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Recommended Citation
Anderson, Cory. 2019. “Of Process, Practice, and Belief: What Can We Learn about Old Amish Church History and Polity from this Special Issue’s Source Documents?” Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies 7(2):101-08.

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Of Process, Practice, and Belief: What Can We Learn about Old Amish Church History and Polity from this Special Issue’s Source Documents?

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Abstract: A full history of the “Old Amish Church” project (c. 1865 to c. 1955-1973) has yet to be written, at least not in English, and not as an overarching, analytical narrative. However, several primary German accounts provide a close—albeit partial—analysis of events leading to the collapse of a unified Old Amish church in the aftermath of the 1860s Amish-Mennonite/Old Amish schism. While Amish-Mennonite churches continually drained a minority of Old Amish members, stricter church districts also emerged, moving members in the opposite direction. Though not self-evident as separate denominations at first, these movements were eventually recognized as schisms. These included the Sam Yoder, Stutzman-Troyer, and Andy Weaver Churches, started in the Holmes County, OH, Amish settlement, as well as the Joe L. Church in Adams County, IN, and the Highway A and Highway C Churches in Seymour, MO. Other contemporary Old Amish communities experienced similar unrest, although stricter individuals largely opted to migrate elsewhere and establish new settlements. Today, the Old Order dominate large, historic Amish communities, while the Andy Weaver and other, stricter denominations dominate the landscape of small settlements outside historic communities. Although three Ordnungs Briefen—1865, 1917, and 1939—represented overarching attempts to forge and maintain a unified Old Amish Church, these statements better predicted the types of changes on the horizon that would permanently divide Old Amish denominations. Hence, no Ordnungs Briefen have been written since 1939. The translations in this issue of JAPAS provide important insights into how Old Amish forged institutional unity and how schisms gradually unfolded. With these original documents now translated and compiled, we better understand more about the attempt at a unified Old Amish Church. Even today, the sheer amalgamation of membership loyalties, ideologies, and practices that characterize each Old Amish denomination suggests ongoing transformations in Old Amish understandings of church unity, in process, theology, and practice.

Keywords: schism; church division; Old Order Amish; polity; denominationalism; institutionalism

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Recommended citation: Anderson, Cory. 2019. “Of Process, Practice, and Belief: What Can We Learn about Old Amish Church History and Polity from this Special Issue’s Source Documents?” Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies 7(2):101-08.
Publication type: Editor’s comments, open access (may be freely distributed). JAPAS is published by the Amish & Plain Anabaptist Studies Association (www.amishstudies.org) and the University of Akron.
THE OLD AMISH CHURCH PROJECT

After two years of ministers’ meetings across North America, the gathering of 1865 finalized a watershed division in the Amish-Mennonite tradition. On one side was die Alt Amische Gemein—literally the Old Amish Church. On the other side were the Amish-Mennonite people, those experimenting with evangelical innovations. From then on, historical narratives often address “the Amish” as a distinct, unified church movement whose trajectory into the next century is characterized as a struggle to survive in and adapt to a modern world, to keep the community together. Such narratives focus on changes in technology, the twentieth-century school conflicts, alternative military service, exemptions from national insurances, and like conflicts between the Amish and America at large (Howard-Filler 1982; Nolt 1992[2003,2015]; Pratt 2004). Other narratives focus on the expansion of the Old Amish into new places (Hartman 1986; Luthy 1986; McKnight 1964), but also assume a more-or-less homogenous Old Amish Church.

This issue of the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* obfuscates our assumptions about a unified Old Amish church that started in 1865 and continues to the present. The present collection offers several important original source documents, most translated from German into English, that show how 20th century Old Amish sorted through differences in doctrine, practice, and, perhaps most importantly, ecclesiastical processes. The present compilation consists entirely of Amish-authored accounts. These documents address church rules, agreements, and schisms, with the greatest attention given to developments in the Holmes-Wayne Counties Amish settlement from the 1910s to the 1950s.

The opening article includes original translations of three *Ordnungs Briefen*—statements of church rules—from 1865, 1917, and 1939. While the 1865 statement has been translated before, we know only of Leroy Beachy’s (2011) translation of the 1917 and 1939 *Ordnungs Briefen*, included as part of his Amish history narrative. These three *Briefen* address the wide-ranging challenges Amish faced, in family and church relationships, continued observance of church rituals, differing views on excommunication and shunning, parental jurisdiction over youth behavior, entrepreneurship and advertising, alcohol and patronization of bars, technology such as refrigerators and automobiles, clothing and grooming fashions, tobacco, and reunions. These three statements hint at an evolving relationship with religious identity and unity.

