

## **Centre County PA as a Microcosm of Early United Brethren Dynamics**

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The United Brethren in Christ denomination had its unofficial beginning when Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) and Martin Boehm (1735-1812) met in Lancaster County PA at Isaac Long's barn on May 10, 1767. Otterbein was a seminary-educated ordained minister of the German Reformed Church, and Boehm was a Mennonite pastor with no formal theological training. Embracing each other and proclaiming "Wir sind Bruder," they agreed to work together to evangelize the German-speaking people in America.

Each had enjoyed and preached heart-warming religion similar to that of John Wesley (1703-1791) and his 1738 Aldersgate experience. But if ever there was an ecclesiastical odd couple, this was it. Otterbein was tall, heavy-set, clean shaven, and attired in accordance with the prevailing style. Boehm was short, frail, fully-bearded, and wearing plain garb. "Otterbein and Boehm?" the scoffers must have said, "It will never last."

Even more disparate were their denomination's teachings. Reformed Christians revered higher education, dressed fashionably, served in the military, baptized infants, met in church buildings, and worshiped with liturgy. Mennonites shunned formal education, wore no jewelry, refused to bear arms, baptized only adults, gathered in homes and barns, and practiced foot-washing.

But their agreement about the necessity of experiential religion was greater than their differences, and the partnership endured. After 33 years of cooperation, and the emergence of an informal network of preachers and converts, Otterbein and Boehm formally organized the United Brethren in Christ denomination in Frederick County MD at the home of Peter Kemp on September 25, 1800.

While John Wesley was the one noted for affirming that there must be agreement on essentials and tolerance in all other areas, the early United Brethren certainly put that adage into practice. Some congregations baptized their infants, for example, while others did not. And adults could be baptized by sprinkling, pouring or immersion – the latter being either in ponds or in flowing water, and either three times forward or one time backward. There was similar tolerance and diversity of practice with regard to foot-washing, plain dress, pacifism, membership in secret societies, and other issues that could have easily caused divisions.

Since there was no formal discipline, preachers and converts alike were free to experience Christ without man-made regulations. At least that's the picture that is often presented. There were, in fact, differences of opinion on these and other issues that caused some to leave the United Brethren fellowship well before the formal denominational splits of 1877 and 1889 – and some of those who left were key leaders intimate with Otterbein and Boehm.

This paper identifies and investigates some of these early dynamics. While the specific geographic focus of this presentation is Centre County PA, the personalities and situations examined are representative of the movement as a whole. Following an introductory statement, the paper considers the early United Brethren from three perspectives. While an amazingly impressive cast of characters appears in the narrative and appendices, primary attention will be given to Christian Newcomer (one who stayed), John Detrich Aurandt (one who returned to the Reformed) and Eusebius Hershey (one who returned to the Mennonites).

## Introduction

Beginning with its first white settlers, Centre County PA has always included a strong German element. Many of the early Germans were won to Methodism, the first organized religious body to send circuit riders into the region. Peter Gray senior, for example, was a German shoemaker who came to Half Moon Valley with his extended family from Frederick County MD in 1788. The family immediately began hosting travelling preachers, founded the present Grays United Methodist Church, and formed the nucleus of the strong and long-standing Half Moon charge of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Evangelical Association entered Centre County from neighboring Union County, the denomination's unofficial first headquarters, in the very early 1800's. By 1805 Albright himself had preached and established classes in Penns Valley and Brush Valley. Paradise (Musser's) Church in Penns Valley near Millheim hosted the famed 1839 General Conference, perhaps the denomination's most significant ever – at which a constitution was adopted, a delegate system was approved for future General Conferences, and John Seybert was installed as the first official bishop. During the 1894-1922 split, this was the only region of the Central Pennsylvania Conference that maintained both Evangelical Association and United Evangelical circuits.

The United Brethren Church, as seen in the following sections, was also quite active in Centre County in the early 1800's. When the United Methodist Church was formed in 1968, the 54/11569 congregations/members in the county were divided according to their predecessor denominations as follows:

Methodist	29/7487 = 65%
Evangelical	13/2592 = 22%
United Brethren	12/1490 = 13%.

On the surface, these statistics seem reasonable. But closer examination reveals that the 12 surviving United Brethren congregations were all founded well past the early 1800's and were on the fringes of the areas of strong German concentration. The large United Brethren building in Millheim (in the heart of Penns Valley) that once hosted annual conferences has been a private home for more than a century. A similar fate befell the denomination's structure in Rebersburg (in the heart of Brush Valley) – which has stood through transformations into a Chevrolet garage, a small factory, and a storage building.

Why the followers of Otterbein and Boehm failed to establish a stronghold in Centre County, an almost ideal field for enduring United Brethren work, is the subject of this paper.

### **Early Centre County**

The primary source of information on the spread of the early United Brethren Church is the diary of Christian Newcomer (1749-1830). This was originally “transcribed, corrected and translated” from the German by John Hildt (1775-1862) and privately printed in Hagerstown MD in 1834. Samuel S. Hough (1864-1944) produced an edited version that was printed by the denomination in 1941. Although published in a more readable format that included some notes and a significant index, the severely abridged 1941 edition included barely over half of the original material. In 1996 under the editorship of Abram Sangrey, the Otterbein (Lancaster) District of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church reprinted the original Hildt version along with an almost exhaustive index prepared in by Homer Kendall (1913-1991).

Newcomer mentions traveling in Centre County on two occasions. In September 1802 he traversed the county in a northeasterly course. On a different preaching excursion eight months later, he traveled in the opposite direction – visiting essentially the same homes in the reverse order. Those references are reproduced below, with underlining and bracketed “corrections” for place names and surnames that will be discussed.

#### **September 1802 (page 96)**

Tue 14<sup>th</sup> – I traveled alone all day in this wilderness. At last I arrived at Spruce Creek and tarried with Mr. Mather [Mattern].

Wed 15<sup>th</sup> – Today I preached here from Matthew 7:24-25.

Thu 16<sup>th</sup> – I preached at Mr. Heiskel's [Hyskell's] from Luke 18:29. The word spoken was accompanied with power. Some cried aloud, others praised the Lord shouting for joy. At night I came to my old friend P. Cry's and was rejoiced to find him and some of his family on the narrow way that leads to life eternal.

Fri 17<sup>th</sup> – I rested here and visited several families in this neighborhood. I am now in Centre county.

Sat 18<sup>th</sup> – This forenoon I preached at Mr. Gearhardt's [Kephart's = Henry Kephart]. At night I had meeting at Mr. Duchman's, where I was received by several of my old acquaintances with great joy and gladness of heart.

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> – This morning we held a Love Feast. The friends spoke feelingly with a warm heart of their experience in religion. I preached from Titus 3:5-8 in the German, and also from Psalm 8:5 in the English language. Although I spoke with some difficulty on account of a severe cold, yet – bless the Lord – the word had considerable effect. I rode yet 10 miles to Mr. Flugel's [Flegal's = Valentine Flegal], where I tarried for the night.

Mon 20<sup>th</sup> – This day I came through Bellefonte to Millsbury [Milesburg], where I preached in a school house both in the German and English language. I lodged at Mr. Steffy's.

Tue 21<sup>st</sup> – This forenoon I preached at Mr. Brickly's. In the afternoon I rode to Mr. Kremer's, in Penn's Valley. I had a Mr. Kaus [Goss = Abraham Goss] for a guide.

Wed 22<sup>nd</sup> – This forenoon I tried to preach here. In the afternoon I rode about 10 miles to L. Smidt's, who had come to Kremer's to pilot me home. On my arrival I found Brother Arndt there, which made me rejoice exceedingly.

