

**Convergence of Identity:
Two United Methodist Churches of Williamsport PA
(1968-2002)**

by Edward Hunter, 2003

Introduction and Thesis

To the eyes of church historians, the twentieth century was a century of revolution. For over a thousand years the Christian religion had known only division. When serious disagreements erupted in established churches, factions would form, and one faction would separate itself (or be expelled from) the other.¹ Once separated, churches simply did not seek reunion. This was the established pattern.

In the twentieth century, a series of church unions altered the pattern and pointed to the beginning of a new era in church history. One of the many unions that characterized the century was that of the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) and the Methodist Church. When these two churches voted to adopt a plan of union in the mid-1960s, the resulting merger reunited three religious movements that had been only narrowly separated in the early 1800s.

It is impossible to deny that the resultant United Methodist Church (UMC) came into being as a unified entity. On a very basic level, from precisely April 22, 1968 until the present, there has been one United Methodist Church.² Under the plan of union, the two churches became structurally one. Their ministers, funds, administrations, Conferences, properties, creeds, and hymnals all converged, and, within a few years of the merger, were systematically unified.³

But on another level, a question still remains: Has the United Methodist Church developed a unified identity? In other words, do United Methodists still actively think about their churches in terms of former denomination, and, more importantly, do they base actions on such thoughts?

One approach to answering this question is to look at localities that have, historically, been strong centers of both EUB and Methodist activity. One such locality is Williamsport PA. Situated in central Pennsylvania on the Susquehanna River, Williamsport is the home of two of the state's more historically prominent United Methodist Churches. One of these churches, Pine Street United Methodist, is a former Methodist church. The other, First United Methodist, is a

¹ For examples of this phenomenon, see Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).

² Paul Washburn, *An Unfinished Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 115.

³ Washburn, 115. Note that this is an oversimplification, there were a smallish minority of EUBs who refused to participate in the union and formed the Evangelical Church of North America in 1968 (cf. Washburn, 112-114.).

former EUB church. Through the examination of a series of interviews of laypeople conducted by the author, a statistical analysis of membership trends in the two churches, and an analysis of certain pastoral service records and interviews, it can be conclusively shown that although “former denomination” prejudice played a role in the life of Williamsport’s churches throughout the seventies, by the mid eighties it was clearly dying, and is now, for all intents and purposes, a dead issue.

This analysis could be conducted in isolation and would make perfect sense with regards to modern history. However, without a more detailed history of the churches involved, most people would be in the dark as to the larger issues and context of this identity study. Even among United Methodists, very few are aware of their various congregational and denominational heritages these days.⁴ For this reason, two histories will precede the analysis as a supplement of important information. The first is a general history of the United Methodist Church. The second consists of two local histories, those of Pine Street UMC and of First UMC.

The Early Divisions and Attempts at Union

In the late 1700s, three separate but closely related religious movements were occurring in the infant United States of America. All three sprang, in some respects, from a combination of the theology and teachings of the famous English circuit rider John Wesley and from the German religious movement known as “pietism.”⁵ Emerging shortly after the American Revolution, these religious societies were led initially by Francis Asbury, Philip William Otterbein, and Jacob Albright. Because early attempts made to consolidate the movements failed, the result was the formation of three separate churches: the Methodist Episcopal Church, the United Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Association.⁶

Although the theological heritages, personal experiences, doctrines, methods, and ecclesiologies of the principal founders were nearly identical, the young churches failed to unite.⁷ The failure of an early union might not seem quite so odd if these men had not known each other or had not enjoyed the very cordial relations that they did. But the facts stand, and it is very clear that Asbury (the Methodist Bishop) considered Otterbein (the founder of the United Brethren) a sort of spiritual father. In fact, Asbury even conducted Otterbein’s funeral services as a tribute to him. Similarly, Albright (the founder of the Evangelical Association), served for a time as a Methodist minister, and, when forming his

⁴ Rev. Dennis Otto, interview by author, 18 November 2003, Williamsport, in the possession of the author.

⁵ Washburn, 41.

⁶ Washburn, 43.

⁷ Washburn, 37-42, 48.

own denomination, insisted that the Evangelical Association use Methodist materials translated into German.⁸ Coupling the fact of the ecclesial/theological interdependences of these churches with a knowledge of the exceptional early relations they shared, it seems surprising that these three groups did not either merge into one denomination initially or do so within a short time.

The thing that kept these three groups separate, initially, was the refusal of Francis Asbury to allow Methodist worship and preaching in the German language.⁹ Because of this, Otterbein, though a good friend, would never join the Methodist Episcopal Church, as he considered his mission to be to “minister among the German-speaking people in the New World.”¹⁰ Albright, as noted above, had joined with the Methodist Episcopal Church and even served as a minister.¹¹ He left the Methodist Episcopal Church after a short meeting with Francis Asbury in which Asbury made it clear that there was to be no work in the German language. Tradition records him as saying, “If there is no room in the Methodist Church to work in the German language and win the Pennsylvania Germans, I am going back to do that work.”¹² Because of the disagreement over language, three churches were formed where only one belonged (in terms of doctrine and polity).

In the early 1800s, all three churches would attempt at one time to merge with each of the other two. The United Brethren in Christ initiated the first two attempts at merger. Key Brethren leadership, particularly Bishop Christian Newcomer, began to see no reason why three bodies with such similar doctrine and polity should remain separate. However, Newcomer’s proposals were rejected because the Methodist and Evangelical leadership argued that the United Brethren in Christ were not “sufficiently formed into a denomination” to be considered an equal partner in a merger.¹³

The third proposed merger sprang out of the Methodists having formally established a German mission in 1835. After the death of Asbury, many Methodist leaders came to the realization that it was foolish not to conduct ministries among so sizable a population. Many Methodists began to favor a union with the Evangelical Association, so that the Evangelicals could run the German wing of the Methodist Church. “After all,” they reasoned, “because the German language was our only real cause for division, we should once again be part of one fellowship.” After a long series of proposals and debates, the Association General Conference of 1871 was ready to vote for a merger with the Methodists. The vote resulted in 38 favoring the union and 37 voting against it.

⁸ Washburn, 49.

⁹ Washburn, 41, 49.

¹⁰ Washburn, 43.

¹¹ Charles Miller and William Raker, *The Histories of the Pennsylvania and Central Pennsylvania Conferences of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (York, PA: Craft Press, Inc., 1968), 509.

¹² Washburn, 49.

¹³ Washburn, 50-51.

The presiding bishop, J. J. Esher, ruled that the majority was “insufficient for so far-reaching an action,” and the idea of a merger was, for a time, laid to rest.¹⁴

In spite of the various attempts at greater unity that were made in the 1800s, it was division, not unity, that this century would bring on all three of the churches. The Methodist Episcopal Church was the first to endure a major split. Like many American Churches, the Methodists were divided over the issue of slavery. In 1844, the issue came to a head and the General Conference voted to divide the Church along geographic bounds.¹⁵ While the Methodist Episcopal Church did parent many splinter groups in the years before the Civil War, none of these groups robbed the mother church of nearly as many members as did the North-South split of 1844.¹⁶

Neither the United Brethren in Christ nor the Evangelical Association suffered splits in the antebellum period. This occurrence owes much to the fact that each of these churches were primarily regional churches, whose followings were strongly concentrated in the northern states.¹⁷ The splits that came to these churches came in the late nineteenth century, and occurred primarily over church-political issues.

