First Church EUB Moves to Salem Avenue: A Retrospective Assessment
by
Samuel E. Longmire

First Church United Brethren, and after 1946 EUB, was one of the “flagship” churches of the two denominations. Among the largest in terms of membership, it usually had one of the most respected men in the denomination appointed as its lead pastor. The two senior pastors during the years the author attended First Church, Fred L. Dennis and Paul M. Herrick, were elected bishop from the pulpit of First Church.

Our family began attending First United Brethren Church in 1940. I was two years old, my brother Howard was seven, and Sister Nancy was ten. Like many families at the tail end of the Great Depression, we were poor. My father’s dry cleaning business had just failed in Knoxville, Tennessee, and we were lucky to have enough money to rent some rooms on Proctor Street near First Church. Mother used to say that First Church, under the leadership of Rev. [Fred L.] Dennis, gave stability and support to us when we most needed it.

Although mother had three kids to look after, she spent many hours volunteering at the church. She taught Sunday school classes, and eventually became director of the children’s Sunday school program. She also worked hard to bring in more children and families who didn’t have a church. Nancy remembers going door to door with mother as she visited with parents and children, inviting them to attend First Church. During one cold winter mother created a committee of church mothers to bring in hot lunches for the poor school children at Central School. My father also loved the church, and we children were not allowed to skip going to church unless we had a fever or a major injury.

In 1953 First Church moved from its location at Fourth and Perry out to Salem Avenue. I was nearly fifteen years old at the time, and I recall vividly that this move angered my father. He never forgave the church for abandoning its people in the immediate downtown neighborhood. I can still see and hear him in my mind as he stood stubbornly on the front steps of the church pointing his finger toward the Catholic Church down the street at Fourth and Wilkinson.

“You see that Catholic Church down there, Sammy?”

“Yes,” I said, not knowing what was coming next.

“You don’t see them running out the door to a nicer part of town—leaving their flock behind. No sir, Catholics come and stay like the Plymouth Rock.”

I nodded in silent agreement.

“Besides that,” he added, “we don’t own a car, and there’s no bus line on Salem Avenue. This move doesn’t make sense. Right now we catch the Third Street bus on the east side of Dayton [by this time the family had moved from its original Proctor Street location], take a cheap ride downtown, walk one block, and here we are.”

My mother, aware of the critical needs of the neighborhood families, was nevertheless agreeable to the move. For one thing, she was mindful of the fact that when First Church merged with Cowden Memorial in 1929, both congregations had agreed to build a new church and relocate out in Upper Dayton View. This relocation had to be postponed until both the Great Depression and World War II ended. First Church, she believed, would increase its ministry in a new, larger church. In addition to these arguments, she said she was going to buy a car and learn how to drive. She said to me more than once, “Your father would be just as happy with a horse and buggy, but those days are finished, praise the Lord!”

This was a debate in which I came to appreciate both positions. My father was somewhat ahead of his time: churches, particularly Protestant churches, later fled from the inner cities at an alarming rate, often leaving a religious vacuum that
other religious groups like the Pentecostals were eager to fill. This is what happened at my old downtown church. He strongly believed that a church should have a deep commitment to its immediate neighborhood. He was especially sensitive to any comments about the transient, unstable nature of the environment. He was especially sensitive to any comments about the transient, unstable nature of the environment. “We used to be transient, too,” he said, “and First Church didn’t turn its back on us.” Furthermore, his attachment to public transportation and dislike of cars was, of course, a radically conservative view in 1953, but it is now environmentally correct.

Emotionally, I was with my father. I hated to leave the old church where I had been so happy. There was much that I loved about First Church: my Sunday school class taught by Rev. Frank Cross, the Youth Choir, the activities of the Youth Fellowship, and sitting in the balcony during the worship service, trying not to get caught “goofing off” with my friends during the sermon. My father was a poor monitor of my behavior because he always fell asleep during the sermons; there wasn’t a preacher on the circuit who could keep him awake. He came to church for the Sunday school, the music, the prayers (particularly the benediction), and the fellowship. Often during the fifteen-minute interval between Sunday school and church, my friends and I dashed down the street to a small corner store to buy a coke or a candy bar. My father was the only adult who was welcome to join us.

As time went by I also saw some good sense in mother’s insights. First Church was certainly obligated to keep its legal agreement to move. Furthermore, because the church was highly successful, it absolutely needed more space. As a lifelong Sunday school teacher, mother would vote for any proposal promising more room and facilities for the children.

