

Fire in the Farmlands

In Pennsylvania's Amish country, where religious traditions die hard, a wave of spiritual renewal has hit the younger generation.

On a Tuesday evening in New Holland, Pennsylvania, a steady stream of cars slowly winds into the parking lot of Petra Christian Fellowship. Across the road, an old dairy barn, surrounded by gently rolling hills and Amish farmland, stands in sharp contrast to the contemporary church structure.

Groups of teens and 20-somethings, most of whom are packing Bibles, gather in the parking lot and church lobby to chat with friends and meet newcomers. By 7 p.m. nearly a thousand young people have filed into the 1,800-seat sanctuary.

Worship leader Cindy Sensenig, 27, steps to the microphone. "Lord, we don't just want to give You words tonight; we want to give You our hearts," she prays. With eyes closed and hands raised, a quiet seriousness descends on the group as young people all across the room begin to offer up praise and worship to their King.

A teen with spiked hair and a black leather jacket stands to his feet. Across the aisle a young Mennonite girl with long hair and a lace head covering raises her voice in praise.

"The angels are singing with us tonight—holy, holy, holy!" exclaims the leader. "We bow down. We bow our hearts."

A worship song continues the theme of adoration: "Amazing love / How can it be / That You my King would die for me/ Amazing

love / I know it's true / And it's my joy to honor You / In all I do I honor You."

By now some participants are kneeling or lying prostrate on the floor. Others worship freely in the aisles.

In one of the most ultraconservative, religious areas of the country, hundreds of young people are experiencing God's presence in their lives in a new way and boldly sharing it in their local high schools and area churches.

What began four years ago as Tuesday Night Bible Study (TBS) in a living room with 10 people has grown so quickly that the group's name still hasn't caught up with its impact. This Bible study turned youth rally-revival now draws anywhere from 1,000-1,300 teens and young adults weekly from all across Lancaster County and the surrounding area.

Tonight's speaker is youthfully energetic, despite his graying hair and beard. He paces back and forth across the stage while speaking, squats, paces some more, then sits on the steps as he continues. Ron Myer, 45, of Dove Christian Fellowship International, enlists volunteers from the audience to act out the triumphal entry of Christ from Luke 19. In order to make the story more relevant to today's teen culture, Myer substitutes an imaginary Harley Davidson for the donkey mentioned in the Scriptures.

The audience laughs and cheers, but behind all this madness there is a serious message—a challenge to each person to fulfill their destiny in God.

"A number of you think of yourselves as too small, too

insignificant,” Myer tells his audience. “But God sees your potential. He wants you to begin to see yourself as He sees you. Give yourself to God, and to His plans and purposes.”

Four years ago, a group of six young people with a passion for God did just that, committing themselves to God’s plan for their lives. Little did they know that their obedience would one day impact hundreds of youth from churches and schools across Lancaster County and beyond.

Passion for God

Converging in Lancaster back in the summer of 1997, Mike and Will Stoltzfus, Doug Eby, Ryan Kurtz, Diana Sharp and Angie Stutzmann each had a desire to share Jesus with their friends. All six had graduated from Lancaster Mennonite High School within one or two years of one another, and all had served in Youth With a Mission (YWAM), though on different mission fields.

The group began meeting together informally, and on Oct. 14, 1997, TBS was launched in Sharp’s living room with just 10 people. “We didn’t have any expectation as to what would happen,” Mike Stoltzfus told Charisma. “But we had a great time of fellowship, and God met with us.”

During the next couple of months, the Bible study grew to 40 people, and the leadership team grew close.

Then on Friday, Dec. 12, 1997, tragedy struck. Sharp, only 22, was killed in a car accident. “It blew us away,” Mike Stoltzfus recalls. “We thought maybe we should just end there.” But God had other plans.

A thousand people attended Sharp's funeral, and more than 50 teens responded to an altar call given during the service. The funeral was on a Tuesday, and because the leadership team wanted to be together, they decided to go ahead with their regular Bible study. This time, 75 people showed up. "We just hung out, cried and prayed together," Mike Stoltzfus remembers.

The next Tuesday, 100 people came to TBS, and it just kept growing from there. In February 1998, the Bible study moved into the basement of a local church, at which their numbers grew to more than 200.

During the next three years, the group moved three more times to accommodate the increasing number of youth who were attending. Finally in November 2000, TBS was invited to use the brand-new sanctuary of Petra Christian Fellowship in New Holland.

