

**THE FOUNDING OF INDIANA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY:  
ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF  
UNITED BRETHREN HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>**

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The history of United Brethren efforts to found church-related colleges, like the efforts of other Pietist denominations, is a narrative of persistence in the face of obstacles, some of which were more formidable than others. Would-be founders had to locate financial backing, negotiate contracts for buildings, hire faculty, recruit students, and pay the many bills associated with such ventures. In addition, the evangelical aspiration of the United Brethren to “raise up” a holy people for the Kingdom of God was not always easily conjoined with visions of “higher education.” Pietist ambivalence about the effects of education was not easily overcome, however demonstrable the benefits might be. Even so, the United Brethren Church did succeed in founding colleges in Ohio (Otterbein) and Pennsylvania (Lebanon Valley) in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the last chapters in the saga of how United Brethren founded colleges and universities was to be written in the first decade of the twentieth century in central Indiana by a small cadre of leaders of the St. Joseph, White River and Indiana Conferences of the United Brethren Church.

In this essay, I tell the story of this later venture, which envisioned the creation of a university, not simply a liberal arts college. First, I describe that effort against the backdrop of the origins of the United Brethren in Christ movement in German-American Pietism. Second, I locate this effort in relation to the nineteenth century debates between the friends and foes of the proposal to founded United Brethren church-related institutions of “liberal education.” Finally, I introduce the founders of Indiana Central University (now known as the University of Indianapolis), an institution which was founded by the United Brethren Church in 1902, three years before the institution began offering classes. The Rev. J. T. Roberts and Rev. Alva Button Roberts not only persevered against all odds, but they also embodied the vocational sensibility of Christian “Life Workers,” which was shared by virtually all the students and faculty who were participated in that first year of

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Timothy Binkley, Archivist at the Center for the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage at United Theological Seminary, and Christine Guyonneau, Archivist at the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis for their helpful assistance in locating some of the historical documents that I have used in writing this article.

the fledgling university's existence.

The company of more than seventy-four students and ten faculty/staff who gathered on the steps of the "portico" of the Academic Building—for September 27, 1905—for the beginning of classes brought with them eager hopes and noble aspirations about the venture they proposed to call "Indiana Central University." Some of them may also have had nagging doubts and brooding anxieties about whether what they were beginning would last. Several students and members of the faculty had already been part of other failed efforts by leaders of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ to begin colleges in the Midwest. They also knew that the financial resources that had been invested in this academic building were technically borrowed. The deed to the college building would not be legally transferred to the Church of the United Brethren by the real estate developer who had contracted with the church to build the college until all the remaining one hundred lots in the neighborhood of "University Heights" had been sold.<sup>2</sup>

The founding community of faculty, administrators and students came from the four points on the compass—mostly from the state of Indiana with a few students and faculty from other Midwestern states like Ohio and Illinois. Virtually all of them were members of the United Brethren congregations and/or were closely related to United Brethren families and shared the Pietistic sensibilities of the founders. While some were from German-speaking backgrounds, and others from Anglo-Saxon lineage, most were from rural precincts. We simply do not know as much about the founders as some of us might like to know. In part, this is because the United Brethren associated with the founding of Indiana Central "kept the stories better than they told their story."<sup>3</sup> What we do know, however, is that the founders were so convinced of the importance of higher education for carrying out the mission of the church that they overcame significant obstacles and disappointments. That is the kind of story that we should tell as the institution that they founded enters its second century.