Thu 23<sup>rd</sup> – Today I preached here from Luke 19:1-4. I visited a sick man and tarried again for the night.

Fri 24<sup>th</sup> – This day I preached in Youngmanstown [Mifflinburg], to a small but praying congregation, from Luke 18:29-30. At night we had meeting at Brother Arndt's, where I found Brother David Sneider.

Sat 24<sup>th</sup> – This day a Quarterly Meeting commenced at Martin Dreisbach's in Buffalo Valley. Brother Kemp delivered the first discourse. Brother Farley, a Methodist preacher, spoke in the English language. Several persons came forward desiring to be prayed for.

### **May-June 1803 (page 108)**

Mon 30<sup>th</sup> – Today we came to Youngmanstown [Mifflinburg]. I preached at Lewis Smith's to a numerous assembly. We rode yet about 20 miles to Mr. Kremer's, in Centre county, where we lodged.

Tue 31<sup>st</sup> – Today I preached in Aronsburg [Aaronsburg]. The work of grace appeared to be a strange doctrine in this place. May God grant the people knowledge. We rode yet about 20 miles to Mr. Muller's, where we tarried for the night.

Wed 1<sup>st</sup> – I preached at Mr. Herzog's. Here we had a blessed time. The word made considerable impression, and some were enabled to rejoice.

Thu 2<sup>nd</sup> – We held another meeting at this place, and several were happily converted to God. I rode in the afternoon about 12 miles and preached to a small congregation at Mr. Heiskel's [Hyskell's].

Fri 3<sup>rd</sup> – Today I preached in Huntingdon county, near Spruce Creek, at G.M.'s [George Mattern's].

As valuable as Newcomer's diary is, these two passages illustrate that the material cannot be casually read and that to be fully appreciated the entire document needs to be carefully re-examined by researchers familiar with both local and United Brethren history. Considering that John Hildt was unfamiliar with the people and geography of Centre County, and that he had to contend with

Newcomer's handwriting and phonetic (further complicated by German pronunciation) spellings of proper names, it's remarkable that he was able to accomplish as much as he did.

For place names, the passages illustrate three types of errors that are common in the diary. First are the misspellings, as in Aronsburg for Aaronsburg. Second are the misrenderings of Newcomer's handwriting, as in Millsbury for Milesburg. Finally there are the locations that have changed names over the years, as Youngmanstown is now known as Mifflinburg.

For personal references, the problem is confounded by the fact that even under normal circumstances many surnames – often within the same extended family – enjoy a wide range of spellings and pronunciations. Failure to properly identify the persons in the diary considerably limits the reader's ability to appreciate the narrative.

Methodist scholars recognize Mr. Mather and G.M. to be George Mattern, who lived on Spruce Creek near Franklinville. George Mattern Sr. was a native of Germany who came to area from Maryland in 1779. This Methodist family typified the hospitality of German settlers across denominational lines. Methodist itinerant Jacob Gruber (1778-1850), one of the very few Methodist preachers able to preach in German (and English) established a regular appointment at the Mattern home in 1803, and a Methodist class was formed there shortly afterward.

The Heiskel surname is usually rendered Hyskell. Benjamin Hyskell came from Germany, settled in Dauphin County, and moved to the area after the Revolution. The Hyskell family was also Methodist, the original Warrior's Mark log church being erected on their property in 1810. One of Mr. Hyskell's daughters married George Mattern Jr and another married Peter Gray Jr. – the German Methodist who tended Bishop William McKendree's broken leg, and whose family pioneered the Methodist work in Half Moon Valley and gave the land for Grays church.

Christian Newcomer was welcomed as a brother by these German Methodists, and they offered him lodging and an audience while he traveled between preaching opportunities that could truly be called United Brethren. The surnames associated with these places are given in the diary as Gearhardt, Flugel and Kaus – which are properly identified as Kephart, Flegal and Goss. Like the Methodist Mattern, Hyskell and Gray families, these United Brethren families experienced significant association and intermarriage.

While Newcomer made these 1802-03 contacts in Centre County, by 1809 all three families were living some 30 miles west – just over the line in Clearfield County. Abraham Goss (1764-1849), however, was actually living in Clearfield County at the time of the diary – and it was at his invitation that they others later migrated west. Goss had settled in Lock Haven after the Revolutionary War and moved westward about 1797. All of this is consistent with the diary, which calls Goss a “guide” and not a resident – for who would be a better guide than someone used to traveling back and forth from Lock Haven to Clearfield and visiting his friends in Centre County.

Henry Kephart (1777-1858) originally settled in Potter township, but was living in Centre Furnace in 1802. In 1803 he joined Flegal and Goss in Clearfield County, which explains why Newcomer didn't visit him on his second trip through Centre County. It happens that the Kepharts became one of the most prominent families in the entire United Brethren denomination. Henry Kephart, Jr. (1802-1886) [son of Henry] married Sarah Goss (1808-1887) [daughter of Abraham] in 1826. Among their 7 sons and 6 daughters were the following UB preachers:

- Isaiah Lafayette Kephart (1832-1908) – president of Westfield College (Illinois), editor of *The Religious Telescope*
- Ezekiel Boring Kephart (1834-1906) – president of Western College (Iowa), bishop
- Cyrus Jeffries Kephart (1852-1932) – president of Lebanon Valley College (Pennsylvania), bishop

Valentine Flegal was one of the early settlers in the Buffalo Run area of Centre County. The 1802 United Brethren conference minutes note: *Resolved that Valentine Flegal shall be permitted to exhort the people to repentance. May the Lord bless him in this work.* In 1827, his son John was given a license to preach. While John was ordained in 1830, there is no record that Valentine was ever granted that status. Without giving any details, the minutes for 1832 state: *The matters concerning Valentine Flegal and his son, John Flegal, were examined. Valentine was passed, but John Flegal was expelled from the denomination.* Valentine's fate apparently was only delayed, for the minutes for 1834 declare: *The matter of Valentine Flugel was brought up, and after serious consideration, he as a whoremonger was expelled as a member of the United Brethren in Christ.* It may be assumed that the sexual language is used in the Old Testament sense of going after false gods – which for the early nineteenth century United Brethren was typically a practical (e.g., joining the Masons or some other secret oath-bound society) or doctrinal (e.g., preaching that there is no literal hell) violation.

Because this paper appears to be the first attempt to so connect the Goss-Kephart-Flegal families with Newcomer's journal and with each other, Appendix A is given to provide additional references and documentation. All the works cited are available in the conference archives.

The time and distances mentioned by Newcomer agree with the persons and places mentioned above to identify his 1802 trip as

Wednesday – Spruce Creek/Franklinville

Thursday – Warrior's Mark

Friday – Half Moon Valley, probably with the Gray family

Saturday – Center Furnace

Sunday – Buffalo Run

Monday – Milesburg

Tuesday – Penn's Valley

His reference to “being received by several of my old acquaintances” suggests that this may not have been his first trip here, and he seems to be familiar with both the land and the people.

The fact that such early and promising United Brethren beginnings in Centre County failed to develop may be partially explained by migration out of the county and eventually to the midwest, particularly by the Kephart family. But westward migrations of extended family and/or ethnic community groups was not uncommon, and the Evangelical Association faced the same phenomenon. In fact the historic Paradise Church in Penns Valley, site of the Evangelical Association’s landmark 1839 General Conference, ceased to exist when the entire congregation moved as a group to Cedarville IL, between Freeport and the Wisconsin state line. Only a cemetery and a marker remain to mark the site where John Seybert was elected that denomination’s first official bishop.

