



PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Harriet Sider Bicksler

Editor

Devin Manzullo-Thomas

Contributing Editor

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Harriet Sider Bicksler

915 Aspen Ave.

Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

Phone: 717-315-8312;

Email: editor@bic-history.org

CONTACT

717-691-6048

info@bic-history.org

www.bic-history.org



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Join Us for the 2026 Annual Heritage Service



We are looking forward to this year's Heritage Service to be held on Sunday, June 7, at 3:00 p.m. at Ringgold Meetinghouse, 14426 Misty Meadow Rd., Smithsburg, Maryland. The theme of this year's gathering is "Contributions of Our Heritage" and will feature a presenter from each of our affiliate groups: Old Order River Brethren, United Zion, and Brethren in Christ.

Presenters will lead a hymn and share why the hymn is significant to their heritage. They will also share a personal story about someone from their heritage who has made a contribution to them, personally, or to their heritage at

large. The presenter will conclude by sharing a conviction of their heritage that speaks to them, personally. It will be a time for us to experience and appreciate our shared history in present fellowship. All are invited, and we extend a special invitation to those who live within easy driving distance or happen to be in the area and have never attended a heritage service.

Old News Clippings Describe Sisters' Reunification



Ruth McKewon Wagner and Norma McKewon after reunification.

Thanks to the prodigious research habits of Dwight Thomas (see page 2 for another historical tidbit from Dwight's research), we have the story of two sisters who were placed in an orphanage when they were children, adopted by two different families, and not reunited with each other until eighteen years later. Glenn Frey (former Brethren in Christ missionary to Africa and a member of the original Turkey Hill Frey family in Lancaster County) had gone to high school with Ruth McKewon, and then met her sister Norma at Messiah Bible College. He saw the strong resemblance between the two girls, and helped to prove their relationship and reconnect them with each other.



Norma at Messiah Bible College, 1940.

A Vision of the Condition of the Churches

By Dwight W. Thomas*

Imagine two young Lancaster County Brethren in Christ men in 1905: Henry T. Frey, age 28, and Levi F. Sheetz, age 22. They grew up near each other and knew each other from various regional denominational activities. Both were baptized in 1898 at the same service, and both were members of the Brethren in Christ Church. Henry married Katie B. Ginder a year after his baptism and began truck farming.

Sometime before 1905, Henry had a powerful and unique spiritual vision. Levi—soon after his graduation from Mount Joy High School—had established the fledgling “Florin News,” no doubt hoping it would become a thriving local newspaper. In 1905, the two men collaborated to produce a printed account of Henry’s vision. A black and white version of the vision appeared as a supplement to the *Evangelical Visitor* in May 1905. But it was also available through Levi as a color print.

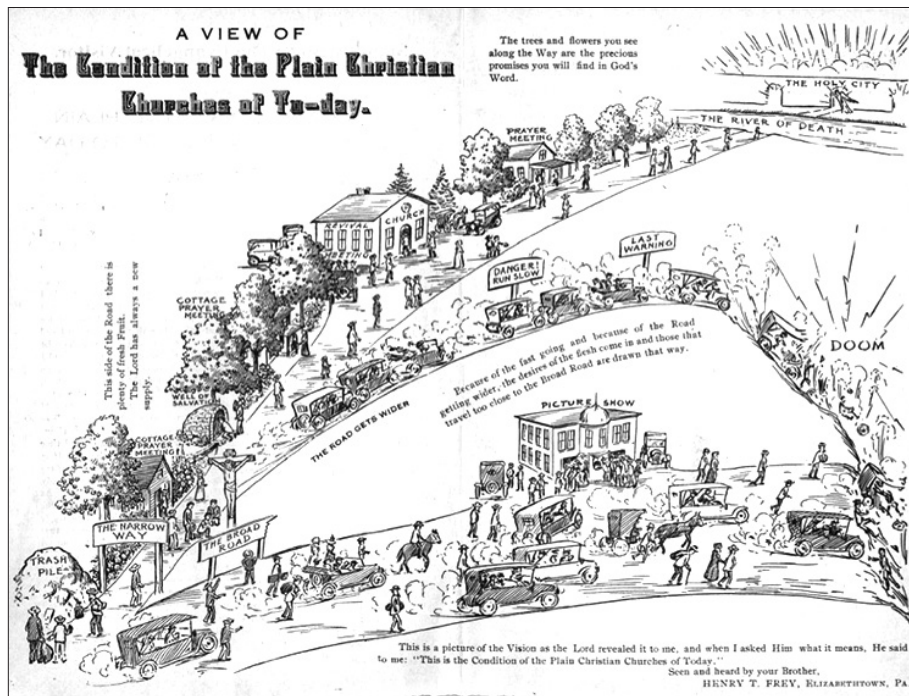
The account itself represents a striking example of Brethren in Christ religious experience in the early 1900s. But I was especially interested in the two-page drawing that accompanied Henry’s vision. I am uncertain whether Henry drew it, but his commentary implies that he did. A descendant of Henry’s confirms Henry was artistic and claims he often illustrated sermons with drawings.

