

no one heard his message. He had chosen to leave the fold and now was considered deceived.

Elmo was unceremoniously stripped of his editorship of Family Life. He was not even allowed to honestly say good bye to his readers. Just a short statement saying he would no longer serve as editor or be writing for the magazine.

The little group forged ahead with their plans. Auctions were held, belongings sold, farms sold. Elmo continued his preaching duties right up to the last. He ordained his nephew, Peter Stoll, as Bishop to replace him when he left.

Sunday, September 30, was his last Sunday in Aylmer. Elmo preached the main sermon. It was a tense and sad affair, his last sermon as an Amish Bishop. On this day, there were no mellow lilting tones, no shimmering woven tapestries, only sparse and somber words. And tears. He solemnly thanked the community and the ministers for all they'd done over the years. But in true Elmo fashion, he also dramatically warned that unless the church in Aylmer changed directions, it would come to destruction.

The departure date arrived. Great clouds rolled in from the west and the heavens opened and poured forth driving torrents of sheeting rain. Elmo sent his family ahead in a van and stayed behind to load their final belongings on the large tractor trailer. The neighbors arrived to help with the loading. As they were finishing, Elmo suddenly disappeared into the house. The neighbors loaded the last few belongings and closed and locked the trailer doors. They stood there for a few minutes in the rain, waiting for Elmo to emerge from the house so they could say good-bye.

But he did not come out. After standing about forlornly for a few more minutes, the neighbors shrugged and departed for their homes. A short time later, some of them watched from inside their houses as the loaded tractor trailer crept slowly down the soft and muddy gravel road. Rain obscured the truck's windows and they caught no glimpse of the man sitting in the passenger's seat. The truck turned south toward Highway 3 and disappeared into the incessant downpour.

And thus Elmo Stoll departed from Aylmer, the community that had been his home for thirty-six years. The vineyard in which he had labored so tirelessly for so long. The people that he had led and shepherded for almost twenty years.

His face was set toward the south and the west. Toward the vision that burned in his heart and called him away. Toward a new flock, in fresh pastures, in an unfamiliar land. Toward Cookeville, Tennessee and the beginning of what would be the final chapter of his life.

# The Life of Elmo Stoll

by Ira Wagler

## The Shepherd at Dawn: The Early Years

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“Someone is responsible to lead and shepherd, and others are responsible to support and submit. Otherwise, there can be no godly order.”

—Elmo Stoll, “Community”

The late afternoon sunlight slanted through the yellow-framed windows of our house. Inside, Big Church was winding down. Bishop Pete Yoder, who had recently moved to Marshfield, MO, had returned to preside over the communion service that day. And to ordain a new minister to fill the slot vacated when he left.

The date was April 14, 1971. I was nine years old and had never before witnessed an ordination. A quiet pall hung in the air after the last song was sung. There was some bustling and shuffling as the ministers disappeared into my parents' bedroom. All church members then filed up to the door to place their votes. The preachers returned and set out the little black books. There were four or five.

Bishop Pete stood and announced the names of those in the lot. And slowly the called men rose and approached the table and chose their books. All except one. He remain-ed seated, stooped over and half hidden on the back bench where he sat, immobile and quiet. A tense minute or two passed. Still he sat. Perturbed, Bishop Pete cleared his throat.

“Those who are in the lot are required to come forward and take a book,” he said quietly, but firmly.

The young man straightened on the bench and rose to his feet. All eyes followed him as he walked to the front, his head bowed. Only one book remained; all the others had already been picked up by the other men in the lot. He picked it up and joined them on the bench.

Bishop Pete approached the ashen-faced men and began the brutally intense process of opening the books, one by one. None held the little slip of paper. Until he finally opened the young man’s book. And there it was.

The young man, quiet and somber until now, abruptly exploded into high, wracking sobs and burst into a great torrent of tears. “Huuuuu, Huuuuu,” he bawled. His shoulders shook, his whole body heaved. “Noooo, noooo, not me, not me,” he wailed. His high rolling sobs swept through the house in sonic waves.