By examining the lives and ministries of Christian Newcomer, John Dietrich Aurandt (the “Arndt” in Newcomer’s journal of 9/22/1802 and 9/24/1802 as printed above, as well as in many others of Newcomer’s entries), and longtime Centre County resident Eusebius Hershey, this paper seeks to identify uniquely United Brethren phenomena that kept that denomination from achieving its potential in this county. In addition, the paper suggests that these dynamics were at work in varying degrees across the developing United Brethren Church.

### **One Who Stayed: Christian Newcomer**

Christian Newcomer (1749-1830) was a former Mennonite, raised in a devout extended family that exemplified the best in Mennonite doctrine and practice. For the story of a former Reformed clergyman associated with Centre County who remained with the United Brethren despite personal and denominational struggles, refer to Appendix B and the notes on John George Pfrimmer.

Newcomer’s path into the United Brethren Church was indirect. His conversion occurred in early 1774, at which time he was married and in possession of the family homestead. While the events and circumstances that led to his conversion are a fascinating account of the work of the Holy Spirit, the subject and length constraints of this paper suggest not retelling the story in this context. Those interested are referred to the autobiographical preface to Newcomer’s journal.

Suffice it to say that Newcomer’s conversion and assurance of salvation were not the norm within his Lancaster County Mennonite community. Wanting to share his experience but unsure how to do it without being offensive, in 1775 he followed the example of Jonah – and fled. He sold the family farm and moved to edge of civilization – Washington County MD. There he found Reformed ministers Otterbein and Geeting preaching the necessity of a religious experience consistent with his very own. The message was being preached without the constraints of any denomination, and to all who would receive it.

After more soul-searching, Newcomer cast his lot with this group. His own words relate the decision as follows: *Whereas these men preached the same doctrine which I had experienced, and which according to my views and discernment so perfectly agreed with the doctrine of Jesus Christ and his Apostles, therefore I associated with them and joined their society. And blessed be to God – although I withdrew myself from the Mennonite society, on account of the want of the life and power of religion among them, I never felt in any wise accused within for so doing. On the contrary, I have received many a blessing of God when assembled with my new brethren.*

One obvious question concerns the strength of the Mennonite community in Washington County MD at that time. If Newcomer truly had moved to the edge of civilization, to a place where there were few if any Mennonites, then leaving the denomination of his upbringing would not so traumatic. The fact that he remained a United Brethren and was never tempted or pressured to return to the Mennonite faith, even in the face of his repeated trips back to Lancaster County and into other Mennonite areas, would not be surprising. It is difficult to tell whether such was the case, but Mennonite sources indicate that Christian's brothers Peter and Henry had preceded him to the area.

Lehman's 1968 book Mennonite Bishops, Ministers and Deacons of Washington County MD and Franklin County PA lists Christian Newcomer of Washington County as a Mennonite minister before his withdrawal to the United Brethren, but there appears to be no other documentation to support that claim. Lehman's surprisingly detailed account of Newcomer includes accurate summaries and quotes from the autobiographical preface of his journal, but it also includes the following misinformation: *While a resident of Pennsylvania, Mr. Newcomer heard Rev. Martin Boehm preach near his home. He was present on the memorable Whit Sunday at the barn of Isaac Long in 1767.* Those statements seem to be unique to this book and are not supported by United Brethren tradition.

Otterbein and Geeting had the ability to put aside their sectarian training in order to communicate experiential religion apart from denominational structure. Mennonite traditions were less grounded in formal creeds and disciplines than were Reformed theology and church government, but they were just as strong. That Newcomer was able fellowship with non-Mennonites without losing his ability to relate to those of his former denomination is commendable.

Most of the early United Brethren circuit riders, like Newcomer, were former Mennonites. There was a strong Mennonite presence extending from Lancaster County into the fertile Cumberland and Shenandoah valleys. But the background of the Germans in the mountain areas to the north and west, including Centre County, was mostly Lutheran and Reformed. Newcomer stands almost alone among the former Mennonites in being able to communicate the faith in these mountain areas.

Newcomer established solid preliminary contacts in Union and Centre counties, but his journeys were at most semi-annual visits. The United Brethren had difficulty finding preachers willing to relocate to these areas. And the few

men they did send tended to be “too Mennonite” to relate to the population. The Methodists and Evangelicals were more successful in these areas for two major reasons.

- (1) Their preachers were not culturally separated from arms-bearing, infant-baptizing, worldly-minded and liturgical populace.
- (2) Their assignment of pastors to circuits was part of an episcopally-directed itinerant system. The early United Brethren denomination relied heavily on local pastors, who were mostly family men. It did not expect pastors to relocate. Distant congregations without a local pastor could be served only by the few people, like Newcomer, who were willing to be away from home for months on end. Remember that most of the early Methodist itinerants were single men, who tended to locate when they took on family life – and Asbury and Seybert, Newcomer’s equivalents in the Methodist and Evangelical denominations, remained single.

And so when local pastors like the Kephart and Flegal left Centre County, this created a void that the early United Brethren had difficulty filling. While this helps to explain why the denomination failed to establish itself in certain areas, however, it still doesn’t directly answer the question as to why Newcomer stayed – or does it?

The most sensible reasons that Newcomer stayed with the United Brethren, and was willing to travel as he did, appear to be that

- (1) He believed in the experiential religion preached by the United Brethren and felt a burden to share that message with the Germans in America.
- (2) He realized that there was none other in his generation – Otterbein, Boehm, and the other pre-1800 patriarchs were growing old – able to communicate the message equally well in both Mennonite and non-Mennonite settings.
- (3) His central location and wide travels had thrust him into the role of overseer. In the absence of an unmarried Asbury or Seybert, who else was there to hold the necessary quarterly and annual conferences and keep the United Brethren denomination together?

### **One Who Returned to the Reformed Church: John Dietrich Aurandt**

John Dietrich Aurandt (1760-1831) was born in Pennsylvania of German immigrant parents who had been active members of the Reformed Church in the old country. His father John owned and operated a saw mill and flour mill in Union County on Turtle Creek, at its eastern terminus on the Susquehanna, and in 1789 was one of the original trustees of the Buffalo Lutheran and Reformed Church (now Dreisbach’s UCC). John Dietrich Aurandt served with the Pennsylvania Regulars under General Anthony Wayne 1778-1781. He was one of those who had served past his enlistment period and was honorably discharged when all 1300 of Wayne’s troops threatened mutiny January 1, 1781, in Morristown NJ for want of pay, clothing and provisions. He returned home to find that his mother

had just recently deceased B which seemed to set his life on a decidedly more serious and religious course.

He eventually settled on a farm near his father's mill and appears to have been awakened to experiential religion about 1798 under the ministry of George Pfrimmer, whose story appears in Appendix B. Aurandt traveled south with Pfrimmer to "big meetings" held by Otterbein and Boehm and others. More germane to the focus of this paper, he traveled with Pfrimmer into Centre County's Penns and Brush valleys while the latter preached and catechized children. In addition, Aurandt opened his home to traveling evangelists that, according to his son John, included the following patriarchs of their denominations:

United Brethren - John Neidig, John Hershey, David Snyder, and Christian Newcomer.

Evangelical Association - John Walters, Samuel Liesser, and Jacob Albright himself.

Although Aurandt was frequently called upon to pray and exhort, he originally had no ambitions to become a preacher. The first time he ever conducted a service was at the funeral of a child – when a man approached him in his fields and requested that he come the next day to preach at the burial of his deceased son. Aurandt asked to be excused from such a task, but the man was insistent. Finally, he consented to attend and speak a few appropriate words B but not to preach. When he found that a large crowd had assembled in anticipation of hearing the Word of God, he attempted to preach and found that the Spirit gave him inspiration and boldness. Soon afterward he was recognized as a preacher by the loosely organized followers of Otterbein and Boehm.

