

## **Tied to the Land: An Analysis of Amish Migration and Community Formation**

The Amish are a sectarian group whose origins go back to 1693 when a separation occurred over various issues related to lifestyle and religious practices between the followers of a conservative religious leader named Jacob Ammann and those of the more progressive Swiss Brethren (or Swiss Mennonite) leaders (Nolt, 1992; Hostetler, 1993). The first Amish came to North America from Europe in 1737 attracted by the opportunity to own land in Pennsylvania. Early church leaders encouraged new immigrant families to find land close to one another so that they could both worship together and share their difficult farming tasks. This resulted in less reliance on their non-Amish neighbors for help, and established the idea of strong community bonds among Amish families early on which has remained a central unifying theme to Amish life.

Several successive waves of Amish migration occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of these new immigrants settled in Western Pennsylvania and states further west: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa, plus Ontario. By 1900, there were few Amish remaining in Europe but approximately 5000 Amish in the United States, living in about 20 communities located in 8 states and Ontario. Their survival was due both to immigration from Europe, to high fertility rates, and the fact that they built cohesive communities which helped them overcome high levels of dropping out or conversion to other Christian faiths.

By World War II there were no Amish left in Europe, yet by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the Amish population in North America had grown to approximately 200,000. This period of tremendous population growth during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was due entirely to the internal dynamics of the Amish population (Ericksen, Ericksen, Hostetler and Huntington, 1979; Wasao and Donnermeyer, 1996), without benefit of immigration from Europe or of growth through conversions (Crowley, 1978). Family sizes have averaged 5-6 children over recent generations, and almost 1 in 5 Amish couples still have 10 or more children today (Cooksey and Donnermeyer, 2004). At the same time, rates of leaving the Amish faith have declined (Greska and Korbin, 2002; Cooksey and Donnermeyer, 2004). The Amish population is consequently doubling approximately every 20 years.

With rapid population growth has come both an increase in the number of church districts within a settlement area, as well as migration and the establishment of new communities. Because Amish religious beliefs are intimately related to their lifestyle which emphasizes both a symbolic and literal separation from many “worldly” things, it is imperative for the Amish to maintain close-knit communities where they are able to worship with each other on a face-to-face basis (Donnermeyer, 1997). Church districts are therefore usually made up of no more than 25 to 30 families. This helps to ensure that the distance between families is sufficiently close that everyone is able to drive by horse and buggy to every other member’s residence for Sunday service (Crowley, 1978; Kraybill, 2001). The largest Amish settlement in the world is the Holmes County Settlement area in Ohio where the number of church districts increased from 44 in 1965 to 222 in 2003. This settlement is made up of almost 5500 families and close to 30,000 adults and children. A

shift from farming to non-farm occupations such as carpentry and construction, along with a variety of other Amish owned micro-enterprises has meant that fewer acres are needed today than in the past to support the population. This has aided in the expansion of existing settlements (Wasao and Donnermeyer, 1996).

A second response to rapid population growth has been migration to new areas of the United States. Groups of men, known as “land parties,” constantly search for places where new communities or settlements can be established. In 1990, there were 176 Amish communities in North America. Today, in response to rapid population growth and the inability of extant communities to accommodate everyone, that number has nearly doubled to about 330 communities in the U.S. and another 12 in Ontario, Canada (Luthy, 2003).

Our analysis of Amish migration patterns is made up of two parts. First, we examine issues related to the formation of new communities, paying particular attention to the point of origin of founding families. Information for this analysis is derived from records maintained at the Heritage Historical Library in Aylmer, Ontario. This privately owned library includes “news” files on all communities founded since 1990, based on three newspapers which serve an Amish readership. These include *The Budget* (Sugercreek, Ohio), *Die Botschaft* (loosely translated, “The Ambassador,” Lancaster, Pennsylvania), and *The Diary* (Gordonville, Pennsylvania). Each newspaper periodically includes reports from Amish settlements that provide readers with information on recent migrations, plus births, deaths, accidents and illnesses, and other events that are reminiscent of the role played in earlier times by the “Town Crier.” Through these sources, we are able to map the location of new communities and connect them back to the place of origin of founding families. In addition, accounts from each news source includes valuable anecdotal information relating to the search for appropriate locations of new communities, motivations for establishing new communities and why certain families move there, and events related to building the economic, social, and religious infrastructure necessary to sustain new Amish settlements over time.

Second we analyze factors associated with the migration of Amish families using a STATA database that we are putting together that incorporates key demographic information derived from published directories of various Amish settlements in Ohio. Although Amish communities can be found in such far-flung locations as northwest Montana, southern Texas, and northern Maine, the lion’s share of settlements are concentrated in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana . Ohio has the largest percentage of Amish families in the country with 27% of all Amish communities living in 41 settlements and 375 church districts. Approximately 80% of Ohio Amish are included in our database. Directories from Amish communities are organized by church district and within each church district, every family member is listed under the male head of household. Directories typically include information on the birth, marriage and death dates of spouses, birth and death dates of children, plus information on whether or not adult children have remained Amish, and if so, where they are currently living. We are therefore able to trace the movement of adult children who have moved to an Amish community that differs from that of their parents. Our analyses will include an

examination of the associations between moving to another community amongst adult children and various individual and family level characteristics, including gender, age, father's occupation, birth order, family size, and whether an older or younger sibling might also have moved to the same settlement.

Our first set of analyses relating to the establishment of new communities is well underway. We have also undertaken preliminary analyses of individual migration using data from the Holmes County Area Settlement. We are currently in the midst of adding data from Geauga County, Ohio, (the fourth largest Amish settlement in North America) into our database, along with data from a number of smaller Ohio Amish Communities. We anticipate completing our analyses by January 2005, and will have a completed paper ready well before March 1<sup>st</sup>.

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