

## The United Methodist Church at 50: A Quick Refresher

### Who and What Puts the “United” in our Name:

The Evangelical United Brethren Church came from two streams of German pietism touched by Wesleyan spirituality as experienced in American Methodism.

### Evangelical Association / Church

Jacob Albright, from Pennsylvania, was raised in a German Lutheran home. As a young adult Albright experienced conversion under Philip William Otterbein and joined a Methodist class. Albright began traveling through the central Pennsylvania area preaching and around 1803 / 1807 formed the “Newly-formed Methodist Conference” for German-speaking groups. In 1807, Albright was elected bishop of this group and translated most of the Methodist *Discipline* into German. Following Albright’s death in 1808, George Miller published a complete *Discipline* for the new group and in 1816 the movement took the name Evangelical Association.

The church spread westward across Pennsylvania and into the Ohio Valley. The denomination became involved in missions in Japan and China. There was a split in the denomination between 1894 and 1922.

### The Church of the United Brethren in Christ

Philip William Otterbein was clergy at a Reformed Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He was a pietist as well. Under his leadership the region had a spiritual awakening. Around 1767, he heard Martin Boehm preaching at Long’s Barn in Lancaster County. Boehm was a German Mennonite who had also been touched by the Pietist tradition. Otterbein, upon hearing Boehm preaching, realized that they were kindred spirits (even though back in Germany they would have been hesitant to be known as such). Otterbein rushed forward at the end of the sermon and embraced Boehm with the exclamation, “We are brothers!” This response would be woven into the character of the denomination over time; one which expressed a strong relational aspect to the Christian faith. (As a result of this publicly shared spiritual experience with Otterbein, Boehm was excommunicated from the Mennonite Church. Mennonites have historically had a long, bitter---and even violent---relationship with the German Reformed Church and would not tolerate Boehm’s association with German Reformed and Methodist adherents.)

Boehm and Otterbein worked to extend the influence of their preaching. In 1800, the work was formalized as the two were elected bishops and the name “Church of the United Brethren in Christ” was selected. They had also been touched by the Methodist experience---Otterbein had participated in the ordination of Asbury---and based their *Discipline* on large portions of the Methodist *Discipline*.

The church expanded westward in Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley. They established a school in Ohio and mission work in Africa, Japan, China and the Philippines.

## **The Evangelical United Brethren Church**

The two groups merged into the EUB in 1946. The new church continued the traditions started by the two original bodies. Mission work continued, which emphasized the development and growth of local leadership without the reliance on non-local expertise. In short, they focused on growing new churches. The body also focused on ways to include the laity of the local church in the management and leadership of the church through such tools as the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (PPR) and the Church Council. This was all seen as a way to encourage growth in relationships, responsibility and discipleship.

On April 23, 1968, The United Methodist Church was created when Bishop Reuben H. Mueller, representing The Evangelical United Brethren Church, and Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke of The Methodist Church joined hands at the constituting General Conference in Dallas, Texas. With the words, "Lord of the Church, we are united in Thee, in Thy Church and now in The United Methodist Church," the new denomination was given birth by two churches that had distinguished histories and influential ministries in various parts of the world.

Theological traditions steeped in the Protestant Reformation and Wesleyanism, similar ecclesiastical structures, and relationships that dated back almost two hundred years facilitated the union. In the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, for example, Philip William Otterbein, the principal founder of the United Brethren in Christ, assisted in the ordination of Francis Asbury to the superintendency of American Methodist work. Jacob Albright, through whose religious experience and leadership the Evangelical Association was begun, was nurtured in a Methodist class meeting following his conversion.

### **African American Methodists**

For as long as Methodists have been meeting in America there have been black members in the movement's classes, societies and churches. While black presence within the Methodist fold has been primal it has also been problematic. Though Methodism's egalitarian theology of free grace to be experienced by ALL was open and welcoming, its practice has been a history of, at best, mixed signals, with even inhospitable, ungracious behaviors. From its very early history, Methodist churches have had segregated seating, early morning services designated only for black members, and limited ordination because of assumed inferior intellectual ability. There were separate black congregations, churches, charges and conferences which still were overseen by whites. There was the reunification of the Methodist Church in 1939 which was made possible in large part by the formation of the Central Jurisdiction to pacify segregationists. What this church will do with black people is one of the lingering and historic questions dealt with in the 1968 merger and still continues to this day. Sadly, the answer to this question has been disillusioning and fraught with uncertain answers.

Indeed, one of the merging streams coming to confluence in formation of The United Methodist Church is the ending of the institutionalized segregation of the Central Jurisdiction. This critical and life-giving tributary to United Methodism must not only be remembered but experience continuing reconciliation.