John Dietrich Aurandt was present at the home of Peter Kemp near Frederick MD when the United Brethren denomination was officially organized September 25, 1800. As the significance of that historic meeting was not apparent at the time, the sparse minutes taken by Adam Geeting do not contain an adequate account of the items that were discussed or the business that was transacted. In fact, only two formal resolutions are recorded B one of them being that the preachers shall henceforth meet on an annual basis. The absence of a full account of this conference has been a recognized source of frustration for every United Brethren historian. Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, the other action recorded was as follows: *Resolved that two preachers shall go to Smoke's and investigate whether D. Aurand should baptize and administer the Lord's supper.*

First, consider the words of the resolution. "Smoke's" was a form of Shamokin, which was the name for the region where the west and north branches of the Susquehanna come together. In period writings, including Christian Newcomer's journal, Shamokin refers to the area around Turtle Creek and modern Sunbury and not to the present city of that name. And because his father's name was John, John Dietrich Aurandt was commonly known as Dietrich. This is consistent with the minutes from following year's meeting (September 23, 1801,

also at Peter Kemp's) which report that *a letter was received from D. Aurand of Smoke's*.

But of far greater interest is what the words of the resolution do not reveal. Specifically, "Who raised the issue, and why?" and "What was the spirit behind the resolution?" While such questions cannot be answered conclusively, this resolution and other available documentation can be woven into the reasonable scenario that forms the remainder of this section. The basic information presented hangs on historical actions that can be documented from various church (United Brethren and/or Reformed) and family records; the motivation presented for these actions is the speculation of the author.

To say that the early United Brethren avoided formalization and structure would be an understatement. Over the years specific individuals had been recognized as preachers, but there was no formal ordination. Otterbein participated in the December 1784 ordination of Methodism's Francis Asbury at Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, but for many years he refrained from employing the rite within his own organization. Newcomer's journal for October 1, 1813, records that a feeble Otterbein requested to ordain him and added "I have always considered myself too unworthy to perform this solemn injunction of the Apostle, but now I perceive the necessity of doing so before I shall be removed." In order that there would be no question about the validity of the denomination's ministry, he proceeded with the assistance of Methodist elder William Ryland to ordain Newcomer, Joseph Hoffman, and Frederick Schaffer elders in the United Brethren Church.

But in 1800 Newcomer and others were preaching, holding quarterly meetings, and giving the sacraments without benefit of formal ordination. Aurandt had reluctantly crossed one boundary when he accepted the call to preach, but there was just enough Reformed theology in him to wonder whether it was proper for him to administer the sacraments. It was probably Aurandt himself who raised this question at Peter Kemp's when the denomination was formed. The others assembled saw no problem about themselves offering the sacraments, or with Aurandt's qualifications to do so, and there was likely some confusion about how to proceed. It appears they learned very quickly how organizations deal with such matters: "We can't settle this today. Let's appoint a committee of two to visit with Brother Aurandt during the year to see if we can't straighten this out."

In true organizational form, there is no formal record as to whether the conference ever followed through on the resolution. Reading between the lines, it appears that some of the brothers met with Aurandt, assured him that he could offer the sacraments, and promised him that some sort of official response could be issued if that was what he really wanted. Apparently no official response had been made by the next conference B which Aurandt did not attend, but which noted the following: *A letter was received from D. Aurandt, of Smoke's or Shamokin, and it was resolved that Christian Newcomer should go and see him and tell him that his wishes were complied with.*

But now there was an extra urgency to Aurandt's concern, for he had been called to serve a Reformed congregation near his home, in Buffalo Valley. In those days it was not uncommon for a minister to be a member of more than one denomination. B Otterbein, for example, was recognized as an ordained minister of the German Reformed Church, and his name appears in their records, right up to the time of his death. This is consistent with the original thrust of the movement B to promote spiritual renewal and experiential religion among the Germans in America, and not to create another church body to compete with existing denominations. And even though the preachers in fellowship with Otterbein and Boehm were now formally organized, no membership records were kept for any United Brethren congregation until the 1820's.

In early 1801 the Buffalo church, now Dreisbach's UCC, had been without a pastor for some time B and there was no prospect of the German Reformed denomination being able to supply the congregation in the near future. The younger members of the church, in particular, were beginning to drift away. When Aurandt was asked to preach a sermon in the church, he consented. The building was filled with persons eager to hear the Word of God, the sermon was well-received, and arrangements were made on the spot for a return engagement.

The second sermon was attended by a still greater number, some traveling as far as 15 miles. Aurandt preached an evangelical sermon on the necessity of preparing one's soul to stand before the Creator. Many were moved to tears, and he was immediately and unanimously elected as their pastor. The New Berlin congregation also joined in this action, and Aurandt found himself the pastor of a newly-created two-point Reformed charge. There was much work to do in these congregations that had been without a minister for long. He proceeded to baptize, catechize and confirm the young, and to offer the eucharist.

All went well until the Synod of the German Reformed Church met May 3, 1801, in York PA. That denomination had not granted Aurandt a preaching license, let alone given him the authority to catechize and offer the sacraments. In addition, he was questioned regarding his experiential rather than confessional approach to religion B as Otterbein had been some 40 years earlier. It was decided to defer making a final decision until next year's meeting. In the meantime Aurandt was permitted to continue preaching for the congregations if he would

- (1) receive on-going ministerial training from Rev. John Daniel Wagner (1750-1810) of York,
- (2) abstain from administering the sacraments,
- (3) refrain from attending the so called "big-meetings" held by the followers of Otterbein and Boehm.

It should be noted that Wagner was sympathetic toward pietism – he was a friend of Otterbein, participated in the latter's Pipe Creek meetings of 1774-1776, and opened his church buildings to Methodist itinerants. While the official position of the Reformed Church discouraged experiential religion, there was room for tolerance. It is an oversimplification to state that those choosing between the

confessional Reformed and experiential United Brethren did so purely along those lines.

This appears to have been a shock to Aurandt, and there is no more record of him or his case in the official Reformed minutes for the next five years. The strict sectarianism and denominational structure of the Reformed Church were quite a contrast to the ecumenical spirit and flexible church policy of Otterbein and Boehm. It appears that Aurandt kept serving the Reformed congregations, and that he also maintained his ties with the United Brethren. It is not known whether he continued to administer the sacraments, but the matter certainly weighed heavily on his mind. In 1802, he attended the third annual United Brethren conference at Cronise's, in Frederick County MD.

September 1803 appears to have been a turning point in Aurandt's personal struggle. At that time he embarked on an exploratory missionary tour of about ten weeks. This was apparently a "fleece" to see whether God was calling him into full-time service. B and United Brethren preacher John Fohl later embarked on the same type of journey in 1835. Starting with the familiar Penns and Brush valleys in Centre County, he eventually traveled all the way to Pittsburgh and back B preaching at least once a day, and tarrying in various places as he felt led. Because of this, he missed the United Brethren's October 1803 conference at Snyder's, in Cumberland County PA. But his name came up, as there was apparently some confusion about his ministry and *it was resolved that David Snyder and John Neidig shall investigate the matter.*

Upon his return from the missionary tour, he left farming completely and moved to a house in the gap of the mountain between Buffalo and Dry valleys. While continuing to preach to the Buffalo and New Berlin Reformed congregations, he made regular preaching visits into Penns and Brush valleys. In addition, he made frequent visits up the West Branch of the Susquehanna as far as Muncy and down to Lykens Valley in Dauphin County. Like most pioneer preachers, he seemed more interested in ministering to the spiritual needs of the people than in establishing congregations for a particular denomination B be it United Brethren or Reformed.