Though the “South Church” leaders authored these *Ordnungs Briefen*, their strict stands may better represent the sympathies of the Andy Weaver Amish Church element prior to their establishment from 1952-55. That the lines drawn in the most recent *Ordnung Brief* (1939) are so widely neglected by Old Order Amish churches today provides evidence that these lines represented not where the churches all agreed to stand in 1939—even if all ministers signed on—but where change was the most likely and most anticipated, where members were routinely challenging practices.

No other *Ordnungs Briefen* in Anabaptist history ever address practice and process in such meticulous detail. How was it that members solicited such detailed statements from their ministers? The search for an Old Amish Church happened in the shadow of the 1900s, a century like no other, which saw rapid developments in manufacturing, expansions in telecommunications and transportation, exponential population growth due to plummeting death rates, bloating cities, and the reconfiguration of agricultural production. Old Amish members needed to determine what faithfulness to their godly heritage meant in this reconfigured context; their conclusion was to distance themselves from the symbols of a materially proliferating host society. Given the firm stand the ministers took on such a diversity of time-specific issues (though many remain relevant today), and yet the sheer amount of global socioeconomic change, it’s unlikely any Amish affiliation today could affirm the 1939 *Ordnungs Brief*, let alone the 1917 and 1865 statements that the 1939 statement affirms.

If the documents in this compilation share one thing, it is this: they describe a struggle to achieve an overarching Old Amish Church project, a project that ultimately failed. By the 1950s, there was no longer one Old Amish Church to affirm these articles, as the division between the South Church (i.e. “Old Order”) and the Andy Weaver Church drove a final nail into the coffin of a single Old Amish Church. By that point, the South Churches

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1 Better known as “Old Order Amish Church” today.
2 Also known as the “Dan Church”
were no longer honoring the *Meidung* of two other Churches. One was the Sam Yoder Church, which was originally viewed as just a troubled relationship between Sam’s district and the other districts. In 1913, Holmes County leaders called four outside leaders to investigate unrest; the main controversy was about the *Streng Meidung* (strict shunning). Despite a resolution, the new P.V. church, which would later become Conservative Mennonite Conference, continued to attract lenient parties while Sam Yoder’s churches in the north attracted the stricter.

On March 9, 1917, the area churches held a meeting and drafted the 1917 *Ordnungs Brief*, partly as an attempt to forge unity between the two Sam Yoder districts and the others. Sam Yoder was absent from this meeting, though most of his co-ministers attended. In 1919, after a dispute, the Wengerd people separated from Sam Yoder’s churches and came under Yoder’s discipline. In the 1930s, the South Church accepted into their districts people from the dissolving Wengerd Church. This move was a final and sizeable wedge that clarified the Sam Yoder Church-South Church differences as a schism.

The later Stutzman-Troyer Church, which also split from the Sam Yoder Church, was not entirely on a course back to the South Church. Instead, the Stutzman-Troyer Church had a schism. Before long, the South Church was fellowshipping with the faction, the Tobe Hostetler Church, thus disregarding the discipline of the Stutzman-Troyer Church. Similar cleavages divided the Adams County, Indiana, Old Amish Church, when a disciplined member of the Stutzman-Troyer Church moved in from the Holmes County settlement.

Many bishops, ministers, and deacons visited Holmes and Wayne Counties over these years, assisting and advising. These visitors mainly hailed from long-standing Old Amish settlements, including Lancaster County, PA; Belleville, PA; New Wilmington, PA; Geauga Co., OH; Elkhart Co., IN; Arthur, IL; Kalona, IA; and elsewhere. Were these communities untouched by the restlessness of Holmes County? Not at all. These visiting ministers were, undoubtedly, quite aware of unrest in their home churches. Nearly all of these communities experienced New Order Amish and/or Amish-Mennonite divisions at mid-century plus much out-migration among stricter segments. These latter ones overcame several decades of ill-fated settlement attempts (Luthy 1986), ushering in a new era of Amish migration. Unlike many prior attempts, these new settlements were, by and large, not too far from home and the people were unified in their conservative orientation. These include, among others, Bowling Green (1947) and Seymour, MO (1968) [from Adams Co., IN]; Conewango Valley, NY (1949), and Norwich, ON (1954) [Stutzman-Troyer]; Ethridge, TN (1944), and West Salem, OH (1952) [Swartzentruber]; Kenton, OH (1953) [from Northern Indiana]; Ashland, OH (1954), and Lakeville, OH (1962) [Andy Weaver]; Camden, MI (1956) [from Allen County, IN]; Spartanburg, PA (1966) [from Geauga Co., OH]; Juniata County, PA [1950, from Big Valley’s Renno Amish and Holmes-Wayne Counties]; and the “Upper Valleys” of Pennsylvania [from Lancaster Co., PA, and St. Mary’s Co., MD]. (See the appendix of the article *A Brief History of Amish Churches in Holmes County, Ohio*). The Holmes-Wayne settlement schisms were but a barometer for increasing pressure in Old Amish Churches across the country.

