The Spiritual Vitality of the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage

Over the past year and a half United Theological Seminary has been engaged in an intensive long-range planning effort. As part of this effort the Center for the EUB Heritage was asked to develop a long-range plan for its work. The Advisory Board of the EUB Center appointed a Work Group to compile this report. Members of this group were: Sarah Brooks Blair (librarian United Theological Seminary), Robert L. Frey (editor, Telescope-Messenger), James D. Nelson (Professor Emeritus, UTS), Ruth Stambach (retired missionary), Gail Stevens-Shourds (Assistant to the Librarian and Curator of the EUB Archives, UTS), Newell J. Wert (Dean and Professor Emeritus, UTS and primary author of this statement), and Edwin Zeiders (President, UTS).

During its working sessions the Work Group spent a significant amount of time considering the various dimensions of the phrase, "the spiritual vitality of the E.U.B. heritage" contained in the mission statement. Eventually the Work Group authored a statement to guide it and the Advisory Board in its work. Clearly, the following statement is central to the essence of the EUB Center.

We are interested in your comments on this statement. If you recall incidents, stories, or other observations from reading this piece, please send them to the editor. We are interested in refining the statement and printing comments and recollections.

1. Christian Commitment and Christian Living

The EUB heritage was characterized by an expectation that salvation would lead to a changed life. This personal experience of Jesus Christ was basic to Christian living and took precedence over creeds and church structure. The Godly life was central. If Christian experience did not lead to earnest Christian living, something was amiss. It was this common experience that linked Christians together, and it was expected that persons would encourage each other in the Christian life. It also meant that church members were expected to care for each other regardless of the need. Loss, grief, pain, and the suffering of one became the burden of all.

Those who gave leadership in these matters were for the most part self-effacing and frugal, and sought simplicity of living. At an earlier time it was common for church leaders to travel in a modest fashion, taking inexpensive conveyances and simple meals. Biblical injunctions were taken seriously, whether these pointed to appropriate life styles or to the demands of discipleship.

2. Christian Living and Social Concern

While the EUB Church tended to exhibit an evangelical passion and biblical witness, at the same time it was open to the world. "It believed it could move worldwards without becoming worldly."* This is reflected in its ecumenical posture as well as its desire for service to the world. Leaders of the church were eager to give service to the larger church and were prominent in the ecumenical movement both in the United States and in world ecumenical endeavors. These same leaders urged social responsibility and were not satisfied with an individual faith alone. Concern for the poor, for temperance, and for the family were prominent thrusts. Leaders were also concerned to provide unity in the political realm. When, for example, a Roman Catholic was a candidate for President of the United States, there
was a strong effort to alert congregations to the dangers of religious bigotry.

3. Unity in the Household of Faith

The common life of the congregation was extremely important. There was a sense of belonging together and it was common for persons in the church to refer to each other as brother and sister. Even faculty members at the theological schools addressed students as brother or sister. To a significant degree this was a reflection of the humble origins as well as the Germanic roots of the denomination and its strong sense of Gemeinschaft (community).

The desire to maintain the unity of the body led the church to be wary of schism, and while there frequently were strong disagreements, these were considered to be within the “household.” There was a certain discomfort and embarrassment in discussing the quality of the Christian life except to exhort each other to “faithful living.” It was for others to judge if this were the case. The local church was more central than was the denomination and representatives elected as district superintendents and bishops had limited tenures and stood for election every four years. Although denominationalism was not fostered, there was loyalty to and responsibility for the church and its institutions at all levels by all members.

4. Democratic Leadership and Shared Responsibility

The EUB heritage included a distrust of autocratic uses of power and a “command and control” management style. Accountability was expected from all: leaders and lay persons alike. Modesty and honesty were often painfully evident. It was not appropriate to “blow one’s own horn,” and bishops were most likely to be viewed as “first among equals” rather than as a “chief executive.” This can be well illustrated in a comment by Mrs. J. Balmer Showers, who reported that her husband (himself a bishop) once said: “In the UB church we think bishops are as good as anybody if they behave themselves.”

Excellence in theological training without loss of the “common touch” was expected. While there was none of the pretense of scholarship, rigorous scholarship combined with evangelical passion was the style of theological schools. It was expected that graduates serve the church, and many educators and missionaries were prepared in the colleges and theological schools of the denomination.

