

History of The University Mennonite Church

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Presented at the dedication of the Mennonite Meetinghouse, 318 S. Atherton Street, State College, PA on October 12, 1980. Transcribed from Truman's hand-written notes

The University Mennonite Church came into existence because Mennonites living in the State College area wanted to establish a Mennonite Church in State College, and because God blessed the effort. This is a brief account of how it came about.

In 1959, some Mennonite students and faculty began meeting together informally for fellowship and worship. The group called itself the Mennonite Student Fellowship at Penn State. Gerald Bender, a graduate student at Penn State, was primarily responsible for organizing the student fellowship. Virgil Brenneman, chairperson of the Mennonite Student Services Committee, also provided encouragement for the establishment of a Mennonite student fellowship at Penn State. The Student fellowship met informally for several years.

In the spring of 1963, several faculty members and their families gave serious consideration to the formation of a Mennonite Church in the State College area. On April 2, 1963 a letter was sent to all known Mennonites in the State College area requesting their attendance at a meeting at the home of La Marr and Nel Kopp on April 21, 1963 to discuss the establishment of a Mennonite Church in the community. The main items to be considered were.

- 1) The structural organization of a congregation,
- 2) When should such organization take place, and
- 3) Responsibilities and obligations of a Mennonite Church in the community.

The consensus of the meeting was that we should begin plans immediately for the establishment of a Mennonite Church in State College. Since Dorothy and I had important responsibilities with the Grove Mennonite Church near Belleville, PA, business meetings were held on Sunday Evenings. There was much discussion at those meetings and there were considerable differences of opinion on organization, structure, and mission. The resulting Charter that was written was an amalgamation of ideas that was acceptable to all participants. The University Mennonite Church was formally organized as a congregation on June 16, 1963 with 12 persons signing the Charter. The twelve were Gilbert and Margaret Franz, Robert and Eloise Hostetler, La Marr and Nel Kopp, Robert and Ruby Lehman, Laurie and Norma Mitton, and Truman and Dorothy Hershberger. Laurie Mitton was chosen leader; Eloise Hostetler was elected secretary and Truman Hershberger was elected treasurer. Since the Charter is probably the most important document the congregation has produced, I would like to read it in its entirety.

(the Charter was read here)

Worship Services were held on Sunday evenings until October 1, 1963 after which services were held Sunday mornings. Laurie Mitton continued to serve as leader of the congregation until he accepted a teaching assignment in Germany in 1965. Merritt Gardner, a graduate student in mathematics, was then chosen as the leader. He served until September 1, 1966 when Victor Stoltzfus, an ordained minister in the Ohio Conference, was called to be the Pastor of the congregation. He served half-time for the

congregation for four years and the congregation gave him partial support for his services. For the next 8 years (1970-1978) chairpersons, elected from the within the congregation, provided coordination for the various activities of the congregation. In September 1978, Harold and Ruthie Yoder, members of the congregation, were chosen unanimously and licensed to be co-pastors of the congregation.

Regardless of the type of leadership, lay or pastoral, input at Sunday morning worship services has been quite variable. Speakers from within the congregation, from the local community, from the Allegheny Conference and from the church at large have helped us sharpen our consciences, dig into the scriptures, and discuss contemporary issues. The order of worship has varied over the years, but a distinctive feature has been a discussion period following the sermon.

Some characteristics of the University Mennonite Church that have been maintained from the beginning are:

- 1) Everyone is expected to be involved in a significant way in all decision making, in holding offices, in teaching, in speaking, etc.
- 2) Efforts are made to care for the spiritual welfare of all age groups. Sunday School for the children has always been provided. An active MYF has been functioning since 1972.
- 3) A program of planned giving has helped us to be self-supporting and has made it possible for the congregation to meet its full askings each year for Conference and Church-wide agencies.
- 4) Despite efforts to involve undergraduate students, the church as been primarily attractive to graduate students, faculty, and other Mennonites in the community.
- 5) The small size of the congregation (39 members at the largest) has allowed decision making to be a total group process. The church as never had a church council or board of elders prior to 1988. Our current membership is 37.

Note added here on 10-28-1984 – 3 elders were elected in 1988.

Outreach to students at Penn State has been a concern of the congregation from the beginning. Students who indicate their religious preference as “Mennonite” are contacted and invited to participate in church activities. Mennonite Student Services also helps to identify Mennonite students on campus. Theological discussions and Bible studies have been conducted for students during a number of school years. Despite these efforts, we are aware that many students have opted to participate infrequently or not at all in our worship services.

The University Mennonite Church has for many years has been a member agency of United Campus Ministry, now The United Ministry at Penn State. This organization ministers to all Penn State students an provides a forum for discussion of many subjects including the draft, conscientious objection, nuclear disarmament, world hunger, etc. Members of our congregation have served as Chairman, Secretary, and Treasurer of this organization. We are also a part of Christian Mission, an organization of State College churches that attempts to meet community needs in a coordinated fashion. It provides for a part-time social worker and a telephone counseling and referral service. We also provide partial support for the Park Forest Day Nursery, a nursery for needy families. Individuals and groups within the congregation are encouraged to respond to spiritual and social needs as we become aware of them.

In recent years, the University Mennonite Church has moved in some new directions. We have worked at goal setting—coming up with nine goals to help us move forward in our life together and outreach. We have moved more and more towards a consensus style of decision making. For the last two years we

have selected officers through a process of gift discernment rather than elections. Our latest leap of faith was the purchase of the State College Friends Meetinghouse on May 2, 1980 for \$72,000. We look to the Lord for guidance in the days ahead.

Post Script

Since October 12, 1980:

Harold and Ruthie Yoder were the leaders of the congregation until September 1988 at which time they resigned to obtain seminary training. A Search Committee was appointed and Edwin and Catherine Rempel were called to be full-time co-pastors as of September 1, 1989.