‘RIDE A CIRCUIT OR LET IT ALONE’: EARLY PRACTICES THAT KEPT THE UNITED BRETHREN, ALBRIGHT PEOPLE AND METHODISTS APART

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A generation after the Christmas Conference of 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church was involved in a series of negotiations with the United Brethren in Christ and the Albright People that sought to unite the three movements but ended up hardening the determination of each to exist independently. Some writers have interpreted the episode as a failure because merger did not occur. However, a review of the interaction from the perspective of institutional history reveals that those events served a positive purpose at the time and provide useful clarification for United Methodists today. This paper examines the negotiations from this latter point of view. In addition the study provides perspective for understanding the frequent assertion that the German language was the primary difference that kept the movements apart.

The most obvious product of those early efforts at church union was a series of formal communications between the Methodists and the United Brethren from 1809 to 1814, but the motives to merge the two German-speaking movements with Methodism existed earlier than that. In April 1803 Christian Newcomer, a United Brethren preacher from the beginnings of that movement, wrote in his Journal that he was present at the Baltimore Conference of the Methodists for three days. “It was my intention,” he said, “to make a proposition to the Conference... in order to ascertain whether it was possible to point out and adopt a plan of operation, by which the English and German Brethren could be more united together, and have a better understanding of each other.” He stated his purpose to a member of the Methodist conference, who advised him to wait till the General Conference in 1804 because they were busy with other matters and could not act on such a proposition.1 Heeding the advice, the 54 year old German, who apparently acted solely on his own authority, did not take the initiative on the matter again for several years. When he did so in 1809 Newcomer had become one of the rising leaders behind Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm and Methodist interest in work among German-speaking Americans had increased.

Two years earlier Henry Boehm, a son of Martin who became a bilingual German- and English-speaking Methodist circuit rider, evidenced the growing Methodist interest by having the Methodist Episcopal Church Discipline translated into German. Boehm indicated three reasons for printing the book: because many who spoke that language had no idea there was such a book, a growing number of Germans were joining Methodism and could profit from it, and “There was a prospect of a union between the Methodists and the United Brethren.” Actually the German initiative originated with Bishop Francis Asbury, who assigned Henry to be his traveling companion for five years, beginning in 1808, because as Boehm said, “Bishop Asbury was anxious I should travel with him, especially on account of the Germans.”

The exact nature of Asbury’s plan for uniting the Germans to Methodism is not explicitly stated in extant documents, but the evidence of his commitment to this cause is abundant over the next several years. In 1807 Asbury wrote to Jacob Gruber, a presiding elder who was the second bilingual German Methodist itinerant, to tell him that Boehm soon would print the German edition of the Discipline and to encourage Gruber to make time “for the Germans in your charge” since that was one reason for his current appointment. Early in 1810 Asbury again expressed his goal to Gruber: “I have felt a great concern for the lost sheep of the house of Germany, [but] we have but only you two boys, that can Germanize.”

That Asbury was not content with that limitation was clear in an incident related by John Dreisbach, who became one of the leaders of the Evangelical Association. Dreisbach told of his being approached in the summer of 1810, when he was just 21 years old, by the Methodist bishop, who “made us a very favorable offer toward receiving us into the ranks of the Methodist clergy.” Asbury proposed that Dreisbach withdraw from the Albright movement, go to the Baltimore Conference with the bishop and join them, and then his appointment would be to travel for a year with Jacob Gruber to better learn the English language. The young preacher said he was interested if Asbury would have German circuits, districts, and conferences supervised by a Methodist bishop, but the episcopal leader said such a proposal “would be inexpedient.” Dreisbach then declined the offer, which he regarded as “a treacherous step” toward the Albright movement.

