

The Amana Church Society: Community, Continuity and Change

By Peter Hoehnle

In 2014 the Amana Church Society will celebrate its three-hundredth anniversary. Founded in 1714 in Himbach, Germany, by Eberhard Ludwig Gruber and Johann Friedrich Rock and known in its early history as the Community of True Inspiration, the group migrated to the United States between 1842 and 1846, settling first near Buffalo, New York.

Calling themselves the Ebenezer Society, the Inspirationists adopted a communal lifestyle that continued, with minor changes, until 1932, when the members voted to end communal living and to separate the religious and business aspects of what was one of the nation's longest-lived, largest, and most successful communal societies. The reorganization of 1932 produced a business corporation, now known as Amana Society, Inc., and the Amana Church Society.

Of the large American communal societies visited by Charles Nordhoff for his book, *The Communistic Societies of the United States*, published in 1874, the Inspirationists of Amana are the only group besides the Shakers that still exists as a religious organization. It is no longer possible to worship with Harmonists, Zoarites, Oneida Perfectionists, Jansonists of Bishop Hill, or Kielites of Bethel and Aurora, but one can still find a worship service in the same spirit as those witnessed by Nordhoff at Amana.

Like many other Pietist groups, the Inspirationists believe in a simple form of worship, without unnecessary ceremony. Services have always been conducted by lay elders, featured *a capella* singing, and have been held in plain meeting rooms with little to distract attention from the commentary spoken by the elder.

The Inspirationists were pacifists and, as such, refused to serve in the military. As separatists from the established Lutheran Church in Germany, they did not send their children to public schools. A key tenant of the Inspirationist faith, both then and now, is the belief in baptism by the Holy Spirit without a water baptism ceremony.

The chief distinction between the Inspirationists and other religious

groups has always been their belief that God continues to inspire certain specially endowed individuals to proclaim His word. These individuals were known as *Werkzeuge* (instruments). During the period from 1714 through 1883 fourteen individuals were recognized as *Werkzeuge*, including four women. A *Werkzeug* might display the gift for as short a period as three months or, in the case of the best known *Werkzeug*, Christian Metz almost fifty years. The testimonies spoken by the *Werkzeuge* could be in written (*Einsprache*) or spoken (*Ausprache*) form. A scribe followed the *Werkzeug* and recorded the spoken testimonies in shorthand. These notes were then transcribed and later published. Today, nearly five hundred of these testimonies have been translated into English for use in our present-day worship services.

Testimonies typically focus on the need to live moral lives centered on God. Sometimes a testimony takes the form of a prayer, sometimes a hymn, but more typically a statement or admonition. The Inspirationists have always tested these words against the Bible, and hold the scriptures to be the ultimate authority. Historically, only if the words of a *Werkzeug* were supported by scripture was that individual regarded as truly inspired by the community.

The Amana Church Society remains an active and vital part of the Amana community. Adult membership stands at approximately 375 people. Ten lay elders conduct regular weekly worship services and special services, and officiate at funerals and weddings.

My wife, Elly, and I approach the Amana Church Society from different perspectives. She was raised a Lutheran and became a member as an adult. I was born into this tradition in 1974. I offer this brief essay as my impressions of what remains a vital faith community.

I was aware of other religious traditions through attending services when we traveled, and from funerals, weddings, baptisms and other rites of passage for family and friends who were not members of the Amana Church Society. This awareness has grown through the years, yet my life and beliefs have always been centered in the Amana tradition.

My wife, by contrast, was raised within the Lutheran tradition, and occasionally refers to herself as a “reformed Lutheran.” She became aware of the Amana Church after moving to South Amana while teaching at the local middle school. A close friend invited her to services, and she felt drawn to the simple style and focus of the worship.



