

The Methodist Protestant Church in Northeast Pennsylvania

This collection of three articles attempts to fill in some holes in the available information about the Methodist Protestant Church in northeast Pennsylvania. The Methodist Protestant Church was born in 1830 when so-called Reformers left the Methodist Episcopal Church to create an organization with less centralized structure and more lay representation at all levels. It ceased to exist as a denomination in 1939 when it re-united with the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South to form the Methodist Church.

The first article by Milton Loyer tells the story of the 15 Methodist Protestant congregations existing in northeast Pennsylvania in 1939 when the denomination joined the Methodist union. Because of the decentralized nature of the denomination, each Methodist Protestant congregation was free to determine its own fate. In the end, five of the fifteen congregations participated in the union – and two of those congregations exist today in the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church.

From 1830 to 1939 there were many other Methodist Protestant congregations in the seven northeast Pennsylvania counties of Bradford, Susquehanna, Wayne, Wyoming, Luzerne, Lackawanna and Pike. Perhaps a future article will be able to document the stories of all of those congregations and charges that did not survive until the 1939 Methodist union.

The second article by Reverends Tagg and Brown is a fascinating account of the involvement of northeast Pennsylvania in the Methodist Protestant division of 1858 to 1877. The denomination split into two competing bodies in 1858, with the dissenting denomination later taking the name Methodist Church. In 1877 the Methodist Church re-joined the Methodist Protestant Church and there was once again a single denomination. In general, the split occurred along geographic lines and each conference either stayed entirely within the Methodist Protestant Church or sided unanimously with the Methodist Church. Such was not the case in the Pennsylvania Conference, and the denomination called in two of its most respected heavyweights to examine and settle the on-going resulting dispute.

While all the Methodist Protestant congregations in northeast Pennsylvania were originally part of the Pennsylvania Conference, such was not the case in 1911 when the Pennsylvania and New York Conferences united to form the Eastern Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. At that time a significant number of Pennsylvania congregations were part of the New York Conference. The article by Tagg and Brown explains how that happened.

The final presentation by Rev. J.F. Lennon, a Methodist Protestant itinerant in northeast Pennsylvania, is a private letter that nicely concludes the collection of three articles by providing personal insights into the denomination.

**The Final Fifteen: The Methodist Protestant Churches
in Northeast Pennsylvania
When the Denomination Ceased to Exist in 1939**

by Milton Loyer 2011

The United Methodist Church was created in 1968 by the union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Methodist Church had been formed in 1939 by the re-union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. That last-named denomination is the focus of this paper.

There were once many Methodist Protestant congregations within the bounds of the present Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church, and the Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church – while not nearly as strong as the adjacent Pittsburgh and Maryland Conferences – possessed respectable size and resources. Over the years, however, the Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church dwindled considerably – mostly because of the ease with which a congregation could opt out of the denomination, which was built into the system as a reaction against the perceived over-centralization of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1911 the Pennsylvania and New York Conferences joined to form the Eastern Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, and the following year the New Jersey Conference joined in. That conference continued until the 1939 union.

Some Methodist Protestant pastors and congregations chose not to participate in the 1939 union. In the Eastern Conference, more than ten pastors and thirty congregations, led by Rev. Newton C. Conant of Calvary MP Church in Camden NJ, remained out of the union to form the Bible Protestant Church – which changed its name in 1985 to the Fellowship of Fundamental Bible Churches, an organization with essentially no centralized structure.

At the time of the 1939 union, the seven counties of northeast Pennsylvania [Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Pike, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming] that are now totally within with newly-formed Susquehanna Conference had 15 active Methodist Protestant congregations – two of which continue to exist within United Methodism. This paper tells the story of those 15 Methodist Protestant congregations.

A. Bloomington circuit, Pastor Roy DuVall: 29 members

The remnant of a once larger circuit, these churches were being served by the pastor at Daleville. In 1939 the Wyoming Conference formally joined this circuit with Daleville to form the new Daleville charge. Roy DuVall (1903-1977) became a member of Wyoming Conference.

The 1940 journal (page 771) reported 3 church buildings on the charge, but the 1941 journal (page 113) reported only 2. By the 1945 journal (page 121), that

number was down to 1 – and only the Daleville church remained. The journals give no specific information on the closure of the Bloomington or Lehigh church.

