

Understanding the Amish: An Overview

Let's start off with a blunt introductory statement: there is nothing to be learned about the Amish from a T.V. reality show!

The Origins of the Amish

The Amish faith itself can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation of the early 16th century. Not satisfied with the reformation attempts of Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli (who is a lesser known but influential leader from Zurich, Switzerland), a small group in Zurich “re-baptized” themselves, declaring that salvation was based on faith, and that baptism was a decision that could only be made by adults through their own free will. They considered infant baptism to be an imposition of government, and therefore not legitimate. Hence, followers of this branch of the Protestant Reformation were called “Anabaptists,” which means to be “rebaptized.” Within only a few years, almost all the founders had been hunted down, imprisoned, and put to death by state authorities, both Catholic and Lutherans, who saw the Anabaptist movement as a threat to their conjoined civil and religious authority.

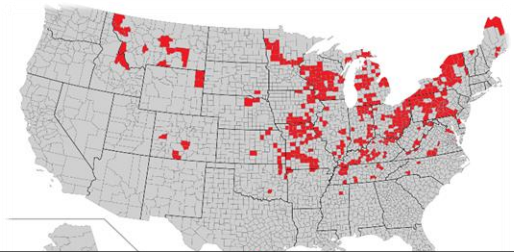
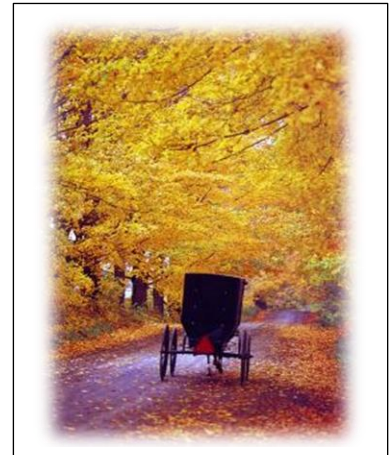
In their early days, persecution compelled the Anabaptists to hold church services secretly, often in caves and woods. The Amish today still maintain a tradition of holding church service rotated among the residences of their members, eschewing church buildings. As well, the Amish continue to emphasize symbolic separations from the world, such as plain clothes, selective use of technology, reliance on horsepower for local travel and farm (field) work, the use of the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect of German, and many other practices.

Despite persecution, the Anabaptist movement spread north along the Rhine River. The word “Amish” comes from the name of a leader of a conservative group located on the other side of the Rhine River in the Alsace-Lorraine area of present-day France, who in 1693 disagreed with the growing assimilation of the Swiss-Mennonites (also known as the Swiss Brethren) as persecution by state authorities finally began to decline. His name was **Jacob Ammann**.

Soon after the division of the Amish and Mennonites, both began to immigrate to the colony of Pennsylvania at the behest of William Penn, a Quaker, who recruited religious minorities to occupy the land given to him by the King of England, and offering a large degree of religious freedom that remains a strong feature of the U.S. and its value placed on separation of church and state. Hence, the Amish tradition of living close together to form tight-knit church groups and communities began in Pennsylvania, as they could now own land. The Amish soon spread westward, first coming to Ohio in 1809, and to Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri during the 1840's and 1850's.

The Amish Today

The Amish population has grown rapidly in the past five decades. Today, there are about 350,000 Amish living in slightly over 600 communities or settlements in 32 states and four Canadian provinces. Most of these settlements are small (less than a 100 families), but a few are large and well known to tourists, such as the Greater Holmes County, Ohio, settlement, the Lancaster / Chester County, Pennsylvania, settlement

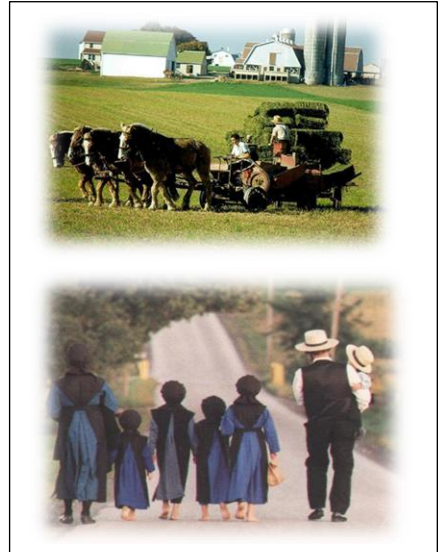


U.S counties with Amish communities: 2020
Map courtesy of: **Braman S.**
<https://bramanswanderings.com/2021/01/23/map-of-amishcounties-2020/> The map is based on information from the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies
<https://groups.etown.edu/amishstudies/statistics/population-2021/>

(also, the oldest), and the Elkhart / LaGrange / Noble County, Indiana, settlement. Even in the large settlements, however, the tradition of small-scale is maintained. Each Amish church group or district typically consists of 25-35 families, with a bishop, deacon, and minister (often two ministers) chosen from among the men through a lot or lottery, which is in accordance with passages from the Acts of the Apostles that describes the method used by the remaining eleven apostles to replace Judas.

There are over 2,700 Amish church districts, each with its own *ordnung* or church discipline. Although all church districts conform to a common philosophy of symbolic separation from the modern world, the lack of a formal church hierarchy beyond the church district has created an incredible array of minute variations in rules that dictate everything from buggy style to appropriate clothing for men, women, and children. The *ordnung* itself is reviewed by a special meeting of all baptized members (called *attnungsgeme*) in preparation for twice-a-year communion (called *grossgeme*) service, usually held on Sunday after harvest in the Fall and again before planting in the Spring. Contrary to stereotypes, decision-making in Amish churches is congregational, and not dictated by dictatorial church leaders. That image is very misleading.

From time to time through the 20th century and into this new century, the Amish have had to resort to the courts and legislation to maintain their religiously-based separation from mainstream society. This includes various First Amendment-based court / government exemptions from compulsory education, military service, social security, Medicare, and universal health care.



Since 1900, there have occurred several minor divisions among the Amish, leading to a series of affiliations or church fellowships with differing interpretations over what it means to be a plain people who remain symbolically separate. Prominent among these fellowships is the Swartzentruber and Swiss Amish affiliations, which consist of a set of Amish church groups who are more conservative in their approach to the adoption of new technology than mainstream or Old Order Amish. In total, the various conservative groups represent about 12% of the total Amish population. The Old Order Amish themselves comprise about 80% of the Amish population. There are also more progressive Amish (7-8%) in terms of technology, including a few church groups who today allow electricity into their homes. The progressives are known as the New Order Amish.

Three trends will influence Amish society and culture through most of the 21st century. The first two are rapid population growth and rapid growth of new settlements. Both the population and the number of communities will likely continue to double about every 20-24 years. This growth is due to large families (i.e., high fertility) and a high rate today of daughters and sons born to Amish families who decide to be baptized Amish when they reach the age of decision. This is a very high rate of successful socialization into the Amish faith. As the Amish population grows in older settlements, the Amish have learned to branch out and find new rural localities for their ever-growing population, places where Amish families can make a living, maintain an Amish lifestyle, and raise their children. The third trend is the Amish shift out of agriculture. It is estimated that today about 14% of Amish men make a living for their families by farming, compared to 50 years ago, when it was about 70%.

Submitted by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph F. Donnermeyer".

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