

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

S U M M E R 2 0 1 8 — V o l u m e 1 7 , N o . 3

MMHC'S NEW LOOK

BY CATHY ROBLING

The MMHC has entered a new phase. Last year we were asking for donations to start this project, and this year we are praising the Lord and thanking you that the construction phase is complete!

The dedication of the Zahniser Chapel took place on October 13, 2017, during the Board of Administration meetings. The Chapel is designed to replicate an early 20th century Free Methodist church sanctuary. It is named for five Zahniser brothers: Bishop Arthur DeFrance, Rev. Jacob Jay, Rev. Edmund Smith, Rev. Ralph Allison and Rev. Archibald Howard McElrath. All five became Free Methodist ordained ministers in the late 19th century and left a rich legacy.

Dr. Howard Snyder, grandson of Jacob Jay Zahniser, and Dr. A.H. Mathias Zahniser, grandson of A.H.M. Zahniser, both participated in the dedication.

Visitors can sit in pews donated by St. Louis Light House Mission and Free Methodist churches in Conway, Mich., and New Middletown, Ohio. Copies of the 1910 Free Methodist hymnal that was used across the U.S. are placed in the pew racks for visitors to peruse. Soon audio/visual equipment will be installed so that guests can learn more of the story of the Free Methodist Church.

A display area just outside the chapel will be updated periodically and currently includes B. T. Roberts' pulpit, Bible, sermon notes and gavel, as well as a pulpit John Wesley Redfield preached from, his traveling writing desk and the original handwritten manuscript of his autobiography. Visitors can stand behind the pulpit where the Wabash Conference was organized by General Superintendent E. P. Hart in 1885 at Attica, Indiana. Future plans include housing Light & Life Hour radio broadcast equipment in a studio display capable of capturing visitors' stories.

The Hugh White Library has been expanded to house the growing collection, but the more than 6,000 volumes are packed away, waiting until funds for sufficient shelving arrive



to make them available to researchers again.

This is an exciting time for Marston Memorial Historical Center. We are extremely happy that this portion of the project is complete. When you are in the Indianapolis area, please stop in to visit and see what's new!



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Cathy Robling, Director
Julianne Class, Archivist
Kyle Moran, Digital Librarian

World Ministries Center
770 N. High School Road
Indianapolis, IN 46214

(800) 342-5531

Email

history@fmcusa.org

Website

fmcusa.org/historical

Newsletter

Paul Tippey (Editor)
Cathy Robling
David Bundy
Howard Snyder
Julianne Class

Layout & Design

Andrea Anibal

BEST BOTTOM: THE CONTINUING IMPACT OF A LONG-CLOSED CHURCH

BY DWIGHT GREGORY

My childhood summer vacations usually included a trip to Missouri. Leaving Colorado as the school year ended, we could reach my grandparents' home in time for Memorial Day weekend, with a service and picnic at the Best Bottom Free Methodist Church and Cemetery.

The church was founded in 1894 when nine people formed a Free Methodist "society" three miles west of the little town of Rhineland, Missouri in the bottom land of the Missouri River between Jefferson City and St. Louis. Rich with upstream nutrients accumulated during periodic floods, it's so productive that farmers can profit even losing crops to flooding every four years. I assumed the name meant the "best" bottom land. Later, I learned the first family to homestead was named Best, with "Best's Bottom" gradually shortened for easier pronunciation.

One of the church's charter members was 18-year-old Oswald Tilden Gregory, my grandfather. No one knows for sure the story of Granddad's conversion. His grandparents raised him and had nominal church connections, but liquor flowed freely in the home and spirituality was low. One story says he was drawn to schoolhouse meetings where two young single women were preaching. That reminded me of the "Pentecost Bands," a movement in early Free Methodism that often included pioneer teams of two or more women, but Marston Memorial Historical Center's archive showed no evidence of bands in that area.

The actual origin story proved more interesting. The Holtwick family, long-time Best Bottom residents, had moved to Oregon and found new life through contact with Free Methodists. William Harmon Holtwick felt compelled to return to Missouri and plant an FM congregation. Considering the arduous challenge of moving 2,000 miles by wagon, I can only imagine how compelling the call must have been—and how vivid the memory of spiritual emptiness—to make him reverse course. Holtwick built the church in 1892. When the society was organized two years later, the Missouri Conference appointed him pastor.