By the late 1880s, both churches had been controlled by radical conservatives for long periods of time. So-called “progressives” in both churches came to challenge the authority of the conservative factions. In the case of the United Brethren in Christ, the progressives won their battle. In 1889, many of the indignant conservatives left the denomination and lost their legal battle to keep their church properties. They formed the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution), which name expresses their desire to hold on to some of the polity/doctrine of their Church that the progressives were throwing out. They never reunited with their mother church, and remain a separate entity to this day.¹⁸

The results of the church-political differences were very different in the Evangelical Association. Between 1891 and 1894, the conservative, ultra-authoritarian Bishop J. J. Esher, who had single-handedly defeated the proposed Evangelical-Methodist merger in 1871, won his battle with the progressive faction led by Bishop Rudolph Dubs.¹⁹ Dubs, a leader of the group that had favored the merger with the Methodist Episcopal Church, had severe disagreements with Esher and his followers, particularly on issues surrounding the power of the ecclesial hierarchy and the continuing use of German in worship services. As hostilities came to a head, conservatives and progressives separated, each holding

¹⁴ Miller and Raker, 551 and Washburn, 59.

¹⁵ Rev. Frederick E. Maser, *Methodism in Central Pennsylvania 1771-1969* (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Company, 1971), 120.

¹⁶ Maser, 117, 118, 122, 124, 125, 126.

¹⁷ Miller and Raker, 515.

¹⁸ Washburn, 55.

¹⁹ Miller and Raker, 557.

their own General Conferences in the year 1891.²⁰ In 1894, after losing a long series of court battles, the Dubsite faction was forced to yield all their property (church buildings, etc.) and the right to use the name “Evangelical Association” to the Esher faction. The conservatives triumphed, for a time, and the expelled progressives regrouped under the name of the United Evangelical Church.²¹

The Evangelical Churches of Williamsport, which were typical of Central Pennsylvania Conference churches, almost all sided with Dubs’ United Evangelical Church. The only holdout was First Evangelical Church, which was better known as “the German-speaking church.”²² All of the other local Evangelical churches sided with Bishop Dubs and, in consequence, lost their church buildings.²³ Tempers flared, and personalities clashed, and Williamsport took on a special importance to the United Evangelicals, as they came to the English-speaking Bennett Street Church to organize the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church.²⁴

The Century of Reunion

If the nineteenth century can be called the century of division for the spiritual grandchildren of Wesley, then the twentieth century was the century of their reunion. The ecumenical movement was coming of age in America, and, like many other churches that had been torn apart by issues such as slavery, the Wesleyan churches were becoming increasingly willing to lay aside their past differences and to attempt to reunite.

The Evangelicals decided to reunite first. This was partially due to the Evangelical Association’s having come to see English as the language of their constituency in the future, and partially due to a feeling of shame and foolishness (on both sides) at having let things get so out of hand at the end of the nineteenth century. As early as 1907, the two denominations began to seek a reunion.²⁵ In 1916, joint services were held to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the building of the first Evangelical Association church building. In 1922, when the question of reunion was formally addressed, an overwhelming majority of both groups voted in its favor.²⁶

The road to Methodist reunion was a much more difficult and long-drawn affair than was the Evangelical one. As was the case with the Evangelicals, there

²⁰ Paul G. Gilmore, “The 1894 Evangelical Association Split and the Williamsport Evangelical Churches,” *The Chronicle*, vol. 5 (1994): 57.

²¹ Gilmore, 58.

²² Gilmore, 59 and Lenore Losch, “Our History” *50th Anniversary Celebration* by First United Methodist Church (Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1974), 10.

²³ Gilmore, 59-60.

²⁴ Gilmore, 62 and Miller and Raker, 558.

²⁵ Miller and Raker, 559.

²⁶ Miller and Raker, 560.

were no formal theological distinctions separating the northern Methodists, the southern Methodists, and a smaller group which had broken with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1830, known as the Methodist Protestant Church.²⁷ What made the reunion of these three churches more difficult was their differing leadership styles and the understanding, on the parts of members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, that their ability of self-governance would be drastically reduced. This was because the northern Methodist Episcopal Church was so much larger than the other two bodies. As early as 1911, members of the respective denominations began to actively seek reunion. In 1939, the denominations merged and took the simpler name, the Methodist Church.²⁸

As has been noted, the United Brethren in Christ never reunified. However, they had continuously enjoyed good relations with the Evangelical Churches. This has been attributed, historically, to their similar doctrines and their zeal for reaching German-speaking Americans. And so, in 1911, once the Evangelicals began to openly seek a reunion, the United Brethren “registered an interest in making it a three-way union.” Their request was rejected, but only because the consensus in the Evangelical Churches was that “[the] reunion of a divided church was too delicate a task to attempt including a third body.”²⁹ It took more than 20 years after the formation of “the Evangelical Church” for a plan of union to be approved by both the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelicals. This union was difficult because of differences in church polity and confessions. In spite of the difficulties, the two churches came together in 1946, taking the name Evangelical United Brethren (EUB), from a simple combination of the names of the parent churches.³⁰

Ecumenism and interest in mergers did not die there among the spiritual descendants of Wesley, and in 1968, with the issue of the German language now long dead, the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren, after long periods of exploration and negotiation, merged to form the United Methodist Church (UMC) as the second largest Protestant denomination in America.³¹

The History of Pine Street UMC

Laying larger macro-historical issues aside, the second sort of useful history is that of the local churches to be studied. The first key to finding an understanding of just who and what “Pine Street UMC” is can be discovered in the very origins of the church. The Methodist Church at Pine Street has always been proud of the fact that it is the primary descendant of the very first Methodist

²⁷ Washburn, 58, 61.

²⁸ Washburn, 60-61.

²⁹ Miller and Raker, 561.

³⁰ Washburn, 62-63.

³¹ Washburn, 162.

fellowship to meet in the modern city limits of Williamsport. In the bulletin of the 1929 “103rd Anniversary” service, the writer notes that “four years before the town of Williamsport was laid out, in the humble home of Amariah Sutton... the first Methodist Class Meeting was organized.”³² That class meeting grew in numbers, and eventually the need for a regular church building became apparent.³³ In 1796, Sutton deeded a plot of land (on the modern corner of Fourth and Cemetery) to the Methodist Episcopal Church to be used as a site for Methodist services.³⁴ This land near Lycoming Creek became the site of the first Methodist church building in Williamsport. It was constructed at some point between 1802 and 1805, and was appropriately named Lycoming Chapel.³⁵

In 1825, due to the pressures of “the growing Society” in Lycoming Chapel, the congregation purchased a lot on Pine Street. In 1826, the congregation completed the construction of a new church building. Pine Street began to count that church as its first church building, and has celebrated its congregational anniversaries from the completion of the construction.³⁶ Perhaps the reason for this method of counting, which has been reported but not commented on in Pine Street’s telling of the story for over 150 years, is that the entire congregation at Lycoming chapel did not live in Williamsport. In fact, a goodly number lived in Newberry, and they went on to found a church in Newberry, which was formally established in 1854.³⁷ However, the fact that Pine Street numbers its congregational birthyear from 1826 and not, say, 1796 or the like, indicates one of three things. Either the actual site of the church, or the gathering together of the distinctive congregation, or some combination of both was the basis around which the congregation formed its local identity.

The fact that Pine Street was the first Methodist Episcopal Church in Williamsport was something that was not soon forgotten by her congregants. It was repeated over and over in the congregation’s literature, and it was an idea ingrained in the heads of the young for many generations. It gave Pine Street a certain feeling of a historical mandate to be the best church in Williamsport, and certainly, the best Methodist church. It was continued, and passed down, and each generation added further to the glory achieved by the one before.

For example, in 1844, based, once again, on the pressures of space constraints, the congregation of “Williamsport Station,” as it was then known,

³² *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, by the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church (Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1929), pages unnumbered, but this information is on the sixth page.

