

## Amish Beliefs about Modern Conveniences



Today there are over 25 different Amish, Mennonite, and Brethren church groups in Lancaster County, all holding to slightly different traditions and their own interpretations of the Bible.

The more traditional groups are called 'old order'. They do not permit electricity or telephones in their homes. By restricting access to television, radio, and telephones, the Amish are better able to keep the modern world from intruding into their home life. These people have long preferred farming as a way of life. They feel their lifestyle and their families can best be maintained in a rural environment.

While they do not permit the use of tractors in their fields, these old order Amish groups do use modern farm equipment pulled by teams of horses or mules. These old order groups do not own or operate automobiles, believing that cars would provide easier access to the ways of the world.

You will often see their horses and buggies on our local roads. These traditional groups wear plain clothing styles, which has earned them the name "Plain People".

It is the simple, peaceful lifestyle of these plain people that attracts such a curiosity today. Many wonder how these people can survive in their supposedly backward ways. Well, they're not only surviving - they're thriving.

Since 1960, the Amish population in Lancaster County has almost tripled. Their separation from the rest of society and their way of life actually helps to strengthen their community.

## Amish Schools and Education

Amish children attend one-room schoolhouses through the eighth grade. Worship services are held every other week in one of the member's homes. Socializing is an important part of their life. They have a strong sense of community spirit, and often come to the aid of those in need. Their **barn-raisings** are a good example. Neighbors freely give of their time and their skills to help one another.

They are generally private people and often find all the attention and curiosity about their lifestyle disturbing. They believe that the taking of photographs where someone is recognizable is forbidden by the Biblical prohibition against making any 'graven image'.

Please respect their desire for privacy when visiting here. With our society's current interest in restoring '**family values**', much can be learned from studying the **way of life**. Their devotion to family and community and their strong work ethic are good examples for our larger society.

## Amish Clothing and Dress

Old Order women and girls wear modest dresses made from solid-colored fabric with long sleeves and a full skirt (not shorter than half-way between knee and floor).

These dresses are covered with a cape and apron and are fastened with straight pins or snaps. The women never cut their hair, which they wear in a bun on the back of the head.

On their heads they wear a white prayer covering if they are married and a black one if they are single. Women do not wear jewelry.



faith.

The men and boys wear dark-colored suits, straight-cut coats without lapels, broadfall trousers, suspenders, solid-colored shirts, black socks and shoes, and black or straw broad-brimmed hats.

Men's shirts are fasten with conventional buttons, but their suit coats and vests fasten with hooks and eyes. They do not have mustaches, but they grow beards after they marry.

They feel these distinctive clothes encourage humility and separation from the world. **Amish clothing** is not a costume; it is an expression of their

## THE AMISH WAY OF LIFE and CULTURE: FAQ

The following answers to questions we received as part of our "Ask the Amish" feature were given by the resident experts at the **Mennonite Information Center in Lancaster**:

### "Why don't the Amish use electricity?"

"Amish people interpret linking with electrical wires as a connection with the world - and the Bible tells them they are not to be "conformed to the world." (Romans 12:2) In 1919 their leaders agreed that connecting to power lines would not be in the best interest of the Amish community.

They did not make this decision because they thought electricity was evil in itself, but because easy access to it could lead to many temptations and the deterioration of church and family life.

Most of us today would think it impossible to live without the modern conveniences such as electricity and cars. What makes the Old Order Amish unique is not that they get along without modernity, but that they choose to do without it when it would be readily available.

They value simplicity and self-denial over comfort, convenience and leisure. Their lifestyle is a deliberate way of separating from the world and maintaining self-sufficiency. They are less threatened by power shortages caused by storm, disaster, or war.) As a result there is a bonding that unites their community and protects it from outside influences such as television, radios, and other influences."

### "Do the Amish pay taxes?"

"Self-employed Amish do not pay Social Security tax. Those employed by non-Amish employers do pay Social Security tax. They do pay real estate, state and federal income taxes, county taxes, sales tax, etc.

They do not collect Social Security benefits, nor would they collect unemployment or welfare funds. [Self sufficiency](#) is the Amish community's answer to government aid programs. Section 310 of the Medicare section of the Social Security act has a sub-section that permits individuals to apply for exemption from the self-employment tax if he is a member of a religious body that is conscientiously

opposed to social security benefits but that makes reasonable provision of taking care of their own elderly or dependent members.