The *Visitor* did not include printed graphics in 1905, perhaps for doctrinal reasons or perhaps because of expense. That this appeared as a “supplement” rather than a published article might have been a practical or doctrinal compromise. But its printed existence is evidence of Brethren in Christ artistic impulses.

The drawing is quite good and has all the earmarks of Brethren in Christ thinking of that time. Notably, we see the oft-used phrase “the narrow way” in the drawing. Also interesting are the many automobiles found on the “broad way.” In 1905, automobiles were rare, certainly very rarely owned by church members. Henry’s association of autos with the path to destruction was probably an intentional choice.

However, the artwork is also interesting as an example of Brethren in Christ attitudes towards art itself. In 1905, the church was suspicious of any outward show of pride or ostentation. Artwork was often limited to penmanship and calligraphic decoration. Despite any denominational hesitations, this drawing is a full-blown pictorialization of Henry’s vision, and having it also available as a color print must certainly have raised some eyebrows.

Items like this *Visitor Supplement* capture moments in time. Embedded in them we can see personal ideologies and histories, cultural influences and trends, aesthetic attitudes and actions. From a single item, we can often discover things



about individual lives, their times and places. The 1905 *Visitor Supplement* represents two young married Brethren in Christ men—Henry T. Frey and Levi F. Sheetz—attempting to live out their faith, their entrepreneurial dreams, and their artistic desires in rural Lancaster County at the turn of the twentieth century.

*Dwight W. Thomas is a retired music professor from Messiah University and now spends much of his time researching Brethren in Christ history. He is the author of *Blest Be The Tie That Binds: Global Studies in Brethren in Christ Faith and Culture*, published in 2018 by the Brethren in Christ Historical Society.

On Writing (continued)

Such specificity would be difficult to find in a published church record because in large part those records were written by men who had struggles, concerns, and spiritual needs and desires of their own. Of course, not all published records of this time were written by men—women were often published in the *Visitor*, for example—and sometimes struggles, concerns, and needs and desires were shared across gender differences. Nevertheless, the kind of unpublished, personal document that I’m showing here certainly adds depth and nuance to a published record that is considerably male dominated.

The availability of records like Agnes Cober’s letter makes it possible to ask new questions, find new answers, and write differently about the history of Brethren in Christ people during the twentieth century.

On Writing a New Denominational History, Part 2

By Devin Manzullo-Thomas, archivist

In an earlier issue of this newsletter, I described the goals I'm seeking to achieve in writing a new history of the Brethren in Christ Church in North America. Tentatively titled *Open to the Spirit: The North American Brethren in Christ Church in the Twentieth Century, 1900-2000*, the book seeks to bring the story of the North American Brethren in Christ Church up to date, to synthesize new research with the many books and articles on Brethren in Christ history that have been written in the last fifty years, and to be readable and compelling to a wide audience.

How will I do that? What kind of sources am I drawing upon in my research and writing, and how do I plan to use them?

Perhaps the best way to answer those questions is to compare my sources to those of Dr. Carlton Wittlinger, whose magisterial *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* has been the standard denominational history since it was published in 1978, during the North American church's bicentennial anniversary.

If you peruse the endnotes of *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, you'll notice that Wittlinger relied primarily on published records as the sources for his historical writing. These records include:

- The *Evangelical Visitor*, the official newspaper of the Brethren in Christ Church in North America from 1887 to 2004;
- *The Minutes of the Annual (later Biennial) General Conferences*, the official decision-making body for the North American church;
- The minutes of various church districts and conferences, local decision-making bodies;
- Minutes and reports produced by denominational boards and committees; and
- Personal interviews with church leaders who lived through the periods of time that he interpreted.

