

## COMMUNAL LIFE IN AMANA

*By Martin Dickel\**

May I address you as Brothers and Sisters because that is the form and address we use and one of the tenets of our faith is that we are not only held together in the name of the faith and in the dedication to our faith but also that as we love God we should love each other and as such we should be brothers and sisters not only in the spirit but also as we live our daily lives in word and deed.

As I read your program and find out that my address is to touch on the communal part of Amana life, I must say the same thing I said when interviewed on the Dave Garroway show at the time Khrushchev was in Des Moines. When asked to draw a parallel between the two states of society, I said that the Amana type of communism, in its birth, in its intent, and in its implementation, was as far away from the Russian political communism as the village of Amana is from Moscow. In fact, communism, as we know it today, in its meaning and application, did not exist in Amana. The communal ownership of the property was really an expedient used to solve an economic problem rather than a basic doctrine as a part of the faith.

Dr. Moershel's ancestral family, and there were several others whose descendants are still a part of Amana today, were members of the faith from the very beginning. Some of these families were well-to-do in the mid-nineteenth century and when the group determined to migrate to America these wealthier families contributed all their financial resources to finance the voyage across the ocean for the poorer members of the group. In this group we find merchants and peasants, textile workers, candlestick makers, cobblers, carpenters, and all the many trades and crafts forming a part of the economy of the middle nineteenth century.

The Rhineland stood at the forefront in the Industrial Revolution and was subject to rapid change; the region was, perhaps, a leader in that change. The scourge of militarism loomed threateningly on the horizon and was influencing the development of the political and social structure.

\*Martin Dickel is an Elder of the Amana Church Society.

This meant persecution and trouble for all religions actively opposed to militarism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the followers of Christian Metz, being opposed to militarism and all it stood for, soon felt its heavy hand and the sting of the lash. That is one of the main reasons why they decided to emigrate to America. After some years of deliberation the decision to emigrate was made in 1840. The road of the "Inspirationists" led westward over the waters to America — the land of the free.

The "Inspirationists" settled near Buffalo, New York, where they founded the Ebenezer villages. Soon we see the spirit and mind of the individual assert itself. As the land was cultivated, the herds grew, and houses and small factories were built at first under a financial pooling system. The question now arose — who has title to this land, the houses, the cattle, and this increment? With varying skills and naturally varying ambition and love, or shall we say distaste, for work, how shall we share and how shall we enjoy the fruits of our labors? Brother Christian Metz saw that this issue would split the group if it was not settled at once, as similar problems had faced so many other communities similar to Amana. Accordingly, he spoke to his faithful followers as follows:

We have been directed here by our God who has protected us from harm. He will continue to lead us if we but remain faithful. We dare not go any other way. The church is the servant of God through which He gives his grace and blessing. Should not we give our all to Him by giving our all to the church? He who serveth his church serveth God, may it be with the labor of his hands, his mind or his soul or by surrender of his worldly goods. So all shall belong to the church and the church shall provide for all. Anyone who does not care for this may leave and those who wish to remain shall accept my word.

There was no formal decree, no formal contract or documentation and of course no provision for any changes in the future in this arrangement. And so it remained from that time on until the year 1932 when the change was made to a cooperative type of society dividing the economic and the church phase into two distinct societies governed by different people. At the time of the change, descendants of the contributors to the original community fund were given back their original amount without interest.

It might be of interest to place the Amana individual and the Amana family in proper perspective to the group. The individual had the right to leave the group. He had some leeway in choosing his work as such work

was available and fitted his skills. He was given an education, learning to read and write. He had a right to choose his own mate. The family was a unit and lived in the home made available and ate at home as a unit. The man of the household in the German tradition was the master of the household and wife and children were expected to obey. It may be pointed out that parents were held responsible for the behavior of their children and more often than not the parents were called to task for any misbehavior of their children. One wonders if this philosophy might not be very well applied today.