Fig. 1. Church building in Main Amana, built in 1864.
(Painting ca. 1950 by John A. Noc. Courtesy of Amana Heritage Society)



Fig. 2. Worshippers leaving Sunday service, 1937. The building is the first meeting house in Amana, built in 1856. It burned down shortly after this picture was taken.
(Photograph by John W. Barry. Courtesy of Amana Heritage Society)

The church maintains a volunteer “membership committee” whose charge is to work with prospective members as they decide whether or not to join the church. As with other prospective members, Elly approached the committee, declared her intentions, and then met with them twice. During these meetings, the committee questioned her about her beliefs and provided resources and instruction in Inspirationist beliefs. After the second meeting, the committee typically recommends the individual for membership. The church board of trustees acts on this recommendation and, once approved, the new member is asked to sign the church constitution. This is the entire process for joining the Amana Church Society. Among the few requirements is that a church member cannot maintain a dual membership with another congregation. Converts can serve in all church capacities, including as elders, and are not limited in their participation in any church activities.

Unlike my wife, as an Amana native I attended the church-sponsored Sunday school. The Sunday school follows a typical Protestant curriculum, and concludes with two years of catechism study, after which the students are confirmed—a process that usually occurs when they are fourteen or fifteen years of age. Confirmation involves answering questions from the catechism during a special church service. New confirmants are junior members of the church until the age of eighteen, when they are offered the opportunity to sign the church constitution and enter into full adult membership.

When I was growing up, all of my family attended the German-language services as they rotated between the buildings in Homestead, South Amana and Main Amana. I started to attend these services when I was confirmed, at age fourteen, in 1988. Before that time I attended Sunday school while services were being held. During the winter, German services were held in the Middle Amana Church at 8:30 in the morning, followed by the English service at 10 o’clock. When I first began attending, two of the elders still conducted the entire service in the German language, while a few others delivered prayers or read a testimony in German.

In the early 1990s the Board of Trustees decided that all services would be held at Middle Amana, with special services, such as funerals, Christmas, and other combined services at Amana. Instead of having “German” and “English” elders, the same elder presided over both services: German at 8:30 and English at 10 o’clock. For a while, the two elders who delivered their services entirely in German wrote two commentaries: one in German

and the other in English; however, by the time I left high school, the commentary portion of the service was always in English.

Today, we continue to have both a German early service and a late English service. Approximately thirty-five people, on average, attend the German service. In the summer months, the attendance at the German service can be as little as a quarter of those attending the later all-English gathering.

The majority of our weekly worship services are held in the Middle Amana *Saal* (which translates as “meeting house”). This building, constructed in 1863 of locally fired brick, is a long narrow building with a large central room where the service takes place. A small room on one side serves as a place for men to enter and hang up coats and hats, while a larger addition on the women’s side serves the same function and, in the past, also contained a small apartment for the family whose duty it was to care for the building. This space is now occupied by rooms used for funeral visitations and by the children’s nursery.

Prior to the service, attendees might visit or socialize in the hallways and anterooms on either side of the building. In earlier times, people entered the meeting room or sanctuary for quiet contemplation before the service began. This still happens, but visiting before the service is now more regular than in years past. Recently, we have set aside a room with coffee and treats where people can visit between the early and late services or following the late service.

The main room in which the service is held is painted pale blue, with rows of benches facing the long wall and divided by a wide central aisle. Church elders are seated on a single row of benches facing the congregation. In the middle of this row is a plain pine table, covered with a green felt cloth, a small lectern, German and English Bibles and German and English hymnals. At each service, the elder in charge sits at this table and then stands to deliver his or her commentary from the lectern.

The floors inside the meeting room are plain pine and, like the benches, are periodically scrubbed to keep them clean. Strips of hand-loomed carpet are tacked to the floor in front of the elders and down the sides of the church, where they serve to muffle the sound of footsteps as people enter the sanctuary.

A technologically sophisticated sound system runs under the room and amplifies the elder’s commentary through speakers mounted in the ceiling. The commentary is also digitally recorded on a CD that is taken to the



Fig. 3. Interior of the Middle Amana Church, 2011. The elders' bench and presiding elder's table are at left. The section of benches to the right (foreground) is the women's side. The strip of carpeting was hand loomed by a local artisan.
(Photograph by Robert Campagna)

local care center for elderly members to listen to later in the day.

In both services, men and women sit on plain wooden benches on either side of the main meeting room, men on one side and women on the other. As far as I am aware, this seating tradition has no theological basis, but is simply a continuation of a practice that was common in Germany at the time the Inspirationist community originated. Historically, members were also seated according to age, with the youngest people on the front benches and the oldest members towards the back. While this custom is no longer observed, most people have a spot on a specific bench in a specific row that they favor.

