

## **The Evangelical Church in Northeast Pennsylvania**

*compiled from the conference archives, 2011*

The United Methodist Church has roots in three distinct predecessor denominations: the Evangelical Church, the United Brethren Church, and the Methodist Church. In 1946 the Evangelical and United Brethren denominations united to form the Evangelical United Brethren [EUB] Church, and in 1968 the EUB and Methodist bodies joined to form the United Methodist Church.

Each of the three predecessor denominations is well-represented in the former Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. The seven counties of northeastern Pennsylvania [Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Pike, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming] that are now totally within with newly-formed Susquehanna Conference, are almost exclusively Methodist in background. While there never was any organized United Brethren work within these counties, there were several Evangelical congregations – five of which continue to exist within United Methodism.<sup>1</sup> This paper tells the story the Evangelical work within the northeast portion of the Susquehanna Conference.

The denomination that became the Evangelical Church was originally known as the Evangelical Association. It was started by Jacob Albright, who was converted in 1792 and started touring in 1796 as an independent evangelist with a burden to preach the gospel to the German-speaking population in eastern Pennsylvania. The first classes among those converted under his preaching were organized in Bucks, Berks and Northampton counties in 1800. The first annual conference was held in Lebanon county in 1807, and the first General Conference met in Union county in 1816.

The Evangelical work entered northeast Pennsylvania from two different directions. Circuit riders from the Central Pennsylvania Conference traveled up the North Branch of the Susquehanna River into Luzerne, Wyoming and Susquehanna counties; while their counterparts from the East Pennsylvania Conference traveled up the Lehigh and Delaware rivers into Lackawanna, Wayne and Pike counties.

In 1894 there was a national split within the Evangelical Association. About 1/3 of the membership left the denomination and formed the United Evangelical [UE] Church, while the rest remained with the Evangelical Association [EA]. In truth, the split was the end result of pride, stubbornness and

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<sup>1</sup> One of these congregations, Stone Church in Luzerne County's Salem township, has always been served from a circuit based in Columbia County and is not covered in this paper. The remaining four Evangelical congregations entered the Susquehanna Conference in 2010 from the former Wyoming Conference. In addition, the closed Salem church in the same township was also associated with Columbia County and is not covered in this paper.

issues between personalities in the denomination's leadership. In some congregations, the UE/EA controversy divided families, led to verbal and physical attacks, and ended in court battles over the church property. Eventually – or as some have said, “when enough funerals had taken place” – the UE and EA factions re-united in 1922 to form the Evangelical Church. Even then the re-union was not complete, as a handful of UE churches chose to remain separate and form the present Evangelical Congregational denomination.

There were, however, some semi-legitimate reasons for the division and some philosophical differences between the UE and EA factions – also known as the Dubsites and the Esherites, after the two feuding bishops. The UE's were more progressive; they generally favored use of the English language, less authoritarian church leadership, more congregational control at the local level, innovative practices like Sunday School, and conversion rather than sanctification as the primary message of the church. The EA's generally favored keeping the German language, strong denominational leadership with little place for individual or congregational variation, the religious training of children in the home, and holiness (i.e., "entire sanctification") as the achievable goal of the Christian. In parts of the Midwest, language was the major issue and the two groups were simply referred to as the English Evangelicals and the German Evangelicals.

In general, the split severely weakened the denomination throughout the entire country – for a significant number of pastors and lay persons left the Evangelical Church in disgust, and potential converts were not attracted to a church rife with internal squabbling. A nontrivial number of Evangelical churches closed for good – some because the congregation was badly divided and neither faction was strong enough to continue, some because the conference was weakened to the point that it could not supply the congregation, and others because the people simply got tired of all the feuding.

Nationwide, the most common scenario was as follows: *The local Conference split, with 1/3 or fewer of the congregations siding with UE's. This led to two competing and overlapping conferences with the same name – a smaller one in the UE denomination, and a larger one in the EA denomination. The secular courts ruled that the EA faction was the legal continuation of the original denomination, and so congregations that sided with the UE's either had to erect a new church building or purchase back their own building from the Evangelical Association. If a congregation was divided, regardless of the relative sizes of the groups, the EA faction automatically kept the building.* The 1994 volume of *The Chronicle* featured a series of articles on the split and its effects on various local congregations.