As the Andy Weaver schism concluded by 1955, no one was still entertaining illusions about a unified Old Amish Church, that the Sam Yoder, Stutzman-Troyer, and now Andy Weaver Churches were just several districts temporarily outside full fellowship. What were the differences among these Churches? Many objects of material culture demarcate these schisms today, including household décor, buggy design, plain clothing details, and acceptable transportation modes. Furthermore, evangelical Protestant ideas were rocking members’ conception of Christianity, as had happened in the 1860s schism. While the *Ordnungs Briefen* demonstrate much conviction against material excesses and alien religious ideas, the bulk of the documents herein give scant attention to material and theological matters. Rather, they are preoccupied with processes, with “going through the right channels” instead of (1) abusing the ministerial office, or (2) personally disregarding the brotherhood’s counsel.

The Old Amish have institutional processes through which they create and respond to objections and disagreements. These processes have been repeated often enough that an approximation of this institution can be diagramed, as in Figure 1. (For those unfamiliar with flowcharts, diamonds represent options, rectangles represent processes,
Church takes council at next semiannual communion

All have peace

and unity

All take communion

Ministers and
some laity take communion

Ministers
unified

Non-participants
leave church

Non-participants
have missed three
communions

Defectors
are disciplined

Defectors hold
services

Defectors must request
bishop assistance

A bishop responds

New church fully functional; bishop performs communion,
baptisms, marriages, and ordinations

Bishop is with a communing group

Church grants transfer letter

This church is with a communing group

Defectors are free to join another affiliated church;
new church may reinstate silenced ministers

Communion not held

Leader has a following

Yes

Leader accepts new arrangement

Yes

Leader has a following

Communion not held

Yes

Leader accepts new arrangement

Non-participants
leave church

Defectors are disciplined

Defectors hold services

Yes

Defectors must request bishop assistance

Non-participants
leave church

Non-participants
have missed three
communions

Full membership withdrawn

Yes

To keep or change church rules

Yes

To set back leader(s)

Yes

To divide congregation

Yes

Tacit agreement: Leaders don’t visit certain congregation(s) that would test affiliation lines

Yes

To plead for unity or “have patience” with others

Yes

Yes

Ministers agree to proceed

No

No

Some members stop attending services

No

No

Ministers unified

All ministers and
some laity take communion

All have peace and unity

Yes

No

Defectors are free to join another affiliated church;
new church may reinstate silenced ministers

Soft or confined schism

END

No schism

END

Yes

To set back members

New church fully functional; bishop performs communion,
baptisms, marriages, and ordinations

Church grants transfer letter

This church is with a communing group

Defectors are free to join another affiliated church;
new church may reinstate silenced ministers

Soft or confined schism

END

No schism

END

Yes

To set back leader(s)

Yes

To divide congregation

Yes

Tacit agreement: Leaders don’t visit certain congregation(s) that would test affiliation lines

Yes

To keep or change church rules

Yes

To set back leader(s)

Yes

To divide congregation

Yes

Yes

S}
and curved nodes represent origin and terminating points.) While Figure 1 does not exhaust all possible options, it demonstrates clearly that individuals can engage decision-making processes in the Old Amish Church. Prior scholarly attention paid to church processes too often offers this argument: because church processes require all Amish be united to partake in communion, therefore, it’s okay for the researcher to treat “the Amish” as a collective entity because they all submit. On the contrary, the flowchart and the existence of *Ordnungs Briefen* demonstrate that individual Old Amish members regularly contest and challenge agreements, agreements that had to be explicitly stated and written down at some point.

