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BRUDERHOF WOMEN

A Testimony to Love

THE CUBAN CHURCH REBORN Fidelity and Faith
NATIVE ALIENS Faithful Misfits in a Foreign Land



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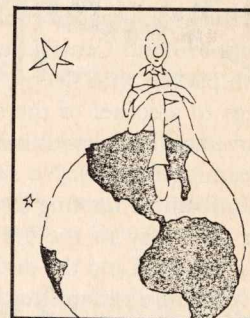
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Ingrid Rogers and Hans Werner Schmale "Two people went to the temple to pray. The one was a Christian, the other was a capitalist. The one was like me, and the other was disgusting."

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Carol Scherling Goodale "The fingers, the bodies, the voices, the touching, the chaos of kitchen and floor. If I could write it in such a way that some young snip out there, trammeling through life, rushing at it all, might see the very difficulty of it. But no—I write for myself, the snip that is me, so that I might understand."

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Photograph by
Dan Hamlett-Leisen



Life Together

THE BRUDERHOF COMMUNITY: A LIVING WITNESS TO GOD'S KINGDOM

On a clear, cool afternoon in mid-September, I was driving down Highway 32 in upstate New York, winding my way between the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River. I was en route to visit a Christian community known as the Hutterian Brethren—the Bruderhof.

I had made the appointment to interview members of the Bruderhof weeks earlier. Like many Christians, I was intrigued by the remarkable history and witness of this closely knit, almost otherworldly community. The planned week-long visit would undoubtedly be a good opportunity to learn what motivated these strange and radical followers of Jesus. Yet I still harbored some strong inclinations against the trip.

Drawing nearer the Bruderhof community, I reviewed my apprehensions about the upcoming visit. The dress of the Bruderhof women was a major hurdle. Their polka-dot scarves and long dresses seemed to signify some deep oppression, an unwillingness to engage the contemporary world. The men with

whom I had spoken on the phone all seemed equally removed from modern realities. They put sentences together so slowly that I continually found myself waiting breathlessly for the next word. What would it be like to communicate in that fashion for an entire week?

I passed a covered bridge and turned at a small sign announcing the store hours for a Bruderhof shop selling community-made children's toys. The road made a sudden sharp right, and just as suddenly I was in a whole new world. Before me was a tree-shaded lawn where children of all ages were playing and laughing. The lawn was surrounded by large European-style buildings which were themselves surrounded by flower beds. Here and there, adult members moved purposefully along asphalt walks. Up the main road, closed to automobiles, a horse-drawn wagon carried a group of children.

I was greeted warmly by a husband-and-wife team. As my hosts for the week, they showed me to a room in a building

they shared with several families. A welcoming, cheerful atmosphere pervaded the household. The walls were adorned with paintings and drawings depicting green grass, blue sky, yellow sun, and brightly colored animals. The pictures seemed unusually creative, not so much sentimental as a celebration of color. I later learned that the artists were primarily Bruderhof children.

That evening at supper, dozens of men, women, and children sat at long tables under colorful lantern lights. On one side of the building was a long picture window looking out on the Catskill Mountains, behind which the sun was sinking slowly, leaving a red celebration of its own. The food was substantial, with a pronounced German accent. Through bulk buying and food donations, I learned, the Bruderhof is able to feed its members at minimal cost.

Later that evening, over juice and crackers, I met with a number of residents in my building. The women in the

group were a special surprise. The oppression I expected to find was not visible: they were relaxed and laughed easily, and the broad spectrum of personalities present included many outspoken women who were well informed about contemporary issues. I discovered more common ground than I had expected, and I began to appreciate and understand some of the deeper dimensions of Bruderhof life.

The community was founded in Germany in 1920 by Eberhard Arnold, his family, and a small group of friends. It was a period which saw the German nation impoverished and disillusioned by the recent world war and the national church greatly discredited by its support for that disastrous conflict. Arnold and the community sought to follow the communal path of the early Christian church as a way of witnessing to the power of Jesus Christ. The community mutually agreed to common property, modest dress, the sanctity of marriage and family, and refusal of military service. Their life was one of joyful simplicity rooted in the Sermon on the Mount.