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4 [John Dreisbach], “The Past, Present, and Future,” Evangelical Messenger (Cleveland, Ohio), 21 Feb. 1855, p. 28.
At the same time Asbury also was negotiating with the United Brethren. Christian Newcomer attended the Methodist annual conference in March 1809 and a committee of the Baltimore Conference met with him to ascertain whether a “union could be effected between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the United Brethren in Christ.” After serious deliberation the conference gave him a written resolution which he was “to deliver to William Otterbein in Baltimore.” The three page communication, which was signed by Bishops Asbury and William McKendree, proposed several terms to be met:

1. Every United Brethren minister and preacher shall have a regular license from your conference which would “introduce them to our pulpits and privileges” and in turn the United Brethren were to receive only ministers and preachers who carried valid Methodist credentials.

2. United Brethren were urged “to establish a strict discipline” to prevent immorality among their people. The German edition of the Methodist Discipline was recommended “to your consideration to adopt it, or any part of it” or “any other form that you may judge best.”

3. All members of the United Brethren societies would be admitted to Methodist class-meetings, sacraments, and love feasts “provided they have a certificate of membership signed by a regularly licensed preacher of your church.”

The spirit of the communication was evident in the remark: “We sincerely wish to accommodate you as far as we can consistent with the discipline which binds us together as a spiritual people.”

Newcomer, whose “heart’s desire has always been to effect a union between his German brethren and the Methodists” according to Asbury, worked diligently to meet the Methodist terms for union. Indeed his Journal contains the principal information about the negotiations, which are strangely absent in Asbury’s Journal. In 1810 Newcomer was present again when the Baltimore Conference met at Baltimore and was the only contemporary to record what must have been one of the most significant

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6-7 Mar. 1809, NJ, p. 172.


9Newcomer’s name does not appear in Asbury’s two volume account except in editorial notes, but Asbury is mentioned fifteen times in Newcomer’s one volume record.
meetings in the union discussions. On Monday, March 12, he wrote: "We were invited to come to the lodgings of Bishop Asbury; we met the two Bishops [Asbury and McKendree] and several other preachers there. Otterbein, Boehm, and Asbury delivered a short address each; the first and last mentioned then prayed fervently to God." Four days later Newcomer was invited to attend the conference session and gave the closing prayer. 10 While it was customary to find Newcomer at these meetings, the session at Asbury’s lodgings was the only deliberation that included Otterbein and Boehm, who did not attend any more annual conferences.

Although the specific content of the negotiations at this stage is unknown, it is certain that the Methodists were informed about the United Brethren annual conference of 1809. That meeting agreed that the two groups concurred on "fundamental Christian doctrines" and felt that all differences consisted of "some external church regulations." Moreover, the Germans approved giving each preacher a license, permitting preachers to give members a ticket to attend the Lord’s Supper with Methodists, receiving Methodists bearing proper tokens, and permitting their preachers to speak in United Brethren preaching places. However, other matters pertaining to discipline required "a longer time to think" and were postponed. 11 Newcomer indicated at the time that he wanted "better order and discipline in our Society" and was so disturbed by those "opposed to all discipline" that he "nearly determined to leave and withdraw from the Society" until they finally resolved "to give friendly and brotherly answer to . . . the Methodist Conference." 12 He conveyed such a letter to the 1810 Methodist meetings in March, and their message back to the United Brethren was sufficiently tolerant that he noted that "The greatest love and union existed among all the brethren" during their annual conference in June. 13 Apparently at that time the United Brethren took the first steps toward adopting discipline, informing the Methodists that "we have regulations upon record with us to guide and walk by and our preachers are at liberty to keep class meetings or to class at any place they think proper." 14

10NJ, p. 186.
1210 May, 1809, NJ, p. 175.
136-9 Jun., 1810, ibid., p. 188.
14MS. letter from the United Brethren to the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church, June 1810 at the United Methodist Archives and History Center, Madison, NJ, quoted in John Dallas Robertson, "Christian Newcomer (1749-1830), Pioneer of Church Discipline and Union Among the United Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical Association, and the Methodist Episcopal Church" (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 1973; University Microfilms, 1982), p. 142. Robertson believes this is the missing letter of the correspondence referred to in UB Mins., p. 50 note.
Learning this positive news the Baltimore Conference in March 1811 boldly assumed that things were progressing nicely and wrote to the United Brethren: “We consider now, if we have not misunderstood you, that we are fully agreed in respect of the necessity of union and a mutual endeavor to accomplish it.” On that basis they declared that “as soon as our presiding elders and preachers return to their respective districts and circuits, we shall consider this union as having commenced on our part.”

