

Ohio Origins of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association

by Donald K. Gorrell

In Ohio the beginnings of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association occurred in the years from 1806 to 1839. In that period both religious societies evolved from simple and informal origins to well-developed and expanding denominations. Within a common environment and among Germans who often lived in the same areas the two movements grew in parallel and similar fashion and yet in distinctive ways that revealed the unique vitality of movements grounded in different understandings of episcopacy, ministry, and church order.

I.

For this paper the environment in which both movements took shape was the State of Ohio, which started its independent political existence in March, 1803. Previously it had been part of the territory created by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and it still was peopled by tribes of Indians which had militantly rejected the immigration of white settlers after the war of American Independence. Not until the native Americans had been decisively defeated at the battle of Fallen Timbers, south of Toledo (1794), and reluctantly signed the Treaty of Greenville (1795) was it safe for new settlers to move into the region. By that treaty the Indians still controlled most of the northwestern part of the State and white immigrants from the original United States settled initially in the eastern and southern portions of Ohio. In 1812-13 the northwestern section again proved dangerous for several skirmishes of the War of 1812 were fought there until Commodore Perry's victory in the battle of Lake Erie ended a threatened invasion by the British.

Most of the State was a wooded wilderness, except for the Pickaway Plains south of the Columbus, which Christian Newcomer described in his *Journal* as "many thousands of acres

covered with grass.”¹ Consequently, travel was difficult except as settlers used the major rivers for access to the interior. The Muskingum, Scioto, and Miami river valleys were important early areas of settlement and in each of them German settlers established farms and homes. Zane’s Trace was a wagon road running from Wheeling, Virginia, through Zanesville, Lancaster, and Chillicothe and ended at the Ohio River opposite Maysville, Kentucky. It was soon linked to the Cumberland Road which extended from Wheeling to Cumberland, Maryland, and points in the East. Many immigrants and visitors, such as Newcomer on his regular annual tours to Ohio from 1810 to 1829 (except in 1811), used the road to reach locations within the State.

II.

Formal initiation of ministry in Ohio by the United Brethren and the Albright People indicated a difference of approach by the two groups. Let us turn first to the United Brethren, among whom the earlier efforts originated. When United Brethren leader Christian Newcomer made his first tour to Ohio in July and August of 1810 he discovered several preachers who had served in the original Eastern Conference, and enough others who had been influenced by the movement in Pennsylvania and Maryland to take a momentous action. On August 13, 1810, he “held a little conference with the brethren” at Michael Kreider’s farm house in Ross County and was so pleased with the “brotherly love and unanimity of mind” of the fifteen preachers present that he designated it the Miami Conference of the United Brethren in Christ.² With both William Otterbein and Martin Boehm aged and largely inactive Newcomer was the acknowledged leader of the movement but apparently this was a unilateral decision without authorization in the records of the Eastern Conference and without his holding any office as presiding elder or bishop.³ Newcomer, nevertheless, keenly perceived that the time was ripe to organize the informal efforts of isolated United Brethren local preachers.

1. Samuel S. Hough (editor), *Christian Newcomer: His Life, Journal and Achievements* (Dayton, Ohio: Board of Administration, 1941), p. 130. [Hereafter cited as *Newcomer’s Journal*.]

2. *Ibid.*, p. 131; *Minutes of the Annual and General Conferences of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1800-1818*, edited by A. W. Drury (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Historical Society, 1897), p. 71. [Hereafter cited as *Minutes* with the specific conference indicated.]

3. Eastern Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 24-5.

In the Miami Valley as early as 1806 Andrew Zeller had organized the first United Brethren class in Ohio in his house at Germantown, near Dayton. About two years later other classes were started at Taylor's Creek, near Cincinnati, and at New Hope, near the Indiana border northwest of Eaton.⁴ Among the German settlers in the vicinity of Lancaster George Benedum and Abraham Hiestand carried on preaching in the United Brethren tradition.⁵ In these early years usually all preaching and class meetings were conducted in cabins, houses, or barns for there were few chapels or churches yet. Pragmatically, Newcomer organized these diverse informal energies into a second annual conference and the westward movement of the United Brethren officially began.