The new church on Salem Avenue was splendid, and we didn’t have any difficulty getting to it because mother bought her ’46 Chevy just in time. First Church continued to meet my needs, especially because it had a growing Youth Fellowship—thanks in large part to the inspired leadership of Rev. Ivan Moyer, Jr. Being close to Bonebrake Seminary [after 1954 United Seminary], the church was blessed and enriched by having divinity school professors and talented students in the congregation. We called it “the seminary church.” I was every bit as happy at the Salem location as I was at the old church, and mother was content. My father reluctantly went along with the shift to a new church—what else could he do?—but he was quick to complain about little things such as the divided choir. “They just stand and face each other and sing to each other, and the congregation sits and watches. The old church was better for the choir,” was his view. Mother said his complaints didn’t carry much weight because he still slept through all the sermons.

I had left home when First Church merged with the Methodists in 1968 to become First Church, United Methodist. Mother informed me that my father quietly accepted that maneuver, but not without hinting that his opinion didn’t matter because “the Big Shots made all the decisions.”

If you live long enough you come to notice life’s many ironies. In Clyde H. Bielstein’s book, The First Church Story, he notes in 1974 that membership has fallen while the average age of members has risen, and many older members have either moved away or “have been called to their eternal home.” He goes on to admit that “Those losses have not been replaced as rapidly as they have occurred” and that “social shifts in the community and an ever-changing culture have challenged it to constructive responses.”

Unfortunately, First Church, United Methodist, continues to lose members while struggling to survive in a changing neighborhood. It is not surprising that the Church is in debt due to the cost of maintaining its big building.

Under the leadership of Rev. Tim Forbess, however, First Church is confronting its challenges with courage, imagination, and faith. It has opened its doors to other churches and organizations: seven independent congregations use the building for worship services; the New City School, a charter school for children with learning disabilities, holds classes in the church; and it also has a martial arts program (Spirit Quest) for children and youth to learn how to deal with conflict and take care of themselves. At one time there was a program for pregnant girls with assistance for them to earn the GED. Furthermore, the Church is now a fully inclusive church, having joined the Reconciling Ministry Network: people are welcome regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Finally, the Church continues to invest in new programs for the community it serves.

In short, First Church is reaching out to people, in spite of all the difficulties and setbacks it faces. This is also the mission First Church UB/EUB had years ago when my family joined it.  

2. Ibid.  
4. For some of the historical background in this article I am indebted to my sister, Nancy Seibert; Evelyn Beason, First Church historian; and The First Church Story written by Clyde Bielstein with the assistance of Roy D. Miller.
When the people of the Evangelical Association were looking for a place to serve Jesus by helping the least of his brethren, their eyes and minds were directed to a part of the United States quite different from the places where they lived; to the valley of the Red Bird River, through the letters and prayers of “Zelphia Roberts, who was teaching in a county school on Phillip's Fork.”

“Once a week she crossed over the mountain to the Beverly post office for her mail. While there, she heard some of the parents expressing a wish for a school to be started for the sake of the young people of their community and surrounding areas. On her way back and forth across the mountain, she had selected a large rock where she stopped for prayer. She knelt there asking the Lord to answer the prayers of the mountain people because she had seen young men and women hanging around the store who should be doing something better with their lives.”

Not long thereafter teachers and preachers of the Evangelical Association came and began the work known as Red Bird Mission. One of the first notable events was the construction of the largest building in the valley to serve as a church and school building. It was dedicated in 1922 and was replaced a few years later by an even larger building because so many young people desired an education.

The people of the Red Bird Valley—and much of Appalachia—were completely neglected by their governments and by mainstream America. In many ways this neglect continues to the present day.

To understand the importance of Red Bird School in 1921, one must realize that people in this area of Kentucky who had the ability to accomplish a great deal academically and to become professional lawyers, doctors, teachers, and preachers had no opportunity to go to high school until Red Bird Mission began its work. Many of these people have finished their work here on earth, but some are still able to tell their stories in retirement.

Today, the core purpose of Red Bird Mission School is to provide a quality education in a Christian environment for students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. By educating the whole person to his or her highest potential, the school prepares them for life’s experiences. All students, regardless of economic, social, racial, ethnic or geographical background, are welcome.

Today there are public high schools, but Red Bird Mission School continues to fill an unmet need in Red Bird Valley by providing a Christian education to poor children who could not afford to get one anywhere else. Red Bird students receive an appropriate education in the academics, and also in character development, through study of the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control [Galatians 5:22-23] and through prayer.

