



Bruderhof Community

Kindle our hearts

Some Brethren found new light with a mid-century migration to the Bruderhof

by David Mow

*Kindle our hearts to burn with thy flame.
 Raise up thy banners high in this hour.
 Stir us to build new worlds in thy name.
 Spirit of God, O send us thy pow'r!
 "Move in our Midst," 1951
 hymn by Kenneth I. Morse*

It was March 1987. I had moved my family from England to Pennsylvania shortly before my father, Merrill Mow, died of cancer. We laid him to rest in our New Meadow Run Bruderhof cemetery next to his mother, Anna Mow.

As his eldest son, I felt the loss keenly, and at the same time my own son, clearly not adjusting to a new school in a new country, was acting out his frustration. I tried to help him, but we were

ABOUT THE BRUDERHOF

The Bruderhof is marking its centennial this year. The movement was founded in Germany in 1920, and today includes more than 2,900 people living in 23 locations across four continents. That includes 16 US locations in six states, nine of them in New York. Woodcrest, in Rifton, N.Y., is the oldest in the US (1954) and has more than 300 residents; Crossroad, in Minneapolis, was just established in 2018.

The Bruderhof website (bruderhof.com) says, "We are a fellowship of families and singles, practicing radical discipleship in the spirit of the first church in Jerusalem. We gladly renounce private property and share everything in common. Our vocation is a life of service to God, each other, and you."



both floundering: me in my grief and he in his insecurity. Enter Dick Wareham, my son's teacher, who, with gentle encouragement and a fatherly hand on my shoulder, helped my son—and me—begin rebuilding our worlds.

Dick was already a legend in our

house. He had grown up in the Church of the Brethren, as had my parents. Youth leader, seminary graduate, basketball hero, firmly rooted in the teachings of the New Testament, and direct descendant of Alexander Mack, Dick sprang from the church's very heart.

It is hardly surprising that Dick shamed his family when, in the 1950s, he abandoned the Brethren to join a new commune, Woodcrest, in New York's Hudson River valley. Even more startling: He was not the only Brethren young person to do this. More than 20 others, many of them seminary-trained ministers with their wives, also journeyed to the Bruderhof. As I look back over the decades, I no longer see it as an "abandonment" of their upbringing, but rather as a fulfillment.

Many of these young men and women had been in Dick's youth group or his classes at McPherson College in Kansas. As children and teenagers, all had learned their tenets of faith in church and at church summer camps. Oddly enough, when they moved to Woodcrest many were not initially looking for community life; they simply desired to live out their own faith, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. They knew these directives must be lived, not only professed.

Even as a child, Dick puzzled why there was one God and so many divisions and denominations, and why even in the church there were very wealthy members and those struggling to make ends meet. Growing up in Pennsylvania, he helped his father care for park grounds and a gym during the Great Depression, and he was a skilled athlete and the town's basketball hero. He could make almost every shot from near half-court, and he could pull the best out of anyone else, on or off the court. At 17 Dick went to Juniata College (Huntingdon, Pa.), where, though he joked that he graduated "summa-cum-dummy," he emerged as a basketball star who broke all scoring records.



Left: Chicago First Church of the Brethren youth group with Jim Horning, Merrill Mow, and Cosette Will. Above: Bethany basketball team with Dick Wareham.

But then came World War II and the draft, and things changed overnight. Dick was one of only two conscientious objectors from his home church and to his surprise was heavily criticized for it. He wondered why the Church of the Brethren, a peace church, should contest his stand. Perplexed and frustrated, yet longing to make his life count for peace, in 1945 Dick moved to Chicago and attended Bethany Seminary for the next three years.

That year Bethany had three of the top 20 college basketball scorers in the country, and Dick Wareham was one of them. Dick loved the team, but he wondered about his studies. He later said:

In my second year I began to realize that I wasn't cut out to be a pastor, so I turned to my favorite teacher, Anna Mow, just back from the mission field in India. She was full of enthusiasm and a very genuine person with a hearty laugh. Without batting an eye, she said, "Well, why

don't you go into college teaching and coaching and get involved with the young people?"

That is exactly what Dick did.

