

**MIGRATION, THEOLOGY, AND LONG'S BARN:
A HERITAGE TO
THE CHURCH OF THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST**

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The Pennsylvania region attracted a multitude of migrants, especially those seeking religious or political refuge after William Penn acquired a significant tract of land and opened it to the public. The wealth of opportunities in Penn's New World land-grant afforded many religious communities freedom of expression by whatever means they saw fit. Through an epic-poetry-style re-telling, the available source materials provide an easily digestible and respectable story which is centered on who migrated, the reasoning for migration, and how their stories unfolded in the new environment.

However, the re-telling of these migration narratives goes much deeper than reenacting the standard version in textbooks or tracking one's lineage on the website *ancestry.com*. Within the very limited context of the Mennonite and German Reformed migration narrative, up until the denominational formation of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, this paper seeks to highlight the historiography of how the narrative was constructed. More concisely, this paper posits that the existing history of the topic at hand is a Ricoeurian performative reenactment¹ of hagiography with each exclamation, "We are brothers!" This paper examines the re-remembering of the migration, familial, and faith narratives. It concludes with questions concerning *why* the story of what transpired at Long's Barn in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1767 is the normative story that is told.

In pursuit of a reverential tribute to the Church's founding partners, that is, Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm, the primary source materials tell of these memorable figures whose families strategically weighed "push" and "pull" factors for migration with their own futures in mind.

As such, the story goes like this. Of the mass German migrations into "Penn's Woods" in the years between 1683 and 1775, there were three significant Christian groups represented among them: the Reformed, Lutheran, and Mennonite. Historian John Owen indicates, "It is estimated that about the middle of the eighteenth century these German settlers numbered

¹ In this context, the analysis is inspired by Paul Ricoeur's work within *History and Truth* (1965) and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). Ricoeur identifies that recalling historical events over and over, whether by historians or by those who experienced the event directly, distorts the historicity. From this, the paper examines how the early denominational resources constructed, or performed, the story of this denomination's heritage and birth. Through utilizing Ricoeur's methodology, I put forward that the early historical writers reenact the events with each written history or moment of storytelling.

about ninety thousand, of whom one-third were affiliated with the German Reformed Church.”²

In 1681, William Penn secured a land grant from King Charles II of England as payment toward a debt owed by the Crown to Penn’s father. With this new land, Penn offered a haven for political or religious refugees and encouraged new land settlements. A number of complex historical and political factors contributing to unrest in the German homeland, and ultimately to migration to America, included the Diet of Speyer (1529); the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which ended that conflict; the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713); King George’s War (1744-1748); and the Seven Years’ War (on and off, 1754-1763).³ Though the first German migrants had arrived through Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the opening of Pennsylvania to all cultivated a truly unique blend of culture.

There were many waves of German migration to the New World. The first wave of German and Swiss migrants into Pennsylvania arrived shortly after the establishment of Philadelphia in 1682.⁴ Francis Daniel Pastorius had acquired a bit of land from Penn to establish a homestead for German Mennonites from the Krefeld and Krisheim regions.⁵ This new land, aptly called Germantown, began with thirteen families from Krefeld and quickly grew to forty Mennonite families within the first twenty-five years.⁶

Per Paul Fetters, within seventy years of the first arrivals of German and Swiss migrants, the Reformed Church identified only forty-six churches with six pastors, leaving thirty-two churches without any pastoral leadership.⁷ The economic hardships of servitude and post-servile poverty, coupled with the lack of pastoral leadership, proved problematic for those within the German Reformed tradition. There were simply more churches needing pastors in Pennsylvania than there were fully educated, qualified, ordained pastors to serve them. Bruce Behney indicates that the most successful ministers were not interested in moving to Pennsylvania because of their status as clergy in state sanctioned churches with comfortable salaries.⁸

For the Reformed Church in Pennsylvania, Michael Schlatter was an instrumental resource. Schlatter spent five years as a missionary in Pennsylvania under the authority of the Reformed Church in Holland.⁹ During this time, he organized the Pennsylvania Coetus (Assembly) of 1747,

² John Wilson Owen, *A Short History of The Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, Ohio: General Board of Christian Education United Brethren in Christ, 1944), 11.

³ J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, ed. Kenneth W. Krueger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 22-23.

⁴ Paul R. Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs: History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Huntington: Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1984), 27.

⁵ Behney and Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 15.