We all watched, frozen. I had never seen a grown man weep like that before. It was a dramatic moment.

Bishop Pete did not long delay. The sobbing subsided slightly, the young man stood and Bishop Pete pronounced him a preacher for life. Then the young man sat on the bench and received awkward gestures of comfort from those around him.

The service was dismissed. We dispersed.

And thus Elmo Stoll was ordained.

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Elmo Stoll. The man. The leader. The orator. The writer. The intellectual. The fire-brand. The legend. In his time, probably the most famous and powerful Amishman in the world. Who, at the very apex of his fame and power, turned his back and walked away from it all. Elmo Stoll, whose name has evoked more responses, private and public, than any other on this blog.

He was born in Litchfield, Michigan on March 5, 1944. The son of Peter and Anna Stoll. Anna was my father’s older sister. They emerged from the hills of Daviess County, Indiana, where Peter had inherited the wild, strange Stoll blood from his father, Victor.

Of Elmo’s childhood I know little. Only the stories of my older siblings, who grew up with him. His family moved to Picketon, Ohio, where my parents lived for a few years. They then moved to the new settlement of

forefathers. And always, always, looked for guidance and strength from their natural leader, Elmo Stoll.

Having placed his hand to the plow, he cast no glances over his shoulders, but forged boldly ahead. He wrote, published and distributed a little booklet outlining his positions. It was entitled “Let Us Reason Together.” In it, he succinctly detailed the problems he had with certain positions of the Amish church, and the solutions as he saw them. How he would follow the truth, even if it cost him his editorship at Family Life, his office as Bishop, and his reputation and good name among the Amish churches.

In early September, 1990, Elmo Stoll and his small group purchased a 200 acre farm in Cookeville, Tennessee for \$130,000.00. They had scouted for land in several states and Canada, but settled on Cookeville because of its proximity to a similarly minded group already settled in Scottsville. The farm they purchased was pretty much bare; all their buildings would have to be erected.

And so the dark days and dark times forecast by Alvin Fisher came to pass. Gloom and despondence descended upon Aylmer. The remaining leaders, several of them closely related to Elmo, struggled to deal with the crisis. And the shame of the world learning of the defection of Aylmer’s most famous son.

The raw hubris that had long plagued the community began to chip away. But not entirely. It was deeply entrenched and almost impossible to uproot. It would cling to life for a few more years. Until the Great Light of Truth finally invaded the sinister hidden crevices in which it cowered, and cast it out. Along with a lot of other things.

The shock of the news of Elmo’s plans cannot be overstated. Eighteen years later, people still discuss it as if it happened yesterday. Those involved on both sides remember it vividly. Details of minutiae would fill several volumes.

The news spread like a pestilent cloud. It caused an explosion of speculation and gossip in all the Amish world. Those in the more conservative communities clucked and shook their heads. See how it goes when one goes about reading and writing too much. You get a big head and lose your mind. Think you know it all. Better to stick with reading just the Bible and The Budget. They always were suspicious anyway of Aylmer and its superior attitudes. The news confirmed all they already knew. The progressive Amish groups also reacted virulently. Elmo was clearly off his rocker.

Whatever valid points he raised, and there were some, were lost in the turbulence. Other than the few in his group, almost no one listened and

Amish, but who were hampered by the language barriers. Some claim that his sons were not content in Aylmer, and Elmo was afraid he would lose them. So he conformed his thinking to theirs. And while I couldn't double-verify this particular fact, it does seem plausible. He wouldn't have been the first father to do such a thing. Or the last.

When and to whom he first unveiled his "heretical" thoughts remains obscured. His brothers, I suppose, two of whom were also in the ministry in Aylmer at the time. What is true is that in late summer and fall of 1989, the Aylmer ministers held a series of private meetings in strictest secrecy. In November of that year, all church members from Aylmer's three districts were summoned together one weekday afternoon. The entire meeting consisted of Elmo getting up and making confession after confession of his wrong and sinful thinking. Without really defining what that thinking was. He was formally forgiven, and people returned to their daily lives, utterly bewildered as to what had just happened.

