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for Joel Weidner

A Brief History of University Mennonite Church
40th Anniversary Celebration
Saturday Evening, May 17, 2003

1. Rather than give a detailed history of University Mennonite Church, I would like to offer a few personal historical perspectives. As I contemplated what I might say this evening, my mind became stuck on two related themes:
 - b. The first concerns persistence and change. This theme reminds me of a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The title is Dauer im Wechsel (persistence in Change). The poem alludes to controlled change and of taking advantage of opportunities before they pass one by. When Mary Ellen and I moved back to State College in the summer of 2000, after being away for 21 years, we noticed that some significant changes had taken place in the intervening years, but in many respects the congregation seemed more the same than it seemed different.

We chuckled when we learned that a few sticky questions have endured all these years. One is, how can we attract more students to our worship services? Pastor Vic Stoltzfus's reply to that question in the late 1960s was, "We have shaken that tree about long enough!" A second question that has persisted is, "Shouldn't we start a coffee house as a way of attracting students?" We considered buying the Stauffer house on South Allen Street for that purpose in about 1969 and again in the 70s, but nothing ever came of it.

Mary Ellen and I were also surprised that this church still observes the practice of having a host family each Sunday. You recall that families take turns to invite visitors for dinner, a practice that started around 1969. If no visitors are present, or if they already have plans, we are encouraged to invite people from the congregation home for Sunday dinner. We also still spend a weekend each year at Camp Hebron. The first time we did that was in March of 1971. Do you remember riding the snow mobiles all Saturday afternoon that year, down where the ball field is now? And do you remember the annual reports from Phyllis Crabtree about Park Forest Day Nursery? That program is stronger than ever and is now directed by our own Gloria Horst Rosenberger, with assistance from numerous other people from this church. We also include that nursery in our annual budget.

There have been changes, but most have taken place gradually and with deliberate thought and careful planning. One wonders whether any opportunities were missed along the way because of excessive caution.

As Goethe cautions in the poem to which I referred:

"With each torrent of rain your lovely valley changes, and, alas, you do not swim a second time in the same stream." Opportunities missed are opportunities lost.

- b. The second theme that has struck me is "The graying, or maturing, of UMC."
Mary Ellen and I noticed immediately upon our return that the median age of the

congregation is much higher than it was 35 - 40 years ago. In fact, some of the people who were the oldest in the first five years, are still around and among the oldest, but they are 35-40 years older than they were then, and they are still not too old to live another ten years or more. Of the 14 founding fathers and mothers, no more than one or two had reached age 40 by 1963, when they signed the charter.

If all who currently attend our worship services on a regular or fairly regular basis were present on the same Sunday morning, that is, all men, women, and children, about 65 of them would be 40 and above, and 42 would be below age 40. Of the 107 people who now attend, 61% are 40 and above and 39% are below 40.

Moreover, in the past three years at least, the number of those 40 and above has been growing faster than the number below 40. If this demographic shift continues, we will soon reach a 2/3rds to 1/3rd ratio.

This shift in age over the past 40 years is all the more noticeable because fewer students, especially graduate students and their spouses, attend now than when our worship services were held on campus.

Let's briefly consider the year 1970, for example: I believe the following were among the graduate students then. All, or very nearly all, were married. I am sure I missed some, but these come to mind. Several of these couples already had children.

Vie Stoltzfus & Marie Stoltzfus

Ken and Yvonne Martin

Arvid & Lorraine Martin

Don & Virginia Ranck

David & Meriam Hess

Marion & Eleanor Yoder

Jim and Jane Halteman

Ralph & Judy Nafziger

I was still a graduate student too.

Jay Martin graduated in 1969, but he and Ruth stayed on for many years.

By contrast, I believe we had only two graduate students, both single, that attended regularly this past year.

Rich Thomas, principal of Lancaster Mennonite School, was also still here in 1970, and he was an influential leader of undergraduate students. He seemed to be recruiting them to attend our church.

2. When I consider the history of this congregation, I think of two major periods: the (1st) is 1963-1979, and the (2nd) is 1980 - to the present. Some customs, practices, activities, and events, and yes questions, span both of these major periods, as I have already indicated. but 1963 was the year in which the congregation was founded, and 1980 was a watershed year in its development, the year when we moved into the meetinghouse on South Atherton.

