

PRUDENT PLAIN PEOPLE: THE HUTTERIAN BRETHERN

by

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The Hutterites have been identified in many different ways by those writing about them. They have been called a sect, ethnic group, religious group, folk society, gemeinschaft group, and communitarians. The last of the Hutterites emigrated from Russia to the Dakota Territories just over 105 years ago. Today, with just a few exceptions, the Hutterian Brethren are located in the northern Great Plains of the United States and the Prairie Provinces of Canada. The growth, from 402 people living in three colonies in the United States in 1880, to the present population of over 30,000 people in approximately 300 colonies, is a remarkable phenomenon.

There are signs, however, that not all is well in Hutterite communities. In his article, "The Death of Hutterite Culture," James Frideres argues that the present Hutterite society is failing due to external and internal pressures. He claims that governmental persecution of the Hutterites poses an external threat, reaching almost genocidal proportions. He also cites their very high birth rate, as posing an even more serious internal threat.¹

Four years ago, in a rebuttal titled, "The Death of Hutterite Culture: An Alternative Interpretation," Canadian sociologist Edward Boldt argued that the major threat to the "Hutterian Way" still appeared to be an internal one. He stated that although students of Hutterite society are almost invariably impressed by the degree to which Hutterites have succeeded in maximizing the overt signs of stability and social order, estimates of deviance, as reported in the literature, are sometimes unrealistically low.²

Studies show that some Hutterite colonies have significant internal problems. Some feel the heart of the problem was clearly stated by the Apostle Paul when he wrote in 1 John 2:16-17 these words:

For all is in the world, the lust of the flesh,
and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is
not of the Father, but is of the world. And
the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but
he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.

In short, the internal problem that exists within the Hutterite culture is carnality, or as one Hutterite minister stated, "lack of spirituality." Yet some colonies retain significant harmony and spirituality. Will carnality or lack of spirituality be the downfall of the Hutterian Way? No one can predict what the future of the Hutterites will be.

One thing that becomes very clear from studying the past, however, is that the Hutterites have been a very prudent people. They have shown great capability to exercise sound

judgment in practical matters. Further, as a culture they are discreet in conduct, circumspect, sensible, and cautious. Their prudence surfaced in troubled times in the past and will come to the fore in future times of trouble, both in temporal and spiritual affairs. The Hutterian Brethren's 456 years of existence is one measure of prudence. No other communitarian group has accomplished such extended longevity.

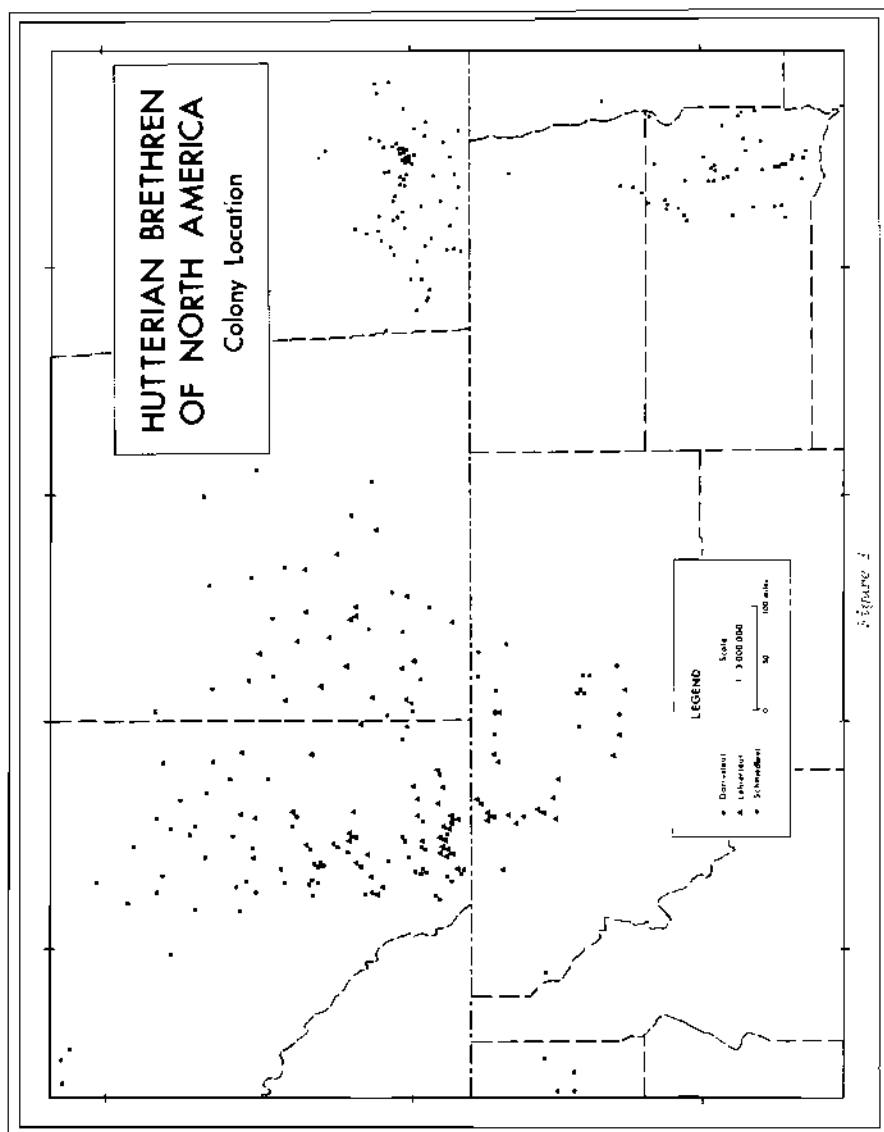
The term "plain people," often used to describe the Hutterites, implies much more than just a people who are austere. It refers instead to social collectives which give the unmistakable impression that they are informed by a value system or social reality that is radically different from the prevailing core society. It is, to use another synonym, a type of counter-culture, if the modern meaning of the term can be expanded to include the Hutterian movement, which has persisted for so long.