Soon, though, the rising National Socialist party fanned the flames of enthusiastic nationalism, gaining even the loyalty and patriotism of the German churches. In November 1933, proclaiming their sole allegiance to Jesus Christ, members of the Bruderhof refused to give their support to Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Nazi harassment followed, eventually forcing the community to flee Germany. They migrated through Europe, to Paraguay, and finally, in 1961, to the United States. Today the Bruderhof has over twelve hundred members in five communities (including one in England).

I spent the week asking questions, and I was impressed by the thoughtful searching that characterized their answers. From teenagers to the elderly, members were careful to explain that they did not see themselves as having a special corner on truth—either as individuals or as a group. "People sometimes come to us to learn how we do things," said one brother. "They say they want to know our secret so they can keep from repeating our mistakes. But we can't even keep from repeating them ourselves!"

As I asked my questions, I was often

questioned in return, and my "interviewers" listened intently and thoughtfully. As the week progressed, I began to feel a part of a large, extended family, and from these new brothers and sisters, I heard many insightful comments:

"The Sermon on the Mount is both our goal and our direction."

"Community can never be founded; it can only be given as a gift of the Spirit."

"The hardest thing is not to give up property but one's pet ideas."

In-depth conversation was only one of the special joys I experienced at the Bruderhof. We enjoyed a picnic in the deep woods with transportation provided by a horse-drawn cart, a night watchman who sang on the hour all night long, visitation at a county jail, hikes and a bonfire, and a centuries-old German comedy performed by the Bruderhof teenagers.

I found the early education of the Bruderhof children particularly intriguing. Their classrooms were brightly colored and festive, and their classes included not only basic skills but pottery, singing, painting, woodworking, and a foreign language. Children learned to work and play together at an early age, and their self-discipline and love of life was apparent even to the casual visitor.

As the week progressed, I found myself appreciating the slow speech of the Bruderhof members. It no longer seemed to me a barrier to communication but a means for deeper, more reflective sharing. Their unwillingness to say much about sacred matters and refusal to use predictable religious language was also surprisingly refreshing. Their effort to discern and live a Christian reality greater than mere words had caused them to become an oasis for Christian believers disenchanting with the steady diet of words fed them by mainstream and evangelical churches.

In our discussions on contemporary issues, I was deeply moved by comparisons Bruderhof members made between their past and the present. "Once again we are standing in the hour of decision, before questions of life and death," Bruderhof members told me, reflecting on their experience of Nazi Germany. "Humankind today has the armaments and the hatred to destroy all of God's earthly creation. The spirit of nationalism has been revived, and many peo-

ple—including well-meaning Christians—are thinking only of themselves and the political and economic interest of their country. We have lived through one renewal of religious feeling and patriotism, and we know that it can be a very dangerous time."

In this climate, members of the Bruderhof believe their life together is the best witness they can make. "For each one personally, the challenge is to fight against those things in the human heart which make for immorality and a lack of fraternal love. For us as a community, the challenge is to live in true brotherhood and sisterhood. We seek to follow the example of the early Christian church and witness by our communal life to the imminent coming of a different order—the kingdom of God."

When the time came for me to leave the Bruderhof, my concerns about styles of dress and manners of speech had long since faded into inconsequence. These were my brothers and sisters. Through our sharing, cultural barriers had been crossed; somehow, despite our very different backgrounds, new and challenging friendships had been formed. We had different roads to travel and different visions to which to be faithful, but our hearts had been knit together.

In their radical commitment to live as the early Christian church, members of the Bruderhof had profoundly challenged my own way of life. The cost of discipleship had been raised higher, but so had its worth. I began to understand in a deeper way that the kingdom of God, that pearl of great price, was not just a future hope but a living reality. It was present wherever Christian brothers and sisters gathered together to witness by their daily life to the coming on earth of a different order—the way of Jesus and of communal love. —Barbara Thompson

The Bruderhof communities publish *The Plough* magazine, as well as a wide selection of books on radical discipleship, marriage and family, spirituality, and Anabaptist/Bruderhof history. A catalog of books, records, and cassettes is available from Plough Publishing, Route 213, Rifton, N.Y. 12471.