The church tended to rely on the loyal financial support of its members. It supported its institutions through general benevolences rather than through endowments. As a consequence the denominational institutions were ill prepared to assume the responsibility to “go it alone,” as was expected in the United Methodist Church.

5. Missionary Outreach and Indigenous Church Development

Missionary outreach was a hallmark of the denomination’s identity, but it was the policy to nourish and foster rather than to dominate new churches. The denomination sought to develop indigenous rather than denominational churches and as a consequence was non-paternalistic in its posture. The church nourished leaders of these churches and made sure they received an education, often bringing them to the United States for college and seminary.

There were strong efforts to relate the local churches to missionaries, and children and youth as well as adults took a special interest in missionaries through a variety of programs such as “Spend-a-day” and “Summer Christmas Tree.” Thus missionaries were widely known by church members and were frequently considered to be members of the family.

Conclusion

In some respects the characteristics mentioned above were the qualities that accompanied smallness of size and the roots in Germanic culture. It was possible for members of local churches to know church leaders. The familial bonds could be maintained when the connections were obvious and there was a predisposition to consider them essential.

There are many evidences in our culture today of persons who seek such intimacy—such a family connection. Perhaps the rediscovery of these bonds of Christian fellowship and a sense of responsibility for the common life of the community can provide a source of a new commonality and a new civility.

While it is not likely that the “spiritual vitality” of the EUB heritage will have the form today that is described above, the essential attitude may be fostered in the church. It is the endeavor of the Center for the EUB Heritage to do so, with the expectation that the Center can be a catalyst for continued renewal and change within the church. The emergence of small groups with face-to-face
communication is one of the means for this to happen; so also is the desire for participation in worship and the extension of good works in local communities and in all parts of the world.

The development of means for spiritual nurture in local churches and in theological schools is another vehicle for deepening the commitment that should give flower in service and responsible participation in the body politic. The Center will lift up all forms of spiritual vitality by preserving and telling the stories of Christians and local congregations past and present that exemplify this spirit.

NOTES:
** Oral interview with Mrs. J. Balmer Showers. Transcript held in the EUB Center Collection.

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Reminiscences of the China Evangelical Mission, 1925-1941
By Trudie Wahl Palm

This fascinating recollection was submitted by Dr. Dwight Busacca who wrote to the author and requested it. It is an interesting account of China during a time when the central government had disintegrated and local warlords were in control—frequently fighting with each other. Furthermore, anti-foreign sentiment, the rise of Communism, and the Sino-Japanese War put the lives of our missionaries in constant danger. Under such circumstances we marvel at the courage and Christian commitment of this missionary couple, Carl and Elisabeth Wahl, and others as well.

“Our boatman did not have enough helpers, so we had a hard time getting over the rapids. One day our boat went back downstream because the bamboo rope simply slipped out of the men’s hands. They tried again only to slip back again. Only on the third try did they manage to get the boat through the rapids. One time the boat went around in circles quite a number of times before our captain was able to stop it. Margy started to scream and Trudie said, ‘Oh Mother, I am so frightened all the time.’ I suppose I had the same feeling.”

With these words written by my mother, Elisabeth Wahl, I start my thoughts about my years as an “MK,” or missionaries’ kid. [Paul Eller’s book, History of Evangelical Missions lists Elisabeth Wahl as Elisabeth Schempp Wahl and says: “Miss Elizabeth Schempp of Reutlingen, Germany, was recommended to China to establish industrial mission work. Frederick and Amelia Mueller, her fellow townspeople, contributed 20,000 marks toward her support. She and Miss Anna Roloff, a missionary nurse, were the first appointees of the Woman’s Board in China. Miss Schempp’s service was to teach the domestic sciences and arts to the Chinese women who were bold enough to enroll in the school.”] My parents, Carl and Elisabeth Wahl had begun their service in China in 1916 and 1909 respectively. Tongren [also Tungjen] in Guizhou province was the city of my birth.

On the occasion of the scare in the boat, our family had been in flight because of much anti-foreign feeling. The American Consul had ordered all
foreigners to flee and now that it was deemed to be safer again we were on our way back to Tongren.

In the year of my birth, 1925, Tongren was very remote from civilization. Like many cities in China at that time, Tongren had a wall around it with gates that were closed at night and in times of political turmoil. A river ran along its western side. The Evangelical Mission had several properties there, surrounded by our own walls for protection. One compound near the city’s South Gate had a hospital and dispensary and several missionary residences. The compound near the North Gate also had two houses for missionaries and a church and school building. There was a third property in the country, and that is where we lived for most of my years in Tongren. It was named Liang Ban Chiao or “Bridge of Two Boards” (LBC for short) for the two planks that crossed a small ditch between two rice fields on the pathway very near our compound. There is where my father built and managed a Christian school for boys.

