



Approaching Amish and Other Plain Anabaptist Communities

FDA Retail Food Protection Seminar
September 17, 2026

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Elizabethtown College



THE YOUNG CENTER
FOR ANABAPTIST AND
PIETIST STUDIES
ELIZABETHTOWN COLLEGE

Outline

- 1. Introducing Plain Communities
 - Geography, population, church groups
- 2. Several cultural characteristics, particularly as related to communication and trust
 - a. Yielding
 - b. High-context culture
 - c. Frontstage/backstage
- 3. A few notes on language and schooling
- 4. Plain communities and the state

Who are Pennsylvania's "Plain" communities?



- An umbrella term for culturally conservative Amish, Mennonites, and Brethren church groups
- Distinctive lifestyle includes simplicity and a *plain aesthetic* in dress, décor, demeanor, etc.
 - Yet, considerable diversity in the details of practice among these groups
 - *Accent today will be on the Amish, as the largest group*
- Sometimes known as Plain Anabaptists

Why Anabaptists?



- Christian tradition, stemming from the 1500s, Reformation era
- *Adult* baptism (rather than infant baptism) – baptism being the rite of initiation into the church
- Understand *church* in local, community terms rather than bureaucratic or institutional terms
- *Faith* expressed in everyday practice as much as intellectual beliefs

To Pennsylvania in the colonial era



- Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren migrated between 1683 and 1775

Home of immigrants Nicholas and Anna Elisabeth Stoltzfus, Berks County, PA

Debate in the 1800s

adapting to a changing society

vs.

upholding the old order (*ordnung* / order)

Old Orders held to the “old order” in their church life. Over time, also tended to hold on to older ways of life more generally – dress, technology, occupations – but, again, with considerable variation from one community to another

Henry Stahly (1810-1894)

Magdalena Ehrisman Stahly (c.1812-1879)



Anabaptist Groups in the Pennsylvania Context

(examples, not comprehensive)

		Old order	Conservative (plain dress, car driving)	More Assimilated
European origin, 17 th C Anabaptist	<i>Amish</i>	• Old Order Amish	• “Beachy Amish” [aka, Amish-Mennonites] • Maranatha Amish-Mennonites	
European origin, 16 th C Anabaptist	<i>Mennonite</i>	• Old Order Mennonites (various subgroups)	• Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church • Pilgrim Mennonite Conference • Mid-Atlantic Mennonite Fellowship • Nationwide Fellowship Churches	• Mennonite Church USA • Mosaic Mennonite Conf. • LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches
European origin 17 th -18 th C Anabaptist & Pietist	<i>Schwarzenau Brethren</i>		• Old German Baptist Brethren (Original Conference and New Conference) • Dunkard Brethren	• Church of the Brethren
North American origin, 18 th C Anabaptist & Pietist	<i>River Brethren</i>		• Old Order River Brethren	• Brethren in Christ

Chart suggests two ways to think about these groups: (1) “horizontally,” that is, in terms of historical/theological traditions of Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, River Brethren; or (2) “vertically,” that is, those that share old order inclinations, those that have experienced more assimilation, and those somewhere in between.

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Amish population: Numerically, the largest group