One significant terminal in Figure 1 is the calling of an all-ministers’ or all-bishops’ meeting. While today, these may be at a regional level, no continent-wide ministers’ meeting has been called since 1955, and no continent wide *Ordnungs Briefen* has been written since 1939. We can safely assume that the power to call such meetings and instate such policies has been undermined by the relative autonomy of other entities, from new denominations created through past schisms to the institutions of local churches, affiliations, and para-church organizations and then right down to individuals. If 1865 marked the beginning of the monolithic “Old Amish” project, 1955 marked its end. Not that a people who now number several hundred thousand strong should all be in one fellowship, especially when brotherhood intimacy and consensus in council are so pivotal to Old Amish processes.

Indeed, among the most important questions in a denominationally fragmented world—and indeed the most important question in the enclosed accounts—is: what is your position on the Bann (excommunication) and Meiding (shunning)? Does your group honor the discipline of our members? Churches will fellowship if they mutually agree, and Figure 1 stresses the importance of honoring church discipline above a common *Ordnung*, even as *Ordnung* disagreements often trigger disciplinary action. While all groups espouse their position as Scriptural, their positions are not the same. In general, we can define a stricter church—all material differences aside—as one upholding the disciplines of all churches that do not necessarily uphold theirs. Petrovich (2017), in his delineation of six Amish affiliations, insightfully lists church discipline as the first demarcation of difference. They are:

- **Swartzentruber** (i.e. Sam Yoder Church): Excommunicates anyone who leaves the Swartzentrubers or moves to a non-communing Swartzentruber faction.
- **Kenton**: Excommunicates those joining a district considered too technologically permissive or that teaches assurance of salvation
- **Andy Weaver** (including Stutzman-Troyer): Excommunicates and shuns any member who joins a non-Amish or New New Order congregation
- **Old Order Mainstream**: Minority of congregations practice strict shunning; most do not shun members that leave the Amish as long as they join an Anabaptist church that practices nonconformity to the world
- **New Order**: Disciplines members primarily for moral failings, rarely for joining a different Anabaptist church community
- **New New Order**: Rarely disciplines for joining a different church

When the South Churches agreed to accept into membership those excommunicated by the Sam Yoder church (the Wengerd Church), the question of honoring other churches’ excommunications came to the fore when defining Amish affiliations. The South Churches accepted these members—and later the Tobe Hostetler Church—because they interpreted as unreasonable the requirements for their disciplined members to achieve peace with their former churches.

Another insight these documents provide is that Old Amish denominational divisions are often gradual events, unfolding slowly like a coming rain. The timelines of historians tend to mark the year of a schism with the benefit of hindsight. For at least a decade after the rift between the Sam Yoder district and the other Holmes County Amish districts, people likely viewed their Old Amish Church as still “one” but with some unresolved issues that prevented full fellowship. A full rift only became evident when the Old Amish decided to
no longer strictly observe all excommunications of the Sam Yoder district.

These documents show an interesting progression in terminology when referring to the minority side of a schism. It goes something like this:

- “Disobedient member(s)”
- “Banned member(s)”
- The leader’s name (e.g. “Tobe Hostetler”)
- “Tobe Hostetler’s people” (leute)
- “The Tobe Hostetler people” (Leute)
- “The Tobe Hostetler church” (Gemeine)

Such a progression shows how thinking toward the other side evolves from merely disobedient members to a full denominational schism with a major figurehead. Indeed, Figure 1 shows how a deadlock can cycle for long spans before all institutional options are exhausted and tensions are finally resolved through schism, or at least a soft schism, when certain churches within an affiliation avoid formal interactions but the affiliation as a whole remains intact (as is perhaps best illustrated with the many variously associated Andy Weaver settlements and churches).

**OVERVIEW OF THIS ISSUE**

Volume 7 of JAPAS is like the metaphorical two sides of a coin. Volume 7 Issue 1 followed the Beachy Amish-Mennonites, who took more lenient paths across the same period. The present Issue 2 focuses on the many stricter break-off groups from the Old Amish. Though their histories are too often traced separately, taken together, they show how the Old Amish responded variously to social changes and were interlocked with each other despite diverging paths. In Unser Leit, Leroy Beachy (2011, 395-418 and 428-32) has provided a satisfying paraphrase of the events covered in this issue, with attention to all sides, although he relied heavily on the single-sided account of Eine Untersuchung (third article in this compilation); readers needing further orientation to these articles should consult his account.

The present compilation includes many intimate details and the names of people. Most of these documents were written in German and/or had a limited distribution due to their sensitive nature. For these reasons, we have decided to make these articles available only in print; they are unavailable on JAPAS’s web publishing platform. The lead translator, Greg Sheets, was an undergraduate German student at Truman State University, Kirksville, MO. He worked with the project director, Cory Anderson, to translate these documents. Dan Raber of the Ohio Amish Library provided detailed German-to-English editing as well as additional translations. Ed Kline, also of the Ohio Amish Library, provided further German-to-English editing.