³³ David Brouse, Jr. and Mary Jo Brouse, *A Narrative of Events in the Life of Pine Street United Methodist Church* (Williamsport, PA: printed privately, 2001), 5.

³⁴ *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, sixth page.

³⁵ *History and Directory of the Fourth Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, by the Fourth Street Methodist Episcopal Church (Williamsport, PA: J. M. Schrock, 1906), 17.

³⁶ *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, sixth page.

³⁷ Brouse and Brouse, 8.

erected a new church building and a new parsonage. Only a generation after that, in 1869, the congregation so enlarged and remodeled the church that they came to consider it an entirely different building than it had been before the remodeling.³⁸ Each generation built off the successes of the one previous to it, and, for the entire nineteenth and the early twentieth century, progress and growth were the order of the day. Pine Street was, by all accounts, the “premier” church among the ten urban/suburban Methodist churches in the immediate Williamsport area.

By the time of the merger in 1968, Pine Street had greatly added to its early achievements. Early in the twentieth century, the church expanded again, demolishing the old building and building a new one. The colossal sanctuary of the new building could seat 2500 people in full view of the pulpit. The pinnacle of the steeple stood an amazing 185 feet off the ground.³⁹ The church became nationally famous. It hosted 11 Annual Conferences of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal (and later simply “Methodist”) Church.⁴⁰ It once received a generous contribution from Andrew Carnegie.⁴¹ The great evangelist Billy Sunday spoke in the church.⁴² Finally, when the nationally renowned songwriter James M. Black (“When the Roll is Called Up Yonder,” etc.) married a Pine Street member, he chose to transfer to Pine Street from the other Methodist congregation in which he had been active.⁴³

In fact, it became a fashion that great community leaders should attend Pine Street.⁴⁴ Perhaps in part because of this, Pine Street also acquired a reputation as a very giving church. For example, in 1910, during the dedicatory services for the fourth church building, an eight day period of celebration, the congregation gave over 62 thousand dollars towards paying off the church’s building loans.⁴⁵ (In modern dollars, this amount would be around 1.19 million dollars.)⁴⁶ This is a testament both to the wealth and power of Pine Street’s constituency and to their generosity. Not only did they give to support their own church, as the current Pastor of Pine Street, Drue Sherman, reported, “no other congregation gives back to the city like Pine Street does. We [currently] invest \$40,000 a year in social ministry [in Williamsport].”⁴⁷

³⁸ *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, sixth page.

³⁹ Brouse and Brouse, 37.

⁴⁰ Brouse and Brouse, 50.

⁴¹ Brouse and Brouse, 37.

⁴² Brouse and Brouse, 38.

⁴³ Brouse and Brouse, 27.

⁴⁴ Brouse and Brouse, 29-30.

⁴⁵ Brouse and Brouse, 37.

⁴⁶ Many thanks to: <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/> for the site’s help in the quick conversion of the dollar value.

⁴⁷ Rev. Drue Sherman, interview by author, 29 October 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author, and *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, seventh page.

But in spite of increasing membership, increasing wealth, and increasing social prominence, in the early twentieth century, older men and women looked back and longed wistfully for the simpler days of what they called “Old Pine.” For these men and women, though Pine Street was now a enormous building, “beautiful to behold,” and “a credit to our city,” it was just not the same as the Pine Street of their childhoods.⁴⁸ Just before launching into the description of the plans for the fourth Pine Street building project, the author of the history for the 103rd Anniversary Services pauses to reflect on the glory years of the church in the late 1800s. He writes, “Mighty men of God they were, who in those years ministered at the Altars of old Pine Street Church. They preached the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and revivals of religion were almost continuous.”⁴⁹ From the late 20s on, the sentiment that “Old Pine” was, at least in part, better than the church of the present, became a continuous stream of thought in the Pine Street literature.⁵⁰ Long-time choir director and prominent music publisher F.W. Vandersloot, for example, even compiled his gospel songs into a booklet deliberately titled *Echoes from “Old Pine.”* This feeling that the present church was not as good as the church of old became locked into the identity of Pine Street. They were at once proud of their heritage and present status, and wistful for days gone by.

Unfortunately for the people of Pine Street, the glory days of Williamsport were about to be over, and as went the town, so went its greatest church. Pastor Drue Sherman asserted, in his interview, that the demise of the Pine Street congregation was significantly related to the economic downturn that hit Williamsport in the twentieth century. As the downtown business district became increasingly unprofitable, Pine Street began to shrink, as its constituency moved away.⁵¹ According to the report of the Methodist “Tabulator” who studied the Williamsport Churches in 1966, between 1940 and 1966, Pine Street had suffered a membership decrease of 44.1%.⁵² The powerful members of the community began to lose interest in Pine Street, and many gradually found their way to churches in the suburbs.

The congregation at Pine Street had a deep sense of its roots and its triumphs in the past. It was specifically proud of its Methodist heritage through

⁴⁸ *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, seventh page.

⁴⁹ *Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*, sixth page.

⁵⁰ For two particularly good examples of this, see “*The Celebration of Consecration and Dedication*, by the Pine Street United Methodist Church (Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1980),” a copy of which is housed in the Methodist Archives at Lycoming College, and the current official church history of Pine Street by Mr. and Mrs. Brouse, which was cited above.

⁵⁰ *The Celebration of Consecration and Dedication*, eighth page.

⁵¹ Interview with Rev. Drue Sherman.

⁵² Howard S. Fitzgerald, “A Study of the Sixteen Methodist Churches in the Greater Williamsport Area: The Tabulator’s Summary” (Williamsport, PA: The Methodist Union of Williamsport, PA, 1967), 18.

Amariah Sutton and the Lycoming Chapel, and also proud of all its particular accomplishments as a congregation. Thus, there existed both a “denominational” pride and a “local” pride. While they existed side by side, however, they were two separate phenomena. In 1968, as the Methodist-EUB merger loomed large on the horizon, Pine Street had been suffering from a tremendous problem of falling membership. This heightened the desire of the congregation to return to the bliss and glory that, in their minds, the concept of “Old Pine” embodied.⁵³

The History of First UMC

Like Pine Street Methodist, First Evangelical has its roots in class meetings – first held by the Evangelical Association in Williamsport in 1812. Also like Pine Street, although without the same swiftness, the congregation erected a small church building in town. They finished the building in 1852, and it was named the Williamsport Mission (later Market Street Church) of the Evangelical Association.⁵⁴

In 1869, this mission gave birth to another mission. The second mission was made up of some of the younger members of the congregation who had expressed a wish to have services held in English. Within a year, a lot was purchased for the fledgling mission on Bennett Street, and the English-speaking congregation named itself Trinity Chapel of the Evangelical Association. As Lenore Losch reports in her bulletin-history of First Church from 1974, “A good relationship existed between the two groups and often-times Sunday School picnics were held jointly as well as other social gatherings.”⁵⁵

To say that the relationship of the two congregations was negatively effected by the 1894 church split seems a logical conclusion, and indeed it must have been, for Williamsport became a center of United Evangelical Activity, and the German-speaking congregation of the Evangelical Association, which had, by the time of the split, taken the name “First,” now stood alone as the only Evangelical Association Church in town where there had previously been four.⁵⁶

In the period of the denominational division, the United Evangelical church grew tremendously in Williamsport. In spite of having lost their buildings, the three congregations (Trinity Chapel, St. John’s in the Newberry section, and St. Paul’s near Lycoming Creek) all grew substantially in terms of membership.⁵⁷ Trinity Chapel changed its name to “First United Evangelical Church,” and grew to a membership totaling over 700 persons by 1922.⁵⁸

⁵³ Interview with Rev. Drue Sherman.

⁵⁴ Losch, 5.