Red Bird Mission School is a fully accredited school. It has met the standards of (and is a member of) the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools since it became a private Christian School in 1988. Most colleges and universities recognize that students coming from Red Bird Mission School have received a quality education and the students are accepted without question.

Most of the students attending Red Bird Mission School are unable to pay the full cost of the school. Therefore without help from outside the region, an education in a Christian School would not be available to them. Most of the students respond well to the small class sizes and the Christian atmosphere. Approximately 65% of the graduating students go on to 4-year colleges, community colleges, and technical and vocation schools each year.

The extra-curricular activities also help to broaden the educational scope of Red Bird students’ learning experiences. Academic Challenge, Future Business Leaders of America, Honor Society, Student Council, Spanish Club, school newspaper, and yearbook provide the students with opportunities for

1Nettie M. DeWall, Memories of Red Bird, p. 2
Grassroots Voices: The EUB Experience

In 1979–1980 the Center for the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage interviewed about 80 former EUB bishops, denominational executives, and seminary professors. The result is an impressive body of reflections on the EUB heritage. Over the past few years we have revived this project and extended it to additional pastors and laypersons of the EUB church. Our intention is to gather factual information and personal impressions of what it was like to be an EUB from 1946–1968.

Our original intention was to conduct these as oral interviews, that is, face to face. We have collected many interviews in this way, but we realize that we do not have enough interviewers to talk with everyone who might wish to record their recollections of their EUB experiences. Consequently we have developed a packet that can be mailed to any individual who wishes to take part in this project and has not already been interviewed either in the 1979-1980 series of interviews or those of the past 3-4 years.

The packet contains a personal information sheet, a list of questions or topics we encourage you to address, and a “Deed of Gift to the Public Domain” that will allow us to place these interviews in our historical collection. This collection will be used for research purposes and thus it is necessary for you to authorize the EUB Center to use your interview as an historical document.

You can respond by typing (on computer or on a typewriter), handwriting, or using a recording device (tape recorder, video camera, CD) to preserve your comments and then send them to us. Information on how to get the material to us is included in the packet. To request a packet, contact either...

Lorraine Pierce or Robert L. Frey
832 Knoll Road 1356 Hidden Creek Rd.
East Lansing, MI 48823 Miamisburg, OH 45342

We are eager to include reflections on your EUB experience in our collection. Please take a few minutes to request a packet and then a few more minutes to share with us your EUB experience.

Authors of This Issue

George Cherry is the Director of Advancement at the Red Bird School in Kentucky.

Samuel E. Longmire of Trenton, Ohio, is a retired English professor who spent most of his career at the University of Evansville.

Jason E. Vickers, assistant professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary, is the new Director for the Center for the EUB Heritage.

DarEll T. Weist, pastor, missionary, campus minister, and administrator, is a United Methodist elder who lives in Los Angeles, California.
New Director for the EUB Center

On November 1, 2006, Jason E. Vickers became the Director of The Center for the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage. Dr. Vickers is a graduate of Trevecca Nazarene University. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Nazarene Theological Seminary and the Doctor of Philosophy degree from Southern Methodist University. He is an Assistant Professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary where he teaches in the areas of systematic theology, Wesley Studies, Methodist Doctrine, and the Philosophy of Religion.

Jason is currently conducting research on transitions in Methodist Christology. He is especially interested in the relationship between Christological transitions and changes in political vision and commitments within the Methodist tradition. A number of articles authored by Jason have appeared in a variety of journals and a book. He is a probationary elder in the Western North Carolina Conference.

The editor has asked Dr. Vickers to comment on his thoughts and directions for the EUB Center as he leads our efforts to retrieve the EUB heritage within the United Methodist Church of today.

The EUB Heritage and the Renewal of United Methodism Today
by
Jason E. Vickers

As the new Director of the Center for EUB Heritage and a new faculty member at United Theological Seminary, I have one overarching concern—the renewal of United Methodism. The Methodism of which I speak began life as a renewal movement within the Church of England, so a concern for renewal is in our bones. Unfortunately, the spiritual and liturgical life of United Methodism has been slowly eroded from within by theological and political divisions that well-meaning persons have tried to overcome but that now seem deeper and more irreconcilable than ever. The spiritual and liturgical life of United Methodism has been undermined from without by the secularizing forces that permeate the wider culture in which the church offers her service to God (Gottesdienst). Consequently, the United Methodist Church is now herself in need of renewal.

