

A Brief History Of The Evangelical United Brethren Church

By

Roger M. Gramling, D.D.

In Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, early Methodist preachers encountered settlements of German-speaking people. A traveling companion of Asbury's, Martin Boehm, who was a Mennonite and a Pennsylvanian, would preach to the German-speaking settlers in places where they visited. Another friend and associate of Asbury was an ordained German Reformed Minister in Baltimore, Maryland, named Philip William Otterbein. Otterbein assisted in the ordination of Francis Asbury at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore. Otterbein became interested in Methodism and, like Boehm, worked among German-speaking immigrants in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia.

These "societies" followed Methodist doctrine and practice but did not affiliate with the Methodist Episcopal Church. This was due mainly to Asbury's insistence that the Methodist Episcopal Church be only an English-speaking church. Asbury was convinced that the use of German would soon die out in America. However, Asbury encouraged Otterbein and Boehm to form a separate church for German-speaking people from among the societies which they had organized.

Thus on September 25, 1800, near Frederick, Maryland, Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm and a small group of preachers affiliated with them organized a church to be known as the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, the name adopted formally in 1821. Boehm and Otterbein were the first superintendents of the new church whose doctrine and polity was copied from that of the Methodist Episcopal Church and a German translation made of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church with whom friendly relations continued. In 1813 Christian Newcomer was elected a superintendent following the death of Martin Boehm in 1812.

Work among German-speaking people was also being carried forward by a Methodist named Jacob Albright, also of Pennsylvania. Albright was a farmer and tile maker who had been born into a Lutheran family, but became a Methodist in 1792. In 1796, Albright began to preach, traveling from settlement to settlement, and organizing his followers into groups like the Methodist societies. Albright wanted his followers in the Methodist Episcopal Church. He also favored the organization of German-speaking conferences. All of which, as indicated earlier, was opposed by Asbury.

At Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania, in November, 1803, Albright and his followers met as a council and organized his German-speaking societies into a denomination. The first name adopted was "The Newly Formed Methodist Conference" although the group was also known in its early days as the "Dutch Methodists" and "Albright's German Methodists". Like the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, it adopted Methodist polity and practices, and its first discipline was largely a German translation of the one used by the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1816 the name of the church was changed to "The Evangelical Association". It too enjoyed friendly relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church across the years. While naturally some differences in doctrine and polity would inevitably develop between the three churches with the passage of time, both the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association considered themselves "Methodist" separated from the Methodist

Episcopal Church only by language. Asbury's prediction that the use of the German language in America would quickly disappear did not prove correct. In the years prior to the War Between the States, many German-speaking immigrants settled in America, and both the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association grew as denominations expanding into Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan.

In 1891 a division occurred within the Evangelical Association between members in the eastern part of the Association centered at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who were more English in background and those in the western part of the Association who were more German in background. This division was healed in 1922 when both groups reunited to form "The Evangelical Church".

In the next few years negotiations were begun between the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ looking towards a union of the two. Twenty years of negotiations led to a union on November 16, 1946, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, forming "The Evangelical United Brethren Church". The combined membership of the two churches numbered approximately 700,000 at the time of union.

Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, a fraternal delegate from the Methodist Church to the Uniting Conference in 1946, issued an invitation to the united church to enter into negotiations with the Methodist Church on the matter of church union opening that door. A commission to study possible union was established by the Methodist Church in 1948 following conversations initiated by Bishop Ivan Lee Holt and continued under the leadership of Bishop Frederick B. Newell and later Bishop Glenn R. Phillips.

Both the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church had an ecumenical vision and both were involved in most of the ecumenical ventures of this period. These associations renewed interest in the common history which the two churches shared. Both churches became members of the World Council of Churches founded in 1948 and the National Council of Churches founded in 1950. Following the St. Louis Assembly of the National Council of Churches, commissions from both churches met to begin informal discussions. In 1960 the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church joined with seven other Protestant churches to form the Consultation on Church Union. This additional association strengthened the formal discussions about a possible union of the two churches which had been initiated four years earlier.