⁵⁵ Losch, 5.

⁵⁶ Losch, 6 and Gilmore, 59-61.

⁵⁷ Gilmore, 60-61.

⁵⁸ Losch, 6.

Although First United's successes and growth may have been initially offensive to some of the members of the Association church, by the time of the Evangelical reunion in 1922, historian Paul Gilmore asserts that, "there were no traces of past hostility [in Williamsport]." In fact, the congregations so favored the denominational reunion, that the older, German-oriented church petitioned Conference for the right to sell their building and to become one congregation again with their daughter church.⁵⁹ On the surface, this would avoid a seemingly omnipresent problem in church merger talks, the problem of "where will the united church meet?" Because the United church had already outgrown its present sanctuary, however, it was not an option for the much smaller Association Church to simply move in with the United Evangelical one. Due to this fact, the two congregations planned and built a new church, which has been the home of Williamsport First Church until this day.⁶⁰ This experience was, in general, a very pleasant one for First Church, and may have contributed to the congregation's willingness to take part in later mergers (on a local and national level).

It is of note that the church merger had in no way threatened the congregation of First United Evangelical church, which represented the vast majority of the post-merger parishioners of First Evangelical. By sheer force of numbers, it was evident to everyone involved that it would be members of the former-Dubside church that would be calling the shots.

In a similar way, in the denominational sense, the United Evangelicals had nothing to fear. As had been noted, all of the churches in town joined the Dubs faction save the Market Street parent church. The denominational merger would in no way effect the balance of power in the District. For these reasons, this was an easy merger for First Church.

In 1926, not long after the completion of its new building, First Church became a church of national significance when the first General Conference of the Evangelical Church was held within the building.⁶¹ Although it never achieved the social prominence or membership that Pine Street Methodist achieved, First Evangelical compiled an impressive record of its own. In 1933, its membership reached an impressive all-time peak of 888 members.⁶² In total, between the years 1840, when the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Association was formed, and 1968, when the EUB and Methodist Churches united, First was host to 13 Annual Conferences of the various Evangelical denominations of which it was part.⁶³ Like Pine Street, it was served by impressive and well credentialed ministers.⁶⁴ It was the Evangelical version of

⁵⁹ Gilmore, 62.

⁶⁰ Losch, 10.

⁶¹ Losch, 11.

⁶² Losch, 10.

⁶³ Miller and Raker, 651-653.

⁶⁴ *Dedicatory Program and other services commemorating the completion of the New Church Home of the First Evangelical Church*, by Rev. A.D. Gramley, chairman (Williamsport, PA: Grit Publishing Co., 1924), 7.

the Pine Street Church in Williamsport. It was its denomination's flagship church in the city.

Approaching the 1946 merger of the Evangelicals and the United Brethren, again, First could breathe easy. There was only one United Brethren church in town, and it was the relatively small Christ Church of South Williamsport.⁶⁵ This meant that, once again, power structures in Williamsport would be unaltered. Whatever happened, First would continue to be the denominational flagship church of Williamsport. In addition, neither of the combining denominations dwarfed the other, and so there were no expectations of Evangelicals getting "swallowed up" nationally by the United Brethren, or vice-versa.⁶⁶ By this time, First had passed through two denominational mergers and a church merger, and never had its position of power or its voice within the resultant denomination been threatened.

All this was about to change. When the Methodist-EUB union was proposed, First was, for the first time, in danger of being "swallowed up" by another denomination.⁶⁷ The differences were staggering; the Methodist Church was huge. It boasted an enormous total of 11 million members, compared to the EUB total membership of around 750,000 members. This would mean that, following the merger, only 6.8% of the resultant denomination would be made up of former EUB's. Essentially, the EUB Church was agreeing to be numerically powerless if they joined the United Methodist Church.⁶⁸

However, this general statistic somewhat blurs the reality of the situation. The EUB Church was a regional church concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest areas of the United States. An EUB congregation in a district or conference where EUB presence was numerically strong could be assured that its voice would be heard, even after the merger. This was the case in Williamsport in 1968.

However, the Methodist presence in Williamsport was also strong. Pine Street was not alone in Williamsport, and the "Greater Williamsport Area" was home to exactly 16 Methodist Churches.⁶⁹ As early as 1966, some Methodist officials were hoping to bring the congregations of First and Pine Street under the same roof. Although no specifics as to the dynamics of such a merger are given in the report of the Methodist "Tabulator," it is certain that what is meant is that First should close its doors. The reason for this certainty is that First's building simply could not have housed the combined congregations of First and that of

⁶⁵ Milton Loyer, "Systematized Backgrounds of Pennsylvania's United Methodist Churches," *The Chronicle*, vol. 2 (1991), 56-86.

⁶⁶ Miller and Raker, 562.

⁶⁷ Augustus O. Thomas, interview by author, 5 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of author.

⁶⁸ Washburn, 69.

⁶⁹ Howard Fitzgerald, 1.

Pine Street. Pine Street's building, on the other hand, could seat 2500, well more than the combined total of both of the congregations.⁷⁰

Analysis from the Interviews of the Laity

To create pool of information to analyze, two slightly different interviews were created and given to five members of Pine Street, four members of First, and one woman who is, contrary to the rules of the UMC, both a member at Pine Street and an associate member of First. The questions in the interviews can be divided into four categories: (1) personal background questions, (2) questions about feelings surrounding the merger, (3) questions about the 1977 arson fire which totally demolished Pine Street's church building, and, (4) direct questions about identity.⁷¹

The first questions, those on personal background, were included both to affirm the value of each person as an individual source and to interpret any problems with the information received. The interview group was balanced in terms of gender, years of membership (the average is 37.8 years), and former denomination. As none of them was under fifty years old, all had lived through the merger and had memories of it. In addition, they represented people attending the traditional worship services at their respective churches. As the people attending the traditional services are most likely those who would hold to older notions of identity, this should not be viewed as a weakness in the data. It should also be noted that those interviewed had been in leadership positions for virtually their entire tenures at the churches, meaning that only the opinions of active members were taken into account. As active members are generally those who set the tone of church business, however, the opinions of these people are the most relevant for this study. Finally, none of them were, directly before the merger, involved in a Christian tradition other than the Methodist or EUB traditions. From the personal background questions, it is clear that no potentially serious problems can be associated with the demographics of the interviewees.

The second category of questions focused on the denominational merger and the feelings surrounding it. When asked the very direct question, "Can you... [say] what people thought about the [Methodist-EUB] merger at that time?," the previously Methodist members of Pine Street stood united. Their responses were typified by that of Donna Bolivar, who said; "I don't remember hearing a lot about it. I don't think it was as much of an issue for Methodists [as for EUB's]. It's not hard to add "united" to Methodist. It's a bit harder to accept the name change from the EUB [perspective]. The identity was *still in the name* for the Methodists."⁷² Mary-Virginia Girton, the dual member of Pine Street and First,

⁷⁰ Howard Fitzgerald, 7.

⁷¹ *The Celebration of Consecration and Dedication*, eighth page.

⁷² Donna Bolivar, interview by author, 17 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author, emphasis author.

phrased her answer as follows: “I don’t think they [i.e. people from Pine Street] gave it too much thought. It was more of... [an issue for EUB’s], they had to change from Evangelical to Methodism.”⁷³ Although Girton probably did not mean to say what she did in the way she said it, comments such as that were prone to slipping out in the course of the interview. In another place she said at the end of a thought, “...since we were all Methodists, the EUB Church didn’t exist, it had merged into the Methodist.”⁷⁴ Girton’s actual intention was likely to communicate something like what Bollivar had said, but her wording was that of absorption, not union. Girton’s unintended phraseology does, however, point directly to the fears of the six people who came from the EUB side of the merger.