Much less frequently did Wittlinger use what archivists call personal papers: materials produced by individuals, such as diaries, letters, photographs, and other similar items. These kinds of records were often not available to him, because when he was working on his book, the Brethren in Christ Archives at Messiah University were still in their infancy.

I am using the same denominational records that Wittlinger used and I am benefitting from the growth of the Archives over the last five decades. A wealth of individual papers and new institutional records have been deposited in the Archives since the 1970s, including the personal papers of ministers, bishops, administrators, educators, and laypeople. These materials document the lives of their creators,

giving us a richer portrait of what it was like to be, for example, a Brethren in Christ pastor in rural Kansas in the 1940s, or a Brethren in Christ bishop in the turbulent decades of the 1960s, or a Brethren in Christ missions administrator in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in the 1980s.

These kinds of sources also give us glimpses of matters beyond what their creators intended. Consider, for instance, the rich correspondence that bishops carried on with individual Brethren in Christ members during the middle decades of the twentieth century. These letters offer us something beyond this record: They tell about the struggles, the daily life, and the spiritual experiences of the average Brethren in Christ lay person who was writing to their bishop.

Allow me to illustrate this point with one example. In 1943, Agnes Cober—a teenager in the Markham District in Ontario, Canada—wrote to Henry Ginder, then a young bishop in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, who, at least in Agnes's mind, understood (as she puts it in her letter) “young people and their different problems.” Agnes was having spiritual problems, most of them centered on her “mixed up” experience of sanctification and the spiritual temptations she was having related to plain dress. Specifically, she reported that many of girls in the Markham Church were exchanging their black stockings for lighter ones—and Agnes was feeling torn between giving into peer pressure and maintaining what she understood to be the church's biblical teaching. “It seems so hard to stand up for your convictions and do what you ought to do,” Agnes wrote. “If it's really right to wear [plain dress] why is it we're so tested about [it]? Or is that just the devil trying to make us give up little by little?”

What does this letter tell us? If you'll forgive the pun, Agnes Cober's letter offers a colorful illustration of the struggle over plain dress that engulfed members of the Brethren in Christ Church in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It offers a rich, textured portrait of one church member's internal and external wrestling with conflicting messages—one from her peers, one from church elders.

It also offers insight into the regional variations in the practice of plain dress among Brethren in Christ. In Agnes's letter, black stockings are portrayed as essential to the plain dress standard at least in the Markham District, if not in all of Ontario. We would probably find different expectations if we read Agnes's letter alongside letters from the same period from Brethren in Christ young women in, say, Southern California or northern Ohio.

Finally, it's worth pointing out that this letter gives us insight into the experience of a Brethren in Christ woman: her struggles, her concerns, her spiritual needs and desires.

(continued on page 2)



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Images from the Past

From the photograph collection of the Brethren in Christ Historical Library & Archives

This innovative cardboard record player was recently donated to the Archives by Keith Ulery, who used it in the 1960s when he visited rural villages in Zambia during his service with Brethren in Christ Missions. “The people were amazed to hear a Bible reading and short message in Tonga coming from this small cardboard device,” Keith noted.

The “CardTalk” phonograph was developed by Gospel Recordings in the early 1960s, inspired by a toy cardboard record player made by a U.K. greeting card company which had a 5-inch record with the Lord’s prayer on one side and a children’s prayer on the other. A 24” x 8.5” sleeve of corrugated cardboard folds into a triangle that stands 8” high, with a short post glued to the base that holds a 78-rpm record. A steel needle is fixed to the edge of the cardboard “arm” which is placed on the record. The record is turned using a pencil or small stick placed in a second hole drilled near the edge of the record label. The cardboard triangle provides a surprisingly loud and relatively clear sound for voice recordings.

The website of Gospel Recordings, now Global Recordings Network, reports that over 100,000 units were produced in India alone, with tens of thousands supplied to Operation Mobilization which distributed them to remote areas worldwide.

With the decline of 78-rpm records, the CardTalk player was replaced by hand-crank and solar-powered MP3 players that continue to share Bible teaching and evangelistic audio in remote and off-the-grid areas.

