This booklet is dedicated to the memory of those who have served our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the life and ministry of Grace Mennonite Brethren in Christ / Grace Bible Fellowship Church. Their faithful and persistent example encourages us who follow after them. Their work, laid on the foundation of Jesus Christ, has stood firm and enabled those of us who continue on to do the work of God.

Richard E. Taylor
2007



First tent meetings in Chester Pennsylvania

The Big Picture

Grace Bible Fellowship Church is a leaf on a twig attached to a branch of the Christian Church called Anabaptism. Anabaptists were a people characterized by radical discipleship, literal interpretation of the Bible and believer's baptism. During and following the Reformation, they were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants who saw them as heretics. Their commitment to non-resistance as a form of their radical discipleship left them defenseless. They became pilgrims and strangers who were driven from their lands again and again. As time passed, they were scattered throughout Europe.

In Germany, some of the Mennonites, as they were known, heard a promise of a peaceful life in land owned by William Penn. They set out for the new land, known as Pennsylvania, where they founded a community called Germantown near Philadelphia. They put down their roots and began to grow and spread through areas today contained in Bucks and Montgomery counties.

During the 1850's, God was stirring in America. The country was on the verge of division. People lived with uncertainty and turmoil. Debates about abolition and the rights of states raged. Out of this boiling cauldron came a sense of spiritual need. Many were turning to God to find some stability. This revival of spiritual need and corresponding Gospel preaching came to the Mennonite communities of the Hosensack Valley, just south of Allentown.

The revival brought clashing values and conflict to Mennonite congregations. Some people were drawn to prayer for the unsaved of their communities. Others were unsure about how prayer meetings would impact on the life of the church. The desire to spread the word of God clashed with the desire to protect the community from the influence of the world. Some wanted to go to the world with the Gospel. Some wanted to keep the world from destroying the church. New people and new ways would destroy the traditions which gave stability and security to their community. Yet, the Gospel was to be preached.



William Gehman

In 1858, this clash came to a head. Several men led by William Gehman withdrew from their Mennonite Church and banded together to support, encourage and pray for each other as they preached the Gospel. They called themselves the Evangelical Mennonite Association. After a series of mergers, they became the

Mennonite Brethren in Christ in 1883.

During the 1940's, theological issues regarding the nature and permanence of salvation drove a wedge between the Pennsylvania Conference and the rest of the church. In the end, the Pennsylvania Conference withdrew. Several years later, a new name was chosen and the Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Mennonites / Mennonite Brethren in Christ became known as the Bible Fellowship Church.

Grace Bible Fellowship Church has its roots in this movement.



Beginnings

Grace Bible Fellowship Church began in the summer of 1926. The exact dates are difficult to determine. The Gospel Heralds, the church planters and future preachers of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ (MBC), came to Chester and began the work of preaching and teaching.

What brought them to Chester was the interest and desire of a young, recently married, couple named Maurice and Blanche Hartzell who saw their city as a mission field. They had become part of the MBC and wanted to be used by the Lord.

Maurice Hartzell was raised in Montgomery County by his parents, George and Sarah. He moved to Philadelphia and found employment there at the Lanston Monotype Company at 24th and Locust Streets. There he learned to build monotype typesetting mold used in casting lead type for book printing. In June 1918, he was living at 1103 Diamond Street. January 1920, found him boarding with Julia May at 2148 18th Street and continuing to work for the Lanston Company. Between these times, Maurice had been in the United States Army, serving during the latter months of World War One as a cook for a unit stationed in Georgia. Maurice was baptized in Philadelphia by Webster R. Stengele, one of the Gospel Heralds who served in the MBC.

Blanche Gehman was the daughter of David and Lizzie Gehman of Hatfield, Pennsylvania. David was a shoemaker there. In 1920, she had a room with Harry and Matilda Hartman on Union Street in Hatfield. She worked as a winder at a lace mill. Her sister, Laura, was married to an MBC preacher named Harvey Kratz. Under his ministry, Blanche was baptized and admitted to membership in the MBC at Macungie.

Maurice and Blanche met at a camp meeting in Montgomery County near Montgomeryville while Maurice was living in Sellersville. It may be during this time that Maurice came to saving relationship with Jesus Christ. After courtship, they were married on June 28, 1923, in Quakertown by an MBC preacher named W. F. Heffner. They settled in Philadelphia where they began to attend the Emmanuel MBC in West Philadelphia. Later, they found a home in Chester at 814 West 11th Street. Maurice may have commuted to his job in Philadelphia for a while but eventually he found work in Chester with the *Chester Times*.


W. G. Gehman

It probably happened like this: on a Sunday when the head of the Gospel Heralds, W. G. Gehman, was in town, Maurice and Blanche probably asked for a moment of his

time to speak of something important. They told him about Chester and the opportunities there to begin a work. W. G. probably listened and said he would think about it and get back to them. At a later time, he came to see what Chester was about. He probably visited them at their home, surveyed the city, and decided that Chester presented an opportunity.


Webster Stengele and family

The next step in the process would require the assigning of Gospel Heralds to the work and the beginning of the meetings. Precise details are vague. Webster Stengele and his wife, Ferol, began tent meetings on a vacant lot near the intersection of 11th and Edgmont Streets. These meetings were held near the end of the summer of 1926, probably in August.



Tent at 11th and Edgmont

Tent Meetings were the backbone of the Gospel Herald methodology. A large meeting tent was set up. A smaller tent was erected nearby for living accommodations for the workers. Nightly meetings with lively music and preaching brought people to the lighted meeting tent. The gospel was presented and invitations for public response were given with each meeting. People were genuinely converted and began a life of walking with Christ because of these meetings.

Apparently, the meetings in Chester were successful since Gospel Heralds were assigned to come to Chester and follow up on the tent meetings.

Eugene George, single and 26 years old, who had been serving with the Gospel Heralds in other cities, was appointed as the leader. He had been serving in the mission at Lebanon when he was sent to Chester. He was joined by Arthur M. Sprock. A.M. was fruit of the mission in Jersey City. He was 18 years old as the work in Chester began. To fill out the team was Chester Reed who had come from the ministry in Shamokin. He was 19 when he came to serve in Chester. They were later joined by Wilbur W. Hartman.


