

Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of the Dual Affiliation of Baptists and Brethren University Baptist and Brethren Church 1968 – 2018

Our church, affiliated since 1968 with both American Baptist Churches USA and the Church of the Brethren, is home to persons with a broad range of backgrounds.

How did the Baptists and Brethren Come Together?

The story about how the two denominations came together in 1968 actually begins in 1922. A small group of people gathered to organize a Baptist Church in State College. The congregation—forty charter members—met in private homes and on the Penn State campus until they were able to build their own church at the corner of West Nittany Avenue and South Burrowes Street. The white stone colonial style building was dedicated on January 8, 1928. Rev. Clarence Adams' sermon topic on that day was "What Mean Ye by These Stones?" University Baptist Church (UBC) rejoiced in their new church home.

Some thirty-two years later, another small group of people in State College began to discuss forming a Church of the Brethren. Most of them, including current UBBC member George Etzweiler, were affiliated with Penn State. They met for several years in each other's homes, most often in George and Mary Etzweiler's home. After researching the possibility of building their own church home, they realized that their numbers were small, they didn't have a lot of financial resources, and State College already had a lot of churches. They decided to approach existing churches to see if any of them might mesh well in terms of character and values. They decided that UBC had the most similarities in faith and practices, plus a common emphasis on character and missions. The Baptists agreed and invited them to join their congregation through a dual affiliation.

So in November 1968, the first official combined service was celebrated. In honor of the special occasion, Rev. Bob Wallace, the pastor of UBC, knew that Nancy Harrison was taking a mural course at PSU, so he asked her to create a mural in celebration of the dual affiliation. The mural was titled "Communion to Serve Community" and it was hung above the altar—just as it is today. The mural emphasizes three themes important to both denominations: community, servanthood, and welcoming.

Rev. Wallace recently wrote: "We had been committed to be a community of faith and found that we had much to learn about community from our new brothers and sisters in Christ. It was both a fulfillment and an opening to new dimensions."

What else did the Baptists and Brethren have in common?

In addition to being welcoming and open to others, some of the common beliefs were: believing that everyone had a gift for ministry; individuals would make their own choice about

being baptized and were responsible for their own relationship with God; Baptism by immersion; a strong peace witness; desire to provide PSU students with a “home away from home”; and strong commitments to community outreach, service and social justice.

How did the members feel about combining the two denominations?

Joe and Lucy Loomis have fond memories of their first Sunday at the church. “The greeter welcomed us so warmly and immediately offered to show us the nursery so our two little girls could go there. And the next Sunday, he even remembered all our names!” Like George Etzweiler, they have been leaders of the church and are still very active members. Lucy also recalled that at one of the first joint church dinners, a woman told her she was “so glad the Brethren women were there because they brought so many delicious dishes to pass!”

Joe also remembers being impressed by the Baptists’ fairness. Even though there were many more Baptists than Brethren, when it came to allotting Mission funds the distributions were equally divided between the two denominations. They agreed that the church would be both an American Baptist congregation and a Church of the Brethren (CoB) congregation—one church, with no attempt to identify a member’s background.

Although members Dot Wiggins and Pat Tingue don’t recall the actual affiliation of the two denominations, they both clearly remember the new Easter traditions that the Brethren brought to the church. Pat said that Foot Washing on Maundy Thursday has been “a sacred addition, with meaning and personal memories attached as we wash such special servants’ feet.” Following the Foot Washing, the congregation enjoys a special meal together, the Love Feast (also called The Agape´ Meal). The meal commemorates the love and joy that marks the congregation’s fellowship.

Marie Hamilton recalled that when she and her family came to State College in the 1970’s, they visited many churches because they didn’t know there was a Brethren Church. “Joe Loomis told us about UBC, so we joined right away. I suggested the name be changed so that others would know there was a Brethren Church. I suggested the new name “University Baptist and Brethren Church.” On April 16, 1978 the members agreed to change the name to University Baptist and Brethren Church (UBBC).

How did UBBC reach out to the local community?

The 1970s were a time of rapid social change in our country. A UBBC Refugee Resettlement Committee arranged the arrival of seven different refugee families from Vietnam, and later from Burma, Cuba and Romania. Betty Blackadar and Joe Loomis were especially active in this effort. In 1989 UBBC also helped families from Russia find a new life in State College.

Local community outreach was an important part of UBBC’s mission. Activities included: helping to establish the in-patient psychiatric unit at the Centre Community Hospital; establishing the Community Alternatives in Criminal Justice which continues to operate out of one of UBBCs properties; Volunteers in Prison was headed by Marie Hamilton; the first Alternative Christmas Fair in 1982; helping Christian Mission establish the Food Bank in 1982;

UBBC member Bob Olsen founded the first Habitat for Humanity affiliate in PA. UBBC purchased and renovated several adjacent properties as part of our local mission commitment. The goal was to offer office space at a rent much lower than market price to local not-for-profit social service agencies.

Reaching out to other denominations included a shared ministry with Park Forest United Methodist Church, Diakonia, and The Sycamore Community. These churches pooled resources to serve the community through clergy cooperation, joint task forces, covenant groups, new approaches in Christian Education, and occasional joint worship services. For several years beginning in 1985, The Black Fellowship, a church in the mainline Baptist tradition, used our sanctuary at 11 a.m. on Sundays. Interfaith Coalition Affirming Diversity was active in the late 1980s and early 1990s supporting educational efforts in Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Islamic communities of faith.

What role does music play at UBBC?

Music has always played an important role in our church services and spiritual development. When the two denominations affiliated, UBC had a well-established and vibrant music program with five graded choirs and 125 participants. Ministry through music has continued to enrich UBBC's worship services. Our annual children's plays have been a highlight of the Christmas season and a joyful blessing to members and guests.

Betty Blackadar recalled a very proud moment when her late husband Al was in the balcony playing the organ and their high school-age son Russell was on the altar playing the piano. In recounting how touched she was, she said "Ah, those were the glory days..."

How has UBBC evolved over the past 50 years?

As with any organization, churches have ups and downs. UBBC is no exception. The Ecumenical Movement in the 1960s challenged Christian denominations to find common ground and to work together for the better good. However, easier said than done. Disagreements over religious beliefs can cause schisms, blending different personalities can be difficult and result in hard feelings, and politics can create divisions.

Fortunately for UBBC's members and guests over the last fifty years, our founders were wise people who realized that openness and sharing God's love were critical requirements in order for both denominations to benefit from the affiliation.

Jean Hill feels that "the affiliation was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to UBC. We came to respect our Brethren families and there was so much love and respect from both sides. For me and my late husband Dick, it was our church family that fit us best, more than the denomination."

In a letter to Pastor Bonnie Kline Smeltzer, Rev. Wallace recently wrote:

"What happened fifty years ago was both a fulfillment and an opening to a greater future. It was a fulfillment of our ecumenical spirit and trust in the new things that God was doing."

The welcoming spirit of our founders and their openness to other traditions lives on!

Pastors who have served UBBC since 1968 are:

Robert B. Wallace	August 1965 – June 1973
C. Michael Scrogin	April 1974 – February 1981
Robert G. Withers	October 1981 – Fall 1986
Beatrice E. Price	Interim Minister
Glenn A. Mitchell	January 1988 - 2002
Donald Buckley	Interim Minister
Bonnie Kline-Smeltzer	Fall 2002 - Present