How does renewal happen? What is needed to renew United Methodism? Instinctively, persons concerned with renewing the church often begin by trying to discern the direction of prevailing cultural winds. Having done so, they rework everything from the church’s approach to evangelism to the church’s worship in an effort to make it more appealing to the wider culture. Invariably this involves getting on board with the latest rhetorical buzzwords and catchphrases in secular life. With this approach, the key to church renewal is keeping up with the times. To put the matter bluntly, it is better for the church to be technologically and politically “hip” than to be sanctified or holy. The language of sanctity and holiness is often seen as an outdated and irrelevant idiom for anyone committed to the renewal of the church.

A better approach to church renewal begins by recalling the intimate connection between the presence and work of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing life and work of the church. Such an approach takes seriously the marks of the Spirit’s activity in the church across the generations. These marks include oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. They also include the many and varied gifts of the Spirit as well as the fruits of the Spirit. On this approach, church renewal begins with the transforming presence and work of the Spirit—work evidenced in marks, gifts, and fruits. This kind of church renewal is more concerned with the human lives and

1 The German word for “worship” is Gottesdienst, meaning “service to God” or “divine service.” The ambiguity in meaning should not be missed. The range of meaning includes the divine action that enables human worship and the free human response to that divine action that we generally term “worship.”
communities than with the updating of technology. It has more to do with the cultivation of peace than with the acquisition of big screen televisions. Faithfulness is preferred over high fashion, political or otherwise.

How does this kind of renewal happen? And what does this have to do with the Center for EUB Heritage? These are good questions, and I will address them forthwith.

The sort of renewal that is desperately needed in United Methodism today does not come easily. It involves the hard work of repentance and prayer. It involves personal and communal discipline oriented around a set of practices, including liturgy, sacraments, reading scripture, care for the poor, and the like. Such discipline does not come easily or naturally. Clearly, we are going to need more than sheer grit and determination.

The good news is that two sources of help are readily available. The first is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit among us. But we need to know how to identify and to participate in the work of the Spirit, and we need to know what Spirit-led and Spirit-filled lives look like. We need advice from persons who have more experience than we do in discerning and actively participating in the work of the Spirit and whose lives are a testimony to that work. In short, we need to retrieve from our heritage the lives of the saints.

This is where the EUB heritage comes in. The second source of help that is available is the lives of the saints who have gone before us. The lives of the saints is a rich resource of inspiration and imitation for those who truly long for the renewal of United Methodism. More than that, the saints demonstrate the kind of disciplined participation in the means of grace that is essential for the reception and cultivation of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit and therefore for the renewal of United Methodism.

In my judgment, imitation of the saints is essential for the renewal of the church. To paraphrase Paul, we need to imitate the saints as they imitate Christ. But we can not do this if we do not know the stories of the saints who have gone before us. Thus we need to retrieve and relearn the stories of Otterbein and Boehm; of Joseph and Mary Gomer; of Sarah Dickey and Edith McCurdy; of Jacob Albright and George Miller; of John Seybert and Reuben H. Mueller and countless others.

With this vision, the Center for EUB Heritage is no mere archive of historical trivia. It is a rich resource for the renewal of Methodism—a testimony to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of women and men across the generations, some of whom were even martyred for their faith. It is a means by which the lives of the saints are preserved in the church’s memory and made available for inspiration and imitation.

The precedent for understanding the work of the Center in this manner is very strong. In ancient Israel, telling the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs was a crucial part of every child’s training in the faith. In the early church, telling the stories of the apostles and martyrs was an integral part of the theological and spiritual formation of new converts. Thus, in addition to defending the doctrine of the Trinity and to organizing the canon of scripture as we now know it, Athanasius also composed the Life of Antony.

To be sure, we should tell the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs and of the saints and martyrs of the early church. But we should also tell the stories of more recent saints, including the persons who served God faithfully in the Evangelical United Brethren Church and predecessor traditions. Their stories bear witness to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our own age and are therefore a vital resource for the renewal of Methodism today.

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**METHODIST AND PIETIST:**

**Retrieving the EUB Heritage**

**Mark your calendars now!**

**What:** A Conference Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of The United Methodist Church

**When:** September 12 – 13, 2008  
**Where:** United Theological Seminary in Trotwood, OH

**Registration:** Information will be available in a forthcoming issue of the *Telescope Messenger*
Window on the World
by
DarEll T. Weist

As a young boy growing up in North Dakota in the late 1940s and 1950s the Evangelical United Brethren Church provided a vital window on the world for me.

