United Brethren Ecumenism
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editor’s note: In this presentation to church historians familiar with the various strands of United Methodism, Rev. Schell uses the following abbreviations.

AME = African Methodist Episcopal Church, separated from the ME’s in 1816
EUB = Evangelical United Brethren Church, formed by the 1946 EV-UB union
EV = Evangelical Church (and its predecessors), founded by Jacob Albright
ME = Methodist Episcopal Church, of which Francis Asbury was the first bishop
MES = Methodist Episcopal Church South, separated from the ME’s in 1844
MP = Methodist Protestant Church, separated from the ME’s in 1830
UB = United Brethren Church, founded by Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm

My friend Paul Holdcraft, UB historian and pastor of Old Otterbein Church, said with typical UB optimism of the impending Methodist-EUB union, “I’m all for it: I married a Methodist wife, went to a Methodist seminary, and never did so few have a chance to swallow so many.” He might have added that over the years the Methodist Publishing House had printed thousands of copies of his practical churchmanship pamphlets.

Were the UB’s ecumaniacs? They courted the Baltimore Conference ME’s 1809-13, discussed union with the EV’s in 1817, and conducted merger talks with the formative MP’s in 1829.

The 1913 UB General Conference voted unanimously to form the United Protestant Church by merging with the MP’s, having recently spurned a 1909 ME invitation to discuss organic union. No less than six MP’s wooed that General Conference, and MP General Conference President Lyman Davis said of UB Bishop Emeritus Carter: “Send him as bishop at large to us, so that we can get used to bishops.” Yet in 1917 the UB’s balked, and by 1921 the only fruit of the proposed union was the UB takeover of Kansas City University from the MP’s.

Similarly in 1929, the UB General Conference voted unanimously to merge Calvinist and Arminian traditions by uniting with the Evangelical Synod of North American and the Reformed Church in the United States to create the United Church in America. But by 1933 the UB General Conference is silent on this United Church and the longstanding Commission disappears – although the other two bodies did merge in 1934 to create the Evangelical and Reformed Church, now part of the United Church of Christ.
Were all these negotiations signs of ecumania? What was going on? Later, most Methodists were startled in 1964 to learn that a Methodist-EUB union might occur. Most UB’s and EV’s had become comfortable by 1964 as EUB’s, but as a non-national church they were losing more and more members to an increasingly mobile US population. When merger was approved in Chicago in 1966 and Dallas was selected to host the 1968 union, some EUB’s exclaimed, “We haven’t a church within a hundred miles of Dallas!”

But let’s start at the beginning. The 1785 covenant of Old Otterbein Church in Baltimore was almost unique in providing for welcoming at the Lord’s Table any Christian. This was in a day when “communion” vied descriptively with “denomination” because of exclusivity around the Lord’s Supper.

Not until 1846, when the Evangelical Alliance was founded in England, did denominational standoffishness begin to diminish. After the American Evangelical Alliance was begun in 1867, the UB’s sent a delegation to the 1873 session. The 1873 UB General Conference exchanged greetings with the ME’s, Evangelical Lutherans, and Presbyterians. In 1877, the AME, MP and Evangelical Association denominations were added. Other groups added to this fraternal list from time to time include the Wesleyan Church in 1881 and the United Evangelical Church in 1897. In 1921 the fraternal delegates included the Congregational Church, Independent Baptists, the Disciples of Christ, and the Reformed Church. That same year the strong and colorful MES Bishop Warren A. Candler, brother of Coca-Cola founder and Methodist philanthropist Asa G. Candler, gave the UB’s a gracious fraternal address – even though he was a staunch opponent of Methodist Union.

Such fraternity, however, could only go so far! When invited to send delegates to the first Ecumenical Methodist Conference in London in 1881, the UB’s said, “We’re not Methodists” – but they finally sent two delegates who said they felt benefited by attending. The 1891 Ecumenical Methodist Conference in Washington DC had representation from both the majority and the Old Constitution UB churches – but the UB’s skipped the World Methodist Conferences of 1911, 1931 and 1961.

The UB’s fully entered into the work of many interdenominational organizations. Christian Endeavor was endorsed in 1905, and UB youth were redirected into its programs in 1909. The UB’s attended the International Sunday School Convention in 1884, and UB Sunday School editor Daniel Berger was repeatedly elected to the International Lesson Committee – a position later filled by Bishop Kephart. The World’s Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893 was attended by Bishop Weaver, while two Japanese UB’s were at the 1937 Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Young People’s Missionary Movement was commended in 1901, as was the Laymen’s Missionary Movement in 1909. In addition, the 1917 General Conference urged UB’s to join the Gideons.