And so things stood until the following June. A few quiet rumors persisted, whispered furtively from person to person. Until minister Alvin Fisher from Somerset, PA, stood before them and delivered his weeping non-sermon. Alvin had also heard the rumors, and to his credit, decided to travel to Aylmer and check their source for himself. That night, he stayed at Elmo's house, and the two of them sat up all night, discussing the issues that troubled Elmo's heart. And while I have heard secondhand some of the things that were supposedly said that night, I am not sufficiently convinced of their accuracy to disclose them.

The next day, Alvin Fisher stood before the church and wept. And from that day, the flood gates were swept open, never to be closed again. Elmo Stoll shocked the Aylmer community and the Amish world to its core.

He formally announced that he and his family, along with others, were moving to found a new settlement. Not just any settlement, but a commune, where all material belongings will be shared. A little socialistic haven for weary seekers. They would not be Amish, or associate with the Amish. They would be known simply as The Christain Community. This was a staggering, unprecedented development.

The Aylmer community reacted as one would expect. The leadership, now shorn of its own leader, clamped down hard on Elmo and any others who were considering the move. Elmo and his little flock of followers were ostracized within the community. Those not already attached to him were strenuously warned against doing so. A palpable tension pulsed through the settlement.

For the little group, these were difficult days. They met semi secretively. Made their plans. Felt persecuted, like their Anabaptist

Aylmer, Ontario in the early 1950s, when Elmo would have been around ten years old.

The Stolls in Aylmer were hard core, but not typical, Amish. They believed in witnessing and missions. In reaching out to the lost and less fortunate in mainstream society.

They were bright, personable brainy people, but mildly unhinged, by orthodox Amish standards. Slightly unstable, now pursuing this theory, now immersed in that. Whatever their hands found to do, they did with all their might.

Elmo developed into a natural young leader among his peers. He was highly intelligent, a deep thinker.

His teenage years were like any other's, wracked with the emotional turbulence so common at that age. At sixteen he began running with the youth, attending the singings and other youth events.

That year, with his peers, he took instruction classes for baptism to join the Aylmer Amish church. He had some unorthodox ideas and was not shy in expressing them. This caused problems.

On the day before the class was to be baptized, all the applicants were scheduled to meet at our home on a Saturday afternoon. For final preparation and admonition. All were assembled, except Elmo had not yet arrived. Then an open buggy clattered into the drive. Beside his father Peter Stoll sat Elmo, his hair flying in the wind. He was not wearing a hat. He had decided it was unnecessary.

This, of course, was unacceptable to the authorities. Wearing a hat while outdoors was the long accepted standard of any respectable Amish church. Elmo unilaterally decided to rebel against this standard. And he had reasons. Show him the Scripture where a hat is mandated. Of course, no one could.

Bishop Pete and the preachers were deeply grieved. They admonished Elmo, who stood there boldly before them all and disputed with them. The baptismal service was postponed until Elmo could be convinced it might be in his best interest to back down. Eventually he did, and some weeks later he was baptized with the others in his group.

The young lion had unsheathed his claws. He'd been forced to back down. This time.

A number of the Aylmer youth were concerned for souls, which was quite atypical for Amish youth. These young people would go to nearby towns and cities and pass out religious tracts. More than once, young Elmo the evangelist preached on the street corners in nearby towns. I never

heard that they garnered a single convert. But the Word, we are promised, does not return void. So who knows? Perhaps he influenced someone to search further. At the very least, he honed his skills for later years.

(From the recesses of my memory, I recall stories of how these youth would get together evenings and wrap the tracts in gum wrappers. When driving about on their buggies they would throw these pieces of “gum” onto driveways of the houses they passed. In theory, the homeowner would pick up what he thought was a free piece of gum, and presto, unwrap a religious tract. I’m sure that went down well. But the story may be pure hearsay, or my memory might be flawed. But I didn’t just dream it up.)