- a. Mary Ellen and I first arrived in State College in the summer of 1964, when this church was about one year old. We had been living in Indiana, and I was interested in pursuing graduate studies in German. When I called LaMarr Kopp one evening in February or March of that year to inquire about the German program at Penn State, he was more eager to talk about this new Mennonite church that was just starting in State College than about the Department of German, of which he was also a member. And I have heard him say more than once since then, with feeling, "I love this church."
 - b. LaMarr and Nel, and Truman and Dorothy Hershberger, were among the 14 who signed the charter. And all have given unselfishly, in so many ways, to this congregation! University Mennonite Church continues to benefit from the vision, enthusiasm, dedication, and leadership of these pioneers. As chair, on behalf of the congregation and those who have worshipped here at various times throughout the history of this church, some of whom are with us this weekend, I offer our sincere gratitude to these four individuals. If only Dorothy could be with us as well to celebrate this 40th anniversary!
3. I will concentrate more on the first period because we lived here during that time and I know it better than most of the 1980s and 90s.
- a. During this first major period, from 1963 through 1979, we understandably had a higher percentage of people who were in one way or another connected with the university. We were mostly students and junior faculty. And there were no high-salaried people among us during the earliest years. All but two of the original 4 were students, faculty, and spouses of students and faculty.

The founders:

Laurie & Norma Jean Mitton; principal of Belleville Mennonite
 Truman & Dorothy Hershberger; he was a young faculty member
 W. LaMarr and Nel Kopp; he was a graduate student and instructor
 Robert and Ruby Lehmen; he was completing his Ph.D
 Robert and Eloise Hostettler; he was a graduate student
 Gilbert Franz and Margaret Franz; he was a graduate student
 Herb and Becki Martin; he was a graduate student

- b. In some quarters of the Mennonite Church we had the reputation of being liberal and not wanting anything to do with conference. That is not really true. Oh, we were more liberal than some churches in Allegheny Conference, but LaMarr reminded me recently that when this church was being founded, we wrote to both Allegheny Conference and General Conference about establishing affiliation; we were thinking of dual affiliation. Allegheny responded immediately and invited UMC to join, and we did. General Conference never responded. Today we have a very strong relationship with Allegheny Conference. Gloria Horst Rosenberger is Moderator Elect and her husband, Jim, is Treasurer. We practically run conference now. And Truman, Carl Keener, and others have been representatives to conference many, many times.
- c. When Vie Stoltzfus came as pastor in 1966, we entered an agreement with Allegheny Conference to accept a subsidy of \$90.00 per month (a grant, really.) to help pay for

his salary, but we soon took the initiative to stop those payments, because we were able to, not because we were afraid of getting too cozy with conference. I will admit that we sometimes did say to ourselves that we would cooperate fully with conference, so long as it didn't violate what we believe and wish to practice. But so far as I know, there was never an adversarial relationship between this church and Allegheny Conference.

Waldo Miller, Pastor of Maple Grove at that time, became our first bishop, and we got along very well with him.

We even invited some conservative preachers and bishops to speak in our worship services from time to time:

Waldo Miller, of course, but he was not terribly conservative
Sanford Shetler, who was a confirmed curmudgeon in Allegheny Conference
George R. Brunk II, tent meeting revivalist. No liberal by anyone's standard
Myron Augsburger, evangelist
David Thomas, a Lancaster Conference bishop was here a few times

- d. We were never inclined to say of any potential speaker, "Don't invite him! He is too conservative!" But we also brought in liberal people from time to time, a number of them not even Mennonites. Some of you will remember Dean Schilling and Bob Boyer, both of Penn State. Schilling was a wise old man and we revered him. He was hardly a liberal. Boyer was more controversial. His style was cryptic and in content he sometimes tended to be mystical for some in our congregation. Schilling and Boyer, especially Boyer, both spoke in our worship services many times in the 1960s and 70s. And we invited women to preach to us, even in those early days. Helen Alderfer of Mennonite Publishing House and Alta Schrock of Penn Alps come to mind. We simply had a broader range of tolerance and perhaps a greater curiosity than some Mennonites did, and we were a university church, but in doctrine and in practices we generally followed the teachings of the Mennonite Church.