1. Bloomington – came into the Wyoming Conference in 1939

This congregation was very small and by 1945 had ceased to exist. It is reported that the church building was razed.

2. Lehigh – came into the Wyoming Conference in 1939

This congregation was very small and by 1945 had ceased to exist. It is reported that the church building is now a private home.

B. Daleville, Pastor Roy DuVall: 96 members

3. Daleville – came into the Wyoming Conference in 1939

The first church building erected at this site in 1847 was replaced by the present structure in 1876. This congregation exists today as the Daleville United Methodist Church, and is one of the two former Methodist Protestant congregations in northeast Pennsylvania in the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church. It has been on a two-point charge with the former ME church at Maple Lake since 1972.

C. Hollisterville circuit, TBS: 82 members

James S. McGowan (1915-1980) was the final Methodist Protestant pastor to serve this charge, ending his tenure at the tumultuous September 1939 conference, at which he was assigned to a congregation in New Jersey within the Methodist Church. While there were officially four churches on the charge, there were viable congregations only at Cortez and Hollisterville. Since only one viable congregation was continuing in the Methodist Church, the circuit was left to be supplied. Local pastor Thomas Henwood assumed the duties there (i.e. at Cortez) in December 1939 and proved to be just the person for the job, serving until his death in 1942.

4. Cortez – came into the Wyoming Conference in 1939

Cortez was a separate charge until 1934, when it was placed with Hollisterville in an effort to consolidate area charges. The congregation exists today as the Cortez United Methodist Church, and is one of the two former Methodist Protestant congregations in northeast Pennsylvania in the Susquehanna Conference of the United Methodist Church.

5. East Sterling – closed in 1939

This building is now a private dwelling.

6. Hollisterville – became Bible Protestant in 1939

This congregation continues as the Hollisterville Bible Church. In 1939 the congregation locked the building to the Methodist Church and held Sunday School and church in a private home until finally acquiring the property. The 2011 tax rolls of Wayne County still list the properties by the parsonage on PA 690 as owned by the “Methodist Protestant Church” and the church site on PA 590 as owned by the “Bible Protestant Church.” [The current Hollisterville United Methodist Church was formerly ME.]

7. Mt. Cobb – closed in 1939

This building is now a private dwelling.

D. Pittston, TBS: 107 members

8. Pittston St. Paul's – came into the Wyoming Conference in 1939

This church remained a station appointment until 1959 when it was paired with neighboring Pittston First, the former ME congregation. At that time St. Paul's reported 106 members and First reported 303. In 1977, St. Paul's merged into First to form Pittston United Methodist Church, at which time St. Paul's reported 92 members and First reported 247. The St. Paul's building now houses an independent congregation.

E. Reyburn circuit, John Wesley Booth, 143 members

A 1939 communication from James H. Straughn, president of the Methodist Protestant General Conference and (after the 1939 union) bishop of the Methodist Church, to the Central Pennsylvania Conference commented on this charge as follows: *Rev. J.W. Booth was pastor last year and because he joined the dissenting group which left our Eastern Conference was given a relation of "left without appointment." I understand that this same dissenting group which organized reappointed Booth to this charge. Evidently the charge itself is in a very uncertain condition with reference to the union. In several similar cases Bishop [Ernest G.] Richardson [of the Philadelphia Episcopal Area] reassigned dissenting men to charges hoping it might modify their positions.*

A 1939 communication from F. Lamont Henninger, district superintendent of the Sunbury District of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church, to the cabinet and trustees comments on this charge as follows: *The buildings are none too good, though the parsonage is fairly new. Rev. Booth is utterly opposed to the "modernism" of the Methodist Church and some of its leaders, naming them in particular. He has a long signed petition, which includes most of his membership and I think all of his officials, asking they be released to go their own way. This he carried to Atlantic City [the final session of the Eastern Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church] last week, but nobody would take it. But it represents their frame of mind.*

He was "left without appointment" at Atlantic City and the charge was listed as "to be supplied." Shall we send a man in and displace him? If we do, it would be a raging storm, making a nasty local situation for our own churches thereabouts. Our man I feel would be locked out and not received. In the little community of Bloomingdale, where they have a handful of people and we do too, families are divided in feeling and in fact. Upon my question, he stated they expect to keep right on going until stopped by court. What would we gain by such action? Just a few old buildings; certainly not the people.