Newcomer did not attend the Methodist Conference that year because of the sickness and death of his wife, but he observed that a harmonious spirit prevailed at the United Brethren annual conference. In that body’s communication to the Baltimore Conference, Newcomer declared that “we do not hesitate a moment longer to give you the right hand of Christian fellowship again.” Nonetheless, he noted that while a number of classes had been formed “there are a number yet among us who have not yet joined with us in this privilege.” Moreover, the Brethren had “drawn up some regulations, or discipline” and would endeavor “to put them into effect.”

By 1812 Bishop Asbury attempted to broaden the union enterprise, asking Newcomer to attend the Methodist Philadelphia Conference as well as the Baltimore Conference. This proved to be effective and Newcomer noted that the Philadelphia Conference committed itself to “act, and go as far in this matter, as the Baltimore Conference had done before them.” They sent a communication to the United Brethren and appointed two members as messengers to the Brethren annual conference. However, it did not take the new negotiators long to realize that United Brethren and Methodists differed with regard to discipline and their communication in 1813 firmly declared: “Our doctrines are fixed and established; our discipline is binding upon [us] by the authority of our General Conference.” Long experienced with the advantages and obligations of these regulations, they recommended them fully to the United Brethren.

The differences highlighted by the Philadelphia Conference were increasingly evident throughout the Methodist-United Brethren union negotiations. As early as 1803 Asbury had remarked about the twenty preachers associated with William Otterbein and Martin Boehm that “They want authority, and the Church wants discipline.” In Asbury’s usage the word “want” meant to be deficient, not to be inclined. Ten years later Christian Newcomer continued to experience the same problems in the movement. When the United Brethren conference met in the area where

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16United Brethren Conference to the Baltimore Conference, 25 May 1811, ibid., p. 54.
18Philadelphia Conference to the German United Brethren, 1 May 1813, UB Mins., pp. 60-61.
192 Aug. 1803, JLFA, II:400.
its Mennonite constituency was strongest in May 1813 he remarked: "I find the Brethren are greatly divided in opinion, in respect to the discipline of our society." The next day he wrote: "We had rather somewhat of a turbulent session: the Brethren appear not to understand each other." What stimulated these strong feelings was a brief Discipline that had been written by Newcomer and Christopher Grosh. It contained six statements of doctrine and fifteen rules concerning conduct and polity. Finally, the troubled conference resolved that "the Confession of Faith and Evangelical Discipline of the United Brethren in Christ be printed."20

United Brethren resistance to discipline was neither absolute nor all-encompassing, and it was as much a matter of attitude as of content. With regard to forming classes, for example, they made a distinction between loosely structured groups for prayer and spiritual nurture, which were acceptable, and tightly organized Methodist-style classes where members had to adhere to Wesley's General Rules or face expulsion, which were not acceptable. They feared that rigid disciplinary rules might stifle the spirit or restrict membership. As a result, United Brethren permitted their societies to have classes or not have them, but they rigidly maintained no membership rolls, which made it difficult to comply with Methodist terms for union. Behind these differences lay the fact that the United Brethren in Christ derived from two branches of the Reformation, the more ordered churchly Reformed heritage and the more loosely-structured free church Mennonite tradition. The latter were especially resistant to strong authority and exclusionary regulations. In contrast, both the Methodists and the Albright People were more homogeneous in membership, and had less problems with rules for Christian living and church order.21