The former EUBs, with an uncommon solidarity, answered the same question by statements such as, “we thought we’d be swallowed up.”⁷⁵ In fact, three of them used the specific phrase “swallowed up” to express what the general fear was. But just what were EUB’s afraid would be swallowed up? Knowing that their church would be numerically insignificant in the national post-merger denomination, it is likely that they weren’t afraid of being swallowed up in a numerical sense. Suzanne Heilman, a former EUB and member of Pine Street, clarifies by saying of the EUB’s that: “[On the surface] they were accepting... [but] there was a sort of an undercurrent that people were afraid we’d *lose our identity*.”⁷⁶ The identity to which Heilman refers could only have been denominational identity.

The interviews indicate that denomination was a big issue for EUB’s, and may or may not indicate the same for Methodists (depending on how far one wants to take Mrs. Girton’s comments). What can be said with surety is that one group clearly felt that their identity was being threatened, and the other felt as though the merger “was almost a non-event.”⁷⁷

When asked what they personally thought about the merger, the Methodists all responded with answers like, “it didn’t seem to effect me too much.”⁷⁸ The EUB’s sampled seemed to hold no consistent opinions. Suzanne Heilman, the only formerly EUB member of Pine Street (in the sample) came right out and said, “I thought it was fine, I was for it.”⁷⁹ Chester Harbach and Augustus Thomas, members of First, seemed more neutral. Chet claimed that he “didn’t form any kind of opinion about it at that time.”⁸⁰ Of the two remaining, Dale

⁷³ Mary-Virginia Girton, interview by author, 8 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

⁷⁵ Interview with Augustus Thomas.

⁷⁶ Suzanne Heilman, interview by author, 2 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author, emphasis author.

⁷⁷ David Brouse, interview by author, 18 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

⁷⁹ Interview with Suzanne Heilman.

⁸⁰ Chester Harbach, interview by author, 23 October 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author, and interview with Augustus O. Thomas.

Bower said that he “felt that fear” that “the EUB Church would be swallowed up,” and Burnice Kackenmeister said, “I’m not sure I was happy about it.”⁸¹

What can be said with certainty is that there were no overtly hostile reactions among the sample. Even those who personally feared the merger did not take strong actions to prevent it. There were likely three reasons for this. First, as several former EUB’s reported, “it was a decision that Conference made” and “it’s one of those things that the hierarchy controls.”⁸² This means that most people felt personally incapable of stopping the merger, even if they really wanted to. Secondly, there was a consensus among both groups that “we pretty much believed the same things.” Thirdly, as the Pine Street historian David Brouse said, “Before it [i.e. First] was UM, we came to one another’s events. We were very much alike, it was not like going to a Lutheran church or an Episcopal church.”⁸³ Put simply, the lack of strong local resistance to the merger (on the part of EUB’s) was a result of the powerful ecclesiastical system of the EUB Church, an understanding of shared doctrine, and a feeling of kinship with former Methodists that came both from an understanding of shared history and a similarity in worship styles. If resistance to the merger was in the open at either Pine Street or First, none of those interviewed acknowledged it.

Although this is true, denominational identity did not simply die with the merger. Augustus Thomas, who had moved to Williamsport in the late sixties and was looking for a new church said, “we would go from one [church] to the other and still know which was which. That [ability to tell one from the other] probably lasted another five years.”⁸⁴ Dale Bower reported that he was commonly offended in the early years when people would talk about “the Methodist Church,” omitting the word “United.”⁸⁵ Pat Wittig, a member of Pine Street, related two stories about former EUB churches that she had heard and that she felt pertained to denominational divides in the seventies and eighties. The first was a story about “a man... who used to scratch off the word ‘Methodist’ from his church envelope every Sunday.” The second story was of a former EUB congregation that specifically requested a former EUB pastor. What is particularly note worthy about this incident is that it occurred in 1988, proving that former denominational identities were not dead, even at that relatively late date.⁸⁶

The third series of questions focused around the Pine Street fire. The reason that the fire is even an issue is that First was the first church to invite Pine Street to meet with them after the fire. Pine Streeters met at First for one Sunday,

⁸¹ Dale Bower, interview by author, 31 October 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author and Bernice Kackenmeister, interview by author, 20 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author.

⁸² The first quote is from the interview with Bernice Kackenmeister, and the second is from the interview with Augustus Thomas.

⁸³ Interview with David Brouse.

⁸⁴ Interview with Bud Thomas.

⁸⁵ Interview with Dale Bower.

⁸⁶ Patricia S. Wittig, interview by author, 21 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author.

and then moved in with Calvary UMC, a former Methodist Church. Subsequently, a congregational merger between First and Pine Street was formally discussed. In the end, the special commission from Pine Street rejected it.⁸⁷ On the surface, this has all the feel of former denominational tension on a massive scale. But when all the votes were counted, no one even thought that former denominational identity had anything to do with the affair.

With regards to meeting at Calvary instead of First, several reasons were given, and none of them pertain to the former denominational question. David Brouse gave a very convincing reason when he said, “if we’d have gone to First [as opposed to Calvary] we’d have lost our *congregational* identity.” He then cited the fact that when Pine Street worshipped with First, they worshipped as a blended congregation. Maintaining the distinctive identity of the Pine Street congregation was certainly on the minds of at least some of the leaders. Although Calvary allowed Pine Street to meet for worship at a separate time, Brouse reported with some dissatisfaction that even with the separate meeting time Pine Street’s “identity was blurred” during the stay at Calvary.⁸⁸ A second reason for the move to Calvary that was commonly given in the interviews was the financial trouble in which Calvary found itself. Because of Pine Street’s enormous insurance compensation after the fire, the Pine Street congregation had more money than they knew what to do with. Calvary, on the other hand, had a very large building, and was struggling financially to keep it maintained. Thus, the seemingly obvious reason for Pine Street to meet at Calvary was to help them to maintain their building. A third possible reason for the move was supplied by Mary-Virginia Girton, who said, “Personally, I thought that perhaps [Pastor] Derwood [Strunk, of Pine Street] was afraid of losing his congregation.”⁸⁹ As Dale Bower also testified, Pastor Grubb at First Church was a magnetic pastor.⁹⁰ During Grubb’s tenure, from 1976 until 1988, First Church grew from 445 members to 695 members, an increase of about 56 percent. Not only did Pine Street fail to grow over the same period, it actually declined.⁹¹ Therefore, Mrs. Girton’s theory should not be casually discarded, and pastoral rivalry may have played a part in the move.

Likewise, denomination apparently played no role in the decision of Pine Street to rebuild, rather than merge with First. The primary reason given was a failure to agree on a place to meet. The people of First didn’t want to give up their building, and the people of Pine Street didn’t want to move into First’s building, because, as David Brouse put it, “we would have become secondary, and lost the identity of the group.”⁹² The idea of joining First in their building

⁸⁷ Interview with David Brouse.

⁸⁸ Interview with David Brouse, emphasis author.

⁸⁹ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

⁹⁰ Interview with Dale Bower.

⁹¹ *The Official Journal(s) of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Ed. William Brown (Mobile, Alabama: M. A. Publishing, 1977-1989).

⁹² Interview with David Brouse.

was intolerable. To many members of Pine Street, this would have been a disgrace to their glorious past, and an abandonment of the ideal of the grandeur of “Old Pine.”