I would recommend a way worked out to permit them to go their own way. Taking our legal right to the property would gain us nothing but bad publicity,

bad local feeling, a few church properties we could not turn into much cash, and people who would only be problems for us in the Conference.

Separate signed documents in the conference archives for the Bloomingdale, Koonsville and Reyburn churches state that “the membership of said church is unanimous in their wish to withdraw from the new Methodist Church without any obligation or encumbrance whatsoever” and that they are “more than willing to relinquish the name Methodist Protestant.” Quit-claim deeds were given for these churches, the church hall at Bloomingdale, and the circuit parsonage, with the additional assurance that there would be no use whatever of the name “Methodist.”

As the separation was not as friendly for some circuits in other geographic areas, a final condition was that the Reyburn circuit give assurances they would not participate with “that group of churches formerly belonging to the Eastern Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church which are now contesting the rights of the Methodist Church in the union lately affected.”

9. Bloomingdale – became Bible Protestant in 1939.

This church building was erected in 1883, and the church hall in 1908. The latest addition was completed in 1969. This congregation exists today as the Bloomingdale Bible Church.

10. Koonsville – became Bible Protestant in 1939.

This building was erected in 1895. The congregation was active until about 2000, but services are no longer being held at this site.

11. Register – ceased to exist in 1939.

The community of Register was originally called Pine Creek, and the 1869 church building was sometimes called Webster’s Chapel after the founding pastor. The property, deeded to the MP church in 1870, was no longer being used by the Reyburn circuit in 1939. The arrangements for the property in 1939 are unknown, but a note in the files indicates “Rev. Birdsall [the MP pastor at Shickshinny] is holding services in Register Church. We have given no deed for this.” The building eventually deteriorated and no longer stands; the lot once occupied by the church building is vacant. [The church building in Register that was converted into an existing private home was the former Methodist Episcopal building.]

12. Reyburn – became Bible Protestant in 1939.

This class was organized in 1850 and met in school houses until the present church building was erected in 1884. The Sunday School rooms were added in 1962, and the new social hall was erected in 1996. This congregation exists today as the Reyburn Bible Church.

F. Shickshinny, Pastor Archie F. Birdsall: 89 members

13. Shickshinny – became independent in 1939

The first church building in Shickshinny, this structure had been erected in 1860 as a union church shared equally by the Presbyterians and Methodist

Protestants. It was also used by other denominations for several years, but eventually became exclusively Methodist Protestant.

Pastor Birdsall had been discontented in the Methodist Protestant Church for several years before the 1939 union. In 1937 the congregation voted itself into independency – but the denomination had been keeping the church on the rolls, even though the congregation was no longer submitting annual statistical reports. While there was never any doubt that the Shickshinny MP Church would not participate in the Union to form the Methodist Church, the pastor and congregation proved to be even more independent than most other dissenters by refusing to join them in the newly-created Bible Protestant denomination and launching out completely on their own. In 1940, the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church issued a quit-claim deed to the property.

Rev. Archibald Birdsall served the congregation 1925-1957, followed by his son Rev. Warren Birdsall 1957-1995. The congregation is now affiliated with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, and continues as the Bible Baptist Church of Shickshinny.

G. South Canaan circuit: Pastor R.J. Lucy, 75 members

Ralph J. Lucy (1888-1975) and his wife, the former Lena Mae White (1888-1985), were an effective and much beloved team that held this charge together for many years. This was the only charge Rev. Lucy ever served. He began as a supply pastor in June 1925, was ordained in 1926, and continued here in ministry all his life.

14. South Canaan – became Bible Protestant in 1939

This building stood by the Bible Protestant Cemetery at the north end of South Canaan. The first church structure at this site was erected as a Methodist Episcopal building in 1823. The 1830 Methodist Protestant controversy divided the congregation, and both groups continued to use the church until the Methodist Episcopalians erected their own building in the east end of town in 1865. That structure is now a Free Methodist Church. The original building continued to be Methodist Protestant until 1939, when it became Bible Protestant.

This congregation joined with its sister congregation at Varden in 1975 to erect the present Canaan Bible Church at the southern end of town. The original building at the cemetery site was razed and replaced by a monument housing the old bell and an historical plaque.

15. Varden – became Bible Protestant in 1939

This building stood on the hill just east of Varden, on the north side of the road. The congregation continued with South Canaan as a two-point Bible Protestant charge until 1975, when the congregations united to erect the present Canaan Bible Church. This property was then sold and the building razed. A modern ranch house now occupies the site.

