

The Stuff Of Life

A visit to the Bruderhof.
by Joyce Hollyday

Dusk was just settling in as we completed our seven-hour journey through snow from Washington, D.C., to Rifton, New York. We drove up a long hill past a large building labeled "Community Playthings" and knew we had arrived.

Several years earlier our community at Sojourners began a day-care center in our low-income neighborhood in Washington, D.C. We put out an appeal for funds and received a large package from the Bruderhof, the community behind Community Playthings. It came with a note explaining that the community lives in voluntary poverty and could not send money, but they wanted to support our ministry. The package contained a brand new tricycle. A few months later we received a gift of large wooden blocks.

For most of us at Sojourners, the name Bruderhof brings to mind sturdy toys. In February, at the invitation of the Woodcrest Bruderhof, we traveled to upstate New York to find out more about the tonymakers and their community.

As we crested the hill, a stream of people made its way toward us. The chill of the night was just setting in, but we felt

enveloped in warmth. Smoke curled from the chimneys of the buildings that dotted the hillsides, their windows giving out warm glows of light. The handshakes of the sisters and brothers were heartfelt and welcoming.

We were guided to the Arnold household. Coffee and juice awaited us, as well as cakes—of the hearty and sweet German variety which would greet us every morning for breakfast and several times during each day throughout our stay.

Dinner followed in the huge, community dining room. All the adult members and the older children gathered for the evening meal, which opened with beautiful four-part singing and a moment of silent prayer. After we were warmly greeted and introduced to the community, a microphone was passed in turn to each of us who had come from Sojourners.

About 350 members of the Woodcrest Bruderhof were gathered in the hall, but another 900 or so people were listening in through a special telephone hook-up. Four Bruderhofs exist: New Meadow Run in Pennsylvania, Deerspring in Connecticut, Darvell in England, and Woodcrest. The two other U.S. communities, the 900 listeners, are hooked up at every community meal and meeting.

The bond among the communities is strong. They share financial resources in one common purse. They often visit one

another and sometimes exchange members if, for example, one of the communities has need of a nurse from one of the other communities. Four clocks hang on the dining room wall, one with the time at each of the other Bruderhofs, and one with the hour at the Hutterian community in South Dakota. The Bruderhof, also known as the Hutterian Society of Brothers, maintains close ties to the Hutterites, who are also Anabaptists originally from Germany.

We were warmly greeted after the meal by many of the sisters and brothers. Then each of us was invited by our host families to go back to their homes and "meet with a few friends." I went with Winifred, Rudi, and Susie Hildel. Their home, like all the others, is marked by beauty and simplicity. Fresh flowers are always to be found, and delicate needlework graces the pillows and tablecloths. Painted in warm colors—deep blues and bright yellows—the homes are built together into larger households that contain several families.

The coffee, juice, and cookies were brought out, and soon the "few friends" filtered in. By the end of the evening, we were a circle of about 25 people in the small living room. We shared late into the evening, with the sisters and brothers anxious to hear about Sojourners and answer our questions about the Bruder-

hof. It was a joy to revel in the company of gracious and faithful people.

The daily rhythm at the Bruderhof includes work and play, community and family time, and a siesta after lunch that is a joyful discipline carried over from the community's days in Paraguay. The raising of children is a central part of the life, "a mission field in itself," according to Christoph Arnold, grandson of Emmy and Eberhard Arnold and the community's elder. It seemed appropriate that our first visit on Friday was to the school.

"Let all the children come unto me." The words of Jesus, hung on a wall beyond the entrance, welcome the visitor to the school and reflect the joy with which children are received at the Bruderhof. Children in grades one through eight attend the school, while younger ones are cared for by community members in the "Babyhouse."

For our visit the second graders had prepared a play, "Saint Francis and the Wolf," in which the school guinea pig played the role of the helpless lamb. Then before all the children went off to their classrooms, we sang together songs about snow, in both English and German.