In October 1804 Aurandt finally sensed where God was leading. Finding a lack of organized religion, but an openness to the things of God, along the western reaches of the Juniata, he settled near Yellow Springs in Huntingdon County. At that time, this was beyond the area served by the United Brethren B which were still loosely organized, and not even permitting congregations to maintain membership lists. It appears that in the end Aurandt felt more comfortable with the theological and temporal structure of the German Reformed Church than with the still-developing United Brethren.

Aurandt's name next appears in the Synod minutes of the Reformed Church in 1806, when his congregations in Huntingdon County file a formal request that he be ordained. The Synod again deferred, but licensed him to continue during the next year "on condition that he should diligently prosecute his studies for one year." The 1807 Synod determined that Aurandt had met all the

stipulated conditions and continued his license for another year. Meanwhile, the 1807 United Brethren conference officially noted the end of Aurandt's association with that body. He was formally ordained a minister in the German Reformed Church on May 1, 1809, at the annual synod convening in Hagerstown MD.

Rev. John Dietrich Aurandt became the father of the Reformed work over a wide area that extended from Cassville to Bedford, and twice a year he journeyed to Cumberland MD. He died April 4, 1831, and is buried in the cemetery at Water Street B his tombstone, a unique large boulder with a bronze plaque, easily recognizable from a distance.

In John Dietrich Aurandt the United Brethren lost a man of intelligence, zeal and commitment. The simplistic notion that he returned to the Reformed Church because he lost his zeal for experiential religion is not supported by the evidence. The following factors which contributed to his decision to return to the German Reformed Church are likely the same factors that kept the United Brethren from establishing a strong presence in Centre County B despite its large German population and the pioneering efforts of preachers like Newcomer, Pfrimmer, and Aurandt.

- (1) The loose government of the United Brethren Church. The Reformed Church had been functioning as a formal denomination in America for over 50 years B at least since 1747 B and governed its ministers and members with well-defined rules and procedures. While the Reformed Church was unable to supply the frontier, Aurandt and most of the Germans in Centre County were accustomed to authoritarian ecclesiastical structures and wanted more than an open-minded fellowship that was making its rules as it went.
- (2) The strong Mennonite component and emphasis in the United Brethren Church. Aurandt and the Germans of Centre County were of Lutheran and/or Reformed heritage. Aurandt's spiritual mentor George Pfrimmer, probably the first United Brethren to have a regular ministry in Centre County, was Reformed. Christian Newcomer, like Martin Boehm, was a Mennonite who functioned well in ecumenical circles. Beyond that, most of the United Brethren preachers in contact with Aurandt and central Pennsylvania were from the Mennonite side of the denomination. It is reasonable to assume that their plain backgrounds raised subtle barriers that Methodist and Evangelical circuit riders did not encounter. Once he settled in Huntingdon County, Aurandt's most enduring personal relationship was with John George Butler (1754-1816) B the Lutheran clergyman in Cumberland MD. A fellow veteran of the Revolutionary War, Butler's prolonged struggle for Lutheran ordination paralleled that of Aurandt in the Reformed Church. In addition, Butler appears to have shared Aurandt's experiential orientation to religion and even named one of his sons Whitefield.

In support of the theme of this paper, that Centre County is a microcosm of United Brethren dynamics, it could be noted that this scenario was repeated in the life of Peter Herrman (1796-1852) – he was also a medical doctor and even named one of his sons William Otterbein Herrman. After serving prestigious Old

Otterbein in Baltimore 1835-1838, he moved to York County and resumed his practice of medicine while pastoring in the Lutheran Church. His son Samuel E. Herrman (1831-1903) served United Brethren appointments 1867-1882 and left the denomination because of its disciplinary ban on secret societies to become a minister in the (Winebrenner) Church of God.

### **One Who Returned to the Mennonite Church: Eusebius Hershey**

Eusebius Hershey (1823-1891) was considerably younger than Newcomer or Aurandt, so much so that it may be assumed he was never in the presence of either one. But he was aware of both men, and he knew that he was building on the work they had established earlier. In fact, Hershey did far more than “build on” their work – before returning to the Mennonites, he single-handedly revived the United Brethren church in the area and saved it from disappearing all together.

Like Newcomer, Hershey was raised in Lancaster County in a devout Mennonite home. He was converted at age 18 and felt compelled to share his experience. Like Aurandt and Fohl, he eventually engaged in an extended self-directed preaching tour as a “fleece” to determine whether God might be calling him into full-time ministry. Hershey’s testing of the waters took him to Ohio 1846.

On March 4, 1847, at age 23, he presented himself to the first meeting of the United Brethren’s East Pennsylvania Conference – that portion of the state having just been split from the Pennsylvania Conference. He was given a license to preach, but not assigned to a charge. It appears that over the next few years he made at least two evangelistic trips west, this time as far as Iowa.

It also appears that he may have done some work in present Snyder County during this time, as tradition and secular histories credit him with starting specific congregations (e.g., Paradise, in Chapman Township) there before 1850. Dunkleberger’s 1948 classic *The Story of Snyder County* states the following about Hershey: *It is said that he was an energetic and resourceful man, and revived United Brethrenism in Union and Snyder Counties by his evangelistic preaching 1848-53. In 1850 he was appointed to take charge of the Union County Mission which embraced part of present-day Snyder County, serving it for about two years. He preached in Monroe, Union, Chapman and Washington Townships. He built the United Brethren church at Freeburg, laboring with his own hands in cooperation with the other laborers in its construction. He organized congregations at Middleburg and Port Trevorton.*

In 1850 he was ordained and assigned to the newly-formed work named Union County mission, but the area included is within present Snyder County. Although this is the first official record of an assignment for him, as stated above it appears that he had preached there before. It is possible that he laid the ground-work on his own, and then asked the conference to declare it a circuit.

In 1851 he was returned to the Union County mission and given an assistant, newly licensed Henry E. Hackman (1824-1896) from Rebersburg, Centre County. At this time the East Pennsylvania Conference had an active Millheim circuit, with church buildings in Millheim and Rebersburg, and the Union County mission would have been the neighboring circuit. This is consistent with the early United Brethren use of local pastors, and the practice of placing first-time itinerants near to their homes.

But for Eusebius Hershey, this January 27, 1851, pairing with Henry Hackman of Rebersburg soon took on a special meaning – for on June 3, 1851, Hershey married Mary Ann Strayer of Rebersburg. While it's possible that Hershey could have met his future bride in any number of ways, it's most likely that they got together, either directly or indirectly, because Hackman was from Rebersburg.

The 1852 minutes state the following: *On motion, leave was granted to Brother Eusebius Hershey to form a new mission provided it interferes not with any already established.* This desire to start a new work and develop it into an appointment is further evidence that such may have been what occurred 1848-1850 at his last appointment. But the following June 1852 statement of Hershey in the United Brethren's weekly newspaper The Religious Telescope reveals that all did not go quite as planned: *Since Conference, I have experienced that God's thoughts are not as our thoughts. When I left Conference my intention was to form a mission between the north and the west branch of the Susquehanna – but my wife being unwell, I could not do as I had intended. I was obliged to move to Rebersburg. So I concluded after having seen my presiding elder, to form a mission in Bald Eagle Valley and by the assisting grace of God, I have had good success so far. I have at the present eight appointments. Prospects, in my opinion, are promising. I have had no protracted meeting yet, but solemn meetings.*

Hershey's next recorded assignment was given in 1855, for West Branch circuit. While it's tempting to conclude that this was the outgrowth of his missionary work, that appears not to be the case – for West Branch circuit had been created in 1852 and served by others 1852-1855. Any attempt to identify appointments Hershey served 1852-55 in Bald Eagle Valley or 1855-56 on West Branch circuit would be pure speculation.