Maximum ongoing interest and participation was awarded the Federal Council of Churches from its inception in 1908. Not only was its Social Creed instantly adopted, but General Conference henceforth heard Federal Council
reports, usually from high executives, and voted encouragement – but little funding. UB office holders in the Federal Council cannot be determined from the UB Yearbook, but obviously there were many through the years.

The first UB twentieth century courtship grew from a Tri-Council of the Congregational, UB and MP churches as OK’d 251-5 by the 1905 UB General Conference. The Congregational Church dropped out, however, leaving the UB-MP federation proposal – which the MP General Conference approved with the understanding that the UB’s would still go along if an MP-MES union was approved in the meantime. So much for the UB’s not being Methodists! The MP General Conference President Thomas H. Lewis was very persuasive before the 1909 UB General Conference, and Bishop Weekley’s optimistic reply called the twentieth century one of religious reconciliation, not of division, and declared “there is only one Methodism.” The Church Union Commission was made permanent – with 15 members, including all the bishops.

Neither was there any lack of feeling during this time between the UB and ME denominations, for in 1905 the UB’s handed over all their work in Germany to the ME Church. But it was with the MP’s that the Bishops recommended union, and it was voted 557-60 in 1913 – with the new body to be called the United Protestant Church. But the 1913 UB-MP merger proposal abruptly ended forever, at least until 1968, with the 1917 UB General Conference declaration that due to “serious objection in both denominations, further agitation on the question of organic union cease…”

Meanwhile, in 1889 a walkout led by Bishop Milton Wright (father of the Wright Brothers) produced the “UB Church (Old Constitution)” – after a futile appeal to the US Supreme Court claiming to be the true UB Church. Although in 1909 the “liberal” UB delegates were politely received in the “radical” UB (Old Constitution) General Conference, the 1917 Old Constitution delegation to the liberal General Conference bid “godspeed” saying “His Word must be fulfilled.” That marked the end of exchanged greetings for decades.

In 1921 the Reformed Church sent greetings, and later invited merger talks with the UB’s and the Evangelical Synod of North America – not to be confused with the Evangelical Association founded by Jacob Albright. Eventually a plan of union was “unanimously approved” at the 1929 UB General Conference, only to be ignored in the 1933 UB General Conference when a new suitor appeared in the person of Bishop Matthew T. Maze of the Evangelical Church, who had been prominent in the 1922 re-union of the Evangelical Association with the United Evangelical Church. He informed the UB’s that the EV’s were ready to negotiate union. After all the courting, and several broken engagements, the UB Church had at last found a suitor with whom a marriage would eventuate in 1946.

I once asked Paul Holdcraft why it took from 1946 to 1964 to merge the three EUB Conferences with churches in Baltimore City – and the sage replied, “We had to have some funerals first.” The 1946 union required working out some compromise and some leftover feelings between former Association and United Evangelical people and pastors in Baltimore. This delay was in total contrast to
the aftermath of the 1939 Methodist Union, when all the conference mergers were concluded within a year – except for the ethnic conferences (black, and one German).

Finally, perhaps the most unusual incident in UB ecumenism began in 1892 – when Iowa UB preacher Rev. Breadshear trekked to Omaha and addressed the ME General Conference as a fraternal delegate. He extolled Methodism – recalling Lincoln’s wartime tribute (“the more Methodists to the front, the more prayers to heaven”), noting Bishop Simpson’s conducting of Lincoln’s funeral, and citing how Bishop Newman hastened from West to East to the dying President Grant. This Victorian oratory so excited Holston Conference delegate Thomas Coke Carter that he exited to become a fervent UB in 1894. This DePauw grad, a former college president and Methodist editor, was viewed by the UB’s as a Godsend to win numerous Methodists and build a strong UB presence in the South. After superintending that work, Carter was elected Bishop in 1905 for a new Southern District. When growth did not eventuate, he failed to be re-elected in 1913 and was made bishop emeritus without salary – even though he was not of retirement age. It was he that MP President Lyman Davis had asked for in his 1913 statement mentioned earlier.

In conclusion – when you assess UB ecumenism, it seems genuine. There were outreaches to Lutherans, Calvinists, and the hosts gathered after 1908 into the Federal Council of Churches – although one does have to wonder at UB disinterest in the World Methodist Conferences. As a confirmed ecumenic, I have found this topic worthwhile. Over a long period of time I have been active in many ecumenical groups and owe much to brothers and sisters with names other than Methodist. It was this involvement which cured my racism, taught me much about prayer, instructed me as a neophyte Christian in Washington DC, etc., etc. How fortunate we are to have come into a tradition which considers our Master and His love to be of more value than any partisan creed or cherished polity. Otterbein and Boehm would approve of this part of our makeup.

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