When my father and Joseph Stoll, Elmo’s older brother, launched Pathway Publishers and later Family Life, Elmo came aboard as a writer. He wrote short stories and a monthly column, Views and Values. He wrote in a folksy flowing conversational prose, connecting with his readers.

He and David Luthy lived together as bachelors in a small place east of us they bought from Nicky Stoltzfus and Joe Eicher, when they moved out of Aylmer in 1969. David Luthy began his long distinguished career as one of the most eminent, influential Amish historians in the world, publishing his research regularly in Family Life.

On June 4, 1970, Elmo married Elizabeth Miller, a quiet unassuming woman, the daughter of Saul and Sarah Miller. They settled on the LeRoy Marner farm in the center of the community. They were married for less than a year when Elmo was ordained.

I remember Elmo as tall (He was of medium height; I was just a little kid.), wiry, balding, with brownish hair and golden beard. Easy to talk to. A ready listener. He always flashed a warm smile and gazed about with piercing, piercing eyes. He could look right into the core of your soul and see you as you really were. Or so it felt.

After his ordination, it did not take him long to exult and flourish in his newfound power. He relished his leadership role. And took to it naturally, like a hound to the hunt. Most people were drawn to the sheer magnetic force of his charismatic personality. Like moths to the flame.

He soon took a sledgehammer to the established Aylmer church rules. Within weeks, it was suddenly decreed that all eyeglasses must be wirerimmed or rimless. No more plastic frames, too worldly.

And that was just the beginning.

The scorned. The unloved. Not just by Elmo, but by certain other members of the leadership. These people were second class, the ones who never had a voice.

I listened to their tentative hesitant voices, probably as few before ever have. And heard them. Read their letters. And absorbed their words. It soon became clear to me that there are a number of such people out there today who harbor deep wounds from those times. The passage of the years has scabbed over the wounds so they no longer bleed. But under the right circumstances, the pent-up emotions release and come pouring forth in torrents.

My heart goes out to these people.

Some who participated in inflicting those wounds still live in Aylmer. And in at least one nearby settlement. In leadership positions. They know who they are. And they know who they wounded.

They can still do the right thing.

I last heard Elmo Stoll preach at the wedding of Bert Farmwald and Linda Wagler (my cousin). In Shipshewana, Indiana around 1987. Elmo conducted the marriage ceremony. It’s not the last time I saw him, just the last time I heard him preach. I can still remember some of the things he said that day.

As the 1980s decade approached its end, Elmo Stoll was at the very peak of his power and influence. As close to empire as any Amishman will ever achieve. At age 46, he was a Bishop. Leader. Editor and writer. With a national audience. He was known in every Amish community in North America, with the possible exception of some isolated Swartzentruber settlements. And maybe a few places like Big Valley in PA. He was at the top. The most powerful and well-known Amishman in the world. And, being human, he quite likely was quite aware of that fact.

But here, at the peak of the mountain where he stood alone, something was lacking inside. In his heart, he was unsatisfied and unhappy. The young man who had shown up hatless at his pre-baptismal meeting still stirred in him. The Amish church, he felt, was too materialistic, too focused on wealth. Too restrictive, too culturally dormant, not evangelical enough. Not open enough to those from the outside who were interested in the plain lifestyle and pure Anabaptist faith. Despite his efforts in writing and preaching, he saw little evidence of the changes he had expected.

And there were other influences. Some say this and some say that. That his heart was drawn to isolated communities like Gorrie. And that he had a burden for the outside seekers who desperately wanted to join the

As Bishop, he could be and often was a harsh disciplinarian. Once, a group of Aylmer young people visited the community of Mio, Michigan. While there, several of the youth boys rode around on bicycles. Unfortunately, one of the young men fell off his bike and broke a bone (possibly his collar bone). So their sin was found out.

The fact that they were riding bicycles caused a huge and furious uproar back home in Aylmer. Unfathomable and senseless to us who view the incident in retrospect over the years. But true. Riding a bicycle was a SIN. The young man who broke a bone was not a church member, but others in the group were. All who were members were required by Elmo to make a public confession in church. They did. The yoke he inflicted was heavy.

