

Bible Fellowship Church – Historical Society August, 2018.

What follows is a bit of pot purri. The pieces started at different places. Some began with questions directed to me. And, I always enjoy looking back at the conference of 100 years ago. This year, I tried to make some comparisons.

Because in the summer, many Bible Fellowship Church faces are turned toward Pinebrook which celebrates 50 years in BFC hands, we will stop for a brief recollection there. It comes by way of member Dale Seifert who was involved in the early days. He wrote me on a couple of occasions. What follows are clippings of some of his memories. Thanks, Dale.

So 50 years ago was the denomination dedication of Pinebrook, that great Labor Day. Probably about 2500 folks were on the grounds to share the excitement, many of them received a free meal. Those last summer weeks, my father had many volunteers helping, trying to improve the general appearance of the

buildings/grounds. Glenn [Bailey] and I soon became involved in the snack shop; probably he made more ice cream than anyone else. A tight operation, we served many light meals on weekends, turned a profit...



Pinebrook Dedication - Pastors' Choir

My dad always wanted to book the best speakers available. One was Henry Morris for Memorial Day 1973. Perhaps my best recollection of all, this brilliant/humble brother lecturing, showing slides, that weekend. Having started The Institute For Creation Research out in San Diego not long before. Hundreds of guests present, the Spirit touched many of us via him, as we affirmed his love for our Lord, his Word, accepting without reservation its authority...

They (Pinebrookers, Dale called them) all seemed to share a deep appreciation for this conference, its many summers under Crawford auspices. The dynamics changed in late 1960 with Percy's death. About then, the family began the yearlong operation but couldn't maintain the busy, vibrant summer operation, Don, the oldest son, in charge. Excepting when Ross Rhoads, his team, rented the facility (three busy seasons, I'm

guessing 1964-1966). Ross wanted to purchase the property but talks with the family failed which opened the way for Jack and my father, shortly thereafter, to talk with Dick, by then, in charge. Probably you know that the family's main interest was radio/travel which still continues.

A question about the practice of feetwashing was directed to me. What follows is a brief survey of how we observed it and how it ended.

Feet washing has always been a bit controversial among us. Was it an ordinance or a sacrament? What was called an ordinance received that name because it was said to be ordained by God. What was called a sacrament received that name because through the practice, grace was bestowed. The Catholic Church identified seven sacraments which were practices through which grace was conferred upon the one who participated. Ordinances were understood to be a way of being drawn to what was symbolized. The Reformers identified them as sacraments. The Mennonites identified them as ordinances.

Mennonites identified three ordinances: baptism, the Lord's Supper and feet washing. The other Reformers saw only two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The criteria seem to have been that Jesus both taught and commanded it and it was practiced in the early church. It is clear that Jesus taught and commanded all three of the practices. For the Mennonites, that was enough to consider feet washing as an ordinance. However, for the Reformers, feet washing was not an ordinance because no reference is made to it at any point in Acts or the Epistles. So, they saw two continuing practices instead of three.

The practice of feet washing continued in the Bible Fellowship Church (then the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church) until at least 1955. The Annual Conferences up to that point have a mention of feet washing. In 1954, the minutes state, "The Conference body then joined together in the observance of saints' feet washing and the Lord's Supper. A Spirit-inspired blending of hearts was truly evidenced in this devotional period." In 1955, no mention is made of a time for feet washing. But, the provision for the practice was still envisioned. One of the the duties of an Ordinances and Practices Committee was to be "3.They shall provide the emblems and other necessities for the Lord's Supper and Washing of the Saints' feet." References to feet washing seem to end at this point. The minutes of 1956 make no reference to feet washing at all.

Dr. Harold Shelly gave a review of feet washing in his book, The Bible Fellowship Church (pages 311-12):

The matter of feet washing which in the earliest days of the Evangelical Mennonites appeared to be optional and then became mandatory, now became a matter of debate. Pastor William A. Heffner, when it came time for foot washing, explained to the Hatfield Local conference that he could not in good faith participate in the practice. He and his family then withdrew before that part of the meeting commenced. Conference debated the matter and finally in 1962 at an adjourned session "feet washing" was dropped as a regular practice of the Fellowship. A few years later the Reading congregation petitioned Annual Conference to determine if they had the right to practice feet washing. Conference assured them that nothing in the decision disallowed the practice.