### **The Origins of the United Brethren**

The Pietist movement developed amid the growing sense of the "incomplete" character of the Protestant Reformation by people who had come to

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of this financial transaction, see Frederick D. Hill, "*Downright Devotion to the Cause*": *A History of the University of Indianapolis and its Legacy of Service* (Indianapolis, Ind.: University of Indianapolis Press, 2002), 5-8. For a copy of the original document, see the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this insight to Rebecca Blair, who is the co-author with Dr. Jim Fuller, (Associate Professor of History) of *Profiles in Service: 1905-2005* (Indianapolis, Ind.: University of Indianapolis, 2006), a collection of narratives of "Education for Service." Given the enormous task that they embarked upon, the founders of the university probably did not have the leisure to reflect about what they were doing. For that reason, with the exception of a few documents that are available in the University's Archives, I have based my remarks about their educational vision on the published documents of the university and the parent denomination, the United Brethren in Christ Church.

believe that the Reformation that Martin Luther began was “far from completed as far as regards life and morality.”<sup>4</sup> There are at least three distinct senses in which this is true.<sup>5</sup> First of all, Pietists were less concerned about the formal outlines of the classic Lutheran doctrine about the *ordo salutis*—order of salvation—than they were that it was understood that God was working in us in such a way as to regenerate us. This does not mean that Protestant Pietists denied that salvation is God’s work for us in the sense that Luther regarded God’s justification as an “alien righteousness” (of Jesus Christ) that is imputed to the believer, but they did celebrate the creation of a new nature in the life of the Christian believer.

Second, Pietists attempted to restore the sense of ecclesial fellowship that had been disrupted not only by the Thirty Years War (ending in 1648), which had done so much to discredit Protestant Christianity in Germany, but also had distorted the way Christian worship had come to be enacted. In some German cities, the pastor’s sermons for virtually the entire year were devoted to attacking the integrity of Catholics as well as other Protestants in matters of doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Instead of focusing on doctrinal differences, Pietists tended to be more interested in the question of whether the “heart” of another person was renewed. Thus, the common Pietist disposition: “If your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand!”

Third, Pietists attempted to restore the use of the Bible at the level of pastoral guidance and lay shepherding. Whereas Lutheran orthodoxy had focused primarily on the formal authority of the Bible in alliance with an elaborate doctrine of the “verbal inspiration” of Scripture, Pietists emphasized attention to the Word of God as a continuing source of nourishment for those who had been united in Christian love in obedience to Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

In all three of these respects, Protestant Pietists sought to bring about renewal of the church by forming church fellowships, where loving concern for one another was nurtured by the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Confident in the possibility of renewal, Pietists looked to the constancy of God’s love in the humble awareness that despite the inconstancy of human beings to embody the Christian gospel, mutual accountability for discipleship could be sustained by daily attention to the Word of God in the context of prayerful repentance.

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<sup>4</sup> John Weborg, “Pietism: ‘. . . The Fire of God Which Flames from the Heart of Germany,’” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank Senn (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1984), 185. The quotation is from a statement by Philip Spener, as cited in Amande Saintes, *A Critical History of Rationalism in Germany* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1849), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am following John Weborg and others whose descriptions of Pietism emphasize these three basic characteristics. Other historians expand this pattern by calling attention to the ways Pietists developed a “theology of experience” that in turn became the context for living within the horizon of expectation of the radical transformation of the world by the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom. See Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Weborg, 190.

<sup>7</sup> Weborg, 191.