The children explained that there wasn't much time left for singing these snow songs. Before long the ice skates—a pair in each child's cubbyhole at school—would be stored away, and the "mitten dryer," a large rack near the school's front door, would stand empty.

The maple sap was giving away the fact that spring was just around the corner. The children had hammered spiles—hollow tubes through which the sap flows—into the maple trees around the community. "Every once in a while you see one stuck in an oak tree by a young child," said Ian Winter, the school's principal, with a smile. "And we usually put one into a telephone pole just to see if the guests notice."

When the time is right, the children lug the buckets and boil the sap. A write-up about "Maple Sapping 1983" by a fifth grader in *Ranger's News*, the school newspaper, explains that "40 gallons of sap=1 gallon of syrup," and "500 gallons of sap=1 busted tractor." The completion of the syrup making is celebrated each spring with a pancake fry.

A tour of the school gives an idea of the other activities that keep the children busy—chopping wood for the school's furnace, binding books, making pottery from clay found behind the community's barn, planting flax for making linen. In activities as well as studies, the emphasis is on values that are affirming of the children and cooperative rather than competitive. And the atmosphere is one of flexibility. Ian mentioned with that same smile that, "Sometimes, like on a day like today, the best science lesson is a close

encounter with ice crystals"—his explanation for the joyful shouts of the younger children outside sledding on the hill beside the school.

The community is committed to protecting the purity and innocence of childhood, but at the same time feels the need for the children to be aware of the world. The older children have studied the political situations in places like Nicaragua and the hunger and poverty of countries like India. They sell some of their crafts and maple syrup at the Community Playthings shop in order to raise money for an orphanage in India.

But perhaps the biggest shock for them comes when they go to high school in Kingston, New York. Here their Christian values confront the world's values, and they suffer a great deal of taunting from many of the other high school students. But the community feels that such an encounter with the world is crucial, and many young people are encouraged to go on to further training or college studies. Only after some exposure to the world outside of the Bruderhof can a young person make a decision to become a member of the community. As one parent explained it, "We can only lead our children to values; they must choose."

The suffering the Bruderhof experiences is not limited to situations outside of the community. In September of last year, the Woodcrest Bruderhof suffered the loss of Esther Annemarie Mason just two months before her eleventh birthday. It was a loss described as one of the most shaking things experienced at Woodcrest in its almost 30 years of life, and it touched a wide circle of friends in many places.

A tumor on a bone in Esther's knee was discovered last January, and her leg had to be amputated in February. The community gathered for prayer several times on the day of her surgery. She recovered and was soon getting around on a specially designed, three-speed tricycle, which she pedaled with her hands.

In July, Esther suffered a massive coronary thrombosis and had emergency open-heart surgery, which left her paralyzed and nearly blind. Eighteen days after the surgery, she was able to smile and then laugh. But she was still in pain and cried over her inability to communicate. Then one evening while her family was gathered at her bedside singing, she said a few words. It was a request for the song "Let All the Children Come Unto Me."

She soon regained her mischievous and joyful spirit. Her classmates made a special space for her in school, and although she was still partially paralyzed and almost blind, she insisted on doing her homework.

One evening after feeling weak all day, she hung limply over the side of her bed and said to her father, "You know, Daddy, I think that by Christmas I am



