

## The Beginnings of the Ohio District of The Brethren Church

It may seem odd that the initial organizations beyond local congregations in the Brethren Church were not the national organization or even district conferences. Those who joined the Brethren Church after being dis-fellowshipped by the main body of the church, the German Baptist Brethren, had given very little thought to the type of organization that they wanted beyond the local congregation. They were, however, united in their support of such ministries as higher education, evangelism, and Sunday Schools.

Based upon the numbering of Ohio conferences that have been used since the late 1890s, this conference would be the 134<sup>th</sup> conference of Ohio Brethren churches. It actually should be the 135<sup>th</sup> conference, but the 1896 Ohio conference never met. The moderator for that conference moved to California earlier in 1896 and no one took the initiative to convene the conference. That means that the first Ohio gathering would have occurred in 1883. Unfortunately, we are missing some important records for much of 1883 and do not have details about that first conference. We do have records of every other Ohio gathering that has occurred since 1884.

The first gathering of Ohio congregations was not for a district conference but for another purpose. In 1884 some Ohio Brethren churches gathered at the North Liberty congregation in Knox County, Ohio, which is south of Ashland County, for a Sunday School Convention. These conventions, which were very important for the newly formed Brethren Church, shared what we would call today “best practices” regarding local Sunday School programs. In fact until 1888, these gatherings of Ohio churches were still being called Sunday School Conventions, not district conventions or conferences.

The next significant development among Ohio Brethren congregations occurred at the 1886 Sunday School Convention at Louisville. A committee was formed and was tasked with drafting a plan for an Ohio Home Mission Board. This board began functioning later that year. Note that the first gatherings of Ohio congregations were motivated by a common vision for Sunday Schools and evangelism.

In 1887 the Brethren Church met in Ashland for its third denominational gathering. A significant action of that convention was advocating for the formation of districts to advance the ministries of the Brethren Church. Following through with this action, the Ohio Sunday School Convention of 1888 passed a resolution that “this meeting shall in the future be called ‘The Convention of Brethren churches of the State of Ohio’ . . . and its business shall be Sunday School work, missionary work, and general church work.”

In 1890 a constitution for the Convention of Ohio Brethren churches was tentatively adopted, but it was sent to the congregations in Ohio for their support. Representatives of the Ohio Brethren churches unanimously supported the constitution at the 1891 Ohio Convention and the district was fully organized with that action.

## Important Early Leaders within the Ohio District

P. J. Brown: A significant leader during the early years of the Brethren Church was P. J. Brown, an elder in the Fair Haven congregation in northern Wayne County, Ohio. He was the only person in the Brethren Church to serve on the Standing Committee of Annual Meeting before the division of the

1880s. Because the German Baptist Brethren always had a free or unpaid ministry, Brown earned his living as a blacksmith. But he decided to branch out into a new field, using his blacksmith skills as a dentist. He played key roles in the development of Ashland College; he and another influential elder, E. L. Yoder, were instrumental in the decision to start a Brethren-related college in Ashland. He served on the college Board of Trustees during its early years. He played significant roles at the denominational level; the 1883 Dayton Convention of the Brethren Church appointed him as a national evangelist to assist in organizing Brethren congregations in the aftermath of the division with the German Baptist Brethren. He twice served as moderator of the Ohio Sunday School Conventions in the 1880s; these were the forerunners of our District Conferences. He also served as a state evangelist for the Ohio Home Mission Board in the latter 1880s. He was a clear and forceful thinker and speaker with a keen sense of organizational life in the fledgling denomination.

Edward Mason: One of the truly unique early leaders of the Brethren church was Edward Mason. He was born in Wales, England. His father was said to have been a member of the British Parliament. Without doubt, Mason was one of the best educated members of the German Baptist Brethren; he was a graduate of Oxford University in England. He came to America in 1870 and joined the Chippewa congregation in Wayne County in 1878. He was an editor of one of the Brethren periodicals that was a forerunner of the *Brethren Evangelist*, the *Gospel Preacher*. He played a number of prominent roles in the early years of the Brethren Church, often as secretary of denominational gatherings. He was selected as a state evangelist for the Ohio Mission Board in the latter 1880s. He either organized or strengthened a number of congregations in the Miami Valley, notably West Alexandria (originally called Lexington), Gratis (originally called Winchester), Farmersville, Bear Creek, Miamisburg, Little York, Pleasant Hill, and Covington. He and his wife both died young; his son, E. Glenn Mason, who would go on to become a president of Ashland College, was raised by a Brethren foster family.

J. Allen Miller: Without doubt the most significant leader in the Brethren Church in the late 1800s and the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was J. Allen Miller. He came from the same small Indiana congregation at Edna Mills as another key leader of the Brethren Church, Martin Shively. Under Miller's leadership Ashland College emerged from near bankruptcy in the 1890s; he also was instrumental in the beginning Ashland Seminary in 1906. As was the case for the early years of what is now Park Street Brethren Church, he served as its pastor due to his position as either the president of the college or the dean on the seminary. He was a member of nearly every significant denominational committee from 1895 until the 1920s. He was a long-time member of the Foreign Missionary Society, the Publication Board, and the Board of Directors of the Brethren's Home (a retirement home for ministers and laity in Indiana). He served once as moderator of the Ohio District Conference and five times as secretary. He shaped the thought of more than two generations of pastors in the Brethren Church through his work at the seminary and laid much of the philosophical and educational foundation for both the college and seminary.