1104 West 7th Street

When the Heralds arrived, they rented a house at 1104 West Seventh Street near the intersection with Lloyd Street. Within a month or two, a facility was located at 721 West Seventh Street which the Heralds purchased for their use. The denominational yearbook reported, “We purchased a very suitable property in Chester, Pa., which will shortly be used as a mission, which we trust, will prove a spiritual birthplace of many souls.”



721 West Seventh Street

When a facility was secured, either rented or purchased, it became the meeting hall for gospel preaching and living quarters for the Gospel Heralds. By day they would walk the streets selling the Gospel Herald which was part tract and part magazine. Through the sale of the Herald, they met some of their financial needs and made contacts in the community. The Gospel Heralds served with great sacrifice. By night, they preached, sang and invited people to put their faith and trust in the living Savior who alone could deliver them. By day, they went door to door to meet people where they lived.

The Heralds moved into 721 West Seventh Street. They began meeting people as they went door to door selling their tract / magazine. Across the street, neighborhood boys played football and baseball. They loved it when the Gospel Heralds came to join them in their games.

And so, Grace Bible Fellowship Church had its beginning.



First Fruits

The riverside with its docks made Chester a place where industry could flourish. The demands of World War I brought new businesses and more factories. The 1920s brought even greater employment opportunities; employment opportunities brought people.

Chester was becoming a busy place. Its open air market near 3rd Street was a place to gather and to shop. Theaters were showing the latest movies. Of the 37 people baptized through the ministry of Grace Church between 1927-1930, only 12 of them were born in Pennsylvania. It is easy to see why Maurice and Blanche Hartzell saw opportunities for the gospel in the busy streets and markets.



Heralds at 721 W. 7th St.
George, Reed, Hartman, Sprock

The Gospel Heralds settled into the work of spreading the gospel on the busy streets of Chester. They continued to set up their tents and hold nightly meetings. In 1927, meetings were conducted on a vacant lot at 8th and Lloyd, about four blocks from the bungalow where they had established their headquarters. Street meetings were held at 6th and Market streets on Saturday where people who had gone to shop might stop to hear a song and listen to the word as it was preached.

On May 27, 1927, the first Sunday School was held. Sixteen scholars were in attendance. An offering was received that amounted to $1.29. The ministry in Chester was on its way and beginning to put down roots.



Tent Meeting

The focus of the ministry was people. The leader of the ministry, Eugene George, grew up near the town of Bowmansville, Monroe County, Pennsylvania. He believed he had received a call to preach. He went to W. G. Gehman and presented himself. W. G. turned none away - a call to preach is a call to preach. Whether the call was legitimate would be determined on the job. The desire of the Gospel Herald was to be recognized as a preacher and ordained. Not all were so recognized. Brother

George labored in but never was ordained by the Mennonite Brethren in Christ.



E. George and children, waiting

E. George had a special way with children. He was like a pied piper. Children loved and followed him. His pockets were full of candy. His mind was full of fun. His car, an oversized Pierce Arrow, became a magic carpet ride to a day's fun. He preached and shared his faith in Chester. He called his listeners to believe and trust in Jesus. The Holy Spirit reached into hearts and people were born again.

Robert Charles (RC) Reichenbach was one of those who came to Christ in those early days. He writes of Brother George:

> People loved E. George because he loved them and showed it. He loved us kids to such an extent that before I started working at the A & P, I would come home from school and oft times head for the Mission. My mother at one time told me that she was going to send my bed down there. I think we would have done about anything for the brethren. Wherever E. George went, he took kids with him. He would take us to camp meeting, sleep in the straw with us and we loved those times.



Robert C. Reichenbach

On October 2, 1927, the first of several baptisms was held. Most of these early baptisms were held in the Delaware River at Flower Street which provided a beachfront and shallow water to perform the baptisms. Seven people publicly professed their faith in Jesus Christ on that day and were first fruits of the harvest to follow in Chester. Among them were George and Mina Jewell who became part of the church and continued to faithfully serve for years to come.

The spring of 1928 brought more evangelistic fruit and entire families to the church. The first of two significant baptisms was held on April 29. RC Reichenbach, who was baptized that day, remembers it well. He recalls:

> My mother, father and I were baptized in the Delaware River, where the

Chester-Bridgeport River ferry existed for many years. It was a cold day. There had been snow flurries that night before the baptism. I remember that my mother forgot dry trousers for me and Bro. Lindermuth had no dry socks. Bro. George wanted to wrap me in his big coat and bring me home but I objected to that. Bro. Lindermuth drove home for sox and took my mother along to get me trousers. Also, my mother, who had a heart condition was told by her doctor that baptism was a no no but she did not listen to him. She had a heart attack in the water. The brethren kept her in the water for a brief while and she recovered. That night we went to the Lindermuth's home along with the ministerial brethren.



Baptism of E. R. Lindermuth - April 29, 1928

This baptism was notable for three families who participated. Charles, Laura and RC Reichenbach were one of the families who went in the water. (Their son, Wilmer, would later be baptized and become part of the church in Chester.) Clarence Edward (CE) and Donald Kirkwood were among those who entered the river to be baptized. Elmer and Ethel Lindermuth with their daughters, Helen and Mildred, joined the others in professing their faith.

This group was singularly blessed. Three (RC, CE and Donald) became preachers in the MBC. Helen and Mildred both married preachers who began their ministries in the Gospel Heralds. Five ministering families were formed from those who were baptized. And, the rest of their families who continued in Grace Church were for many years a vital part of the ministry.

The second baptism of 1928 was held on July 22 at the same spot along the Delaware River. Sixteen people were baptized. Among them were the three Harris brothers, Raymond, Norman, and John. Norman Harris and his wife, Eleanor, returned to the church and continued in the church as their health permitted. Norman celebrated his 90th birthday in the same year that Grace Church celebrated its 80th anniversary. Also baptized was Mary Kirkwood, the widowed mother of CE and Donald, who became a pillar of the church. Her half sister, Catherine Lyons, was baptized as well on that day. She continued to serve in the church until she found employment in Washington DC.

The foundations of the church had been laid. Some of the pillars were in place. The ministry of Grace Church was coming together.

People Notes

The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church had roots in German culture. Their ancestors had been German immigrants. It is no surprise that many of the expansion missions found a ready response among people comfortable with German ways and thinking. The names of those who gathered in Chester show that influence. Hartzell, Lindermuth, Reichenbach, and Griest are all Germanic names. Mrs. Reichenbach and Mrs. Harlan were confidants because they could converse in German. Mrs. Harlan had come from Germany in 1910 with German as her native tongue.