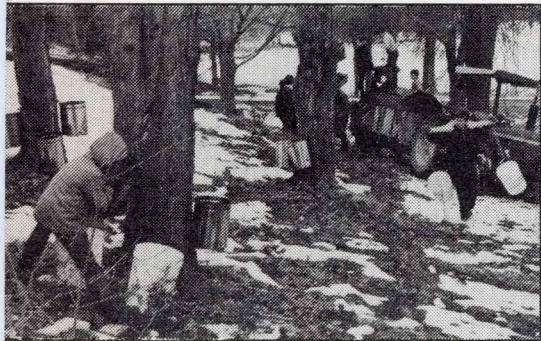
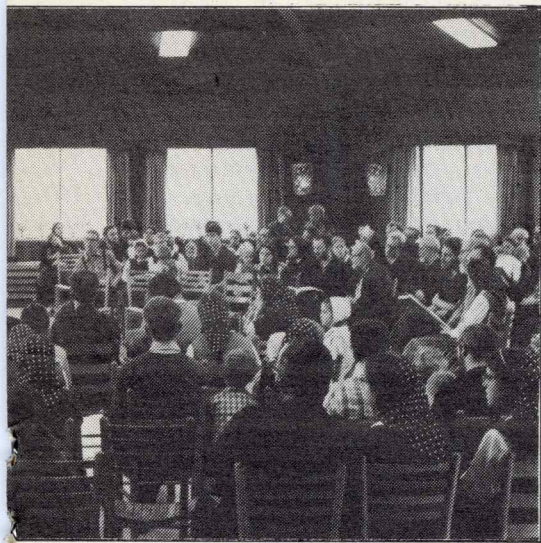
going to walk." She died a few days later.

This little girl's fight for life is a testimony to courage, and the love that surrounded her a sign of the bonds that go deep in both joy and tragedy. Her classmates put together a moving testimony of her life and last days in a booklet that they shared with us. In her classroom is an obvious emptiness.

Our experience of the morning showed us that the Bruderhof is a wonderful place to be young. And our afternoon confirmed that it is also a good place to grow old. No concept of retirement exists here, and everyone, no matter what their age, is seen as a valuable and contributing member of the community. Particularly respected are the wisdom and experience that come with age.

We were privileged to spend part of

Woodcrest Bruderhof gathered: riding in a six-seater community Playthings wagon; maple sapping; bedtime stories.



Friday afternoon, and several times throughout the weekend, with some of the older members of the community, some of whom had been part of the Bruderhof throughout the early days of persecution during the Nazi era in Germany. We began our dialogue by asking Hardy Arnold, son of Emmy and Eberhard Arnold, to tell us the history of the community. He spoke for 30 minutes, telling tales of Gestapo raids and prison sentences and flight to other parts of Europe, then smiled wryly and asked, "Next question?"

We discovered in our dialogue that we share many similarities between our communities. Both the Bruderhof and Sojourners were forged in resistance to war—the Bruderhof to World War I and Sojourners to the Vietnam conflict. We also discovered that the same Scriptures were foundational to the birth of both of

our communities: Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, his mandate to love our sisters and brothers in Matthew 25, and the record of the early church in Acts 2 and 4.

After our warm and lively conversation, we went down the hill for a tour of Community Playthings. The mail-order toy service, headquartered in a huge, old cow barn, provides the main financial support for the community. Thousands of solid-maple toys, as well as sturdy wagons, bicycles, and gym equipment, are produced each year in the three U.S. Bruderhofs and sent out to families, churches, day-care centers, and schools. With the aid of physical therapists, the Bruderhof has also developed a line of toys and equipment for handicapped individuals. The care that goes into producing this equipment reflects the profound respect that the community has for children and for all persons, which is related to the deep respect that the members have for one another.

We also made a visit to the publishing house and office of *The Plough*, the recently reborn publication of the Bruderhof communities. We walked through the extensive archives, which include nine volumes—two and a half years' worth—of engagement letters written between Emmy and Eberhard Arnold from 1907 to 1909. The Bruderhof traces its birth to the relationship between Emmy and Eberhard and their search for faithfulness.

Also among the archives are early Hutterite books written 400 years ago. Produced with the expectation of persecution, they were made small enough to fit into a boot, where they could be hidden in flight. Many of these precious documents as well as Eberhard Arnold's writings were smuggled out of Germany during submarine warfare, weathered trips to other parts of Europe and through South America's tropical heat, and arrived intact in the United States.

