

**First Fellowship: The Congregation at Nummer Drei**  
**A History of Zionsville Bible Fellowship Church**  
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**1858-1884**

Revival fires were burning across the eastern seaboard in the 1850s and the hamlets along the King's Highway on South Mountain in Lehigh County were impacted. The Mennonite, Lutheran and Reformed communities were feeling the "heat" as the preaching of the Gospel brought renewal to their members and to other lukewarm and indifferent hearts. In the center of Old Zionsville the General Conference Mennonite Church with its history back to 1740 was struggling with renewal as certain families including their lay associate pastor, William S. Gehman, full-time farmer, sought a more dynamic form of worship and group prayer, and desired to evangelize those around them. In May of 1858 twenty-four members and their children were ousted and left family and friends to organize a more progressive "fellowship" under the leadership of 31-yr.old "Elder"Gehman. Records indicate twice a month meetings with offerings starting in June. These Evangelical Mennonites met in homes & barns until their brick meeting house was ready and dedicated on November 12 ,1859 in the presence of invited "friends of Christianity near and far". The edifice was built by Nathan Stahl of Powder Valley for a cost of \$1360, through gifts of about 250 people, including family, neighbors and friends and from Mennonite congregations south toward Philadelphia. The mother church—the Oberholtzer Mennonite congregation—contributed \$126.25 and other gifts from its pastor and other members who did not favor the division but maintained good relations. The building was 36' X 50' with two wood-burning stoves and oil lamps, with men seated on the left (so they could watch the horse stalls)and women on the right. Because the love of Christ burned in their hearts these families made great sacrifices to attend German-speaking worship services, prayer meetings and at least one annual "protracted" meeting that could last as long as 8-15 evenings. These happy believers would load wagons and buggies and travel as far as three miles on country lanes from Hosensack and Seizholtzville all four seasons of the year.

Located south of Vera Cruz and north of Old Zionsville, the Upper Milford Meeting House and cemetery as it came to be known- was built on property originally owned by Abraham Kaufmann Sr. His grandson Abraham aided "Father"Gehman with spirited leadship to the new church as did a cousin David Gehman, who had a store and was postmaster in Hosensack. Other "pillars" in the early days were an uncle Henry Gehman and ,after 1873, his son John B., descendants of the first immigrant Christian Gehman, whose sons were Mennonite preachers, and whose 300 acre farm was just past the Lehigh County line in Berks Co. Daughters of these Gehman men married and brought their spouses into the church, one being school teacher Joseph Romig who became a preacher but died quite young. In addition to father-in-law Jacob Musselman, others committed to the development of the work included these families: the John Heists, the Aaron Hasslers, the George Lamberts, the Jacob Landises, the Abraham and David Musselmans, the Daniel Mohrs, the John Roeders ( long-time treasurer) the Levi Shellys, the Joseph Stauffers, the Joseph Wieands (on whose farm a stream was used for baptisms), the Joseph Yeakels. An important leader beginning in the 1860's

was Joel Brunner who led the a cappella singing at worship and funerals. Jonas Musselman, son of David, would become a dynamic, effective church-planter in the Evangelical Mennonite Society and the Evangelical United Mennonite Church from 1872-1886.

Membership of the Mission Class of the Upper Milford Mission in 1865 included 27 men and 33 women. Pastors were chosen by lot and after 1874 by appointment, Gehman and Kaufmann (until his untimely death in 1888) as well as Abel Strawn ('78, '84) and Jonas Musselman ('82-'83) led the local assembly, and membership fluctuated between 60 and 36 during this twenty-five yr. period. Financial records indicate that both men's and women's giving were listed quarterly. The average monthly amounts fluctuated between \$4.50 and \$6.00 until after 1874 when the average was \$7.50. Loose change, called "penny collection" after 1884, are first recorded in 1871 being received on Sunday mornings and evenings. Funds were solicited once a year both for coal and the "fire-tender". David Gehman was the official "deacon" by the laying on of hands, who could admonish the assembly after the sermon, who distributed funds for the poor and visited the sick, and had a "watchful eye upon the doctrine and the Church of Christ". Prayers were spontaneous, all at the same time; "amens" and shoutings accompanied the preaching. Lisbon white wine was served in a common cup at communion in the early years. Toward the end of this period tin boxes were hung by the door to receive funds for the "Poor" and the "Heathen". In September of 1873 through November 1876 there were quarterly Missions Meetings on Sunday mornings with very generous offerings in 1875. Blazon across the front of the meeting room in German were the words, "Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it", Luke 11:28. In 1881 the first conference-wide singing book of the then United Evangelical congregations was published in German, with no music!! It was purchased for Joel Brunner in '82 for 75 cents. (He later helped compile the first hymnal of the MBC in 1887 which included an English section.) Camp meetings were begun in 1879 at the Chestnut Hill location above Limeport ( through 1897). A railroad was cut along the south-east side of the church/cemetery in 1875 with a station called Dillinger to the north and Old Zionsville to the south. Conductors would stop the train at the cemetery if mourners needed to alight. Sunday school was begun in 1875, every other week just as worship was.

