

The Michigan Amish Fellowship: A Case Study for Defining an Amish Affiliation

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Abstract: The Michigan Amish Fellowship is a distinct Reformist Amish affiliation marked by intentionality in its religious vision, decision-making procedures, and planned daughter settlements. This article explores the Fellowship's understandings of "true spirituality," "scriptural church," and "living witness." In the process, the article advances a tentative definition of what constitutes an Amish affiliation.

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Introduction

The Michigan Amish Fellowship (also known as the Michigan Circle) is a network of thirty-three settlements in Michigan, Maine, Missouri, Kentucky, Montana, and Wyoming that are formally affiliated with one other.¹ (See Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix.) As such, they provide one model for defining an Amish affiliation.

The idea of an affiliation is a contested subject. Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt in their landmark study, *The Amish*, defined an affiliation as

a cluster of two or more districts with at least twenty years of shared history. Affiliated congregations share similar Ordnungs, which specify distinctive lifestyles and visible symbols that set them apart from other affiliations. (p. 138)

The authors of *The Amish* observe that migration history, ethnicity, distinctive *Ordnung* practices, local conditions, and internal divisions can contribute to the formation or evolution of an affiliation. They also note that fellowship relationships in which ministers of various districts

¹ Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 42–44, 250–253, 258–278, 314–322, 355–380, 401–407, 411–433, 458–462, 496–503, 563–567; Weaver, *Western States Amish Directory*, 55–92, 119–130, 183–200; Yoder and Yoder, *Central Plains Amish Directory*, 193–196; Yoder, *Amish of Missouri*, 150–155; *Who Is Who*, 96–97, 131–132, 138–139, 141–154, 156–158, 160–162, 164–165, 177, 207–208, 211–212; bishop of Marion, Michigan, settlement, conversation with author, May 27, 2022; Jake and Savilla Girod, "Thorndike/Unity, ME," *The Diary*, October 2022, 66.



or settlements collaborate with one another are an important marker of an affiliation. Using these criteria, and building on the work of Stephen Scott, *The Amish* lists forty distinct Amish affiliations.²

Christopher Petrovich has challenged this definition, as well as whether there are forty distinct Amish affiliations. Instead, he asserts that there are only six Amish affiliations: Swartzentruber, Kenton, Andy Weaver, Old Order-mainstream, New Order-traditional, and New New Order. His main criteria for limiting Amish affiliations to six is whether districts or settlements share similar “disciplinary procedures and technological restrictiveness as constituent elements of *Ordnung*.”³ He places the Michigan Amish Fellowship within the Old Order-mainstream affiliation “as an internal movement aimed at reforming moral and spiritual practices rather than a distinct affiliation.”⁴ In doing so, Petrovich confuses the idea of an *affiliation* with the concept of a *type*. His categories may be helpful in understanding where a cluster of districts or a settlement falls on a low-high *Ordnung* scale, but they do not adequately define what constitutes an affiliation.

The Michigan Amish Fellowship has its roots in a movement that Stephen E. Scott has described as Amish Reformist.⁵ This movement originated in the Aylmer, Ontario, Amish settlement, which sponsors Pathway Publishers. Through its magazines, *Family Life* and *Young Companions*, Pathway has promoted a spirituality that maintains an intrinsic connection between inward renovation and the life lived both individually and corporately. This spirituality looks to its Anabaptist and Amish past for inspiration and guidance. Specifically, it has weighed in against tobacco use, impure courtship practices, and the more notorious wild *Rumspringa* activities in some of the larger Amish settlements.⁶ The influence of Pathway has given rise to grassroots efforts by parents in some of the older and larger settlements like Lancaster County, Holmes County, and Elkhart-LaGrange to organized parent-sponsored youth groups that promote a reformist agenda. The reformist impulse has also been behind the establishment of new settlements where settlers aspire to organize a community along reformist principles. Another characteristic of the reformist mindset is an openness to seekers from non-Amish backgrounds.⁷ The seeds of the Michigan Amish Fellowship originated in a reformist settlement in Mio, in northern Michigan.

Families from Geauga County, Ohio, founded the Mio settlement in 1970. Following the common ad hoc Amish settlement pattern, they soon were joined by families from Holmes County, Ohio, and the northern Indiana settlements of Elkhart-LaGrange and Nappanee, as well as from the Elkhart-LaGrange daughter settlement at Charlotte, Michigan. Its first resident bishop was originally from the Swiss Amish of Adams County, Indiana, but had moved to the Elkhart-LaGrange settlement before coming to Mio in 1974. In 1983, Mio had grown to the point that the settlement divided into two districts. Up to this point, Mio was following a pattern similar to many

² Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 137–152.

