

A Brief History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ

The Church of the United Brethren in Christ began during the latter part of the 1700s. People had become discontent with the dead formalism of the established churches. Then a revival movement swept through Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. It emphasized the idea of a "new birth" and a deeper spiritual experience.

Out of this movement came the first denomination to begin in America, rather than be transplanted from Europe.

"We are Brethren!"

Spearheading the movement were two evangelistic preachers of very different backgrounds.

One was Philip William Otterbein, a German Reformed minister who came from Germany in 1752. He discovered that formal religious practices were the common standard in the American colonies. His training and subsequent heart change prompted him to preach a message based on a deeper, life-transforming spiritual experience.

Martin Boehm was the other man. He came from the Mennonite faith, and had been selected by lot to be a preacher among his people. Initially, Boehm felt that he had no message to present, but that changed when he had a personal experience of God's saving grace through faith. Then Boehm became a flaming evangelist, proclaiming the salvation experience wherever he had the chance.

Both Otterbein and Boehm did extensive evangelistic preaching in inter-denominational gatherings. However, they didn't meet until Pentecost Sunday, 1767. A "great meeting" was held that day in the barn of Isaac Long near Lancaster, Pa. These great meetings were usually held over weekends in groves, barns, or wherever a large congregation could assemble. The congregation in Long's barn included preachers and laypersons from various denominations, including the German Reformed, Lutheran, Moravian, Mennonite, Amish, and Dunker groups.

Martin Boehm preached that afternoon. Otterbein was so thrilled with Boehm's powerful message that this man of great stature threw his arms around the diminutive Boehm and exclaimed in German, "Wir sind bruder!", which in English translates as, "We are brethren!" They were different in many ways--in background, appearance, and some aspects of theology--but Otterbein realized they were alike in the areas which really counted.

From that enthusiastic greeting came the name "United Brethren."

A New Movement Takes Root

These two leaders were joined by others in attempting to evangelize the German-speaking churches located in the Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland colonies. They cooperated in conducting great meetings where one or more of them would preach. Counseling and guidance were given to other preachers and laypersons who joined the inter-denominational venture. They selected itinerant preachers to conduct services where possible. However, in those early years, no thought was given to organizing a separate denomination.

There are records of organized small group meetings dating from 1774. Otterbein and other Reformed pastors were involved in meetings that sought to awaken the Reformed churches spiritually. Opposition forced Otterbein to proceed along other lines.

The church Otterbein pastored in Baltimore, Maryland, interested in outreach, became the mother church for a number of other churches. These operated under Otterbein's oversight. Preachers and exhorters already in the field looked to Otterbein for direction.

The Movement Gets Organized

A formal conference was held in Baltimore in 1789 to gain a fuller knowledge of the field, to unify the work being done, and to plan for larger and more permanent results. Another conference was held in 1791 to advance the work started two years before.

There are no records of additional conferences until September 23, 1800, when a group of men gathered at the home of Peter Kemp near Frederick, Md. During that meeting, the ministers adopted the name "Church of the United Brethren in Christ," and elected Otterbein and Boehm as bishops. Both men were 74 years old when chosen. Boehm served until his death in 1812, and Otterbein served until his death in 1813.

Between 1800 and 1815, meetings were held annually. However, ministers in Ohio felt that, because of distance, it would be better to hold meetings less often. So beginning in 1815, a "General Conference" was held every two years, with regional "annual conferences" held every year. Since 1821, General Conferences have been held every four years.

That first General Conference in 1815 adopted a Confession of Faith, a concise statement of our key doctrinal beliefs. Not a word of the Confession of Faith has been changed since then, and it remains our central organizing document.

The Church Moves West

Christian Newcomer was elected bishop in 1813. Under his leadership, the loose evangelistic fellowship became a more organized movement. And the church grew rapidly.

As the young nation expanded westward, so did the church, with hundreds of new churches starting. People who had been associated with United Brethren in the east migrated west and settled in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. In the mid-1820s, Newcomer spearheaded the establishment of churches in Canada, taking the church into another country for the first time.