414,545 Amish in 33 U.S. states

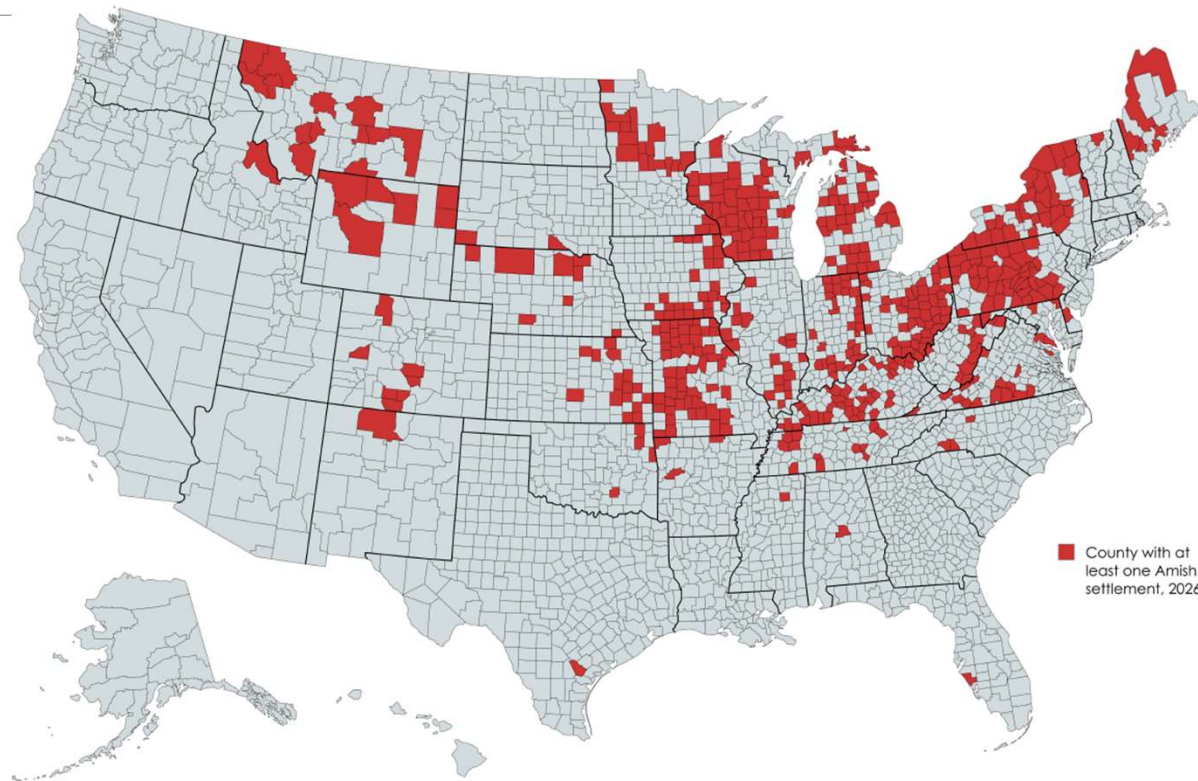
Pennsylvania (23.2% of U.S. total)

96,535 Amish people in
67 settlements

across 43 Pennsylvania counties

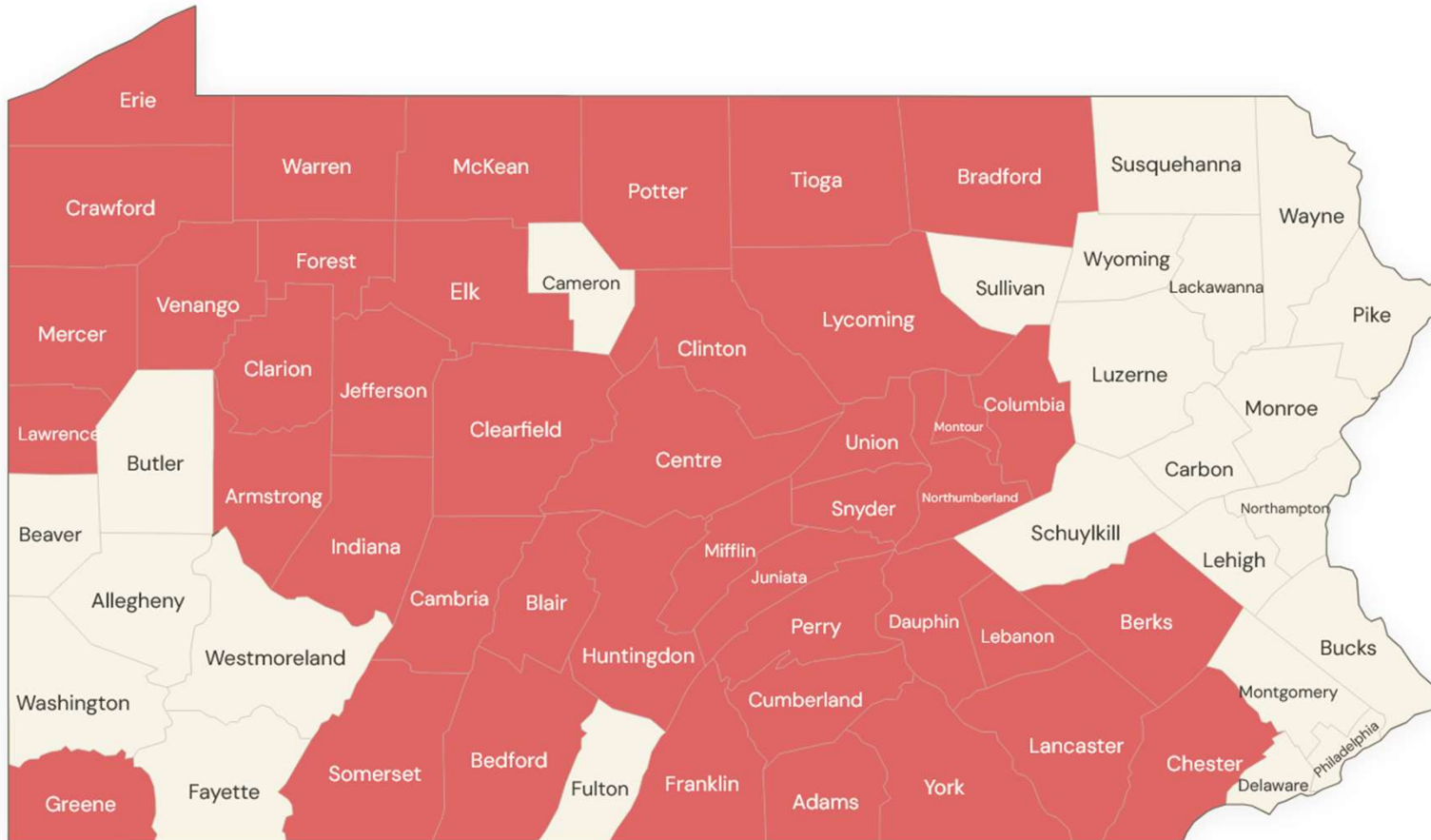
Map of U.S. Amish Settlements. Counties in red were
home to Amish settlements in 2026

