

History of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches

The Brethren Church began with a very small group of people who wanted to be Bible believing Christians who would follow the Scriptures in simple faith and obedience. The protestant reformation of the 1500-1600's inspired by Martin Luther, John Calvin and others started the ball rolling. The Bible once again was given its rightful place. Biblical doctrines and good theology were taught. But barren orthodoxy and cold indifference to dynamic Christian living left many with much to be desired. The church was not relevant to ordinary life and simple faith obedience to the moral precepts of the Bible. It tolerated evil. Some people wanted to go a step further.

Alexander Mack was one. Having studied carefully the commands of the New Testament together, Mack and his few followers (5 men and 3 women) began a new fellowship of believers in Schwarzenau, Germany. Their attitude of obedience to the Bible was demonstrated in a triune baptismal service in the Eider River in 1708. From that humble beginning the Brethren Church grew – not perfectly – not fantastically – but steadily and solidly. In 7 years several congregations were established in Germany. But by 1719, because of opposition, the majority of “The Brethren” moved westward to America under the leadership of Peter Becker, many living in the area of Germantown, Pa. From this humble beginning the Brethren Church started. Through many trials and a few divisions the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches has emerged to what it is today. A study of the Tunker Fraternity Church and the dates, names and places on the following list, and a reading of CE National's readable “What Is a GBC?” will help you get a birds-eye view of our history. For full details we suggest you read Dr. Homer A. Kent, Sr.'s book, *Conquering Frontiers*.

Names, Dates and Places to remember:

1708 - Eight people, under the leadership of Alexander Mack baptized in the Eider River by Triune immersion at Schwarzenau, Germany. They declared they were returning to the New Testament more fully than Martin Luther and the other Reformers.

1719 - The people of the Brethren Church came to America. Peter Becker was their leader. Most of them settled and lived near Germantown, Pa.

1723 - On Christmas Day the American group baptized some others and began the first official church in America. Becker was the pastor.

1728 - The Ephrata, Pa. break off movement was started by Conrad Biessel. He led a group into a type of cloister life, trying to get people to stay away from the world via hyper-separatism, non-marriage and austere living. The whole thing failed, but the cloister with buildings can still be seen in Ephrata, Pa.

1729 - A second group of Brethren sailed to America. Alexander Mack was their leader and he became the pastor of the group in Germantown.

1742 - The first Annual Conference of the church in America met.

1743 - Christopher Sower, a printer, prepared and produced the first Bible printed in America. It was printed in German. He also printed other helpful literature.

1836 - At an annual meeting, "The Brethren" unanimously adopted the name "Fraternity of German Baptist." By now the church had lost a lot of its original evangelistic fervor. Some still carried the churches aggressive spirit. Among them were George Wolfe, leader of the Far Western Brethren in Illinois, and Adam Paine who had a real burden for the Indians. During the early 1800's one of the great preachers of the Germantown church was Peter Keysor.

1851 - A new Brethren publication spoke the progressive ideas of the church. It was entitled "The Gospel Visitor" and was established by Henry Kurtz. It was followed by a weekly published by Henry Holsinger entitled Christian Family Companion. These two merged into The Primitive Christian in 1876.

1848 - A very conservative-traditional group broke away calling themselves the New Dunkard Church of God.

1871 - The mainline Brethren people began calling themselves the German Baptist Brethren.

1876 - The first Foreign Mission work was begun when the church sent missionaries to Denmark and in 1800 the Domestic and Foreign Mission Board was organized.

1878 - The church started Ashland College in Ashland, Ohio.

1881-1883 - The progressive ideas championed by Henry Holsinger (and others) in his publications called for more progressive ideas and actions in the church. This brewed a crisis. After much discussion and no little division, the church divided into three fellowships. The Progressive Brethren or the Brethren Church as it became named, wanted more emphasis on education, Sunday School, missions and congregational government – the right of each congregation to make their own decisions instead of hierarchical control from national leaders. They were called progressive because they did not believe you had to wear plain clothes or not have paid pastors. The other two groups were the Old German Baptist or Old Orders and the German Baptists who became the Church of the Brethren in 1908.

1900 - The Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church was formed by an independent group of concerned Brethren, and in 1909 Charles Yoder went to Argentina as the first missionary of the Society.

1921 - Missionary work was begun in French Equatorial Africa, now Central African Republic, where our largest and most thriving missionary work has been done. James Gribble and his wife, who was a doctor, became the early leaders of the work.

1930 - The church leaders began the Brethren Biblical Seminary Association, a new school thrust to train men for the ministry. The Seminary on Ashland College Campus began with 4 students and 4 faculty members. It expanded to 24 students by 1936.

1939 - The Brethren Church split into two groups because of strong theological differences and operational opinions, which centered around Ashland College. Dr. Alva J. McClain, dean of the Seminary and Louis S. Bauman, pastor of the church in Long Beach, Calif. with many others, became leaders in the Grace Group. Grace Theological Seminary was started in Ellet, Ohio and later moved to Winona Lake, Indiana. Dr. Alva J. McClain was named president and Dr. Herman A. Hoyt, professor. Out of this controversy the two groups, the Ashland Brethren and the Grace Brethren came into existence. The Grace Group is now known as the

Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.

1940 - The Brethren Missionary Herald Magazine started.

1948 - Grace College began as a part of Grace Seminary. Now the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches in the United States has grown to about 260 churches with a total membership of about 41,000. Statistics show that there are more baptized believers in the Grace Brethren Church on foreign soil than in the States.

1996 - Yet another split occurred with the beginning of the Conservative Grace Brethren International group.

The headquarters of most of the national boards and organizations are at Winona Lake, Ind. But each church is still autonomous with congregational government. The national conference meets annually each summer in late July or early August – usually in Winona Lake. A Grace Brethren Annual is published each year by the Missionary Herald Co. giving full details of the conference, the national boards, organizations, district conferences, lists of churches, ministers and missionaries.