⁶ “Germantown Mennonite Settlement (Pennsylvania, USA),” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online.

⁷ Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs*, 27.

⁸ Behney and Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 23.

⁹ John Lawrence, *The History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton: Vonnieda & Sowers, 1860), 1: 129.

establishing the Reformed Church as a subsidiary body of the North and South Holland Synods. Still worried about the success of the Reformed Church in the American Colonies, Schlatter requested additional help from the Holland Synod.¹⁰ In 1752, Schlatter enlisted six missionary pastors to work among the German Reformed Churches in America, one being Philip William Otterbein. The Reformed Church in the American Colonies remained fully dependent upon the North and South Holland Synods of the Reformed Church until 1798, at which point it became a synod in its own right.

Philip William Otterbein had been trained at the Reformed School in Herborn, Germany, where his father, John Daniel Otterbein, had trained and taught before he married. Due to John Daniel's death when Philip was sixteen, the sons of the family felt obliged to provide financial support in what ways they could. For Philip, this meant taking the odd jobs of private tutoring, catechetical instruction, and moving back to Herborn to teach. As this teaching position required a licensing as an accredited candidate for ministry, Philip was examined at the age of twenty-two, and ordained at twenty-four.¹¹ During this time of education and teaching at Herborn, and regular preaching in Ockersdorf, the tenor of his message was a holy life and sincere spirit. Biographer A. W. Drury is quick to point to Philip's Pietistic professors, Dr. Henry Horch and Dr. Schramm, as the sources of Otterbein's theological focus.¹² The religious zeal with which he preached proved to be too reckless for his pious friends. These colleagues advised him to "speak more cautiously, more calmly; to moderate his voice, his fervency, until he had become more exercised in the pulpit," as Henry Spayth notes.¹³ His mother picked up on these critiques and urged him to consider missionary work, despite the familial strains such service would cause. Otterbein then listened to his mother's advice and responded positively to Michael Schlatter's request.

In 1752, Otterbein accepted a call to a Reformed pastorate in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. This now wealthy area outside of Philadelphia was fraught with internal tension and stressors which plagued Otterbein's spiritual livelihood. Though he continued to preach and witness in that place, he could no longer offer spiritual counsel, due to his own agony. During the next fifteen years, Otterbein would serve as pastor in Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania; Frederick, Maryland; and York, Pennsylvania.¹⁴ Though Otterbein officially retained his loyalty to the Reformed Church, he diverged from that denomination on the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. Despite attacks upon his theological stance, such as the one by Nicholas Pomp in Baltimore,

¹⁰ Behney and Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 25.

¹¹ Paul W. Milhouse, *Philip William Otterbein: Pioneer Pastor to Germans in America* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1968), 18.

¹² A. W. Drury, *The Life of Rev. Philip William Otterbein, Founder of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House, 1884), 41.

¹³ Henry G. Spayth, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Circleville: Conference Office of the United Brethren in Christ, 1851), 19.

¹⁴ Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs*, 61-66.

Otterbein remained a sanctioned clergy within the Reformed Church as he continued to participate in the interdenominational German “great meetings” with Martin Boehm.¹⁵

The re-remembering of Martin Boehm’s heritage is focused among the Mennonite immigrants in Pennsylvania who came from the Palatinate region of southwestern Germany. While there had been individual Mennonite migrants to Germantown, Pennsylvania, in the late 1600s, the first Mennonites to migrate as a large group arrived in Philadelphia during 1710 and quickly moved to Lancaster County. This group of Mennonites left Holland and Switzerland to escape religious persecution and heavy taxes. Some dispersed across Europe, while others went to Pennsylvania, where they could start afresh in a new settlement with a close sense of family and communal relationships. The first group of six families obtained 10,500 acres of farmland. When the group began thinking of a larger expansion, Martin Kendig, one of the earliest settlers, returned to Europe to report back on the group’s initial success and to implore others to make the long voyage to Lancaster County.¹⁶

Kendig convinced the newly Mennonite family of Jacob Boehm to move, and in 1715, the Boehm family migrated and acquired additional tracts of land. Jacob Boehm arrived first in Philadelphia, then moved to Germantown, Lancaster, and finally settled in Pequea where he served as a blacksmith and lay elder in the Mennonite Society.¹⁷ By 1718, the numbers of Mennonite migrants to Lancaster County, where the Boehms settled, had grown to 600 people with 15,000 acres of land.¹⁸

Martin Boehm, son of this immigrant Swiss-German family, grew up in the Mennonite tradition as his father Jacob had been persuaded.¹⁹ Boehm was chosen to be a minister in his home congregation by lot, as was the custom, around 1758. He accepted this designation willingly, but as a neophyte, he was unable to get through sermons without forgetting his biblical passages and stammering over his message—a sign, at least to him, that the weight of his sin was a serious impediment to fulfilling his call to ministry.