Elmo insisted on another strict and strange and far-reaching policy. Over the years, some members of the Aylmer church moved away to other Amish communities, perhaps a bit more progressive. Some of these former Aylmer members, years later, left their then current Amish church and joined a Beachy or Mennonite church that allowed cars. The standard method among Amish churches was to allow the church the member actually left to deal with it. And decide whether or not to excommunicate.

This did not fly with Elmo. He insisted that anyone who ever was a member of the Aylmer church who ever left the Amish, anywhere, anytime, was still under his jurisdiction. I can't verify that he actually did so, but he threatened to excommunicate people he hadn't seen in years, and barely knew. Formally hand them over to Satan. Just because they had once been members in Aylmer. The yoke he inflicted was heavy.

After posting my first "Elmo blog," I heard from many people who knew him and lived under all stages of his leadership. Some I knew. Some I didn't. But they all felt compelled to join the conversation, for which I'm grateful. They contacted me through letters, emails and on the phone. I heard it all.

From those who loved him. And from those whose memories of him bring only pain.

Some told me of how, after the strident early years, he mellowed and developed open relationships with the young people in the community. How he gained their trust. How they respected and liked him, and looked up to him, even the ones who disagreed with him, because they knew he really cared for them. How easy he was to approach and talk to. How sympathetic he was to the struggles that others endured. How they listen-ed, mesmerized, to the stories he told.

But I heard, too, from the least among them. The ones who could never do anything right. The ones who were openly persecuted and harassed.

The God he served was a furious, frowning God, who just might possibly be placated if only increasingly demanding and difficult sacrifices were made. In the end, it would all depend on how hard you had tried. How willingly you bore your cross. On the things you had done. And to what degree you had rejected the "world."

And so he set out on a mad quest, in earnest pursuit of a plainer lifestyle. Paint the inside of your buggies black, wear a broader brimmed hat, with the brim turned down all around, no cowboy wannabes. Make sure the women's head veils covered their ears, and their dresses practically swept the floor. Girls and boys could no longer play volleyball together. No ball playing at all on Sundays. Carpenter crews could no longer travel to jobs in motor vehicles, but had to drive a horse and buggy, thus limiting their range. Anyone traveling to another community overnight could not hire a taxi driver for transportation, but had to travel by bus or train, unless "business" was involved.

All to satisfy one man's vision, and to appease an impersonal, imperial God who demanded abject obedience and primitive simplicity.

But it was never enough.

A patient populace bore with him, and indulged his whims. But the youth increasingly seethed as the weighted yoke of his ideas and demands choked the life from their few precious rights and fragile freedoms.

It did not take him long to find his stride as a preacher, either. And oh, the man could preach. I've heard it said that anyone who ever heard Elmo Stoll preach in his heyday would remember some aspect of that sermon for the rest of his life. This, I think, is true. I know it is for me.

He always finished his sermons in due time. The children did not get restless when he preached.

I can still see and hear him, pre-1976, when we lived in Aylmer, on a Sunday morning, rising slowly to take the floor. Somber, head bowed, hands clasped at his chest. Opening chattily, as if he were talking directly to you and you alone. Usually some small anecdote of something he'd seen or heard, or some conversation he'd had with someone, followed by a Bible verse. And from that small building block the man would weave and thread and stitch, in fantastic vivid detail, in mellow lilting tones, an elaborate yet meaningful tapestry of a lesson to be gleaned and learned and applied. All delivered extemporaneously, with no podium and no notes.

And we all sat there quietly, even those of us who half despised the man, and listened and drank it in, mesmerized. And in those brief fleeting moments, despite ourselves, despite the deep flaws we knew he

had, despite his heavy handed efforts to single handedly mold the church into a model of perfection, we liked and respected him because we realized that what we'd just heard was something rare and fine and great and beautifully told.

Even those most stridently opposed to his agenda, among whom I count myself as a minor figure, rarely questioned his sincerity. His methods were another matter.