Source: Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies



Amish in Pennsylvania

96,535 people in 67 settlements across 43 counties



Counties with one or more
Amish settlement

Variety of affiliations:
Alt Byler, Byler, Dover,
Fredericktown, Geauga I,
Gauga II, Hostetler,
Lancaster, Lancaster
(St.Mary's), Nebraska,
New Order, Renno, Swiss,
Swiss- Allen, Somerset,
Troyer

A young and growing population

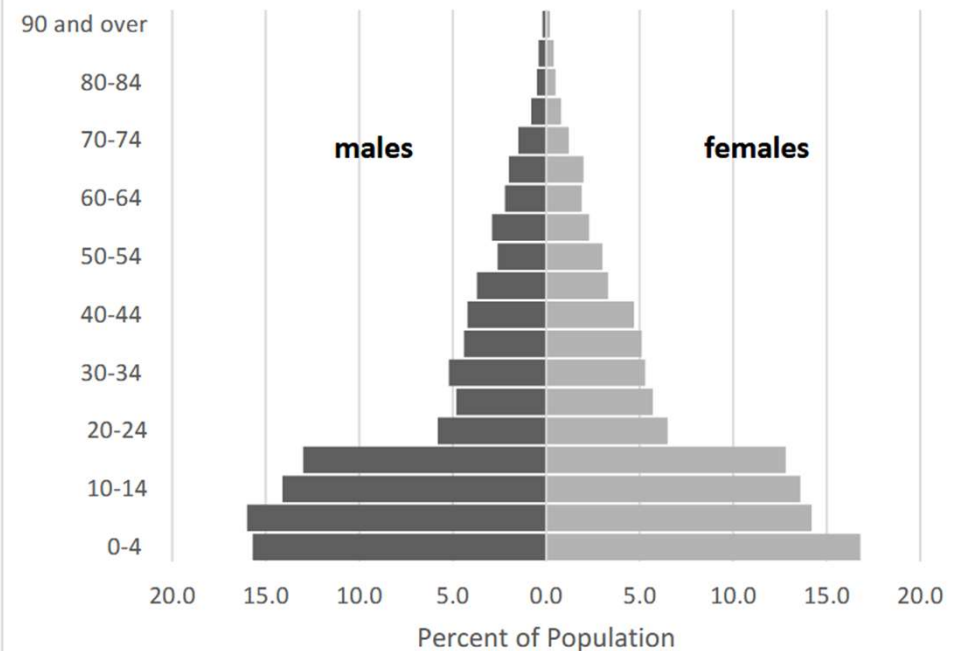
53% are under age 20

Population doubling time is 21 years

Roughly 15% of children do not join the church and assimilate, to one degree or another “into the “the world”