In the Central Pennsylvania Conference, virtually every congregation and all the leadership sided with the UE's. In fact there were so few Central Pennsylvania congregations remaining in the EA that the Evangelical Association

could no longer maintain a Central Pennsylvania Conference. The Central Pennsylvania congregations choosing to remain in the EA were made part of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the EA. Those congregations included the German congregations in York and Williamsport, and parts of several rural circuits. Besides the German congregations in York and Williamsport, the only Central Pennsylvania charges that survived within the EA until the 1922 re-merger were Penn's Valley, Port Trevorton, Spring Mills, Sugar Valley, Swissdale, Waller, and two unserved congregations in Mifflin county.

In the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, about half the congregations sided with the UE. When the re-merger came in 1922, almost all of the UE churches refused to re-unite and formed the Evangelical Congregational denomination – which exists to this day with headquarters and a seminary in Meyerstown, Lebanon County.

The Evangelical churches in northeast Pennsylvania happened to be in just the right geographical location to experience everything that the split produced nationwide.

Almost all the Central Pennsylvania Conference congregations in the area chose to follow the vast majority of their sister congregations and side with the UE's. Only on the Tunkhannock charge was there a division of opinion. As was typical in such cases, (a) the EA retained possession of the buildings, (b) there was considerable animosity between the competing factions, (c) the EA supporters had to be served by the East Pennsylvania Conference of the EA, and (d) none of the congregations of either faction survived until the 1922 re-merger.

The East Pennsylvania Conference congregations in the area generally chose to stay with the EA. In Wayne county a minority sided with the UE, and these congregations co-existed on friendly terms until they were placed together to form a single Evangelical charge following the 1922 re-merger.

The remainder of this paper gives a brief summary of the history preserved in the conference archives for each Evangelical congregation known to have erected a church building within northeast Pennsylvania. For convenience and clarity of presentation, the congregations have been arranged by circuit – but since arrangements changed considerably over the years, the circuits may never have appeared at any one point in time exactly as presented. While several other Evangelical-owned buildings existed in the area, supporting documentation has not survived in any records available at the conference archives.

## **Central Pennsylvania Conference**

### **1. Luzerne Circuit**

This region was on the boundary between the Central Pennsylvania and East Pennsylvania Conferences of the Evangelical Association. Originally served by circuit riders from Central Pennsylvania, the circuit was given to East

Pennsylvania in 1847 when the General Conference fixed the Susquehanna River (and its North Branch) as that conference's western boundary from Maryland New York. By mutual agreement, however, East Pennsylvania returned the circuit to Central Pennsylvania the following year. The General Conference of 1855 finally formally ruled that the Luzerne Circuit belonged to the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The circuit was UE during the split.

**a. Briggsville, Nescopek township, Luzerne County**

This building stood on the other side of the cemetery from the Lutheran and Reformed Church. The 1873 county atlas gives the exact location. It ceased to exist before the charge was dissolved in 1924.

**b. Mt. Zion, Hollenback township, Luzerne County**

In 1847 preachers from the Columbia circuit came by invitation and took up an appointment in the Peters schoolhouse. The first church was erected in 1849, followed in 1867 by a new church and a parsonage. The parsonage made this the seat of what was called the Wapwallopen charge for many years. The parsonage was sold in 1924 and the churches on the charge split between the West Nanticoke and Necopeck charges. Mt. Zion ceased to exist at that time or very soon afterward. The 1873 county atlas gives the exact location of the church and the parsonage.

**c. Slocum Faith, Slocum township, Luzerne County**

Organized in 1869, Slocum was for many years part of the Wapwallopen charge. The congregation worshiped in a union wooden church where the park is now before erecting their own building to the east. In 1924 it was placed on a charge with West Nanticoke, and the 1970 state-wide United Methodist reorganization placed that two-point charge in the Wyoming Conference. It has since been placed on a charge with two nearby former Methodist congregations. Slocum Faith is one of the four former Evangelical congregations that entered the Susquehanna Conference from the former Wyoming Conference.