It all culminated with a telephone call I placed in 1972 to my parents. I told them that my family (including my wife, 7 year old son, 11 year old daughter, and me) had been appointed missionaries to Sierra Leone. The response on the other end of the phone was at first silence and then a very Midwestern, “That is very nice,” from my Mother. In talking to her the next day I said:

Mother you ought to be ecstatic. You dragged me to every missionary speaker who came to Jamestown; you encouraged me to be active in Youth Fellowship. You gave me your WSWS reading course books to read. It is because of you and the influence of the EUB Church that I became interested in being a missionary.

Her response was a typical parental one: “I am concerned about the grandchildren, and you are going far away into what might be a dangerous country. Something might happen to you and to them.”

The influence of Mission Band, Summer Christmas Tree programs, Youth Fellowship, summer assembly, and visits from the many missionaries who came through North Dakota, and especially Jamestown, regularly gave me a different view of the world. The problems of health, agriculture, education or even cultural differences of Appalachia in the Red Bird Mission or New Mexico at McCurdy School or postwar Japan or Africa or the Philippines were brought home weekly with material produced by the EUB Board of Missions.

In Jamestown we did not have a national newspaper and the local one only occasionally had international news. The TV stations again were all local with little international news. So the EUB Church became the vital window on the world. This is hard to believe given our present media saturation and instant news from around the world, but it was true. I am sure it was true not only for North Dakota but for many other places in the Midwest at least.

As a young man, I was given a chance to dream when I read or heard profiles of missionaries. What would it be like to live and work in a different culture? About 1955 I remember hearing about Dean and Lois Gilliland—missionaries to Nigeria. Twenty years later I visited the Gilliland’s in Nigeria on a trip from Sierra Leone and then in the late 1970s I was one of the Gilliland’s pastors when Dean was a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and I was Executive Pastor at First United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California. What a fascinating connection!

The work of the Women’s Society for World Service (WSWS) also provided the same education for my Mother. A woman who like many of her generation did not even finish high school, but liked to read and to be challenged with ideas from a safe distance found the WSWS Reading Course to be invaluable. She proudly was one of a number in her Circle who read the required number of books each year.

Mother also shared much of this material with me, first as stories when I was too young to read it myself and then when I was older she encouraged me to read the books for myself. In reading this material she learned about the conditions of the itinerant migrant workers and their families in this country, the state of women in Africa and Asia, the struggle to provide education for children and young adults in many areas of the world, the cultural differences between our community and those in Appalachia and New Mexico, and the challenges the EUB Church faced in post war Europe. All of this was a valuable education for her in becoming a “world citizen” and understanding life beyond North Dakota.

The EUB denomination had a limited number of missions in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States so it was easy to focus on these parts of the world. Part of the missionaries’ task was to reflect on their work. The material produced by them in denominational publications found an eager audience with Mission Bands, Youth Fellowships, and local members of the WSWS. Most important the Church provided information that led to an understanding not available from any other source.

Why I heard the messages and took them to heart, I am not sure. I did become a “missionary” in campus ministry in urban Los Angeles and now in running a successful, affordable non-profit housing corporation in the Los Angeles area. During my days in Sierra Leone I was also a theological teacher. I can only hope that others heard and understood a little more about the greater world because of the wealth of information provided by the EUB Board of Missions at a time when no one else was doing that.

I feel privileged to have grown up as an EUB and as an adult in serving in the EUB and United Methodist Churches for 45 years.
Publication of Papers from the 1996 Conference
Commemorating the Creation of the
Evangelical United Brethren Church

For more than a decade it has been the intention of the Center for the EUB Heritage to publish the papers given at the November 16-18, 1996 conference commemorating the creation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Early in January, 2007, the manuscript of these papers titled, *The Making of an American Church: Essays Commemorating the Jubilee Year of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, was submitted to Scarecrow Press for publication in its Pietism and Wesleyan Studies series.

This book contains ten papers on topics such as the background to the 1946 merger, the EUB understanding of ministry, the development of the 1962 confession of faith, a history of the Evangelical work in Europe, a history of women leadership in the EUB heritage, the role of ecumenism, the relationship between piety and hymnody, and a powerful personal analysis of the episcopal leaders of the denomination. In addition there are chapters on the history of the Center for the EUB Heritage, the nature of the EUB heritage, a summary of the conference by Elmer O'Brien, and the texts of the two sermons preached at the conference. It is an invaluable collection of papers reflecting on the short history of the EUB Church that many readers of the *Telescope-Messenger* will wish to read.

When the book nears publication, we will send information on how to order it to all people on the mailing list. For further information on this publication contact the editor at rlfrey@myexcel.com.

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