He knew what he knew without the slightest hint of doubt or hesitation. And in those heady early years, he did not much care who might disagree with him. Whoever did that was wrong. Period. He did not brook resistance or foolish chatter. Any hint of opposition was considered rebellion. And rebellion was a sin.

He freely expressed his opinions when and where he felt they might be needed. Once, right in the middle of a sermon, he paused, and asked whoever might be chewing gum to dispose of it. He felt chewing gum in church was disrespectful and wrong. A sin. He then resumed his sermon. I never was sure, but I thought my brother Steve may have been the culprit. Or one of them.

One Sunday, church was at my uncle Abner Wagler's home. I was sitting on a bench with my friends Hank Wagler and Raymond Miller. Right in front of the preachers. Elmo delivered the main sermon that day. We boys were restless and fidgety and perhaps did not give our full attention to his words. Again, right in the middle of the sermon, he stopped and directly addressed us. Told us to stop fidgeting and behave ourselves and quiet down. We froze in our seats. And fumed silently, chalking up one more black mark against him.

But he recognized and lauded the good things, too, the little things that might easily have been beneath his wont to notice. One Sunday, my friends and I approached the dinner table for the noon meal. We were hungry and this was already the second seating. The table was filling up. A quick count told me that I would be the last one seated. The ones behind me would have to wait until the next seating, a good twenty-five minutes. I suddenly realized that my friend Luke, a year older than me, was behind me. I had somehow stepped ahead of him, violating the hierarchical "age rule" of our social setting. As I approached the last seat on the bench, I stopped and motioned Luke ahead of me. He swooped into the seat. I turned around and walked outside with a herd of unlucky boys to wait for the next table.

Unbeknownst to me, Elmo had witnessed this small scene unfolding and was touched. He told my father later that afternoon what he had seen, and praised me.

This state of raw hubris simply could not stand. The day of reckoning approached. In the distant horizon like a tiny cloud the size of a man's fist.

Sometime around the late 1970s/early 1980s, four young men, two of whom had joined the church, finally could not take it anymore and rebelled. (That's the simplistic version. The issues, as usual, were more complicated.) I grew up with these guys. They were my friends. They left the Amish, but stayed in the area. The Aylmer church reacted as one would expect, by cutting off any attempts at effective communication and lowering the boom on the young men with the full force of its awesome might.

The official position was that the young men were bad to the bone. Rebellious. They must be broken of their own strong will. And submit unconditionally. The two who were members, of course, were summarily excommunicated. All four of the young men were ostracized and scorned. Most eventually left the area.

Despite its flaws, the Aylmer community prospered and grew, and in 1984, two districts were formed from the one. Now another Bishop was needed. The ordination was held on October 10th. Elmo Stoll and Simon Wagler were in the lot. This time it fell on Elmo Stoll. He had now reached the office in which he would rise to the apex of his power and influence.

He was already widely known throughout the Amish world as a writer and a preacher. So it did not take long for other communities to request his assistance whenever outside Bishops, or "fremda Mann," were needed to settle church or personality disputes. He traveled widely and soon gained quite a reputation as a man who gave wise and Godly counsel.

As the years passed, Elmo mellowed a bit from his earlier habits of always demanding his way, in his time frame, usually right now. But he never lost them entirely. And he never quite lost his habit of constantly stirring about, always pursuing some issue, small or large, to fuss about and fret over. At least not while in Aylmer.

At one point, he decided that the motor powered lawn mowers were too worldly. Too handy. He labeled them "flying boats" and began his usual campaign strategy to ban them. But this time his message did not resonate. Motor powered lawn mowers had been allowed in Aylmer since its inception. People were unwilling to give them up. And when Elmo tried to stir up public support to ban them, he was simply ignored. This defeat was highly unusual.

Eventually he saw his wishes would not come to pass. So he remarked that if everyone else has the flying boats, then he will get one too. And he did.