Disgrace or no disgrace, (the former-Methodist) Bishop Warman was intent that Pine Street should not rebuild, and it is his actions that totally discredit any argument that the proposed congregational merger between First and Pine Street failed primarily on the basis of former denominational antagonism. Warman actively sought to have Pine Street merge with First, but, when he saw that that simply would not happen, he came to Williamsport to plead with the members of Pine Street not to rebuild. He suggested instead that Pine Street merge with Calvary, their host, and a smaller UM church called Grace.⁹³ Both of these churches were former Methodist, and so there was no possibility of any sort of former denomination based animosity among them.⁹⁴ Pine Street rejected this proposal as well. Warman, angry at what he perceived to be a waste of the Church’s money, decreed that nearby Lycoming College was to end its long-standing relationship with Pine Street and begin to relate primarily to First.⁹⁵ This must have been an intentional slap in the face to Pine Street, because a rivalry had developed between the two congregations concerning which was to be the “flagship church” of Williamsport.⁹⁶

Finally, the last category of questions related to current identity and trends in identity. Several things were made very clear from the responses of the group. First, all of the interviewees but one said that they believed that, in general, denomination (e.g. being Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, etc.) is less important today than it was to people at the time of the merger. (The only person who dissented said that he simply didn’t know.)⁹⁷ One man, Russ Lentz, cited the fact that United Methodist sacraments are open to anyone of Christian profession as an example of how denominational barriers were breaking down.⁹⁸ Second, all persons who were interviewed felt that most young people knew very little about the denominational heritage of their respective congregations, and almost certainly had no strong opinions about the Methodist/EUB merger, one way or the other. Third, all of the interviewees but two said they believed that the UMC was moving toward a more unified denominational identity. One of the remaining two abstained to answer, and, exasperated by the wording of the last few questions, exclaimed, “ask the minister!”⁹⁹ The other one said only that he felt that “things are being taken over by the independent churches,” a very unclear response.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Interview with Patricia Wittig.

⁹⁴ Milton Loyer, 56-86.

⁹⁵ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

⁹⁶ Interview with Patricia Wittig.

⁹⁷ Interview with Chester Harbach.

⁹⁸ Russ Lentz, interview by author, 19 November 2003, Williamsport, written notes, in the possession of the author.

⁹⁹ Interview with Chester Harbach.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Dale Bower.

On another issue, there was slightly more division. When asked the question, “Do you think that the 1968 merger was successful in creating one church out of two, speaking in terms of self-identity?,” seven answered yes, two answered no, and one gave a noncommittal answer. Oddly enough, the two who answered no happened to be the very oldest two people who were interviewed. And even these two did not claim that there was a strongly divided identity. Mary-Virginia Girton put her answer like this, “I don’t really think so, at least not one-hundred percent.”¹⁰¹ David Brouse, who argued in favor of a unified identity, commented on those who might have felt differently when he said, “It [i.e. the feeling of divided identity] is a dying feeling. As the older folks leave us, that will go.”¹⁰²

The interviews lead directly to the following conclusions. First, most Methodists felt that nothing had really changed on the local level during and after the merger. Second, EUB’s felt that their identity was threatened, but took no strong actions to combat the perceived threat. Third, although there were tensions in the two churches even until the late eighties, most older people now consider themselves to be solidly United Methodist; they have accepted the change. Fourth, according to the older people, most younger people (born during or after the merger) have little recollection of their Methodist or EUB heritage and are unconcerned with it. Finally, the interviews suggest that denominational identity in general is on the decline, and many modern people “tend to look at Christian churches as Christian churches,” not as churches of a particular denomination.¹⁰³

Supplementary Analyses

Three types of additional analyses will be used to verify the conclusions drawn in the previous section. The first is a statistical analysis of the records of members who have joined or left Pine Street and First since the merger. The second is an analysis of pastoral service records to note changes in the backgrounds of pastors who have served the two churches. The third is further qualitative analysis based on interviews with the current pastors of First and Pine Street, and on the written comments of three former pastors of those churches.

The numbers used in the first quantitative section are based on a combination of the records of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the UMC as reported in the Official Journals for the years 1969 to 2003 and information extracted from the Pine Street Register of Membership (1977-present). Due to key omissions in the data, information from First’s Register of Membership proved impossible to manipulate in any meaningful way.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

¹⁰² Interview with David Brouse.

¹⁰³ Interview with Russ Lentz.

The following chart gives a chi-squared analysis of the data extracted from the Register at Pine Street. The original entries gave the names of the churches from which people came or to which they went (from all over the country). These names were, in all but two cases, coupled to dates, and, hence, useful in the analysis. Information about the former denominational background of all of the churches listed was provided by Dr. Milton Loyer, the Archivist for the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the UMC. In addition, Dr. Loyer made determinations about several UM churches that are the product of a merger between a former EUB and a former Methodist congregation. He assigned “Methodist” or “EUB” to such churches, based on the relative strength of the congregations that merged. Unfortunately, as the Register only went from 1976 (the year before the fire) to present, the exit data from 1968 to 1976 is lost – although the entrance data of everyone who was a member in 1977 was still included.

In examining the following data, several possible causes of error must be considered. First, these charts count members without regard to family units – and so, while singles count only once in the data, married couples count twice, and families with confirmed children carry even more weight. Secondly, the exit analysis assumes that location is not a factor in choice. This is simplistic, as there are some areas that have no former EUB/Methodist churches within a reasonable driving distance. Third, the entrance analysis assumes that all those transferring in from former EUB churches were former EUB, and that all those transferring in from former Methodist churches were former Methodists. Finally, churches listed without addresses in the Register were assumed to be other churches in Williamsport – as opposed to distant churches with the same name.

PINE STREET*

	FROM			Total
	Meth	EUB	Other	
1968-1979	63 (49.6)	13 (19.0)	14 (24.1)	90
1980-1989	94 (102.2)	46 (41.5)	46 (52.3)	196
1990-2002	87 (94.9)	40 (38.5)	55 (48.6)	182
Total	244	99	125	468

$$\chi^2 = 14.62 \quad df = 4 \quad p\text{-value} = .006$$

The chi-squared analysis indicates a statistically significant trend in the former denominational background of people who moved to Pine Street across three periods, which roughly follow the decades of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. The data indicates a downward trend in the percentage of members who came from former Methodist backgrounds, and an increased percentage of

* The values in parenthesis are the expected values, if the two variables (former denominational background and time period) were independent. The numbers not in parenthesis are the observed values.

members joining the church by transfer from both former EUB churches and other denominations. From 1968 to 1979, fully 70% (i.e., 63 of 90) of the people transferring into Pine Street were transferring in from former Methodist churches. About 14% of the remainder came from formerly EUB United Methodist Churches, and the remaining 16% came from other denominations. In the 1980s, the percentages changed noticeably. Over the course of that decade, about 48% of those who joined Pine Street were from former-Methodist backgrounds, 23% from former EUB backgrounds, and 28% from other denominations. There was very little change in the trend that was established in the eighties during the nineties.

This substantial turnaround in where people came from who transferred to Pine Street might be indicative of either a decreasing former denominational identity among Pine Streeters, a decreasing former denominational identity among those entering the church, or both.

As was mentioned before, the exit data based on the Pine Street Register excludes 1968 to 1976. Because of this, the so called “trend of the seventies,” is based entirely on the three remaining years. But these years were very turbulent ones for Pine Street, being the years they spent at Calvary. As such, the following findings should be taken “with a pinch of salt,” as the saying goes.

