn to respect and honor the Amish, not as subordinates in ministry but as full partners.

⁶⁸ Campdepadrós-Cullell et. al, “Interreligious Dialogue Groups.” See esp. sec. 4.1, “Conditions for an Interreligious Dialogue That Generates Human Agency.”

⁶⁹ Sensenig, “Old Order Amish.”

Bibliography

- Bender, Harold S. *The Anabaptist Vision*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944.
- Berry, Lee Roy, Jr. "Review Essay: Shawn Francis Peters, *The Yoder Case: Religious Freedom, Education, and Parental Rights*." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 79, no. 3 (2005): 383–390.
- Bowen, Dawn S. "Preserving Tradition, Confronting Progress: Social Change in a Mennonite Community, 1950–1965." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 25 (March 1995): 53–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722019509481786>.
- Campbell, Colin. "Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the 'Black Box' of Personal Agency." *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 4 (December 2009): 407–418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01355.x>.
- Campdepadrós-Cullell, Roger, Miguel Ángel Pulido-Rodríguez, Jesús Marauri, and Sandra Racionero-Plaza. "Interreligious Dialogue Groups Enabling Human Agency." *Religions* 12, no. 3 (March 2021): 89. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12030189>.
- Cronk, Sandra L. "Gelassenheit: The Rites of the Redemptive Process in Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite Communities." Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1977.
- Detweiler, Lowell. *The Hammer Rings Hope: Photos and Stories from Fifty Years of Mennonite Disaster Service*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000.
- Dyck, Peter J., and Elfrieda Dyck. *Up from the Rubble: The Epic Rescue of Thousands of War-Ravaged Mennonite Refugees*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991.
- Epp Weaver, Alain, comp. "MCC and National Socialism." *Intersection: MCC Theory & Practice Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2021). <https://mcc.org/media/document/130171>.
- Epp Weaver, Alain. *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation: A Missiological History of Mennonite Central Committee*. North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2021.
- Geraci, John, and Christopher Chavez. "To Innovate, Think Like a 19th-Century Barn Raiser." *Harvard Business Review*, August 4, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/08/to-innovate-think-like-a-19th-century-barn-raiser>.
- Goossen, Benjamin W. *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691174280.001.0001>.
- Graber, Nick. "Horse Progress Days and: Agri Culture, African Culture, and Amish Culture." *2013 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, 101–104.
- Grimsrud, Ted. *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007.
- Kline, Paul A. "Gelassenheit: A Bible Principle." *Family Life*, March 2017, 7–9.
- Kraybill, Donald B. *What the Amish Teach Us: Plain Living in a Busy World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421442181>.
- Kraybill, Donald B., and Steven M. Nolt, *Amish Enterprise: From Plows to Profits*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801878046>.
- Liechty, Joseph C. "Humility: The Foundation of Mennonite Religious Outlook in the 1860's." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (Jan. 1980): 5–31.

- Longenecker, Richard N. *Galatians*. Vol. 41 of *Word Biblical Commentary*. Dallas: Word Books, 1990.
- Mennonite Central Committee. "Berlin Exodus: A Story Told by Peter J. Dyck." 1988. YouTube video, 56:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jjYVy-OzF8>.
- Miller, Joseph S. "The Peculiar Beauty of *Gelassenheit*: An Interview with Amos B. Hoover." In *The Measure of My Days: Engaging the Life and Thought of John L. Ruth*, edited by Reuben Z. Miller and Joseph S. Miller, 201–227. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004.
- Nolt, Steven M. "MCC's Relationship with 'Plain' Anabaptists in Historical Perspective." In *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver, 135–166. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2011.
- Olshan, Marc A. "The Old Order Amish Steering Committee: A Case Study in Organizational Evolution." *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (December 1990): 603–616. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/69.2.603>.
- "Our Mission Statement," Horse Progress Days. Accessed July 13, 2024. <https://horseprogressdays.com/about-us/>.
- Phillips, Brenda D. *Mennonite Disaster Service: Building a Therapeutic Community After the Gulf Coast Storms*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.
- Redekop, Calvin, Stephen C. Ainlay, and Robert Siemens. *Mennonite Entrepreneurs*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9780801850035>.
- Rovane, Carol. "Is Group Agency a Social Phenomenon?" *Synthese* 196 (2019): 4869–4898. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1384-1>.
- Schlabach, Theron. *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America*. Scottdale, PA: 1988.
- Sensenig, Kenneth. "Old Order Amish: MCC's Invisible Partner, 1990–2010." Unpublished paper, 2010, available from Mennonite Central Committee, Akron, PA.
- Smucker, Barbara C. *Henry's Red Sea*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1955.
- Stoltzfus, Dale K. "Horse Progress Days, Tillers International, and Bob Okello of Acholi Region Gulu Diocese Uganda, Africa." *2009 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, 84.
- Stoltzfus, Dale K. "More Help for Africa, This Time Mali." *2009 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, 84.
- Stoltzfus, Dale K. "Thirty Years of Horse Progress." Accessed July 13, 2024. <https://horseprogressdays.com/about-us/thirty-years-of-horse-progress/>.
- Wengerd, Leon W. "Changing the World." *2016 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, 105–113.
- Wengerd, Wayne H. "The Mali Connection." *2013 Horse Progress Days Information Guide*, 87–94.
- Yoder, Ida, ed. *Edward, Pilgrimage of a Mind: The Journal of Edward Yoder 1931–1945*. Wadsworth, OH: Ida Yoder, 1985.