Our Mission had several outstations too, at least eight whose names I can remember, and it was part of my parents’ responsibility to go to these stations to conduct the business of the Mission. Traveling to these places by foot or on the river was one of the most time-consuming aspects of their work. Days and weeks and even months were needed to travel the relatively short distances. Sometimes it was because they needed to wait for military escorts to protect them from robbers or warlords who held their captives for ransom. Other times it was because of the high water or the low level of the river, either the current was too strong or the river was too shallow for a boat. When it was necessary for our family to travel on the small boats that plied the river, it was not unusual for a trip of 130 miles to take more than a week.

My father’s primary responsibility was to the boys’ school which he started, Ming Deh (Boy’s Boarding School). It was located at LBC in the country about a mile from the city. He saw to it that there were buildings either erected on site or moved into the compound to function as dormitory, dining room, kitchen, teachers’ housing, and, of course, classrooms. Then there were the teachers to be found and that was a problem because educated men were hard to find and Christian teachers were very scarce indeed. Initially the need for teachers was met from other missions further to the east where schools had been operating for some years and who sometimes had graduates to spare. In later years my father counted on some of his own promising graduates to help with the younger students.

A fee of about $4.00 was assessed for a year of room, board, and classes. Students came from mostly the better-off families, but my father gathered the orphans and waifs from the streets with the hope of giving them a better future. He took their costs as our family’s responsibility, but he also invited his mother, brothers, and sisters in the States to share in their cost with the caution that such contributions not be deducted from their tithe to the church. One of his ventures was to bring in weaving looms so some students could learn a trade that could give them a livelihood. It grieved my father when for some reason students left the school. It was always “touch and go” as far as the finances of the school were concerned. By the time of my father’s death at the age of 48, the school was deemed a success.

The Mission in Tongren sponsored at least two other schools, and my father regularly made the rounds to check on them and to see that all was in order for the staff and the students. Although my father considered the schools to be his first responsibility, when the depression hit and budgets were cut and there was a shortage of missionaries, he had to pick up the slack and fill the role of resident pastor also. Because of the shortage of funds and missionaries, my father often felt very discouraged. He complained that the Board of Missions was insensitive and not supportive of their needs. That was the time when he also traveled to the outstations either by boat or by foot quarterly to preside at communion services and baptisms, and to share parish concerns with the local pastors.

My mother started her ministry in 1909 when she left her home in Germany and, after a brief stay in the United States for English language study, sailed to China. She had been trained as a teacher of needlework for women. She started her work in Shenchow, now named Yuanling, as a Bible and Sunday school teacher and as a teacher of knitting, crochet, bobbin-lace making and embroidery. Through several years she built up a fine school for...
this work. My father commented to his family that the work of the Embroidery Mission, as it was called, was not surpassed in all of China for its excellent quality. One of the sources of revenue for the Mission came from the sale of items the women made. When my father and mother married in 1919 and moved to Tongren, this work gradually declined and ultimately closed completely since there was no other teacher to take over after my mother’s departure.

In her new setting my mother took up women’s evangelistic work in addition to her role as parent and later teacher to all of her four children. One of her big challenges was always the concern of training servants to learn to cook and to do laundry and household care and then to supervise their service. Since we lived in such a remote part of the country there were no stores for any of the things that we needed—such as clothing—and so many of our clothes were sewed or knitted by her. Whatever she could not make out of her own supplies had to be ordered from either the United States or Germany and those orders (shoelaces, shoes, underwear, food items, pens and paper, popcorn) often took up to a year to arrive.

After my father’s death my mother was faced with the dilemma of how to support her family. It was decided that she would leave the two eldest children, John and Margaret, in the United States with my father’s sister and brother-in-law. She could then return to China and be employed by the Mission and receive a regular salary, including children’s allowance that could cover our basic living expenses.

