

In Pursuit of Jesus

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In February seven members of Sojourners Community visited the Woodcrest Bruderhof in Rifton, New York. The following is a recounting of the history of the Bruderhof as told to Sojourners by some of the Bruderhof's earliest members.--The Editors

Hardy Arnold: I was 8 years old when the community started in a little village in central Germany called Sannerz with my parents, Emmy and Eberhard Arnold, my aunt, we five children, and various friends. Right from the beginning, we had many guests, because after the first world war, people in the so-called youth movement in Germany were looking for a new way of life. They were disillusioned with Christians who had killed each other by the million, and yet went to church on Sunday.

When my parents had lived in Berlin, they had an open house once a week and 80 to 100 people came and shared together about the best way to live. They read the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the early church in Acts 2 and 4 and felt more and more that we should live like the early Christians.

My parents had been influenced by the revival movement in Germany, which originally goes back to Charles Finney and the American revival movement. The emphasis for them was on personal conversion and a clear stand with regard to the way the early Christians had lived. That led them to decide to share everything in common.

My parents had also been influenced by the old message of religious socialism,

which was strong not only in Switzerland but also in Germany. It proclaimed that the economic injustices of the world had to be overcome by love. Religious socialists believed we had to stand on the side of the workers and the poor who were exploited. And although my parents never became socialists in the political sense, they always chose the side of the poor, the working class. They always said, "We don't want any middle-class economic security, we want to live on faith."

The community wondered at first whether they should live in the city or in the country and finally decided on the country, in this village of Sannerz. There was a movement in that area of Germany called the New Work movement, and my father was the editor of its magazine from 1920 to the fall of 1922. More than 2,000 guests came to visit us there every year, and although not all stayed overnight, many had to sleep in haylofts in the barns because there were not enough rooms available.

But in 1922 came a crisis. Some churches felt that our community life was too radical because we shared all our goods in common. Several pastors tried to convince the young people to go out in the world, to live like ordinary people, to be a leaven in the dough, rather than live together. Quite a few guests and members left us so that only seven adult members and about seven or eight children were left. This lasted until 1927 when the community again had grown to about 40 people.

From the beginning we took in underprivileged or orphaned children, bringing them up together with our own children in order to do something for the need in the world. We also kept in close contact with the whole youth movement in Germany and the working-class people in our area because, although we did not join the socialists, we considered ourselves religious socialists from the start.

We stayed there until 1927 and then we moved to Sparhof, a small village seven

miles north of Sannerz, about two hours' walking distance away. We bought a farm and called it the Rhon Bruderhof. We lived in community as we had in Sannerz, with many guests and new members. In 1933 Hans Meier came from Zurich, Switzerland, with a community, and many of this group joined the Bruderhof. We grew to about 150 people.

When Hitler came to power in Germany, we got into a conflict with the National Socialist system. They first closed our school, which caused us to send our children abroad to Switzerland and later to Liechtenstein because we would not send our children to National Socialist schools. We disagreed with what they taught about hating Jews, going to war, and almost worshiping Germany like an idol. We disagreed with the custom of raising your hand and saying, "Heil, Hitler," but it was almost illegal in Germany to refuse to do that. We were no longer allowed to have any guests except new members, or to sell our books and goods which we needed for our income.

But all that was not as serious as when in 1935 conscription, or compulsory military service, was introduced in Germany by the Hitler government. All our young men, who refused to serve, would either be imprisoned or killed by the very ruthless National Socialist government if they did not leave the country. After serious consideration we decided to leave and serve God's Kingdom rather than die at that juncture.

These seven young men came with us when we started our Liechtenstein Bruderhof. But in 1936 the law of conscription was extended to Germans living abroad. The Liechtenstein government would not offer asylum to conscientious objectors, and that's why we moved again and started the third Bruderhof in England in 1936.

Shortly before that move, on November 22, 1935, my father died very suddenly and unexpectedly after an operation to amputate his broken leg. We were left

without our founder, our spiritual leader, our father, and this was a very, very terrible blow. Nevertheless, we felt we had to carry on as before.