My grandmother knew quite well that the Brethren youth needed some guidance. It might have been during this very conversation that her youngest son, Merrill, and his friend Jim Horning were up on a five-story roof dropping paper bags of water onto pedestrians below. And the church was still in an uproar over Merrill letting his pet rats loose during prayer and then causing disturbances during worship with his friends in the balcony.

Dick soon realized, "Actually, these guys needed somebody to love them. So I invited them into the gym and started a basketball team with them and, boy, they were really happy about it." The group of about 25 high schoolers was at first disruptive, but later they began to ask important questions of faith and meet on Sunday nights for lively discus-

"I was present at one retreat when Perry Huffaker and Ken Morse wrote 'Move in our Midst.' That meant a lot to me, to camp with these guys—it was a good experience for me." —Dick Wareham



sions. They even began sitting in the front row at church.

There were girls in the group too, and after some time Dick fell in love with one of them.

Years later, Dick told his family:

I struggled with this feeling a long time. I couldn't go to the pastor for advice, because Cosette was his daughter. So I went to Anna Mow and said, "I have a problem. What would you do if you were a seminary senior with a love for a high school girl?"

Anna said, "Who is it?"

I said, "Cosette Will."

Anna never even hesitated. "I'd marry her and bring her up to fear God!" Then she leaned back and laughed such a hearty laugh, reached out her hand, and dismissed me with "God bless you, Dick!"

Dick went to teach at McPherson College, and Cosette headed for Manchester College in northern Indiana to finish her degree before their marriage in 1950. Dick had promised his youth group in Chicago that they would get back together in a few years to see how far they had come in

A MANCHESTER CONNECTION

Gladdys Muir is best known for launching the world's first undergraduate peace studies program, at Manchester College (North Manchester, Ind.) in 1948. It was Muir who invited two brothers traveling from Paraguay to her weekly Saturday tea attended by my mother and Bob Wagoner. Later, during the 1954-1955 school year, Dick Wareham set up the first peace studies courses at McPherson (Kan.) College. —David Mow



their discipleship, and early in their marriage he and Cosette sent letters to over 60 young people, inviting them to a two-week retreat at a Missouri campsite. Only four people joined them—two other young married couples, Bob Wagoner and his wife, Shirley, and my parents, Merrill and Kathy Mow.

The six quickly found out that living in close quarters with the same people over an extended time was not as easy as living separately.

They talked and talked and talked by the hour, dreaming of a Brethren school or some sort of new venture where they could put their beliefs into practice.

Then Bob and Shirley Wagoner announced that they were going to visit the Bruderhof communities in Paraguay.

The others were incredulous. They

were well aware of this 30-year-old group that had been forced to emigrate from Europe to South America during the war because of its members' commitment to each other and to non-violence. But was this wild idea about living in community all the time even possible in today's society? Or was that just another of the miracles of the early church?

At Manchester College they had met Bruderhof members visiting North America to raise funds and connect with other groups interested in full-time Christian living. My dad told me later that Bob, his college roommate, was one of the gloomiest, most skeptical people he knew, who had no trust that people could do anything good, anywhere, any time. But this time Bob

"The Brethren had assisted [the Bruderhof] financially in the initial construction of the hospital [in Paraguay]. . . . A large shipment of clothing arrived in Primavera from the Brethren Service Committee while we were there. There were large sacks of shoes, boxes of blankets, and a large number of bales of clothing—some of it brand-new. Since we are the only Brethren who have been here to date, their gratitude came especially in our direction, and we would like to pass this gratitude on to every Dunker who happens to read this. The gift itself meant much to them but in its coming from another brotherhood with which they feel a certain kinship of spirit, it had a double significance."

—Bob Wagoner, *Community in Paraguay* (p. 82)



Bob and Shirley Wagoner



just felt he had to go there or he would never be at peace again.

The Wagoners had a fantastic trip. It took them over two months to get there since they traveled by land, shooting hundreds of pictures along the way. As soon as they arrived at the community, however, the exuberant, touristy letters changed. Bob wrote: "Raise the money somehow; come down here! The New Testament has become a completely new book for me." Bob's urgency spoke volumes.