**2. Nescopeck Albright, Luzerne County**

This congregation dates from 1878, when Isaiah Bower crossed the river from Berwick to hold services in a school house. The first church building was erected in 1881. The appointment was part of the Luzerne circuit until becoming a station appointment in 1889. The congregation was UE during the split. On two occasions, Hetlerville was attached to this charge for several years. In 2001 the congregation was placed Wesley, the former ME church in town, to form a two-point charge, and in 2010 the congregation ceased to exist.

**3. Ransom Circuit**

This circuit was UE during the split.

**a. Bethel, Falls township, Wyoming County**

This congregation was organized and erected a church building in 1880 that was known as the Swartwood Church. In 1887 the building was sold

at a sheriff's sale to an individual and served by the Presbyterians for several years. In 1919 the structure was re-opened as Bethel United Evangelical Church and attached to the Ransom charge. The Ransom-Bethel charge was placed in the Wyoming Conference by the 1970 state-wide United Methodist reorganization – and that arrangement continued for another 30+ years. When the Ransom congregation voted to merge with the three nearby former Methodist congregations in 2008, the Bethel congregation opted to continue by itself as a part-time appointment. Bethel is one of the four former Evangelical congregations that entered the Susquehanna Conference from the former Wyoming Conference.

**b. Mountain Valley, Ransom township, Lackawanna County**

Speaking of the Evangelical Association, the 1880 county history states, "This denomination uses the schoolhouse at Mountain Valley for meetings and Sunday School." The congregation appears to have later erected a building, for the 1888 conference journal grants the request of "the members of the Mountain Valley church on Wyoming circuit for permission to collect on Lewisburg District for the benefit of their church." The 1939 conference history states that the Mountain Valley church was closed "several years ago" and that the members transferred to Ransom.

**c. Ransom, Ransom township, Lackawanna County**

This class was formed in 1858 by the preacher assigned to the Wilkes-Barre mission. Meetings were held for a short time in the nearby Lutheran chapel and then for several years in the home of Miss Celinda Gardner. The church building was erected in 1871. For many years this was the home church of the Ransom-Bethel charge, which was placed in the Wyoming Conference by the 1970 state-wide United Methodist reorganization – and that arrangement continued for another 30+ years. In 2008, the Ransom congregation voted to merge with the three former Methodist congregations of the nearby Newton charge to form a new congregation.

**4. Scranton Zion, Lackawanna County**

After an unsuccessful attempt to organize a congregation here in 1867, and the failure of the East Pennsylvania Conference's efforts 1871-1882, a congregation was finally organized in Scranton in 1891. The congregation met in Cooperative Hall in Hyde Park, the Railroad YMCA Hall, and a hall on the corner of Capouse Avenue and Marion Street before their building at 1420 Capouse Avenue was dedicated 1/14/1894. The congregation was UE during the split. The conference journals sketch the rest of the story of the work. By 1915 (page 15) the work had grown to the point where a new building was needed, and in 1924 (page 90) the congregation was given permission to relocate – but apparently that never happened. By 1944 (page 67) the work had ceased and the conference was seeking a buyer for the real estate and furnishings.

**5. Scranton Trinity, Lackawanna County**

This second congregation in Scranton was organized in 1893 and immediately acquired property for a church and parsonage. The congregation was UE during the split. The records are not clear, but the congregation did not survive. It was paired with the Sibley appointment in 1897, and by 1900 it appears to have been discontinued.

**6. Tunkhannock Circuit**

This charge was affected by the split. The Evangelical Association (East Pennsylvania Conference) maintained possession of the buildings, but there was so much feuding and division that no congregations survived to the 1922 denominational re-union.