Another facet of the discipline problem was the loose structure and lack of strong central authority among the United Brethren. Partly the consequence of their generally tolerant attitude and a lack of doctrinaire polity, it was also the result of the pragmatic approach of a new movement. Neither Otterbein nor Boehm were inclined "to rise up and organize and lead them" or "to erect a church government," as Asbury told the mourners at Martin Boehm's funeral.22 Lacking central leadership, Newcomer was able in 1810 to organize a second annual conference in Ohio on his own authority simply because he found a number of former United Brethren preachers in the area and thought it wise to do so. Two years later the original conference in the East ratified his action.23 And


21Robertson discusses these matters in greater detail in "Christian Newcomer," pp. 113-16.


then at the feisty 1813 annual conference, the brethren elected Newcomer as bishop for one year. John Robertson's study of Newcomer argues that this was done to strengthen the leader's hand in negotiations with the Methodists, but I am inclined to think it was a move to fill a more general leadership vacuum in the movement. With the deaths of Martin Boehm and George Adam Geeting in 1812 and the imminent demise of William Otterbein, plus the need for someone to preside with authority over the contentious men at their own meeting, Newcomer's election met an immediate need in a fluid movement. Rather than strengthening his hand in deliberations with Methodists, the election to the episcopacy called attention to the loose structure of the United Brethren that permitted such impulsive action and involved a person who was not yet officially ordained.

Newcomer's ordination was not related directly to the actions of the Eastern Conference. Rather it was the result of the action of the Miami Conference in Ohio, the body that he had initiated three years earlier. At its meeting in August 1813 that group got into a discussion of ordination that led them to deplore the fact that "too little order was observed, both in the reception and the ordination of preachers." Concluding that it was not proper to ordain without "the laying on of hands of the elders," the conference decided to write a letter "to Father Otterbein . . . asking him to ordain, by the laying on of hands, one or more preachers, who afterward may perform the same for others." Apparently Newcomer laid no claim to such authority on the basis of his election as bishop, and seemingly did nothing himself to fulfill the action. When he arrived in Baltimore on October 1, 1813 he visited Otterbein, who told him that "he had received a letter from the Brethren in the west, wherein he was requested to ordain me, by the laying on of hands, to the office of elder and preacher of the gospel, before his departure [death]." The dying leader asked Newcomer if he had any objection and he did not, but he requested that Joseph Hoffman and Frederick Shaffer also be included since they too were present. The next morning, with the assistance of William Ryland, a Methodist elder whom Otterbein invited to participate, Otterbein ordained the three men "to the office of Elders in the ministry, by the laying on of hands." On November 17, 1813 William Otterbein died at age 87.

During the six weeks between his ordination and Otterbein's death Christian Newcomer met with representatives of the Albright People to see if a union could be effected between the two German-speaking movements. One wonders if the turbulence at both annual conferences of the United Brethren raised doubts that union could materialize with the Methodists and Newcomer tried another approach, but there is no

261-2 Oct. 1813, NJ, pp. 219-20; 24 Nov. 1813, ibid., p. 221.
Evidence in the sources to indicate his reasons for initiating the new negotiations. He had made the first contact with the Albrights in the spring of 1813 and at that time discovered that the modest Discipline prepared for the United Brethren conference in May aroused no objections among them. Consequently, a committee of four from each movement agreed to meet in the fall. With no problems concerning discipline and none caused by the continuing use of the German language, a union with the Albright People seemed feasible. The consultation lasted from November 11 to 13 but the negotiators were not able to achieve complete agreement. According to Newcomer, "The greatest stumbling block appeared to be this, that according to our discipline our local preachers have a vote in the Conference as well as the travelling preachers; this was a sine qua non which the Albright Brethren could nor would not accede to.”

Again the looser structure of the United Brethren impeded union with another movement.