³ Petrovich, “More Than Forty Amish,” 141.

⁴ Petrovich, 139.

⁵ Scott, “Amish Groups, Affiliations, and Categories” 4–5.

⁶ Hostetler, *Amish Society*, 378–380.

⁷ Scott, “Amish Groups, Affiliations, and Categories,” 4–5; Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 140–141, 161, 371–373.

other reformist-minded settlements. That pattern was significantly refined when Mio decided to start a daughter settlement in Ewart, Michigan, in 1989.⁸

The Ewart settlement appears to be the brainchild of Omar Miller, a minister from Charlotte, Michigan, who moved to Mio in 1982. Miller was later ordained bishop at Ewart. He has written,

The goal and vision of the church at Ewart was to establish the Anabaptist vision of a scriptural church promoting true spirituality, obedience to God’s Word, and being a living witness to those around us. The church also has the vision of maintaining a Biblical view of evangelizing by starting other church communities rather than dividing the districts and growing into a large community. (Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 258)

There are three key ideas in Miller’s statement: “true spirituality,” “scriptural church,” and “living witness.” How does the Michigan Amish Fellowship work out these ideas?⁹

For the Michigan Amish Fellowship, “true spirituality” originates in the new birth, an inner transformation that results in obedience to God’s Word. This understanding follows general reformist lines. Nor is it absent from non-Reformist Amish. Amish catechetical materials express the importance of the new birth.¹⁰ However, there is an implicit attitude among Reformist Amish that not all members of the Amish church have the new birth but may be simply following learned cultural norms. This in no ways means they are repudiating Amish cultural practices, but it does mean they emphasize the *why* as being the foundation of the *how*.¹¹

What distinguishes the Michigan Amish Fellowship from some other reformist-minded Amish is the mechanism by which they discern whether or not their members have the new birth. The Michigan Fellowship expects its members to articulate how they understand both the new birth and the ongoing experience of inner transformation. The Fellowship will not baptize youth or receive members from other Amish communities unless they can do so. However, as the Marion bishop noted, some Amish come from settings where verbalizing one’s faith is so unfamiliar that even though they may have the new birth, they do not know how to articulate it. The Michigan Fellowship sees part of its task as being to help these people express the *why* of their faith.

The Michigan Amish Fellowship understands a “scriptural church” to be one that operates as a brotherhood. As the Marion bishop said, “Whatever we do, we do as church.” For example, when there is a school meeting, the expectation is that everyone will attend, not just the parents of the students. Also, discrete youth groups are downplayed. When a singing is planned, it is for the whole church, not just the youth.

⁸ Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 411–414.

⁹ To answer this question, I will be drawing from accounts in Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory 2019*, and a conversation with the current bishop of the Marion, Michigan, settlement.

¹⁰ Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 70–71, observes that many Amish prefer the theological code words “new birth” to the evangelical terminology of “born again,” seeing the former as more communal in its orientation and the latter as accentuating individualism.

¹¹ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

Another aspect is the increased role the men in the congregation have in corporate religious instruction. As the Marion bishop commented, “We are looking for more direction in teaching and the whole brotherhood becoming familiar with the Word of God.” The primary means by which this is done is through the Sunday school, which is held on the Sundays between the biweekly church service Sundays. The typical format of a Michigan Fellowship church’s Sunday school begins with the congregation singing four songs. Then one of the ministers has a fifteen- to twenty-minute opening. A chapter of the Bible is read. One of the ministers explains the chapter. Then he calls upon six or eight men to add anything they want. This is followed by a theme verse for the morning. Again, a minister calls on several men to explain what they think the verse means. Most of the Michigan Fellowship communities do not have separate classes for children, which fits into their emphasis on doing everything together as a church.¹²

The “brotherhood” concept also informs the Michigan Amish Fellowship churches’ decision-making processes. Amish polity is congregational. Usually, an Amish district makes decisions in a two-step process. First, the leadership discusses an issue. If they are able to reach an agreement on how to proceed, they present a proposal to the members of the congregation, who have to give their approval.¹³ The Michigan Fellowship adds an intermediate step in the process. After the ministry processes an issue, they present their proposal to a meeting of the male householders in the congregation for their consideration. The men discuss the proposal, either accepting it as given or modifying it. After agreement is reached, it is presented to all the members, including the women, who have to agree.¹⁴

