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EDITORIAL INFORMATION

Robin Black
10 E. Lancaster Avenue • Wynnewood, PA 19096.
PHONE: 610-645-9391 • E-MAIL: prism@esa-online.org
Unsolicited submissions will not be returned
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"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life."

PROVERBS 13:12

*"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."*

JEREMIAH 29:11

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Cover Power brokers: with the help of the Agros Foundation, 22 women in Cajixay, Guatemala, have formed a community bank. With a \$40 loan women in that village can start a small business that not only contributes to the family income but also increases the women's self-confidence and encourages them to become more involved in community affairs. (Photo by Gena Morgan)

The Bruderhof

BY PETER LARSON

Just down the road from Woodstock, N.Y., is a community where people live without money, cell phones, television, or fast food, where no one owns private property and no one lacks healthcare.

Aging hippies? Survivalists? Buddhist monks? No, this is the Bruderhof, a Christian community committed to being a first-century church in 21st-century America. In this community, the values are New Testament, not New Age. Sexual promiscuity is taboo, illegal drugs are forbidden, and everyone works hard—very hard—six days a week.

Members of Bruderhof communities are fervently anti-war, anti-abortion, anti-death penalty, anti-nationalism, and anti-capitalism. In an age when Christians are often indistinguishable from the rest of the culture, Bruderhof members are like rock salt: they don't blend. Like the early Puritans, they are fiercely determined to be in the world but not of it.

Historically, many Christian groups have attempted to live communally. The Shakers, the Moravians, and the Pilgrims of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were all based on the communitarian model found in Acts 4:32: "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; and no one said that any of his things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common... There was not a needy person among them for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold... Distribution was made to each as had any need."

Eventually, all of these Christian communities either failed or faded into extinction. The Moravians—who, in spite of marrying and having children, lived in gender-specific dormitories lest too much attention to family life distract them

from their missionary efforts—reverted to family life. The Pilgrims converted to capitalism. The Shakers—who didn't believe in sexual procreation—died out for obvious reasons.

Against this backdrop of failure, the Bruderhof has been surprisingly successful. Founded in 1920, the group has survived Nazi persecution and internal strife to become a worldwide movement. Today, the Bruderhof claims some 2,500 members in 10 communities located in the United States, England, Germany, and Australia. In addition, the Bruderhof's publishing ventures, Internet presence, and political activism give them a far-reaching influence. After four generations of communal life, the Bruderhof shows no signs of dying out. On the contrary, it seems to be growing.

When I first contact the Bruderhof to request an interview, they turn me down. Burned by negative publicity, they are reluctant to allow journalists in their midst. Eventually, we agree to a compromise: If I am willing to live and work with them as an ordinary visitor, I am welcome to come and stay a few days. So I pack my overnight bag and head for the Bruderhof's Woodcrest Community in Rifton, N.Y.

Early Roots

The Bruderhof (literally, "the place of Brothers") traces its roots to Eberhard Arnold, a Christian leader born in Germany in 1883. As a young theology student, Arnold was influenced by an evangelical revival that broke out in the city of Halle. In 1919, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was then an incurable disease. Arnold and his family retreated to the Tirolean Alps where he began studying the early Anabaptists and developing his vision of Christian community. In the

years that followed, Arnold was deeply moved by the suffering of German soldiers who returned from the trenches of World War I. After the war ended, Arnold found himself caught up in a youth movement that was sweeping Germany. Disillusioned with society, thousands of young Germans rejected the middle-class values of their parents and fled to the countryside. Like the American hippies of the 1960s, they wore simple clothing, decked their hair in wildflowers and gathered around campfires to dance to folk music played on guitars and recorders. They called themselves Wandervogel—"birds of passage."

How could he reach this lost generation? At first, Arnold envisioned a gypsy caravan that would travel from town to town, or an urban settlement in the slums. Finally, in 1920, he purchased a broken-down farmhouse in the village of Sannerz, and the Bruderhof was born. In that first year, more than 2,000 visitors descended on Sannerz, ranging from students and Christian groups to anarchists, atheists, tramps, and abandoned young women. By 1927 the farmhouse was so crowded that they purchased a second farmhouse in Sparhof, called the Rhon Bruderhof.

With the rise of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party, Bruderhof members were persecuted for their pacifist and anti-nationalist beliefs. In March of 1933, Arnold defiantly declared that the cross and the swastika were absolute opposites. During a national election that same year, members of the Bruderhof attached a statement of faith to their ballots, proclaiming their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. In November of 1933, 140 armed S.S. and Gestapo officers surrounded the Rhon Bruderhof and searched the community for weapons, books, and subversive writings. Two years later, Arnold died after a prolonged illness.