**a. Bardwell, Tunkhannock township, Wyoming County**

Both the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelical Church tried to claim this building and hold meetings here during the split. There was much animosity, and one group actually set off dynamite by the foundation of the building while the other group was inside. In the end, neither congregation survived until the 1922 denominational re-union. After the split, the building came back to the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Church. It was listed for many years as an unused church on the Ransom charge and finally sold in the 1950's. The structure is now a garage.

**b. Tunkhannock, Wyoming County**

This building was at the corner of Clay and Slocum Streets. Both the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelical Church tried to claim this building and hold meetings here during the split. In the end, neither congregation survived until the 1922 denominational re-union. In 1898, the Evangelical Association tried to maintain a viable charge by adding West Clifford. After West Clifford closed, Tunkhannock was attached to Wilkes-Barre. Services were discontinued in 1903, and the building was sold.

**7. West Clifford Circuit**

**a. West Clifford, Clifford township, Susquehanna County**

The Evangelical church here was erected in 1880. While both the United Evangelicals and the Evangelical Association tried to keep this congregation during the split, the congregation and building ultimately went to the United Evangelicals. But the congregation did not survive. The Association seems to have abandoned the work in 1898 and the United Evangelicals in 1908.

**8. West Nanticoke Calvary, Luzerne County**

In 1893, the pastor at Nescopek began holding services in a school house in West Nanticoke. A Sunday School was organized, and in 1895 the appointment was formally established. Since the first building was erected after 1894, the property never was part of the Evangelical

Association. The congregation was UE during the split and remained in the Central Pennsylvania Conference until the 1970 state-wide United Methodist reorganization placed it in the Wyoming Conference. West Nanticoke is one of the four former Evangelical congregations that entered the Susquehanna Conference from the former Wyoming Conference.

### **East Pennsylvania Conference (EA)**

#### **1. Scranton, Lackawanna County**

The Central Pennsylvania Conference had made an unsuccessful attempt to organize a congregation in Scranton in 1867. The East Pennsylvania Conference set out to establish a mission here in 1871, and a chapel was erected in the Hyde Park section. By 1874 the work was established, but struggling – and so permission was granted to collect funds for the project throughout the Conference. In 1878 the finances were such that a committee was appointed to investigate the situation. The building was sold in an attempt to liquidate the debt. In 1881, a claim of \$400 against the church was assumed by the conference – which was met the following year by assessing the traveling preachers. Scranton was then dropped by the East Pennsylvania Conference, but an enduring congregation was finally organized by the Central Pennsylvania Conference in 1891.

#### **2. Wayne Circuit**

This circuit was separated from Monroe circuit in 1870, with Sterling and Jefferson as the original classes. It was disrupted by the split, with both the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelicals trying to maintain congregations at almost every church. It appears that Wimmers and Tresslarville eventually came under control of the United Evangelicals, and those congregations will be covered in that section. The EA and UE circuits re-united in 1922, sold one of the parsonages, and began the healing process – although there is no evidence that on this circuit there was ever much bitterness or animosity between the two groups

##### **a. Elmdale, Jefferson township, Lackawanna County**

The 1873 county atlas identifies this as the “German Church.” In 1969, following the Methodist-EUB denominational union, this congregation of 47 members entered the Wyoming Conference of the United Methodist Church. The church was discontinued in 1979, with 53 members on the rolls. The building is now the home of the Elmdale Bible Church.

##### **b. Maplewood, Lake township, Wayne County**

This building stood by the Maplewood Evangelical Cemetery on Lake Henry Road. The congregation divided as a result of the denominational split and the dissenters formed the Grace United Evangelical Church of Maplewood and erected their own building a short distance up the road. When the two Wayne circuits came back together in 1922, there were two Maplewood buildings. The UE structure being the newer and better, this EA congregation voted to merge into Maplewood Grace and to sell their

building (1924 journal, page 127) – which was then removed from the site. The church lot and adjoining cemetery were sold two years later (1926 journal, page 297).