On her return to China she was sent first to Shenchow and then to Changsha in Hunan province to work within the two existing congregations as an evangelist. She worked alongside the Chinese Bible-women who conducted all manner of services for women and children. About a year into this program the war between China and Japan began and a large influx of refugees trying to escape the war and bombing started to arrive from the eastern part of China. By 1938 the war and bombing moved west and Changsha itself became a target. As a result the need for food, clothing, and medicine for the refugees increased and the focus of the Mission centered more on serving the refugees than the regular services of the Mission congregations.

During the early days of the war my sister Helen and I had been at a boarding school in the mountains about 800 miles from Changsha. We came home to our mother during Christmas and summer vacations, but eventually the war endangered our school as well. We spent one half year at home with a refugee teacher and then returned to the boarding school that had by that time relocated to Hong Kong. There we stayed until 1941 when the entire student body was evacuated to the United States.

My mother continued her work among the refugees under the most strenuous circumstances until in 1944 the invading Japanese army came quite near to Changsha. At that time she and another missionary family of the Evangelical Mission, Rev. and Mrs. Rodney Sundberg and their family who were among the last to flee, found some means of escape by boat and overland until they got to Chongqing from where they were able to fly on an American Army plane to India. For several months they waited for passage on an American troop transport that took them to San Diego, California.

My mother made a home for Helen and for me during the last of our college years in Naperville, Illinois. There she lived until her age and failing health made it impossible for her to continue in her beloved home on Center Street. At that time she came to live with my husband and me in Park Ridge, Illinois. John, Margaret, Helen, and I all shared in her care at various times. After a second hip replacement she was ordered by the medical team to be cared for in a nursing home and there she died at the age of 93 in 1977. This is the short version of my parents’ lives and ministry.

I have a few reflections regarding the work of the Evangelical Mission during those years from 1925 to 1941 when I left China at the age of 16. In China all missions and missionaries were part of a big family. In the west where we lived it was quite usual to have missionaries from one denomination
help another when they were traveling through the area. They shared in preaching or in women’s work in whatever way they could. It seems to me that they were not in competition but were all working for the same cause. My parents had excellent relationships with missionaries from other countries too, those from Germany in particular. When missionaries were traveling on the river and came to one of our stations, the Evangelicals baked bread for them to take along, as it was impossible to buy or bake for themselves along the way. They shared evangelists with one another too, or teachers if they had them to spare. Sometimes they asked if someone could use a good man in some way that would advance the work of the Lord. And they visited back and forth and shared meals whenever there was an occasion to celebrate—Thanksgiving or Christmas or July 4th, for instance. I found it quite interesting to see ecumenism demonstrated in this way.

The medical work at Tongren was extremely important. For some years the Evangelicals did not have a doctor on hand and the hospital had to remain closed between the years of Dr. E. H. Brunemeier’s departure and the arrival of Dr. W. P. Ulmer. There was great rejoicing when Dr. Ulmer came to Tongren and the hospital could once again be in operation. There were several nurses; Miss Anna Renninger, Miss Justine Granner, and Miss Martha Wolf are the ones I remember. They were much loved among the Chinese as well as by us.

Prominent among my recollections are the numerous stories of the terrible things that happened around us while we were in China. There was constant danger of robbers. High on a cliff along the river was a cave with a ladder suspended from it, and that was one of the many places robbers had to hide out. When a boat came along the chances were that they would be robbed. Robbers came to the Boys’ School several times and robbed the boys of blankets and anything else that they could get their hands on. On one of my father’s trips to an outstation he himself was robbed of a few precious things—a watch, a few dollars, and an overcoat. Why did the military not stop the robbers? Because the military joined in, looting whatever they could get by with.

There were wars waged by the military units of one city [or warlord] against another. It was dangerous to be outdoors during these battles. Bullets flew into our house on one occasion narrowly missing Margaret and my father. But other houses and other people were not so fortunate. At the end of these confrontations we children watched as the prisoners were marched to the execution grounds. No, we did not see the executions for they were outside of the city. But the thought of these men being marched to their deaths was enough of a horror. In bed at night Margaret and I could see the fires on the city wall and hear the shouting from one band of soldiers to another. The fires warmed as well as aided in watching for the enemy.

Time after time we heard of the terrible things that the poor people of the city and the countryside were subjected to by the military. When fuel was low the soldiers tore out the rafters of the shacks that people called home and there was no recourse for anyone who made a complaint had torture in store. Heads were mounted on spikes to warn any that there was a harsh reckoning for any resistance. One morning as we were on our walk to Sunday service we passed a beheaded body lying beside the road. The stories go on and on. I wonder, in retrospect, how it was possible to continue with the work of the Mission when there was so much turmoil.