In 1937 Nazi storm troopers again invaded the Bruderhof, confiscating their property and giving them 48 hours to leave the country or face imprisonment and the concentration camp. Overnight the group fled to Holland and then to England, where they joined a fledgling Bruderhof community in the Cotswolds. In England, however, the group was viewed with suspicion. Their German roots and pacifist views made them deeply unpopular in a country that was fighting for its very survival. Produce from the Bruderhof farm was boycotted, and German members of the community risked internment as aliens. Once again, the group was forced into exile. Denied entrance to Canada or the United States, the Bruderhof relocated to Paraguay in Latin America where they established a 3,000-acre farm and a hospital. By 1954 the group had grown to 700 members, including 100 refugees from Eastern Europe.

After the war, members of the Bruderhof began visiting the United States, where they made contact with likeminded Christians and conscientious objectors. In 1954 they

established their first American community at Woodcrest, two hours north of New York City in the Hudson River Valley. Since arriving in the United States, the group has endured some wrenching conflicts. They have clashed, at times, with branches of the Hutterite communities in North America over issues of doctrine and an alleged political takeover. In 1990 two groups of Hutterites formally broke with the Bruderhof, excommunicating them. The Bruderhof has also been torn by internal divisions.

Despite these conflicts, the Bruderhof has continued to grow and plant new communities. If nothing else, the conflict has made them deeply aware of their shortcomings. Bruderhof members harbor no illusion of living in utopia; indeed, they speak openly of their failures.

The Bruderhof Today

Arriving at the Woodcrest Community, I am directed to the main dining room, where lunch is being served. At first glance it looks pretty much like a family church camp, with several hundred adults and children seated at long wooden tables. On closer inspection I notice that the women have their heads covered and are wearing long skirts. Most of the men wear beards. At the Bruderhof, lunch and dinner are served in the common dining hall; breakfast is cooked and eaten in personal living quarters.

The Bruderhof is not, strictly speaking, a closed community. They pay taxes, support local fire departments and



ambulance crews, and run food banks. Once a year they invite their neighbors to a Christmas celebration, and they interact with local schools, churches, and hospitals. Unlike the Branch Dividians in Waco, Tex., members of the Bruderhof have won the trust and confidence of local authorities and the respect of their neighbors.

After lunch we go to work. The main source of income at the Woodcrest Community is Rifton Equipment, where they manufacture products for people with disabilities. I am given a place on the assembly line, which affords me the opportunity to talk with several of the workers.

Milton, 24, grew up in the Bruderhof. His grandfather was a doctor and conscientious objector who joined the Paraguay community during World War II. Milton was educated within the Bruderhof until he reached high school, when he was sent to the local public school. After graduation, he spent a year backpacking in Europe and Israel.

Upon his return home he enrolled in a pre-law program at the State University of New York but found he didn't like it. Today he is studying to become a doctor practitioner. "I feel like I'm doing it for the community, not just for myself," he tells me.

When children of the Bruderhof reach adulthood, they must decide whether they will remain in the community or leave it. For Milton the decision was not difficult: He made a lifelong commitment to stay. I ask him why he has chosen

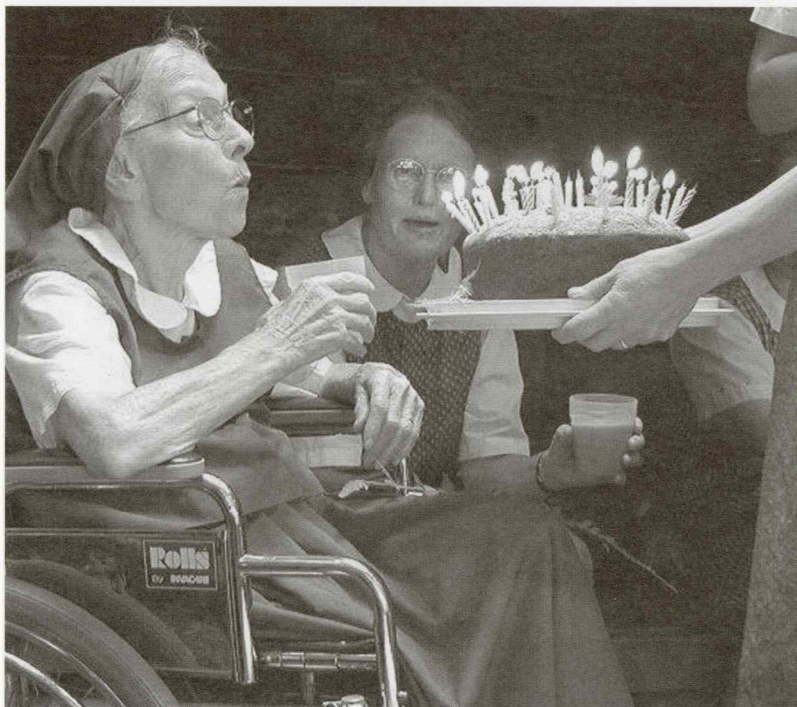


to live in an isolated community, when Jesus commands us to go out into the world. "Our mission is to form communities," he replies. "That is our main witness, but we also have books and publishing as part of our mission."