Historically, men and women tended to dress in black for services. Men wore black or dark-colored suits, while women wore a fitted cap, shawl and apron. The clothing worn by the women seems to have been a plain version of the street dress worn by women in Germany when the Inspirationists lived there. It has become imbedded in our tradition as a sign of humility. Until the 1990s virtually all women wore these garments. Gradually, in the last two decades, this custom has disappeared. Today, one



Fig. 4. East Amana resident Lucille Schaefer, then sixteen, is pictured dressed for church in this 1937 photograph. She is still active in the church today.
(Photograph by John W. Barry. Courtesy of the Amana Heritage Society)

will still find a large percentage of women in the early (German) service with caps, shawls and aprons, but only a handful of women so attired in the late (English) service.

In both services, a period of silence precedes the start of worship. A few quick whispers are sometimes heard, but generally, these moments are quiet. Five minutes before service time the church bell is rung by one of the men. Those who want to visit before services usually wait outside until the bell is rung before entering.

The service begins with a welcome directed to the congregation, including visitors, and a few short announcements by the presiding elder. During the summer and fall, we typically have several visitors at a service; an invitation to visit is featured in the local tourism publications. A volunteer greets visitors, explains the order of worship, and sees to it that they have a Bible and hymnal.

Historically, church elders were all male and were called to this position by the inspired leaders, or *Werkzeuge*, of the community. Following the death of the last *Werkzeug*, Barbara Landmann, in 1883, elders were appointed by the governing board of trustees.

While community members regarded eldership as a high distinction and an honor, men who were asked to serve became increasingly hesitant to do so in the decades following the end of communal living in Amana in 1932. The trustee minutes of that era offer numerous examples of a prospective elder who refused the appointment.

In more recent years, the eldership has focused on an individual's calling to serve. While the sitting elders may approach an individual who displays the gifts of an elder and ask them to consider serving, most modern elders are people who feel a calling to serve and themselves approach the current elders. Once these persons have made their intentions known, they participate in a nine-month training period, during which church doctrine and practice are covered in depth and the individual conducts a few services in tandem with an experienced elder. At the end of the period, the elders may offer a recommendation that the individual be named as an elder, which then had to be confirmed by the governing board of trustees. Once appointed, elders serve for life.

After the announcements and welcome, the elder announces a hymn. All of the hymns are sung *a capella*. Song leaders provide the pitch and lead the singing. On special occasions our Amana Church Choir presents one or more selections. At the church in Amana an electric organ, the gift of

a local businessman, is played as prelude and postlude music at weddings and special services.

When the hymn has been concluded, the elder reads one of the inspired testimonies. Since the 1960s, when English services were instituted, volunteers have translated nearly four hundred testimonies, as well as 169 of the hymns contained in the Amana Church Hymnal. Most commonly, the testimony read was spoken by Christian Metz, J. F. Rock, or Ursula Mayer, although testimonies by most of the fourteen recognized *Werkzeuge* are included in the collection.

Following the testimony, the elder invites those present to kneel for prayer. In the German service, each elder says a brief personal prayer. In both services, the elder asks a member of the congregation to say the Apostles Creed (*Der Glaube*), after which the elder delivers a community prayer. Prayer concludes with the congregation praying the Lord's Prayer (*Das Unser Vater*) in unison.

Once the congregation is again seated, the elder announces the first scripture reading for the day, often chosen from the New Testament. The presiding elder reads the first verse, and then each of the other elders in attendance reads a verse. If verses remain in the selection, the reading proceeds to the congregation; willing members each read a verse until the selection has been completed. In the English service, this reading alternates from week to week: one week the men's side finishes the reading, the next week, the women's side.

After the scripture reading, the presiding elder delivers his or her commentary. Commentaries tend to be between ten to fifteen minutes in length and are similar to the sermons given in other Protestant churches. In the past, the congregation read through the Bible chapter by chapter and the testimonies and hymns were also assigned. Today, the elder selects the testimony and scripture reading and, although the song leaders prepare a schedule of hymns, some elders occasionally select particular hymns that complement the readings. The commentary is based on these readings. Historically, the elder spoke extemporaneously. Today, the elders prepare a text. Writing a good commentary today involves research, as well as the prayer and contemplation of the elders of years gone by.