The night before, Alvin Fisher had stayed at the house of his friend, Elmo Stoll. The two of them had sat up and talked all night, in a sleepless vigil.

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After October, 1976, when my family moved from Aylmer to Bloomfield IA, Elmo Stoll stepped into the spot vacated by my father and became the editor of Family Life. Under his guidance, the magazine continued to prosper and expand its audience. His articles and editorials were among the few actually worth reading each month.

He was a man with a vision. On a mission. To convince the Amish world to repent of its old evil ways and renew itself on a more spiritual path. He used all the tools in his arsenal and all his powers of persuasion. He boldly wrote and spoke and preached his conscience, regardless of whose toes got crushed. And in the pursuance of his vision, he persisted in molding the Aylmer church into the image of what he thought it should be.

A few years after he was ordained, Aylmer, which then consisted of only one district, ordained a Bishop to replace Pete Yoder, who had moved to Marshfield, MO. Elmo and Jake Eicher were the only two in the lot. It fell on Jake.

Jake was a kindly, good-hearted man. My favorite preacher as a child. In a normal setting, he would have fulfilled his leadership duties with little difficulty. But this was not a normal setting. And Jake simply could not withstand the powerful combined force of Elmo's charismatic personality and leadership skills. Before long, Elmo led, and Jake followed. A figurehead leader only. After Elmo's brother Stephen Stoll, a deacon, moved back to Aylmer from Honduras and resumed his deaconly duties, the two of them simply overwhelmed any leadership opposition. Things went the way they dictated. Backwards, mostly.

While I realize this fact may be difficult for some to face and absorb, it is simply the truth.

As I mentioned before, the Aylmer church at this time thought more highly of itself than it ought. As the shining light for other communities to emulate, it madly plunged about this way and that, searching for ever increasing, and ever more difficult, ways to please that furious frowning God who could never be placated. Or ways the leaders thought would please God. There was no stability. What was OK today was banned tomorrow. What was pleasing to God today suddenly was pronounced unacceptable and would draw His wrath.

"I remember exactly how hungry boys are at that age," he told my father.

My father later told me what Elmo had said. And it felt good to know that he had seen and acknowledged my small unselfish act.

He pestered the youth (defined as any single person above 16 years old). Once, the youth had planned to rent a bus and go visit the Detroit zoo for the day. Together as a group. Just the young unmarrieds. The night before they went, Elmo sent word that he and his wife would go along as well. He was told the bus was full. No problem. They would set chairs in the aisle of the bus.

And so they went along. After arriving at the zoo, all the youth piled out eagerly, ready to head out for a fun day at the zoo. Unfortunately, most of them neglected to put on their hats and bonnets. Elmo, the man who showed up at his pre-baptismal meeting sans hat, sternly called them all back to the bus. And told the boys they must wear their hats. And the girls their bonnets. They obeyed, seething. What they had suspected was confirmed; he went along only to make sure everyone behaved as he felt they should.

He was not popular with the youth. And yet he reached out to them. He idealistically believed that there should be no generational gap, that teenagers should hang out comfortably with their bearded elders. Socialize. Have things in common. Share hopes and dreams. As if such a concept would have a prayer of success. But he tried.

At one point, he invited the youth boys to his house for weekly readings, and together they worked their way through Corrie Ten Boom's "The Hiding Place." Such an activity was a startling new concept to the group. I imagine they attended somewhat sullenly and did not much participate in the discussion. But they went. I was too young, but my older brothers who attended still speak of those times. They may even still have the very copy of the book they used.

Those were turbulent times. He was a busy, busy man. Writing, preaching, leading, admonishing, improving. Always something going wrong, someone going astray, a brother who needed admonition, church rules that needed tweaking, more stringent guidelines to be implemented.

And here, I think, it should be mentioned that Elmo's wife Elizabeth, or Lisbet, as she was known, exercised a calming influence over him that tamed his passionate, erratic nature, calmed the savage beast within that would have hurt a lot more people, a lot more deeply, absent her gentle, persuasive influence. Lisbet was always content in the background, always smiling and always kind.