Some of the identifying characteristics of the "plain people," in general, and the Hutterites, in particular, are the practices of cultural and social separation from the world. These have resulted in the Brethren becoming highly selective in their use of prevailing cultural forms. Their dress is the most visible difference to outsiders. The "plain people" have been agricultural and rural in orientation. Ideally, the Hutterites were not to stress economic self-sufficiency over their way of life which they feel is ordained by God. To live in a Christian community is best accomplished in a rural agricultural setting. The social structure of the Hutterian Brethren has been traditional, Biblical, and patriarchal, with a strong extended family emphasis.

The "plain people" can also be characterized by a longevity and stability which set them apart from other types of social movements or groupings. The "plain people" are separatist and are not intent on changing society to conform to their own images. Rather many of them assume that the world cannot be, or should not be "saved." By separating from the larger dominant society, the plain groups have, through historical expedience, developed beliefs and social relationships in support of a common charter. They have become sufficiently self-energizing and self-authenticating to continue on their own.³

The "quiet in the land" or the "gathered," as some 16th century writers called them, are showing unusual flexibility and adaptability in spite of any casual empirical observations which suggest otherwise. Of all the communitarians who have existed or still exist in North America, none have flourished like the Hutterites.

Because of prudent behavior, the Hutterites have experienced tremendous growth and have ultimately spread over the plains and prairies of North America. The results of this prudence can, in a very real sense be mapped. Careful inspection of data found on both colony location maps and address lists shows growth which demonstrates the vitality of the Hutterian Brethren--at least demographically and spatially. (Figure 1.) All colonies established from 1874-1917 were in the United States. The Hutterian Brethren are



divided into three sub-groups or "Leuts." In 1918, all three leuts moved to Canada because of perceived persecution triggered by the martyrdom of Joseph and Michael Hofer. It was not until 1934 that colonies again began to re-establish themselves in the United States although the Bon Homme Colony in South Dakota never did leave the United States. By the end of 1981, there were 294 colonies; 27.6% were located in the United States, and 72.4% were located in Canada.

Over the past decade land holdings have been expanded for almost all colonies. (Figure 2.) In addition to the creation of new colonies, the average Lehrerleut Colony has increased farmland by 1.5%; Dariusleut has increased farmland by 2% and Schmiedleut has increased holdings by 22% over the decade from 1971-1981. The Schmiedleut have been the most aggressive purchasers of new land for colony expansion. Today, 39% of all colonies are Schmiedleut, followed by 35% Dariusleut and 26% Lehrerleut.

By 1971 the average colony was 7500 acres. This average increased to 8037 acres per colony in 1981, just under a 7% increase. In 1984, there are approximately 320 colonies, some of which have not yet officially been organized. If the reported data are correct, the total acres being utilized by the Brethren is just over 2.5 million acres--more than three times the area of Rhode Island. Not all of the land being farmed is owned by the colonies; some is rented and/or leased from nonHutterites.