From the beginning, this congregation consistently fostered a healthy balance between adhering to Mennonite traditions and being open-minded to new thought, interpretation, and practice.

- e. We admittedly sought at length for answers to some questions. An example of one of our honest, ongoing struggles with Mennonite tradition concerned communion and foot-washing. One concern was how to involve the children. The other was even the importance and relevance of foot-washing in our time. You realize that we have always had some who did not grow up in the Mennonite Church and were not accustomed to foot-washing. And naturally we wanted to be inclusive within our own congregation.

Also, some of us who witnessed foot-washing early on and participated in it all our lives had come to believe that this practice had lost its symbolic meaning. Those of us who grew up in more conservative churches had too many negative memories of foot-washing. We remembered it as a somber occasion, one to be avoided. You may recall

that at University Mennonite we tried hand-washing instead, but that never took. We considered shoe polishing as a more timely and more meaningful experience, but I don't recall that we actually ever tried it.

I must confess that I did not participate in foot-washing for many years until just this past Maundy Thursday evening. I really didn't want to participate this time either, but Mary Ellen is an elder and made me go. That turned out to be the most meaningful foot-washing service I ever witnessed or participated in. David had barely given us the green light, before Krista Weidner and her two young daughters rushed to one of the stations; that seemed odd to me! Foot-washing isn't for children, I thought. Almost at the same time, LaMarr Kopp and Leah Witzig came walking toward the front of the room. Now where could they be going. I wondered? You don't mix gender in foot-washing, went through my mind! Soon Nate Stehouwer came over and whispered something into my ear. I don't fully trust my hearing anymore, and I wasn't sure what he was saying, but I could tell that he, a high school student, was asking me, a retiree, to pair off with him. Imagine! Just then Evelyn Bartsch came across the room and invited Nate's younger sister, Rachel, to join her. All around me these unusual pairs were forming, and everyone seemed to be having a wonderful and meaningful experience. I had never had such a good time at a foot-washing service!

I relate this experience as an example of an answer to years of sincere searching. We have finally found a way of observing the biblical tradition of foot-washing that is meaningful, timely, and inclusive.

- f. The 1970s were somewhat uneven years, at times a little discouraging, in part because of lack of consistent, seminary-trained leadership, but I don't think that was the only reason. The core of the church just did not seem to be holding together as well anymore. The church needed new vision, inspiration, and leadership. I felt, and some others did too, that we were floundering a bit.

Here are a few bulletins as exhibits of those years of unevenness in the life of our fellowship. This one is for September 9, 1974. Nothing is filled in at the appropriate places for the order of worship except that the speaker is Earl Yoder. Here is one for June 8, 1975 - again nothing except that Jim Wible is the presenter, a term for "sermon" that itself must have ~offended some. And here is one that has "Worship Service" across the top and nothing else filled in. There are two announcements, one of a business meeting and the other one a Halloween party. Even some of the announcements at that time were terse. Here is one for September 23 and October 14. 4'HOST - Bartsch, SWEEPER -Kopp"

We were losing people because, they said, they weren't finding spiritual fulfillment with us. They would attend for a while and then fall away and begin going to other churches in the area. We had no church building, no pastor, not enough Bible-based sermons, and we were too issue-oriented, they complained; not Bible-centered enough.

It is true, not all presentations were based on biblical texts. And instead of breaking for Sunday school, adults remained seated for discussion of the topic that had just been

presented. And, if the input was not Bible-based, the discussion probably wasn't either. Some were. and some weren't.

I recall contacting speakers for our worship services. If they weren't familiar with our format, I advised them to say something controversial, something that would lead to good debate after. I remember contacting David Thomas one time, a bishop in Lancaster Conference. Now how does one tell a Lancaster Conference bishop to say something intentionally controversial? The bishop's word is supposed to be final, isn't it?

But he came, and I think he honestly enjoyed leading us, and we liked him. He was here a few times.