They have a long history of taking care of their own members. They do not have retirement communities or nursing homes; in most cases, each family takes care of their own, and the Amish community gives assistance as needed."

### **"Why are all the buggies black?"**

"Throughout the United States and in Canada not all buggies are black. The similarity of their carriages in any given area allows little for status, but speaks of all being equal. Therefore, members of a particular group can be identified by the buggies they drive.

In Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, for example, there are five distinct groups of Old Order Amish living in the Kishacoquillas Valley. The two most conservative groups drive white-topped buggies, another has yellow tops, and two others use black buggies.

Here in Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish drive gray buggies and the Old Order Mennonites drive black buggies."

### **"How does a barn-raising work?"**



"A **barn-raising** is indeed a community endeavor for the Amish. At daybreak, the buggies arrive at the farm where the barn is to be erected.

Then, an experienced Amish carpenter/contractor is put in charge and men are assigned to various areas of work. Often the framing is completed before the noon meal and in the afternoon the roofing is installed.

#### **An Amish Barn Raising**

Meanwhile the women are preparing a delicious noon meal, sometimes served outdoors. There is always prayer before a meal is served. The children play games and are available to run errands. But they also have a most exciting day as spectators at a truly amazing project of brotherly love---building a barn in one day."

### **"What language do the Amish speak?"**

"In their homes and in conversations with each other, the Old Order speak Pennsylvania Dutch, which is a dialect of German. We understand that it is similar to "Platt" that is spoken in parts of northern Germany. When children go to school they learn English. In their worship services the sermons are given in German. The German language, "Deitch", is also taught in their schools."

### **"Do Amish families play games?"**

"Yes, the families do play games and read together in the evenings. Parents are involved in their children's activities. However, there are not long evenings in an Amish family.

When the children get home from school, there are chores that must be done. At an early age, children

have responsibilities assigned to them. After the evening meal, the school homework must be tackled, and before long it is bedtime. They are early risers and therefore go to bed early."

### **"What holidays do they celebrate and why?"**

"Holidays observed by the Amish are the religious holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, and Whit Monday (the day after pentecost). The reasons for these observances are to fast and meditate on scriptures related to these days.

We should also mention that December 25 is a solemn celebration of Christ's birth and "second Christmas" on December 26 is a time for visiting and family dinners."

### **"Do the Amish use modern medicine and doctors?"**

"Most Amish and Mennonite groups do not oppose modern medicine. Their readiness to seek health services varies from family to family. Nothing in their understanding of the Bible forbids them from using modern medical services, including surgery, hospitalization, dental work, anesthesia, blood transfusions, etc.

They do believe, however, that good health, both physical and mental, is a gift from God and requires careful stewardship on the part of the individual.

### **"What happens at an Amish funeral?"**

"Here in Lancaster County, funeral and burial usually takes place three days after death. A funeral director from the local area assists in a minimal way, which usually includes embalming, and sometimes includes supplying the coffin and the hearse. In death, as in life the simplicity is evident. A plain wooden coffin is built. Often it is six-sided with a split lie - the upper part is hinged so it can be opened for viewing the body. It is very simple - no ornate carving or fine fabrics.

Traditionally a woman will wear the white apron she wore on her wedding day. In some Amish communities both men and women wear white for burial. The tone of the two-hour funeral service is hopeful, yet full of admonition for the living. There are no eulogies. Respect for the deceased is expressed, but not praise. A hymn is spoken but not sung. There are no flowers.

The grave is hand dug in an Amish church district cemetery. There will be only a simple tombstone to mark the spot, much like all the other tombstones in the cemetery - in death as in life, we are all equal and do not elevate one person above another."

### **"Do the Amish play any form of musical instrument?"**

"No. Musical instruments are forbidden by the Old Order community. Playing an instrument would be "worldly." It is contrary to the spirit of "Glassenheit" (humility), and would stir up the emotions of those who are involved."

1. In what ways are the Amish similar to other, more common, protestant churches? In what ways are they different?
2. In the Amish community, how could you tell if someone was single or married?
3. What do you think would happen if someone in the Amish community committed a large sin? How do you predict the community might react?