

A History of the Congregation of the First United Methodist Church

I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord.
Psalm 122:1

Mechanicsburg, PA



Union Church—1825

The Church Beautiful

Rev. C. Guy Stambach, 1936

This beautiful building as it now stands is not merely a great monument to the glory of God and the faith of devout people; it is also a place where the soul finds God, and an instrument of conquest of the world for Christ. Brick, steel, and paint are only silent, lifeless, material things, but this plant is more: it is our Church home. It needs to be invested with the home atmosphere where kindred spirits meet and hearts are unified in the love and fellowship of the Christian religion. The beauty of the temple is cold until touched and warmed by the fires of Christian fellowship. The final touch of beauty is spiritual – that the artist and artisan could not give. It will require years to complete this final touch – years of mutual love and sacrificial service by all who meet here.

Sources

Most of the information for this report was drawn from a variety of church histories prepared by members for church directories and special brochures. Material was also gathered from the extensive files of Dr. Richard Brandt, long-time church historian.

*Compiled by Thomas O. Mullikin, Ed.D.
April, 2008*

The United Brethren Church

In 1767, William Otterbein, a German Reformed minister, shared a “Great Meeting” with Martin Boehm, a Mennonite bishop. Boehm told his story of becoming a Christian and a minister. It deeply moved Otterbein, who left his seat, embraced Boehm, and said loud enough for everyone to hear, “Wir sind bruder,” which is German for *we are brethren*. This meeting took place in Isaac Long’s barn, north of Lancaster. In 1789 Otterbein presided over a meeting of ministers who shared his beliefs at the Second German Reformed Church in Baltimore. As this group grew, with ministers who had been associated with the German Reformed, Lutherans and Mennonites, a conference was held in Frederick, Maryland on September 25, 1800. This date is considered the founding date of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. William Otterbein and Martin Boehm were elected bishops of this newly formed denomination.

The Evangelical Association

In 1803, Jacob Albright established the Evangelical Association, a denomination that held beliefs similar to the United Brethren. The Evangelical Association was also ministering to German-speaking immigrants who had settled in the Cumberland Valley.

John Wesley’s Methodists

In 1783, John Wesley sent Dr. Thomas Coke to America to ordain Bishop Frances Asbury at the Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore. The Methodist Church grew throughout the region. The United Brethren, the Evangelicals, and the Methodists, all believed in the saving grace of God’s love. Salvation came to the individual who was aware of God’s grace and

forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus Christ. The Methodists served English-speaking congregations, while the United Brethren and Evangelicals ministered to German-speaking people. The United Brethren and the Methodist ministers devised one of the truly effective adaptations to frontier life, the **circuit rider**. Instead of being tied to a single church, a minister would ride hundreds of miles each month in his circuit to visit remote farms. If there were neighbors, he would have an “appointment to preach.” These circuit riders would comfort, counsel, marry young couples, baptize children and bury the dead.

In the Beginning

First United Methodist Church congregation has its roots in the Shopp's United Brethren Church of Shiremanstown, PA. Shopp's Church was a “station” for the United Brethren Church in Cumberland County, serving various congregations throughout the region, using circuit riding preachers. The United Brethren originally met in John Shopp's home. Shopp's church was built in 1827 on the farm of John Shopp, just east of the town of Shiremanstown. Shopp's Church was ideal for the development of the United Brethren in Christ sect because of the large number of German-speaking families who had settled the area. There were few Lutheran, Reformed and Mennonite preachers west of the Susquehanna River. Prior to the building of Shopp's Church, itinerant ministers Martin Boehm, Christian Newcomer, William Otterbein, George Geeting, John Hershey, Martin Crider and Jacob Erb visited the farms of these settlers to provide services. Many of these ministers also preached at Peace Church, in Hampden Township.

Shopp's Station served Shiremanstown, New Cumberland, West Fairview, and Yocumtown. This congregation today is the Shiremanstown United Methodist Church. The original chapel was dismantled when the congregation moved into the town of Shiremanstown. However, the original burial ground can be seen on Simpson Ferry Road, next to Trinity High School.

Jacob Coover, Founding Father

At the invitation of Mr. Jacob Coover in 1848, the Rev. Jacob S. Kissler, United Brethren pastor of Shopp's Station, was invited to preach in the old Union Church on the north side of East Main Street in Mechanicsburg. Built in 1825, Union Church was not affiliated with any one denomination, but served as a meeting place for a variety of local congregations that did not maintain a house of worship.