The United Brethren in Christ denomination initially formed as a kind of ecumenical alliance or “union” of like-minded brothers-and-sisters in Christ in the context of the Second Great Awakening by German-speaking immigrants (and their American descendants) in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. From Reformed, Lutheran, and Mennonite backgrounds, all of whom were influenced by the Pietist movement<sup>8</sup> that originated in Europe and subsequently spread to the American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century, the United Brethren developed as a network of congregations and pastors that stressed the faith of the “warm” heart formed in a personal relationship with God made possible by a *first-hand* experience of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The saga of the United Brethren in Christ movement begins with a pivotal encounter between two men that took place at Isaac Long’s barn near Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1767 when the well-educated German Reformed Church pastor Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) and the uneducated Mennonite preacher Martin Boehm (1725-1812) met when Otterbein attended one of the revival services that Boehm was leading. Having listened intently to Boehm’s preaching, Otterbein recognized that Boehm’s witness to the gospel closely paralleled his own spiritual struggle and experience, especially the “assurance experience” that he had in Lancaster in 1754. Having been moved by the Mennonite farmer’s sermon, Otterbein walked forward to Boehm and exclaimed, “*Wir sind Brüder!*” (“We are brothers!”) With this gesture of class-crossing hospitality and denomination-transcending reconciliation, a relationship developed between the two leaders that lasted until Boehm’s death in 1812 and proved to be the basis for the emergence of a movement that took as its name the “United Brethren in Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Otterbein became the better known of the two “founders” of the United Brethren, in part because of his gifts for organizational leadership in the fledgling denomination. Like the “Methodist” followers of John Wesley, with which both of these men were already familiar, Otterbein and Boehm both emphasized the doctrine of Christian assurance of salvation. They pointed to the eighth chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, where the Apostle declared that “it is the Spirit himself bearing witness to our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). Like John Wesley, the Oxford don whose heart-warming experience at Aldersgate Street in 1738 led him and “the people called Methodists” to a renewed sense of vocation to “spread Scriptural holiness across the land and to reform the continent,” the leaders of the United Brethren emphasized the empowerment of the Spirit in the lives of men and women. Indeed, the egalitarian sensibilities of the United

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview of the history of Pietism as a movement, see Dale Brown, *Pietism: Its History and Development* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> For details about the lives of Otterbein and Boehm as well as other historical perspectives on the origins of the United Brethren in Christ movement, see J. Bruce Behny and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* edited by Kenneth W. Krueger (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1979), 29-54.

Brethren led them to ordain women earlier than most other Protestant groups in the Midwestern United States.

Although merger with the Methodist Church would not come until 1968, “fraternal” exchanges between the United Brethren in Christ and the leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church occurred as early as the second decade of the nineteenth century. But that is getting ahead of the story. The United Brethren movement, which began in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia gradually spread west with the expansion of the frontier. Congregations were organized in the state of Indiana as early as 1812. By 1826, a total of six circuits existed, most of which were located in Southern Indiana along the Ohio River. The first session of the Indiana conference was held in 1830. Five years later, with the creation of the Wabash Conference (Western and Northern Indiana, parts of Michigan and all of the state of Illinois), the Indiana Conference was reorganized. In 1846, a third reorganization occurred. The White River Conference was organized in between the Wabash Conference and the Indiana Conference with the southern boundary running from east to west along the line between Columbus to Bloomington.<sup>10</sup> The leadership for Indiana Central University came from the White River Conference, but members of the faculty came from all three of the Indiana area conferences.

### **Educational Visions of the United Brethren Church**

Pietistic movements in Europe and North American contexts have tended to regard the prospect of higher education with wariness, and this ambivalence has marked the institutions of higher education that they have founded in different ways. The Oxford scholar/Anglican priest/ “Methodist” poet Charles Wesley could write about “uniting the pair so long disjointed, knowledge and vital piety,”<sup>11</sup> but American Methodists no less than the United Brethren would struggle in each generation with the tension between the need for a trained clergy and the intellectual conflictedness of the Pietist religious heritage about how to unite “head” and “heart.”

As the religious historian Conrad Cherry has noted, this conflict appeared as early as the 1784 “Christmas Conference” in Baltimore, the gathering at which the Methodist Episcopal Church was born. On that occasion, a self-directed “course of study” was recommended to ministers, but with a qualification added: “Gaining knowledge is a good thing, but saving Souls is

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<sup>10</sup> For the details of these conference realignments, see A. C. Wilmore, *History of the White River Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1925).

