

UMC History Speech
50th Anniversary Celebration
Saturday, October 19, 2013
Joel Weidner

As one your co-MCs this evening, I have the task of delivering a historical perspective of UMC. During our 40th anniversary celebration Willard Martin delivered a wonderful talk on our church's history and my hope is to follow in his footsteps. Krista and I have been attending for almost 33 years so I guess that's enough to be worthy of providing a historical context. That does however leave 17 formative years for which I'll need to rely on the recollections and memories of others. I will be borrowing from Willard's recorded history script as well as from memories collected from alumni and community members.

A central theme woven throughout the life of this group of believers is community. A community held together with Christ at the center. We've defined ourselves in this way—focusing on what brings and binds us together with less emphasis on the boundary issues. A willingness to live together with ambiguity—not always in agreement with each other and the broader faith community.

The community has grown and changed over the years.

- People have come and gone. Some have come and gone, and then come back again—even multiple times.
- The topics of discussion and discernment have changed as the culture around us and the culture of the wider Mennonite church has changed.
- The location where we gather has changed, from homes, to classrooms on-campus, to 316 S. Atherton Street, to our current location at 1606 Norma Avenue.
- The song books have changed, from red, to blue, eventually adding green and purple.

Through it all community has grown and flourished and the focus on Christ as our center has remained.

Some of the practices that were started early on and that remain demonstrate the tangible ways we care for and are involved in each other's lives.

The practice of host families, started in 1969, that makes it a good bet newcomers will get an invitation for lunch after church (at least once)

Camp Hebron Retreat where we gather for a weekend of fellowship began in March of 1971

Loading and unloading of U-Hauls as community members come and go in this transitional town

Meals for families of new babies and small groups for exploring faith issues and supporting one another

These are all evidence of practicing community and demonstrating the love of God.

The church was officially established in 1963 by a group of 14 founding members.

Laurie & Norma Jean Mitton
Truman & Dorothy Hershberger
W. LaMarr and Nel Kopp
Robert and Ruby Lehmen
Robert and Eloise Hostettler
Gilbert and Margaret Franz

Herb and Becki Martin

From the beginning the church was affiliated with the Allegheny Conference of the Mennonite Church.

The early church met in homes and initially called lay persons as spiritual leaders. Vic Stoltzfus was the first pastor beginning in 1966 and serving part time as the church's first ordained leader. Most of those involved in the fellowship were directly associated with the university. The early years were challenging for a new congregation. Willard wrote in his history that

"The 1970's 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 didn't 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 foundering a bit."

Without a building to call their own, the group met on campus. Although it was a chore, sweeping the cigarette butts off the floor in Chambers building before worship seems to be remembered fondly. Everything for worship and Sunday school had to be hauled in suitcases to campus and stored in members' homes.

Some Recollections from the early days, 1960s and 70s

Merritt Gardner – First wedding at UMC

During the summer of 1965, a young couple, Ralph Miller and Mona Lisa Berbano, wanted to be married in our congregation. As the regularly scheduled spiritual leader of the congregation (Pennsylvania law), it fell to my lot to perform the ceremony. This was UMC's first marriage. I tried to give some counseling sessions, but I'm afraid my lack of training kept me from giving them all that they should have had. The ceremony was striking. He was of plain Mennonite background, she was Filipino, a home economics major and fashionable. The contrast between the two sides of the aisle is still etched in my memory.

Merritt Gardner – We live in a different world

Fifty years later, when this is written, we live in a different world, a different country, and go to a different church than were the realities back then. These differences had their genesis in the 60's, but they were barely nascent in 1963. We believed in non-resistance – it was Biblical, -- and we believed in equality – sexual, racial. But they were not the issues-de-jour that they were to become. The words *gender* and *culture* meant different things, and we gave more accommodation to structures that had problems with women in leadership than we would today. Obviously, the question of sexual orientation equality was an issue of another planet yet to be discovered by astronauts.

Vic Stoltzfus – We needed each other – 1960s

I believe that I was the first seminary-trained person and the first to be paid an allowance for my part-time work. We rented a classroom and the first holy task on Sunday morning was to sweep up the cigarette butts. We were a few faculty members, a few grad students, a few community folks and a few undergrads. At times, visiting family and friends added to the congregation. This was a time of spiritual challenge for any church in State College. Secularism was indeed an ism and pushing back hard against any faith expression. The banks refused to lend money to church expansion at that time, and as a Presbyterian pastor said, "there were already more seats in State College churches than people willing to sit in them." For UMC, that meant we needed each other.