We now had our three communities. They lasted until 1937 when the Rhon Bruderhof was finally dissolved by the Gestapo, the German secret police. They said we were communists and that we were not wanted in Germany. But the members wanted to continue living in community, either at the Alm Bruderhof in Liechtenstein or the Cotswold Bruderhof in England. Finally the Gestapo agreed and provided passports, but because they had confiscated the community bank account, we in England and Liechtenstein had to pay for their transportation.

Hans Meier: We came to the Bruderhof in 1933 on the day when Hitler came to power—of all the times to go to Germany! We were born in Switzerland, and we had tried to live in community in Switzerland for three years on an idealistic-ethical-socialist basis. As you know, human good will is not sufficient for community, so we had to seek for the real basis. We had heard of the Bruderhof through the religious socialists of Switzerland, and, as we didn't find unity in our community in Switzerland, all those who were serious joined the Bruderhof.

In November 1933 Hitler arranged a vote which asked the German people to confirm his politics. We in the Bruderhof considered several suggestions about what we should do. In the end, Eberhard drafted a statement in which we declared that our leader is Christ alone, and that though we recognized the task of a worldly government, we are forbidden to do anything that is contrary to Jesus' teachings. Everyone wrote this statement down on the gummed label on the voting paper.

Three or four days later we had 160 of the Gestapo surrounding and storming the Bruderhof. They took books from the library—all the books with red covers as proof that we were communists. They searched for weapons and were

disgusted when they didn't find any. They had been ordered to come in the middle of the night to raid a communist nest. They took many of the minutes we had taken of our meetings, but we still had much more. I took what was left to safety in Switzerland in two big rucksacks; otherwise they wouldn't be in the archives today.

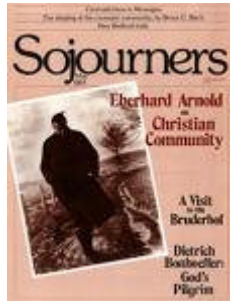
I inquired in Switzerland if we could bring our children to a community we had gotten to know earlier. They offered to take our children, but only if the government was in agreement. The government refused, asking why we wanted to move our children out of Germany. They knew we were C.O.'s, and to be a CO in Switzerland then was a crime. Finally we brought the children over without permission in the beginning of the year. And then I was sent to Czechoslovakia to find out whether we could find a place there.

I was away from the Bruderhof a fortnight and, because of the situation, I did not know whether it still existed. So I sneaked up through the woods in the night and saw lights there. And then I heard a voice that I recognized, so I knew the Bruderhof still existed. I was very glad to be with them again.

Soon after, two of us were sent to Berlin to find out from the Gestapo themselves what they had in mind for us. So we went into the lions' den in Berlin, and they read all through the minutes they had captured and said, "Yes, there is sufficient reason for you to be dissolved because you, especially Eberhard Arnold, have accused the German government of showing the character of the beast of the abyss." That had been taken down in the minutes. After warning us that we should recognize Hitler as the real leader of the Germans, they let us go.

We decided we wanted to find out how to lead a spiritual fight against the political atmosphere that was developing in Germany. We went to visit the Confessing Church and Martin Niemoller, who was very well known. Niemoller declared to us that on the basis of Romans 13, we should be obedient to the

government. He knew that we refused to do military service and said, "I can't go with you. If Hitler asked me to go back to the submarine"—because he had been a submarine captain during the first world war—"I will go. I will be obedient. I will disobey only if he hinders me in proclaiming the word of God."



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Niemoller was later taken prisoner because he spoke up against the laws against the Jews. For eight years, until 1945, he was in a concentration camp. He experienced during that time a conversion to radical Christianity after the following event. To anger and burden Niemoller, the Gestapo hung a man in front of his window. He was furious. Then suddenly he no longer saw a man there, he saw Christ hanging on the tree saying, "God, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing." That was the moment of his conversion.

