

A Visit to the Caneyville Christian Community

We all climbed into a hay-wagon hitched to a team of horses eager to pull us around the Caneyville Christian community on an afternoon orientation tour. We were seven visitors, a couple of hosts and a few exited boys. On the way we passed several community homes, the school and meeting-house, and then stopped off to walk through the community's stove-making factory, jam factory, and country store. Then we joined with the youth group felling trees with two-handed cross-cut-saws and axes to clear land, haul logs, and cut up firewood. We saw how hard and expertly a group of teenage girls and boys can work together on a brisk fall afternoon while visitors are watching.



This Nurturing Communities Project (NCP) trip (December 5-7, 2014) was actually a return visit to reconnect with the Caneyville Christian Community, located about 100 miles south-west of Louisville. We first got acquainted when half-a-dozen Caneyville folk showed up at the October NCP Gathering at Reba. They blew some of our Amish stereotypes by their eagerness to hear our stories, tell their own, and make connections with other groups to help them reflect on their Christian community calling.

The Caneyville folk wear traditional Amish garb, live off the grid, and drive horses to get around. But unlike most such communities, they do not stem from a few common ancestors or maintain a German worship life in strict "separation from the world." The Caneyville members include Old Order Amish, German Baptists, and a few "back to the land" types who have no previous experience with "plain folk" culture. One of our hosts, Shannon Laytham, raised our eyebrows when he acknowledged that "in a previous life I was an aviation instructor at Hesston College!" This diversity has required the community to talk through a lot of issues to find a common way. It has also opened them to many seekers looking for a more wholesome moral and spiritual life set apart from the disintegrating forces of the American mainstream.

The Caneyville community itself is only ten years old, settled on half-a-square-mile of hilly wooded land with some clearings for small-scale farming. They practice private personal property, but the community holds long-term title to the land so that they can discern who moves in after someone leaves. They have maxed-out at eighteen households. Now the overflow of young families and new-comers has begun another settlement near Brownsville KY, about thirty miles away where there are already eight houses built or under construction.



The main source of livelihood for the community is a factory that produces a unique line of wood-burning stoves that will warm a house, serve as a bake-oven and cook top, and also heat running water for house and laundry use. Naturally, these Pioneer brand stoves occupied a central spot in each home we visited.

I was fascinated by the way they ran a factory off-grid. A wood-powered steam engine drives an under-the-floor shaft running the length of the building, somewhat like factories

100 years ago. This shaft powers an electric generator for the welders, an air-compressor for all the hand power tools, and drives the towering break-press machines that punch and shape the thick sheet metal stove walls. There is no electric lighting, but each work station has a propane-gas lamp with brightly burning mantles -- something like a long-necked camping lantern. With this set-up they turn out about 500 stoves a year, providing a living wage for eight to twelve workers according to the season and the demand. Most men in the community work in the factory, but also tend animals, gardens, greenhouses, and small fields on the side, which provide food and supplementary earning for their families. We also toured a jam factory that gives work to five households, and a country store for the public on the edge of their settlement.

As the horses turned toward home, Andrew Hess offered the reins to one of us visitors. Quickly the horses realized that they could do as they pleased and headed into the ditch to chow down some late-fall greenery. Voice commands and pulling on the reins did not get them back on the road. One of the boys on the hayrack spoke up in a computer-like voice: "Horse GPS recalculating, Horse GPS recalculating." We laughed once at the joke and a second time in surprise that an Amish kid could mimic a geo-tracking system.

The whole community has two telephones in a small shed near the factory so that Shannon can handle stove orders and for other important community calls. When you call that phone number, I've learned, no receptionist picks up the phone. Instead you get an answering machine, and a call-back, usually the next day.

We asked why the community goes to such trouble to keep electricity, telephones, and cultural media at a distance. Andrew Hess, the church deacon who squired us around on the tour, answered, "These technologies are not bad in themselves, but we have to look at everything that is attached to them. For the most part, we don't like what we see. We don't want those cultural influences to distract us from our focus as communities called to follow Jesus. Of course, we talk a lot about where our boundaries ought to



land. We discuss until we reach consensus. The rare times we cannot agree, our bishop Bryce Geiser eventually makes a decision. The Bishop may also override a decision if he cannot feel comfortable with it. We agreed to put in solar collectors to power our well pumps because windmills don't do the job in these Kentucky valleys. We have pedal-powered or horse-powered washing machines. Sometimes it's inconvenient, but these boundaries keep reminding us of why we are called to live the way we do."