While the main locus of authority in the Michigan Amish Fellowship is in the congregation, the bishops in the Fellowship are concerned that the congregations maintain generally similar *Ordnungs*. To do that, the bishops consult with each other and on occasion have meetings to discuss issues. They also turn to one another for conflict resolution and assistance with ordinations.¹⁵

Another area in which the Michigan Amish Fellowship decision-making differs from that of many other Amish affiliations is the manner in which new settlements are started. Most new Amish settlements are ad hoc endeavors, where entrepreneurial-minded men and their families move to a new area in hopes that others will follow. If ordained leaders are among the immigrants, church can be held. Otherwise, a new settlement relies on visiting ministers to hold meetings. If the community gains traction, eventually it will ordain resident leadership. By contrast, in the Michigan Fellowship, new settlements are deliberately planned and sponsored by an established settlement, with ordained leadership already in place before the families move.¹⁶ One of the first settlers at Reed City, Michigan, outlines the process as it was implemented when Evert started the Reed City community:

¹² Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

¹³ Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 170–171.

¹⁴ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

¹⁵ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

¹⁶ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

[In the spring of 2012], the Evert Amish church put into motion the commitment to establish an outreach church rather than divide into districts. We settled on sending five families. Two of the families were to be ministers and three others. Because of the large youth group in Evert, we wanted three of the families to have youth. In a series of meetings in late May and June, we made nominations by families to go to the outreach. We were to use the lot if we didn't get a clear consensus from the voice of the church. We had five families by the end of June. The proposed timetable was to find a location by fall of 2012 and move in the summer of 2013. (Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 496)

Evert's decision not to divide its district, but to start a new daughter settlement is a characteristic of the Michigan Amish Fellowship and is intentional. The Fellowship sees largeness as a hindrance to brotherhood. Largeness makes the process of decision-making more difficult, because it multiplies the number of persons who have to agree on a question. Multiple districts also potentially can create a situation where one district might decide one way on an issue, and the other another way. Larger communities also tend to divide into peer groups, particularly with the youth, which the Fellowship sees as working against the idea of the church doing everything together.¹⁷

Choosing the families who are to go to a new settlement is also characteristic of the Michigan Fellowship.¹⁸ As with Reed City, attention is given to what mix of families will make a successful settlement, as well as to what will promote the ongoing success of the sending church. There is also a concern that the leadership sent along be experienced. The Marion bishop said that his church is of the size that it should start a new settlement, but at this point Marion does not have enough experienced leaders to send. The Fellowship churches not only determine whom to send initially, but also who may move in later.

Thirteen of the Michigan Amish Fellowship churches belong to the group by virtue of being daughter settlements of the original Mio, Michigan, settlement. The following settlement list demonstrates the development of this family of churches:

¹⁷ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

¹⁸ *Who Is Who*, 164–165.

- 1970 – Mio, MI
- 1994 – Evart, MI
 - 1995 – Marion, MI
 - 2001 – Leroy, MI
 - 2012 – Tustin, MI
 - 2021 – Sterling, MI
- 2000 – McBain, MI
 - 2016 – Rodney, MI
- 2003 - Hersey, MI
- 2013 – Reed City, MI
- 1995 – Ossineke, MI
- 2000 – Leroy, MI
 - 2008 – Ethel, MO
 - 2019 – Bevier, MO
- 2018 – East Jordan, MI

The other twenty settlements are previously existing Amish settlements that were adopted into the Michigan Amish Fellowship or daughter settlements of the adopted settlements.

- 1990 – Fremont, MI
 - 1994 – Newaygo, MI
 - 2019 – White Cloud, MI
- 2004 – Campbellsville, KY
- 2004 – Lewistown, MT
 - 2015 – Toston/Townsend, MT
 - 2019 – Roberts, MT
 - 2021 – Powell, WY
- 1993 – Manton, MI
 - 2013 – Hawks, MI
 - 2017 – Brutus, MI
- (Former Christian Community)
- 1996 – Smyrna Mills, ME
 - 2008 – Unity, ME
 - 2020 – Hiram, ME
 - 2012 – Hodgson, ME
 - 2022 – Livermore Falls, ME
 - 2020 – Wales, ME
- 2004 – Caneyville, KY
 - 2012 – Brownsville, KY