A family whose ancestors were converted at Best Bottom church in the 1890s told of a great-grandfather who murdered his wife and fled the region in 1884, leaving 12 of his 19 children to be raised by older siblings or neighbors. I wondered how the story might have differed with a healthy congregation nearby to bring a transforming gospel to this perverse "patriarch."

My grandfather entered Free Methodist ministry in his twenties. He and his wife, Effie, served other churches before being appointed "home" to Best Bottom in 1913. Their youngest, Alma, was born in the little log parsonage now crumbling behind the church. She married Burleigh Willard and served Free Methodist Missions in the Dominican Republic and later Nogales, Arizona, training ministerial students from Mexico, where missionaries were forbidden to live.

Grandfather's friend, neighbor and early Best Bottom member Enoch A.

Holtwick went on to college and graduate school and taught history for many years at Greenville College. He was on the ballot for Vice President in 1952 and President in 1956 on the Prohibition Party ticket. When I was a freshman at Greenville, Prof. Holtwick, then in his 80s and retired, still gave his annual "Survey of Current Affairs" chapel talk.

Former Greenville President Richard Stephens says Enoch walked 75 miles from Best Bottom to Ashburn (home church of the Stephens family and my grandmother's Epperson family) as a young delegate to annual conference.

Eventually, improved transportation enabled people to attend church farther away. Rural populations declined as larger farms and better equipment required fewer (and smaller) families. Perhaps the church failed to disciple the young or maintain health and harmony. Whatever the reasons, Best Bottom ceased weekly services in the 1950s, fitting the pattern John Wimber pointed to in the 80s that the average lifespan of an American church is about 60 years.

My grandfather left itinerant ministry in midlife, partly to feed his family more consistently, but also, I believe, from the pain of wounded congregational relationships. He farmed a small piece of land on Loutre Island, a stone's throw from Best Bottom. They stayed active in the church, and Bishop Robert Andrews remembered that when his father was pastor at Best Bottom, they would untie the little boat on the "mainland" to go across and visit.

My grandmother remained a member of Best Bottom until her death in 1961, leaving only Eva Bundrick on the roll. In 2016, I interviewed Eva's son, then in his 90s. He never became an active Christian but said that he and his buddies used to attend Best Bottom for "entertainment." That may have simply meant "looking for girls," but I asked if the people got excited and made a





*A little aside from the main road,
becalmed in a last-century greyness,
there is the chapel, ugly, without the appeal
to the tourist to stop his car
and visit it. The traffic goes by,
and the river goes by, and quick shadows
of clouds, too, and the chapel settles
a little deeper into the grass.*

*But here once on an evening like this,
In the darkness that was about
His hearers, a preacher caught fire
And burned steadily before them
with a strange light, so that they saw
the splendor of the barren mountains
about them and sang their amens
fiercely, narrow but saved
in a way that men are not now.*

lot of noise or ran around in the services. He said that was sometimes true. I asked, "Was your mother one of those that got excited?" He replied, "No, but my grandmother was." Apparently the gospel was preached forcefully with call for response. "I was there when your Aunt Opal came to Christ," he said. "If anybody ever really got saved, she did!"

In 1964, my family drove me to Illinois to begin at Greenville College and spent an evening in Vandalia with the family of one of Dad's childhood friends from Best Bottom. Their daughter introduced me to others from her church who would be going to Greenville. One of them became my wife in 1969—partly through the Best Bottom connection!

My father sometimes recounted his vivid memory of two small plaques on opposite sides of the pulpit at the church. One said "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." The other, "Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also." Those phrases formed his life's philosophy. Traveling home from college once, I stopped at the old church and found those plaques on the floor near the pulpit. I put one in my pocket and wrapped it for him at Christmas. It remained in my parents' bedroom until Mom moved to assisted living.