She bore his sons and quietly mothered them while her husband rushed about with all the answers, pouring a lot of heavy concrete, writing and preaching with great authority on the proper methods of discipline and correction in raising children.

In the early to mid 1970s, the Aylmer community expanded rapidly in fame and influence. Became widely known through its publications of Family Life and several lesser periodicals. That golden age saw probably the greatest collaboration of visionary Amish intellectuals ever assembled. They sailed boldly through uncharted waters. What they were doing had never been done before. My father, Joseph Stoll (who lived in Honduras, but continued his written contributions). David Luthy. And of course, Elmo Stoll, whose meteoric rise as a preacher and writer accelerated each year, as he traveled about and preached in many distant settlements.

From the outside, Aylmer was viewed in awe by thousands upon thousands of admiring sheep as the great shining city on a hill. From the inside, it was, well, something less. Striving always to stand tall as an example to lesser communities that allowed such wickedness as tobacco growing, smoking, bed courtship and other horrors, the Aylmer leaders came to believe their own polished rhetoric of the perfect church. And how it could be attained. They felt Aylmer was about as close to perfect as one could get. Never satisfied, they plunged about this way and that, in a chronic state of mad instability, inflicting ever-increasing burdens on their groaning flock.

This state of raw hubris could not stand. In due time, it would crumple to bitter ashes.

In October, 1976, when I was fifteen, my family moved from Aylmer to Bloomfield, Iowa. Although his heart never really left Aylmer, my father realized that none of his younger sons would stay in the faith unless he moved from that place (most eventually left anyway). The Aylmer leaders publicly supported him, but privately they must have wondered why David Wagler could not control his wild, unruly sons.

Our departure date arrived. As the loaded tractor trailers slowly lumbered down the dusty gravel road toward the highway, Elmo Stoll paused and looked out across the fields from his Pathway Publishers office window. The tractor trailers turned and headed toward Highway 3 and disappeared behind the woods that bordered the southern edge of the farm that had been the only home I'd ever known.

The next Sunday in his sermon, Elmo described in dramatic detail how he stood there and watched us leave, how the flood of memories flowed in unbidden and the tears suddenly welled in his eyes and trickled in unchecked rivulets down his cheeks. The shepherd wept. For himself. And for us.

## The Shepherd at Noon: Empire & Exodus

Source of this article: <http://www.irawagler.com/?p=546>

Note: This post consists of certain facts, sifted from a wide variety of sources and interpreted from my perspective. From certain events that unfolded more than eighteen years ago, events now shrouded by the fog of years. My opinions, observations and conclusions are my own, and may differ from the reader's.

“Let us reason together.”

—Elmo Stoll

It was a Friday afternoon. Special church services were being held in honor of a visiting minister. He had lived in the area for a few years, then moved away. After moving, he had been ordained. The congregation now sat expectantly as the people waited to hear from this former lay brother who would stand before them and preach.

After a short opening sermon by a home preacher, and the reading of Scripture, the visiting minister stood to take the floor.

Head bowed, he fumbled briefly with his opening statements. He was glad to return to the area, even with his increased responsibilities. It had been good, he said, to visit with his old neighbors and friends. To visit his old home area. The congregation settled in.

But then a strange thing happened. The visiting minister could not preach. Instead, he wept and wept. At times almost uncontrollably. He tugged at the white handkerchief in his pocket and wiped his eyes. It was soon soaked with tears.

“Oh, there is a dark cloud on the horizon, and it is coming right into this community,” he cried. “You are going to experience some dark, dark times.”

He seemed, for a moment, to seize control of himself. He blew his nose and wiped the tears away again. Tried to flow into the natural course of his sermon.

But the tears would not stop. Again and again, like a biblical prophet of doom, he cried out, warning of dark clouds and dark times on the horizon. The congregation stirred, restless. What did the preacher see? What was he talking about? What dark times was he describing?

The congregation was assembled in Aylmer, Ontario, in June, 1990. The visiting minister was Alvin Fisher of Somerset, PA.