Maurice and Blanche Hartzell with son, Richard

Maurice and Blanche Hartzell have already been introduced as critical people in the decisions which led to beginning the ministry of Grace Church in Chester. Their support and leadership were significant for many years. Maurice was the first delegate to the Annual Conference when the church was recognized as a member. Maurice began a machine shop in his garage which eventually became Hartzell Machine Works. The specialty of the business was the manufacture of linotype for printing. When the garage could no longer contain the business, a shop was purchased two doors away from the church on 7th Street. Eventually, the business moved to Twin Oaks. Maurice and Blanche were blessed with two children, G. Richard (Dick) and Lorraine. Lorraine married Robert Burton who served as a pastor in the Christian Missionary Alliance. Dick married Ida Schaefer of the Wissinoming MBC and settled into life in Delaware County. Dick served for many years as an elder of Grace Church. Rich, the son of Dick and Ida, has continued the influence of the Hartzell family, through ministry and leadership in the church. Nancy McIntyre, the daughter of Dick and Ida, has likewise served as a teacher and supporter of the ministry.

One of the first families to respond to the gospel preaching in Chester was that of Elmer R. Lindermuth. Elmer was born and raised in Auburn, Pennsylvania, located in Schuylkill County. He, like others, had come looking for work in Chester. He was the son of Alfred and Sarah Lindermuth. In 1910, still living in Auburn, he



Elmer R. Lindermuth

was employed as a foreman in a shirt factory. He married Ethel E. Hohl, daughter of Reuben and Carrie Hohl, from Berks County. In 1920, The Lindermuths were living with the Hohl's in Marcus Hook. Elmer was by now a foreman at the Congoleum plant down next to the river. Later they moved to their own home at 35 West 10thStreet. During a crisis in his health, Elmer met with Brother George who introduced him to the provisions of Christ. By 1930, he had become manager of the A & P grocery store on 10th Street in Chester. Elmer and Ethel were parents of two daughters, Helen and Mildred. Both daughters married preachers and served with their husbands. Helen was married to T. E. Turnbull who began as a Gospel Herald in Chester, served for a time in the MBC and finished his ministry with the Evangelical Congregational Church. Mildred was married to William Keeley, another of the Chester boys who entered the ministry. Bill began with the Gospel Heralds and spent 25 years serving with the Primitive Methodists. He returned to serve as an elder and teacher. He has given valuable leadership to Grace Church. The Lindermuths were baptized together as a family and became a backbone family for Grace Church. The Lindermuths were one of the families that stepped up to give financial support by placing a mortgage on their home to provide for renovations for the church. For many years, the Lindermuths were faithful members of the congregation. Elmer was the treasurer of Grace Church.



Mr. and Mrs. E. R. Lindermuth and daughters, Helen and Mildred



The Lindermuths

An additional work of God in the Lindermuth family went on in Elmer's sister Lily who was married to Joseph Somers. Their son, also named Joseph, entered the Gospel Heralds after a time at the Girard School for Boys in Philadelphia.

The Reichenbachs came to Chester from the Lehigh Valley where the MBC had its beginning. They apparently had no ties to the church from there. Charles was a covemaker by training and came to work in the locomotive works. He was married to Laura. Together they had three children, Wilmer, Harold and Robert. Harold died within a few months of



Charles and Laura Reichenbach

his birth from meningitis. They settled into a home at 907 West 9th Street. The Reichenbachs were among those baptized in 1928. They continued to be part of the work of the Lord in Chester. Their son, Robert (R. C.) entered the Gospel Heralds and spent his life as a minister in the MBC / BFC. Now, over 90 years old, R. C. still preaches when he is called upon. Son Wilmer, was baptized at a later date. He married Anna and was for many years a faithful attender. Later in life, he became blind as a result of diabetes. After the death of his wife, Charles sadly slipped away from the church and was ultimately removed from membership.



C. E. Kirkwood

The Kirkwood family had its roots in Maryland. Henry and Mary Kirkwood had come up from Maryland joining many others who were seeking employment in the expanding industrial complex in Chester. Tragically, Henry was killed leaving Mary to care for her 3 sons. Mary had already known the heartbreak of death. She was the daughter of Oscar and Catherine Taylor but her father had died at an early age. Catherine married Emmanuel Lyons after the death of Oscar. In 1930, Emmanuel and Catherine presided over a full household that included Mary and her three sons and their daughter, Sarah Catherine. They lived just a few doors from the church at713 West 7th Street. Mary and her half sister were baptized with the others in 1928 and for many years served in the church. In later years, S. Catherine, who never married, moved to Washington to take work there. In 1930, Mary was a cook working for Bell Telephone. Two of her sons entered the ministry. Clarence Edward (C. E.) entered the Gospel Heralds and later the ministry of the MBC / BFC. He later served as the District Superintendent and director of the Home Mission Board. Donald, after serving as a medic during World War II, went to seminary and became a minister in the MBC / BFC. Donald was a significant leader in the development of the new doctrinal statements of the church during the 1960's.



Willard and Donald Kirkwood

Going farther

The church had a home in its meeting place at 721 West Seventh Street. But the ministry continued to be one of going to the people. They were not content to set up shop in their building and wait for people to arrive. They went back to the streets and continued to preach the gospel where a crowd could be gathered or a meeting tent erected.



In the summer of 1927, tent meetings were held at 8th and Lloyd streets, about 4 blocks from the church. The open air music and preaching would draw listeners. They continued to do what had been effective in bringing the Gospel to the people. The summer of 1928 saw more meetings at the same place.



The Sunday School was thriving. The school began with 17 scholars in 1927 but by 1930, over 100 students were attending with 10 teachers and 7 officers.

God was at work through the efforts of the Gospel Heralds and the people of the church. The church needed more room. The building which housed the church was remodeled to accommodate the growing congregation. The Brosius brothers of the Sunbury MBC were hired for the work. They raised the roof and made it a new building. Windows were brought from the Bethlehem MBC to add decoration and light. The report of the 1930 denominational yearbook said, "The Chester, Pa., property was extensively remodeled. A large addition for living quarters was built and a splendid balcony, so that now we can seat about 300



A New Look for the Old Building

people." They were now blessed with a place big enough to hold all that would come. They had even provided housing for the ministers in the addition added to the back of the church building.