Donnermeyer, J. (2023). A Demographic Profile of the Greater Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Amish. *The Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities* 3(2):1-34.
doi: 10.18061/jpac.v3i2.9154

Age-Sex Pyramid of Greater Lancaster County, PA,
2015 Directory

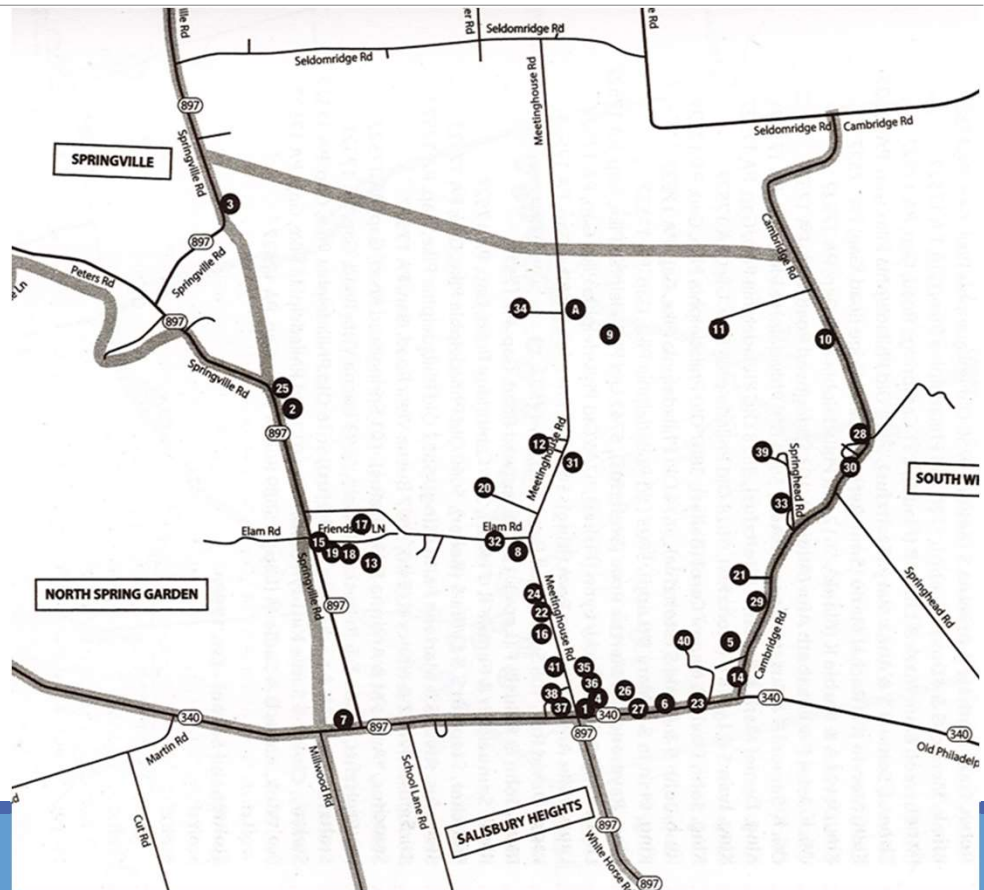


Amish: Highly local in organization

More than 630 local districts (congregations) of roughly two dozen households each

No conferences, synods, diocese, or other institutions.

An Amish district in Lancaster County, PA
(North White Horse)



Amish

A few things we can generalize

- Rural residence
- German dialect is everyone's first language
 - Also speak and read English, from school-age onward
- Some element of regulated dress/appearance and limited use of technology
 - But much variety among settlements and affiliations
- Amish church members do not hold driver's licenses
 - Might hire non-Amish car or van service for some trips, or take public transportation (busses or Amtrak)
- Schooling ends with 8th grade
 - With few exceptions, attend Amish schools



Many things we *can't* generalize

Variation in customs, appearance, and even relative wealth



Many things we *can't* generalize

often, Amish communities reflect their surroundings

LANCASTER COUNTY, PA (2021)

Suburbanizing context, building trades

- Occupations of Amish men under age 65
 - farming 32 %
 - building trades 25 %
 - woodworking 12 %
 - metal fabrication 6 %
 - retail stores 4 %