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Wesley’s hymn for children “At the Opening of a school in Kingswood” a.k.a. “Come Father Son and Holy Ghost,” No.461 in *A Collection of Hymns for Use of the People Called Methodists* in *The Works of John Wesley Vol. 7*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (New York, N.Y.: Oxford UP, 1983), 643-644.

better. . . . If you can do but one, let your Studies alone.”<sup>12</sup> Despite this bias, early American Methodists and United Brethren in Christ leaders founded over eight hundred institutions of higher education over the next century and a half. Given the Pietist ambivalence about “gaining knowledge,” however, these pietistic Protestants “struggled, rather than hurried, to Zion” in founding church-related colleges.<sup>13</sup>

The debate within the Church of the United Brethren began in the mid-1830s, expressed in sessions of the General Conference as well as in the pages of *The Religious Telescope*, the newspaper that served as the principal vehicle for discussion of important issues for the denomination. On the one side, an anti-intellectual faction of leaders identified themselves with the needs of the poor and working classes, worried that educated leaders would lose their faith and become “proud and haughty”<sup>14</sup> if they created colleges based on the classical liberal arts model followed by Harvard and Yale. On the other side of the debate, advocates of “liberal education” like the Rev. William Hanby passionately argued that if the United Brethren were going to carry out their mandate to carry the gospel throughout the world by founding missions, the church would need to have an educated clergy and an educated laity.<sup>15</sup> At this stage, the debate about education did not sharply distinguish between theological education and what we think of as undergraduate study. At this juncture, both enterprises were associated with “classical education” and United Brethren leaders disputed about how helpful or harmful “liberal education” could be in assisting the church in carrying out its overlapping missions of evangelism and social reform.

Rev. John Russel represented a third position in between these two factions. Early in his ministry, he stubbornly opposed the creation of church colleges. Radically egalitarian and radically agrarian, Russel was an odd kind of social reformer who emancipated slaves and advocated for the rights of African-Americans while also urging church leaders to never forsake the common people of the American frontier. His first occupation was that of a blacksmith and throughout his life he made his own shoes and advocated liv-

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<sup>12</sup> Conrad Cherry offers this apt judgment in his book *Hurrying to Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Cherry, 19.

<sup>14</sup> See “Editor’s Valedictory” by William B. Hanby in *Religious Telescope*, 18 June 1845, 188, col. 3, top half.

<sup>15</sup> Hanby devoted the greater part of his “Editor’s Valedictory” article in the June 18, 1845 issue of *The Religious Telescope* to the subject of education. “Our people are an industrious and wealthy people, but by no means with a few noble exceptions a learned or even a reading people. God has declared that his gospel shall be preached in all the world, among all the nations, but alas, is our church prepared to send missionaries among all nations? If the most affectual [*sic*] doors were opened could we enter the field? No, we are not qualified. We have the means of usefulness, but lack the energy. . . . No great reformation in the church since the crucifixion has ever been achieved without profound learning and religion combined. . . . The best and most pious—the greatest reformers that ever lived, were learned men. Indeed without this they could not have been great reformers. As well talk about a great schoolmaster who did not know his letters” (188-189).

ing simply among the people of the land. Eventually, he began to see some of the ways that colleges could serve as a means to lift up the downtrodden and in his own way advocated for “the right of all men to a liberal education . . . .” At the same time, John Russel was anxious that “the dissemination of knowledge” would be directed in such a way that it would “secure the blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of righteousness that will in the end secure the inestimable blessing of life eternal.”<sup>16</sup>

As a self-made man, Russel and other United Brethren admired the autodidactic model articulated by Benjamin Franklin and others. In fact, near the end of his life, Bishop Russel endowed a “Biblical Chair” in the Pennsylvania Conference for the theological education of future clergy in which a pastor-scholar would serve as a mentor to pastor-apprentices who would have the kind of self-motivation and initiative to undertake a rigorous program of education.<sup>17</sup> The conditions that he attached to this proposal were so extensive that it could not be implemented.<sup>18</sup> (Some critics believed only Russel could ever have met all the conditions!) He also advocated that the church college to be created in Ohio be located on a farm along with the denominational headquarters and newspaper in order to avoid the problem of educational elitism. At his death in 1871, he was memorialized in the pages of *The Religious Telescope* not only as an early opponent of “church colleges” but also as a leader who had changed his mind about these matters.<sup>19</sup> Bishop Russel was lauded (by some) for his willingness to change, thereby becoming an exemplar for advocates of founding church colleges, but others questioned whether his vision of education was really consistent with liberal education.<sup>20</sup> This would not be the last time that the virtues of democratic egalitarianism would conflict with the aspirations of educational excellence in United Brethren circles.