I speak with an engineer named Dan, who joined the Bruderhof 13 years ago. Before joining the community, he spent most of his career designing military helicopters. "I was devoting my life to producing weapons to kill people," he recalls. After quitting his job, he went to work on his father's farm on Long Island, but it was a solitary life. He remembers asking himself, "Where are my brothers? Am I only interested in my own peace and well being?" His spiritual search led him to the Bruderhof. I ask him if he has any regrets. "My only regret is that I didn't find this community sooner," he replies. "I was wasting my life doing a lot of stupid, sinful things."

Working beside me on the assembly line is John, 83. Born in Great Britain, he joined the Bruderhof during World War II as a conscientious objector. At an age when most people retire, John still works hard in the Bruderhof factory, operating a drill press. "I'd hate to be one of those old people who watches television all day," he confides. "I hope that when we get to heaven we're given work to do."

Henry, 72, is a New Zealander who joined the Bruderhof three years ago. His wife, terminally ill at the time, has since died. After selling their home in New Zealand, they gave part of the money to their children and the rest to the Bruderhof. "We tried the Bruderhof once before, earlier in life, but we decided at that time not to join," he explains. "We weren't ready for it." Raised Catholic, he says he was converted during a Pentecostal revival in 1959. "I'm probably more evangelical than most of the Bruderhof," he tells me. "For a lot of evangelicals, the emphasis is on personal



salvation, but here the focus is more on living out your faith and working for social justice.” When asked why he joined the Bruderhof, he replies, “I couldn’t accept belonging to a church where some people were rich and some were poor.”

When the work day is finished, I am invited to the home of Caleb, 56, who was born at the Bruderhof community in Paraguay. His parents made the perilous transatlantic crossing from England during the height of World War II. “All of the ships that carried us to South America were later sunk by Nazi submarines and torpedoes,” he recalls. “It was a miracle that they survived.”

While his wife fixes coffee, Caleb speaks openly of the Bruderhof’s failures: “People come here for a little while and they think we’re perfect, but if you stay here any length of time, you’ll see that we’re not. We have our disagreements and arguments. Some of our best meetings as a community have been times when someone asked for forgiveness and it was given.” When I ask about allegations against the Bruderhof, he looks pained. “Sometimes we mess up,” Caleb admits. “Sometimes, I guess you’d say we’ve lost our way. But always, we have returned to our roots.”

Although Caleb seems content living at the Bruderhof, I wonder: Does he have any other alternative? To join the Bruderhof, members must give up all their private property. In return they receive food, basic shelter, and healthcare—a sort of cradle-to-grave socialism. Living conditions are austere, and there is little time for frivolity. If the abandoned basketball court is any indication, Bruderhof members don’t spend much time at play.

During my brief stay at Woodcrest, I hear many times of the need to focus on Christ. It’s a lesson Bruderhof members are constantly learning and relearning. “Our goal is not community,” says Klaus, 72, who was born into the original Bruderhof group in Germany. “If community becomes the goal then things fall apart very quickly. Our goal is to give glory to Christ.”

An Internet search reveals many websites and articles critical of the Bruderhof, most written by ex-members, accusing them of having a “purgatorial complex” which involves a capacity for ceaseless self-examination and self-torment. To their detractors, the members of the Bruderhof are victims of religious melancholy, cut off from the world and manipulated by guilt.

During my brief visit, however, I see no evidence of self-torment or melancholy. Rather, I see a sober-minded group of people who are striving, very imperfectly, to obey Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The Bruderhof is not eager for converts and, in fact, they discourage impulsive commitments. No one during my stay at the Bruderhof invites me to join the community or even raises the subject. “We discourage



people from burning their bridges,” one Bruderhof spokesman tells me. “It’s a lifetime commitment. People are so used to hopping from congregation to congregation that this is a whole new concept.”

Lifetime commitment? That’s a radical idea for Christians who want to keep their options open. We want to follow Christ on our terms, our schedule, and our conditions. At the Bruderhof, that is simply not possible. Joining this community requires complete self-surrender. To some, that sounds like a cult. To others, it sounds like the church.

I wonder to myself: Is the Bruderhof a living fossil—doomed to extinction—or is it that tiny mustard seed that contains the best hope for the church’s future?

As I leave the Bruderhof, I encounter Johann Christoph Arnold, whom I met earlier while working on the assembly line. Arnold is a senior pastor at the Bruderhof, a widely published Christian author, and the grandson of founder Eberhard Arnold. When I tell him that I’m leaving, Arnold smiles. “The sooner you leave, the sooner you will return,” he replies. ■

(Be sure to visit the Bruderhof’s excellent and inspirational website at www.bruderhof.org.)

Peter Larson is pastor of Lebanon Presbyterian Church in Lebanon, Ohio, and a contributing editor to PRISM. He can be reached at Peter@LebanonPresbyterian.org.