Clearly the year 1813 was a turbulent and creative time for the union discussions, and particularly for Newcomer and the United Brethren. Through the course of the year most of the major obstacles to union had surfaced. The Methodist Episcopal Church was a stabilized movement with fixed doctrines, a binding discipline, and centralized authority, trying to fashion a bilingual German-English ministry that put them in contact with United Brethren and Albright People. The latter were sympathetic to Methodist order but were insistent on a continuing rather than a temporary German-speaking ministry and did not have an active episcopacy. The United Brethren emerged as the most divided and most formative movement, being split over rigid discipline and church order but committed to maintaining looser structures despite the efforts of Newcomer to achieve tighter discipline and control. These basic features that emerged in 1813 remained constant and affected the final years of negotiations.

The consequences of events in 1813 were not limited to the two German movements. With prospects so favorable just a few months earlier, Asbury slowly learned that his plan was not working. His frustrated feelings have been obscured by the well known fact that he preached the memorial sermon for William Otterbein on March 24, 1814, at the close of the Baltimore Conference. Speaking by request in Otterbein’s church to an overflowing crowd of persons from several denominations, Asbury eloquently referred to “the retiring modesty of this man of God; towering majestic above his fellows in learning, wisdom, and grace, yet seeking to be known only of God and the people of God.”

Three and a half months later, however, the bishop vented his frustration about the German ministry in a letter to Jacob Gruber. Estimating

28 11-13 Nov. 1813, NJ, p. 221. Dreisbach made a similar comment in his Journal, II:13, quoted in Robertson, p. 212.
a German population of 200,000 east of the Ohio River, Asbury stated bluntly that there was “not one gospel minister among them.” “What are the Lutherans, what are the Reformed, the Friends,” he asked, “what are the Albrights, but ______ and opposers of Methodists, what are the United Brethren? But you may ride a circuit or let it alone, you may meet a class—or let it alone.”

To Asbury the permissiveness of the United Brethren to have class meetings or not, and especially to itinerate or not, demonstrated an intolerable lack of discipline. Diversity over class meetings among the Brethren has already been evident in this paper, and the minutes of their annual conferences confirmed the Methodist bishop’s charge concerning traveling preachers. In 1812, for example, only three of twelve preachers of the Miami Conference “gave themselves up freely to travel the circuit” and in 1813 only one of seventeen preachers of the original Eastern Conference served a circuit. Classified as “full-members,” “preachers,” and “exhorters” United Brethren ministers sometimes were distinguished also as local and traveling preachers in the records, but all were voting members of the early conferences. Primarily their preachers were farmers who preached when chores and crops permitted; few were full-time itinerants.

Asbury’s letter to Gruber went on to raise the continued need for a German language mission. Although there were now four bilingual preachers and the Discipline and other literature in German, he complained that not much was happening. He called upon Gruber to develop a strategy, perhaps dividing the territory in order to meet quarterly meetings but definitely seeing that the German converts took “our complete form of discipline.” In conclusion he told Gruber: “Let it be known, that one of the grand acts of his [Asbury’s] life was a capitall mission to the American Germans, but lived not to finish it, or that the conferences did not see eye to eye with the Bishop in the undertaking.”

The letter reveals a frustrated bishop with a continuing dream of a German mission that was unfulfilled. In it he identified the Albrights as opposers of Methodists and the United Brethren as those who ride a circuit or let it alone, who meet a class or let it alone. And he insisted that the real goal was for Germans who would take the complete form of the Methodist discipline.

With such strong feelings by Asbury it was not surprising to find that the letter from the Baltimore Conference to the United Brethren in 1814 unilaterally terminated the union negotiations. “We rejoice that you are progressing in the work of organization and discipline,” said the letter, but the Brethren were reminded that they had not fulfilled the “terms of union” specified in former correspondence. Since both conferences were

30 Asbury to Gruber, 7 July 1814, JFLA, III:504-5.
31 Miami Conference, 6 Aug. 1812, UB Mins., p. 73, Eastern Conference, 5-6 May 1813, ibid., pp. 30-31.
32 Asbury to Gruber, 7 July 1814, JFLA, III:504-5.
"harmonious in sentiment and interest, we think it unnecessary to con­tinue the ceremony of annual letters."

