

An interior view of Long's Barn, where William Otterbein and Martin Boehm met in 1767, and launched the movement that became the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. *(Photo courtesy of the photographer, Mark Van Scyoc. To view this and more of his work, see www.redbubble.com/people/markvanscyoc/art/4439764-3-isaac-longs-barn)*

The “Odd Couple:” William Otterbein and Martin Boehm at Long’s Barn

Joseph F. DiPaolo (2010)

Editor’s note: the following article was originally an address delivered by the editor on May 31, 2009, at the dedication of Long’s Barn as a United Methodist Heritage Landmark (see page 58). It has been edited for publication.

In 1767, just a few feet from where we are standing today, an event took place which no one present at the time could have imagined would still be remembered so many years later. Several hundred people had gathered in and around this very barn for a revival meeting, among them two charismatic preachers, Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm. When these two very different men clasped hands, they set into motion a movement which has helped shape the life and ethos of United Methodism to this very day.

But who were these two men? How did they come to be here on that day more than 240 years ago? And how was it that two individuals of such widely different backgrounds, temperaments and perspectives – so much so that I call them the “odd couple” – could have embraced, and found common cause in Christ?

GERMAN MIGRATION TO AMERICA

To begin to answer that question, we need to back up a bit and trace the history of German migration to the colonies, especially Pennsylvania, beginning in the 1680s. William Penn’s experiment in religious freedom became a magnet for religious groups seeking liberty to worship and to begin a new life in the New World. Penn in fact visited persecuted groups in Europe, and invited them to immigrate to his colony. In 1683, he set aside an area near the provincial capitol for a

German settlement, which is today's Germantown section of Philadelphia. The first of many shiploads of German immigrants arrived on British ship *Concord*, which docked in Philadelphia on October 6, 1683.¹ Among the groups who came here seeking liberty and the opportunity to organize around their own unique biblical visions were Mennonites (including the Amish), Schwenkfelders, Moravians and Dunkers.

However, other German groups came seeking not so much religious liberty, as economic opportunity. For more than a century after the end of the 30 Years' War in 1648, the lands of Germany remained in a state of economic ruin and intermittent warfare, as other European powers struggled for ascendancy over the region. Many of the German emigrants, therefore, were from the state or established churches, the Lutheran or Reformed, who were not escaping persecution as much as privation. Our two protagonists came from those two very different backgrounds, Otterbein from the Reformed Church – an established church – and Boehm from the Mennonites – a persecuted sect.

By 1770, there were some 300,000 residents in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The German population numbered about 100,000, or one third, and new German immigrants continued to settle here after the American Revolution, including many former Hessian troops who chose to settle among the people they once fought. These German-speaking residents established Pennsylvania's unique Pennsylvania Dutch culture (a corruption of *Deutch* or German), and the Pennsylvania Legislature at one point actually debated a proposal to make the state officially bi-lingual, by declaring both English and German official languages.

WILLIAM OTTERBEIN (1726-1813)

Philip William Otterbein (who went by his middle name) had a personal story reminiscent of that of John Wesley. William was born in Dillenberg, Nassau, Germany into the family of a German Reformed pastor, whose six sons all went into the ministry; when he was 16 years old, William's father died. Like Wesley, his mother Henrietta was a powerful spiritual and intellectual influence upon his life, which Otterbein recalled with gratitude in later years. He was educated at

¹Raymond W. Albright, *A History of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg: The Evangelical Press, 1945), 4.

Herbron Academy, a school characterized by a moderate Calvinism, guided by the Heidelberg Catechism, and impacted powerfully by Pietism. William was ordained in 1749.

Otterbein's journey to America was inspired by Rev. Michael Schlatter (1716-1790), a pioneer organizer of the German Reformed movement in America. Rev. Schlatter (a direct ancestor of our District Superintendent, Jim Todd) organized the first American synod (or Coetus) in Philadelphia in 1747, with just four ordained ministers. Schlatter identified about 30,000 people of the Reformed faith who were in need of leadership, and established parishes and schools to minister to their needs, but ordained clergy were in short supply.

Schlatter returned to Europe in 1751 and persuaded six young German Reformed ministers to come to America, among them one Philip William Otterbein. The six young clerics arrived in New York on July 28, 1752, and were greeted by Henry Muhlenburg, the great Lutheran leader and organizer, who sent them off with the words of Jesus from Matthew 10:16, "*Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*" When the arrival of the six ministers became known, they were deluged with pastoral calls from clergy-starved churches. Otterbein accepted the pastorate of a congregation in Lancaster, which is the ancestor of today's Old First Reformed United Church of Christ, serving there from 1752 to 1758.