Jacob Coover of Mechanicsburg had attended a number of United Brethren services conducted by Rev. Kissler at Shiremanstown. It was this association that inspired Mr. Coover to invite Rev. Kissler to preach in Mechanicsburg.

Rev. Daniel Eberley, in his written notes, describes Jacob Coover as follows:

At this time Father Jacob Coover was the chief member of the United Brethren Church in that town (Mechanicsburg). He was a splendid man physically, well proportioned, pleasing address, with pleasant open countenance, and a fluent speaker. He was regarded as one of the most conscientious, pious and honorable men in the county. He is the man that had our ministers come to Mechanicsburg and open up the work there. Of him I have the most pleasant recollections. The words of encouragement which he gave me in the first year of my ministry I can never forget. His presence in church was an inspiration to the minister, and the members felt good to see him. Such a man gives character to

church work, especially at its inception. His life and work stand as “a monument of praise to God.”

Rev. Eberley also recorded a meeting between Rev. Jacob Erb and Jacob Coover.

On a certain evening, when returning from prayer meeting, young Erb entered into a controversy with great zeal on this subject (withdrawing inactive memberships) with Jacob Coover, a most excellent Christian gentleman, who was very reluctant to sever the bonds of his church union. Mr. Coover said: “If I have a light to guide a company over a dangerous road on a dark night, am I justified in taking that light away from them?” To this Mr. Erb responded: “If your company be composed of persons who appreciate the light, it would be very wrong to remove it; but if the company be constituted of persons who, without discretion, are wielding bludgeons right and left, liable at any moment to extinguish your light and placing yourself in the dark with them, better get out.” And Mr. Coover, not long afterwards, did get out. For many years he was a resident of Mechanicsburg, the first member of our Church in that town, around whom others gathered and a society formed in the old Union Church, which with years has grown into the present large congregation.”¹

Union Church 1850-1857

Soon after a number of services were held at Union Church, a class was formed in 1850 and recognized as a regular appointment connected with Shopp’s Station. This first class consisted of Jacob Coover, John Lininger, John Schwartz, John Singiser, Susan Yeager, Sarah Frankenberger and Rebecca Frankenberger. In the years that followed, services were conducted by various Circuit Rider preachers from Shopp’s Station.

The church numbers grew slowly. Revivals were held regularly, but, with no church building, many of the converts joined other

established churches. In 1854, under the pastorate of Rev. Samuel Enterline, a great revival was held. A spiritual awakening swept the town and community and the church membership increased. The need for a permanent house of worship was evident.

Locust Street Church 1857 - 1911

Under the pastorate of Rev. John Dickson a lot was purchased in 1857 on the northwest corner of Arch and Locust streets. A two story frame church building was erected at a cost of \$3,400. This building was erected under the direction of the board of trustees: Jacob Coover, L. F. Eberly, C. Keim, H. Snavely and Solomon Markley. The church membership, numbering 30 worshipers at this time, soon increased.

Once a house of worship was built, the next step was the organization of a Sunday Church School. Mrs.

Catherine Houck and Mrs. Elizabeth Rupp were appointed a committee to determine how many scholars could be secured. As a



¹ Eberly, Daniel (1911). *Landmark history of the united brethren church*. Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House.

result of their canvass, they reported 70 possible members. The Sunday School was organized with Solomon Markley as the first superintendent.

At the annual conference of the United Brethren in Christ church, held in Greencastle, PA, in 1863, Mechanicsburg was made a Station and the Rev. W. B. Raber was appointed pastor.

Membership at that time was 118. The church continued to grow and it became evident that again a new building was necessary. The Mechanicsburg Station also served the congregations in Shepherdstown (now Shepherdstown United Methodist) and Monroe Church in Churchtown (later disbanded). During the pastorate of Rev. S. A. Mowers, the frame church was torn down and a new two story brick church was erected on the same site in 1871. The building was dedicated in 1872 and, in 1889, the recess was added and the church was slightly remodeled. That church building is still standing on Locust St. It should be noted that the total church budget for 1878 was \$850. A short distance from the church, at No. 20 E. Locust St., stood a brick parsonage, a gift of L. B. Eberly. The house is no longer there.