Ministerial leadership among these randomly organized societies was provided by men who earlier had some credentials from the original Eastern Conference or who were self-appointed preachers. Primarily the men were farmers; preaching was a sideline they pursued when chores and crops permitted. For example, in 1812 only three of twelve preachers at the Miami Conference "gave themselves up freely to travel the circuit," and in 1817 only five of sixteen did so.⁶ Classified as "full members," "preachers," and "exhorters" the ministers also were distinguished as "local" or "traveling" preachers in the records, but regardless of category all were equal members of the early conferences.⁷

For several years the Miami Conference precipitated and shared in the shaping of ministerial orders as the Church of the United Brethren in Christ was still in its formative stages of development as a denomination. In 1813 the Conference "deplored that too little order was observed, both in the reception and the ordination of preachers" and it was agreed 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."⁸ Responding to the request the

4. Roy D. Miller, "History of the Miami Conference, The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 1810-1950..." in *Minutes...of the Ohio Miami Conference...of the United Methodist Church*, 1970, pp. 41-47.

5. A. W. Drury, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, Ohio: The Otterbein Press, 1953 revision), pp. 297, 308-9.

6. Miami Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 73, 83, 85.

7. Miller, p. 49.

8. Miami Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 75-6.

aged and dying Otterbein on October 2, 1813, assembled the vestry of his church at his home and, assisted by William Ryland, an ordained elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he ordained Christian Newcomer, Joseph Hoffman and Frederick Schaffer "to the office of Elders in the ministry, by the laying on of hands."⁹ Five months before the October ordination the Eastern Conference already had elected Newcomer to be bishop for one year, and the following year they elected him bishop for a three year term, "to have charge of the whole society, and... with the consent of each Annual Conference, to appoint Elders to assist and support him..."¹⁰

Again in 1815 the Miami Conference asked that "some of the older brethren...be ordained with the laying on of hands by the bishop" according to biblical teaching, and Bishop Newcomer then ordained eight men, five of whom earlier had been designated full members at the first meeting of the Conference in 1810.¹¹ Largely at the instigation of the Miami Conference in Ohio the United Brethren worked out their pattern of ministerial orders, not by theory but by practice and pragmatic succession. The denomination was still in its process of formation even as it expanded into Ohio and did not take on its fully developed early form until its first General Conference in 1815.

III.

In contrast, the Evangelical Association did not begin its work in Ohio until its basic pattern and structure had taken shape in 1816. Its first preachers to the Buckeye State were appointed by specific action of the Annual Conference. That body at its 1816 session in Abraham Eyer's barn in Dry Valley, Pennsylvania, voted to establish a Canton Mission and a Scioto Mission in Ohio.¹² As early as 1806 two brothers, Daniel and Philip Hoy, had started farms in Fairfield County, Ohio, northwest of Lancaster. Each had married a daughter of Abraham Eyer, in whose barn the Conference met. Moreover, two other daughters of Eyer had married John Dreisbach and Henry Niebel, the first two presiding elders of the Evangelical Association following the death of Jacob Albright. Undoubtedly

9. *Newcomer's Journal*, pp. 161-2.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 154, 166; Eastern Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 31, 34.

11. Miami Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 80-1.

12. A. Stapleton, *Annals of the Evangelical Association of North America and History of the United Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Publishing House of the United Evangelical Church, 1900), pp. 223, 224.

the leaders were aware through these family contacts of the prospects for the Ohio missions and were able to propose circuits where German settlers were located.

Adam Hennig (or Henney), twenty-two year old son of a ministerial associate of Jacob Albright who had two years' experience itinerating in Pennsylvania, was assigned to the Canton Circuit. In the next year he formed what he described as "a great circuit, about four hundred miles around, consisting of from thirty to forty appointments." It covered nearly ten counties and took about three or four weeks to get around. Often he preached two or three times daily and his message was so geared to arouse sinners that it also aroused opposition and he was persecuted as a fanatic. He indicated that his road was often little more than a narrow path or faint Indian trail that frequently led through swamps and over swollen streams uncrossed by bridges. Meanwhile his wife and infant child occupied the first parsonage of the Evangelical Association in Ohio, a converted sheep barn isolated by dense forests and surrounded by wolves whose howling terrified the woman during the long weeks her husband rose his circuit. After a year Adam Hennig left the itinerant ministry because of broken health, at the age of twenty-three. Twenty-seven years later he returned to the ministry.¹³

