



Mennonites and Amish: 7 Common Questions

By Dr. Maura Cullen

When I ride my bicycle, I pass many Amish and Mennonite family homes and farms. Like many, I have seen Amish people on television portrayed as serious people dressed in traditional clothing and who keep to themselves. Often, they are asked by "outsiders" to pose for pictures in their horse and buggy. They are stared at because they look different than mainstream America. But who are they really, what are some of the common elements they share, and how do they differ from those who are not Amish or Mennonites? What are some of the most common misconceptions?

The Amish are among the fastest-growing populations in the world, with an average of 6.8 children per family. ⁽¹⁾ They prohibit the use of contraception. There are over 249,000 Amish and Mennonites throughout North America. The largest settlements live in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana respectively.

Like any group of people it is impossible to paint them with one broad stroke. We can no more say that Amish are this way and Mennonites are that way anymore than we can say men are this way and women are that way. That said, we will examine some common elements of Amish and Mennonite people.

1. What is the difference between Amish and Mennonites?

"The difference between the two groups is how the beliefs are practiced and lived. The overall doctrine followed by each is similar.

The Mennonites tend to be more accepting of technology and the outside world than are the Amish. Furthermore, the Mennonites accept higher education and modern technology. They tend to see these influences as ways that can be used to strengthen their religious beliefs.

The Amish, on the other hand, tend to feel that these influences of the outside world only interfere with the purity of their faith. They generally forbid higher education, dress in "plain" clothes, refrain from the use of electricity and ride in horse-drawn buggies. Despite these differences, it should be noted that there are groups of Amish who accept worldly influences such as higher education and the use of automobiles. Likewise, there are groups, of Mennonites that don't accept such influences and still ride in horse-drawn buggies and forbid higher education.

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Perhaps, the best way to understand the Anabaptist heritage in Lancaster County is not to distinguish between the Amish and the Mennonites. Rather, it is more helpful to differentiate between the "Old Order" and the "Modern."

Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites are those who base their lifestyle decision-making choices from their faith fellowship and tradition. These are the Amish and Mennonites who dress "plain," forbid higher education, ride in horse and buggies, and choose occupations connected to the farm and to the home.

On the other hand, Modern Amish and Modern Mennonites are those more acculturated to modern society. They accept the influences of the worldly society even if those influence may conflict with what their faith fellowship believes."

(This section is taken directly in its entirety from Welcome-To-Lancaster-County.com)

2. Why don't they use modern conveniences like electricity?

Amish people believe that linking with electrical wires as a connection with the world that is counter to their simple life. Easy access to such things as television, radio and the Internet are seen as temptations that may erode family and religious values. However, they do use gas to power refrigerators and stoves.

3. Do they go to doctors and hospitals?

Yes. There are no restrictions for use of modern medicine or hospitals. They do not carry insurance because of the need to maintain their independence and self-reliance. However, there is a community of funds to cover such expenses.

4. Are they exempt from going to war?

No. All males between the ages of 18 and 25 who reside in USA have to register for Selective Service (the Draft). However, most Amish and Mennonites practice non-resistance and do not participate in war.

If the draft were ever reinstated, the Amish would most likely be exempt from serving due to conscientious objector status. The government created a Conscientious Objectors policy that allows Amish men and others the option to work in an alternative service program away from home rather than join the military. This includes working in hospitals, doing community service, or participating in agricultural programs for a period of two years in lieu of military service. (Wikipedia)

5. Why don't they have to pay Social Security Tax?

First, Amish and Mennonites do pay income, real estate, federal, state and sales taxes. However, Congress approved an exemption for self-employed people to pay Social Security Taxes. The reasoning is that the church will look after its own elderly members. Therefore, many Old Order Amish refuse Social Security benefits and believe they should not pay into a system they don't use.

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6. Do they home school their children?

Amish church groups seek to maintain a degree of separation from the non-Amish world. There is generally a heavy emphasis on church and family relationships. They typically operate their own one-room schools and discontinue formal education at grade eight

7. Do they really shun people who violate the rules?

Yes. If someone violates the rules of the order and does not repent, it is believed that there must be consequences for that behavior. Shunning is social isolation in an extreme form. At times, this can even extend to other family members. The intention is to bring the violators back into the fellowship.

Sources:

Julia A. Ericksen, Eugene P. Ericksen, John A. Hostetler, Gertrude E. Huntington (July 1979). "Fertility Patterns and Trends among the Old Order Amish". *Population Studies* (33)

Wikipedia

National Committee For Amish Religious Freedom

20 Most Asked Questions about the Amish and Mennonites by Merle and Phyllis Good

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