They stayed on for several months and wrote often:

We have settled down to find out what the ordinary day-to-day life is. Like human existence anywhere, it has its commonplaces and drudgeries. . . . The work is hard, there are disagreements and personality clashes, and the children can be as naughty here as anywhere. But there is one tremendous difference between this and any other group of people I have ever seen: They have a common basis among them for meeting difficulties and overcoming them. The common basis is the Spirit of love, and "love overcometh all things."

Bob and Shirley found the gathering love of Christ that "gave rise to the Brethren and the whole Anabaptist movement. . . . Indeed, on several occasions Shirley and I have almost felt as if we had been transported back through

Dear Dwight and Norann,

Would we recommend this life to anyone? Yes, I emphatically would recommend it to anyone who could stand it.

Christian community is not just sinking into the eternal bliss of living in a congenial group. . . . So in a physical sense I would say that the adjustment is relatively easy, but in a spiritual sense it is a never-ending struggle with self. And it is the most joyful and abundant life I have ever known or conceived.

Love, Merrill and Kathy

—excerpt from letter home by Merrill and Kathy Mow, Jan. 15, 1956



Merrill and Kathy Mow with their children.



Above: Woodcrest in 1960. Top: A soccer game in front of the original Woodcrest house.



A BRETHREN MIGRATION

Church of the Brethren members who joined the Bruderhof include:

Dick and Lois Ann Domer	August 1954
Merrill and Kathy Mow	June 1955
Wayne and Loretta Shirky	September 1955
Welton and Kathleen Snavely	June 1956
Donna Ford	June 1956
Dick and Cosette Wareham	July 1956
Dwight and Norann Blough	October 1956
Paul and Esther Mason	September 1957
Jim and Audra Horning	September 1957
Glenn and Marlys Swinger	June 1959

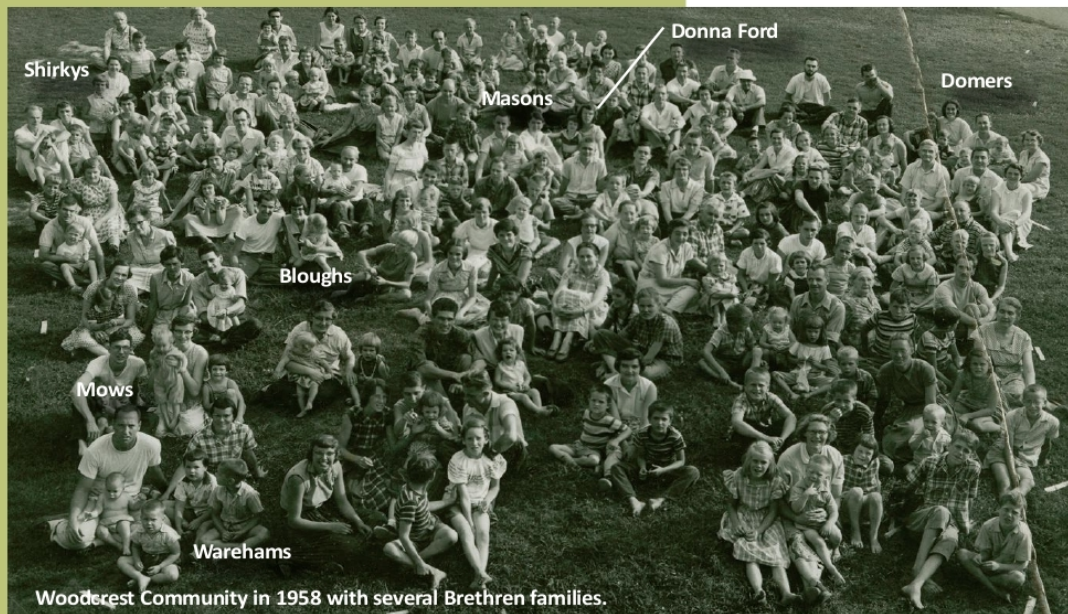
Three additional Brethren couples came at a later date:

- Dale and Carole Neal
- Cordell and Marlene Bowman
- Joel and Deborah Gish

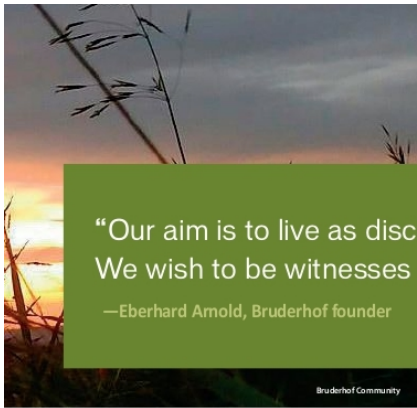
history and were watching the early church at work.”