There had been some ambiguity in the meaning of feet washing and its defence. In some of the proceedings it was referred to as an ordinance, thus making it the third ordinance after Baptism and Communion. More often it was considered a practice. Most agreed there were only two ordinances, the two dominical ordinances, sometimes called sacraments, Baptism and Communion. In 1951 the report prepared for the Gospel Banner stated, "the Conference members observed the Ordinances of saints' feet washing and the Lord's Supper." The following year the minutes stated, "The observance of the Lord's Supper and the Practice of the washing of saints' feet was a time of blessed fellowship together in the Lord."

Some urged that Jesus said his followers "ought" to wash one another's feet; therefore, he instituted feet washing as an ordinance. Others noted that in New Testament there was no record of it as a practice as there was of the two commonly accepted ordinances. The latter argument seemed to win the day.

Another question came my way concerning when our current leadership structure took shape. What follows is a brief survey. The Historical Society meeting in October, 2018, has on its agenda a presentation of the men and organization which comprised our leadership.

Leadership Structures

When was our current leadership structure was put in place. The simple answer is the early 1970s. But of course, the simple answer is superficial because the reality was much more complex.

When our church began, not much attention was given to formal matters. The early leaders were focused on being evangelists. Organization was not on their minds. When they met in the fall of 1861, two years after their first meeting, they had begun to put things together. A roll was called indicating there were two recognized offices, preacher and deacon. The German minutes show that what was called a deacon was a vorsteher. Deacon was their English translation. Deacon carries the idea of service. Vorsteher carries the idea of authority. Was it a bad translation or their understanding – service/authority combined? When they published their doctrines and practices in 1867, they identified three offices, elders, ordinary preachers or teachers, and overseers or deacons. (What Mean These Stones, page 34)

In 1880, the denominational manual included four offices, presiding elder, elder, deacon and class leader. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/1880docanddisc.htm>)

The responsibilities of the class leader were:

1. That he never cease praying for, and watching over himself, to obtain such grace from God, that he may, in observing these rules according to the commandments of God, be a faithful leader, and give his brethren and sisters good instruction by his own deportment. – 1 Peter 5:2-3.
2. That he cordially love the class committed to his charge, frequently pray for them in secret and visit them, and hold public prayer meetings at least once a week, and be diligent in supplication, in intercession, in deprecation, and in thanksgiving; thus like exercises being commanded by Jesus Christ and His holy apostles.
3. That he do not seek to dominate over his brethren and sisters, but watch over them in love, and see that they progress in the divine life; not only according to the form, but to see that they grow in the true knowledge and love of God; and in love advise them, teach them, reprove, comfort, and admonish them, as circumstances may require.
4. That he be careful that all things are conducted in his class according to Divine and human order; to inform the preacher of such as lead a disorderly life, and will not be admonished; as well as of those who purposely or habitually neglect their duty of doing good.

The duties of the deacon were:

1. As soon as is practicable after the session of the annual conference, they shall meet and inquire of their preachers what their disciplinary claims are for the current year, and shall see to it that each class contributes quarterly its proportionate amount for meeting such claims.
2. They shall receive quarterly all funds intended for the support of the ministers, and annually the missionary fund, and pay it over to the quarterly conference.
3. They shall provide the emblems and other necessities for the Lord's Supper.

4. They shall procure dwellings for the preachers, or assist procuring them.
5. They shall see if there are poor in the district over which they preside, and if there are such, to inquire into the cause of their need and nature of their wants. If in a helpless condition, make it known to the quarterly conference; but should the wants be very pressing, make it known to the minister in charge, and he shall make it known to the congregation, so that all may know their circumstances and sympathize with such poor brothers and sisters.

The duties of the Presiding Elder were:

To preach, to meet the societies and classes, to visit the sick, to hold class meeting four times a year in each class, to see that our Church discipline is observed with respect on his charge, and to read the general rules or get them read once a year.

By 1910, the list of officers included Presiding Elders, Elders, Helpers, Probationers, S. S. Superintendents, Stewards, Trustees, Deacons and Class Leaders.