In those early years, services were conducted almost exclusively in the German language. The congregations were led by "circuit-riding" preachers who might have responsibility for a dozen or more churches.

In 1821, the church inserted into the *Discipline* a historic stand against slavery, 40 years before the outbreak of the Civil War. This stand hindered the church's growth in the South. The church also inherited from the German culture a strong opposition to secret societies.

A tentative constitution for the church was adopted by the General Conference of 1837, followed by the formal adoption of a constitution in 1841. This Constitution included the church's stands against slavery and membership in secret societies.

Early Denominational Ministries

Denominational departments and other ministries were organized as needs arose. The work of publishing a church paper gave birth to the United Brethren Publishing House, established in 1834 at Circleville, Ohio. It was moved to Dayton, Ohio, in 1853.

In 1853, the denominational mission board was organized under the name of the Home, Frontier, and Foreign Missionary Society. That year, we launched our first missionary endeavor, sending a 30-wagon caravan of settlers--nearly 100 people--to Oregon, where the church took root and grew. So in less than 100 years, the movement which began in Long's barn had spread from coast to coast.

Two years later, a mission was established in Sierra Leone, West Africa, extending the church to another continent. An outreach to Germany began in 1869.

The first educational institution was Otterbein University at Westerville, Ohio, established in 1847. The Union Biblical Seminary was founded in 1871. A number of other colleges sprang up.

In 1820, Rev. John George Pfrimmer organized the first known United Brethren Sunday school near Corydon, Ind. The Sunday School Association was organized in

1865, and the Church Election Society was constituted in 1869 to begin new churches. The Women's Missionary Association began in 1875 and soon became a major supporter of United Brethren missions.

Division

By 1889, the United Brethren church had grown to over 200,000 members, with six bishops and a full-blown denominational structure. But then controversy arose, and eventually a division occurred.

Several General Conferences discussed proposed changes regarding three major issues: allowing proportional representation at General Conference (rather than a set number of delegates for each conference, regardless of size), allowing lay representation at General Conference (instead of ministers only), and permitting church members to also be members of secret societies (previously forbidden). In 1889, the General Conference delegates voted to change the Constitution's requirements concerning these issues. However, they chose to ignore the proper procedures for doing so, as spelled out in the Constitution, which stated that no changes could be made in the Constitution without a majority vote of all United Brethren members.

A segment of the General Conference, led by Bishop Milton Wright (father of the Wright Brothers), left the General Conference meeting and resumed the session in another part of the city. They declared that the other delegates had withdrawn from the denomination by adopting a different Constitution.

This brought into existence two fellowships operating under the name "Church of the United Brethren in Christ."

Starting Over

The majority group became known as the "Church of the United Brethren in Christ (New Constitution)," with headquarters in Dayton, Ohio. They were also known as the "liberal" United Brethren. This group united with the Evangelical Association in 1946 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church.

Milton Wright's group, which adhered to the Confession of Faith of 1815 and the Constitution of 1841, became known as the "Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution)." They were also known as the "radical" United Brethren.

Siding with the Old Constitution group proved costly for many congregations. Except in Michigan and Oregon, courts awarded all United Brethren church property to the New Constitution group. Many congregations found themselves without a meeting place.

The same was true at the denominational level. There were no departments, no publishing house, no headquarters, no hierarchy of any kind. But under Bishop Wright's capable leadership, the church reorganized itself.

Church Headquarters and College

When the dust had cleared following the division of 1889, only two of the many United Brethren colleges and seminaries were in the hands of the Old Constitution group: Hartsville College in southeastern Indiana, and Philomath College in Oregon. Hartsville closed in 1897, and fire destroyed its building a year later. Philomath remained open until the 1920s.

In 1897, the church headquarters moved from Dayton, Ohio, to Huntington, Ind., where a new college was opening its doors. Today, Huntington University (originally called Central College) is the US National Conference's only college.

The UB International Headquarters and publishing house were located in downtown Huntington until 1976, when the operations moved into a new building next to Huntington College. When an international structure was adopted in 2001, it became the headquarters of only the United States National Conference.