Not satisfied with the growing work in Chester, the Gospel Heralds began to expand by holding meetings in Trainer.

The work in Trainer started in the same way as the work in Chester. Tent meetings were held on a lot off 4th Street in 1931. When it was apparent that people were being drawn to the Lord, a building was rented and meetings were held there for five months. Soon, a Sunday School was underway. Sunday School was held in Chester in the morning followed by Sunday School in Trainer in the afternoon.

The workers continued their aggressive outreach. In 1932, they were holding meetings in both Chester and Trainer and extended their outreach through meetings in Upland and even into Wilmington. The report to the Annual Conference was filled with encouragement.

> The meetings are held in a church building the extension of which forms a sort of a parsonage in the rear. The property is owned by the Society. The meeting room seats about 300 people. It is a fine place for worship and the living quarters are cheery. Quite a nice class of people is being gathered together, who realize more and more the meaning of full salvation. Meetings were held nightly for five months in a hall in Trainer with very good attendance and a number of souls saved. Tent meetings were held in Upland, Pa., near Chester, Pa., with quite a number of souls saved. For a short while the Gospel was broadcast through the courtesy of WILM. People of Trainer and families from Upland come regularly to the meeting in Chester. The Sunday School is flourishing and has an enrollment of 132. Thirty-two followed the Lord in baptism. The prayer meetings are well attended and old and young take part in public prayer and testimony.



Ernest W. Bean

To the ministry in Wilmington was assigned Ernest W. Bean, another of the faithful Gospel Workers. The work in Wilmington showed great promise for a period of 3 or 4 years but finally faded. Glowing reports were given of the efforts in Wilmington in 1932:

These meetings are held on the second floor, which we rent with adjoining rooms for living quarters. Last January a Sunday School was organized with an enrollment of 18, which has since increased to 48. Tent meetings were held for nearly two months. The attendance throughout was very good and quite a number sought and found the Lord. In this comparatively new mission there is a gathering together of a people who love and serve the Lord and attend the meetings regularly. Nineteen open air meetings were held during the summer months. About 8500 homes were reached with Gospel literature during the year.



Baptism at Chester Creek near Brookhaven - May, 1932

The Wilmington congregation met in several locations as it developed. In 1931-33, the mission met at 1522 West Fourth Street. In 1934, the mission was moved to 401 Howard Street. What started as a promising mission faded away and was abandoned in 1938.



The ministry in Trainer flourished for a couple of years. In May,1932, a baptism was held for 17 people, many of whom were reached through the efforts there. While no record exists to tell who were baptized there, several photographs recorded the event which was held in the Ridley Creek near Brookhaven.

The ministry in Trainer was closely linked to the developing church in Chester. Several families were reached and added. A decision was made to fold the mission in Trainer into the Chester work. Those who were reached in Trainer became part of the ministry in Chester.

In 1933, the report to the denomination spoke of continued outreach and continued growth.

There is a faithful class of people worshipping here who have their heart on things eternal. A series of 22 cottage prayer meetings was held during the winter, quite a number of them in Trainer, Pa., in which many unsaved people heard the Gospel. Revival meetings were held in the early Spring in which a number were saved and healed. A hall was rented in Trainer where special meetings were held during June. A number of open air meetings were held and tracts given out.



Rudy H. Gehman

A children's service was held every Saturday afternoon during the summer months. Memory work, object lessons, Bible stories and learning new choruses was the order of these meetings. The Sunday School kept up the attendance during the summer months, officers and teachers standing by nobly and getting new people in attendance.



Pastor Rudy Gehman and Sunday School Teachers ca, 1934

1933 saw a change of leadership. Rudy Gehman replaced E. George who moved on to Wilmington to give attention to the faltering work there. Rudy was joined by his wife, Dora, and the aggressive outreach to the community continued.

Grace Church was taking root and becoming a lighthouse for the city of Chester.

People Notes

Because records are missing from some of this period, the actual dates of baptism and receiving into membership are missing. It is known that a number of families who made an impact in the life of Grace came to be part of the fellowship during this time.

The family of Harold and Elsie Griest lived at 932 West 9th Street. For a time, Harold worked as a laborer at the steelworks. Later, he worked as an electrician. Ultimately, he lost his life in an electrical accident.

The roots of the Griest family were in Nottingham, Chester County, Pennsylvania. The Griests were craftsman who worked in the trade of carriage building. Henry and Georgiana Griest, parents of Harold, lived with their children in Chester. Henry was a carpenter.

Elsie Griest was the daughter of John and Lavinia Merritt who lived in Chincoteague, Virginia. John made a living as an oyster man.

An unusual part of the story of the Griest family is that they all came to Christ at the same time at the same meeting. During a series of evangelistic meetings, an opportunity was given to respond publically to Christ. The entire family came to Christ at that time and continued on with Him.

Harold and Elsie had four children who would leave a mark on the ministry of Grace Church for many years to come. Their oldest son, Richard, did not continue in Grace Church but served the Lord faithfully in other congregations. Their second child, daughter June, married Ed Shockley and continued in active service at Grace. Ed used his electrical skills when they could be used in construction projects at the church and served as treasurer of the church for a number of years taking over the responsibility from his brother-in-law, Harold. Their third child, daughter Norma, married Wallace Journey, a physician / gynecologist who maintained his practice in Chester. Wally and Norma for many years had a vital ministry of teaching and preaching. Their home became a center for young adults who came to faith in Christ through their teaching and example. Wally's Sunday School class was greatly appreciated by many and was well attended for many years. The youngest of the Griest children, son Harold, became a banker and served as a leader for the ministry of Grace Church. He was the treasurer of Grace Church as well as the treasurer for the denomination. He married Muriel Sedgwick of the Wissinoming Church who was, incidentally, the sister of Dorrit who had married C. E. Kirkwood. Harold's life was shortened by cancer yet he left a legacy of careful planning and management for the church.

The Keeley family entered the life of the church through the conversion of children Bill and Mary. They were baptized along with their mother, Lucy, in the large group of people who identified with Christ in May, 1932, in Ridley Creek in Brookhaven. Mary served as the Sunday School secretary for many years. Later in life, she married Ed Chamberlain. They have continued to serve faithfully in a supportive role. Bill Keeley learned the trade of machinist and at an early age began to work for Maurice Hartzell when the machine shop was in the Hartzell garage. Later, Bill received God's call to ministry. He married Mildred Lindermuth and headed off to serve in the Gospel Heralds. After his time with the Gospel Heralds, he entered the pastorate of the Primitive Methodist Church serving congregations in the Midwest and Pennsylvania. Later, he returned to Delaware County and returned to using his skills as a machinist working again for Hartzell Machine Works from which he ultimately retired. Bill served as an advisor to the pastors of Grace Church, an elder and an adult Sunday School teacher for many years.