The final assignment Hershey received from the United Brethren was his 1856 appointment to Amityville in Berks County, between Reading and Pottsville. This class existed from 1854 to 1891 and met in a building abandoned by English-speaking Lutherans when they returned to their parent congregation. It is unclear whether the United Brethren ever owned the building, but it is clear that this appointment was to dramatically alter life of Eusebius Hershey.

To set the stage, it should be noted that the conversion experience and early nineteenth century Mennonite practice were a difficult mix. While the Mennonites were distinctly experiential when they were founded in the 1500's, three hundred years of formal organization and isolation – they were initially

severely persecuted in Europe by both the Protestants and the Catholics – had left them cold. While they were devout people, their community and way of life had become their religion. Conversion experiences that implied community and devout living were not the essence of Christianity were a threat to their very existence – and fellowship with non-Mennonites having similar experiences was the final indignity.

The two divisions in United Brethren history were conservative splits that were most disruptive in strong Mennonite areas. Rev. George W. Hoffman (1820-1883) was concerned about growing liberal tendencies within the denomination. Overlooking diversity to lift up the primacy of the conversion experience is fine – until those “diverse” practices start to become the norm. Most threatening in Hoffman’s eyes were

- (1) the spread of infant baptism,
- (2) the increased wearing of wedding rings and other worldly attire
- (3) the failure of the denomination to rebuke those who willingly bore arms during the Civil War
- (4) the admission, contrary to church discipline, of members of oath-bound secret societies [e.g., the Masons] into the church
- (5) the trend toward using colleges as “preacher factories” to educate men into the ministry regardless of their spirituality or calling, and
- (6) the use of musical instruments in church.

After trying to be a reform movement within the denomination, Hoffman and his key followers, including former presiding elders and other persons of importance, were dismissed from the conference in 1869. Like Otterbein and Boehm before him, Hoffman was reluctant to formally organize another denomination – even though had he done so immediately, the effect on the United Brethren Church would have been much more devastating. The group finally organized in 1877 as the United Christian Church, and they exist to this day as a small regional denomination headquartered in Annville, Lebanon County. While they have since adopted modern dress and other once-forbidden practices, they continue to preach the necessity of experiential religion and are decidedly Anabaptist (and those who were baptized as infants must be re-baptized to join the church), pacifist, and opposed to oath-bound secret and/or fraternal societies.

One of the preachers dismissed with Hoffman in 1869 was John Stamm (1819-1895). Twice a presiding elder, he was one of the most senior preachers to identify with the United Christians. He served Centre County’s Millheim circuit 1848-50, while Hershey was apparently doing missionary work in adjacent Snyder-Union County. Assuming his conservative leanings that surfaced in the 1877 split were life-long, one finds further evidence for the statements in the previous section suggesting that the United Brethren preachers assigned to Centre County were “too Mennonite” for the population.

The second split occurred when Bishop Milton Wright (1828-1917), the father of Orville and Wilbur, led a walkout at the 1889 General Conference meeting in York PA – when that body voted in a new constitution that did not

forbid membership in oath-bound secret societies. His followers organized as the United Brethren (Old Constitution) and exist today as a small national denomination headquartered in Huntington IN. They continue to preach the necessity of experiential religion and do not permit their members to join oath-bound secret societies.

John Fohl (1815-1901), whose name has been mentioned before in this paper, and whose autobiography was printed in 2000 to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Brethren Church, is the only person directly involved in both splits. It is the 1877 split that is most relevant to Eusebius Hershey and this paper.

In Upper Milford Township of Lehigh County, not far from Hershey's 1856 Amityville appointment, the conversion controversy was again stirring up the Mennonites. Mennonite preacher William Gehman (1827-1918) had experienced conversion and began holding private prayer meetings, with conference approval, for those like-minded. In 1856 the Mennonite bishop forbid continuation of the meetings. At the spring 1857 conference a vote was taken on the question, and the 24 persons voting against the bishop's decision were expelled. They organized themselves September 24, 1858, as the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia: *The Evangelical Mennonites were strictly evangelistic and practiced a warmer, more emotional type of piety than the other Mennonites of that time. They definitely represent the entrance of a Methodist type of piety, activity, and church organization into the Mennonite brotherhood in America.*

How much, if at all, Hershey was involved in these 1856-58 events is not known, but it was with this group that he decided to cast his lot. The 1859 minutes of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren Church record: *Eusebius Hershey was, upon his request, granted a certificate of dismissal of good standing in the church.*

It is understandable that Hershey felt a special kinship with these former Mennonites who shared his experiential religion. This was a chance to return to many of the conservative values he treasured – believer's (i.e., adult) baptism plainer dress, pacifism, footwashing, etc. – without having to compromise the necessity of the new birth. But this was a decided loss to the United Brethren, for Hershey had more than proved that he was capable of operating in an ecumenical context. In fact, when Hershey was formally accepted as a preacher by the Evangelical Mennonites on June 4, 1861, he presented not only his certificate of release in good standing from the Eastern Conference of the United Brethren Church but also letters of recommendation from five fellow Centre County clergymen of various denominations! They were

- (1) Levi Lukenbach (1807-1895), River Brethren (i.e., Brethren in Christ). This prominent bishop lived in Centre County in 1861 and presided over the Centre, Clinton and Lycoming districts. Bishop Lukenbach had the reputation for being a wise counselor. During his denomination's 1855 United Zion split, when Matthias Brinser was expelled for erecting a church building

- instead of continuing to meet in houses, he counseled Brinser that he could eventually have his meeting house if he would only be patient and wait. While very sympathetic with the holiness movement, his mild manner earned him the respect of both sides during his denomination's struggle with that issue.
- (2) Daniel S. Tobias (1804-1864), German Reformed Church. After serving the Bloomsburg charge 1829-1851, he accepted a call to serve the Rebersburg charge – where he remained for 13 years, until his death.
  - (3) Joseph Welker (1821-1895), Evangelical Lutheran Church. A native of Germany and a graduate of Gettysburg Academy, College and Seminary, he served the Aaronsburg charge 1857-62.
  - (4) John Amos DeMoyer (1826-1903), Methodist Episcopal Church. A native of New Berlin, Union County, he served the Methodist's short-lived Middleburg mission 1851-52 while Hershey was operating in precisely the same area for the United Brethren. He was serving Penns Valley charge 1860-62, which included the Methodist church at Smulton – a mile south of Rebersburg, and very close to Hershey's house.
  - (5) Henry Althouse (1819-1895), Evangelical Association. During 1860-61, he was one of the two preachers on the large Centre circuit. The 1868 minutes state: *Inasmuch as Rev. Henry Althouse desires a certificate of dismissal from this conference to go to the West, therefore: Resolved, that his request is granted.* He initially joined the Iowa Conference, and then moved to California in 1888 – where he itinerated for several years before retiring in Los Angeles. One of his five sons, William Henry Althouse (1858-1929), was also an Evangelical minister – serving in the Nebraska Conference beginning in 1881, and transferring to the California Conference in 1897.