The Fremont, Michigan, settlement was founded by families from the short-lived reformist-minded Beaver Springs, Pennsylvania, settlement. These families had reached out to the Michigan Amish Fellowship prior to moving to Fremont and were incorporated into the Fellowship from the

beginning.¹⁹ The Manton, Michigan, church began in 1993 as an independent New Order-minded settlement led by a minister and a deacon. The families had come from various Amish communities, and they had difficulty in arriving at a common *Ordnung*. After two years, the minister left with several families. The remnant unsuccessfully sought affiliation with the Christian Community at Cookeville, Tennessee. They then turned to the Michigan Amish Fellowship and were taken into the Fellowship in the spring of 1996, with oversight from Ewart. In 2003, seven families, including a minister, moved from the defunct Ovid, Michigan, settlement to Hersey, Michigan. The ministers at Ewart assisted the new community until a minister from Leroy, Michigan, moved to Hersey, and it affiliated with the Michigan Fellowship.²⁰

A third set of settlements have their origins in the Christian Community founded by Elmo Stoll.²¹ A bishop from Alymer, Ontario, Stoll had been an editor at Pathway Publishers. His influential writings promoted a reformist agenda. As Richard Pride has explained:

He sought to expand otherwise closed Amish community life to include religious folks who were not from an Anabaptist tradition by renegotiating cultural and religious norms with them.... He sought to bring together people of diverse Christian backgrounds—both plain and non-plain—in order to build a faithful community modeled on the Gospel and writings of early church fathers. The communities that he began emphasized social cooperation, plain dress and simple living, faithful obedience to Biblical injunctions, and adult male participation in the councils of the church—cultural practices out of the Anabaptist tradition but informed by a literal reading of the Bible that men of all faiths could participate in. Most notably, the Christian communities were founded on the collective ownership of land. (Pride, “Elmo Stoll,” 36)

The first Christian Community was established by Stoll in 1990 in Cookeville, Tennessee. It attracted persons from various Plain backgrounds as well as seekers from non-Plain backgrounds. To accommodate the latter, Stoll decided the community would switch from German to English. Over the next six years, it expanded to five communities including one at Smyrna, Maine, in 1996. However, the diversity of backgrounds created a situation in which community norms were constantly being renegotiated. Holding the communities together was the personal leadership of Elmo Stoll. In September 1998, Stoll suddenly died of a heart attack. Within a year, three of the five communities had disbanded, including the mother community at Cookeville.²² One community affiliated with the Noah Hoover Old Mennonites. The community at Smyrna reached

¹⁹ Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 264–265; Luthy, “Amish Settlements,” 20; bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation.

²⁰ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation; Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 264–265, 318, 363–364.

²¹ Waldrep, “The New Order Amish,” 417–420.

²² Pride, “Elmo Stoll,” 36–49; Waldrep, “The New Order Amish,” 417–420.

out to the Michigan Amish Fellowship. After a two-year probationary period, it was received into the Fellowship.²³

In 2004, several former members of the Christian Communities decided to try the experiment again. They started a new settlement at Caneyville, Kentucky. It grew rapidly, leading to a daughter settlement at Brownsville in 2012. However, some of the same internal tensions that had troubled the earlier experiment afflicted the new communities until only four families were left at Caneyville and about a dozen at Brownsville. They reached out to the Michigan Amish Fellowship for help. In May 2021, both communities were received into the Fellowship.²⁴

The Michigan Amish Fellowship follows a formal procedure for receiving a settlement into its circle. After receiving a request for affiliation, the Fellowship appoints a committee of bishops who visit the community to explain the Fellowship's vision, practices, and church governance. If the requesting settlement still wants to move ahead, and the committee thinks it is a fit, the settlement is received. In some cases, a bishop from the Fellowship actually moves to the settlement for a year or two to help it make the transition.²⁵

The third key point of Omar Miller's vision is "a living witness." It is significant that the Michigan Amish Fellowship refers to new settlements as "outreaches."²⁶ As a member of the Manton, Michigan, church wrote about his church:

As a church, our vision is to be a plain horse and buggy church with the means to help those who are sincerely seeking the truth. As the church grows, we are minded to plant churches in other areas to the honor and glory of God. It is also our heart's desire that a scriptural church setting might be maintained for our posterity. And above all else, that we might not lose our first love and grow lukewarm in the degenerate society we find ourselves in. (Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 363)

The Michigan Fellowship believes that the most important vehicle for a "living witness" is a well-functioning brotherhood that demonstrates to its immediate neighbors what it means to love

²³ Waldrep, "The New Order Amish," 420; bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation. Since 2019, the Smyrna Church has sponsored a bimonthly magazine, *The Vanguard*, described as "a publication of the Christian and separated life." Its two editors are a son and grandson of Elmo Stoll. The letters to the editors indicate a wide readership among various Amish and Old Order Mennonites communities in the United States and Canada. "Your Turn," *The Vanguard* 4, no. 4 (July–August 2022): 5-10.