Tom Keeley came to the Lord later in life. On one occasion, he was in attendance at the church in Chester when a public invitation was given to come to the Lord. A little wiry man named Samuel Tyson grabbed Tom by the arm, spun him around, and challenged him to respond to the invitation and trust Christ as savior. Tom did not react but when he returned to his home, he announced that he would never ever go to the church again. Fortunately, he did return. In 1939, during a meeting with an evangelist named Billy Wiggins, Tom responded to Christ and was born again. He lived to a ripe old age and continued to walk with the Lord.

Rudy Gehman served for about three years as the lead Gospel Herald. He married Dora Woodring, the daughter of Richard Lewis Woodring, a pastor of the MBC. Dora had a godly heritage. Her mother, Dora Rote, had been a member of the Gospel Workers, the women's ministry that paralleled the ministry of the men in the Gospel Heralds. Rudy had begun ministry in the Mennonite Church after attending school at the Bluffton Academy in Bluffton, Ohio, and briefly at Moody Bible Institute. He became acquainted with the Gospel Heralds through his brother-in-law, Menno Myers, and began to serve among them with Menno in 1927. In 1933, he was assigned to the Chester Mission and served there for about three years. During these three years he was privileged to baptize 18 people.



Rudy, Richard and Dora Gehman

Rudy spent the rest of his ministry service among the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. He died on August 17, 1961.

Richard, the only child of Rudy and Dora, became a missionary with the Africa Inland Mission serving as a teacher and leader at Scott Theological College in Kenya. Richard and his wife, Flo, were supported in their African ministry for a number of years by Grace Church.

Formation

When the Annual Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ convened in Allentown on Thursday, October 15, 1936, it had two new members. One was the former Gospel Herald, Ernest B. Hartman. In 1934, he was assigned to replace Rudy Gehman in Chester. While he had been serving as a Herald, he had completed the assigned reading course, passed the required tests and been approved by his brothers. He was ready to be ordained and received as a member of the Annual Conference. Also present was Maurice Hartzell. He was there to represent, as its Delegate, the new church in Chester which was now a part of the Annual Conference. No longer a mission under the direction of the Gospel Herald Society and its leader, W. G. Gehman, it was now a fully recognized congregation.



E. B. Hartman

Grace Church was less than ten years old. It had been under the Gospel Herald leadership of Eugene George who was replaced by Rudy Gehman. E. B. Hartman had come to take the pastoral reins.



Grace Church - 1936

Being a recognized church meant that things were different. The mission took the status of a church on December 18, 1935. Now they were no longer directed by the Gospel Herald Society but had a say in such matters as who served as pastor and how they would spend their money. The church would now sink or swim depending on the commitments and support of the people of Chester. The church was legally incorporated on January 18, 1937.

In 1937, when Chester's first statistics were recorded, 54 people were recorded as having made the commitment to membership. The Sunday School had enrolled 151 and was averaging 104 students each Sunday morning. The ministry of the church to the community continued. W. G. Gehman said of the ministry in Chester in his

annual report:



The front of 721 West Seventh Street

> This class consists of a number of families who are out and out for the Lord. There are also quite a number of young people besides these families. The prayer meetings held on Wednesday are well attended and have a spiritual atmosphere. Cottage prayer meetings were held during the winter months. Open-air meetings were held on Friday nights during the summer months, in a prominent section of the city. Quite a number of the members showed an interest in this work. Many Gospels were distributed and a number were saved and healed. One child was dedicated to the Lord. The Sunday School interest is lively, a number last year attending every Sunday, and some missing only one or two Sundays. Love prevails among the members who are loyal and are ever alert to make Christ known. The response to pastoral visitation is good. Seats were purchased to replace the former ones. This class has been organized and will be transferred to the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Conference.

The report shows that the enthusiasm for sharing the gospel in Chester had not diminished one bit. They gathered for prayer. They were out on the streets singing and preaching. Bibles were given out. Families were reaching out to other families. When people came to the Sunday School, they would look for others to bring with them. Occasional contests stimulated students of the Sunday School to bring visitors.



Children - now young adults ca. 1941

The church continued its steady growth and ministry through the Depression. Families had learned to help each other. When money was tight and need for it made demands on everyone, families pulled together and the family of God pulled together. During these difficult

years, a steady stream of people came to the Lord.

As the decade of the 1930s came to an end, the children who had been won and discipled when the church was new began to come of age. They had grown up and stayed together creating a vital and lively group of teens who were supportive of each other. The significance of families could be seen in the maturation of these young people. Many children had been reached in the first decade of ministry. While many came, sadly many left. However, those whose families became part of the life of the church tended to stay, grew in the Lord and became part of the ongoing ministry of Grace.

The 1930s ended with sounds of war beginning to circle the earth. The group of young people who had grown together now began to go off in their separate ways. Some went off to war. Some went off to ministry. Some went off to marriage. Some simply went off to adulthood.

The war brought new times and new people. But, Grace Church continued its ministry to the people of Chester.

People Notes

Fred J. Harlan Jr. was the son of Fred and Carolyn (Keller) Harlan. Carolyn had immigrated from Germany in 1910 and later married Fred. Fred Sr. had the reputation of being a somewhat difficult man. Fred and Carolyn had two sons, Fred Jr. and Harold. Fred Jr. had professed faith in Christ and was known to be serious about his walk with the Lord.



Harold, Carolyn and Fred Harlan

On the morning of February 9, 1938, Fred and his brother were riding on a bike and came to the intersection at 7th and Penn. They were struck by a car. Both were taken to the hospital. At first, it seemed that Harold was the most seriously injured since he had received head injuries. In surgery, a plate was inserted in his head. However, it became apparent that Fred had internal injuries that were not seen at first. Several hours later, he succumbed to the injuries at Chester Hospital.

The church family at Grace felt the loss of this young life keenly. Many today recall this event and was for some a first time experience of the loss of death. That his death made such an impression shows how the church had become a close knit family.