Hardy: From the very beginning, when the community started in Sannerz, my father and mother had looked out for other communities with which to unite. My father used to say, "We want to do nothing on our own, we don't want to be a group on our own." During his search he found the Hutterites, whom he had known from studying theology. In 1930 and '31 my father visited 30 Hutterian communities and found them spiritually awake—deeply grounded in Christ and deeply moved by the Spirit. He united with them on behalf of the Rhon Bruderhof in Germany.

Seven years after our uniting, something happened that helped us very much.

Two Hutterian brothers from North America came to visit the Rhon Bruderhof in Germany just three days before it was dissolved and the bank account confiscated.

Hans: We had read, I think in a Mennonite paper, that every member of the Hutterians had refused to serve in the first world war. When these two brothers came to help us, they went with me to visit the governor of our town.

In the old German art, they addressed the governor as "thou," and one put his hand on the governor's shoulder and said, "What do you have against my brothers?" The governor didn't know what to do, and he said, "Oh, I have nothing against them. Of course, they can't go on refusing to do military service. That's against the law." That was all. As we went out, one of the brothers said, "Beware of him, he's a fox." Two days later about 100 soldiers and policemen came and declared that the Bruderhof was dissolved to protect the German government against violent communist attacks.

The Gestapo felt immediately afterward that they had made a mistake because the two brothers would go back to North America and tell what was happening in Germany. Hitler didn't wish to have information against Germany spread in America.

So the Gestapo found another excuse for dissolving the Bruderhof. They accused us of criminal bankruptcy, forcing us to pay our debts. We said, "There are plenty of assets to cover the debts if you give us back what you have confiscated." But they refused to do that. Finally the community was released, and we three who had been responsible for the community were put in prison.

Hardy: Quite a few people were imprisoned during World War II. And Hans Meier wasn't in prison only during the Nazi time; he was imprisoned for refusing to do military service before he came to the Bruderhof. He was telling me earlier

today that after the second jail term and a refusal to serve the third time, the normal procedure was not to jail a person but to declare him insane. So we have an insane man among us.

Hans: The judge spent three months trying to find out if we were guilty of criminal bankruptcy, and he couldn't find anything. The Gestapo told us, "If the judge lets you go free, we'll get you in the concentration camp. You can't escape us, you are in prison." We did escape though, once we were released. There was a black car there waiting for us when we got out of prison. We didn't know why the car was there or what it would do. But then the driver gave us a letter from our lawyer with 20 marks inside and instructions to take the car and try to escape as far as possible. We went to Holland, and the Dutch Mennonites cared for us until we could move on to England.

Hardy: We came from Germany in 1937. Both the Liechtenstein and the German Bruderhofs united with the Bruderhof in England.

Winifred Hidel: England, just before the outbreak of the second world war, was in quite a ferment. There was quite a vigorous peace movement, and the Peace Pledge Union and the League of Nations were flourishing. People had high hopes that the first world war had been the last, but it was becoming increasingly clear that we would really have to get together if we wanted to prevent another world war. I think there was quite a lot of optimism about pacifism in those days.

I was disillusioned with the Church of England because I had really hoped for a change in my life after I was confirmed at the age of 13. I vividly remember walking home feeling nothing had changed, least of all myself, and I was profoundly disappointed. I had little to do with the church until I got to high school. We were studying comparative religion and we had gone quickly through all the religions of the world. When we came to Christianity, I was just floored by

Jesus' statement, "I am the way, I am the truth." I was completely convinced that those are words of truth, but I hadn't found it anywhere.

I started to search for this sort of Christianity, and when I got to college at the age of 19, I found that others were searching too. Most of my contemporaries were asking, "What are the major issues in life? What is life all about? What are we meant to do with our lives?" We used to talk until 3 or 4 in the morning about these questions. I was quite active in the League of Nations and the Peace Pledge Union.

Then when the war broke out there was quite a lot of sincere hope among the circles we were in that if young men gave their lives for England to crush Hitler, it would really be a war to end something infamous, and it really would end war. So very many went into the war with high hopes, and those who were left behind as pacifists were faced with the question, what are the alternatives? That became a very serious question.