Differing from the United Brethren, the Evangelical Association filled its circuits with full-time itinerants and there was a great turnover of personnel as well as frequent reassignment of circuits. The Association was more like the Methodist system with clearly established circuits and districts headed by presiding elders. Following Jacob Albright's death in 1808 the emerging movement struggled to organize. It negotiated with both the United Brethren and the Methodists but decided finally to maintain its own society. At its first General Conference in October, 1816, Articles of Religion, a Discipline, and a hymn book were approved, and the official name was changed from "The So-called Albrights" to "The Evangelical Association." Unlike the United Brethren they also kept membership statistics. By 1819 the Canton Circuit had 139 members and the Lancaster Circuit, which replaced the Scioto,

13. Roy B. Leedy, *The Evangelical Church in Ohio...1816-1951* (n.p.: The Ohio Conference of The Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1959), pp. 12-16.

had 90, or a total of 229 Ohio members in a total membership of 1,895.¹⁴ During the next seven years that membership grew to only 368 members and three circuits in Ohio in a total Association constituency of 2,207, but at the request of the Ohio itinerants a Western Conference was authorized in 1826 to remove the needlessly long and tiresome required trip to annual conference in the East that averaged 800 miles one-way.¹⁵

IV.

By that same year, 1826, the United Brethren ministry in Ohio had prospered significantly. The Miami Conference earlier had called for the creation of a representative General Conference composed of two delegates chosen by each of nine districts in the two existing annual conferences and the original Eastern Conference concurred.¹⁶ Accordingly, the first General Conference convened at Mt. Pleasant in western Pennsylvania in 1815 and adopted a Confession of Faith and a Discipline for the United Brethren in Christ. Two years later in the same town a second General Conference met, at which Christian Newcomer was reelected as bishop and a second bishop was chosen, Andrew Zeller of the Miami Conference. Both bishops then ordained preachers by laying on of hands.¹⁷ For the first time a preacher from Ohio was elected to the episcopacy. A further action by the 1817 General Conference formed another conference, the Muskingum Conference, which included the eastern counties of Ohio and sections of western Pennsylvania. Clearly the western portion of the United Brethren Church was becoming more central in the life of the denomination.

In 1821 the United Brethren General Conference met in Ohio for the first time at Dewalt Mechlin's farm in Fairfield County. The next ten sessions of the quadrennial General Conference also met in the Buckeye State. The 1821 Conference voted to continue relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church but agreed to "have no fellowship with the Albright preachers" in the joint use of houses for meetings and worship.¹⁸ That practice had developed because the United Brethren and Evangelicals worked so much in the same regions, but at that

14. Stapleton, pp. 224-7.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 227, 233; Leedy, pp. 28-9, 32.

16. Miami Conference, *Minutes*, p. 78.

17. First General Conference, *Minutes*, pp. 65-6.

18. Miller, p. 51.

point it was decided to maintain separate and competitive institutions. Actions of succeeding General Conferences seemed to confirm that the United Brethren felt in an expansive mood about their work and saw little need for the earlier joint use of facilities. But more importantly it was recognized by both groups that they could not reconcile fundamentally different concepts of ministry and church order, especially the United Brethren practice of not distinguishing between traveling and local preachers and permitting both categories to be equal members of annual and other conferences.¹⁹

At the 1825 General Conference the Miami Conference was divided and a new Scioto Conference was formed in eastern Ohio. By 1829 the outreach of the Miami Conference into Indiana and Kentucky led the General Conference to create an independent Indiana Conference. And in 1833 a Sandusky Conference in northwestern Ohio limited the mother Miami Conference to its home territory in southwestern Ohio. Formation of these several conferences from the work of the Miami Conference evidenced the vitality of the body, and there were other signs as well. A conscious effort to make increasing use of English as well as German contributed to much of this growth in the 1820s and 1830s. Church buildings and chapels also began to replace houses for meetings in the same period. In 1834 a publishing house was established at Circleville in the Scioto Conference and the *Religious Telescope* was printed there as the official paper of the denomination. Historian A. W. Drury estimated that nationally the United Brethren in Christ grew from about 9,000 members in 1820 to approximately 20,000 in 1835.²⁰ In 1837 the General Conference received a proposed constitution for consideration; on the surface that appeared to be another evidence of growing stability in the denomination but events in the next several decades would reveal it to be more a bone of contention and cause of eventual division. But this was not evident in the late 1830s when growth and stability characterized the descendants of Boehm and Otterbein.