Again, like Wesley, William had a heart-warming experience of grace after he had been ordained and in active ministry for years. One Sunday in 1754, he preached a sermon on God's grace before his Lancaster congregation. Afterward a parishioner questioned him on the meaning of grace, to which Otterbein replied, "*Advice is scarce with me today.*" He retired to a quiet room for a time of fervent prayer, which resulted in an experience of assurance that changed his ministry. He put aside his silk robe, ceased reading full manuscript sermons, and his preaching became more confident and convincing. He also became something of an itinerant, traveling to visit people in remote areas who were bereft of pastoral care. Otterbein's only surviving sermon, preached in 1760 in Germantown and printed in 1763 (it was only rediscovered in 1963!) outlines an evangelical understanding of the gospel, demanding personal response:

Are you converted? Has Jesus delivered you from sin? Are you convinced on the basis of living experience of the work of grace in you? What then is a broken

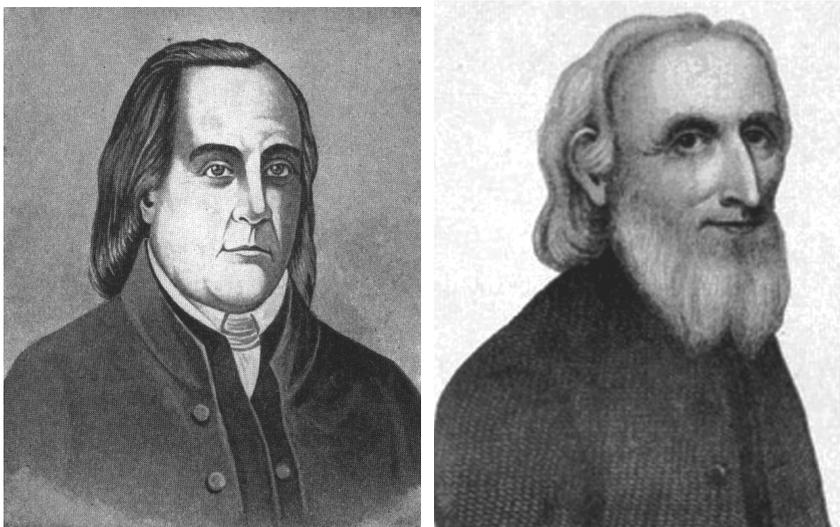
*heart? What does it mean to die with Jesus and how does one do it?... If you know nothing about this, you are not converted, as surely as God lives. There is cost involved before one can come to peace with God. The new birth and its process does not happen without much pain... Consequently, if these things are yet strange to you, then your Christianity is merely appearance.*²

Otterbein's spiritual affinity to the Methodists can be seen in his efforts to tighten up church discipline and prod his people toward deeper discipleship. In 1757, he drew up rules for his Lancaster parish; among other things they required parishioners to be interviewed by the pastor before being admitted to the Lord's Supper. While serving in Frederick, Maryland in 1760, the consistory was so offended by his enthusiasm and zeal that they locked him out of the church and shouted derisive names at him, including "Methodist"! Again, like Wesley, Otterbein took the abuse in stride, and preached in the adjoining cemetery until the leaders relented and let him back inside.

After the English-speaking Methodists began organizing in the 1760s, Otterbein became a fast friend of the movement, and especially of Francis Asbury. Asbury makes a number of references in his journal to his German friend, including the following from June 4, 1786: "I called on Mr. Otterbein: we had some free conversation on the necessity of forming a church among the Dutch, holding conferences, the order of its government, &c." In 1784, Otterbein was invited to attend the Christmas Conference which founded the Methodist Episcopal Church, and was among those who laid hands on Asbury during his ordination. Otterbein also became more "Methodistic" theologically, moving away from the Calvinism of his youth. In 1788, he was essentially taken up on charges by a fellow Reformed minister named Nicholas Pomp, who wrote Reformed Church authorities in Holland that Otterbein had fallen into error regarding the doctrine of predestination, and needed to be disciplined. In response, Otterbein wrote off to Holland, "to tell the truth, I cannot side with Calvin in this case. I believe God is love and that he desires the welfare of all his creatures... I believe in election, but cannot persuade myself that God has absolutely and without condition predestined some men to perdition."³

²Arthur C. Core, *Philip William Otterbein: Pastor, Ecumenist* (Dayton: The Board of Publication of the EUB Church, 1968), 88.

³Core, 100.



Left: William Otterbein; right: Martin Boehm

MARTIN BOEHM (1725-1812)

In contrast to the tall, well-educated Otterbein, Martin Boehm was a short, stocky Lancaster farmer – and a Mennonite. Tracing their origin to the work and thought of Dutch Reformation leader Menno Simons (1492-1559), and called “Anabaptists” (primarily by opponents), Mennonites were distinguished by their insistence on adult or believers’ baptism, pacifism, and a stance of separatism, especially toward established churches they regarded as corrupt and hopelessly compromised. Mennonites had been cruelly persecuted in Europe, and many who came to the new world settled in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties; a 1693 split among the Mennonites led by Jacob Amman (c. 1644 before 1730), gave rise to the Amish.

Among these early immigrants was one Jacob Boehm, a Swiss-German Mennonite who came to America in 1715, and settled in Pequea area of Lancaster County. He married a woman named Barbara Kendig, who in 1725 bore a son the couple named Martin.

Martin became a successful farmer, who eventually accumulated some 400 acres in the Pequea area. He was also chosen by lot to be a minister among the Mennonites in 1758, but he was dismayed by the choice, deeply convinced of his inadequacy and unworthiness for the

role. Concluding that he was lost, Martin underwent a spiritual crisis. One day while out in his fields plowing ground, he fell to his knees and cried out “*Lord, save! I am lost!*” The thought suddenly came to his mind, “I am come to seek and save that which is lost.” He later recalled, “*In a moment a stream of joy was poured over me.*”

Infused with new spiritual energy, Martin now began preaching with power and effectiveness, and often shared his story of redemption. In 1761, he became Bishop of his congregation, and increasingly found himself invited to preach at other Mennonite congregations. Soon the “Boehm Revival” began in earnest, as Martin began traveling and preaching widely, throughout Pennsylvania, and into Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia. In the late 1770s, Mennonite leaders, fearing a split in their movement, called Boehm before a conference to address a list of charges, among them that he took part in “*forming a union and associating with men (professors) which allow themselves to walk on the broad way, practicing warfare and the swearing of oaths.*”⁴ – no doubt a reference to his cooperative work with Otterbein and other non-Mennonite ministers. Though he defended himself, Boehm was dis-fellowshipped, but he continued his ministry.

In addition to his “Methodistic” willingness to cross denominational lines, Boehm also formed other ties to the early Methodists. A lover of Wesley’s sermons, Boehm opened his home to Methodist preachers, and hosted a class meeting in his home from 1775 onward. He also deeded a portion of his land for a Methodist chapel, which was built in 1791, and is today’s historic Boehm’s Chapel. Asbury makes many references in his journal to Martin, and in 1812 preached the latter’s funeral at Boehm’s Chapel. Yet another tie: the youngest son of Martin and his wife Eve, Henry Boehm, became an ordained preacher with the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Bishop Asbury’s longest traveling companion.

INCIDENT AT LONG’S BARN

On a Pentecost Sunday, probably in 1767, a revival (or “Great”) meeting was held in this very barn, then belonging to Isaac Long. Otterbein was there, and heard Boehm preach. Though they were from widely different backgrounds, Otterbein became so excited by the

⁴J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 43-44.



Long's Barn, Lancaster County – still a working barn.

testimony of Boehm, that he rushed forward, embraced him, and exclaimed *wir sind bruder!* (“We are brothers!”). An association then began which would lead ultimately to the formation of Church of the United Brethren in Christ, one of the predecessor bodies of the United Methodist Church.

Perhaps they were not so odd a couple after all. For it seems always to be God’s way to bring together unlikely yokefellows – say, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28) – and unite their hearts and lives in Christ. William Otterbein and Martin Boehm found that their common experience of redeeming grace and assurance in Jesus Christ transcended barriers of birthplace, education – even denomination. That ecumenical spirit became part of the “DNA” of the United Methodist movement and, along with their passionate sense of mission to share their experience of grace with others, remains both their legacy and their challenge to their descendants in the faith of our own day.