²⁴ Bryce, E. Geiser, *What Does Simple Living*, explains the rationale for restarting the Christian Community experiment at Caneyville as a communal rejection of technology that creates a space where individuals can align themselves with creation, obey the teachings of Jesus, and limit the resources they consume; Jeff Smith, *Becoming Amish*, 167-175, describes a visit to the Caneyville Christian Community; bishop of Brownsville, Kentucky, settlement, conversation with author, August 2021; member of Caneyville, Kentucky, settlement, conversation with author, May 15, 2022.

²⁵ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation; Smith, *Becoming Amish*, 228.

²⁶ Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 250, 258, 355, 362–363, 496; *Who Is Who*, 131–132, 138, 164–165; "Lewistown, MT," *The Diary*, November 2016, 104; Mrs. Jason Wanner, "Leroy, MI," *The Budget*, January 3, 2018, 37.

one another. Their hope is that such a witness will attract seekers.²⁷ Of course, as with any Amish group, there are significant cultural barriers for those from non-Amish backgrounds to join an Amish church. One of the primary barriers is linguistic. The Michigan Fellowship attempts to bridge this barrier by conducting its Sunday schools in English and by providing non-Pennsylvania Dutch speakers with translators for church meetings.²⁸ However, the number of members from non-Plain backgrounds is very small.²⁹

More significant is the Michigan Fellowship's outreach to other Amish who are attracted to their way of doing church.³⁰ If a person or a family wishes to move to a Fellowship church, they are encouraged to visit it a couple of times. During their visits, the ministry will interview them. As the Marion bishop explained, the visitors are asked how they understand the new birth, if they are truly enlightened, and how they understand brotherhood. The ministers go over the community's *Ordnung*. They also meet with the visitors' home ministry to make sure there are no outstanding problems from their home community. If all these questions are answered to the ministers' satisfaction and the community is not too crowded, the church will issue the family an invitation to come. The Michigan Fellowship attracts Amish from a variety of backgrounds. There are Swiss Amish and Lancaster County Amish surnames among the members, as well as surnames common to Midwest Amish settlements. These various ethnicities form a fictive kinship based on a common "vision and goal, structure and function of the church."³¹

With its clearly defined vision, generally similar *Ordnung*, brotherhood decision-making processes, planned outreaches, deliberate control of who joins their Fellowship either as

²⁷ For a detailed account of one family who joined the Amish church at Marion, Michigan, see Smith, *Becoming Amish*. The family—Bill and Tricia Moser and their children—later left the Marion church for a car-driving Amish-Mennonite fellowship, but with warm regard for their ten years as members of the Amish church at Marion.

²⁸ Bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation. Caneyville and Brownsville continued to use English after they joined the Michigan Amish Fellowship.

²⁹ A survey of surnames in the Amish directories that include Michigan Amish Fellowship churches shows only three households with "English" surnames. There were also five households with Mennonite surnames. Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 43, 252, 261, 269, 272, 315–316, 320, 358, 360, 367–369, 377, 404, 421, 426, 430, 444, 449, 460, 498, 565; Yoder, *Amish of Missouri*, 152; Weaver, *Western States Amish Directory*, 61, 77, 12, 189; Yoder and Yoder, *Central Plains Amish Directory*, 195; Smith, *Becoming Amish*, 189–194, recounts the difficulty that the Mosers encountered in learning Pennsylvania German, thus hampering their full integration into the community.

³⁰ Indicative of the influence of the Michigan Amish Fellowship among Amish generally is circulation of the *Tägliche Manna*, a bimonthly devotional magazine published by Plain Precepts Publications, whose chair is a member of the Manton church. Many of the contributors are members of various Michigan Amish Fellowship churches, but they also include writers from Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Ontario. Its stated purpose is "to help instill godly convictions, to support stability and traditional values in our plain Anabaptist churches, to inspire Christians to live a life of courage, integrity, and upright character, and to guide lost souls into the fold of God." "About Plain Precepts Publications," ii.