Boehm’s son, Henry Boehm, recalls that his father was a Mennonite by upbringing and “for some time he preached without a knowledge of sins forgiven; but in 1761 he found redemption in the blood of the Lamb, and then he became a flame of fire, and preached with the Holy ghost sent down from heaven.”²⁰ In this, Martin became convicted of his new life and conversion in faith, which led him to preach regeneration, repentance, forgiveness, and conscious salvation to his churches and beyond.²¹ He was quick-

¹⁵ Fetters, *Trials and Triumphs*, 70-73.

¹⁶ Abraham W. Sangrey, *Martin Boehm* (Ephrata: Science Press, 1976), 2.

¹⁷ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*, ed. Joseph B. Wakeley (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), 11.

¹⁸ Sangrey, *Martin Boehm*, 2.

¹⁹ Behney and Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 41.

²⁰ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical*, 12.

²¹ Owen, *A Short History of The Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 22.

ly excommunicated for what Henry considered, "being too evangelical."²² Excommunication did not, however, stop Martin Boehm from preaching.

On a propitious day in Lancaster County at Isaac Long's Barn, most likely between 1766 and 1768, Boehm reported, "out of the fullness of his heart, the deep spiritual truths which he himself had experienced, [and so] Mr. Otterbein's soul was kindled with a responsive feeling."²³ The emotional effect of the sermon propelled Otterbein's dramatic exclamation, "We are brothers!"

The sermon on assurance at Long's Barn is what bound these two individuals together, where they "hungered for an experience of grace and God's power."²⁴ From this interaction, a new denominational body came to life. These two leaders pursued something new together, which they called The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, focusing on conversion experience, assurance of faith, and regeneration through the practice of holiness. In due course, a denomination was formed. In the minutes of the 1800 Protocol of the United Brethren in Christ, A. W. Drury identifies George Adam Geeting's notes, which record from September 25, 1800, that "each person spoke first of his own experience, and then declared anew his intention with all zeal, through the help of God, to preach untrammelled by sect to the honor of God and [the good] of men."²⁵

So ends the concise recounting of a lengthy history. Now, let us focus on the implications this re-remembering has upon the historical concepts that have just been presented. The first consideration is that the sources go to great lengths to articulate this story of moral agency, conviction of sins, and a changed life of faith, but they do not give any rationale for why the conversion experience should be reported in such fashion. One plausible explanation is that the experience of conversion from the First Great Awakening is still fresh in collective memory and supplies the language for indicating one's change of heart. However, the efforts of Whitefield, Edwards, Freylinghuysen, and Tennent never quite took heart in the German population, according to Paul Fetters' account. The only indication of Whitefield's reach among these persons is in Spayth's recounting from 1761 when "some converts of the eminent George Whitefield had reached New Virginia, and commenced preaching a present salvation. With others, some members of the Mennonite families became seriously affected."²⁶

The re-telling of the conversion experience seems to bear much more weight for the authors of the primary source material than it does for the German populations from whence the Church of the United Brethren in Christ came. That is, there are relatively few accounts of grandiose conversion experiences among the forbears of the new denomination, but the rhet-

²² Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical*, 12.

²³ Owen, *A Short History of The Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 22.

²⁴ Sangrey, *Martin Boehm*, 13.

²⁵ A. W. Drury, trans. and ed., *Minutes of the Annual and General Conferences of the United Brethren in Christ: 1800-1818* (Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House, 1897), 9-10.

²⁶ Spayth, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 32.

oric which the historical sources use to talk about the experience still bears the weight of what happened in the Great Awakenings.

The second consideration of the constant re-telling is that following the death of these founding individuals, the United Brethren Printing Establishment, the United Brethren Publishing House, and the Otterbein Press, published numerous commemorative histories. The first among them include Henry Spayth's *History* in 1851, John Lawrence's two-volume history in 1861, and A. W. Drury's account of Otterbein's story in 1884. These sources are emotionally invested in relating the story. This is not solely a topic of interest for these early writers; it is instead a re-telling of what has been handed down to them. It is a tender subject which allows the voice of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ to be heard outside of its context. However, in each of these remembrances, the story differs just a bit—rather like the way the individual synoptic gospels report the life and ministry of Jesus.