But Eusebius Hershey is not the only link between the Evangelical Mennonites and the United Brethren. Christian Peffley (1802-1885), a four-time presiding elder in the United Brethren Church, did not take an appointment in 1858. He joined with the Evangelical Mennonites, and in 1862 he was officially dismissed from the United Brethren's Eastern Conference. A preacher of note with Gehman's denomination, he delivered their conference sermon in 1869. When Hoffman finally organized the United Christian Church in 1877, Peffley left the Evangelical Mennonites for the new denomination – and succeeded Hoffman as the United Christian Church's second presiding elder, which is their highest office! Whether Peffley's move to the United Christians was for reasons of faith, or simply to be close to his Lebanon County children and extended family, cannot be determined. But he seems to hold no permanent grudge against the United Brethren – he is buried at a United Brethren (now United Methodist) church, and his daughter Elizabeth Peffley Glace named her first child William Otterbein Glace.

What happened in Upper Milford Township was apparently just the beginning of evangelical revival within the Mennonite Church. Without going into specifics, suffice it to say that the Evangelical Mennonites and other like-

minded groups of Mennonite origin united to become in succession the Evangelical United Mennonites (1879) and Mennonite Brethren in Christ (1883). In 1947 the Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination became the United Missionary Church, but the Pennsylvania Conference resisted the name change and eventually became a separate denomination. In 1959 the name was changed to the Bible Fellowship Church, and they exist today as a small denomination with approximately 60 congregations – mostly in Pennsylvania, but extending from Connecticut to Virginia and including one congregation in New Mexico. They are evangelical in spirit and practice believer's baptism, but have abandoned foot-washing.

But there is one final denominational connection worth noting. At the United Christian district conference held at Balsbaugh's on June 6, 1896, William H. Gehman was "received with ministerial credentials from the Mennonite Brethren in Christ." As there is no evidence that he accepted a United Christian assignment or left the denomination he helped to found, one can only speculate about the dynamics involved. There are at least two possibilities, the first being the more likely:

- (1) It was a type of courtesy, or honorary mutual recognition of credentials between like-minded groups. As in the case of Otterbein's United Brethren/Reformed status, it was not considered inconsistent for a preacher to be recognized by different denominations.
- (2) Gehman was concerned about the size and/or direction of the now large Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church and was investigating other denominations for himself and/or his local congregations. This would be similar to the position of John Fohl, who eventually cast his lot with the United Brethren (Old Constitution) when it was formed in 1889.

In either case, Gehman appears to have been fully Mennonite Brethren in Christ until the time of his death.

Eusebius Hershey went on to become a spiritual giant in the new denomination. Although he continued to live in Rebersburg, well over 100 miles west of the churches in Montgomery, Berks and Lehigh counties that comprised the Evangelical Mennonites, he rarely missed the semi-annual and later annual conference sessions. Four times he was elected chairman of the denomination's highest council. In general, he took no regular pastoral assignment – but traveled widely across the Eastern United States and Canada as a missionary and evangelist. In 1890, at the age of 67 and against the advice of Methodist missionary bishop William Taylor (whom Hershey knew and respected), he traveled to Africa as the first overseas missionary of any American Mennonite body. While his efforts in Africa were as dynamic and successful as always, he contracted malaria and died there a scant half year after his arrival. His remains lie in the African soil.

The reasons for Hershey's return to the Mennonites – not to the cold denomination out of which he was converted, but to a denomination that celebrated the heart-warming experience while not neglecting the old practices – do

not need further elaboration. It does seem, however, that his was not a unique situation. While much coverage is given in United Brethren history to the 1889 Old Constitution split over the issue of secret societies, treatment of the 1877 United Christian schism is typically relegated to a footnote. Besides Hershey, Peffley, Hoffman and Stamm, how many other potential leaders were lost to the denomination because it failed to meet their conservative standards? The only previous scholar to recognize such a strong interdependence between the United Brethren, Evangelical Mennonites and United Christians appears to be Dr. Don Yoder. His classic 1961 book Pennsylvania Spirituals concludes that the three groups must have had extended contact and interaction.

Finally, one cannot overlook the diligence of Bible Fellowship historian Daniel G. Ziegler in reconstructing much of what we know about Eusebius Hershey. Interested readers are referred to his January 1989 article “Eusebius Hershey, the Traveling Preacher” in Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage and his 1996 biography In Search of Eusebius Hershey (available from the Bible Fellowship denomination).

When Otterbein and Boehm said “Wir sind Bruder,” the scoffers said it could never work. For the most part, it did! But let’s not ignore those from both sides who sincerely tried but, for whatever reasons, felt unable to remain in the United Brethren Church. We live in an age when diversity, inclusiveness and political correctness appear to be dominating buzz words. As we face the challenges of the future, may we not overlook the lessons within our own United Brethren heritage.

## **Conclusion**

The United Brethren in Christ denomination began as a loose fellowship when Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm met at Long’s Barn in Lancaster County on May 10, 1767, and proclaimed “Wir sind Bruder.” It was formally organized at Peter Kemp’s house near Frederick MD on September 25, 1800, with Otterbein and Boehm as the first bishops. Methodistic in doctrine and polity, it was essentially an attempt to preach experiential religion among the German-Americans – led primarily by former German Reformed and Mennonite individuals who had experienced the new birth.

Centre County PA would appear to be extremely fertile soil for the United Brethren Church. Its population was heavily German – including the Kephart family, that produced a number of United Brethren bishops and denominational leaders. It was visited early and often by three dynamic United Brethren missionary evangelists, each of whom was present at the 1800 formation of the denomination – Christian Newcomer, John George Pfrimmer, and John Dietrich Aurandt. A generation later it was the permanent home of Eusebius Hershey, one of the denomination’s most energetic and most successful evangelists and church planters.

But it was the Methodists and Evangelicals of Asbury and Albright that had far greater success in Centre County. The United Brethren congregations which survived to become United Methodist were founded well after the area's original settlement and initial missionary activity, and they were located in fringe areas of the county. In other parts of the country, however, the United Brethren totally eclipsed the Methodists and Evangelicals. This paper presented the following factors that hindered United Brethren work in Centre County and suggests that these were phenomena with which the denomination had to contend nation-wide.

- (1) Westward migration of key families.
- (2) Early dependence on local pastors instead of a strong itinerant system.
- (3) Initial lack of definitive denominational policy and the attempt to deal with people and situations on an individual basis with as few rules as possible.
- (4) Belief that the conversion experience was a sufficient basis for fellowship that would unite diverse German Reformed and Mennonite doctrines and practices – without the need to address the issue or to prepare a formal discipline.
- (5) Predominance of former Mennonites among the early preachers, and their failure to relate to the “more worldly” Lutheran and Reformed population, especially in the less agricultural and more mountainous and more urban areas.

### **Appendix A. Notes on the Flegal-Goss-Kephart Connection**

Details on the Flegal, Goss and Kephart families can be found in many secular and religious histories. The sections below indicate the source of much of the relevant information expressed or alluded to in the main paper. Note that some of the statements are not correct. There is, for example, no supporting evidence that Valentine Flegal was ever an ordained Methodist Episcopal minister (Aldrich, 511). Neither is it true that all the children of Henry Kephart Jr became ministers (Aldrich, 513). This reinforces the necessity for careful, patient and broadly-based research when trying to reconstruct and interpret early American history.

The following notations are used in the sections below.

Aldrich = History of Clearfield County, Pennsylvania,  
edited by Lewis Cass Aldrich, 1887.

Fohl = Autobiography of John Fohl, by Milton Loyer, 2000.

Kephart = Life of Rev. Isaiah L. Kephart, DD, by Cyrus J. Kephart, 1909.

Linn = History of Centre and Clinton Counties, Pennsylvania,  
by John Blair Linn, 1883.