When the Wagoners returned from Paraguay, Bob was a ball of fire, according to my dad. Immediately he stirred up hot controversy back in the seminary. People argued with him, but Bob was a changed person. Previously he would have lost his temper if an argument went against him, even stomping out of the room in protest. Now he had love, patience, and understanding for other people. He would wait and hear them out, and then he would stand his ground. Bob wrote in one report:

I feel very strongly that the presence of the Bruderhof in the world is a



Woodcrest Community in 1958 with several Brethren families.



“Our aim is to live as disciples of Jesus—to give up everything for the kingdom of God. We wish to be witnesses . . . to be people who do not proclaim themselves, but Christ.”

—Eberhard Arnold, Bruderhof founder

Bruderhof Community

silent but nevertheless sharp rebuke to us. It is a reminder of where we came from. Either we accept the rebuke, it seems to me, and creatively re-examine our position, or by default let the Bruderhof and other radical groups take up the Anabaptist tradition of the gathered “holy community” and carry it on.

My parents, like a number of others, had to see for themselves this community the Wagoners had experienced. In the early 1950s, the Bruderhof had begun a new place in upstate New York, which was much more readily visited than Paraguay. Two months before I was born in 1955, my parents stored their household goods and boarded a train to New York for a year’s visit to Woodcrest. They never left.

Immediately letters flew from my parents to Dick and Cosette and to other young couples they knew, like Jim and Audra Horning, Wayne and Loretta Shirky, and Welton and Kathleen Snavely. My dad wrote:

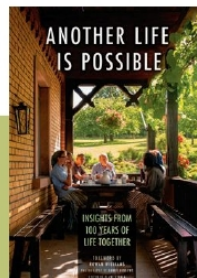
Language is hopelessly, hopelessly inadequate. So many of the ills of the churches stem from too much talk about Christ and not enough living of Christ. The life here cannot be described. I can say all I wish and I won’t convey it. The Christian life

cannot be expressed or described. It must be experienced. Therefore, if any of you can make it, by any stretch of time or finances, do visit us here.

Dick and Cosette were still in McPherson, intently seeking God’s will and opening their home to other young people. His old basketball teammate Glenn Swinger and his wife, Marlys, Dwight and Norann Blough, Paul and Esther Mason, Donna Ford, and Jim Hershberger all spent time with them. Evenings, weekends, whenever they could, they talked, asked questions, read and wrote letters. All of them visited Woodcrest, and by the end of the 1950s all of them had joined the Bruderhof. This remarkable influx of younger couples and single people came at a crucial transition time for the Bruderhof, a much-needed renewal of the spirit that was alive in its 1920 beginnings.

Bob Wagoner had originally hoped that others would go, experience the Bruderhof, and come back to begin a community that would be Brethren in character. He was disappointed that so many families who had felt the same as he did never returned.

It is a mystery why some are called irresistibly to a



In celebration of its centennial, the Bruderhof has published Another Life Is Possible. The book “uses the stories of one hundred Bruderhof members to show how a shared life provides answers to isolation, materialism, and inequality,” with images from British photojournalist Danny Burrows. Available from Brethren Press.



Wareham, Swinger, and Blough families.

new way of life while others of the same group, church, or family are not. This can result in misunderstanding and controversy, with both sides sincere and wanting only the best for all. Over the years we have experienced that dedicated listening, humility, and respect for different callings can eventually overcome such painful misunderstandings.

As I look back over our hundred years of history, the contribution of those who came from the Church of the Brethren is immeasurable; it was clearly led by God. Today there are more than 600 descendants of the Church of the Brethren in the Bruderhof communities. Our roots are inextricably entwined, and our branches reach for the same light. May the wind of the same Spirit of God still lead us today. **W**

David Mow and his wife, Louisa, are residents of the Spring Valley Bruderhof community in Farmington, Pa. David has lived at eight different Bruderhof communities since his parents first traveled to Woodcrest.