### **1884-1909**

The final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many changes in the small denomination as seen in the Upper Milford church. Seeking a wider fellowship of churches, leaders led the rank and file into what would be called the Mennonite Brethren in Christ of eastern Penna (1883). (The William Wieands entertained the conference on their farm near the church in 1899!!!) Since the little brick church would host the first General Conf in Nov. '85, it would need a face lift. For \$365 the pastoral alcove was created up front to bring more day-light into the pulpit area. This necessitated the removal of the Bible text in German, a sign of changing times. Accepting the organizational experience of the brethren to the west, the system of leadership by the stewards (responsible for funds for the pastor and the parsonage) and class leaders was instituted. Trimestrial evaluations, called quarterly conferences, were organized with the visit of the newly-

established denomination-wide leader called the Presiding Elder. Zionsville's own Elder Gehman oversaw these weekend inspirational meetings which including feet-washing. It would become necessary for the local churches to receive collections to pay for this itinerant ministry. The mourners' altar remained in place (a new one purchased in 1906) as did periodic evangelistic meetings. The cemetery was enlarged in 1906 with purchase of land from the Kauffman descendants. Lots were now selling for \$8 and \$10 rather than \$5.00.

Full-time evangelistic home missionaries, both male and female, called Gospel Heralds and Gospel Workers respectively, were first recruited under the call of God during this period.

Young people from this rural parish began to share the Gospel in other towns and cities of Penna.

20% of the total offerings in Zionsville went to further missionary work at home and abroad. Missionary barrels or globes were available for outreach giving. Loyal members faithfully subscribed to the Gospel Banner." During this quarter-century the church was led by ten different preachers, some young and inexperienced at shepherding a flock, some staying three years, all assigned by denominational leaders. These men received training in ministry by following a three year series of reading courses graded by conference pastors in leadership. As work opportunities increased in the growing cities to the north, formerly committed families descended into the valleys to birth or strengthen young churches. People from Zionsville were now found in Emmaus, Allentown, and South Allentown. The congregation in Macungie was started in 1902, tho Allen Gehman who lived on a farm there continued involvement in his father's church through 1920. Francis M. Gehman was Sunday School superintendent in Zionsville from 1902-1911, later moving to Emmaus.

MBC records indicate that a church-plant existed from 1883-1909 near the St. Peter's Union church between Shimmersville and Seisholtzville, called the East Hereford mission (in Berks County). It would appear that this was an effort to evangelize workers and their families living near the iron-ore mines operating since 1872, on land leased from John B. Gehman and S. Bittenbender. The population of Seisholtzville had swelled to 96 by 1895. A spur railroad was taking iron-ore to Red Lion on the Fogelsville-Catasauqua railroad in the valley to the North.. A small cemetery called Croll-Gehman Cemetery was created but records show a transfer of bodies to Zionsville ( one year old Miriam Hoffman, granddaughter of John B. Gehman) and elsewhere in 1911.

Class leaders, slowly replacing the deacons ( Zionsville still had two deacons in 1895), were in charge of Bible studies and prayer meetings during the week, with offerings solicited for various needs weekly. Trustees in place since 1880 included such names as Abraham Musselman, Joel Brunner, John Rhoads, C. H. Kline and John Roeder. It would appear that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century services were now held each Sunday. Special gifts were still sought annually to pay the custodian, replacing the term "fire tender". The building was again renovated in 1903 when a vestibule was created inside the entrance Denominational records indicate that membership fluctuated from a high

of 89 in 1896 dropping to a low of 67 by 1908. Sunday School attendance varied from 97 to 65. The first members were passing into eternity and children and grand-children were moving away. William G. Gehman, first a school teacher in the area and active in the church in the late '90s, was ordained in 1900, and served the Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination for many years.