Christian Education

The 1897 General Conference started the Young People's Christian Association to minister to youth. The name was changed to United Brethren Christian Endeavor in 1901. Sunday school and Christian Endeavor united in 1921 into the Department of Religious Education, which was later renamed the Department of Christian Education.

In 1977, the Christian Education and Publications departments merged into the Department of Church Ministries. This, in turn, merged in 1981 with the Stewardship department and the Archives to form the Department of Church Services. (The Archives relocated to Huntington College in 1988 and was placed under the Education Department.) Church Services worked in a number of areas, including family and children's ministries, youth, senior citizen's ministries, evangelism and discipleship, singles, Bible quizzing, and camping (though the camps are operated by annual conferences). It also ran a large curriculum and literature marketing operation, supplying Sunday school materials to churches both within and outside of the denomination. The profits helped underwrite the department.

Publications

In 1885, Milton Wright began a weekly publication called *The Christian Conservator*, which served as a counter-balance for the more liberal views represented in the denomination's official publication, *The Religious Telescope*. After the division of 1889, the *Christian Conservator* became our official publication.

The name was changed to *The United Brethren* in 1954. At that time, it became a bi-weekly publication, and later became a monthly publication. The name was shortened to *UB* in 1992.

The magazine ceased publication at the end of 1993 and was replaced by a new denominational communications strategy based on newsletters distributed free of charge to all persons who attend United Brethren churches. The direct successor to the *UB* magazine is the *Connect* newsletter. Another newsletter, *Global Impact*, relates to missions work of the US National Conference.

Until 1982, the denomination published its own Sunday school literature, including materials for children through adults. However, the cost was too great, especially compared to the costs of commercial curriculum. Therefore, the printshop was closed and churches were encouraged to purchase, through the Department of Church Services, Sunday school literature from other companies.

A denominational website went online in 1997 at: www.ub.org.

Toward an International Structure

During the 1989-1993 quadrennium, Ontario Conference became aware of conflicts between our church structure and the laws of Canada. The issues included charitable status, board representation, and general issues of national sovereignty. Ontario Conference was forced to organize under its own Constitution, separate from the Constitution of 1841 which the rest of the denomination followed. This new entity adopted the name United Brethren Church in Canada. To enable them to continue as a part of the denomination, a new category was established: national conference.

The 1993 General Conference created a United States National Conference, though its duties were limited to matters pertaining to joint ministry agreements with the Canadian church. These agreements allowed Canada and the United States to work together in missions and other areas; they pertained specifically to the transfer of money from Canada to the United States.

The issues surrounding Canada pertained to all other countries, too, though the need for change was not urgent. Realizing this, in 1992 the church began working on developing a structure which would be truly international in nature, recognizing national sovereignty and giving equal representation to all UB people worldwide. Elements were adopted at the 1993 and 1997 General Conferences. Between 1997 and 2001, the

leaders in Jamaica, Honduras, Sierra Leone, Nicaragua, and Hong Kong worked on developing their own governing documents (constitution and by-laws). At the same time, the General Board and the Executive Leadership Team worked on developing the documents to which every national conference would need to subscribe.

Worldwide Church Structure Since 2001

The international documents, along with the governing documents developed by each constituent national conference, were all presented at the 2001 General Conference (see pages 172-183 for the final documents). There, the delegates from around the world formally organized the Church of the United Brethren in Christ International, and all seven national groups were, individually, voted into the membership of the international church and their governing documents approved as compatible with the doctrinal beliefs and core values of the worldwide body.

The international structure includes an international executive committee consisting of the highest leader from each national conference, which holds annual meetings. Every fourth year, a General Conference is held, with delegates representing all national conferences worldwide.

Although the United States National Conference was organized in 1993, its meetings were limited to approving joint ministry agreements. That changed in 2001, when the first true United States National Conference was held in conjunction with the 2001 General Conference. At that meeting, a single bishop was elected to serve the US Church, and the denominational "Commission" structure was replaced with "Leadership Teams" whose members would be chosen by the bishop and other leaders, rather than elected.