At the Eastern Conference of the United Brethren receipt of the let­ter was noted but nothing more was done. The rest of the minutes dealt with matters of internal organization, including the election of Newcomer as “bishop for three years.” When the Miami Conference convened in August, however, there was considerable agitation, but not over the mat­ter of Methodist union which they still affirmed. The western preachers protested against the order of discipline that had been approved earlier by the Eastern Conference. And they objected to the way it was adopted without consulting them. In response, they proposed calling a delegated General Conference to meet in western Pennsylvania, midway between the two conferences. “This convention shall form a church-constitution for the Brethren,” they declared.

When the first General Conference met June 6-10, 1815 the United Brethren in Christ became a national denomination rather than a series of autonomous annual conferences. The meeting was called because of the resentment of one conference toward the other and that mood of misunderstanding created “a spirit of hatred and discord” that was only partly removed. Nevertheless, the General Conference was able to deal with a much expanded Confession of Faith and Discipline developed by Newcomer and John Hildt, adding, omitting, and improving it. As adopted the first Discipline of the United Brethren was four times larger than that approved in 1813 and it was more like the form used by the Methodists. Despite many similarities to Methodism, however, the polity and prac­tices were distinctly different: bishops were elected only for four year terms, presiding elders were elected by annual conferences, local preachers as well as traveling elders were full members of annual conferences, class meetings were to be established “where it is practicable,” and feet-washing was freely permitted. Two years later a second General Conference met and thereafter such meetings occurred quadrennially. After the session in 1817 Newcomer remarked in his Journal that “we had considerable trouble with a few of the Brethren to convince them of the necessary discipline and regulation of the society” but “the difficulty was at last surmounted.”

34This was in accord with provisions of the Discipline approved in 1813. Eastern Conference, 24-26 May 1814, UB Mins., pp. 33-34.
In the same period the “So-called Albrights” convened their first General Conference October 14-17, 1816 and also became a national denomination, changing the name of the society to “The Evangelical Association.” Being accustomed to having a *Discipline* since their second annual conference in 1809, John Dreisbach and Henry Niebel had only to rearrange and improve it and it was adopted. However, its publication was delayed until after a pending social conference with the United Brethren in February 1817 concerning possible union. Christian Newcomer was present to discuss this with the conference. Although its polity declared it to be an episcopal church, the Association continued to function without a bishop, being led by two presiding elders, Dreisbach and Niebel. Election of a general book agent to run a new printing office at New Berlin, Pennsylvania was perhaps the most visible sign of their enlarged scope of ministry because there was considerable ambiguity about the difference between the General and Annual Conferences. The latter met more frequently and exercised more power during the early years. 

Although similar to Methodism in structure on paper, they were much less centralized because of having no bishops. And their distinctive emphasis on ministry only to Germans made their focus more unique than the United Brethren, who had their *Discipline* printed in English as well as German.

Perhaps the printing of the Discipline may seem of little significance, but that matter was decisive in determining the outcome of the last meeting to unify the United Brethren and Evangelical Association during the formative years. When six delegates from each denomination met on February 14, 1817 in what was called “the Social Conference” they discovered more difficulties than anticipated. Newcomer said simply “We could not succeed in coming to an agreement,” but John Dreisbach expressed more anger and elaborated on the reasons. The difficulties involved a suitable name for the new organization, the rights of local preachers, the itinerancy, discipline, and church government. Although some United Brethren historians said the chief problem was the name, the central difficulty was resistance by the Evangelical Association to accept local preachers as full members of annual conference. At the time, however, the decisive point had to do with the printing of the Discipline, for the Evangelicals postponed printing a new edition of theirs until after the conference because they understood that the delegates would have full authority to make a final decision concerning the proposed union. When the United Brethren