HART COUNTY, KY (2020)

Timber & suburbanizing Bowling Green

- Occupations of Amish men under age 65
 - construction trades 43 %
 - logging 14 %
 - sawmills 12 %
 - woodworking 5 %
 - farming 3 %



Youth activity, mixed-gender athletics but within the ethnic peer groups *(photo by Daniel Rodriques)*



Amish Storm Aid

Young adult Amish volunteers rebuild homes damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Ida in Larose, Louisiana *(photo Jan. 2024, courtesy Mennonite Disaster Service, Lititz, Pa.)*

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Old Order Mennonites

Many similarities with the Amish but also differences

- For example, Old Order Mennonites have church meetinghouse, whereas Amish meet for worship in members' homes
- Old Order Mennonites have a church *conference* structure that provides more uniformity (greater uniformity in practice and in approving/rejecting something) across local areas than is found among Amish groups



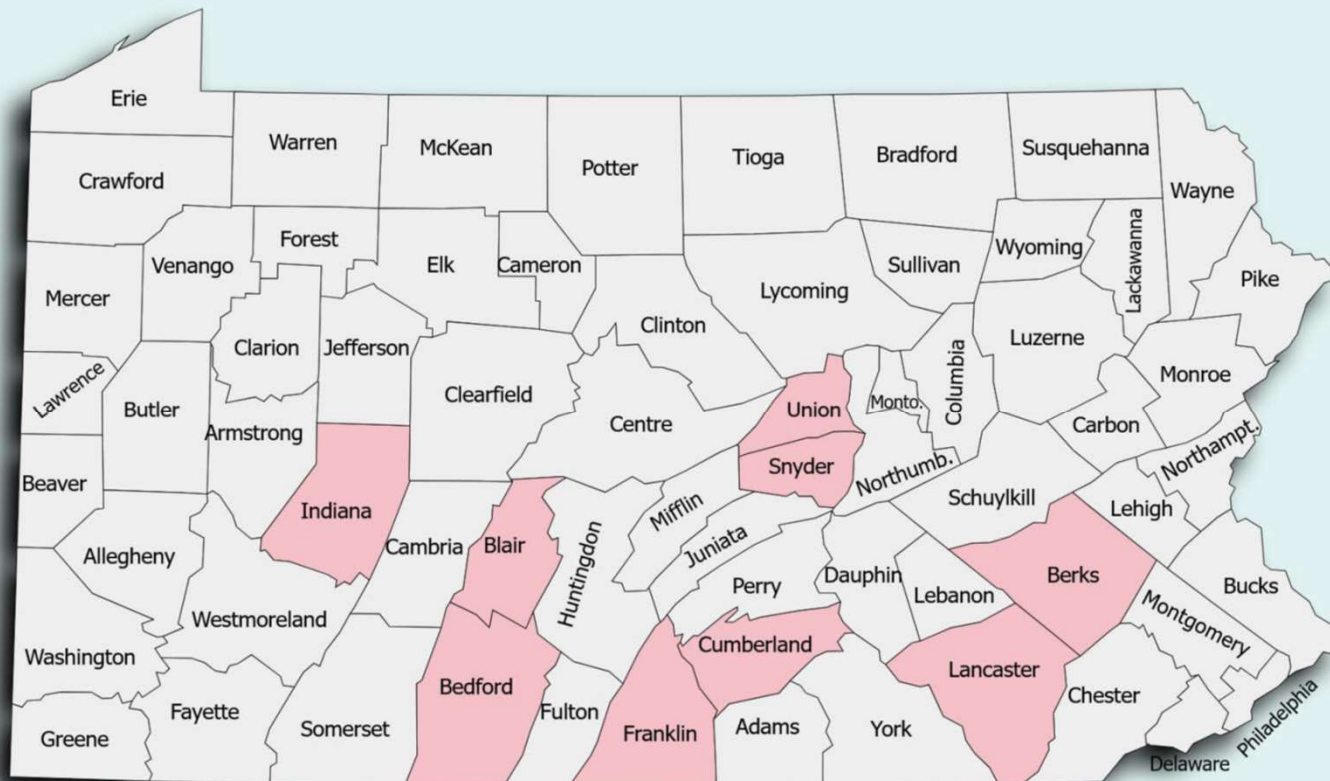
Old Order Mennonite
church meetinghouse

Old Order Mennonite
buggy, Lancaster
County, PA



Horse-and-buggy Old Order Mennonites

12,450 people in 32 congregations across 9 counties



Counties with one or more churches of:

Groffdale Conference
Mennonites, Stauffer
Mennonites, and/or
Reidenbach Mennonites

Conservative Mennonites and Amish-Mennonites

In 2025, approx. 20,000 adults and children in Pennsylvania

- More than a dozen groups, some which use the name *Beachy Amish* or *Amish-Mennonite*

A really varied category

- Members adhere to some element of distinctive “plain” dress (specifics varying by group), and hold tradition gender role
- Reject most entertainment technologies
 - E.g., no TV, streaming services, etc.
- Otherwise, transportation and household technology not limited
- Many have internet access, but highly-filtered



Conservative Mennonites and Amish-Mennonites

A really varied category

- Formal education level varies: 10th or 12th grade (their own schools) and in *some* groups also attend college (e.g., nursing, business)
- Few farmers, very few speak Pennsylvania Dutch; include converts of varied backgrounds. Many live in suburban and even urban areas



2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

a. *Gelassenheit* (yielding) or *Uffgevva*

Collectivist culture

Yielding to God, to others, to the church, to tradition, to older community members



2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

a. *Gelassenheit* (yielding) or *Uffgevva*

- Expressed in ...
 - desire to know what the group thinks before taking individual action
 - hesitancy to put oneself forward as an example or a model
 - reluctance to call attention to oneself by being named in a publication or posing for a picture
 - patience – waiting, waiting to understand
 - divine providence – not fatalism or predestination – but an acceptance of human limitation

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

a. *Gelassenheit* (yielding) or *Uffgevva*

- Thoughts on understanding the phrase “It’s God’s will”
 - A theological statement, yes. But also part of a *cultural repertoire*, that is, a statement typically expressed after a difficult, disappointing, or painful experience.
 - Expressing that “It’s God’s will,” is not a sign that an individual is uncaring or detached. It is an expression of *Gelassenheit*, linked to the Bible (James 4:13-15).
 - Hearing a Plain person say “It’s God’s will” doesn’t necessarily close down conversation; it might be an opening to a conversation on how things might go differently next time

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

b. High Context Culture

- High context culture vs. Low context culture

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

b. High Context Culture

- High context culture
 - Relationships with *specific people* matter more than relationships with *institutions* or *organizations*
 - Trust is typically invested in a known person rather than expertise alone
 - Much is lost when staff (or the local face) of an office, program, or initiative changes

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

b. High Context Culture

- High context culture
 - People are known in multiple ways and interactions are not narrowly role-defined
 - Trust is complex, roles overlap, much can be left unsaid, and confidentiality looks different

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

b. High Context Culture

- Neighbors as influencers
- Although Plain communities have a strong sense of separation and in-group identity, most members have many out-group relationships
 - Neighbors, coworkers, customers, drivers
 - Relationships of long-standing and high-context trust

2. Broadly shared cultural characteristics

c. Frontstage/backstage metaphor

- Backstage: Generally lively, consultative, relatively egalitarian
- Frontstage: Men generally do the speaking
 - If possible, allow for backstage time
 - When frontstage spokespeople feel pressed to speak without having had time for backstage conversation/consultation, they will typically default to the least risky (least new, least creative) option (*They still might, even with backstage conversation, but ...*)

Dr. John A. Hostetler (1918-2001)



3. Language:

Old Order Amish & Old Order Mennonites

German dialect is everyone's *first* language

- Pennsylvania Dutch (a.k.a. Pennsylvania German)*
 - Language of home/community
 - Oral/spoken language; really no print matter in the dialect

*For a small number of Amish in Clarion, Crawford, and Tioga Counties it's not PA Dutch, but a different Swiss-German dialect

All are bilingual: English as everyone's second language

- Language of Amish / OOM schooling
- Interaction with outsiders
- Amish / OOM printed material/magazines/community newspapers are in English
- Key religious texts – Bible, prayerbook, hymnal in standard German
 - *NB*: Most families also have English Bibles, usually King James Version; Old Order Mennonites use both English and German hymnals in worship



3. Language:

Old Order Amish & Old Order Mennonites

English is everyone's *second* language

- Talking about highly personal matters, emotions, or nuanced subjects will be harder in English even if, on a day-to-day basis, individuals are genuinely fluent English speakers
- Preschool-age children might not be conversant in English
 - May depend on home situation: Does family have a home-based business where children hear lots of English-speaking customers? Or, the child's birth order—Do they have multiple older siblings who speak English at school?