During the years the inspired Amana leaders — Christian Metz and Barbara Heinemann Landman — lived in Iowa, many important decisions were made and policies formulated by them with the help of the other Elders of the Church. After their death the council of Elders became the sole ruling body. Each village had a group of Elders to conduct the church services and from this group a council of 5 to 7 of the senior Elders formed the governing body. They met once a week and by resolution guided the church and economic affairs of the village. From the total group of Elders of all villages a Supreme Council of Trustees was elected by the entire church membership to rule over the entire organization. Such elections were not held in the American style of politics as we know it. The council succeeded itself by renominating itself without opposition and all vacancies were similarly filled by nominations made by the presiding Council of Trustees. This tended to create a succession along family lines and at the top level. One may see the inroads of a caste system which weakened the general esprit de corps.

The Amana group was bound closely together, not alone in its singular religious faith, but also by race, language, and traditional background. This solidarity was kept intact through the years by certain church regulations regarding the institution of marriage. No one could marry someone from outside the members of the faith, which restricted marriages to within the group. The inherent dangers of intermarriage within a small group were recognized and avoided. Thus, church regulations prohibited intermarriage even at the second cousin level. The man had to be 20 and the young woman 19 before they could announce their intent or wish to be married. The Elders would then fix the marriage date about a year away from the posting of the wedding bans. By design this was a good way to avoid hasty marriages and marriage by those still too young and immature.

The wedding ceremony was simple — no wedding ring or flowers were permitted. After the quiet ceremony, there was a gala affair, with friends and villagers taking part. Everybody brought a cake! The parents would make sure that the group singing should not lack in force and volume by making available an ample supply of homemade wine.

Divorce was not permitted and in the few cases where it occurred, one of the parties was usually asked to leave the community. There may be a lesson here that I wish to include in my observations. When in youth and in the early stages of married life there was discord and misunderstanding where a break might be the easy way out, it was not possible to do this without breaking all ties with the community and going away. Under Amana regulations, this was not possible so we see the same two continue to live as man and wife, raise a family and go through life, learning to understand, to love, to serve, and not having a chance to run away from each other and from life. They found out the years teach much which the day does not know.

#### *Education and Opportunity*

Amana provided an elementary school education for all up to the age of 14 years. Schools and curriculum were under the State Department of Public Instruction. In addition, the children were taught the German language and grammar, and the catechism and principles of our faith. School was on a full year basis, including a shortened session on Saturday mornings. The summer sessions were also shorter in hours and the older boys did not attend but helped in the harvest. The Elders of the church further selected a few to go on to schools of higher education to fill the jobs of doctors, dentists and teachers, but no lawyers. As far as opportunity is concerned, this kind of a group, in its operation, is a drawback to the ambitious. The aforementioned existence of caste barred many able boys from advancement, and for the girls of course there was but one career — the community kitchen, followed by marriage.

A most valuable addition to the formal education of the boy was his compulsory participation in the rotating of certain jobs determined by the Elders in accordance with the available labor supply and the need in the various departments. In the daily routine a boy might have to help on the farm with its many and varied chores, milk cows, help build a house, shingle roofs, whitewash plastered walls, putty windows, and harvest and prepare broom corn, and many others. The young ladies were ably in-

structed in all phases of cooking, baking, and sewing. Again, with a nostalgic feeling, I dare say our present age of specialization has taken many of these opportunities away from us.

It comes as a distinct surprise to many visitors to the Amana villages to find so many of the traditions, customs, colloquialisms, dialecticisms, and use of the German language after more than a hundred years in America. Up to 1910 the isolation of the group, both physically and culturally, no doubt was the main reason for this. One must, however, not underestimate the inborn traits of the people. Remember, it took courage to leave the comparatively comfortable Rhineland of the 1840's and venture forth into the New World with its many unknowns. These people were brave and they firmly placed their trust in God and the leaders in the faith. In pioneering at Ebenezer and later at Amana there was a lot of hard work but good simple foods, restful nights that started early because the kerosene was in short supply, the liberty and freedom of Our American Heritage combined with the skills, the thrift and the industry of the German man and woman, brought success.

