

PLAIN
ANSWERS
about the
AMISH
LIFE

MINDY STARNS
CLARK



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PLAIN ANSWERS ABOUT THE AMISH LIFE

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*This book is dedicated to the Amish,
with thanks for all they have taught me about the need for
surrender, submission, separation, and simplicity
in my own Christian walk.*

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FOREWORD

Why are we so fascinated with the Amish? If we're not marveling at their enchanting dress and simple lifestyle, we're grappling with their unusual practices and austere ways. Our curiosity mingles with admiration, confusion, and suspicion. Just who are these people? Why do they live this way?

And why do we care so much?

Without a doubt, the Amish ignite our curiosity. We buy Amish-made products, cook Amish recipes, and read Amish fiction. We take vacations to what we call "Amish country," those Amish-heavy regions such as Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Holmes County, Ohio. While there, we look for glimpses of them from our cars and discreetly snap photographs from a distance. We wonder what it would be like to live without constant interruptions, the stresses of modern life, and the intrusions of technology. Once in a while, we think we might like to be one of them, to live as they do.

Usually, those thoughts pass just as quickly as they come, for we know we couldn't survive without television, without e-mail, without driving. We don't really want to be one of them, and yet the allure remains. The Amish themselves don't always understand our attraction either, but in response a wise Amish man once issued the following challenge:

If you admire our faith, strengthen yours.

If you admire our sense of commitment, deepen yours.

If you admire our community spirit, build one.

If you admire the simple life, cut back.

*If you admire quality merchandise or land stewardship,
then make quality.*

If you admire deep character and enduring values, live them.

This popular saying is frequently posted on the walls of restaurants and tourist attractions in Amish country. The first time I saw it, I understood why its message was so important. We can't all be Amish, but in many ways, we would do well to follow their example.

Unfortunately, that's not always easy to do. Given the vast proliferation of Amish-related myths, inaccuracies, and outright fallacies that are out there—online, in print, in the movies, and more—it's easy to misunderstand even the most basic facts about the Amish. The goal of this book is to clear up many of those misconceptions by providing accurate information about these people and the lives they lead.

In these pages I have chosen to focus primarily on the largest and most well-known affiliation, the Old Order Amish. Practices vary, however, so in order to avoid definitive statements that do not hold true for all Amish affiliations, or even for all Old Order districts, I use words such as “usually” and “most” and “many” whenever describing Amish life and regulations.

Finally, though the Amish have terms to describe those who are not Amish—such as “English” or “fancy”—I will most often use “non-Amish” and “outsider.” These seem appropriate because this guide is looking in on Amish life from the outside rather than the other way around.

Living near Lancaster County myself, I have developed great respect for the Amish over the years. Though I could never live as they do, I understand why it works for them. I do not see them through rose-colored glasses, nor do I pass judgment on their more incomprehensible regulations. The subject is so complex, in fact, that for this book I have chosen simply to observe, question, read, study, watch, interview, and report. This process has confirmed to me that while the Amish themselves are “just people” like the rest of us, their way of life is utterly foreign to our own, the choices they make are unique, and their ways are genuinely worthy of study.

As you read and use this book, I hope you will gain a deeper understanding of the Amish faith, life, and values, and that this will

help you to form your own opinions about why you find them so intriguing. Most of all, my prayer is that you will use this new knowledge to enhance your own faith. Thus, may we all be “iron sharpening iron”—Amish, author, and reader—helping one another to grow through a new perspective.

Enjoy!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Plain Answers About the Amish Life is written in a question-and-answer format and is organized by topic into five main sections:

- *Foundation* explains the basis of the Amish faith, including theology, history, organization, church practices and leadership, and demographics.
- *Lifestyle* covers various elements of Amish life that are so different from our own, such as clothing, language, transportation, and the use of technology.
- *Passages* deals with the various stages of growth and transition in life—such as childhood, baptism, marriage, and death—from an Amish perspective.
- *Outside World* presents information about interactions of the Amish with external entities such as media and tourism.
- *Supplemental Material* provides additional resources for further study, including biblical references, contact information for various Amish-related organizations, and a full index.

Much of the information in this book has been gleaned from a previous work of mine, *A Pocket Guide to Amish Life*, which was published in 2010. Using that guide as my starting point, I shaped the text from that book into this all-new Q & A format, expanding and enhancing the material to provide answers to every possible question you might have about the Amish.

Not only is this information even easier to access and understand, but it can be read in any order and referred to again and again. Simply start with the Contents or the Index to find your topic of interest and move around from there. (Note: To enhance this skip-around approach, I have had to include some minor repetition of information

where various subjects tend to overlap.) While you can use this book in any order you please, each section does build upon the previous material, so reading it in order may give you an even greater understanding of the Amish and their various beliefs and practices.

Finally, be sure to check out AmishReader on Facebook, which lets you join in the conversation, pose questions of your own, and discover an even wider array of resources about the Amish.