The Mechanicsburg church, known as the First United Brethren in Christ Church, continued to grow and prosper both spiritually and in membership. Conference minutes of 1885 reported 214 members, 275 on the Sunday School membership rolls plus 36 teachers and officers. As the congregation continued to grow, the church facility once again seemed inadequate to meet the needs of the congregation.



The congregation gathers for the groundbreaking ceremony for the new sanctuary at the corner of Frederick and Simpson Streets.

1911 – The Move to Simpson St.

In 1905, during the pastorate of Rev. John W. Owen, a lot was purchased from the Elcock estate and from Mrs. Samuel Cline at the corner of Frederick and Simpson Streets for \$4,500. Soon after, under the pastorate of Rev. E. C. B. Castle, another great revival was held that impacted the congregation. Many were added to an already growing membership and new facilities became a necessity. A new sanctuary was erected and the cornerstone laid Oct. 8, 1911. The Board of Trustees who supervised this project included George G. King, president, Edward L. Stansfield, secretary, G. Lawrence Strock, treasurer, Joseph H. Eckerd and John Mishler. The new church was dedicated February 2, 1913. The total cost of the structure was \$75,000. A few years later a new Kimball pipe organ was installed in the sanctuary. This was a “tracker” organ, meaning that all connections from keyboard to pipes were mechanical, not electrical.

On February 3, 1913, *The Daily Journal*, of Mechanicsburg, reported this new church as a “...handsome, massive and modern church edifice,” and thanked the congregation for “...giving to Mechanicsburg a church home of such grandeur.” The new church plant was a major commitment on the part of the congregation to nurture the work of the Lord at that time and for years to follow.

In 1921, during the pastorate of Rev. Paul R. Koontz, a two and a half story brick parsonage was built alongside the church plant. The parsonage cost \$13,000.

The congregation’s indebtedness was quickly reduced and, in 1929, under the pastorate of Dr. A. H. Horn, the last debt was paid in full and the mortgage burned at the altar of the church.

In 1936, during the pastorate of Rev. C. Guy Stambach, it became necessary to renovate the sanctuary and the Sunday School rooms. At a cost of \$15,000, the renovations and re-decorating of the entire church facility as well as addition of new equipment was completed. The pipe organ was rebuilt by the United States Organ Company, of Philadelphia

The Merger with the Evangelical Church

On November 16, 1946, at a General Conference of the Evangelical Church and a General Conference of the United Brethren Church, both held in Johnstown, PA, these two church organizations merged to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church. In Mechanicsburg, the congregation became known as the First Evangelical United Brethren Church. The 1940s also saw discussion of further expansion of the church facility. However, due to the lack of complete unity and harmony on the subject, action was not taken immediately.

In June of 1950 First Church held a special series of services commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the church in Mechanicsburg. The committee in charge of this program included Rev. Paul O. Shettel, pastor, Mrs. Ida Lambert, M. E. Anderson, Merle E. Keller, John B. Bowman, J. Wilbur Dietz, George C. Dietz, Bernard E. Stansfield, G. Weir Strock, David D. Coover and Miss Katherine Kutz.

On June 1, 1956, the church purchased three properties on High Street, between Simpson St. and the public alley. At a cost of \$27,000, these houses were rentals until such time the church needed the area for expansion. The congregation continued to

debate the merits of an expansion and renovation.

In November of 1957 an architect was employed by the Building Committee to develop plans based upon the needs of the congregation.

On Sunday, August 8, 1962, following the regular morning worship service, a special ground breaking service was conducted on the west side of the sanctuary. The first shovel of dirt was dug by Rev. Schmuck and the expansion program was launched. On Sunday, June 16, 1963, the rehabilitated original structure and the new facilities were dedicated by pastor Rev. Dr. Miller S. Schmuck. The original facility was refurbished and the new facility consisted of classrooms, a church office, a nursery, and a small chapel. Total cost of the new building and renovations to the old was \$326,992.69. The building committee consisted of A. Wayne Smith, Chairman, Richard M. Biggs, Paul S. Brandt, C. Richard Brandt, David D. Coover, Charles F. Dornbach, James W. Dougherty, I. S. Eberly, Paul W. Heberlig, George M. Houck, Carl R. Koch and Earl I. Lauver.

Under the pastorate of Rev. Kenneth Bower, First Church purchased properties on Keller Street and installed a new Schantz pipe organ in 1973.

