



Ulli Ammann, to Churches in Crisis

The following letter is perhaps one of the most unsung masterpieces of the early Anabaptists. I ran across this letter as I was studying some of the early source documents of the Amish/Mennonite division. Fortunately, historian John D. Roth has taken these letters out of obscurity and printed them in a book titled *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook*.

At first glance the letter doesn't seem all that earth shaking. It is mainly just some good, practical teaching from a seasoned bishop to a struggling congregation. On its own merits, the advice is powerful ... but what I believe makes the letter extraordinary are the life experiences of the writer, bishop Ulli Ammann.

It is believed that Ulli Ammann was the younger brother of the famous Jacob Ammann, from whom the Amish church received its name. Ulli was a young minister during the painful split of 1693 between the Amish and Mennonites. This was an ugly split.¹ The two most visible figures were Hans Reist from the "Mennonite" side and Jacob Ammann from the "Amish." When you dig into this split and look for the cause of the division and try to determine "whose fault was it" ... it becomes very difficult. When reading the letters, you find the older "Mennonite" group being aloof and somewhat slippery with the straight question that was being asked of them. On the other hand, the younger and more radical group of "Amish"—particularly Jacob Ammann—comes off as too demanding and harsh.

In the passionate mix of strong personalities, the voice that sparkles with gentleness, wisdom, and humility was Jacob's younger brother—Ulli Ammann.

Five years after the major meltdown, Ulli made several attempts to be a peacemaker. A letter from 1698 reveals his humble attitude, with words like these: "For without any question, mistakes were made on both sides, and therefore each person should carry his own burden, and it is proper

¹ It is interesting to note that this was the first known major division in the Swiss Brethren since their beginnings 168 years earlier. 168 years without a major split!

for each person to reconcile himself again with God and with the aggrieved fellow human whom he has wronged."²

In the following years, we see Ulli along with Jacob and the other Amish bishops apologizing for their attitude during the division. They went so far as offering themselves to be excommunicated in order to once again have unity. Sadly, the Mennonites could not find it in themselves to forgive the Amish. Several requests were made for reconciliation, both verbally and by letter, but the Mennonites never accepted their offer.

Over 20 years later, Ulli Ammann, now an older, experienced bishop, was asked to help out a struggling congregation in current-day Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, France. In an attempt to help, he wrote the following letter. The letter is simple, yet profound. Ulli prescribes a humble relationship between a brotherhood and its ministers. He suggests first of all that the brotherhood should be able to work out their problems. While he strongly upholds biblical leadership, Ulli envisions a balance between the opinions of the elders and the opinion of the brotherhood. He feels that these problems should be worked out locally. However, if they cannot be worked out locally, then they should seek help from another congregation. Finally, he says they should accept the counsel of the visiting minister. Other things briefly touched on in the letter are the role of the minister in general, and even some thoughts on church standards. Coming from a seasoned bishop who witnessed damage caused by the zeal of his older brother, the unforgiveness of his opponents, and a lifetime of working through difficult church problems, this letter deserves a close inspection. The letter was used by permission of John D. Roth and the Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen, Indiana. The subtitles were added by me. —Dean Taylor, Editor

Ulli Ammann to the ministers and elders of the congregation at Markirch.³

A sincere brotherly greeting with the wish for the very best for your soul and body in time and eternity to all the beloved fellow ministers who have helped with the work in the house of the Lord, also to the brothers and sisters who by God's grace are partakers with us in the same faith and worship. Think well of us in your prayers, of which we are in great need.

For the sake of peace and unity, and to ward off quarrels as much as possible, it has seemed good to us to make known by means of a letter the following points:

² "Letters" p. 85

³ Today known as Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, France. This letter was written in 1720.

Take it to the brotherhood

Namely, that a minister and overseer of a congregation—at whatever place he may be, an ordained man or fully confirmed man who is called an elder—can save himself from guilt and the accusations of others in no better way than to proceed with counsel in those matters of consequence that occur in the congregation. We think it is also his duty to do this when something controversial or other important matters arise in the congregation, that he should first of all take counsel with his fellow ministers and then also with the congregation.

A leader should lead

It is our understanding that an elder or ordained minister does indeed have authority to make his presentation first about the things which happened, and may suggest a model of what he thinks to be best, and then he may present it to his fellow ministers and to the congregation to consider and turn it over to them to correct as much as they can from the Word of God.

However, a leader should not ‘lord over the flock’

He should not think that his presentation must be the only valid one and that no one should have anything to say against it, or that even though ten or twenty brethren oppose it, the minister’s word must be king, as Hans Anken in Holland said.⁴

Differences with the ministry should be discussed by the brotherhood

But if no one has a valid—we repeat, a valid—objection (and not something based on spite or ill will, as can easily happen) to the minister’s or elder’s initial presentation, then it should be confirmed by the consent of the congregation.

The brotherhood bears the responsibility of the decision

But if it should happen, as it easily could, that the general counsel does not turn out for the best, then the minister who made the initial presentation does not bear the sole responsibility; the entire congregation helps to bear the blame with him and the congregation then has no authority or right to put the blame entirely on him.

⁴ Hans Anken had just led a split in Holland after he purchased an old monastery to live in, and the brotherhood felt it was too ostentatious and worldly.