Translate print materials into Pennsylvania Dutch?

- In most cases, English print materials are preferred. But since English is a second language, do invest energy into making sure materials are easier-to-understand-English

3. Language:

Car-driving Plain Anabaptist groups

Almost all monolingual English speakers

Few or no Pennsylvania Dutch speakers

- For a few, in some groups, Pennsylvania Dutch might be a heritage language, if they grew up in an Old Order home and later joined a less traditional church

3. Education / schooling: Old Order Amish & Old Order Mennonites

One-room schools, serving combined grades 1-8. Typically, 18-26 students

One teacher and assistant (“teacher’s helper”) from the church-community;
almost always women

Curriculum:

- Reading and grammar, spelling, math to pre-algebra, geography, penmanship
- Limited science, history; not much civics. Singing and drawing, but not music and art *classes*
- No religion or Bible classes
- German reading/spelling in some schools, for older grades



3. Education / schooling: Old Order Amish & Old Order Mennonites

Example of swift change alongside tradition: School vest movement

- Cumberland, Lancaster, Chester, Dauphin, York Counties (*I can't personally vouch for it elsewhere*)

Sparked by Penn State Extension nurse/safety educator Kay Moyer in 2014

- Example of long-term relationship building and trust



3. Education / schooling: Conservative, car-driving groups

- Educational attainment might be grade 10, or 12 or college, depending on group
 - In most groups, church-operated schools are the norm, but home schooling is not uncommon in these groups
- These church-operated schools are, in key respects, different from Old Order schools and more like evangelical Christian schools outside the Plain world
 - Teachers are more often male (esp. in upper grades 7–12)
 - Religion classes are standard part of curriculum
 - Curriculum is not ca. 1940 public school curriculum, but a wider curriculum including many subjects, but with certain differences (e.g., biology would not include teaching about evolution)

4. Plain groups' views of government

- Keen sense of separation of church and state
 - Historical and theological
- Historical legacy of persecution
 - *Don't make too much of this, but ...*
- “the state” is not *us*
 - Weak sense of civic identification
 - “Two Kingdoms” theology



Maria van Beckum, en Urfel, haers Broeders Wif. 1544.

4. Two kingdoms theology

Kingdom of God

- Expressed on earth through the church
- Functions via a nonresistant and cooperative ethic
- Not responsible for society at large; responsible for itself

Kingdom of this world

- Often in rebellion against Divine will, and thus in need of civil management / control
 - Government is a *necessary evil*
- Functions via an ethic of coercion and violence
- Is self-aggrandizing and tries to control everything

4. Two kingdoms theology

Preceding slide suggests a stark, idealized dichotomy

Reality of lived experience is more nuanced

- Bible enjoins them to pray for government and pay taxes
- Seek to obey the law unless it intrudes on the realm of the church
 - May well be disagreement between church and state over where that boundary lies
- Plain Church members generally understand that they are part of communities that are wider than the church
 - Examples: Participating in a volunteer fire company; asking the public library bookmobile to stop at their schools; occasionally—in some communities—voting
 - Influenced by political views of non-Amish neighbors

4. Subjects vs. Citizens: One theoretical lens

Subjects receive privileges in exchange for obligations

- Outcomes are negotiated and specific
- Privileges and obligations differ from group to group

Citizens have rights and responsibilities

- Ideally, outcomes are legally-determined and universal
- Rights are inherent to the individual, same for all

4. Subjects vs. Citizens: One theoretical lens

A subject-like stance has been endorsed, in one sense, by the state itself, in the form of various exemptions

- 1955 from high school attendance in Pennsylvania
 - Later in other states and then in 1972 by U.S. Supreme Court
- 1965 from Social Security (if self-employed or employed by another Plain Church member)
- 1965, as above, from Medicare
- 2003 from portions of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act governing child labor in family-run businesses
- 2010 from Affordable Care Act individual insurance mandate

Note: these exemptions pertain to horse-driving groups; *some* apply to *some* car-driving groups