In the end, the more progressive faction won the debate and institutions of “liberal education” were founded to train the future leaders of the church. The first institution to be founded was Otterbein College (Ohio) in 1847. Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania began in 1866. Still other institutions would be founded in the years to come but “small enrollments and

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<sup>16</sup> See the article “Rev. John Russel, Thirteenth Bishop” by J. A. Miller, *Religious Telescope*, 29 December 1934, p. 22, column 3.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the controversy associated with Russel’s Biblical Chair, see Behny & Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 177-178.

<sup>18</sup> See the related article about the Biblical Chair in *Religious Telescope*, 7 May 1869. I am grateful to Tim Binkley at the Center for the Study of Evangelical United Brethren Heritage of United Theological Seminary for his assistance in locating this document and others that pertain to the controversy over the Biblical Chair.

<sup>19</sup> See “Ex-bishop John Russel” (author unnamed), *Religious Telescope*, 4 January 1871.

<sup>20</sup> Although it is doubtful that John Russel would ever have wanted to call himself an advocate of “liberal education” in the classical sense, he does represent the perspective of those who advocated for the use of education to free people from servitude, and therefore reflects the egalitarian trends in American culture that have influenced the development of American higher education.

meager support”<sup>21</sup> from United Brethren congregations made it difficult for them to survive. In 1895, the United Brethren General Conference created a Board of Education to coordinate such efforts, but this body had no real power until it was reconstituted in 1913. For all practical purposes, would-be founders had to gather support from United Brethren clergy and laity by creating collaborations at the annual conference level, and even where such sponsorship was achieved, it often did not yield sufficient support. In fact, by the time Indiana Central opened its doors in 1905, three earlier institutions had been founded in Illinois and Indiana, but all had failed.

Those who proposed to create the college in central Indiana dared to hope that this venture would succeed where the others had not. They could not know it at the time, but the institution that they set out to establish on Otterbein Avenue would be the last institution of higher education to be founded in the United States of America by the United Brethren in Christ Church. This background information provides some of the context necessary for locating the significance of the two persons who, more than anyone else, did what was necessary to build the college for the United Brethren of Indiana.

### **The Founders of Indiana Central University**

The Reverend Dr. John T. Roberts (1865-1937) and The Rev. Mrs. Alva Button Roberts (1872–1950) brought a shared hunger for opportunities to pursue higher education in the context of carrying out the mission of the United Brethren Church to the task of founding Indiana Central University. Their mutual hunger for learning and zeal for the church’s mission had been the occasion for their initial contact with one another and it would mark their life together throughout their marriage.<sup>22</sup>

“J. T.” Roberts had been raised in the home of a United Brethren family in Southern Indiana, and had completed a B.S. (1887) and M.S. (1890) degrees at Hartsfield College<sup>23</sup> before that institution closed. Later he would receive his Doctorate of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Harriman University (1903). According the 1905-1906 catalog, prior to taking the position at Indiana Central, Roberts had taught in a public school for two years, served as a pastor of United Brethren congregations for five years, and had spent eleven years serving as a presiding elder in the White River

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<sup>21</sup> Behny and Eller, 243.