What to do if there are opposing views in the brotherhood:

Love is most important

If it should happen that the minister’s or elder’s initial presentation on some important matter was not generally understood to be the best and dissension then followed, and some supported the elder and his initial presentation while the opposing party thought they could not support it, then we think they should not argue about it to the point where love is lost.

The elders should not force their ideas

Nor should the minister think that the opposing party must bend to his understanding and that he would gladly like to rule over them contrary to their conscience, as Hans Anken did in Holland, which resulted in such great harm.

If the brotherhood can’t resolve the issue, get help

The elder and those who support his initial presentation, and the opposing party which feels that they cannot accept it, should come to an agreement and let the matter come to other elders and ministers in other congregations to examine and to discuss according to their best understanding ...

Accept the conclusion

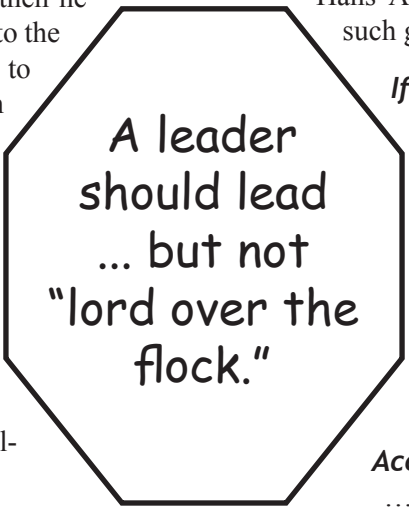
... and then both sides should be content to adapt themselves to it as far as possible so that it might promote the general peace from the elder’s side as well as on the other side.

Ammann’s cry to the elders

Oh, if only this could happen, which would be very necessary and good, that all elders and ministers would follow Christ’s example in all that is good, and especially in humble and scriptural obedience to God, and could give the people a good model, and that a domineering nature—which is very closely related to destructive pride—would be given no place.

As Peter says: Not as those who rule over the inheritance, rather become an example to the flock (1 Pe. 5). Also, if someone has made you a ruler, do not put on airs; but rather be as one among the people, says Sirach 32.

Also, the appointed kind of Israel should not lift his heart up above his brethren (De. 17:20). Also, the Savior said: You know that the worldly princes rule over the people, and the overlords act with authority. But it should



not be so among you. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the multitude (Mt. 20). From these words one cannot draw the meaning that freedom is granted a minister in the Lord's church to dominate ...

Respect for Elders

...but, on the other hand, neither should it be understood to mean that one has the freedom to treat an elder or minister poorly and unkindly, as can easily happen at times.

But one who puffs himself up and speaks more out of hostility than with a just reason ... let him remember Korah!

We are obligated and duty-bound to give help and support to faithful ministers and leaders of the church of the Lord, for they are a gift of God, and not allow them to be trampled on unjustly, accepting no complaint against them except from the mouths of two or three witnesses (1 Ti. 5).

We should love and respect them and give them appropriate honor and service, as the apostle Paul admonishes in this

regard: The elders who lead well are worthy of double honor and reward, especially those who labor among you and who lead you in the Lord, and who admonish you, that you hold them in even greater love because of their work, and are at peace with them (1 Th. 5).

Also, submit yourselves to them that rule over you, for they watch over your souls as one who must give account for them (He. 13).

But one who puffs himself up and speaks more out of hostility than with a just reason against a faithful minister of the Lord and leader of His congregation who speaks and acts in exemplary manner, and thinks that one may surely speak against [the minister] and not simply accept everything he says as valid—Korah with his mob indeed found out what kind of pleasure the Lord takes in such wrongful rebels and gainsayers (Nu. 16). Because disobedient Israel did not love the good prophets sent by God, but contradicted them and hated and persecuted them

unto death, God therefore punished Israel and allowed false prophets to come in great numbers.

Holy Scripture provides plenty of instruction on how leaders and followers are to conduct themselves toward each other. The Apostle says: The younger are subject to the older, and all are subject to one another in the fear of God, thereby showing humility (1 Pe. 5).

Keep to the "Old Paths" ...

We also consider it necessary and good that a minister strive to keep order by maintaining the old, traditional practices of the church, not doing much that is new and out of the ordinary, or breaking with the old. It is better that he continue with the teachings of the divine Word and to break down the old, carnal, sinful life of humans and to implant a new godly life.

... but discard and renew outdated standards

If, however, something that is useless and contrary to the Word of the Lord would be the practice in the congregation, it must of necessity be dropped, and in its place a better practice should be established in harmony with the Lord's Word. This we think should indeed be done, but no one should undertake to do it by himself without the knowledge and counsel of other ministers and elders. Tobit says: Always ask counsel of the wise (Tobit 4). Do nothing without counsel, and after the deed you will not regret it (Sirach 32).

Allow and respect differences between congregations

It is, of course, possible that one congregation has a practice not found in another, but only unimportant and minor things which are not in conflict with the Word of the Lord. Against such things one should not complain, but rather plead the cause of love and peace.

This is a small portion, presented in simplicity and brevity, of what we think is necessary and good for a minister and also for the congregation and which serves through Jesus Christ, Amen. Whoever also accepts this as good, and wants to help work to this end, may sign below if they so desire.

—Ulli Ammann

It is better ...

... that he continue with the teachings of the divine Word and to break down the old, carnal, sinful life of humans and to implant a new godly life.