Going east from Bluffton or west from Rhineland along Missouri Highway 94, you can look carefully and find a road that looks like a driveway between a stone house and its barn. A half mile up Lensing Road sits the little church on the hill. "The Chapel" by Welsh Anglican priest-poet R.S. Thomas almost describes it:

A stroll through the cemetery reveals names familiar in FM circles: Northern, Finders, Medlock, Rose, Quick and Autenrieth. A former resident told me that the church is the only remaining community institution. His former church in Rhineland never had a cemetery, so for decades almost any non-Catholic in the region was buried at Best Bottom. The cemetery association keeps the church building painted and the grass mowed, though attendance hasn't been large enough even to keep the Memorial Day picnic going.

In 2015, a cemetery association officer called me for advice after someone left a bequest to the Best Bottom Church. I explained that bequests to a closed church devolve to the annual conference and sent copies of *FM Yearbook* and *Discipline* pages. Eventually the Gateway Conference earmarked significant funds for Missouri church planting. When I retired in 2016, Mid-America Conference assigned me to help churches welcome ethnic groups and refugees. Contacts from the growing network of Central African refugee churches referred me to Burundian FM families in Columbia, Missouri. Superintendent Ben Tolly met with the folks a day later, and funds from the heritage of Best Bottom are now developing this new church! Soon a small plaque will go on the old building, recounting its history and members who served the Lord in wider fields. The "Resurrection Chapter," 1 Corinthians 15, tells us nothing done for the Lord is wasted. Best Bottom Church has now been closed more years than it was open, but its labors still bear fruit. May the Lord of the Harvest continue to give the increase!

URGENT!

Our annual giving needs a boost to be on target. Kindly pray and give a gift to help. Please use the return envelope or give online <https://give.fmcusa.org/givemarston>. Thank you!

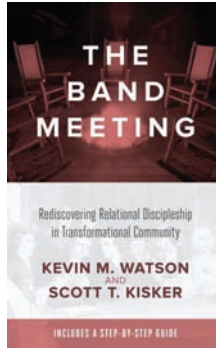
BOOK REVIEW

Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker, authors. *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017. ISBN: 13: 978-1-62824-495-3.

This useful book tells a lively tale of early Methodist bands. The authors teach in United Methodist seminaries—Kisker at United Seminary in Dayton, Ohio and Watson at Candler in Atlanta, Georgia. Both participate in bands and share their own experiences of deep life change through meetings organized according to the original Methodist pattern.

The Band Meeting shows how bands were “the engine of holiness” in early Methodism, John Wesley’s “core strategy” for bringing about “deep life change.” Although it focuses specifically on Methodist bands, the book covers a broad sweep theologically and is a good introduction to Wesleyan theology for readers unfamiliar with the tradition. *The Band Meeting* is a companion to Watson’s *The Class Meeting* (also Seedbed Press); however, this book is more focused on contemporary application. (Watson discussed bands in depth in *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley’s Thought and Popular Methodism Practice* [Oxford University Press, 2014], based on his doctoral dissertation.)

This new book explains the history and theology of the Bands and their “rise and fall” within Methodism. It



then focuses on practicalities: how to start a band, “Keys to a Thriving Band Meeting,” and testimonies from more than 20 diverse Christians about their life-changing band experiences. The authors show how bands connect with Wesley’s stress on social holiness. For Wesley, social holiness meant people experiencing God together, primarily through classes and bands. Watson and Kisker say bands were the real catalyst of deep spiritual change and discipleship—true social holiness. Wesley understood that disciples should go deeper in their Christian experience than typically happened even in the classes. To be entire Christians and really live inward and outward holiness meant obeying James 5:16—“Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed”—the biblical charter for bands. Such confession and healing seldom happen without them. Thus, in Wesley’s mind, bands had a solid theological and biblical foundation.

Watson and Kisker call today’s church to much deeper spiritual experience and accountability through the rediscovery of bands. Yes, bands are countercultural, but this was true in Wesley’s day also. They worked because they provided an essential ingredient in discipleship.

The Band Meeting is a significant book for today’s Free Methodists. Seeing how strategically important bands were for early Methodists speaks to us now. The book prompted me to form my own weekly band. I heartily recommend it.

— Howard A. Snyder

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Free Methodist Church – USA
Free Methodist Historical Society
770 N High School Road
Indianapolis, IN 46214
(800) 342-5531