Some of the offerings in the late '90s were as follows:

Preacher	Home Missions	Foreign Missions (church)	(S.S.)	Poor
1892	\$84.21	\$28.28		\$22.94
Wm Gehman 1893	\$113.51	\$17.80		\$17.24
\$24.63 Wm Gehman 1894	\$66.75	\$6.96	\$14.14	\$5.77
L.B. Taylor				

### 1909-1934

The faithful of the Zionsville congregation were being impacted by the modernization of the world around them. Few male members were still farmers while others were laborers in factories and craftsmen. Elder Gehman's Anna died in 1904 and son Menno in 1907; and as Father Gehman aged (He died in April of 1918) his influence in the local assembly diminished as did that of his sons Henry M.. (charter member of Bethel, Allentown in 1889), Francis M. and Allen M. who were now living in the Lehigh Valley. The latter, charter member of the Macungie Church, continued to help in Zionsville through 1920 Joel Brunner passed from the scene (mourners came from Allentown on the train that stopped for them at the cemetery) to be replaced by his son Harvey. Russell Shelly began a long tenure as Sunday School superintendent in 1920.

Plain attire was still expected through the second decade; jewelry was still a no-no, and weddings were held in the parsonage. Financial records speak of grape juice in 1916 and of a communion set in 1912. Baptisms were now being held in the pond on the Gehman farm in Macungie. It is not known if any young men did military service during the First World War or if anyone died in the flu epidemic.

Physical improvements included a space heater in the center of the church and a new metal ceiling in 1916 (purchased from A. O. Gehman Hardware in Coopersburg) for which special gifts were received. It is be to noted that the sanctuary was first wired for electricity in 1922 at a cost of \$98.00 and the first monthly bill was \$1.67. Special Harvest Sundays were still held in the fall to supply the parsonage pantry or for missions.

With the creation of the Macungie, Emaus, Zionsville circuit in 1920, the local parsonage (bought in 1906) was rented out thru 1927 and then sold. Zionsville members willingly helped purchase the circuit parsonage in Emmaus. The Rose of Sharon hymnbook with music was introduced in 1917.

Camp-meetings which had been easily attended in nearby Chestnut Hill ended in 1897 . After a pilgrimage of a few years, the east Allentown location was established in 1910 and called Mizpah Grove. The Zionsville believers loyally gave \$200 in 1926, possibly for the new tabernacle.

During this 25 yr period, ministers had three year assignment though O. S. Hillegas returned for a second assignment of 6 yrs. between 1914-1920 and G. F. Yost from 1924-1933 for 9 yrs. Between 1920-1924 J.C. Roth was pastor. Membership begins at 64, falling to a low of 37; S.S. stood at 90 in 1909, ending at 81 in 1934.

The members continued to give generously to the work of the Gospel Herald Society (home missions) and to Foreign Missions as well as for the building and for the pastor. Giving dropped in the early 1930's at the height of the Depression.

C.H. Brunner, who arrived as circuit pastor in 1933, organized in Zionsville a special Homecoming in 1934 honoring those over seventy years of age from the circuit churches since both Macungie and Emmaus churches were fed numerically by families and friends from the "country" parish. Among those honored from Zionsville were the Henry B. Shellys, Mrs Mary Taylor, Mrs Kate Ackerman, Mrs Amanda Wieand and Emma Rohrbach, a German immigrant. Other key families in the 20s were the Brunners, the Hasslers, the Heists, and the Kauffmans Other names that appear on records are the Higs, Klines, Roths, and Ruths.

Quarterly Conferences with feet-washing continued as did revival meetings. Probably to make it easier for the circuit preacher, prayer meetings were moved to the church, rather than homes. Sermons in German ceased in the early 1930's. It is unknown who the first pastor with an automobile was but we can be sure it was bought at the William (Alfred) Gehman Chrysler dealership in Emmaus after 1924. Wm. A. was the son of Francis (Musselman) Gehman.

### 1934-1959

The congregation had stability during this 25 yr period because of the long tenure of its three pastors: C.H. Brunner 1933-42; F.B. Hertzog 1942-51; W. W. Hartman 1951-58; Paul Baer 1958-59 but membership remained between 38-45. It was during this period that Zionsville shared its pastor with Emmaus and Macungie and that the parsonage was in Emmaus. When the circuit was dissolved in 1958 evening services were resumed as believers no longer traveled to Emmaus and attendance greatly improved.