PART ONE: FOUNDATION



When I arrived, Christy was sitting under the oak tree, her skirt and apron perfectly arranged, a thick book open on her lap. Nearly every Amish home had a copy of the familiar, massive tome, an account of our ancestors who perished for their faith.

*I kneeled beside her. “What do you think of the Martyrs Mirror?”
“Bo-ring. History is stupid.”*

It was quite an unusual statement for a person of our faith to make. From the day we were born, our history was practically born with us. It was a huge part of who we were as a people. I couldn’t imagine, for example, that she found boring the story of Dirk Willems, the man who rescued his pursuer who had fallen through ice, only to then be arrested. I said as much, but she merely yawned in response.

“You’ll see,” I said to her, “history won’t be boring on this trip. Not the way I’m going to teach it. It will all be very much alive.”

—Excerpted from *The Amish Nanny*
by Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould

DEFINING THE AMISH

Who are the Amish?

The Amish are a Christian sect that separated from the Mennonites in seventeenth-century Europe and began emigrating to America in search of religious freedom in the eighteenth century. Now living exclusively in the United States and Canada, the Amish are known, among other things, for their plain dress and plain living, rejection of modern conveniences, and chiefly agrarian society.

Are all Amish groups the same?

No. Due to several centuries of church growth, expansion, and division, many different types of Amish affiliations are now in North America, each with different sets of rules and practices. There are, however, certain elements that most Amish groups tend to have in common, including that they:

- adhere to a statement of faith known as the Eighteen Articles
- wear some form of distinctive Plain clothing
- worship in homes rather than in church buildings
- do not connect their houses with public utilities as a way of remaining separate from the world
- use horses and buggies as their primary means of transportation
- limit formal education to the eighth grade
- live in rural areas
- emphasize an agrarian lifestyle

- are pacifists
- choose their religious leaders through divine appointment by drawing lots
- speak a German dialect as their primary language
- value the history of their people and their martyrs' heritage

In what ways are the various groups different?

While all Amish affiliations adhere to the same basic belief system, the particular ways in which they choose to live out those beliefs can vary greatly from group to group. Aspects on which they may differ include such elements as buggy styles, church discipline, clothing, lawn mowers, technology, and much more.

How many Amish people are there?

Statistics differ among researchers, but according to the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College, if we count all family members—including baptized adults and not-yet-baptized infants, children, and teens—the total number comes to almost 300,000 Amish currently living in the United States and Canada.

How are they divided into the different groups?

Though it's difficult to provide an exact number, at least two dozen different Amish affiliations are in North America. (See chapter 6, "Organization," for more information about how the Amish church is structured.) These affiliations are further divided into more than 2000 church districts. Approximately 500 Amish settlements are located in 30 states and in Canada.

Where did the word "Amish" come from?

The word "Amish" first came from the name of Jakob Ammann, an Anabaptist leader who proposed a number of changes to the Mennonite faith in the late 1600s, eventually causing a break in the church. Those who joined him and followed his teachings became known as

the “Amish.” (See chapter 11, “History,” to learn about Ammann and his followers.)

Is that what the word “Amish” means? Someone who is a follower of Jakob Ammann?

That was its original meaning, though it has evolved over the years to indicate that and much more. In fact, the word “Amish” is listed in the dictionary as both a noun (the Amish) and an adjective (Amish farm, Amish furniture, Amish fiction, and so on). Currently, “Amish” indicates a faith culture, a way of life, a set of values, a style of clothing, a collection of technological adaptations, and much more.

The Amish and Mennonites have remained separate groups to this day, though their technology is similar in many ways.

BELIEFS

Are the Amish a cult?

No. The Amish are Christians and do not fit the modern, generally accepted criteria for what constitutes a cult. They may be confused as one because they follow a very restrictive set of rules and face excommunication (shunning) for certain infractions of those rules. However, unlike a cult, the Amish faith is not centered on a single human authority, they do not require their members to pool their finances, and the tenets of their faith are compatible with most major Protestant denominations. Thus, they are not a cult but simply an ultraconservative Christian faith culture.

What do the Amish believe, religiously speaking?

The Amish are Christians and adhere to the following tenets of the Christian faith:

*There is one God.
 God is a trinity.
 Jesus came to earth as God in the flesh,
 died, and rose again.
 Salvation comes through grace by faith.
 Scripture is the divinely inspired word of God.
 The church is the body of Christ.*

Note that these same beliefs are also held by the Catholic church and by most Protestant denominations as well. The difference between the Amish and other Christian groups is not so much what they believe as it is how they have chosen to live out those beliefs.

If their beliefs aren't all that different from other Christian denominations, then why do the Amish have so many odd practices, such as dressing the way they do and not using electricity?