PINE STREET

	TO			Total
	Meth	EUB	Other	
1976-1979	36 (42.3)	21 (13.3)	24 (25.4)	81
1980-1989	72 (75.7)	20 (23.9)	53 (45.4)	145
1990-2002	82 (72.0)	19 (22.8)	37 (43.2)	138
Total	190	60	114	364

$$\chi^2 = 10.47 \quad df = 4 \quad p\text{-value} = .033$$

The trend shown by this data is counterintuitive. It shows that, between 1977 and 1979, 25% (i.e., 21 of 81) of people leaving Pine Street went to former EUB churches. It further shows that in both the eighties and nineties, roughly 14% of all those who left Pine Street went to former EUB churches. Following the logic used in the last section, this would seem to indicate that members of Pine Street are now more conscious of former denomination. The problem with taking that approach is that it doesn't factor in the group of people who left Pine Street and joined First in protest of Pine Street's rejection of the merger. To be sure, the group favoring merging the congregations was smallish, but, as Mary-Virginia Girton indicated in her interview, people did leave Pine Street over just that issue.¹⁰⁴ When the records are analyzed, it turns out that eight of those twenty-one people in the category of “To EUB” went, in fact, to First. The presence of

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

this group of eight dissenters biases the statistics. Although they were certainly men and women who didn't give much consideration to former denomination, the crisis event of the fire made them show (in terms of these numbers) their lack of concern for former denomination in an irregular way. The actions of these eight people unbalance the trend, making the deviation from the expected variation statistically significant. However, a proper explanation for this deviation must be the unusual circumstances of the Pine Street fire. Former denomination can only be seen as a background issue in this situation.

For First UMC, the data is very different. Because it is from the Journals of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, it is listed only in terms of transfers from/to UMC and from/to other.¹⁰⁵ Thus, there can be no analysis of the former denominational identity question from it. However, it might be useful in indicating that the concept of denominational loyalty is, on the whole, in decline.

FIRST

	FROM		Total
	UMC	Other	
1976-1979	108 (94.7)	31 (44.3)	139
1980-1989	99 (113.0)	67 (53.0)	166
1990-2002	128 (127.3)	59 (59.7)	187
Total	335	157	492

$$\chi^2 = 11.31 \quad df = 2 \quad p\text{-value} = .003$$

The above data from First indicates a strong increase in the percentage of non-United Methodists joining First in the 1980s, and a consistently higher percentage in the 1990s as opposed to the 1970s. This might indicate that over the two decades since the 1970s ended people joining First from outside the denomination might have considered denomination less of a factor as they selected a church. There is, of course, no way to be sure what caused this trend. It may simply have been the ministry of magnetic pastors such as James Grubb.

Finally, the exit data from First UMC did not prove to be statistically significant across the decades; when analyzed, it had a p-value of .071. The fluctuation cannot be concluded to be other than fluctuation of a random nature.

In conclusion, it is clear that Pine Street's entrance data is by far the most helpful, in that it suggests a substantial change in the trend of the sorts of people joining Pine Street since the 1970s. People without former Methodist background seem to have become much more comfortable with the idea of joining Pine Street, both from former EUB backgrounds and backgrounds in other denominations. First's entrance data is also mildly helpful, in showing that, percentage wise, more

¹⁰⁵ *Official Journal(s) of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Eds. John Buhler (1969-1976), William Brown (1977-2000), and Shirley Sowers (2001-2003), (Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 1969-2003), Williamsport District Sections.

people from other denominational backgrounds are joining First now than were thirty years ago. Because of the circumstances surrounding the exit data from Pine Street, it proved to be skewed and less than helpful. And finally, First's exit data can establish no change in trend since the 1970s, because of its statistical insignificance.

A second type of quantitative analysis consists of examination and interpretation of the service records of the pastors who have served First or Pine Street since 1968. The service records, like the Register/Journal numbers, also suggest a quiet breakdown of former denominational identity.

In 1968, Pine Street and First were being served by Thomas Hopkins and Melvin Whitmire, respectively. Whitmire never served a former Methodist for the simple reason that he retired from First in 1975.¹⁰⁶ Hopkins also never served a former EUB church, although he had the chance to. He was moved in 1972 to a former Methodist church in Tyrone, PA. He retired from that church in 1977.¹⁰⁷

The next pastor of Pine Street was Owen D. Brubaker. He was a former Methodist, and he, like Hopkins, never served a former EUB church in his career.¹⁰⁸

In 1976, both churches got new pastors, and Pine Street explored new territory. Derwood Strunk, the new pastor of Pine Street, had actually served a formerly EUB church before he was assigned to Pine Street. Although he was a comfortable former Methodist, he had experience working with men and women from the other side of the merger.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, First got James Grubb, who had never served a former Methodist church (although he would go on to do so after his tenure at First).¹¹⁰

In 1984, Strunk was replaced by Walter Schell, who never served a former EUB church. Schell served at Pine Street until he retired in 1995.¹¹¹ In 1988, Grubb was asked to be the District Superintendent of the State College District. He accepted his appointment, and was replaced by another former EUB, Robert Close. Like his predecessors at First, Close had never served a Methodist church. He had served as a District Superintendent, however, so this might be described as the first time First was served by a minister who had extensive experience working with former Methodist churches.¹¹²

In the mid-nineties, both churches changed pastors again. First was sent Dennis Otto, who was, like all his predecessors, a former EUB. But unlike those

¹⁰⁶ *Official Journal of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Ed. William Brown, (Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 1987), 422-423.

¹⁰⁷ *Official Journal of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Ed. William Brown, (Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 2000), 399.

¹⁰⁸ *Official Journal of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Ed. William Brown, (Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 1988), 406.

¹⁰⁹ *Official Journal of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Ed. Shirley Sowers, (Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 2003), 465.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 423.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 457.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 410.

who went before him, Pastor Otto had actually served at a former Methodist church before coming to First. To date, First has never had a former Methodist pastor.¹¹³ Pine Street, however, finally got its first former EUB pastor in 1995. The Rev. Thomas Jacobs was a man both of EUB background and who had primarily served former EUB congregations during his ministry. He was Pine Street's trendbreaker, breaking a trend that has not yet been broken at First.¹¹⁴ In 2000, he was replaced by Drue Sherman, another man of Methodist background. However, like Pastor Strunk before him, Pastor Sherman had already served in formerly EUB churches.¹¹⁵

What is truly amazing is that in 35 years, only one pastor serving either of these two churches has been a pastor of the opposite former denomination. Out of a combined total of 70 service years, only five have been filled by the presence in one of the churches of a pastor of opposite former denomination. What is significant, in terms of the larger analysis, is that there was an increasing trend of former denominational mixing among the pastors who served both churches. While First has not yet been appointed a formerly Methodist pastor, the trend is clearly going in that direction, albeit much more gradually than the trend at Pine Street.

The final analysis used in this paper is based on the responses of the two current pastors of First and Pine Street, and three of their predecessors, two of whom served Pine Street, and one of whom served First, to a standard "pastoral interview," which was created to supplement the interviews with the laity. The surveys/interviews of these pastors serve to clarify several residual issues in the analysis as presented thus far. They can be neatly divided into two categories. The first category is those questions that pertain to the reasons behind pastoral appointments, and the second are those that pertain to the attitudes/identities of the congregations.

Beginning with the first category, when asked the question, "why do you think you were appointed to this particular church?" Pastor Close wrote that he felt that the reason he was appointed to First was his previous experiences in large churches.¹¹⁶ Pastor Jacobs said that he thought that he was assigned to Pine Street in order to assist them in a move from traditional to contemporary worship.¹¹⁷ Pastor Otto was quite forthright in saying that he felt he was appointed because of his track record in "numeric/ministry growth."¹¹⁸ Pastor Sherman said he felt likewise.¹¹⁹ The final respondent, Pastor Schell, indicated that he thought that he

¹¹³ Ibid., 450.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 431.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 461.

¹¹⁶ Rev. Robert L. Close, written response to a survey by the author, no date given, Lewisburg, PA, in the possession of the author.