North American Hutterian Brethren:
Average Land Holdings per Leut, 1971/1981

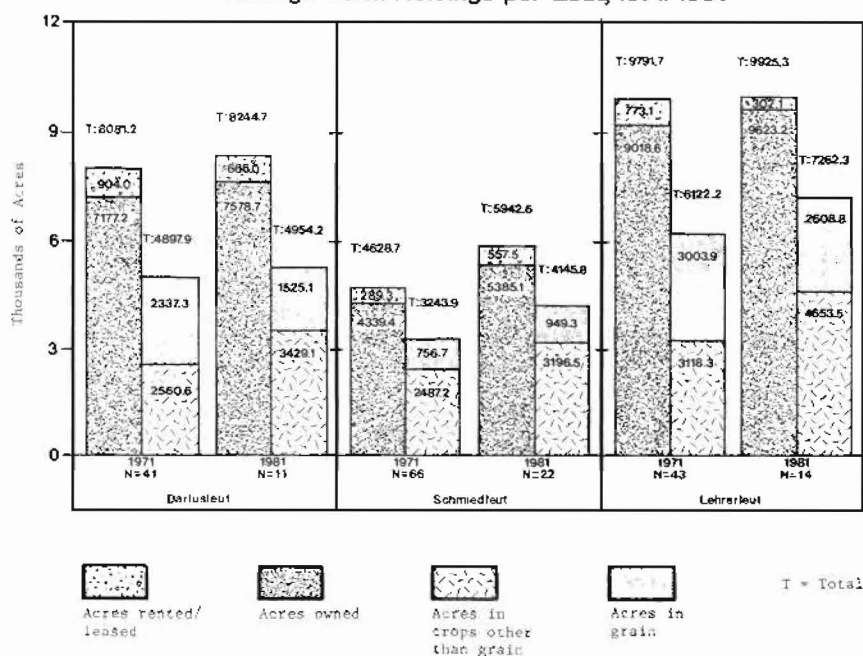


Figure 2

Few would disagree that the Hutterites are expanding rapidly. Nearly one-third (30%) of all colonies were established in the past ten years.

Perhaps the greatest threats to the "Hutterian Way" are internal problems. The "plain people" are not a static societal system, for many changes exist within the culture. As the number of colonies increases, it is reasonable to assume that some schisms might take place. Increased mobility and exposure to the outside world brings about changes--some good and others quite detrimental to the "Hutterian Way." Today more colony monies are channeled into travel--some related to business but often with a clear side benefit of recreation and personal pleasure. Some Hutterites have flown to Europe to visit their ancestral homes. Others have taken trips to Japan to encourage the brothers and sisters in the Owa Colony. Still others have visited the "Eastern Hutterites" or the Society of Brothers. Trips to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota by Hutterites are quite common. Recently a Hutterite and his family flew to Mexico in search of medical help.

The past two decades have also brought about changes in some of the religious practices. Although for years the leadership of the colonies has avoided church buildings as such, more and more colonies are constructing church buildings located near the foci of the colony. For years, the pattern was to worship in the school house, a building deliberately set off on the side of the area devoted to living quarters and the communal kitchen. Several ministers have preached in English during the evening services. This was done for the benefit of outsiders who were in attendance and did not understand the spoken German normally used.

Currently, several Hutterites are translating sermons handwritten in German during the 1600s into English. Several years ago, most ministers handcopied their own sermons. As recently as a decade ago, most ministers felt it important that new ministers handcopy their own sermons. Yet the prudent arguments forwarded, and eventually accepted, suggested xeroxing would eliminate the inevitable errors that take place when an individual handcopies long passages. Today most of the sermons are xeroxed or printed on an offset press.

Problems of in-breeding still plague some colonies. Albinism is on the increase and can present a very real problem for certain combinations of Wipf/Wurz families. Some say alcoholism is one of the major problems in or of the colonies. An increasing number of Hutterite young people are leaving the colony to "try the world." Yet some preachers, when asked what they perceive to be the major problem facing the colonies, will focus on those issues earlier highlighted in 1 John 2:16-17. When asked what would assure continued success of the colonies, they emphasize "becoming more spiritual."

NOTES

1. James F. Frideres, "The Death of Hutterite Culture," Phylon (September 1972), 260-265.
2. Edward D. Boldt, "The Death of Hutterite Culture: An Alternative Interpretation," Phylon (December 1980), 390-395.
3. Calvin Redekop and John A. Hostetler, "The Plain People: An Interpretation," Mennonite Quarterly Review (October 1977), 266-277.