Eberhard had plans to publish a 100-volume work titled *Quellen*, which means "Sources." It was to be a collection of the work of Christian witnesses throughout the centuries, including the early church, St. Francis, German women mystics, St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, and many others. He envisioned each volume to be a bright color so that, just as all the colors of the rainbow brought together form the color white, all these sources together would reflect the truth of the gospel. Only 20 of the volumes were completed before his death.

This formidable task is perhaps matched today by the work of the women at the Bruderhof who are translating into English and editing the massive amount of documents, letters, and other writings that made the trip from Germany.

On Saturday we found ourselves on the

Bruderhof bus on our way to Green Haven Correctional Facility. Green Haven is a large maximum security prison in New York, a state filled with prisons, and the site of New York's electric chair. The Bruderhof's ministry to prisoners began with a response to a prisoner asking for mail in the "Connections" section of *Sojourners*. Their ministry now includes work in one county and several state prisons.

When we got into the prison, we began with some lively dialogue about faith, community, and politics with about two dozen prisoners. The room got quiet when it was mentioned that Hans Meier, who was with us, had spent time in a Nazi prison. Everyone listened to his story.

Then we shared music. First the Bruderhofers and Sojourners sang. The prisoners listened respectfully to the four-part hymns and applauded enthusiastically at the beautiful rendering of the gospel song "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" by one of the Bruderhof sisters. Then it was the prisoners' turn, and we heard from the "Choice Voices"—with a style a bit more lively and rhythmic than ours.

Ours was a rare blending of cultures and perspectives, and it was clear how much the visits of the Bruderhof have come to mean in the prisons where they minister. Several of the prisoners expressed gratitude for being remembered at Christmas when 2,000 homemade cards arrived at the prison from Woodcrest. One man in the prison had entered and won a statewide running competition, and he passed his trophy on to a handicapped child at the Bruderhof.

One prisoner in Pennsylvania wrote after receiving a letter with news of Esther Annemarie's death: "I didn't show any emotion when I was found guilty or given the death penalty and I was wondering if I had any emotion inside. I found that out when I read your letter. I didn't know the little girl but I cried as if she was my own daughter." Esther's death broke through a wall of hurt this man carried, and he was able to be reconciled with his father, who had walked out on his family when this man was just a year and a half old.

The prison ministry is one consequence of a growing desire on the part of the Bruderhof to reach out beyond itself. Rooted in an Anabaptist tradition that has historically chosen a posture of separation from the world, the Bruderhof is seeking to maintain the best of that tradition while discovering new directions for its ministry. Sojourners was invited to Woodcrest in part to dialogue and share our experience in ministry for justice and peace.

In one of our meetings together, Jim Wallis, reflecting on the sojourning his-

tory of the Bruderhof and its flights from persecution, commented, "History has pushed you from place to place; but there are no safe places anymore. There is nowhere else to go." We talked together about the importance that the gospel places on having our lives and faith shaped by relationship to the poor and their struggles. We discussed the need to see the principalities and powers at work not only in our own sins and failings toward one another, but also in the systems of the world. And while acknowledging that humility is one of the refreshing qualities that mark life at the Bruderhof, we challenged the community to be bold in its evangelism to the church, in being a sign of the unity to which Christ calls the church.

We shared from our different contexts: a beautiful mountain in upstate New York and an inner-city neighborhood of Washington, D.C. We discussed the ways in which environments affect our community life, families, attitudes toward raising children, and ministry. We talked about our different interpretations of scriptural passages that outline the role of women in the family and the church, and agreed to further conversation on this important issue. We felt excitement about our points of commonality and respect for our differences, and the bond that formed among us as we talked made us feel that this was just a beginning. At heart, we are all seekers on the same journey with the same desire: to follow Jesus Christ. And as we shared our stories, I was reminded of the words of the apostle Paul as he longed to be with other Christians, "that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Romans 1:12).

