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BOOK REVIEWS

Review of: **Anderson, Cory, and Jennifer Anderson. 2019. *Amish-Mennonites across the Globe*. Amish-Mennonite Heritage Series, Vol. 2. Millersburg, OH: Acorn Publishing. 320pp., hardcover, \$45.00.**

By Karen Conley
Old Order River Brethren Church

The Amish-Mennonites across the Globe is a coffee-table type book, a 320 page documentary of the international mission efforts of the “car-driving” Amish groups, known variously within the plain communities as Beachy, Amish-Mennonite, or Fellowship churches. It was preceded by *The Amish-Mennonites in North America*, the first book of the Amish-Mennonite Heritage Series and compiled by the same authors. Naturally it is likely to appeal mostly to those people with connections to said churches.

The book covers church planting efforts in 18 countries, which includes 100 congregations, most of them current but 16 of them now extinct. Each country is introduced by a summary of the last few hundred years (including the efforts of other cultures pressed upon the populace); its foods (What’s Cookin’?); Language—including a Bible verse; a blurb on the clothing/textile history of the country; and maps of the country marking current and past Amish-Mennonite congregations. The real gems of this book are the pictures of the congregations and their meetinghouses.

The book begins with an essay in which the authors introduce their own work in a kvetchy style that immediately feels argumentative. They dive right into the common criticisms made of missionaries that are so popular today: that they ruin local culture by imposing their own (as in Colonial times in Africa and Central America); that the indiscriminate sharing of resources and clothing destroys the local economy and dignity of the people, and that the gospel message itself is often secondary to material pressures and is a weak inferior article sold to the locals. One begins to feel a little uncomfortable, especially when they think about the authors’ status as converts to the Amish-Mennonite church. While this gives them a refreshing perspective on their own church body,

it also requires special diplomacy to be heard and to gain credibility. You may wonder if the authors even like the Amish-Mennonite people.

If you continue reading, you will discern a couple who really does love their chosen people, despite the many questions and concerns they have. The book, documentary-style, is a historical record as well as educational; as such it appeals to the historian and armchair anthropologist alike. It records the rise (and fall) of many church planting efforts. As the authors are also educators, effort was made to make it usable in the classroom.

Following the Forward is a “Welcome!” essay, another didactical effort to educate the reader (presumably swimming in North American plain culture) about culture. Whereas the world’s secular concerns have been summed up elsewhere by the laconic phrase “It’s the economy, Stupid,” current understanding of world missions seems to be, “It’s the culture, Stupid.” Another article outlines how Westernization of clothing styles has impacted countries around the world. The authors have studied and written much about clothing. This subject is an integral part of their analysis throughout the book.

Each continent or sub-continent is introduced by a page of illustrations hand drawn or traced using markers and colored pencils. The identity of the artist is not apparent. The pastel artwork and tiny lettering is a startling contrast to the bright colors and bold print in the rest of the book and feels a little incongruous. Possibly the authors thought to appeal to the homegrown talents plain people embody so well. It should be noted that the authors are also the publishers of the book, including its “editing, layout, printing and distribution.” It was admittedly a huge project for a team of two to accomplish. There are places where the text nearly runs into the binding and others where line breaks make for awkward reading. Also, assuming many people with the time and interest to read such a book are probably past two score years, the print could be larger to accommodate the needs of their mature eyes.

Nearly every congregation listed is accompanied by pictures of the church house. Some of these were little more than an extra room over a garage or a member’s home. Others are large buildings

built expressly for church services. All of them are simple and a consistent witness to that part, at least, of Amish-Mennonite cultural heritage.

A brief history for the founding of each congregation is given. Initial outreaches in the late 1960s and early 1970s are admirably covered with vintage photographs and careful anecdotal research. Several churches were founded following the distribution of Christian literature, and many more were formed as the result of requests from local families who did not want to travel so far to services. This is exactly how one would expect a church to grow where the Spirit is moving among the people.

Best of all are the photos of the congregations. Some are taken while members are seated in the pews, and in several cases require a split photograph due to cramped quarters, with the effect of the males in the congregation in one photo and the females in another. Other congregations collected outdoors in a much more planned fashion. It reminds me of the book *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* by Menzel and Mann (1995) in which photographers convinced families to pose out of doors by their homes alongside all their material possessions. The vulnerability of the subjects has a gripping effect on the observer, and the longer one studies the photograph, the more he sees.

The congregations in this book each have their own personality. There are pensive and sober gazes, especially, as might be expected, from those of the Eastern European countries. Some very small and obviously struggling congregations were persuaded to pose for the camera, and their earnest gaze makes one feel their struggle as well as their sincerity. Still other congregations, large and colorful, face the camera with the undercurrent of enthusiasm that accompanies a large family group; the photo session is yet another fun activity of bonding for the community. If one wants to compare clothing styles from one congregation to the next (and everyone knows that's what the authors and many readers will do), then these arrested images afford ample opportunity to do so. The irony is that these descendants of the Amish historically would never have allowed photography at all.

If this book is approached like a picture book, the overall effect is one of a sentimental and cool review, much like going to an evening slide show

at the church where the missionaries are planning to take a collection afterwards. However, taking the time to read the before and after essays to the main content presents quite a different picture....

After the country-by-country treatment of the churches, there is a section of maps and graphs for those fond of numbers. Following that is an article titled "Do you want to be a missionary? Fifty-two questions to ask yourself." The list is comprehensive and the questions are excellent. Since no one can answer all of them satisfactorily, the effect is to push the reader deeper into his easy chair and to keep him away from the mission field for good. But that can hardly be the intent of the book. Surely the work of Missions is much like the work of Salvation itself: if one waits until he has missions perfect, he will never go to the field at all. If one waits until he feels fit for salvation, he will never come to Christ at all.

The book closes much as it opened with an evaluation of missions by the authors, titled "What to make of mission?" It is an admittedly polarized approach, heedless of political correctness and "in the ditch" as opposed to middle-of-the-road. The questions raised are enough to make anyone ever involved in missions feel affronted; the reader may ask if the writer is qualified to ask the questions. The first and main premise is that North American plain people are blinded by their wealth and unable to accomplish missions without slathering them all over with money. Indeed, their money is their mission. A second premise is that the Amish-Mennonite church is becoming so liberal that it compromises its effectiveness in missions; and furthermore, the "mission work" directly contributes to this slide. This drift, in fact, is eloquently addressed on page 313 where the authors describe the ever-changing climate of the church as a product that confuses and frustrates converts, not only converts within North America but in the church plantings abroad.

Finally, the authors grapple with globalization and with how Amish-Mennonite missions have been "evangelized" by the world and worldly (i.e. Evangelical) Christianity. They plead for would-be missionaries to live up to their "strangers and pilgrims" spiritual heritage. There seems to be a dogged focus on community planning, as it were, rather than an acknowledgement of, and moving forward with, communities already established, messy though they be. There is a place for planned

communities, of course. There is also a place for meeting people in their brokenness and need, and counting on the King to redeem imperfect attempts at furthering His Kingdom. This is what revival is. This is what is called for in missions. And this is exactly how this book may be most useful: a descriptor of what was, what is, and what still may be in the world of Amish-Mennonite missions. There is a work for ALL to do and a time for every voice to be heard. God works through our imperfect souls to win other souls; the time is short, and the mission is... His.

Karen Conley is a member of the Old Order River Brethren in Lancaster County, PA, and a registered nurse who has traveled internationally, working with teams of other American Christian healthcare personnel.

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