His funeral was held at the church. Pastor E. B. Hartman conducted the funeral. C. E. Kirkwood and R. C. Reichenbach, both Gospel Heralds at the time, were called back to help with the funeral. R. C. remembers being called upon to sing “Nearer My God To Thee.”

Rufus (Bud) Spedden came to the church in the early 1930s. He was baptized in Philadelphia in 1932. In 1935, he was among those who were received into membership of Grace Church when it was officially recognized by the Annual Conference. He had worked in the store of E. R. Lindermuth and the Lindermuths would certainly have given an invitation to join them at their church.



Bud Spedden

While Bud was baptized earlier, he apparently had

never fully grasped the full significance of trusting Christ until he spent time with his boss, E. R. Through Grace Church, he came to Christ and became part of the life and ministry of Grace.

In 1938, Pastor Hartman married Bud to Lenora Evelyn Forsythe. Evelyn attended Philadelphia College of Bible and was an active teacher in the summer Vacation Bible ministry at the Bible Presbyterian Church of Chester. Bud and Evelyn were blessed with five sons, Jack, David, Paul, Donald and Craig. Bud was another of the faithful servants who were part of Grace Church. Over the years, he served as class leader, Sunday School Superintendent, and delegate to Annual Conference. For special occasions, he would don a chef's apron and cook for church suppers.

Ernest B. Hartman was the son of Ellsworth and Nora (Weidner) Hartman. Ellsworth Hartman had been saved in the MBC under the ministry of George Campbell, a veteran of the Civil War who took to preaching God's word. Ellsworth was born and raised near Harleysville. He later relocated his family in Royersford where he worked as a foreman in a factory. He opened a paint store which became his livelihood.



The Brothers Hartman, Ernest, Herbert, Wilbur, Jansen

Ernest was the second of four Hartman brothers who served the Lord as pastors in the MBC / BFC. He was born on May 17, 1905. For a time he worked as a knitter at the Spring City Knitting Mills. He entered the Gospel Heralds in 1924 and served in several missions until his assignment at Chester in 1935. He was ordained and called to the Chester Church in 1936. He served a number of BFC churches until his death in 1968. He and his wife, Esther, were parents to two children, James and Janet. Brother Wilbur Hartman was one of the Gospel Heralds to serve the church in Chester.

Moving on

With America involved in a world wide struggle, the industrial resources of Chester and its people were being tapped. Chester had again become a magnet for people seeking work. Workers came to take their places in the factories and shops that were supplying the equipment and material necessary.


Joseph Henry Family

1942 brought a new pastor to replace E. B. Hartman who had served for five years. Joseph B. Henry was appointed to the Chester Church. Appointments of pastors were made at the Annual Conference by the Stationing and Boundary Committee. Each year, the congregation would take a poll on whether they favored retaining their pastor. The results of that poll were taken to the Annual Conference and given to the Stationing Committee. The Stationing Committee would consider the congregational poll, the pastor's wishes and the best interests of the denomination in making its decision. In 1942, J. B. Henry was called from Philadelphia to Chester and E. B. Hartman was sent from Chester to Philadelphia.

During the four years of J. B. Henry's pastorate, the church's membership grew by nearly 30. Some of these new members came as transfers from Shamokin. The Truett family, Robert and Lena transferred with their children, Robert, Paul and Jean, who was married to Daniel Snyder.

Special events filled the calendar of the church. There was the annual missions conference. The church's growing commitment to God's world wide task was being deepened through the conferences which exposed the church to missionaries and speakers from around the world. The annual camp meeting was part of the MBC denominational ministry. Each summer, families would leave to spend a week or two at Edgwood Grove in Shamokin or Mizpah Grove in Allentown. During the war years, the MBC camp meetings did not meet. The church rented the facilities at Chester Heights where they were joined by the Philadelphia churches.


John Golla

After J. B. Henry's transfer, John Golla began a seven year ministry. The growth of the church continued. Most notably, under his leadership the Sunday School nearly tripled straining the

capacity of the church building.



A New Entrance

In 1947, the building at 721 West 7th Street underwent a transformation for the third time. A new entrance was added allowing for more space. Most significantly, the new entrance gave space for the installation of a new heater beneath that entrance and allowed for the removal of the old to make more space for classes. The ground was dug by volunteers who came with picks and shovels to remove the dirt to allow a foundation and provide room for the new heater. Ed Shockley remembers working with other men on Wednesday evening when the prayer meeting was scheduled. They would dig until it was time to pray when they would clean up and join the meeting. Ed and Harold Griest, Sr. worked to rewire the building to make it adequate for the growing numbers who were becoming part of Grace Church.



Willard Cassel

During this time, the house next to the church was purchased to provide a home for the pastor and his family. This opened even more space for the expanding congregation by freeing those rooms which had served as the residence.

1953 brought a new pastor, Willard E. Cassel, to ministry in Chester. He was joined by his wife, Esther, and their children. The ministry of the church remained steady.

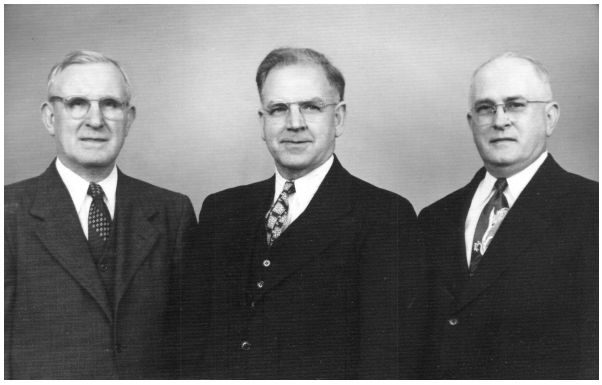


The 1950s ended with a changing Chester. The wars were over. Factories were standing idle. Workers were laid off and beginning to move away. The decay that came to many urban industrial cities was beginning to show itself in Chester.

Grace Church was strong. As the community changed, how would the ministry of the church be affected?

People notes

Robert J. and Ruth (Spencer) Journey served as missionaries in Burma under Baptist Missions. They became dissatisfied with what they saw as a weakening of desire to preach the gospel. They and their three daughters, Doris, Gladys and Frances, and son, R. Wallace, returned to Chester. They came to appreciate the ministry they found in the MBC mission there. They were living nearby and so it was natural that they would become involved.