<sup>22</sup> These two clergy encountered one another first as correspondents through the denominational periodical *The Religious Telescope*. At the time she was serving as a pastor in Westfield, Illinois, the site of an earlier attempt to found a United Brethren-related college. For more details, see Michael Cartwright’s article about Alva and J. T. Roberts in the “Founders & Parents” section of the book *Profiles in Service: 1905-2005* by Rebecca Blair, Michael G. Cartwright and A. James Fuller (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Ind.: University of Indianapolis, 2006), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Hartsville College was an earlier United Brethren-founded institution located in Northeastern Indiana. It closed in 1897. For details about the failure of this earlier institution, see Hill, *Downright Devotion to the Cause*, 3.

Annual Conference (Indiana) of the United Brethren.

More so than most United Brethren at the time, it appears, J. T. Roberts had a strong commitment to “gaining knowledge” while he also pursued the salvation of souls in his care with appropriate zeal. At the time that he was asked to serve as chair of the search committee to identify the first president of the venture to be called Indiana Central University, Rev. Roberts had served the United Brethren Church for almost two decades. For much of that time, he also was one of the leaders in the effort to found a college in Central Indiana. In particular, he had been “driven by a ‘deep and abiding conviction’ regarding the need to keep United Brethren youth away from ‘state schools and schools of other churches’ from which they seldom returned to their home churches for service.” As Frederick Hill explains, J. T. Roberts “brought academic credibility as well as religious conviction to the position” of President, and given the available pool of United Brethren leaders in the state, Roberts “probably was as well qualified to lead the new institution as any other member of the United Brethren Church in Indiana.”<sup>24</sup>

That does not mean, however, that J. T. Roberts ever felt “called” to be a college president and business manager. Far from it! As he explained to the White River Conference, “It had been farthest from my mind . . . to have anything to do with the administration of the school when established.” Once he had been handed this responsibility, however, he felt that he could not shirk the call by his church to serve in this role. “As I turn my life toward a new field of activity, as I now see it, *a little larger parish* where I may touch more lives, I am anxious that the Spirit may lead me all the way, and I beg your sympathy and cooperation.”<sup>25</sup> As this comment suggests, Roberts’ vocational self-understanding was not dependent on a particular role configuration—much less informed by academic ambitions as such. Rather, he saw himself directed by purposes beyond his own self-initiative, and his attempts to serve God in the roles he was given was marked by a remarkable determination and deep sense of personal integrity.

We know that Alva Button Roberts was an equally determined person, who had her own strongly felt sense of vocation to serve in ministry as a United Brethren “elder.” Although raised in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Illinois, she left that denomination because of its refusal (at that time) to ordain women. She joined the United Brethren and in 1893 she became one of the first thirteen women who were ordained in that tradition. During the time that she and her family lived in University Heights (1905-1908), Alva sang in the chorus alongside students, and enrolled some of the Roberts children (as well as various Roberts relatives and Button cousins) in the music instruction offered at ICU. She also appears to have been the person around whom the first United Brethren in Christ congregation in the University Heights neighborhood formed. On Sundays, the congregation would gather

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<sup>24</sup> Hill, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Hill, 33, emphasis mine.

in Kephart Memorial Chapel for worship.

Before coming to University Heights, however, Rev. Alva Button Roberts had served in the Lower Wabash Conference in Illinois (1893), and based on conference records, we know that she was highly regarded as a pastoral leader. While serving as pastor of the Westfield Circuit, she appears to have studied at the United Brethren College in Westfield, Illinois before it closed in the mid-1890s, but we don't know if she actually completed requirements for a degree. In 1894, when she took an appointment in the White River Conference at approximately the same time that she married J. T. Roberts, she would have been one of only two ordained clergewomen to have served United Brethren congregations in the area of central Indiana.

There are no surviving records or personal reflections from Alva that reveal what she felt about her role as spouse of the first president of Indiana Central, but judging from the eulogy offered at her husband's death, she must have served in a variety of selfless ways. "Dr Roberts was asked to plunge into this situation as first president; with the responsibility. . . of securing furniture, new students; and funds for operating expenses. Rev. and Mrs. Roberts moved to Indianapolis, took up residence in two rooms of the college building until a home could be built, and Mrs. Roberts cooked for faculty and students, and all and sundry who came to look for lots, as well as caring for her own family, which then numbered six, with four children."<sup>26</sup> After raising her children, Alva served pastoral appointments in central Indiana in the mid-1920s and became a much beloved figure known by many United Brethren as "Mother Roberts"—an appellation that may or may not have its roots in the care that she displayed to the founding generation of students at Indiana Central.