Following the commentary, the elder typically announces a second reading from Psalms. The congregation sings a second hymn, always rising for the final verse, after which the presiding elder offers a benediction. The entire congregation is then seated, providing congregants time to collect



Fig. 5. Rudolph and Erma Schanz Kellenberger on their wedding day in West Amana, 1933. They are dressed in typical wedding garb for that time, just after the reorganization of the Society.

(Photograph by Paul Kellenberger. Courtesy of Amana Heritage Society)

their books. At the elder's signal, the congregation rises and files out of the sanctuary row by row. When the last congregant has left, the elders shake hands with one another.

A service generally lasts thirty-five to forty minutes and rarely as long as an hour, although I am told that in earlier times services often lasted well over an hour and a half, if not longer. This extended length was partly because all of the elders present were invited to comment on the presiding elder's message. Some elders simply asked the Lord's blessing, but others offered a short commentary of their own.

Weddings in the Amana Church are short and simple. The bride and groom dress like couples in most Protestant churches and a reception or dance follows the service. Until the late 1940s, the bride always wore the black cap, shoulder shawl and apron that she would normally have worn to church. In the 1930s and early 1940s many Amana couples, desiring a "typical" wedding, were married outside the community. People seem to have naturally assumed that the elders would not permit a white wedding dress. The bride at the first "white" wedding recalls how she and her fiancé asked the church president if it would be all right if she wore a white wedding dress. He agreed and then observed, "You know, no one has ever asked before!"

Elly and I were married at the church building in Main Amana. After the service everyone was invited to a reception in the adjoining fellowship hall where cake and punch were served. In communal times, these receptions were held at one of the communal kitchen houses. Cakes have always been a big part of these celebrations and there are, literally, dozens of them, of all varieties, all homemade. According to tradition, the cakes are cut and placed on trays for serving. In the past, the bride and groom returned to their family homes after the reception, not moving in together until two weeks after the wedding. Elly and I did not observe that custom.

In the Amana Church calendar there are twenty-three special services. Many of them are typical Protestant services such as Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost and Advent. We hold a short prayer service every night during Holy Week. Some services unique to the Amana tradition are *Liebesmahl* (communion), *Bundeschesung* (covenant service) and *Buss Versammlung* (repentance service).

Communion is held once a year, in October. Until 1996 it was a biennial event. Growing up, my parents taught me that communion was very special and we only observed it once every two years in recognition



Fig. 6. Funeral procession in East Amana. The wagon carrying the coffin is followed by the elders, the men, and then the women.
(Painting ca. 1936 by Carl Flick. Courtesy of Amana Heritage Society)



Fig. 7. Amana cemetery, 1937. Note the evergreen fence around the cemetery.
(Photograph by John W. Barry. Courtesy of Amana Heritage Society)



Fig 8. Women's entrance to Middle Amana Church, built in 1863.
(Photograph by Emilie Hoppe)



Fig. 9. Middle Amana cemetery, 2011.
(Photograph by Robert Campagna)

of its significance. A special preparation service is held the week preceding communion. During the communion service we sing five hymns, the elders read two testimonies and the story of the Last Supper, and we partake of the bread and wine.

The *Bundeschesung* (covenant service) has been held on Thanksgiving Day since the 1860s. At this service members renew their covenant of faith, symbolized by shaking hands with the elders. The weeks preceding this service include reading the “Twenty-Four Rules for True Godliness,” presented by Johann Adam Gruber as a testimony in 1716. The rules enjoin us to be faithful to God, respectful of one another, and to disdain worldly sin.

The repentance service was instituted in place of the *Unterredung* or spiritual examination service of communal days when the members confessed their sins in public. Tradition states that this service had lost much real meaning by the 1930s, with members offering standard answers about not going to church regularly enough and so forth. One anecdote relates to an anxious little girl who, when her turn came, blurted out her confession: “I have been good, but I promise to be bad!” During the current repentance service, the presiding elder stresses the importance of atoning for one’s sins and the power of God’s grace.