One of my college friends had been to the Bruderhof, and we talked about what it was like. I said, "No, I belong to the world. I want to do something for the world. The Bruderhof is not my place. But I'll go there on my way to a Quaker work camp, just to spend one night." I was traveling on a bicycle, and I had no money. Since the work camp was too far to ride in one day, I planned to cycle 60 miles, spend a night free at the Bruderhof, and carry on to the Quaker work camp.

But when I got to the entrance of the Bruderhof, I pedaled down the drive feeling I had come home, without having met anybody. I was there for one night, but I asked if I could stay the weekend. They said yes. It happened to be Easter weekend, and it was a very powerful experience. I asked all the questions I had about social issues. I then asked to stay a week, and in that week I decided that it was exactly what I was looking for.

As a very small girl growing up in a mining town, I had felt the injustice of poverty. I questioned my mother, "Why doesn't everybody just share all the money equally?" The question of old people also concerned me a lot. So many elderly were alone and not wanted in their very best years. Quite a number of us came with the question of what we should do with old people. I had already decided that I would have nothing more to do with education in England, because of the competitive nature of it. I wanted to give my life for something that brings no income, but didn't know how I would live and eat. So the Bruderhof was a real answer to many, many of the questions we had thrashed over in our college days.

I made a decision to finish my first year at college and return to the Bruderhof when I was done. That was a very painful time because everybody questioned what I was doing, including my family, and because I knew the whole community was going to emigrate at any time. This was at the height of the U-boat activity in the Atlantic, and any ship sailing would keep it secret, so I had no idea even if the Bruderhof would be there when I finished my first year.

At the end of the year, I got on my bike again and went to the Bruderhof, was vastly relieved to find it still there, and was given a cup of tea by Rudi. In October I became a novice and went back to say good-bye to my parents. I also visited my principal at college, and when she saw me she said, "I think you have made the right decision." She was very perceptive, and she felt the joy that I was feeling at having found the pearl of great price.

Many young people joined other communities which were less radical than the Bruderhof, but those have disappeared. I don't think one of them exists still. There were so many young people visiting the Bruderhof—by the busload—that there had to be several people on desk duty on Sundays and all through the week to receive them. I think they even got Rudi into it.

Rudi Hidel: The time at the Cotswold Bruderhof was really quite an experience for us. When Hardy's father and our spiritual leader died quite suddenly in 1935, we were actually rather lost, a lost flock without a shepherd. We had quite a lot of internal problems to solve after his death. When we came to England, we were inspired that, in spite of our shortcomings, in spite of our iniquities, the Spirit of God was moving among the people. We felt it very strongly. It wasn't our doing whatsoever, but God moved people then and we grew. When we came to England, we were hardly 150 in number, and we were 330 or so when we left four years later.

We had arrived with no money whatsoever and, with some help, bought a very rundown farm. Because we had been driven out of Germany, people felt compassion and helped us out. Also people were seeking a different life. We never experienced the building up of the community as we did in those four years. We started a printing shop, and we had guests come in busloads. And we were treated very decently in England by the government.

Then the war broke out. In very quick time Hitler had taken possession of many countries, and England was very afraid of being invaded. We were told that the Germans in our community would be interned if we did not emigrate. The British government made special arrangements for us to get travel documents so we could go to South America.

Hardy: We had considered Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and other countries. The only country that was willing to take us as we were—a group of young and old, children, men, and women, Jews and non-Jews—was Paraguay. The Mennonites had once told us that if we ever needed help, we should go to the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania. And that was why Hans Meier and another brother went to Akron when we were looking for a place where we could go. The MCC suggested Paraguay. So we went to Paraguay

through the help of the MCC, and they have always been our warm friends and still are now. The first group, of which I was a member, left in November 1940 and arrived in Paraguay the first days of January 1941.

Winifred: We had two other reasons for going to Paraguay. It offered us freedom from military service and freedom to teach our children in our own schools. Those were very important points.