¹¹⁷ Rev. Thomas Jacobs, written response to a survey by the author, no date given, State College, PA, in the possession of the author.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Rev. Dennis Otto.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Rev. Drue Sherman.

was appointed to Pine Street because he was “intimately familiar with the needs of the church.”¹²⁰

When asked specifically, “Might your appointment... have had something to do with your previous denominational affiliation and the previous denominations of the churches you served at previously?” the response was a uniform, “no.”

In order to “beat a dead horse,” as it were, a third, more specific question was leveled at the pastors, namely, “Do you think the bishops have intentionally appointed former Methodists to Pine Street and former EUB’s to First?” Again, the pastors responded with a universal, “no.” Pastor Close elaborated on this by writing, “as a member of the [Bishop’s] Council from 1971-’77, that factor was rarely mentioned.”¹²¹ The implication is that, if such things were rarely spoken of in the seventies, they likely were not spoken of at all in the eighties and nineties. While affirming the clear trend of the pastoral service data, the pastoral interviews seem to suggest that such data is not good evidence either for or against the presence/strength of former denominational identity within the two churches.

In the second set of questions, an interesting phenomenon played itself out in the surveys/interviews. It was based around a question asking the pastors whether their church had a strong former denominational identity; the three former pastors affirmed it as a still living phenomenon, while the two current pastors disagreed somewhat. Where Pastor Jacobs cited “Pine Street’s older members” as feeling “strongly” about their Methodist background, Pastor Sherman seemed more unsure.¹²² He said he felt as though some of the older people were more staunchly “former Methodist” than others.¹²³ Pastor Otto, on the other hand, said that his people “didn’t know about it.”¹²⁴

All of the pastors agreed, however, that former denominational identity was a dying feature in the life of the two churches. As Pastor Schell put it, “less and less are [the] people aware of heritages.”¹²⁵

So, to recapitulate, it can be said that the pastors, in general, echoed the sentiments of the congregations. They favored notions that former denominational identity was becoming increasingly unimportant, but were divided over whether or not to call it a totally “dead” issue. In addition, they rejected the argument that the bishops had appointed pastors to First and Pine Street with the former denomination of the pastor as a key priority.

¹²⁰ Rev. Walter Schell, written response to a survey by the author, no date given, Williamsport, in the possession of the author.

¹²¹ Survey taken by Rev. Robert Close.

¹²² Survey taken by Rev. Thomas Jacobs.

¹²³ Interview with Rev. Drue Sherman.

¹²⁴ Interview with Rev. Dennis Otto.

¹²⁵ Survey taken by Rev. Walter Schell.

Conclusion

In the late twentieth century, beginning with the merger of the Methodist and EUB Churches, the three religious movements that had been so narrowly separated two centuries earlier converged. During the early stages of this convergence in Williamsport, things were not always pleasant. At times, feelings ran high, particularly among the former EUB's. However, in spite of some minor offenses and causes for hostility, both former EUB's and former Methodist failed to think former denominational identity so important as to impart it to their children. As the interviews, both with the pastors and with the laity have confirmed, young people in the churches are not only unconcerned with denominational heritage, they are becoming less concerned even with their current denominational identities. Many young believers have come to the conclusion that denominations are meaningless, and are now "of the opinion that we have too many denominations, and can't figure out why."¹²⁶ These changes in the way that young people think about denominations and religious identity have led directly to changes in the patterns of membership transfers at First and Pine Street.

Thus, this generation is witness to a great irony. What is ironic about this study of identity is that the final conclusion that must be drawn from the data is not that the identities of United Methodist parishioners have ceased to be "Methodist" or "EUB" and have become "United Methodist," but rather, identities have found new, non-denominational foci. The convergence of identity in the United Methodist Church has been a convergence on a higher "Christian" identity, which exceeds denomination. As Mary-Virginia Girton put it, "narrow denominationalism died with my parents' generation."¹²⁷

As the ecumenical movement came of age in America, it broke down identity barriers among people of most denominations. Calvinists began to feel more at one with Baptists, Protestants more at one with Catholics. This feeling of a larger identity has helped modern Christians to leave behind the denominations in which they were raised, and to join other denominations that they find more appealing. However, modern choice of denomination is rarely determined by the official theological positions of the church bodies, but rather, it rests on the doctrines, ministries, and outreaches of local churches. In the America of the twenty-first century, "denomination" is not chosen; it is churches that are chosen.

¹²⁶ Interview with Russ Lentz.

¹²⁷ Interview with Mary-Virginia Girton.

Bibliography of Secondary Sources

- Bainton, Roland. *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1952
- Brouse, David and Mary Jo Brouse, *A Narrative of Events in the Life of Pine Street United Methodist Church*. Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 2001.
- Gilmore, Paul G. "The 1894 Evangelical Association Split and the Williamsport Evangelical Churches," *The Chronicle*, vol. 5 (1994): 55-62.
- Loyer, Milton, "Systematized Backgrounds of Pennsylvania's United Methodist Churches." *The Chronicle*, vol. 2 (1991), 56-86.
- Maser, Frederick E., *Methodism in Central Pennsylvania 1771-1969*. Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Company, 1971.
- Miller, Charles and William Raker, *The Histories of the Pennsylvania and Central Pennsylvania Conferences of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*. York, PA: Craft Press, Inc., 1968.
- Washburn, Paul. *An Unfinished Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984.

Bibliography of Primary Sources

- Bolivar, Donna. Interview by author, 17 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Bower, Dale. Interview by author, 31 October 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Brouse, David. Interview by author, 18 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Close, Robert L. Written response to a survey by the author, no date given, Lewisburg, PA. In the possession of the author.
- Gramley, A. D. *Dedicatory Program and other services commemorating the completion of the New Church Home of the First Evangelical Church*. Williamsport, PA: Grit Publishing Co., 1924.
- Fitzgerald, Howard S. "A Study of the Sixteen Methodist Churches in the Greater Williamsport Area: The Tabulator's Summary." Williamsport, PA: The Methodist Union of Williamsport, PA, 1967.
- Girton, Mary-Virginia. Interview by author, 8 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Harbach, Chester. Interview by author, 23 October 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Heilman, Suzanne. Interview by author, 2 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- History and Directory of the Fourth Street Methodist Episcopal Church*. Williamsport, PA: J. M. Schrock, 1906.

- Jacobs, Thomas. Written response to a survey by the author, no date given, State College, PA. In the possession of the author.
- Kackenmeister, Bernice. Interview by author, 20 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Lentz, Russ. Interview by author, 19 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Losch, Lenore "Our History" *50th Anniversary Celebration*. Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1974.
- Official Journal(s) of the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church* (1969-2003). ed. John Buhler (1969-1976), ed. William Brown (1977-2000), and ed. Shirley Sowers (2001-2003). Mobile Alabama: M.A. Publishing, 1969-2003.
- The Official Register of Membership of the Pine Street United Methodist Church*, located at Pine Street United Methodist Church, 441 Pine Street, Williamsport, PA 17701. Started 1977. Currently in use. Data extracted on 7 November 2003.
- Otto, Dennis. Interview by author, 18 November 2003, Williamsport. In the possession of the author.
- The Pine Street United Methodist Church. *The Celebration of Consecration and Dedication*. Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1980.
- Schell, Walter. Written response to a survey by the author, no date given, Williamsport. In the possession of the author.
- Sherman, Drue. Interview by author, 29 October 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.
- Souvenir Program of the One Hundred Third Anniversary of the Pine Street Methodist Episcopal Church*. Williamsport, PA: Publisher Unnamed, 1929.
- Thomas, Augustus O. Interview by author, 5 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of author.
- Wittig, Patricia S. Interview by author, 21 November 2003, Williamsport. Written notes. In the possession of the author.