PA = minutes of the PA Conference of the United Brethren Church

- Aldrich ,445 (Bradford township, from which Decatur township was formed in 1828) – “An enumeration of the taxable inhabitants... for the year 1809... showed ... Valentine Flegal... Abraham Goss... Henry Kephart.”

### **Valentine Flegal**

- Linn, 371 (Patton township) – “Valentine Flegal was one of the early settlers in Buffalo Run, but removed to Clearfield County.”
- PA, 1832 – “The matters concerning Valentine Flugel and his son, John Flugel, were examined. Valentine was passed, but John Flugel was expelled from the denomination.”
- PA, 1834 – “The matter of Valentine Flugel was brought up, and after serious consideration, he as a whoremonger was expelled as a member of the U.B. in Christ.”
- Aldrich, 511 (Decatur township) – “Valentine Flegal was another settler in the township, about 1800... Mr. Flegal was an ME local preacher and held services at Goss’ as early as 1815. He was regularly ordained as an ME minister in 1838 and did good service for his Master for a number of years thereafter.”

### **Abraham Goss**

- Kephart, 23 – after the Revolutionary War, Abraham Goss settled and married near Lock Haven
- Aldrich, 511 (Decatur township) – “As early as 1797 a settlement was made at a place called Stumptown, a mile northeast of Osceola Mills. This settlement was known at that time as the Goss settlement, and derived its name from Abraham Goss, who settled there at the time mentioned and proceeded to clear out a farm from the surrounding forest.”
- Fohl, 8 – regular 1836 appointment at home of George Goss, son of Abraham

### **Henry Kephart**

- Kephart, 11 – Kephart is a variant of Gebahard
- Kephart, 17 – “Henry Kephart, Sr., was registered as an inhabitant of Potter township, Centre county, as early as 1801. In 1803 he removed from Center Furnace and settled on a farm two and one-half miles north of what is now Osceola, Clearfield county.”
- Aldrich, 512 (Decatur township) – “Another old pioneer of this township was Henry Kephart, who settled on a piece of land two and a half miles north of Osceola Mills before 1803.”
- Aldrich, 513 (Decatur township) – “The second son of old Henry Kephart (Henry, jr.) was ordained a minister in the United Brethren Church and acted as a missionary for that denomination for a number of years, extending his labors not only throughout this township but over the mountain to the settlers in the Bald Eagle Valley and wherever a settlement was made. His children are all ministers today.”

## Appendix B. Notes on John George Pfrimmer

John George Pfrimmer (1762-1825) was licensed to preach in 1790 by the fellowship that later evolved into the United Brethren Church, but his relationship to the group was not without problems. He was one of the denomination's "charter members" present when it was formally organized at Peter Kemp's house near Frederick MD on September 25, 1800. He was not present at the second annual conference in 1801, but the minutes state: *A letter was read from Rev. George Pfrimmer, and it was resolved not to send a reply.*

He "transferred" into the Miami (Ohio) Conference in 1814, where he was ordained in 1815 – but there is no official record of his transfer out of the original conference. He was an independent sort, for there is no record that he attended an eastern conference from the initial one of 1800 until the time of his "transfer." While the minutes for 1803 record that the conference *resolved that a letter be written to George Pfrimmer that for the present we will have nothing to do with him*, those for 1805 note that *George Pfrimmer was again permitted to preach.*

Pfrimmer moved to Indiana in 1808 and, despite all the controversy implied by the above, became the founder of the United Brethren Church in Indiana. He is buried in Corydon IN, at Pfrimmer's Chapel UMC – the first United Brethren church in Indiana, and a registered historic site of the United Methodist Church. The personal and ecclesiastical struggles he experienced between 1790 and 1808, and the reasons for his ultimate identification with the United Brethren, are not well-documented. The following paragraphs summarize what is known or can be speculated about those years.

First it should be noted that Pfrimmer was an extremely educated man. He reportedly was a physician in the German-speaking Alsace province of France and entered the French navy. It was his naval experiences in the New World that eventually led to his immigration to America in 1788. He was a talented musician, and the instrument he floated down the Ohio to Corydon in 1808 was supposedly the first piano in the state of Indiana. He was a judge, being appointed to that position upon his arrival in Indiana by his friend, territorial governor (later President) William Henry Harrison.

At heart he was an educator, and the instruction and catechism of children and adults was always a priority. Newcomer's May 21, 1800, entry describing his Harrisburg visit with Pfrimmer states: *About thirty children had assembled at his house, to whom he was giving religious instruction; some were under conviction. I also spoke to them; their hearts were sensibly touched. May the Lord convert them truly.* In addition, he is credited with establishing the first official Sunday School in the United Brethren denomination in 1820. His diversity and passion made it difficult for any organization to put him into a well-defined box, and it may have been the United Brethren's very lack of structure that led him to chose that developing denomination over the German Reformed Church.

Before the formal organization of the United Brethren Church in 1800, many congregations and groups of congregations were identified in terms of their

local leadership. Around Oberlin, Dauphin County, “Neidigs Leute” [Neidig’s People] was the name given to those who followed John Neidig and had erected a building in 1793. Neidig was a former Mennonite converted under Otterbein and Boehm. That 1793 property – the oldest continuously-operating congregational site (of any predecessor denomination) in the Central Pennsylvania Conference – is now the location of Neidig Memorial UMC.

Similarly, “Pfrimmer’s Leuete” was the common name in the late 1790’s for those in the Lewisburg-Milton area that embraced experiential religion. Harbaugh’s classic The Fathers of the German Reformed Church in Europe and America describes his ministry as follows: *He is still remembered by aged persons, especially in the Valleys of the Susquehanna. The aged Mrs. Fulmer says that about the year 1792, Andrew Straub and Michael Wheeland were wont at certain times to push a canoe, containing their families and others, across the river, where Milton now is, in order to worship under a tree on the opposite side. The tree stood near where Mr. Hoffman now (1854) lives, about half a mile above the bridge. On such occasions the preaching and services were conducted by Mr. Pfrimmer, and sometimes by Rev. J. Dietrich Aurandt. They also went across in the same way when worship was held by the same men at Lewisburg. Mrs. Fulmer herself so crossed the river to attend worship under the tree.*

Even after the United Brethren conference of 1805 restored Pfrimmer, he continued to move about wherever and under whatever pretenses he felt led. The Reformed synod minutes for 1806 record the following: *A letter was read from Mr. Weber, of Pittsburgh, in which he complains exceedingly of a certain man named Pfrimmer, who had endeavored to make the congregation in that place believe that he was ordained by the Synod. He wishes, therefore, a decisive and authenticated answer in reference to his ordination.*

The response that the Synod sent to Mr. Weber left no doubt as to its opinion of Pfrimmer: *That this man not only has not been ordained by the Synod, but also that this Synod pronounce his ordination, performed by one individual member of Synod, as null and void.* The improper ordination of Pfrimmer by an unnamed individual is not explained, but it might refer to his licensing by Otterbein – there is no record that he was ever ordained by Otterbein.

Upon relocating to Indiana in 1808, his original involvement with the United Brethren Church was not distinguishable from that of other lay and clergy who had moved westward. Following his “transfer” in 1814, however, he worked with renewed zeal. In 1823 he was made presiding elder of the entire Indiana territory, still under the Miami Conference.

After his impressive service in Indiana, Pfrimmer was once again counted as a worthy associate of Otterbein and Boehm. In 1824, when he returned for a visit to the Pennsylvania Conference in session in Washington County MD, the brethren accorded him unusual courtesies. He acted as one of the conference secretaries, was appointed on a committee to reply to letters, and preached the ordination sermon. Pfrimmer ranks with Otterbein and Geeting when naming the Reformed Church’s leading contributions to the United Brethren denomination.