John Hinde: I also went with the first group to Paraguay in late 1940. We went with much enthusiasm to build a life of brotherhood completely new in a foreign land. We were very poor. We soon ran up against the evil of our own nature. I think it wasn't until we left Paraguay 21 years later that I realized that it wasn't me that could do it, or we who could do it, but it was God. It was then that we realized the importance of "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit."

Although there was a great deal of personal sacrifice and dedication in the work, in many ways we strayed from the way of Jesus. The living Jesus in our hearts was pushed out; we did social work, we had our hospital, we tried to relate to the local Paraguayan people. We even had work camps, but inside we were in the wilderness. We set aside repentance. We had actually become enemies of repentance.

This had an effect on our relationship with the Hutterian brothers in North America because, in our pride, we thought we knew more about mission. This led to a temporary break with our brothers in 1955, which was because of our arrogance and pride. But through those years, again and again, there were voices among us who called us back to the lowly way of Jesus, the way of repentance, the small way, the childlike way from which we had turned.

And for us I think it was a very wonderful thing the way the Woodcrest Bruderhof began in the United States on the same basis as the early community

in the 1920s. We were able to turn back to the way Eberhard and Emmy Arnold and all who began the line had pointed out.

I think we're still searching very much for the right way. We must ask, "What would Jesus do in this or that situation?" And that's what I am longing to find for ourselves, our whole group, for all of us together—the way of Jesus in this world.

Arnold Mason: When my wife and I returned with others to England we really were moved by the love and enthusiasm of the small beginning. We felt that certain things needed some correction, but then because of our ambition and self-seeking we very seriously damaged this small beginning. Although we were living the life outwardly, we experienced the fight that goes on in our hearts for a true life of peace, and that very seriously damaged our life together.

That we are still together as brothers and sisters is really a miracle from God. It is nothing which we made; we have only stood in the way. It is very important, I think, that we seek all the time to know ourselves, to know that which rises again and again in our hearts which stands in the way of God.

Gladys Mason: I think all the way along, whatever one had to go through, one came back to what Eberhard had called us to. It has become clear to me more and more that you have to be prepared to give everything. That doesn't mean just money and houses. We did all that at the beginning, and it was quite easy. But also relatives should not get in the way. Just as Jesus said, husband and wife and children and everyone has to be less important than what Jesus was and taught.

I'm so thankful that today God has shown us the way again to stand against evil, in ourselves and in the group. It's a very rewarding experience when we come through and can feel that God's Spirit is among us. That's not just for the individual but it's the Spirit among us which is important, and that is why we're

so thankful that we've been able to keep together.

Now, not everybody has stayed; there have been a lot of casualties all along the way, but we always hope for those who go away that they will come back. But if they don't, we still have to go on, because the unity is between us. And it is something which is a wonderful source of strength; we have no other.

Hardy: What we have learned most of all is that unity is the most precious gift we have. And that can only come by God and his Spirit. We don't have it, we can't make it, we can't produce it, we can't keep it even one day without God coming to us.

And the second thing we have learned personally is that we should be humble and that nobody should look for his own influence or his own position or his own power. And the third thing I would like to mention is never make an idol of community as such. That's what we did in Paraguay. We made an idol of ourselves, of us living in community, and that destroys it absolutely.

Hans: I remember very much something that Eberhard Arnold expressed. In Revelation the church is described as a circle around a candle, around the light. In a vision, Eberhard saw the church as a lampstand with Jesus in the middle and quite a few other lights on both sides which represent, for instance, community, social work, peacemaking. These other things take their light only from Jesus, but the great danger exists that another light like community or social service or peacemaking is put in the center. We always have to repent if we move in this direction. We have to put Jesus in the middle of our personal life, and of the life of the whole community.

Winifred: I can actually only echo what the brothers have said. I have learned about the importance of the indwelling Christ and the importance of the Spirit speaking to the whole community. We believe the Spirit of God does not say

different things to different people, and that is where our unity comes from. We just trust that God's Spirit has been promised to us by Jesus and if we fight in our own hearts to be true to Jesus, he will give us the Spirit that leads to unity. This has become real in our lives, and I can't say how deeply thankful I am for that.

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