(<http://www.bfchistory.org/1910docanddisc.htm>) The growing list of officers indicates a growing leadership organization. The list remained unchanged for nearly the next 40 years.

At the 1943 General Conference, the following was passed: “Resolved, That we permit the use of the term District Superintendent and understand it to bear the same meaning as Presiding Elder, which terms may be used interchangeably.” The term, presiding elder, became a memory.

When the division occurred between what would become the Bible Fellowship Church and the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, leadership was reformulated. In 1955, procedures for the “Official Board” were defined:

The Official Board shall be composed of the following Officers of the Church: Building Fund Collector(s), Class Leader(s), Deacons, Delegate(s) to Annual Conference, General Sunday School Superintendent, Assistant Sunday School Superintendent, Treasurer of the Sunday School, Pastor, Steward(s), and Trustees.

When the number of the members of the Official Board is less than 9, the Local Conference may elect up to three male members at large. In no case shall the number exceed 9 members by this procedure.

The Official Board shall be responsible to their Local Conference to whom they shall submit an annual report and periodical reports as may be required.

The Official Board shall meet at least quarterly. Any special meeting must be held at the call of the Pastor or a majority of the Board.

The Official Board shall organize at the first regular meeting following the last Local Conference. They shall elect a Secretary who shall keep minutes of all official actions of the body.

The Pastor shall be Moderator of the Board. He shall be an ex-officio member of all committees.

The following Committees shall be appointed by the Pastor, subject to the approval of the Board. The Chairman of every Committee shall be a member of the Official Board. Other Committees may be appointed as deemed necessary.

Membership & Discipline, Ordinances & Practices, Building, Missionary, Finance, Christian Education, Benevolence.

Each Committee shall report at least quarterly and all actions must be confirmed by the Official Board. A copy of all minutes of all Committees shall be submitted to the Pastor.

In this structure, the pastor was still key and was accountable to the District Superintendent. All of the “pieces” of a church’s ministry met at the Official Board who gave direction to the church.

This structure continued until 1962 when the Conference determined to restudy the matter of church government. A study committee reported to the Annual Conference of 1963. The proposal of this committee was to move to a presbyterian form of government which would mean leadership by a board of elders instead of an official board. A sizable opposition to this view led to a second committee which reported in 1965. The second committee presented proposals that would retain the system of leadership centered on an official board. A third study was commissioned for 1966 which sought to reconcile the two points of view. This committee recommended that leadership by elder be adopted which has been the standard since.

The presbyterian form of government meant changes in leadership structure at the denominational level. The vestiges of hierarchical authority were removed with the ending of the office of District Superintendent. According to the form of presbyterian government, the highest and most authoritative office in the church is that of elder in the local congregation. Individual churches are to govern their own affairs. That does not imply that churches are to be independent but rather view themselves as autonomous. The denomination is bound together but mutual submission to shared doctrine and ministries.

In recent years, denominational organization was adapted to insure that the decisions of Annual Conference, now called the Bible Fellowship Church Conference, would be carried out. The current Executive Board was established in 2008. Their task is focused on the administrative affairs of the denomination and not on the “ecclesiastical” issues that dwell in the ministry of the Gospel.

Conference - 1918 / 2018

The minutes of the conference of 1918 look very much like the minutes of 2018. Some things just don't seem to change. Formality and order were the rule then and are today. You can't have these sorts of meetings without formality and order. Some think of it as an exercise in bureaucracy. They suggest that most of the conferences could be summarized as was our second conference, "In the second session, held on May 28, 1860, in the Meeting House in Upper Milford Township, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, nothing of importance was decided." You will occasionally find a man who might mutter, "Amen to that," under his breath. But in reality, most of those who attend the conference know that even the routine things have a great significance. Meetings such as our conferences call for accountability and provide vision for our ministry and direction for our activity.