How does this young team of leaders, all under 25, feel about what has happened? "Sometimes we still feel a little overwhelmed," shares Mike Stoltzfus, 24, who is viewed as the leader and visionary on the leadership team. "At first we didn't feel qualified or capable.

"We thought God could pick better people," he continues. "But we've grown to understand that it's God's sovereign hand. He's the one who gives us grace and wisdom to lead, and so we walk more confidently in that now."

The leadership team, which currently comprises four people, meets weekly to pray, discuss practical issues and encourage

one another. "Being in a close relationship with these guys helps keep me accountable," shares Ryan Kurtz, who is responsible for the worship at TBS.

"We've all learned that we have to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and be disciplined in our daily walk," says Joanna Smoker, who joined the leadership team after Sharp's death. "When you develop that kind of a lifestyle, ministry becomes much easier because you're doing it in His grace."

One of the first things the original leadership team did was to gather a group of local pastors to serve as an advisory board. "Without their guidance we wouldn't be where we are today," Mike Stoltzfus admits. "The Lord's gifted us with great people to mentor us."

For the most part, local pastors have endorsed what is happening on Tuesday nights, and report seeing the fruit of it in their own churches and youth groups.

"Our churches have struggled to reach the youth," shares Matt Buckwalter, pastor of Old Road Mennonite Church and one of the overseers for TBS. "We've tried all kinds of different programs that haven't worked, but suddenly we're seeing kids get on fire for Jesus."

The youth who attend TBS represent between 75 and 100 different churches of all denominations from Lancaster and the surrounding area. Leaders estimate that more than half of the young people come from conservative backgrounds such as Mennonite or Brethren.

In several Mennonite churches where Buckwalter has preached

during the last year, he has discovered the youth moving up to sit in the front pews.

“I think it’s a prophetic sign of what is happening with them [spiritually],” Buckwalter says. “They are moving to the forefront of the church because they want to be noticed. They want to be involved. They want what they value to be valued by the whole church.”

Holy Spirit Fire

Many of the young people who attend TBS are experiencing the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit for the first time. According to Buckwalter, the Mennonite Church is not theologically opposed to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

“It’s just been an issue we haven’t touched on in many of the churches in our region,” he explains. “We haven’t taught against it; we haven’t taught for it. We just haven’t said anything.”

“Sometimes it’s a challenge dealing with these issues because the kids come from so many different theological backgrounds,” adds Smoker, “but those who come are hungry for the truth and are determined to seek it out.”

Hannah Riker, 18, who attends Hopewell Mennonite Church, says a lot of Mennonite churches she knows are becoming more open to the Holy Spirit. “It’s coming in through the youth,” she reports. “Some churches are criticizing what’s going on, but others are accepting it.”

Keith Weaver, 22, attends Weaverland Mennonite, a church that is more than 275 years old. "We come from a rich heritage and tradition," he explains, "but that tradition is not holding us back. Our church is moving with God." About 30 young people from his youth group attend TBS. Weaver says these young people are influencing the church because they are realizing the potential they have in Christ.

Some of the youth from Weaverland began meeting for prayer every day from 5 a.m. to 6:30 a.m. during the 40 days before Easter. "At first there were just a couple of us, but now there are as many as 10 to 15 people of all ages coming," he says. "It's bringing the generations together within our church."

Prayer has played an important roll in TBS from the very beginning. Three months after the Bible study group began, Will Stoltzfus, who oversees the prayer ministry, began a weekly prayer group that now draws 10 to 40 young people on Friday nights to pray for local pastors, churches, governmental leaders and the ministry of TBS.

Intercessory prayer also takes place every Tuesday night before and during the meeting. "We have a lot of people praying for us that we don't even know," Mike Stoltzfus says. "About a year ago I ran into a 70-year-old lady who has grandchildren who attend TBS. She was so excited about what God was doing. She told me she had been praying for this to happen for 40 years."

No one understands more than the leadership team that this is a sovereign move of God. "We don't take credit for anything," Mike Stoltzfus continues. "It's much bigger than us."

Revival Generation

In almost every high school in the area, God is doing exceptional things, some of which are connected with TBS, and some of which are not. Hannah Riker reports that in her local high school, Garden Spot High, many people have been saved.

Out of the student body of 800, about half turned out last September for the annual See You at the Pole prayer rally. At the same school, about 100 kids meet every Friday morning before school for “Early Bird”—a time of worship and prayer.