Whatever challenge and encouragement we were able to offer to our sisters and brothers at the Bruderhof was returned many times over to us. We were reminded, as we sometimes need to be when ministry demands get so heavy that we forget, of what a gift our children are to the life of our community. Christoph Arnold, quoting his grandfather, explained that when a person makes a circle with a compass, the larger the circle, the more firmly the compass needs to be placed in the center. He reflected that the more we reach out in ministry, the deeper our relationship with Christ and one another needs to be. It was a reminder that our commitments to ministry as well as the effects of our harsh neighborhood environment should not lead to neglect or fragmentation of our community life, but rather should deepen our need for Christ and one another.

We were moved by the spirit of hospitality and deep respect that pervades the

life of the Bruderhof. The sisters and brothers shared with us the cost of their respect and unity. They told us about the "First Law in Sannerz." Written in 1924 in the first Bruderhof community in Sannerz, Germany, the law has been hung up in households and workplaces of Bruderhof communities for 60 years. It begins, "There is no law but that of love," and it is essentially a recounting of Matthew 18. It forbids speaking negatively about a community member behind that person's back, which is seen as a serious offense against the unity of the church. And it requires that if a member has a difficulty or annoyance with another, that person must approach the other directly with his or her concern.

When we saw the "First Law" hanging on a wall at the *Plough* office, one of us commented that to follow such a law at Sojourners might revolutionize our life. We carried it home with us and have used it and other lessons from our time at the Bruderhof as a focus for Lenten teachings on unity at Sojourners.

We were made aware again by the Bruderhof's vigilance how destructive selfishness and ambition are in the life of a community, and how precious is the gift of unity. That unity comes from the free offering of confession and forgiveness, and from discipline. "Our discipline is written down in our hearts and in our teaching," explained Hardy Arnold.

And unity comes from unwavering faithfulness to the search for the way of Jesus. Upon joining the Bruderhof, members take the same Hutterian vows that have been repeated for centuries: a promise of faithfulness no matter what may come—lack of material security, torture, even death.

Our last evening at Woodcrest, we had a large meeting with the young people, who were particularly interested in hear-

ing about the Witness for Peace in Nicaragua and resistance to the White Train that carries nuclear weapons. Hanging behind us in the meeting room was a wooden beam with the following engraved words: "That we from our hearts love one another, of one mind in peace remain together." The same inscription is written in German on the back of the piece of wood. It first hung in the original community house in Germany, which was destroyed during World War II. Members of the Bruderhof returned many years later and found the engraved beam intact among the ruins and carried it with them to the United States.

Like the beam, the Bruderhof has survived six decades. Whatever befalls them, their unity remains. This is the great gift of the Bruderhof to the rest of us.

On Sunday, over lunch, we had our last conversation with the older members of the community. As we left the table and walked outside, we were greeted with a heavy snowfall and a song of peace sung by all the gathered members of the community. We waved farewell and left with our cars filled with gifts—fresh fruit, maple syrup, books, and more blocks from Community Playthings.

As we pulled away, I recalled a letter from a prisoner in the county jail which was read to the Bruderhof at lunch on Friday: "What's happening at Woodcrest? Just the same old stuff, I guess." The letter received a warm and gracious laugh from the sisters and brothers.

The prisoner was right. Eberhard Arnold said back in 1931 that at Pentecost "the Holy Spirit was poured out. All at once everything changed. And we believe that this change has to take place again and again." And so it goes. That same old stuff is turning the world upside down. □



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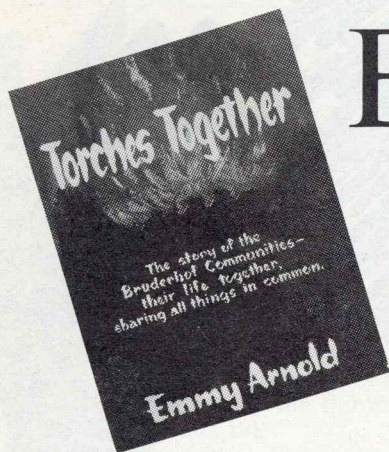
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