Reading Church - then

Interestingly enough, both conferences began on a Monday evening. Normally, a century ago, Annual Conference began on Thursday evening and ended on Monday. It is now our practice to begin Monday evening and end on Wednesday. However, 1918 was not the normal. The conference had originally been scheduled for Thursday, October 10. The conference was postponed because of the flu epidemic that pretty much shut down public meetings. Churches were not to meet. Funerals were made private. The obituary of Horace



Reading Church - now

Kauffman, an MBC pastor who died in October, says, "During this time all the churches were closed on account of the Spanish Influenza epidemic and no services were permitted at the house. On Saturday afternoon, October 26, 1918, most of the ministering brethren of the Conference, together with a number of relatives and friends, gathered in the yard in front of the church at Coopersburg..." (1918 Yearbook, page 36). As October closed, restrictions were

gradually being lifted and the conference could be held. The minutes noted, "This Conference Session was postponed from the original dates because of the state-wide quarantine of several weeks on account of the Spanish Influenza epidemic. The quarantine even now was not altogether lifted, but privileges were granted to hold the business sessions only. This accounts for the curtailing of some of the business and the elimination of the usual preaching services."

More can be said about the flu epidemic. The 1918 yearbook contained four obituaries, William Gehman, Horace Kauffman, Mrs. J. G. Shireman (pastor's wife), and A. P. Deckman (Gospel Herald). The deaths of all but William Gehman were attributed to the flu. The impact of this time of sickness was significant which explains why the conference had to be rescheduled at the last minute.

The Conference of 1918 was held at the Reading Church, Tenth and Oley Streets, where B. Bryan Musselman was in his first year of ministry.

He had been assigned there from the Blandon and Fleetwood circuit to replace W. J. Fretz who had suffered the year before from what would have been called a nervous breakdown. The tally of men present showed an attendance of 48. Of these, 31 were ordained men or probationers. The 2018 conference saw 134 ordained men or probationers. While an actual count of attendees was not taken, over 200 were included in



Reading Kitchen Staff - 1913

conference sessions. The presence of visitors and other curious onlookers would have pushed the total well beyond the 200 mark. The numbers of those present explain why current day conferences can no longer be accommodated in one of our churches, even a larger church. While nothing is said about the logistics of the conference in 1918, you can be sure it was a major task for the host church. Those who could not easily commute had to be housed with families of the church. Meals needed to be provided. Some had convictions that churches should not serve meals on their premises. This was not the conviction of the Reading Church whose kitchen staff and servers were pictured in the 1915 yearbook when the conference was last held at Reading. Men had to be assigned to homes which were opened to provide for them. The logistics are much easier to handle at Pinebrook which is equipped to provide meals, housing and space for conference meetings. The actual cost would have been staggering to the 1918 conference, in excess of \$30,000. Since Pinebrook belongs to the BFC, the actual costs never really show up in some accounting report.

Another of the many similarities is the practice of including messages in the beginning of the various sessions. In 1918, H. B. Musselman, Presiding Elder, brought a message from 1 Peter 4:7. It was said to be “a short but encouraging address.” In 2018, William Schlonecker, senior pastor at the Newark DE Bible Fellowship Church was working with the theme of the conference, “Onward and Outward,” and spoke on the topic, “Expanding the Church by Church Planting” looking at Acts 9:31.

Committees were and are an important part of the work of our conference. Committee appointments and reports are regular parts of the business to be done. The conference of 1918 had approximately 25 committees that reported. Approximately 15 committees made up the committee structure of the 2018 conference. In 2018, distinction is made between boards and committees. While the difference is not always clear, they both reported to the conference.

Some of the committees have the same function after 100 years. The Committee on Statistics and the Committee on Resolutions reported in 1918 and 2018. Some of the committees have different names but perform similar duties: Committee on Candidates for Ordinations / Ministerial Credentials Committee; Committee on Examination of Applicants for Annual Conference License / Ministerial Candidate Committee; Committee on Examination of Quarterly Conference Records / Committee to Examine Particular Church Minutes.

Some committees are no longer needed: The Committee on Examination of Traveling Elders; The Committee on Examination of Local Preachers, Evangelists and Missionaries; The Camp Meeting Equipage Committee; The Laymen’s Benevolent Society; Bethlehem [and Mt Carmel] District Sunday School Convention; Board of Trustees of the Orphanage and Home.

The 2018 committees reflect the changing face of our denomination: Church Health Committee; Communications Committee [who would have dreamed of something like the internet and a web page in 1918?]; Victory Valley Camp; Committee on Multi-Cultural Church.