And then there were the Communists. That was the worst terror and it ultimately drove us out of Tongren. The Reds, as they were called, had caused havoc all over China by capturing and holding for ransom any foreigner they could get. In many cases they killed them as they did to the missionaries John and Betty Stamm in December 1934. Ho Lung was the general of that troop and he ravaged the country as he raced from one city to the next. There was nothing to do but to flee as we did in the middle of the night.

Through all of these difficulties my parents remained dedicated to the cause of the Mission and they were determined to continue as long as possible. My father’s early death changed things, but my mother’s commitment continued to the end of her life.

THE MCCURDY (NEW MEXICO) SCHOOL

This article was drawn from an annual report distributed by the McCurdy School and sent to the Telescope-Messenger by Rev. Ralph E. Miller (South Indiana Conference).

The McCurdy Mission School is located in the Española Valley, a region of great scenic beauty, but an area that suffers from high unemployment and a chronically depressed economy. Throughout its
history education has been neglected in northern New Mexico. Responding to this lack of educational facilities, Miss Mellie Perkins opened the first small United Brethren mission school in Valarde, New Mexico, in 1912. A native of Fort Wayne, Indiana, Miss Perkins befriended a young Spanish teacher named Edith McCurdy and later, after her death, named the school in her memory.

Initially the school was a boarding school (grades 1-8) and was a home away from home for hundreds of students. The school and its teachers faced many hardships during its early years. The poverty and isolation of the Española Valley were severe and the constant opposition of the Roman Catholic priests against a new religion in their area made life difficult, if not intolerable. Many students who attended Protestant schools were subject to intense social pressure and sometimes to physical violence.

By 1917, fifty-four students attended the school, but attendance varied significantly from term to term. Students were charged about twenty-five cents a month for tuition and those who could not afford this modest amount often paid in agricultural produce. By the early 1920s the annual budget of the school was about $12,000. Most of the financial support came from the Woman's Missionary Society.

In 1921, a plan of creating a high school by adding one grade a year was initiated. At the same time tuition was increased to $60 per year for elementary school and $75 per year for high school. The first graduating class consisted of six students in 1926. Since 1926, classes have graduated annually from McCurdy High School. Today enrollment varies between 415 and 450 students each year. About 95% of the graduates continue their education in colleges and universities throughout the United States. The graduating class of 2001 earned $981,000 in scholarships with two of its members gaining appointments to West Point, and two named National Hispanic Merit Scholars. Only one of the graduates did not continue to college.

The fact that McCurdy Mission School not only survived its difficult early years, but actually grew is a miracle in itself. Today's campus consists of 44 acres of buildings, athletic fields, faculty residences and open land. But student tuition accounts for only 43% of the cost of operating McCurdy. Unfortunately, United Methodism today does not support the school to the extent the EUB Church did. If any readers are interested in providing assistance to McCurdy, more information and an annual report can be obtained by writing to the school at 261 McCurdy Road, Española, NM 87532-6731.

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Anecdotage

Our years at [United Theological] Seminary (1930-33) were the bottom years of the Great Depression. But both of us were lucky enough to have good jobs—Emma working in the Dayton Public Library and I in the Dayton YMCA. Our annual combined salary was $2400, which made us millionaires.

One of my memories [of those years] centered around an escapade which involved Dean C. E. Ashcraft. There were only 61 students at the seminary in 1933. Money was scarce, so scarce that two members of the faculty moved into the dormitory to save on housing costs. With such a small number of students and faculty members we were one happy family. We had many social and fun affairs in the spacious dining hall where faculty and students mingled as friends on a common level.

One of the parties was held on March 12, 1933—how well I remember it. It was rumored that it was the birthday of Dean Ashcraft. Some of us conceived the idea that it would be fun to give the Dean a birthday paddling. Quickly we gathered around him, all 200 pounds of him, laid him across our knees and proceeded to give him the paddling. Of course it was not brutal but a fun thing which the Dean seemed to enjoy as much as we did.

When we finished our little game, one of the younger professors, Merle Harner, bragged with a sly grin, “You could never do that to me!” It was the wrong thing to say. As quick as a flash Professor Harner was across our knees receiving the same treatment his fellow teacher had received, with perhaps a bit more vigor.

“That’s the way it was” in 1933. Where else could one find such fellowship between faculty and students?

M. J. Miller