That evening at the supper table, Andrew laid out a handful of books and asked me to let him know what I thought of them. "These authors have been helpful to us," he said, "in clarifying our own thinking about this way of life." That evening, in the light of a propane powered lamp, I read most of David Bercot's *The Kingdom That Turned the World Upsidedown*. I found it a well-researched easy-to-read survey of Church history focusing special attention on those communities and traditions that took seriously Jesus' call to seek first the kingdom of God in visible communities of faithful witness, often in spite of persecution.



The author critiques the "easy believism" that postpones Jesus' kingdom to the afterlife and reduces discipleship to believing right doctrines about salvation. I can see why Bercot is a favorite of the Amish and similar "plain folk" communities. He takes seriously the practice of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's instructions to the churches as culturally relevant today including women's head coverings and holding men responsible for good order in family and church. He critiques both right and left-wing errors in the contemporary American church, since both assume the myth of a Christian nation, they just want to reform it in different directions.

Bercot's historical analysis is the kind of consciousness-raising that intentional Christian communities need in order to stand against our dominant culture in both its Christian and secular versions. But I find Bercot's analysis weaker than it might be on the communal dimensions of the Kingdom of God. In many ways he still operates within an individualist ethical framework that misses the corporate nature of the body of Christ, the "one-another" commandments that shaped the Early Church. The scorn with which he puts down opposing views makes me think he'd be a hard person to live with in community.

On Sunday morning we were invited to join the Community worship with women sitting on the left and men on the right. The hour of congregational singing in full-voiced four-part harmony (without instrumental accompaniment) was deeply moving. Deacon Andrew Hess gave the sermon because their Bishop was away on another community visit. Andrew began by reading a children's story about a farm where everything was messed up because the rooster thought he was a cow, and the cow thought she was a pig, and the farmer's confusion was at the heart of it all. Andrew used this comical story to talk about the good order that God has in mind for creation and for his people -- reinforcing a traditional conservative view of family roles. Then Andrew surprised us visitors by asking if we had any comments to share with the

congregation. We affirmed that, despite some cultural differences between us, we saw God powerfully at work among them and had been given much to ponder.



In further conversation we explored our mutual culture shocks, not from a perspective of judgment, but from a delighted fascination and curiosity, a spirit we already picked up in the Caneyville folks' visit to our Nurturing Communities Gathering. We sensed no "recruitment pressure" or need to trump someone else's argument. As we explored our differences we saw how we share a love for Jesus and are searching for where to stand as a counter-witness to the corruption of the world where fidelity in relationships and commitments to community are increasingly difficult to sustain. The

Caneyville Community has been called to a way of life that supports raising large, healthy families with secure and joyful children, competent in the practical skills of rural life.

Seeing a more self-contained rural community culture so different from our highly diverse urban context has caused me to reflect anew on the question, what is sin? On a basic level, sin is the same for all of us, it is willfully turning our backs on the teachings of Jesus, on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and on the counsel of companions in community, choosing to do our own thing "no matter what." At the same time the church has been given authority ("Wherever two or three are gathered") to make agreements in the Spirit of Jesus about how we will live together as witnesses to God's kingdom, "On earth as it is in heaven." That means that in its details, sin may be different from one community to another because we have local agreements that bind us.



At Reba Place Fellowship, for example, we have agreed to share our finances and basic life decisions. For me it would be sin to ignore that agreement. So it does not bother me that one community might look and behave differently from one another. However, there are faithful and unfaithful ways of setting the local rules -- good reasons for community visits and visitations, allowing outsiders to speak into our local discernments of this shared calling in Christ.



On our drive home from Caneyville, Natalie Potts, Carl Sherrod and I had a 500-mile discussion about the impact of this visit for us. Our strongest impression was not something that anyone told us, but rather what our eyes beheld -- large families with secure children who seemed fully alive, growing, learning in healthy ways, practicing a wide array of useful skills, obedient but not squelched in their spirits. We saw women speak up much less than men, which bothered us, but who were handling large-scale family

responsibilities with joy and creativity. If their children grew too rambunctious, just a look or a word would quiet them down. It was obvious that older children had an important role in providing for the family and in training younger siblings. This was not always fun for them, they acknowledged, but they understood the reasons for their disciplines, and for the most part, carried them willingly.

Of course, we only spent extended time in three homes -- perhaps the most gregarious and well-ordered families in the community -- but the contagious joy of unity expressed in frequent singing, working, and eating together cannot be faked for visitors very long.

Though we are called to pioneer kingdom of God expressions in the urban context, we agreed this visit heightened our insight into the soul-killing forces of society around and within us that we must freshly discern and resist. The visit also gives us reason to thank God for our sisters and brothers in Caneyville, and for folks everywhere trying to faithfully live Jesus' call of costly discipleship in community.

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