Most of the elements of the Amish lifestyle that seem unique or confusing are not due to a complicated or controversial theology, but instead to the ways they have chosen to live out their Christian walk in their day-to-day lives. They attempt to follow the teachings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, by emphasizing certain biblical values, including:

- *surrender* of the self-will to God
- *submission* to authority, to the faith community, and to its rules
- *separation* from the world, becoming a “peculiar people” by turning to family and the faith community, by honoring history and tradition, and by turning the other cheek
- *simplicity* through the practice of humility, modesty, thrift, and peacefulness

Jesus embodied these values of surrender, submission, separation, and simplicity throughout His life and thus provided the perfect example of how we, too, should live. A biblical passage frequently cited by the Amish comes from the night before Jesus was crucified, when He exemplified surrender and submission as He knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed, “Remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42 KJV). The Amish

— IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

For the Amish, culture and religion are intertwined to the point where it is hard to separate the two. Indeed, it is a faith culture.

strive to be as obedient in every area of life as Jesus was in that moment. Their many unique lifestyle regulations are based on this overriding goal of Christlikeness.

Is the reason they deny themselves modern comforts to earn their way into heaven?

No. The reason for their lifestyle is not to earn grace. Instead, it comes from a desire to live out a Christlike lifestyle of surrender, submission, separation, and simplicity.

Are you positive they are not trying to “earn” their salvation? Because I’ve heard conflicting answers to this question. Some Amish say that if they violate the ordinances, they won’t get into heaven. That sounds like a works-based religion to me.

As with many denominations, there are factions that teach variations of the core beliefs. While you are correct that some Amish are taught that they must earn their way into heaven, the official Amish belief—and the one held by the majority of Amish groups—is that salvation comes through grace alone.

Do the Amish believe in the concept of salvation? Do they consider themselves “saved” or “born again”?

Yes, the Amish believe in salvation, and many would describe themselves as saved, born again, or as having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Various Amish affiliations seem to be of different minds, however, on the topic of what is known as “assurance of salvation.” The majority of Amish believe it would be prideful to state outright that they have received salvation and instead maintain what they call a “living hope” or a “continued effort” on the topic. They trust the ultimate fate of their soul to God’s providence rather than claim it with certainty.

There are other Amish groups, however, that feel an assurance of salvation is not prideful but biblical, citing verses such as 1 John 5:13,

which says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life” (emphasis added). Amish who fall on this side of the topic believe that everyone who has accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior can know with certainty that they have been saved for eternity.

Is there a person or organization that oversees the Amish church the way the pope does for Catholics or the Southern Baptist Convention does for Southern Baptists?

No. Unlike many religious denominations, the Amish have no central authority—no pope, synod, convention, diocese, association, or the like. Instead, the ultimate authority for Amish life and practice lies within each local district. This is why rules can vary from district to district even within an affiliation—each congregation follows the rules established by its own leaders.

The bishops in an affiliation meet together regularly to discuss issues and look for common stances. This provides unity within the affiliation and support for the bishops as they administer their districts.

Do the Amish think theirs is the only one true religion?

No. To do so would be prideful, which goes against one of their most basic values. The Amish are respectful of other Christian denominations. As one Amish man said, the Bible is meant to be a mirror, not a spotlight. Better to pay attention to their own walk with God than presume to judge others'.¹

If I asked an Amish person how to get to heaven, what would his answer be?

That person would likely refer to God's will in the matter and then perhaps describe the need to have a personal relationship with Christ. He might also quote an applicable Scripture, such as, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Would an Amish person try to convert me to the Amish faith?

No. More than anyone, the Amish know how rare and unusual such a conversion would be for a person who was not raised Amish. He might, however, encourage you to seek out a good church, one more in keeping with your own upbringing or community.

— IN THEIR OWN WORDS —

The nice thing is that anyone can choose to be a follower of Christ regardless of his lot in life and the cultural context he lives in. No need to be Amish in order to believe in the Lord and have eternal life—unless, of course, the Lord wants you to be Amish.

May I convert to the Amish faith if I want to?

The Amish allow converts to their faith, though successful, permanent conversions of outsiders into the Amish church are extremely rare. See chapter 28, “Us and Them,” for more information.

Do the Amish ever send out missionaries or engage in other mission work?

According to authors Charles Hurst and David McConnell in *An Amish Paradox: Diversity and Change in the World's Largest Amish Community*, “Specific responses to the great commission vary considerably by affiliation, by district, and by individual inclination.”² For the Amish who do support missions, they are more likely to focus on charity and relief work rather than on witnessing or evangelizing.

Any travel for missions is most often to help out in areas that have been affected by natural disasters and are in need of extensive rebuilding. I once had an interesting conversation with two young Amish

men in their early twenties who had gone, hammers in hand, on a mission trip to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

In some areas, Old Order Amish will donate to or volunteer at Plain-run nonprofit organizations such as the Mennonite Central Committee or Christian Aid Ministries. Hurst and McConnell describe one such organization based in Holmes County, Ohio, where local Amish church districts “send volunteers for ‘work days’ to can massive amounts of turkey for shipment to Burundi, North Korea, and other sites.”³

Despite these mission-related activities, most Old Order Amish consider their primary “missions” task to be setting an example in their own lives at home.