Willard and Mary Ellen Martin – Birth of the host family – 1960s

One Sunday many years ago Willard and I were driving across the university campus after our worship service in Chambers Building and saw visitors and former attendees Dave and Miriam Hess walking toward the HUB, presumably for something to eat. “What a shame,” we said, “that apparently none of us regulars had offered them an invitation for lunch.” At the next business meeting the group accepted our recommendation that we adopt a systematic way of hosting guests.

Mark Bartsch – Everyone gets a chance to talk – 1970s

I remember a friend coming over to my house and asking what my father was working on. It was his turn to preach and I said he was preaching (even though for some reason the word preacher had a negative connotation at UMC). My friend asked if my father was a pastor, I said that he wasn't, then he asked how my father could preach if he was not the pastor. I had never thought about that until he said it, but I replied, "At our church everyone gets a chance to talk." UMC for me has been a place where I knew that I was loved by God, and was cared for by the family of God. A church that does those two things is pretty amazing.

Martha Beck – Born into Community – 1970s

In 1975 our son Christian was born and he was welcomed with loving arms into the church family. Gladys Keener was a nurse in OB, Ruth Martin was Director of Nurses at the time, Nel Kopp was in the delivery room for the C-section delivery...what a wonderful feeling of being surrounded by people who truly cared about us.

Back to our History

The 1980s brought significant change as the church moved into the meetinghouse formerly owned by the State College Friends and located at 316 S. Atherton Street. Willard Martin writes,

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

The eighties also brought Harold and Ruthie Yoder as the first pastoral team. I believe they were being paid quarter time when we first arrived on the scene in 1980. Harold and Ruthie were the first pastors that Krista and I knew at UMC. We were blessed early on in our marriage by their influence, friendship, and faith.

The community grew and became more diverse, drawing more individuals and families not directly associated with the university. After Harold and Ruthie left to attend seminary, we took another significant step when we called Ed and Kathrine Rempel as our first full-time paid pastors in 1989. Full-time leadership was a big change and some worried that it would threaten our strong priesthood of believers tradition. Ed and Kathrine remember that they were on “probation” for the first year to make sure that full-time leadership was a right fit for UMC. Evidently it was and under Ed and Kathrine's stable and inspirational leadership the church continued to grow and was blessed by an abundance of small children and babies. In 1995 a two-story addition to the meetinghouse added much-needed Sunday School and nursery space and a chairlift that provided access to both building levels.

After eight years of service Ed and Kathrine “retired” (that’s in quotes) and David Miller was called to pastoral leadership. David arrived on the scene in 1997 with his wife, Mary, daughters Emily, Elizabeth, Suzanne, and son Peter—providing an instant infusion to our youth Sunday School classes. Under David’s leadership the church became more visible in the community. In response to riots in downtown State College, David was instrumental in forming inter-faith Peace Teams that walked the streets of Beaver Canyon on weekends, engaging students and being a presence for peace. David also urged our church to reach out in peace and build relationships with the local Muslim community as a response to the horrors of 9/11.

The church continued to grow and we found ourselves running out of chairs in our sanctuary at 316 S. Atherton. I remember people talking about how if we ever grew too large, we could spin off a sister church—not spending more money on bricks and mortar. We tested those waters (sort of) by trying two worship services for a time, with Sunday School in-between. But after the trial we decided that we missed each other too much.

In 2006 we had the opportunity to purchase our current church building at 1606 Norma Street and on June 24, 2007 we began worship at 316 S. Atherton Street and then all those who were able walked from our church on South Atherton for about a mile and concluded worship in our new building—with lots of room in the sanctuary. A year later we updated the facility with a chairlift and an accessible bathroom. The building does have a stage that elevates the speaker above the masses (I remember long discussions about the 9-inch high platforms in the old building), front facing pews, and a steeple—all things that continue to cause consternation for some.

Recollections from 1980s forward

Joel & Krista Weidner

I arrived on the scene in the fall of 1980 as a junior at Penn State. Krista and I were engaged with plans to be married during the Thanksgiving break. I knew there was a Mennonite church in town, but living alone I didn’t make it on a Sunday morning until one Sunday in early October I showed up at the Meetinghouse at 316 S Atherton only to find an empty building with a sign on the door that said something about no services today--everyone is at Camp Hebron. Hmm, I thought. I went back home and didn’t return until early December, the week after we were married.