Along with the evidences of strength there also were unique expressions in the United Brethren system. At the 1821

19. Stapleton, pp. 224-5; Henry G. Spayth, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Circleville, Ohio: Conference Office of the United Brethren in Christ, 1851), pp. 143-4.

20. Miller, pp. 51-3; Drury, pp. 348, 803.

General Conference Andrew Zeller retired from the episcopacy after four years because of age, infirmity, and a desire not to travel. While he had traveled with Newcomer to all the annual conferences for a couple of years Zeller gradually ceased itinerating. Just as he had earlier been a local preacher and a local presiding elder, he had become a local bishop and that violated the third section of the United Brethren *Discipline*, where item 7 read:

When a bishop ceases to attend to the several conferences, and neglects to travel throughout the connexion at large, can he still exercise his episcopal office among us? No, unless it be that he were sick, and what the like circumstances might be.²¹

Joseph Hoffman of Fairfield County, Ohio, was elected bishop in his stead in 1821 but in 1825 he was not reelected, even though he was one of the three whom Otterbein directly ordained and was only forty-five years of age. After leaving the episcopal office Hoffman served again as circuit preacher, presiding elder, and attempted to start missions in Cincinnati and Dayton. The United Brethren had developed a practice of term episcopacy.²²

V

The era of the Western Conference in the Evangelical Association, which extended from 1826 to 1839, was not as successful as the same period was for the United Brethren in Christ, but the Association showed continued growth. Whereas in 1827 the Western Conference in Ohio had only 522 members in a total Association membership of 2,567, in 1839 it reported 3,653 members in a total of 7,859. In that interval the western membership had grown proportionately from 20 percent to 45 percent of the denomination. However, part of that increase occurred because after 1835 the Western Conference also included members in Indiana and western Pennsylvania and by 1838 contained members in Illinois and Michigan as well.²³

In contrast to the rather independent role played by the Miami Conference in the United Brethren in Christ the Western Conference of the Evangelical Association acted more like a missionary extension of its Eastern Conference. It had to meet

21. *Disciplines of the United Brethren in Christ...*, 1814-1841..., edited by A. W. Drury (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1895), p. 52.

22. Drury, pp. 340-2.

23. Stapleton, pp. 489, 248, 250, 255.

prior to that older body and have its minutes inspected by them. In addition, it was dependent on the mother conference in part for ministers and finances for its work. By 1833 problems in the West reached critical proportions and the Eastern Conference appointed Henry Niebel as presiding elder in the Western Conference to handle the situation. With his wife and seven children he moved by covered wagon to near McCutchenville in Wyandot County, a region of north central Ohio into which Germans moved as the Indians departed. For the next ten years he provided experienced and aggressive leadership to the Sandusky District, and at the General Conference of 1839 when the annual conferences were reorganized, he was recognized as the mainstay of a newly formed Ohio Conference. The new Ohio Conference embraced Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan as well as most of Ohio. The once dependent Western Conference was transformed into a source of growth for the years ahead.²⁴

Decisions at the Evangelical Association General Conference in 1839 drastically reorganized the denomination as well as the annual conference boundaries, and by all evaluations these changes marked "the introduction of a new era in the church." Episcopacy was reactivated for the first time since the death of Albright by the election of John Seybert as bishop, and a readjustment of power among bishop, presiding elders, and itinerants ensued. Introduction of delegated representations of ministers at future General Conferences and adoption of official positions on slavery, "spiritous liquors," and other issues revealed a new sense of institutional stability and direction for the Evangelical Association.²⁵

VI.

Thus, by the close of the 1830s both the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren in Christ were firmly established in Ohio. Signs of strength and vitality were evident in each, and the problems they faced in that decade were similar. As we reach the end of the era of beginnings five common problems deserve notice.

First, both institutions felt conspicuous and identifiable as German-speaking religious groups. This was a strength because it gave them a unique identity among Methodist-style persons,

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-58, 549; Leedy, pp. 32-41.