**c. Sterling, Dreher township, Wayne County**

This building was in the town of Newfoundland. As Dreher township was originally part of Sterling township, and was so when the Evangelical work was established here, the appointment is referred to as “Sterling” in the church records. The Evangelical Association also owned a parsonage in Newfoundland from 1880 to 1887, at which time the circuit was authorized to build another one in a more suitable part of the circuit. The church was known to have been active as late as 1908, but preaching ceased before the 1922 denominational re-union. The church building was reportedly moved across the street in the 1940’s to become a private residence. The so-called Albright Cemetery of this congregation exists just south of Newfoundland, back off the road about 100 yards.

**3. Wilkes-Barre Salem, Luzerne County**

This congregation began in 1871 when the Evangelical Association pastor from Mauch Chunk came to preach in the homes of families who had been Evangelical before moving to Wilkes-Barre. A chapel was erected in 1873 at the corner of Grove and McCarragher Streets, with services held in German Sunday mornings and in English Sunday evenings. In 1875 the chapel was destroyed by fire and rebuilt. The denominational split divided the congregation, with the Evangelical Association and a minority of the members maintaining possession of the building. Even though the majority of the members left to form First United Evangelical Church, Salem continued to prosper. In 1904 the congregation constructed additional Sunday School rooms and a new parsonage. In 1961 Salem and First merged to form Albright EUB Church and meet in the former First building until their present structure at Dana and Grove Streets was occupied in 1973.

**East Pennsylvania Conference (UE)**

**1. Wayne Circuit**

**a. Maplewood Grace, Lake township, Wayne County**

This congregation was formed by those in the Maplewood Evangelical Association congregation who sided with the United Evangelicals. They erected their own building a short distance away. The congregations followed the example of their parent denominations and re-united in 1922, worshiping in the Grace building and selling the former Evangelical Association property. In 1969, following the Methodist-EUB denomination union, the congregation brought 50 members into the Wyoming Conference of the United Methodist Church. Those members joined with the 16 members of the Maplewood Methodist congregation to

form the Maplewood United Methodist Church, meeting in the former Methodist building. The Grace building has been sold and is now home to an independent congregation.

**b. Tresslarville, Lake township, Wayne County**

In 1969, following the Methodist-EUB denominational union, this congregation of 27 members entered the Wyoming Conference of the United Methodist Church. The church was discontinued in 1979, with 16 members on the rolls. The building has been sold and is currently unused.

**c. Varden, South Canaan township, Wayne County**

This is listed as a church in the final 1922 journal of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church. Following the 1922 denominational re-union, this Wayne circuit was then transferred to the former Evangelical Association conference and combined with their Wayne circuit. There is no further mention of any appointment or church building at Varden.

**d. Wimmers, Jefferson township, Lackawanna County**

This church was discontinued in 1960, with 24 members on the rolls. The building is now the home of the Wimmers Bible Fellowship Church.

**2. Wilkes-Barre First, Luzerne County**

This congregation began in 1891 when a majority of the members at Salem identified with what was to become the United Evangelical Church and were forced to leave and erect their own building around the corner at 111 Dana Street. In 1961 Salem and First merged to form Albright EUB Church and meet in the former First building until their present structure at Dana and Grove Streets was occupied in 1973. Albright is one of the four former Evangelical congregations that entered the Susquehanna Conference from the former Wyoming Conference.

**New York Conference**

**1. Oakland Trinity, Susquehanna County**

Oakland is across the river from the town of Susquehanna. Stocker's 1887 county history states, "Trinity Church of the Evangelical Association of North America was organized in 1880 and is commonly known as the German Church. In 1881 a church was erected." This agrees with Evangelical records which indicate that Susquehanna was taken up as a mission by the New York Conference in 1880. Services were held in German. It existed as a separate appointment until 1895, when it was placed "under supervision of the Binghamton preacher who was to oversee the work there." The building, on Westfall Avenue in the south end of the borough, was sold to the Methodist Episcopal congregation in 1896. In 1924 the Oakland congregation voted to unite with Susquehanna. The Oakland EV/ME building later became the Oakland Borough Hall, and it is now used for storage.