In Henry Spayth's *Introduction*, the tenor of his biography is described by H. G. S. Tiffin as "much condensed, without doing violence, to revered memory and the tribute of respect due to moral excellence, and the unblemished lives of the brethren presented in this work."²⁷ In his history, Spayth presents the reader with personal models of virtue and piety, throughout the history of the church universal, who are equipped with "the armor of the gospel, and the power of the Holy Ghost, to go before in the glorious work of reformation." To conclude this narrative, Spayth reverently concedes that his history of "a people spreading out as the Brethren have done," is a concise account, but he admits that "we have done the very best we could, and hope that with all its faults, our humble efforts will be appreciated by the true friends of the Church."²⁸

John Lawrence describes the task of his work (1861) as a combination of describing the principles of the church's history and identifying and tracing whence it came. He carefully identifies the ancestors or "older religious bodies to which ours is related in history, doctrine, spirit, and name."²⁹ Among these older religions, he includes the Renewed United Brethren, the Mennonites, the Church of the United Brethren, the primitive United Brethren, and the Waldenses. In the first volume, Lawrence bases the first part of his history upon the 1825 writing of John Holmes, published in London, which he acquired through the Brethren in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The second part of his re-telling focuses on the fifty years between William Otterbein's death and Lawrence's time of writing. The second Lawrence volume highlights those pivotal persons for whom he has "been able to retain reliable information." He intends this work then, as a "blessing to the dear people with whom it has been his happiness to be identified from

²⁷ H. G. S. Tiffin, introduction to *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, by Henry G. Spayth (Circleville: Conference Office of the United Brethren in Christ, 1851), 3.

²⁸ Spayth, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, 10, 344.

²⁹ John Lawrence, *The History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, iii.

youth, and with whom he hopes to toil for the extension of Christ's kingdom, in some humble capacity, to old age."³⁰

A. W. Drury's material (1884) details the life of Philip Otterbein, beginning with his family in Dillenberg, up to his time with Francis Asbury and Christian Newcomer. Drury sees this volume as recounting sometimes unreliable personal testimony. In the *Preface*, he says, "I have sought to honor facts, and to allow them to make their own impression and impart their own coloring [But] the difficulty of tracing a faintly-marked line of facts almost necessarily excludes literary attractiveness." He remarks on the work of Spayth and Lawrence as important for the recounting of the narrative, where Spayth "visited both Otterbein and Boehm with a view to obtain from them facts as to their lives." Drury sees the task of his own writing as setting forth new material which is not present in Lawrence's work, but also spreading the "vital, aggressive Christianity with which the name of Otterbein is so prominently associated."³¹

These primary sources recount the history, but also re-tell, as they are willing to admit, the impact of this subject upon their own lives. They offer not merely remote historical abstractions, but rather something which is re-told in order to advance the work of the church. This is not to discount their historical relevance or accuracy, but to point to the way in which each person reenacts the history of the tradition, the key players, and the famous exclamation, providing a neat and tidy exposition of something which was likely tiresome and grueling for most of those actually involved in the historical events. Though an earnest remembrance, it remains a history in flux with each new and differing account of what transpired.

When looking at any historical event or at how an event is recorded, discovering who lives, who dies, and who tells the story is important.³² The means by which the historical narrative is recounted is a living history which changes with every author and with every exclamation, "We are brothers!" By pointing to the normative story told about the migration of the German Reformed and Mennonites to the Pennsylvania area, in addition to the history of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, it is possible to see what pieces of information become important and less important over time through the historical re-tellings.

So to conclude, some questions bear further inquiry: Why is the story of what happened at Long's Barn in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, so imperative to the main legacy this tradition imparts to our Wesleyan histories? Is the grand narrative of migration the ideal narrative for framing these historical sources? Is the act of writing these histories in some way meant to create a respectable presentation of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ? Or is the writing of history during that time simply something that varied greatly from the methods historians employ today?

³⁰ Lawrence, *The History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*, v, vii.

³¹ Drury, *The Life of Rev. Philip William Otterbein*, iii, vi.

³² Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story," *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Hamilton Uptown, 2015).