4. Then came 1980, a watershed year in the development of this church. Actually the new era started in mid-1979 already. We had heard that the Friends wanted to build a new meetinghouse and were in the process of selling the one on South Atherton. We first approached them informally~ and on June 20 six representatives from this congregation- Truman and LaMarr, Jim and Gloria Rosenberger, and Harold and Ruthie Yoder met with a contingent of Friends. Harold and Ruthie were congregational leaders at the time.

About 10 days later, on July 1st 1979, the Friends congregation voted to sell their meetinghouse to the Mennonites. but they did not want to sign an Agreement of Sale until they had broken ground for their new building. But: we knew we were getting our present meetinghouse, and that was a godsend. We had not been actively searching for a building until we got wind that this one was for sale and actually some one else was trying to buy it. We therefore couldn't take our usual deliberate time because we feared losing it.

- a. The move from meeting in classrooms on campus to the Meetinghouse changed the congregation in significant ways. Just to get the building into the condition that we wanted and to prepare to move in, generated interest and excitement.

We wouldn't have had to move. The classroom in which we regularly met had more seats than we needed, many more than we have now. And we had plenty of rooms for Sunday school.

The university treated us well. We were members of the University Christian Association. The university didn't charge us anything for the use of the facilities. To be sure, we gave them a little conscience money each year, enough to pay for the electricity someone figured out. but we wouldn't have had to.

- b. The time had come to acquire our own building, a place where we could gather and call our church. A place that we could decorate in ways that we wanted to and wouldn't have to dismantle everything at the close of every service.

Until then the teachers didn't have their own Sunday school rooms. They had to carry everything in each week, set up, and tear it all down and pack: it into suitcases and carry it home. We had soft-sided suitcases, I guess because you can always get one more

booklet, or roll of scotch tape, or pair of scissors into a soft side, whereas hard-sided suitcases are so unforgiving. When they are full, they are full. Those classrooms were far from the parking lots, and the suitcases were heavy. And teachers switched from one Sunday to the next, they somehow also had to transfer the suitcases. Very inconvenient!

We were encouraged to buy our own hymnals, but the congregation also owned some, and the song leader was expected to bring enough each Sunday for visitors and those who forgot theirs. Hymnals are heavy, you know. We were glad when the King family began worshipping with us in about 1967. Mark was a young, broad-shouldered, able-bodied young man then, and was able to carry those hymnals Sunday after Sunday.

5. As the 1980's progressed, diversity increased. More and more non-ethnic Mennonites started to attend and join, I am told. Today the makeup of this congregation is very different from what it was in the 1960s and 70s. Although a number of faculty and staff are still connected with the university, a higher percentage does not have formal connections with the university.
6. The congregation has grown and now it is at just about capacity for our facilities. Already in 1995 an addition, primarily Sunday school rooms, was built and brought much-needed relief.
7. We have had strong pastoral leadership for the past 14 years. Ed and Katherine Rempel arrived in August of 1989 and were co-pastors here for 8 years. David Miller followed immediately after them in August 1997, and continues to give strong leadership internally and in the community .. We have been fortunate!
8. This congregation has traditionally placed greater emphasis on nurturing our own people than on outreach and evangelism. Nevertheless in the last few years, under the leadership of our pastor and the participation of some others, and in part because of the mood of our time since September 11,2001, we have become more visible in this community. Especially in the area of peace, we have become better known through participation in various peace activities, both on and off campus. And David has written several letters and columns in the Centre Daily Times.
9. Although we have not systematically gone into the streets and byways to recruit people, this church is very close to what is considered capacity. On some Sunday mornings we exceed it. The Leadership Team examined this situation and in February presented some options to the congregation. A committee has been appointed to explore possible future direction. We conducted a survey, and the respondents made it very clear that most prefer to remain together as one congregation with one worship service. About 80 recommended that we begin investigating larger facilities.

Conclusion:

1. The Lord has been good to us these 40 years! This congregation has provided a spiritual home for many individuals over the years and it continues to thrive and serve us well.

2. The congregation has changed, but mostly gradually. Mary Ellen and I quickly felt at home again when we returned from Germany in the summer of 2000.
3. This church is still very Mennonite. The Mennonite doctrines and teachings continue to be important to us.
4. We continue to support the agencies of the Mennonite Church, and a number of our people have gone out and served through MCC and other agencies.

Willard Martin.
congregational chair
and historian