The Merger with the Methodist Church

On April 23, 1968, The United Methodist Church was created when Bishop Reuben H. Mueller, representing The Evangelical United Brethren Church, and Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke of The Methodist Church joined hands at the constituting General Conference in Dallas, Texas. With the words, "Lord of the Church, we are united in Thee, in Thy Church and now in The United Methodist Church," the new denomination was given

birth by two churches that had distinguished histories and influential ministries in various parts of the world.

Expansion in the 1990s

As the 21st Century approached, First Church continued to grow and plans were made to meet the needs of the new century. A major expansion was completed in 1998, with a renovation of the sanctuary, refurbishing of classrooms, a new multi-purpose room, an office suite and additional classrooms.

The Music Program

Many of the early churches objected to the use of music in the church worship service. For the first thirteen years after 1850 there was no instrumental or organ music in the First Church sanctuary. However, in 1863, long before singing had been approved by the Pennsylvania Conference, Professor W. Harrison Eberly led singing in the sanctuary, accompanied by Annie Eberly, assistant organist. Song books at that time had no musical notes and were owned by individual members. Early records also show that an organ was placed in the Sunday School room some time prior to 1877.

A history and directory printed in 1895 shows choir rehearsals were held every Friday at 7:30 pm. Professor W. H. Eberly was the musical director and Mrs. Cora Brenner was the organist. Miss Annie M. Eberly was assistant organist. Also in 1895 the orchestra consisted of Ira Eberly, 1st coronet, Guy Eberly, 2nd coronet, Wm. Stretch, 1st clarinet, Edw. Rupp, flute, and Frank Slyder, double bass viola

Shortly after the present sanctuary was built, a new Kimball Pipe Organ was dedicated September 7, 1913. The organ cost

\$3,000, an expense assumed by the choir who paid for it by roasting, salting and selling peanuts door to door. Miss Beulah Castle, the minister's daughter, was the organist at that time. That organ was rebuilt in 1936 by the United States Organ Company of Philadelphia. A new Schantz Pipe Organ was installed at a cost of \$55,044, and dedicated October 21, 1973.

List of Pastors

Circuit Rider Preachers from Shiremanstown:

1847-49	Rev. Jacob Smith Kissler
1849-52	Rev. Alexander Owen
1852-53	Rev. Jacob C. Smith
1853-54	Rev. Samuel Enterline
1854-56	Rev. William B. Wagner
1856-57	Rev. William Owen
1856	Rev. Jacob Erb, Assistant
1857-61	Rev. John Dickson
1857	Rev. Samuel K. Deitrich, Assistant
1858	Rev. Hiram Y. Hummelbaugh, Assistant
1859	Rev. Daniel Eberly, Assistant
1860	Rev. Jacob F. Wilt, Assistant
1861-63	Rev. Jacob C. Smith
1861	Rev. William J. Leacock

Full time ministers assigned to Mechanicsburg, when the First Church became a United Brethren Station:

1863-67	Rev. William. B. Raber
1867-70	Rev. Jeremiah Philip Bishop
1870-75	Rev. S. A. Mowers
1875-78	Rev. Charles Thomas Stearn
1878-81	Rev. Hiram A. Schlichter
1881-85	Rev. Jacob T. Shaffer
1885-86	Rev. J. B. Funk
1886-89	Rev. Joseph Ramsey Hutchison
1889-94	Rev. John Wesley Kiracofe
1894-00	Rev. Edward S. Bowman
1900-03	Rev. Samuel Nicholas Moyer
1903-06	Rev. John Wilson Owen
1906-18	Rev. E. C. B. Castle
1918-19	Rev. Jacob A. Gohn
1919-25	Rev. Paul Rodes Koontz
1925-29	Rev. Alexander N. Horn
1929-34	Rev. Carl H. Mundis
1934-44	Rev. Charles Guy Stambach
1944-49	Rev. Raymond Jacob Tyson
1950-54	Rev. Paul Otterbein Shettel
1954-68	Rev. Dr. Miller Samuel Schmuck
1968-82	Rev. Kenneth Bower
1979-86	Rev. Charles Hiller, Associate
1982-87	Rev. Dr. Donald R. Shover
1987-04	Rev. Donald Ciampa
1987	Rev. Thomas Yackley, Associate
	Rev. Wendell S. Junkin, Assistant
1993-00	Rev. Donald Rowe, Associate
2000-02	Rev. Richard Williams, Associate
2002-07	Rev. Candace Arnold, Associate

2007
2004

Rev. Lucretia Browning
Rev. Michael Minnix