Appendix: Hollisterville Letters from 1939.

Excellent documentation of the events involving the 1939 refusal of the dissenting portion of the Eastern Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church to join the Methodist Union and to form the Bible Protestant Church has been preserved in Newton C. Conant's book *How God Delivered 34 Churches*, printed by Bible Protestant Press. This valuable volume includes much of the correspondence and discussions that took place between Conant, the primary organizer of the dissension, and personalities on both sides of the issue. While existing copies of the book are difficult to obtain, the conference archives has created a bound photocopy from an original borrowed from Mr. Robert Wittenbrader, a long-time member of the Hollisterville Methodist Protestant (later Bible Protestant, and now Bible Church) congregation with family ties back to the Mt. Cobb Methodist Protestant Church.

In this volume of *The Chronicle*, three letters evaluating the situation on the Hollisterville charge in general and at the Hollisterville church in particular are presented in their entirety. The first is a report written by Ralph Lucy, pastor of the adjacent South Canaan circuit of the dissenters and a consistent encourager of Newton Conant. The second is a letter written to Conant by a member of the Hollisterville congregation. The final letter is Conant's response. Together they reveal and document the dynamics that took place on the circuit following the walkout by the dissenters at the September 1939 sessions of the Eastern Conference.

October 19, 1939

Dear Brother Conant,

Greetings in the name of our matchless Christ.

Your card received today. Thanks.

Relative to Hollisterville, and the Hollisterville Church, it is only one of the Hollisterville circuit. The circuit, as such, voted to go into the Union – had delegates at the Wyoming Conference of October 10th, and received a minister appointed to the circuit.

Mr. Bone [William J. Bone of Gravity PA, the lay delegate from the South Canaan circuit] and I were talking it over this p.m. and deemed it unadvisable to try to send anyone to the Hollisterville people, however much we may sympathize with them.

In view of the fact that they voted to go in, and have a man already there, for us to send a man to any part of the circuit would be forcing our side of the issue, the very thing that we object to. Then too, it would look bad in the eyes of the public, and as it is we have the public largely with us.

I do not think that the Hollisterville people will ever attend the ME Church, and I doubt very much if they would go at all to their own church to hear the man that has been forced upon them. They may go to the Baptist Church in the place where there is a good sound minister. Cortez on the other hand cannot support a minister without Hollisterville's help. So I am wondering if there may be some overruling providence that

shall ultimately adjust circumstances. I trust so. (Cortez has real lessons to learn. They are just beginning.)

In view that it is not a clear case, perhaps we had better keep out of the tangle.

God forbid that the above should be in the spirit of dictation to my superior officers. By [my] being frank [I] believe you can best appreciate the situation, for we are concerned for the best.

May the Lord bless, keep and sustain you, be wisdom and grace unto you through all the testing through which we may be called upon to pass.

Yours in His Service,

R.J. Lucy

Isaiah 41:10

Rev. Newton C. Conant

Camden, NJ

Dear Sir,

Moscow, PA

November 16, 1939

[I] have been asked to write you concerning our church. We are one of the churches on the Hollisterville charge, and our delegate who, was from the Cortez church, and our pastor, Rev. James McGowan, went along with the merger. But the members of Hollisterville Church of the charge are everyone against the merger.

We have refused the services of the pastor sent to the charge by the Wyoming Conference of the Methodist Church which met at Binghamton. We also refused him the key to the parsonage, which is located here at Hollisterville.

We have been holding our Sunday School just the same as we always did.

We would like to be affiliated with the MP Conference, although we would be unable to support a pastor at present time.

We would appreciate any conference news, and any suggestion that you could give us.

If for any reason you would be in this part of the country we would be glad to see you.

I hope I have made our position clear to you.

Remember our little church in your prayers.

Yours respectfully,

Mrs. Edwin Kellam

Dear Mrs. Kellam,

Greetings in the name of our Lord!

The man I had hoped to appoint to your church will be unable to come. After much prayer and after consulting with Mr. Hurd [Albert Hurd, who went on to serve for several years], I felt led of the Lord to appoint him your pastor. He will arrive at the parsonage some time on Wednesday. I trust you will receive him as one of the Lord's messengers and that your associations will be blessed of the Lord.

Yours humbly in Christ,

Newton C. Conant