Because the Brethren Church had to build the denomination from the ground up after the division with the German Baptist Brethren in 1882, much of the initial energy of the church was devoted to organizing local Brethren churches. The auxiliaries of the church—organizations for women, men, children, and ministers—only gradually developed. As is often the case, the women in the church were the first to recognize the need to develop a nurturing and supportive ministry. At the denominational convention held in Ashland in 1887, the women in the church formed the Sister's Society of Christian Endeavor, associating with the mushrooming inter-denominational ministries of the Christian Endeavor movement. The 1892 Ohio Convention urged that local chapters of the SSCE be organized in every congregation in the state of Ohio. The name of the women's program was changed to Woman's Missionary Society in 1919.

The next group to organize in the Brethren Church were the youth. The fledgling youth program, which had its origins in 1890, was initially called the King's Children Society, but it also identified with the Christian Endeavor movement in 1901. As Ron Waters has noted, the resulting organization had the longest acronym of any Brethren organization: the YPSCEBC, the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor of the Brethren Church. The youth ministry of the church has more recently been called Brethren Youth Crusaders and currently Brethren Youth in Christ. The Ohio district has actively supported youth ministry since 1893. District conference during the late 1950s through the 1970s hosted Speech and then Bible Quiz contests, in which some of us participated.

The ministers in the denomination first organized in 1893. There has been an ongoing association of ministers in the Ohio District since that time. The last of the auxiliaries to form was the laymen. A National Laymen's Organization was formed in 1923 and district bodies formed shortly afterward. Though the formal men's ministry discontinued shortly after 2000, most local congregations continue to have more informal men's ministries. We should note that both the men's and women's groups for many years actively sponsored ministries for boys and girls respectively, known as the Brotherhood and Sisterhood programs.

As we have already noted the Ohio District very early developed organizations to advance the cause of both the Sunday School and evangelism, including church planting. Other organizations and boards developed in the 1890s and early 1900s included a Board of Oversight, originally called a Board of Appeals that dealt with conflicts within congregations, and a Board of Ministerial Examination, to guide prospective pastors toward ordination.

### **OHIO CAMPING**

In the 1940's Ohio youth campers went to Camp Shipshewana in Indiana for summer camp. As early as 1947 the district had formed a Camp Site Committee to find a suitable location for an Ohio camp. Meanwhile, in the 1950's the district rented Camp Zion south of Canton, for a few weeks of camp.

At the 1957 District Conference the Camp Site Committee recommended the purchase of a farm near Nashville, Ohio as the Ohio camp site, at a cost of 10,000 dollars. In a poll of Ohio congregations, the committee found a 90 per cent approval rate for the purchase. The conference approved the recommendation and a Camp Board, consisting of Orié Bair, John Byler, Robert Hoffman, Clarence King and Charles Munson was elected.

Under the leadership of Chairman Robert Hoffman, and later Charles Munson, the district membership supplied the funds to develop the site into a summer camp. The barn was renovated into a chapel on the upper level, with a kitchen and dining hall on the lower level. Restroom facilities were built and platforms were

constructed with tents attached as sleeping quarters for the campers. A small lake was developed from springs on the property.

On Sunday afternoon July 5, 1959, the Ohio District Conference celebrated a dedication service for the new camp in the chapel and the summer camping program began. Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Franks were the first caretakers. Mrs. Fern Smith and her assistants provided delicious meals for the campers during the first several years. Over the next five years cabins were built to replace the tents for the lodging of the campers.

On Labor Day weekend in 1961 the first Ohio family camp was held. Program planners included Phil Lersch, Robert Keplinger, Donald Rowser and James Black, with J. Ray Klingensmith and others as speakers. This event has continued to the present time, with a variety of activities for the whole family over the weekend.

On Wednesday morning, February 4, 1964 a seeming setback occurred when fire destroyed the chapel and heavily damaged the kitchen and dining hall. But Charles Munson, chairman of the Camp Board, told the district that the board considered this event as a sign to move ahead. So the chapel and the dining hall were quickly rebuilt under the donated leadership of architect Clarence King and much volunteer help with money and time from the members of the district. Thus, the camping program continued to develop throughout the 1960's.

In the late 1960's a lodge was constructed on the property. This enhanced the year-round program of the facility. The lodge is currently undergoing a renovation and expansion program which will increase its usefulness for retreats and conferences.

Over the past 60 years campers have enjoyed fellowship, established lifelong friendships, have made decisions for Christ and have deepened their spiritual awareness and commitment through their camping experiences at Bethany. As we think of the camp, the names of Munson, Lersch, Deeter, Rowser, Barnhart, Lowmaster, Van Duyne, Rinehart and Cooksey come to mind, as well as many others who have given their time, talents, and financial resources to the activities at Camp Bethany. Also, recognition must be given to many Brethren young people who have served as counselors during the weeks of camp. The dedication of the Ohio membership will assure the success of the camping program for years to come.