When we did make it to church, we were immediately embraced by the community and Jay and Ruth Martin were invited us over for lunch. Also invited were Reuben and Vicki Sairs. We remember walking into the Martins’ immaculate home with its expanse of pale yellow wall-to-wall carpeting. Afterward on the way home we both agreed that a church that could accommodate Jay and Ruth and their pale yellow carpet and Reuben and Vicki with their long hair and tattered jeans and jackets, would have room for us somewhere.

I remember the first Sunday with David when we were scheduled to practice communion. I was to bring the grape juice and completely forgot until we arrived at church and was reminded (probably by Carolyn Brubaker) of my responsibilities. In a panic I took off to find grape juice, ending up at the UniMart on Pugh Street. The selection was limited. I grabbed a plastic bottle of grape drink and headed back to the Meetinghouse, feverishly filling the small cups and getting them to the front in the nick of time. When David lifted the lid on the communion tray he never missed a beat, graciously blessing the pale gray, artificially flavored drink.

Gerry & Vange Leatherman Gerber

Less than a year after coming, we were approached by another young couple, Jim and Martha Mather, who wondered whether we would like to go together with them renting the Osseo-Asare house while that family traveled to Ghana. We enthusiastically accepted and moved in with the Mathers and two single women, Stacey and Heidi. Martha and Jim's son Nathan was born that year, a momentous event for the Mathers but also for the rest of us as we learned to share our home with baby Nathan. Hopefully the Osseo-Asare family found their house in acceptable condition after a year of exposure to our gang of young people who knew nothing about caring for a house.

Joyce and Marvin Hall

We were at a business meeting at the meetinghouse, and a number of children were downstairs playing. All of a sudden, the fire alarm started blaring, of course, interrupting the meeting. Lauren burst into the meeting and yelled, "It's a false alarm, it's a false alarm!!" We eventually found out that James had unintentionally set off the fire alarm when the kids were tussling around. After things calmed down a bit, the meeting resumed.

Dave and Cathy Hockman-Wert

LaMarr Kopp was always interested in chatting after church. His presence was so friendly and welcoming. And I'll never forget the time Rodney Brubaker took us on a night hike at Camp Hebron and taught us a number of owl calls. This came in handy a few years later when we were camping and heard some hoots in the middle of the night. Alas, I can no longer remember all of the specific calls and which owl makes which one!

Conclusion

When David Miller felt called to teach at the seminary in Elkhart in the summer of 2009 we began another pastoral search that ended up looking north of the border. In 2010 we called our current pastor, Marv Friesen, from Canada. Marv's U-Haul pulled up on Irvin Avenue in September of that year and we continued the tradition of unloading and carrying boxes. Marv, Brenda, and Grace have quickly become integrated into the fabric and community of our church.

So now, what lies ahead in the decades to come?

Our population is aging. Willard reported on this in detail 10 years ago. We've recently added several babies that have helped steady the average but we still have a pretty significant over 50 population.

We are challenged with student outreach. For many years we participated in United Campus Ministry, an interfaith organization of local churches that has had its ups and downs. The ministry was energized for several years when Bruce Martin arrived on the scene in 2002. Bruce's Anabaptist connections and ties to our church brought a number of students to our doors—some who remain. Bruce moved to Ann Arbor in 2009 and United Campus Ministry ended in 2010 because of funding. For several years we have been working on a plan that would call a seminary-trained leader to UMC to focus on student ministry fulltime and will soon be embarking on fund raising and a search.

We are challenged to maintain a global focus. Many current and former community members have served around the world and we have a strong tradition of sending out witnesses. Founding member LaMarr Kopp was a pioneer in building international programs at Penn State. Our church currently has

an active partnership with the Good News Theological College and Seminary in Accra, Ghana, and we've sent two delegations to Ghana for service and to foster the relationship.

We are challenged with church administration and continue to work at how we do church when the group has become too large to sit around in a circle and involve everyone in all decisions. How do we convince those under 40 that church business meetings are important and can actually be interesting?

We are challenged to find ways to maintain and foster that strong sense of community when it has become harder to look around the sanctuary and know everyone there and what's going on in their lives.

We are challenged as we grow larger and more diverse to speak the truth in love when we don't agree. How do we draw to Christ as our center and core, and at the same time speak passionately and lovingly with each other around the ethical border issues that face the culture and broader church?

God has blessed us richly these past 50 years and we are grateful for those blessings and all who have been a part. May we continue to keep the faith, while taking care of one another, spreading those blessings outward.