The first article in the compilation provides translations of the 1865, 1917, and 1939 Ordnungs Briefen, the second and third each affirming the Ordnungs Briefen that came prior. These are some of the only direct statements we get from these writings about the tangible issues Old Amish churches were facing. We translated these documents based on the German text in Yoder’s (2017) *A History of the Andrew J. Weaver Churches*. Raber’s Bookstore (Baltic, OH) has also published these German statements as small pamphlets.

The second article, *Begebenheiten von die Alte Amishe Gemeinde...*, is an account of the following three schisms: Tobe Hostetler/Stutzman-Troyer beginning in 1939; Shetler/Joe L. Schwartz in Adams County, IN; and Old Order/Andy Weaver. John Y. Schlabach, the author and compiler, pulls from multiple sources to construct this account. Schlabach and collaborators are sympathetic with the Stutzman-Troyer, Joe L., and Andy Weaver sides. This 40-page booklet was originally published in 1968 and was printed by Gordonville, Print Shop (Lancaster County, PA). It has gone through at least four printings, including the recent Yoder (2017) compilation.

The third article, *Eine Untersuchung in die Alt Amische Gemein von 1922 bis zu 1974*, covers the same schisms as Schlabach and collaborators, plus the earlier schisms of the South Church/Sam Yoder and Sam Yoder/Stutzman-Troyer, plus the later Seymour, MO, schism. The unnamed author, who belongs to the (Old Order) Tobe Hostetler Church, was part of a committee that investigated difficulties in Adams County, Indiana, that brought about the out-migration to a new settlement in Seymour, Missouri. The ideas contributing to the Adams Co.-Seymour troubles had a long history, going back to the South Church/Sam Yoder schism. The author is responding to Schlabach’s account, retelling the stories with sympathy toward the Old
Order, Tobe, and Shetler sides and obvious concern about misuse of the *Bann* and *Meidung* in all of these schisms. The 45- to 54-page booklet (depending on edition) has gone through at least three printings. It is a much longer account than Schlabach’s, as the font size is smaller. The second printing was by Middlebury Graphic Arts (Middlebury, IN) and the most recent by Rocky Ridge Printing II (Shipshewana, IN). It includes copies of the 1923 South Church resolution about Sam Yoder and a copy of the 1955 *Allgemeine Diener Versammlung* decision during the Old Order/Andy Weaver schism.

The fourth article, *Allgemeine Diener Versammlung* by Joseph E. Peachey, is a personal account of the 1955 all-church ministers’ meeting. Though copies of this account have circulated for decades and John Schlabach adopted portions for his account, the copy for this present translation is a 1996 printing from Raber’s Bookstore (Baltic, OH), which is tract-sized and has 15 pages. Peachey was from Belleville, PA, and shows sympathy with the Andy Weaver Amish side of the division. He was born in 1897 and ordained a deacon in the Renno Amish Church (“black toppers”) in 1925. He died in 1982 (Kauffman 1991, 372).

The fifth article, *A Brief History of Amish Churches in Holmes County, Ohio*, is a reproduction of an English booklet of recent origin, 2012. While the now deceased author was named in the original booklet, because the booklet was intended for only limited distribution, the family has requested his name not be used in this present compilation. The 28-page booklet is sympathetic with the more conservative Churches. The booklet covers all of the abovementioned schisms plus Amish-Mennonite schisms from the Old Amish and more recent schisms in the Swartzentruber Church. The appendix tables testify to the new settlements that have come from the Holmes-Wayne Counties Amish lineage since the mid-20th century.

The sixth article, *Ein Historischer Bericht von den Alt-Amischen Gemeinden in Nord-Amerika*, is a brief church and leadership genealogy of the Holmes County Amish settlement in the 1800s. The article was originally published in the *Herald der Wahrheit*, an Old Amish and Amish-Mennonite periodical, and was reprinted in Yoder (2017). We include it here, especially for the sake of providing a complete set of German-to-English translations from Yoder’s (2017) compilation.

A few final editorial notes for these documents: First, we decided to leave name spellings as-is; evidently, less standardization existed for family names then than now. Second, note the subtle distinction between giving counsel (advising on church matters) and holding council (taking a formal voice from the group, as with whether to proceed with communion). Third, we left abbreviations of states and Bible verse citations as is, though they are inconsistent throughout.

REFERENCES


