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## Visiting Amish Circles of Fellowship

—by Joe Keim

Dear Friend,

During this past month, Esther and I made several trips to Indiana, several trips to Holmes County, and one to Middlefield, Ohio. We shared ministry updates in three churches, preached the Word of God, and spent time with pastors. Along the way, we met some of our own people in their homes—sometimes to encourage them, other times to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, and other times to help couples work through marital separation and rejection from families back home. We also walked through a suicide, the departure of two key staff members from MAP, and the process of interviewing people to fill their positions.

Twenty-five years ago, God used a tragic incident in Mount Eaton, Ohio, to lead me away from my tool and die job and into full-time ministry. Esther and I have pressed forward for the glory of God and His call on our lives and never looked back. Some nights the burden of ministry weighs so heavily on our hearts that we are unable to sleep. It is not uncommon for one of us to lie awake in the middle of the night, reach over, lay hands on each other, and pray that God would deliver His child from the weight and the never-ending battles of ministry.

One of the greatest blessings comes on Tuesday mornings. It is then that I get to go through the mail and read your notes

of encouragement, find a check written out to the ministry, or download an online financial report with your name on it. I cannot fully describe the immense encouragement this brings to our hearts. It reminds us that you are still there, still supporting MAP, and still caring for the souls of our people.

Know that when we say thank you, it comes from the depth of our hearts. We are deeply thankful to God that He has called both you and us to reach the Amish people. Through the SonLight Club Bible studies, one hundred and eight Amish individuals have given their lives to Christ since January. This is incredible and worthy of praise.

I recently sat down with a former Amish bishop in Holmes County. During our conversation, he looked at me and asked, “Are you the ones who send out the SonLight Club Bible lessons?” I said yes—we’ve mailed out over two million lessons since 2000. He replied, “Well, I remember being enrolled in the SonLight Club when I was growing up. After I got married and had children, we enrolled our children in the club.” It was such a powerful moment for both him and me.

This same bishop and one of his lay ministers both came to the understanding that Jesus alone can save the human soul from hell, and that the Amish system

cannot, in any way, provide salvation. After surrendering their lives to Christ, other members of their community also traded in their culture for the sake of Jesus Christ and His gift of eternal life. Over one hundred people began meeting in a pole barn to hold church services. They put up a sign at the driveway pointing to **God’s Word Church**.



While we have always had a desire and burden to see former Amish attend the same church we have been part of for thirty-eight years, we have never been able to gain traction, even when we started a Sunday School class. All we can figure is that, while God did use Mission to Amish People and our home church mightily to influence hundreds of former Amish lives, they eventually moved on and joined other churches in the area. To say this was painful at times would be an understatement. It wasn’t until I let go and began to seek the heart of God that He started to open doors for ministry beyond the comfortable walls of our home church.

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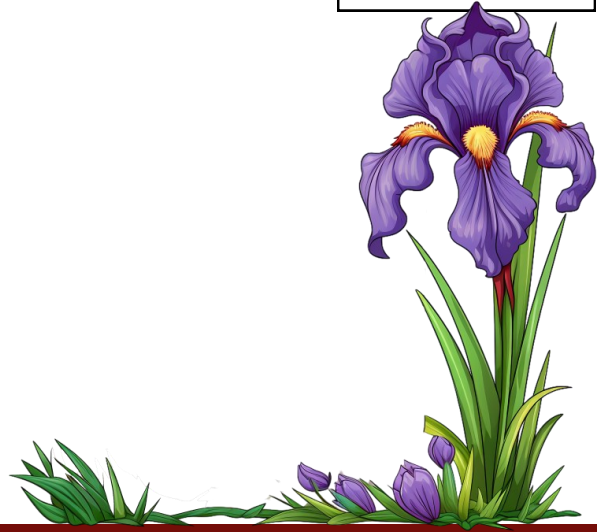
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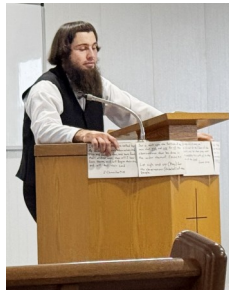
—by Joe Keim

I had been hearing more and more about small pockets of Amish people leaving the Amish system and beginning to establish their own garage and pole barn meetings. In some places, these gatherings are called “Circles of Fellowship.” In October of 2024, Esther and I felt a deep burden and a clear calling from God to visit some of these churches on Sunday mornings. The first church we visited was located near Mt. Eaton, Ohio. In that setting, the men and women numbered about fifteen to twenty-five. They wore traditional Amish clothing, drove cars, met in a church building with pews, and even had a sound system installed. In fact, several, including the pastor, attended the service barefoot.

I had originally met Levi, the pastor, a few months earlier when he stopped by our ministry in Savannah. He was hauling a house trailer from Norwalk, Ohio, to a property in Mount Eaton. His father had kicked him and his entire family out of the house, and they had nowhere to live. That night, Levi told me that while he was in prison for a few years, he had come to faith in Christ. He also shared



that God had given him a vision to build a structure that could hold up to 500 people. Levi and a few others went to work and built that building, right out in the middle of nowhere.



the church in Mount Eaton, where Levi was pastoring. Not only were we greeted with open arms, but Levi also asked if I would speak before the congregation. As I spoke, it became clear that God had truly gotten hold of my heart and placed a burden for ministry to the Amish, just a few miles from that very meeting place.

You see, it was on a very dark night in 1999 that Esther and I decided to travel one hour east from Ashland, Ohio, to view the body of an Amish man who had taken his own life, leaving behind a wife and several children. As I shared this story, Levi and the group came alive—many of them remembered when it happened. That tragic incident brought us even closer together as I continued speaking from my heart.

Once Esther and I had decided to visit some of the smaller Amish and former Amish churches, I mentioned that I would like to start with

But then my heart was truly saddened—torn up beyond words—when I opened the hymn book and found a picture of William Branham and his testimony on the inside cover. If you’re unfamiliar with him, I encourage you to look him up online. I had first encountered Branham’s influence about ten years earlier when I met a man who had left the Amish with his large family after becoming involved in the Branhamite movement. While the group appears to preach the gospel, they have added many other teachings. In my view, it’s simply another system built around following a dead leader—one who claimed to be next to John the Baptist, a forerunner to Jesus’ second coming.

That morning, I walked out of that plain-looking church house in the middle of nowhere, wondering whether we should return and work with Levi and his group or visit one of the other gatherings.



(To be continued in July issue.)