



reunion

Hutterites in North America

by Arie and Daniel Hochstetler, Goshen, Ind.

Hutterites, like the Mennonites and Amish, trace their origins to the Swiss Anabaptists in the 1520's. Due to persecution they fled eastward through Tirol, Austria, and the country of Moravia where the movement gained many followers but also suffered major persecution and martyrdom. The name derives from Jakob Hutter, an early leader (not a founder), who then was burned at the stake in 1536, the year the Dutch Menno Simons left the priesthood.

Like some German Mennonites, these Anabaptists also eventually went to Ukraine where they prospered for a time. Their history is the story of ups and downs, and they have a strong awareness of their Anabaptist origins. From the early times, as an expression of faithfulness, they practiced community of goods or communal living in production and consumption, and are strongly nonresistant.

In the 1870's a remnant immigrated from Ukraine to the Dakota Territory in North



Daniel (above left) visiting with one of the old Hutterite preachers and his daughter who had been a third grade student 50 years ago.

America and settled in three colonies from which have developed several distinct groups. Hundreds more, with the same ethnic and religious background, didn't settle in colonies, but merged with Mennonites or other groups. Today there are over 500 communal Hutterite colonies scattered from Minnesota to the Pacific and in the Prairie Provinces of Canada.

In 1963 Mennonite sociologist Dr. John A. Hostetler invited Daniel to apply to teach at a Hutterite colony in Montana and both of us assist him as informal field workers in research for his "Education and Marginality" study. This included an analysis of how children are prepared to become a part of the colony church and community, and of the process and result when a small percent choose to leave the colony.

Daniel, top left, visits with Hutterite friends while young children eat a meal together separate from adults.

Hutterites in North America (cont. from front)

Daniel taught the English school at a Dariusleut Hutterite colony near Grass Range where he had 19 students in six grades. The next year he taught the school at a Lehrerleut colony near Choteau, Montana, where there were 34 students in all eight grades. Like the Amish, Hutterite young people do not usually finish high school or attend college. In each colony we lived in a "teacherage" near the residences, communal dining room and church house. With three small children Arie had many opportunities to relate to the colony women and families, and observe their way of life and talk about life and faith in our families and in our churches.

Besides becoming acquainted with the people and colonies where we lived, on weekends we visited most of the 21 Hutterite colonies in Montana at that time, plus a few colonies in Alberta, Canada, and a Schmiedleut colony in South Dakota for a wider perspective. In addition to doing some interviewing and other projects, we mostly observed colony life through the seasons and how the formal and informal activities contributed to the life and well-being of the community.



Women at work preparing food in the communal Hutterite kitchen. The large polka dot scarves identify these as members of the Lehrerleut group.

Hutterites, also known as Hutterian Brethren, live in diversified agricultural communities consisting of 50 to 150 people. Their highly structured lives reflect their long past, but they have seen considerable changes in the past century as they cope with technology and the pressures of the culture. While many of the colonies do grain farming, ranching, or have large poultry or hog operations, more are going into some kind of farm-related manufacturing or sales. While they all use modern farming equipment and transportation, some other aspects of their lives are more like a past century.

Hutterites all speak a German dialect related to their sojourn in Tirol, Austria, but their

church services are in Luther's High German. Children and teenagers have regular German school sessions where they learn to read and write in German, and memorize songs and Scripture. Young people are baptized as members before they can get married. While families are a priority, commitment to the community is also fundamental. Due to their distinctive homemade clothes, in many ways they have more similarity to the Amish than to most Mennonites.

Besides the Sunday worship service, Hutterites have a short service most evenings just before the group meal. No hymn books are used, as the minister chants out each line before the congregation sings that line. All sermons are read from texts written in a past century. Their view of shunning, if necessary, is very similar to the Amish belief. While closed communion is observed, they have no history of practicing foot washing. Ministers are elected from the membership, and each colony has a "head preacher," with a role similar to an Amish bishop. There is also a "second preacher" who becomes a head preacher when a colony has passed its optimum size and divides into two colonies.

During the two years we lived in Montana, we developed a close relationship with quite a few people and have kept in regular contact with a number of them. We have gone back to visit several times, but by now Daniel's students and our other friends are living in quite a number of colonies due to periodic branching out." In September 2014 we drove a rental car 1,000 miles and visited nine colonies and found most of Daniel's students. Since girls live in their husbands' colonies, some of them were living in Canada or too scattered to locate (if their husbands had come from some other colony).

While Menno-Hof, for obvious reasons, features primarily the history, life and faith of Mennonites and Amish, it is well to remember that there is a large branch of our Anabaptist family in the Northwest that shares a common history and faith.

Many Hutterites welcome friendly visits, although due to their more isolated way of life have much less contact with the outside world than we are familiar with.

Many Mennonites are familiar with many Amish, some Hutterites are acquainted with some Mennonites, and a few Amish know a few Hutterites. But rather few people have a long acquaintance with members of all three parts of the Anabaptist family in North America. We're grateful for our life experiences that have allowed us to be one of those "few people."

Arie & Daniel Hochstetler live in Goshen, Ind., and attend East Goshen Mennonite. They have five children and seven grandchildren and enjoy reading, hosting friends & travelers, volunteering at church, The MCC Depot, Menno Hof, and Greencroft retirement community.