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delegates said they lacked such authority the Evangelical delegates were offended. Dreisbach said, "This was very repulsive to us" and the entire plan was abandoned. 39

Thus, by 1817 all efforts to unify the So-called Albrights, the United Brethren in Christ, and the Methodist Episcopal Church had failed. But by that time each of the movements was firmly established as an independent institution. While the union negotiations had been unable to achieve organic union, they had served to clarify basic issues and identify irreconcilable differences between them. Among these the primary difference that kept the three groups apart was the United Brethren practice of having both itinerant and local preachers as full members of annual conference, what Asbury derisively referred to as riding a circuit or letting it alone. Rather than disillusioning the participants, the merger negotiations seemed to confirm the convictions of the three groups. This hardening of commitment had the positive result of producing better developed church institutions to replace the fluid movements that first emerged after 1800.

Obviously this was more true of the United Brethren and Albright People than of the Methodists, but this difference serves to magnify an underlying problem in those union negotiations between 1809 and 1817. In reality the participants were at two different stages of institutional development. At that time the two German-speaking movements were more primitive in organization and practices than the Methodists. Not only had the Methodist Episcopal Church been organized three decades earlier, but also it inherited a system of beliefs and church order from John Wesley and English Methodism. Although Asbury and his preachers made some adaptations for the American context, most of the principal components of Methodism were already established and proven. Moreover, their system of itinerancy, episcopacy, and discipline was already firmly fixed by the Restrictive Rules adopted by the 1808 General Conference. In contrast, pragmatism and experimentation characterized the United Brethren and Albrights as each evolved a polity to enable their pietistic movements to survive.

What the three movements had in common was a recognition of the importance of a mission to Germans in America. What they discovered as they tried to combine their energies to fulfil that mission was that they differed in basic ways of functioning. When Francis Asbury said in frustration, "What are the United Brethren? But you may ride a circuit or leave it alone, you may meet a class—or let it alone," he identified a functional difference that he could not tolerate. For him it was inconceivable to have an itinerant system in which preachers could elect to ride circuits or be

39Stapleton, Annals, p. 225; "Correction of Bro. H. G. Spayth's Stricture, in the Religious Telescope of April 11th. on our Editorial, in the 4th No. of this Vol.," Evangelical Messenger Cleveland, Ohio), 2 May 1855, p. 68.
local preachers at will and still be full members of annual conference. It was equally incredible for him to understand how anyone could organize a movement so loosely as to permit a basic component like class meetings to be permissive rather than mandatory. But those differences expressed basic convictions about the way Mennonite and Reformed constituents in the United Brethren movement had agreed to function, and their movement was not prepared to abandon them for the more developed discipline and order of Methodism. Later such accommodation took place between the groups in the twentieth century, but by then the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association had themselves evolved to a more advanced stage of institutional development. Finally, both German-speaking movements were willing to abandon their distinctive practices and organization and to fully accept Methodist discipline and order, which is what Asbury’s German plan originally intended during the generation after the Christmas Conference of 1784.

Had Methodists and Evangelical United Brethren in the 1960s and since known better the history of this episode of union negotiations they might not be so surprised that there are basic differences built into our combined heritages that have never been resolved. From time to time some former EUBs have been known to grumble about the Methodist system out of vestigial memories. However, the distinctions are more essential than that and are evident also in current issues concerning ministry, such as combining a diaconal call system with an appointed itinerant clergy or permitting local preachers to vote in annual conferences. In the nascent union negotiations between 1803 and 1817 our forebears determined that such differences were too great to permit merger. In our century we minimized the diversities and became one church, only to discover that the problems are fundamental and cannot be ignored. While meeting a class or letting it alone slowly disappeared from the heritage, the issue of riding a circuit or letting it alone, though modified, remains divisive.