25. Stapleton, pp. 257-9.

but it was a disadvantage in two ways. On the one hand, they were only a small part of the Germans who settled in Ohio and were often persecuted by other Germans. There was a sharp distinction not only between Catholic and Protestant Germans but also between more traditional Lutheran and Reformed Germans called "the church people" (die Kirche leut) and the more evangelical, revival oriented group called "the converted people" (die bekerte Leut), to which both the United Brethren and Evangelicals belonged.²⁶ On the other hand, they lost access to large numbers of English-speaking people in their areas and even to second generations of their own families. To face this problem the United Brethren consciously sought preachers to work in both German and English. But the Evangelical Association at its 1830 General Conference decided to "confine their labors to the German portion of the population" until they recognized how much this hindered their growth and the action was rescinded in 1843.²⁷

Second, recruitment of itinerants was a continuous problem. The rigors of travel necessitated by the circuits and the high moral standards imposed by the conferences, when coupled with the meager level of financial support and necessary absence from families, made itinerancy a demanding job even for very faithful men. United Brethren repeatedly tried to secure increased giving in order to induce persons to become traveling rather than local preachers. And Evangelicals urged the presiding elders to support and encourage their itinerants on the circuits as well as to improve their remuneration.²⁸

A third problem evidenced growth and also required more money; that was a steady shift from preaching and meeting in small house groups and classes to preaching and worship in meeting houses, chapels, and churches. Small log churches had been constructed by United Brethren as early as 1810 and 1811 but those were exceptions. The first brick church west of the Alleghenies was built by Otterbein's descendants at Germantown in 1829. Earliest of the Evangelical churches in Ohio was at Greensburg on the Canton Circuit in 1838.²⁹

Fourth of the problems was the inability of either

26. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 241, 259; Drury, pp. 373-8.

28. Leedy, pp. 35-9; Drury, p. 378.

29. Miller, p. 53; Leedy, pp. 67-8, 328.

denomination to move into cities. Each movement started among farmers and remained rural all through the period of origins. Lancaster Circuit of the Evangelical Association in 1833, for example, included thirty-two appointments in six counties but never came closer than a mile to such towns as Circleville, Chillicothe, Logan, Lancaster, or Columbus. The United Brethren failed in starting a mission to Germans in Cincinnati in 1833 and in Dayton in the 1830s, and they had no congregation in Circleville until several years after they established their printing house there in 1834.³⁰ Growth in cities would develop in the next decade.

The fifth and final problem was the fact that the two movements were competitors in the same areas of the State. While the geographical designations of circuits frequently changed in the records there were four major regions of Ohio where the United Brethren and Evangelicals concentrated: 1) Canton, Wooster, Mansfield in the northeast; 2) Lancaster, Circleville, Chillicothe in the south central; 3) the Miami Valley in the southwest; and 4) the Sandusky plains in the north central. Both movements began among persons touched by Otterbein, Boehm, Albright and their followers in Pennsylvania and Maryland and the beginnings of both denominations in Ohio were among persons who had known the spiritual vitality of those founders and then had migrated westward to Ohio. They became the persons first contacted as both denominations expanded; the areas where they congregated became the centers where the denominations concentrated. Interestingly, the immigrants settled in the same regions, just as they came from the same sections in the East. In light of the much larger German migration throughout Ohio these concentrations seem to indicate that the movements appealed to Germans with a particular bent to evangelism, personal experience, and piety which the Evangelical Association and United Brethren shared in common despite the differences in ministry and church order that kept the two movements separate and competitive until 1946.

Our task in this paper is not to resolve the problems identified but rather to trace the origins of the two religious bodies in Ohio. The period of beginnings ended in 1839 when each group had achieved institutional stability and was ready to

30. Leedy, p. 47; Drury, pp. 342, 382-3, 706-8; Spayth, p. 261.

enter upon new and larger ventures. On May 24 of that year, two months after John Seybert was elected bishop of his denomination, Bishop Andrew Zeller died at age 84 in his home in Germantown. In his home the first United Brethren class in Ohio had been organized in 1806. In the large meeting room he built into his second farm house the Germantown congregation met regularly for over twenty years, and four times the Miami Annual Conference met in those quarters. From that house he functioned as circuit itinerant, local preacher, presiding elder, and bishop for a term. He was a member of the Miami Conference from its inception and represented that group at the first five General Conferences. But as he died his Miami Conference was in session in the recently constructed United Brethren brick church one-and-a-half miles away in the center of Germantown.³¹ In a symbolic way, Zeller's death marked the end of the era of beginnings for the United Brethren and Evangelical Association in Ohio.

31. Paul Rodes Koontz and Walter Edwin Roush, *The Bishops, Church of the United Brethren in Christ...* (2 vols.; Dayton, Ohio: The Otterbein Press, 1950), Vol. I, pp. 152-64.