In addition to spreading the gospel in their high schools, many teens are getting involved in short- and long-term missions trips. In 1998 and 1999, TBS took two teams on short-term missions trips to Chili. Just this last summer, TBS teamed up with local churches for service projects and evangelistic outreaches in local city parks.

Many teens from the area are also choosing to postpone college and go into missions for a year. “It’s not looked down upon to go into missions instead of college,” Riker reports. “Three of my closest friends are going into YWAM this summer, and I plan to go next year when I graduate.”

Where is TBS headed? According to the leadership team, they are still on track with their original vision, which includes sharing the gospel with others, helping Christians grow in their relationships with the Lord, serving and supporting local churches, and getting teens excited about missions.

Although TBS sponsors weekend retreats focusing on the foundations of Christianity, the baptism of the Holy Spirit

and training for ministry, the leaders make it very clear they are not a church. "We're not interested in sheep-stealing," Will Stoltzfus says. "We encourage those who attend TBS to get connected to a local church and begin serving there."

Lester Zimmerman, pastor of Petra Christian Fellowship, believes God is working through these young people because they don't have the baggage and hang-ups some older Christians have, and because there is a passion among the youth to see God do something new and fresh in their generation.

"God is using the youth to help bring unity among churches and leaders in the area," Zimmerman says. "TBS is a powerful demonstration of what God wants to do in the whole church."

Buckwalter, who also teaches Bible classes at Lancaster Mennonite High, reports seeing more and more young people saved and delivered from alcoholism and drug abuse.

"I think it's a sign of things to come," he shares. "I think right now we're more in renewal than revival. As more and more passion for holiness comes to the region, we will see it explode into revival."

Whether one defines what is happening as renewal or revival, God is undeniably moving among the youth in Lancaster County.

"To me it's proof that God really wants to do something at this time in history all around the world," Will Stoltzfus says. "We're just blessed to be a part of it."

The Tuesday Night Bible Study began in 1997 with just 10 people. A year later 200 were coming, and the numbers continue

to grow. Leaders today include (from left) Mike Stoltzfus, Joanna Smoker, Will Stoltzfus, Ryan Kurtz. RIGHT: Diana Sharp, who helped start the outreach in her home, died in a car crash two months later.

The New Mennonites

Church leaders are adopting 'a new wineskin.'

Ten Mennonite churches, most of which are within a 50-mile radius of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, have recently pulled out of their denomination, forming their own network of interdenominational charismatic churches.

According to Lester Zimmerman, pastor of Petra Christian Fellowship in New Holland, Pennsylvania, his fellowship and nine other churches formed the network in April 2001, deciding not to go along with a pending merger of the two main branches of the Mennonite Church.

Zimmerman points to a difference in vision as the main reason for the pullout. "There is a new wineskin that's emerging that we're trying to walk," Zimmerman told Charisma. "We are moving into more of an apostolic understanding of the church, and the denomination seems to be going in the opposite direction."

The 10 churches have been working together for several years, but realized they were heading in a new direction about five years ago. Many of the congregations, such as Petra Christian Fellowship with an attendance exceeding 800, draw people from various church backgrounds, as well as the unchurched.

Zimmerman also reports a move of God among pastors and churches of all denominations within Lancaster County itself. "While there have been several groups of pastors in the region who have been meeting independently in prayer for a number of years, there is a new coming together of the whole body," he says.

A group of 25 pastors are now meeting monthly to discuss the development of a regional church in the area. "It's an amazing thing that's happening here," Zimmerman says. "The coming together of leaders in the area and the Tuesday Night Bible Study with the youth are two of the greatest things I've seen happen here in a long time."

On May 3, for the National Day of Prayer, several thousand people from area churches came together for prayer and worship at Lancaster City Park. More than 3,000 people from all denominations have joined together for several citywide worship gatherings. In addition, a number of "harp and bowl" meetings, based on the International House of Prayer model in Kansas City, Missouri, are now emerging in the county.

Sam Smucker, pastor of the 3,000-member charismatic Worship Center in Lancaster, says there is a hunger for more of God, not only in his church, but also among many other churches. "Lots of churches are putting up new buildings that seat a couple thousand people," he reports.

Smucker, who grew up Old Order Amish but left at the age of 18, told Charisma that he has had dozens of Amish families join his church in the last five to six years. "There is a spiritual stirring among the Amish," he says, despite the fact that many are excommunicated when they attend unsanctioned church meetings or Bible studies.

“What’s happening in our area is not about just one group,” Smucker insists. “You can’t say it’s a Mennonite thing or a charismatic thing, or it’s this or that. It’s a God thing.”

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