

Amish 'reality' show misleads, experts say: "More distortion than education"

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If you were among the 5.4 million viewers who made the premiere of *Amish in the City* a smashing success, supporters of the widely misunderstood Christian group want you to know that the show does not constitute educational programming.

"This is entertainment and not a PBS documentary," said Amish scholar David Weaver-Zercher. *Amish in the City*, UPN's latest reality TV entry, first aired July 28 and was the evening's second-highest-rated show nationally and the top show in major markets such as New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

The show follows five people in their late teens or early 20s who grew up in Amish homes but have been set up in a Hollywood house with six non-Amish young people. The Amish are in *rumspringa*, a traditional time for contemplating whether to join the church. During that time, the young people, because they are not yet bound by church teaching, often drive cars, dress in "worldly" fashions and party.

Controversy has surrounded *Amish in the City* since plans for it were announced earlier this year, as critics believed it would be exploitative. The first episode—titled "This Is My First Time on an Escalator"—did little to mitigate concerns.

While it is conceivable that Mose, the Amish youth taking the escalator ride, had never been on a moving staircase before, his claim has prompted some head-scratching. Speaking of the youth and young adults in his community, Leroy Hochstetler, an Amish minister near Nappanee, Indiana, asked rhetorically, "How many of these kids haven't been in a mall and been on an elevator or escalator?"

The show noted other firsts for the five Amish, such as first sauna, parking meter, sushi and airplane ride. Such an approach casts the participants as emerging from "a cultural medieval cave somewhere," said sociologist Donald B. Kraybill, author of

a number of books on the Amish and a professor at Elizabethtown (Pennsylvania) College. Weaver-Zercher, religion professor at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, described the show as seeking to depict people who “shed their weirdness and become cool.”

As a result, the Amish are stereotyped as backward people who dress funny and don't use modern conveniences, when in fact many of them use telephones, computers and sophisticated manufacturing equipment powered by generators. “My concern is that [the show] will breed more distortion than education,” Kraybill said.

While tackling the superficialities, the premiere dealt poorly with issues of belief and practice, said Diane Zimmerman Umble, who teaches communication at Millersville (Pennsylvania) University. She cited Mose's experience after his first visit to a beach. He goes too far into the ocean and has to be rescued. The prospect of drowning strikes fear into him, as he has been led to believe that those outside the Amish church are doomed to hell. That night, a sleepless Mose reads his German-language Bible and prays, his spiritual difficulties recorded by the cameras.

“I'm sad because I think we really abuse another faith when we treat their search for commitment as entertainment,” said Umble, who with Weaver-Zercher is editing a book on the Amish and the media.

Commenting about the show, Weaver-Zercher said: “You don't get a meaningful portrait of what it's like to be Amish.” He lamented the overly simplistic “cultural chasm” the show creates. The Amish participants' housemates include a “party girl” fashion stylist, a gay “club promoter” and a vegan who argues that cows are extraterrestrial beings.

But those striking contrasts might have made the Amish look better rather than worse. The Whitesburg, Kentucky-based Center for Rural Strategies, which spearheaded a campaign to keep the show off the air, received some 60 e-mails the morning after the show's first episode aired. “They tended to agree . . . that the kids of Amish heritage were the smarter, more likable ones,” said Vice President Marty Newell.

While plenty of people watched the first show, some, like Ross Miller, refused to watch as a protest. “It exploits the Amish way of life. They are trying to sensationalize, get ratings,” said Miller, pastor of Walnut Creek Mennonite Church in eastern Ohio, which has the nation's largest concentration of Amish. Miller's

congregation includes members who formerly were Amish. Of course, most Amish didn't see *Amish in the City* either. "We don't like it, that's for sure," Hochstetler said. "But you can't do anything about it. . . . The media and show people, they do what they want to do." -*Rich Preheim, Religion News Service*