In 2018, our denomination publishes OneVoice as its magazine which includes articles of interest and concern to our people. In 1918, we were well involved in the publication of the “Eastern Gospel Banner”. The Pennsylvania Conference had launched this publication to supplement the denomination’s magazine, “The Gospel Banner.” Their report for that year stated, “While the country is being flooded by false doctrines, Higher Criticism, Russelism, New Thought, and other ‘damnable heresies,’ many of them ingeniously disguised, it behooves us to be wide awake and do all we can to spread the truth as it is in Jesus Christ... It is the aim of the Eastern Gospel Banner to present unto its readers the best thoughts of the best and most spiritual writers in original and selected articles for their edification, encouragement and

comfort in these last and perilous days.” While it might have been stated differently in 2018, the intentions are very much the same.

On Monday night of the 2018 conference, a special celebration was held to recognize two new churches, La Roca of Reading and Northern Lehigh County. The process of recognition is laid out with some precision. Church Extension Ministries begins by establishing a mission church or recognizing a previous ministry. When 20 or more individuals (called committed participants) give testimony and evidence of conversion and express commitment, the mission church is recommended to the Conference for recognition as a church. The stages are rather clear. Few people ask the question, when is a church a church? In 1918, churches were the result of Gospel Herald Evangelism. When a group of people were meeting, they might secure a building for their meeting place. Who was the legal entity? If there was a deed, someone had to sign for it. Ceremonies were not held in but churches were simply transferred from the Gospel Herald Society to the denomination. The process was not always clear and tended to focus on the legal aspects of it all. The yearbooks of this era began with a section entitled, “Special Laws and Resolutions,” which functioned like a set of standard procedures. The legal transfer, which included financial transfers, was described like this. “Whenever the Gospel Worker Society turns one or more missions over to the church, a committee, consisting of the Presiding Elder, Treasurer and Missionary Presiding Elder, shall appraise the personal property or real estate belonging to said mission in case the Church chooses to buy said property, paying the same out of the Home Mission treasury.” (1918 Yearbook, page 9) When all was said and done, a pastor was assigned, a delegate was elected, and a new church appeared in the statistical list.

The conference of 1918 ended as did that of 2018 on Wednesday afternoon allowing those in attendance time to travel to their homes. Most of the pastors at the 2018 would return to preach at the church where they were serving. Some of the pastors at the 1918 conference would find themselves in a different church. They came to the conference not knowing where they would be assigned for the following week but they would either return or face a new congregation. They were committed to whatever or as they would have said it, unconditional.

After the conference, a yearbook with minutes, statistics and reports would be published. Of that yearbook, editor C. H. Brunner wrote:

This is the twenty-third edition of the Conference Journal of the Pennsylvania Conference. From a 24 – page pamphlet in 1896 it has increased to 90 pages in last year’s edition. First we had no illustrations and now this year’s Journal contains more than thirty. This makes this edition more expensive than any previous one [price 25

cents]. All these illustrations are half-tones made from actual photographs never before printed. Many of them are from photos received from our Foreign Missionaries, very striking and suggestive. Then there are a few large groups of Sunday School workers, officers and teachers on one of which several are missing. Besides these we have inserted photos of our co-workers who have fallen asleep during the year and also of several parsonages built or purchased lately. (1918 Yearbook, page 32)

A yearbook has been prepared for the 2018 conference. You can see it online, download a version to your computer, or purchase a paper copy [price \$10.00]. It is loaded with pictures, even photos of the conference in progress. Of course, you could have watched the events being streamed over the internet. Our 1918 brothers could not even comprehend the technological changes that have come over the last 100 years but they would love it and cheer us on.

Things have changed in the last 100 years. On the other hand, things have remained the same. Wonderfully, the core of the Bible Fellowship Church is the same as that of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, commitment to the revealed truth of God's word and the call to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Your comments and questions are always welcome. I always enjoy the challenge of digging out information. It often leads to new discoveries.

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Pictures from the archives. I love our collection of photographs. I will just share a few that we have .



Girls at Mizpah Grove - 1912



Bethlehem Male Quartet



Eugene George - Gospel Herald



Philadelphia - Salem bus



**Eusebius Hershey
(our first missionary)**

**Southern Lighthouse Singers
(came to Mizpah Grove)**