Amana funerals are worship services, without lengthy eulogies. The service focuses on the life eternal promised to believers through Christ and includes a short biography of the deceased. Sometimes the elder, in reviewing the life of the deceased member, will focus on a particular aspect of that individual’s life as an illustration of a life lived in faith. Since the late 1990s, the gradual trend has been towards having families sit together in the back rows at funerals, although the rest of the congregation still sits with men on one side and women on the other.

After the service at the church, the earthly remains of the deceased brother or sister are taken by hearse to the cemetery. If the funeral and burial both occur in Middle Amana, where the cemetery is located near the church building, the congregation resumes the old tradition of walking behind the hearse to the cemetery. As funerals are no longer held in the other village churches, when the burial does not occur in Middle Amana, congregants drive to the cemetery in the village where burial will occur after the service at the Middle Amana church. Once at the cemetery, the deceased is buried in the next available plot, continuing the pattern of chronological burials that began in the 1850s. Tombstones are made of

silica sand concrete that is white when it dries. The stone has the name of the deceased, date of death, and the person's age in years, months and days. Non-church members can be buried in the Amana Church cemeteries in a separate section, usually adjacent to the member section.

Each of the cemeteries is surrounded by a border of pine trees. When standing in the cemetery, one often has the sense of being inside a building, or a sort of "roofless church." The trees are an important feature of each cemetery, and local people, including non-church members, made a tremendous effort to replant these trees after many were lost during a windstorm in 1998. I was always taught that since pine trees keep their



Fig. 10. Amana Church in ca. 1892. The men's entrance is shown on the right side. The ph
houses, like this one, were located near the center of their respective villages, often in the
by driveways or alleys. In the other three villages the building
(Photograph by Bertha M. H. Shambaugh. Im

needles all year, they are a symbol of the eternal life promised through faith in Christ Jesus.

All graves, with the exception of individuals who served in the military and who are entitled to a military marker, have Amana-made headstones. We are sometimes asked about this practice of chronological burial and why it is done. This form of burial was far more common in the 1840s, when Inspirationists adopted it, than it is today. We like to point out that it gives all of us a sense of equality, as everyone is treated the same in death. Husbands and wives are not buried next to each other unless, as sometimes happens, no one happens to die in between them. As brothers and sisters



Photograph shows the relationship of the meeting house to the village. Most Amana meeting houses are centrally located but are actually facing the street. (Image scanned from original glass plate negative.)

in the faith, however, the entire cemetery represents a large family plot.

During the communal era members were buried in the village where they died. My great-great-great-grandmother was a Middle Amana resident but spent the few years of her widowhood living with a daughter's family in High Amana. Because she died in High Amana, she was buried there, two miles away from the cemetery in which her husband was buried.

The story is often told of a man in South Amana who, in the 1880s, used a private stash of money to buy an elaborate gray marble stone for his wife, which included a two-foot-high stone heart. The elders allowed this monument on the condition that his wife was buried in the non-member section of the cemetery where the farm laborers and some neighboring farm families were buried, sometimes under commercially made monuments. He asked that a space be reserved next to her for himself; a request that the elders refused. Ironically, the man died while visiting family in East Amana, which is where he was buried, and people took this as a sign of divine disapproval for his desire for special treatment.

Until the late 1940s the coffin was taken to the cemetery by horse and wagon, followed, on foot, by the congregation. The change to a motorized hearse took place because tractors had replaced horses on the village farms, and it was becoming difficult to maintain the sets of black horses in each village needed to pull the wagon. My great-grandfather, who died in 1948, was the last person taken to the Amana cemetery by horse and wagon; the next coffin was taken by car. In West Amana, the elders informed the man who had always driven the horses to the cemetery in that village that the transition to a motorized hearse would be made. Perhaps because his services were no longer needed, the man passed away and, ironically, was the first person taken by automobile to the cemetery.

Today, the Amana Church Society has approximately 375 adult members, with an additional thirty children in Sunday school. In recent years new memberships have often balanced, and even slightly surpassed, deaths. Some young families are active in the church. Although the majority of the current members are Amana natives, a growing number of members, including Elly, are not.¹

1. For more information on the Amana Church, please visit the website:
<http://www.amanachurch.org/>