The conference year book in 1934 furnishes these statistics:

Value of the church property—\$4,050; membership—38; Sunday school average attendance—64; 6 classes in the auditorium.

Special offerings: Home Missions \$208; Church Foreign Missions \$231; S.S.

F.M. \$192

The class leader led the Wednesday night prayer meetings where a steward and building (rent) collector received gifts.

General Fund records for this entire period:

	1934	1939	1944	1949	1954	1959	
Income	\$252	\$323	\$599	\$888	\$1095	\$1879	Total
Expenses	\$292	\$329	\$580	\$825	\$1571	\$1722	1959 Distributions

were \$6,219

In 1954 an expenditure of \$1060 was made to place a white facing over the brick outside

Other Hot air oil burning furnace in the basement in 1949  
Room in basement for mothers with P.A. system 1956  
Century old flooring was varnished/aisle carpet in 1958

Cemetery lots in 1954 were being sold for \$90 including perpetual care.

One momentous change in worship style came with the use of a piano and a song leader in 1947 to accompany the hymns. Quarterly conferences continued with feet-washing

Zionsville believers have always had a strong foreign missions commitment. According to the Centennial Book, in the period 1949-59, the missionary giving had averaged \$1270 per year. After the denomination encouraged local churches to accept responsibility for individual missionary support, Zionsville assumed some help for Edna Pridham and even promoted the purchase of an automobile in 1956 for her ministry in Africa. The Women's Missionary Society was begun in May of 1955.

Bible Clubs were begun and well attended in the early 1950's and in 1958 a Menno Youth group began to meet twice a month on Saturdays.

Concerning weddings---Loretta Heist insisted in having a wedding band at her ceremony in Emmaus but Pastor C. H. Brunner refused to touch it. She recalls hearing Cecelia Shelly say how sad that she was that she was never allowed to have a ring. It was only in the 50's that weddings were no longer performed in the parsonage where only believers witnessed the ceremony. Non-Christian friends were invited to the church weddings of Freida Shelly and Mae Shelly.  
Church picnics were held at Milford Park.

### **1984-2009**

The most recent 25 year period (1984-2009) shows again how resilient the first Bible Fellowship Church was and is. Though none of the direct male descendants of Father Gehman are on the church roles today, the son of Francis M., Clarence Walter, born in 1888, was contributing to the church right before his death in 1969. The Heists and Shellys and their extended families, active in leadership in the church during this period, trace their Gehman heritage back through Hannah, born in 1869, daughter of William Schwartz Gehman. Royal A. Stoneback with his wife attend the church today. He is the grandson of Francis M., through his mother Olive.

Pastor David Armstrong served the parish from 1984-1989 rebuilding the membership to 55.

Greg Ulrich ministered from 1989-1998 with membership peaking at 66.

Harvey and Bertha Fritz effectively served an interim before Rev. Bennett was called in 2000

Joyce and Larry have faithfully and persistently pastored the flock and were happy to report eight baptisms in 2008. There are fifty members and four elders presently.

The church facility was improved in various ways in recent years. An organ was acquired in 1995 and the chapel was embellished with new paint, colorful drapes and comfortable cushions on the pews. The parking lot was enlarged and macadamized in 1987 at a cost of \$19,500.

Pastor Bennett and the elders challenged the church members to undertake the construction of an all-purpose pre-fabricated building behind the original church structure. This has been ideal for the children, youth and fellowship-type meetings. The church also purchased five and a half acres of fields and woods across from the present location with long-range plans of expansion. During this period the believers also saw the wisdom of the pastor owning his own home.

The new activities' building enabled the launching of the Awana Clubs' ministry. The yearly Valentine's Day banquet and annual Mother-Daughter get-together, both with many years of effective outreach, are held in the recent construction. And on a cool Easter morning the faithful who attend the Sunrise service, started in 1952, are happy to find refuge there for a light breakfast.

Lloyd and Loretta as well as Bright and Joyce Heist held leadership roles from the 1950s onward as did Charlie and June (Heist) Hersh. When Bright and his wife moved to Virginia in 1997 for health reasons, David Weller replaced Bright as delegate until his untimely death in 2005. Kevin Derr, song leader and elder, is the present delegate.

Because of God's amazing faithfulness and because of the members' deep love for the Lord and His Church, the Zionsville assembly has persevered over these one hundred fifty years. The small nucleus and its pastor don't hesitate to say "TO GOD BE ALL THE GLORY".