4. Plain groups' views of government

A few points to note

- Plain people pay taxes
 - Exemption from Social Security, Medicare, and Workers Compensation* payroll taxes are based on the notion that these are insurance programs and not taxes as such
- Individuals who are exempt cannot receive benefits from these programs
- Legal wording of these exemptions create a hesitation to accept any publicly-funded service

* Workers Comp exemption is a state-based exemption in Pennsylvania and a few other states

Form **4029**
(Rev. November 2018)

Application for Exemption From Social Security and Medicare Taxes and Waiver of Benefits
Go to www.irs.gov/Form4029 for the latest information.
Before you file this form, see the instructions under Who may apply on page 2.
This exemption is granted only if the IRS returns a copy to you marked "Approved."

Department of the Treasury
Internal Revenue Service

OMB No. 1545-0064
File Three Copies

Caution: Approval of Form 4029 exempts you from social security and Medicare taxes only. The exemption does not apply to federal income tax. Ministers, members of religious orders, and Christian Science practitioners, see Form 4361, Application for Exemption From Self-Employment Tax for Use by Ministers, Members of Religious Orders, and Christian Science Practitioners.

Part I To Be Completed by Applicant

1 Name of taxpayer	2 Social security number
Address (number, street, or P.O. box)	3 Date of birth
City or town, state, and ZIP code	4 Contact phone number (optional)

☐ Do not send me my Social Security Statement.

I certify that I am and continuously have been a member of _____
(Name of religious group)

_____ (Religious district or congregation, and county and/or city, state, and ZIP code)

since _____, and as a follower of the established teachings of that group, I am conscientiously opposed to
(Month) (Day) (Year)

accepting benefits of any private or public insurance that makes payments in the event of death, disability, old age, or retirement; or makes payments for the cost of medical care; or provides services for medical care. Public insurance includes any insurance system established by the Social Security Act.

I request that I be exempted from paying social security and Medicare taxes on my earnings from self-employment under Internal Revenue Code section 1401 and from the employer's share of social security and Medicare taxes under Internal Revenue Code section 3111.

I further request exemption from the employer's share of social security and Medicare taxes under Internal Revenue Code section 3101, for my services as an employee whenever I am employed by an employer who has an identical exemption from social security and Medicare taxes.

I waive all rights to any social security payment or benefit under Titles II and XVIII of the Social Security Act. I understand and agree that no benefits or other payments of any kind under Titles II and XVIII of the Social Security Act will be paid based on my wages and self-employment income to any other person. I certify that I have never received benefits or payments under the above titles, nor has anyone else received these benefits based on my earnings.

I agree to notify the Internal Revenue Service within 60 days of any occurrence that results in my no longer being a member of the religious group described above, or no longer following the established teachings of this group. See Where to file on page 2.

Furthermore, I understand that if the tax exemption for myself or for my employer under sections 1402(g)(1) or 3127 of the Internal Revenue Code is no longer effective, this waiver will also no longer be effective for:

- Myself, with respect to all my wages and self-employment income; and
- My employees with respect to wages I may pay to them; and that if my employer's exemption is no longer in effect, my exemption will end with respect to wages paid to me by my employer. However, the waiver will no longer be effective only to the extent that benefits and other payments under Titles II and XVIII of the Social Security Act can be payable on the basis of:
- My self-employment income for and after the first tax year in which the exemption ends; and
- My wages for and after the calendar quarter following the calendar quarter in which the exemption no longer meets the requirements of section 1402(g)(1) or 3127 on which the end of the exemption is based.

Under penalties of perjury, I declare that I have examined this application and waiver, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, it is true and correct.

Signature of Applicant _____ Date _____

Part II To Be Completed by Authorized Representative of Religious Group (Print or type)

<https://www.etown.edu/centers/young-center/>

4. Plain groups' views of government

A few points to note

- As with many communities, memories of bad experiences persist much longer in a social ecosystem than do good experiences
 - You may be dealing with resistance or fear or anger that you did not create and may no longer be relevant due to reforms within the system, but the legacy of the negative experience lingers
- Response to a bad experience with a system will generally not be to file a civil rights lawsuit (or a malpractice lawsuit, etc.), but will be withdraw and noncooperation
- I am aware of concern on the part of some Plain church leaders that their members are sometimes “used” by third parties to score political points in the court of public opinion because Plain people make attention-grabbing stories

Questions, discussion

Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies