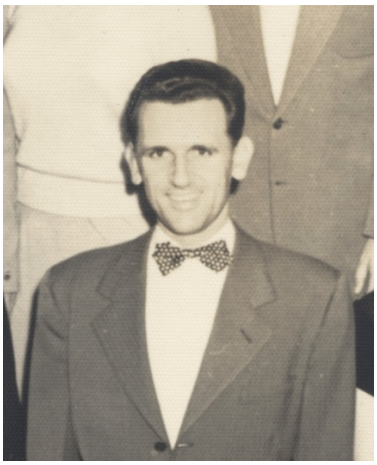
Robert (Pop) Journey, Maurice Hartzell, Elmer Lindermuth

Pop Journey, as R. J. was known, became a class leader and teacher. Class leader was an important position in MBC churches. The class leader led the prayer meeting and introduced prayer times with Bible teaching. The congregation looked to the class leader who was a source of stability for the congregation. The pastors would periodically be re-assigned, but class leaders continued on providing significant lay leadership.

It is an oft told tale. Boy meets girl. Girl is a committed Christian. Girl won't see boy unless boy comes to church. In this case, the boy was Richard Holmes. The girl was Flora Koechert. Flora had been part of Grace Church from its early days and was part of the group of people baptized in May 1932, in Ridley Creek in Brookhaven. Her mother and father had also become part of the church family. In order to see Flora, Dick agreed to come to church. While he was looking for his girl, God found him. Dick was baptized under the ministry of J. B. Henry. Dick and Flora were married when Dick returned from WW2 after serving in the military police. Dick and Flora began to serve the Lord together. His willingness to do what needed to be done made Dick a regular among work crews. Dick assumed various leadership positions serving both as deacon and elder. Dick was a valuable and key man in the building projects undertaken by the church. In his later years, Dick has served as the greeter who offered a hearty welcome to those who came on Sunday morning and helped to foster the friendly atmosphere that has defined Grace Church.



Dick Holmes



Wally Journey

After serving in WW2, R. Wallace (Wally) Journey returned from serving in the medical corps. He and Norma Griest were married during the war. Wally returned to take advantage of the G. I. Bill opportunity to attend the University of Pennsylvania and continued on in its medical school. Wally worked at the Sun Ship Yard while taking classes. Norma remembers how, even in these busy days, Wally was a student of the Bible.



Norma Griest Journey

Following his graduation, Wally established his medical practice as a gynecologist. He and Norma were able to purchase a home on Bickmore Lane in Wallingford, a purchase which helped determine where Grace Church relocated its ministry.

Over the years, Wally's teaching ministry deepened and matured. Families were drawn to his Sunday School Class. During the early years of the church's ministry in Wallingford, the sanctuary was filled with those who came to sit under Wally's teaching. He and Norma worked to strengthen families spending many hours in counseling and encouraging people to make godly decisions. Their home became a magnet for young adults many of whom came to know Christ as Savior and later became part of the Grace Church family.

Following Wally's death, Norma continued a vital ministry of teaching and counseling which has helped many individuals and families through difficult times.



Jack Bromley

Another of the young men who came to be part of the Grace family during this time was Jack Bromley. He came at the invitation of friends he knew and like others heard of his need to be saved and turned to Christ. Jack became part of another vibrant group of young people who had formed at Grace Church. Jack remembers Roy Sutherland, Norman Harris, Billy Soyster and Warren Scott among those who were friends in the youth group. He recalls his appreciation for

his Sunday School teacher, the long serving E. R. Lindermuth, for his knowledge of the Bible. Jack has wonderful memories of Pop Journey, the loving class leader, who gathered the people for Bible study and prayer meetings on Wednesday nights. In 1958, Jack married Joyce Happersett who he met at a Youth For Christ meeting. Joyce joined Jack in becoming part of the family and ministry of Grace Church. Jack and Joyce have been treasurer and book keepers for over 25 years.

Joseph B. Henry was born in Birdsboro, Berks County, Pennsylvania and came to the Lord as a child. At age 18, he entered the ministry of the Gospel Heralds and served at a number of places. In 1927, he married Millie Gehman, daughter of W. G. Gehman. They were blessed with two children, Woody and Donald, who spent part of their childhoods in Chester. In 1950, he left the ministry in the MBC to become the Associate General Secretary of the Africa Inland Mission. He died on April 6, 1962.



Joseph and Mildred Henry

Willard E. Cassel was born in 1919 in the home of a MBC / BFC pastor, E. N. Cassel. He is one of a number of pastors for whom ministry came as a family affair. Willard was one of the earliest men to have received a seminary education having been educated at Faith Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He and his wife Esther had four children; Roger (Tim), Martha, Mary, and Rachel. They were the first to live in the newly purchased home next to the church on 7th Street. Willard served a number of Bible Fellowship Churches. He carried a number of significant denominational responsibilities.

A New Beginning

The 1960s was the decade when America broke its ties to the past. Change and turmoil were being experienced in everything. Social change had begun in the 1950s as young people began to question the values and morality of the previous generation. Freedom was the watchword - freedom to do whatever you wanted. The restrictions that bound society and culture were thrown away. Drugs could bring new levels of life experience. Unbounded sexual activity brought pleasures that were denied by outdated morality. The horrors of racism began to be revealed. The war in Vietnam produced opposition to what was perceived as unnecessary and unjust killing. An era of distrust for government was born.



Pastor Jack Riggall

Grace Church labored on. As the 1960s began, another pastor had been called to give leadership to the growing congregation. Jack Riggall came in 1958 and joined the congregation in its task of sharing the gospel with their community.

The congregation was becoming aware that their church building might be a hindrance to the ministry. The community of Chester was changing. People were coming from a distance which meant that what had been a neighborhood ministry had changed. The building was being crowded by a growing Sunday School. Few options existed.



A search for land was begun. Sites in Chichester were considered. As the new location was being explored, Dr. Wally Journey became aware of land in Nether Providence Township. Because of the number of churches in Chichester, the Nether Providence property was thought to be a more strategic location. The congregation made a decision to pursue land which was attractive because of the location



and the price.



In order to purchase the land, the church and property in Chester needed to be sold. The congregation not only decided to proceed with the purchase but also decided to become a church without a building while a new building was erected. For three years, the congregation met in the YMCA of Chester. This interim location required that each Sunday a worship center be created. Chairs had to be unstacked in the morning and put away at the end of the day. It brought opportunity for involvement by many people.



The land in Nether Providence Township had at one time been a farm. Originally, it had been owned by members of the Sharpless family who were some of the earliest settlers of the area. The stone house on the property dated to 1839. Frame additions had been added over the years. At the time of the purchase, the house stood empty and was in bad shape. It was the desire of the leaders to purchase more of the land in the rear of the house, but that land was not made available.



When the home was purchased, work began to restore the home to a usable dwelling. Long hours were invested by men of the church to repair and prepare the home. The house provided a home for Pastor Riggall and his family as well as a meeting place for prayer during the interim when they were without a church building.



The new church facility was completed in the spring of 1963. A dedication was held on March 23, 1963.

Many things about Grace Church had

changed over the years. What did not change was the desire of the congregation to reach out with the gospel. While the ministry in Chester had been localized, the ministry in Nether Providence was far flung. The people who now became part of Grace Church were coming from farther away. The closely knit relationships of Chester neighborhoods were gone.



Sunday School - ca. 1970

After eight years of ministry and a successful relocation, Pastor Jack Riggall accepted the call to serve in the Bible Fellowship Church of York. His replacement, C. E. Kirkwood, one of the sons of the church, returned to offer pastoral leadership. He had been serving as the District Superintendent of the denomination.

The home on the north side of the church was purchased to provide another parsonage as well as additional Sunday School space. Grace Church now offered two homes on Providence Road beside the new church building.

Pastor Kirkwood gave bold leadership and saw the Sunday School grow to nearly 300. The children's ministry was enhanced by the summer ministry of Vacation Bible School which brought children from the neighbors as well as the surrounding communities. At the same time, the ministry to teenagers was encouraged with the addition of youth workers to the staff. Even the adults were blessed under the gifted teaching of Wally Journey whose lessons were eagerly received.


William F. Heffner

These years were peak years for the Sunday School. Following the peak, the decline in attendance indicates that the school had again reached its capacity. When a facility is full, often the number of people begins to decrease. During these years, a national trend was observed when Sunday Schools began to decline. Grace Church was not alone in watching the numbers of those who attend Sunday School begin to fall away.

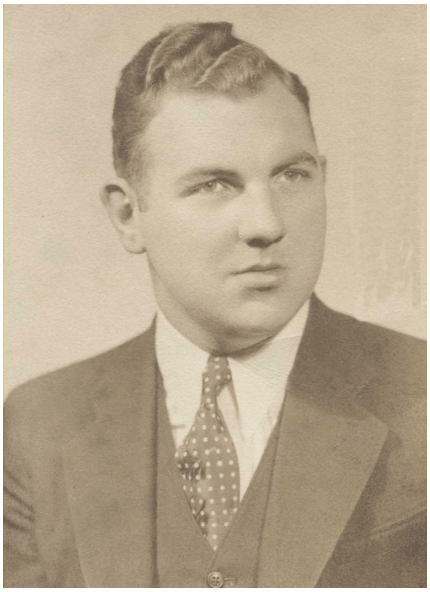
Pastor Kirkwood retired after serving eight years at Wallingford. He was replaced by David Branning who had been serving as pastor at the Walnutport BFC. His ministry was a brief one. The veteran pastor, William Heffner, was called to serve as the senior pastor.

While the Sunday School had declined, the facilities were still a problem. Classes were held in all three buildings. The situation was far from ideal. The congregation launched out in faith again to provide an adequate meeting place for its ministry. In 1980, an ambitious project was begun that would more than double the available space for ministry. New classrooms were added. A gymnasium was provided to offer a place for youth ministry. The addition was completed and dedicated in 1981.

In September, 1982, Richard Taylor was called to serve as the pastor of Grace Church.

The ministry of Grace goes on as new leaders and servants step up to take the place of those who have gone before.

People notes


Clarence Edward Kirkwood

Clarence Edward Kirkwood was a son of the Chester Church. C. E., as he was known, was accepted in the Gospel Heralds at age 16. Those who knew him then said he was even at this early age a gifted preacher. After serving a time in the Gospel Heralds, he was ordained to the MBC ministry and served churches in Pennsylvania. He became a leader in the denomination serving as the director of the Home Mission Department and as the District Superintendent. He returned to pastoral ministry accepting a call to serve his home church of Wallingford in 1968. He served until 1974. He died on August 2, 1994.

He was married to Dorrit Sedgwick of the Wissinoming Church, a sister of Muriel who was married to Harold Griest. C. E. and Dorrit were parents to two sons, Charles and Dean.

During his years of retirement, he continued to be a faithful supporter and positive influence on the work of Grace Church. His obituary in the 1994 Bible Fellowship Yearbook gave an excellent summary of his influence and ministry.


Ed Shockley, Dorrit and C. E. Kirkwood, Bob Truett at Pastor Kirkwood's retirement

> Brother Kirkwood was a leader of biblical proportions in churches and the denomination he served. First and foremost, he was a pastor who cared about and for his people. He displayed courage in his leadership as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ became the Bible Fellowship Church. He showed the rare quality of insight in his ability to see through people and events.
>
> In retirement, Brother Kirkwood's ministry continued. His ministry of encouragement made possible by telephone was appreciated by many.

People had a way of seeking him out for advice and wisdom. He was a faithful supporter of pastors and people in the Wallingford Church. He is missed.

Afterword

The memories of Grace did not end with a new building in 1981 or its eightieth anniversary in 2006. The story gets harder to tell as it comes closer to us. When we become part of the story, others must do the telling.

Who will be the people to remember?



One of them will be Harry Alshouse. Harry served as one of the leaders of Grace Church at the time when they began their building project. Harry was a contractor by profession and took the job of building the addition to the church. The planning went well. A good design was adopted. But no one could know that God in His wisdom would take Harry to his eternal home just as the work of building began. His death was a blow to Grace Church and the building project.

To be remembered are the people and the hours they gave when it was time to finish the building. Those who were part of long nights given to completing the building know who you are. The list of names is too long to repeat here and overlooking someone would be dreadful.

What is to be said about those who have continued to teach Sunday School, to invest in the young people of our church, to pray for God's work and to give financially to support what God is doing through Grace? Grace Church is a lot of people who are memorable because they know their names are not important.

As a church, we continue to serve while awaiting the return of our Savior. And we continue to seek ways to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the community where He has placed us - just like those who went before us.