The way of life of the individual in this kind of a society varies considerably from that of one in the capitalistic society. Daily routines are different, shadings of thought are different, and likewise one may say desires and dreams are different. Guided and directed by the hand of a strong, able personality like Christian Metz, yes, even by the force and momentum of an idea and faith, this community remained basically the same in its structural organization until 1932. But time, abetted by the instinctive desire of the individual to center around the self, gradually diminished the group spirit and weakened the foundation of brotherly communal coexistence until it became apparent to the members that a change had to be made. The remarkable thing is that this change was made with unanimous consent and approval, without a single legal contest, and with a minimum of hardship to all age groups. The division of the property was based on a payment in stock to all adults in the new corporation based on the years of service rendered. In other words, total appraised value of the land and all communal properties was distributed among total years of service of all adult members and then the shares were given to each member according to his age. A part of the stock could then be exchanged by the individual for the title to his home. All village areas had been platted and appraised and could be transferred with clear title to the individual. In cases of occu-

pancy by more than one family it was necessary for the parties to agree amongst themselves. In looking back it seems very remarkable that after only two years this phase of the distribution was almost complete without creating any great ill will and bad feeling. The reorganization was accomplished at a rather fortuitous time. Our nation was at the lowest point of the great depression and all appraisals and values were extremely conservative. The new economy of the villages, starting at the bottom, had only one way to go and that was up.

One weakness that may be an inherent part of a communistic type of social order was plainly apparent in Amana before the changeover was made. Without the incentive and personal gain motive, without the zealous devotion of the soul, without the use of authoritative force, the individual does not do the job as it should be done. In this community we had the drones, the non-workers, and their numbers seemed to be on the increase. As much as we admire the acquired skills of the candlestick maker, the cooper, the basket weaver, the old fashioned cobbler or the one-man-shop bookbinder, we found out that they would no longer provide for bread and butter for the family in the 20th century economy. We still had people not so gainfully employed in these vocations in the year 1931. These jobs, as a breadwinner, disappeared overnight in April 1932.

#### *Health and Recreation*

From the beginning of this organization we find that our doctors were members and belonged to the Amana Society. Throughout the years the group has been able to provide adequate medical and dental care.

A total of about 1400 members was served by three or four doctors, and two or three dentists, and two trained pharmacists. In addition, each village had a locally-trained midwife.

Superstitions were of course taboo and sinful so the unusual in bodily care did not enter into the picture. More than one household, however, proclaimed great curative powers for herb teas made from Kamille flowers, roadside flowers, and roots gathered in the forest. Usually this concoction was sweetened with wild honey and flavored with good strong wine made from wild grapes. This brew, heated in a tin cup on a pot-bellied wood-burning stove and served piping hot, will cure most everything — even a broken heart.

Recreation other than group singing was considered sinful and hence forbidden. It may be gathered from the various proclamations that this

area of control was one of the most troublesome and perhaps one of the main reasons for the young to leave the Amana group. Music as entertainment was also proclaimed sinful but it was hard to deny the gay, music loving Rhinelander his moments with his violin or zither. These two soft musical instruments were preferred to the loud volume accordion.

Beginning with the turn of the century, these controls relaxed and some card playing, chess, and checkers helped break the monotony of the evening. The introduction of competitive sports, such as baseball, had rough going and these sports, along with dancing, did not break the control barrier until the late 1920's.

The principles of our faith are firmly opposed to war as an instrument of national policy. In actual application, however, this principle has accommodated itself to the realities of the times throughout the years. In the Civil War and Spanish-American War, for example, a few men volunteered, and later were accepted into the community upon their return.

During World War I all members served as noncombatants under the Selective Service Act, and in World War II the boys served without any reservations both as enlistees, officers, and draftees.

At the time of this meeting some profound changes are going on in all phases of life in Amana. But to one who has been a part of the changing scene under both systems it seems that these changes have so far been able to build on to that which was good of the past and build with that which is the best of the new. The church services are conducted in both the German and English language. The sale of property to people of all creeds and races has so far introduced none that were not readily assimilated. The educational system has been able to grow with the community.

It may be truthfully stated that the communities have the same problems, social, cultural, economic, educational and financial that any other mid-western small town has. We hope that the forces of tradition and pride in the past may help us and guide us in the days to come, that we may live at peace as neighbors, as brothers and sisters, as Americans, as pilgrims of this earth, and above all at peace with ourselves.