³¹ Miller, *Michigan Amish Directory*, 43, 252, 261, 269, 272, 315–316, 320, 358, 360, 367–369, 377, 404, 421, 426, 430, 444, 449, 460, 498, 565; Yoder, *Amish of Missouri*, 152; Weaver, *Western States Amish Directory*, 61, 77, 12, 189; Yoder and Yoder, *Central Plains Amish Directory*, 195; bishop of Marion, Michigan, conversation; *Who Is Who*, 97.

individuals or as settlements, and cross-settlement ministerial collaboration, the Michigan Amish Fellowship is something more than “an internal movement [within an Old Order-mainstream] aimed at reforming moral and spiritual practices.”³² It is a distinct affiliation.

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Erratum

12/5/2022: Activated links in PDF file.

³² Petrovich, “More Than Forty,” 139–140.

Appendix

Figure 1

Michigan Amish Fellowship Settlements in Michigan

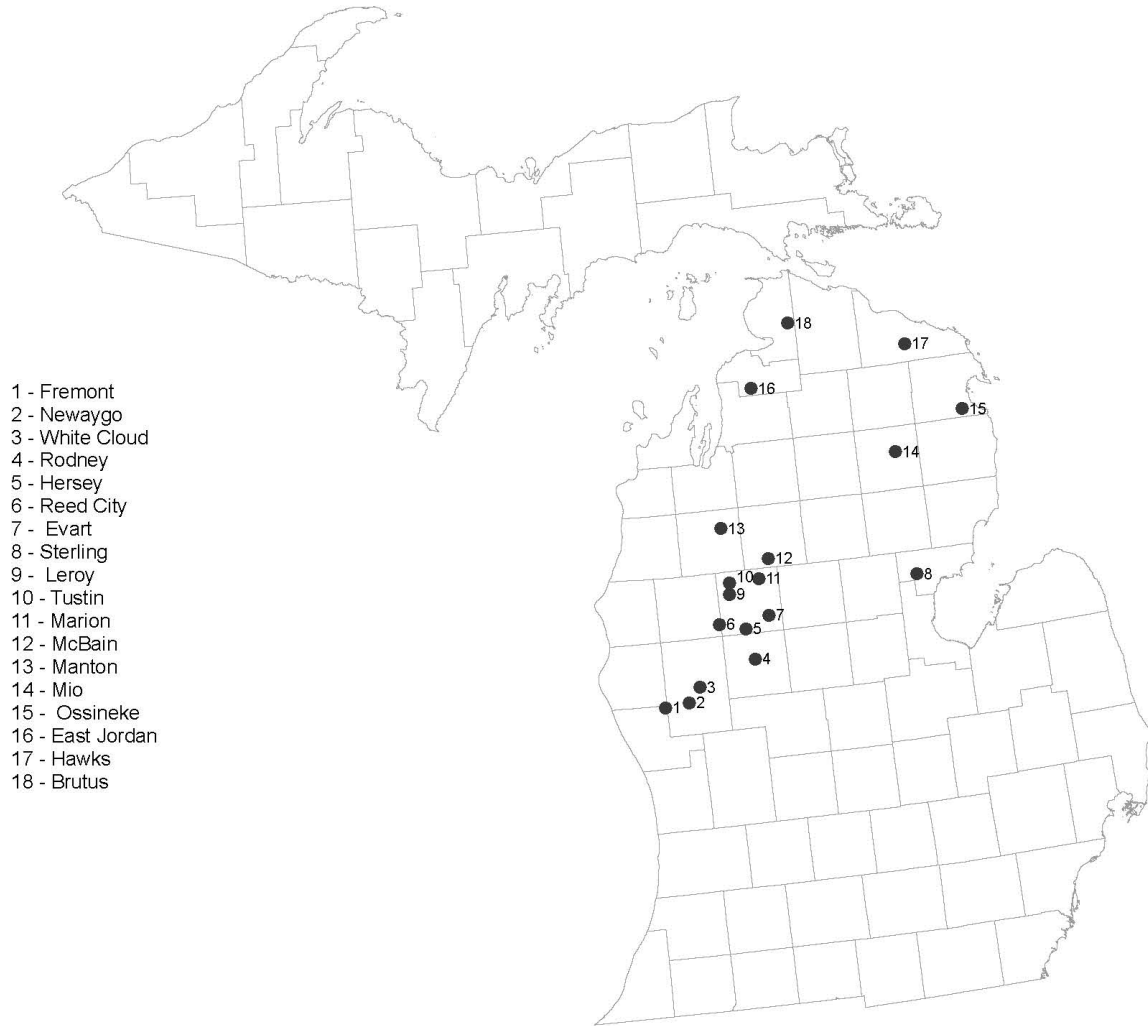


Figure 2

Michigan Amish Fellowship Settlements outside of Michigan