As this retrospective narrative suggests, for the founders of Indiana Central, leadership roles overlapped in a variety of ways for reasons of necessity as well as perceived talents. In a circumstance in which they had few financial resources and very little infrastructure, they relied on a shared vocational sensibility to sustain their efforts to found this university. The idea that faculty and students alike were Christian "Life Work Recruits" was not so much a pre-professional identity as it was an ethic of Christian service that was displayed in the mundane details of selling lots and washing clothes as well as learning Latin, studying history, and singing hymns in the college chorus.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Eulogy given at J. T. Roberts' funeral in 1927 available in the John T. Roberts Papers in the Frederick Hill Archives. Clearly aware of the stress of her multiple roles, the eulogist adds in empathetic admiration, "It is no wonder that gray hairs developed during the succeeding three years. . . ."

<sup>27</sup> For more details about the shared vocation of the students and faculty in the founding generation of Indiana Central University, see Michael G. Cartwright, "Student Oracles at Indiana Central College about Service as 'Life Work Recruits,'" in *Profiles in Service, op cit.*, 17.

## Conclusion

As the two persons most intimately involved in making the “idea” of founding Indiana Central University into a reality, Alva and J. T. Roberts bore the greatest burdens during the first three years as the United Brethren Church in Indiana attempted to create an institution of higher education. In so doing, they embodied what the principal historian of the University of Indianapolis would identify as the “legacy of service”<sup>28</sup> that has played such a significant role in the university’s identity and quite possibly constitutes the university’s principal charism during its first century of existence. That ethic of service, however, cannot be understood apart from the wider story of the United Brethren in Christ movement, and the efforts of men and women like J. T. and Alva Button Roberts to build colleges to enable the United Brethren Church to achieve its mission.

The leaders of the fledgling institution struggled, often heroically, for the first four decades of its existence. They had to shelve the dream of being a university for a while and content themselves with being a college that trained preachers and teachers. For the greater part of that time, President Irby J. Good, one of the first graduates of Indiana Central University, would serve as its president (1915-1944). With the coming of Rev. Dr. I. Lynd Esch in 1945 and a new effort to find ways to partner with the city of Indianapolis, Indiana Central began to grow and develop in ways that would ultimately lead to the resumption of its status as university in 1975.

Esch’s successor, Rev. Dr. Gene Sease (1970-1988), launched an even more aggressive effort to engage the business community of Indianapolis by created professional programs that would result in the transformation of the liberal arts college into a comprehensive university that offers graduate professional programs as well as a liberal arts education. In due course, Sease changed the name of the University to reflect this identification with the capital city of Indiana. By the fall of 2007, the total number of students at the University of Indianapolis exceeded 4,650, and the university now graduates more doctorates each year than one of the state universities in Indiana.

In some ways, the institution founded over a century ago by J.T. and Alva Button Roberts has exceeded the modest hopes of the founders. In other ways, with the changes of the institution’s name, and the 1946 merger (to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church) and the 1968 merger (to form the United Methodist Church), the journey of the University of Indianapolis has taken twists and turns that the founders could not have imagined. Meanwhile, the effort to conjoin higher education with the cultivation of vital piety that began in 1902 continues in the twenty-first century at the corner of Otterbein Avenue and Hanna Avenue on the south side of Indianapolis.

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<sup>28</sup> See the subtitle of Frederick D. Hill’s book, *Downright Devotion to the Cause*, *op cit.* For a discussion of the significance of the “Legacy of Service,” see chapter 15, 368-382, esp. 381-382.