

80 Years of Grace:
A History of the Bible
Fellowship Church of
Chester and Wallingford

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Jesus said, "I will build My church." If you ask what that looks like, your answer will be a very human one. If indeed Jesus is building the church, it happens before our eyes as observable human activity. We don't always make the connection between what God has said He will do and what we see human beings doing. We expect to see miracles and something from heaven when a church appears but instead see some very normal events.

What makes it hard for us to observe the work of God is our knowledge that what He is doing is being done through human beings and ordinary events. We know that human beings are defaced and marred by sin and incapable of carrying out a divine directive in a way that appears divine. Somehow, it seems to us, if God is doing something, it will show the marks of perfection and success that give it a divine stamp. It is difficult to draw a line from God's declared objectives to the meager and flawed efforts of human beings. But the line is there. And nowhere is this difficulty more apparent than in the building of the church. God is at work and human beings are His instruments.

We must not lose sight of the truth. When Jesus declared that He would build His church, He was speaking of a process that leads to groups of people who gather together in little corners all around the world to declare His praise and join in serving Him. What led to the formation of these groups, each one of them a church and together the church, was often a pretty ordinary human being and some pretty ordinary events. But, make no mistake. This is a divine work.

The church which gathers in the building in which you are now seated is a direct product of the objective of Jesus to plant His church. The story of how it comes to be here is a very human story, full of successes and failures, strength and weakness, and vision and short-sightedness. People and methodologies combined to carry out what Jesus has said He will do. Sometimes, what happened was the result of the people and their plans. Sometimes, it was in spite of them. At any rate, Jesus has had His way. Here we are.

In this paper we will explore the events and factors that led in the formation and growth of Grace Mennonite Brethren in Christ / Bible Fellowship Church. While the story of the church is a story of what God was doing, it is also the story of how God did what He intended.

The story of Grace Bible Fellowship Church of Wallingford begins in the story of the Evangelical Mennonites who became the Mennonite Brethren in Christ (MBC) who in turn became the Bible Fellowship Church (BFC). The larger story has been presented elsewhere and will not be told here.

The impulses that led to Chester began with new efforts at evangelism. The MBC was born in evangelistic zeal. Its pastors and people were never satisfied and continued to

reach out and seek new ways of introducing people to Jesus Christ. In the late 1890's, the evangelistic impulses of the MBC found outlet through the rising and new leadership of men like C. H. Brunner. Brunner had formed the Gospel Workers, an organization of men and women that would carry the torches of evangelism out into new areas of Pennsylvania. Soon after its formation, the Gospel Workers became two organizations, the Gospel Workers for women and the Gospel Heralds for men.



C. H. Brunner began to eye the city and believed that God was leading there. If we translate that into the observable, it means that someone became a contact for the new work. That someone raised the idea and did some talking. According to Brunner, the first formal meeting was held in Philadelphia on October 2, 1902, in Germantown. In attendance were two people, C. H. Brunner and a man named James Weaver. It seems reasonable to suppose that the frail link between Brunner and Weaver led to the start of MBC ministry in a metropolitan setting. It was a big step for a church that began with a very rural setting and outlook. But now, Jesus was building His church in Philadelphia. And, from this small beginning came a number of attempts to start missions and eventually three separate Churches, Salem and Wissinoming in the northeast, and Emmanuel in the southwest.

In 1926, Maurice and Blanche Hartzell were attending meetings at Emmanuel, and saw the potential for a church in Chester, Pennsylvania, where they were living. They were the link from Philadelphia to the mission in Chester.

Maurice was born and raised in Montgomery County. His family had moved to Philadelphia. He found work at the Lanston Monotype Company at 24th and Locust Streets and became a molder for monotype. Maurice spent a short time in the military at the end of World War 1 serving as a cook for a unit stationed in Georgia. In January of 1920, he had returned to Philadelphia where he was boarding at the home of Julia May at 2148 18th Street.



Maurice and Blanch Hartzell and son, Richard

Blanche Gehman was the daughter of David and Lizzie Gehman of Hatfield, Pennsylvania. Her sister Laura was married to a preacher, Harvey K. Kratz, of the MBC. During his ministry at Macungie, Pennsylvania, Blanche was baptized and admitted to membership in the MBC.

According to the family, Maurice and Blanche may have met at a camp meeting near Montgomeryville. Maurice and his brother Reuben were attending the meetings. It seems that the relationship between Maurice and Blanche may have begun there. It is not clear when, or under what circumstances, Maurice came to Christ but he did. Maurice was baptized by Webster R. Stengele, one of the Gospel Heralds, most likely in Philadelphia. On June 28, 1923, they were married by W. F. Heffner, the pastor of the Quakertown MBC. They began married life by settling in Philadelphia where they became part of the new Emmanuel MBC. Later, Maurice found work with the Chester Times in the city of Chester and they moved to 814 West 11th Street.

Delaware County, just south of Philadelphia, was experiencing a population explosion. The rapid industrialization of the area brought workers to new factories. From 1910 to 1930, Delaware County grew from 118,000 to 280,000, an increase of 140%. The city of Chester saw its population increase from 38,000 to 58,000 in the decade from 1910 to 1920. Of the first 37 people baptized in the new mission in Chester, only 12 were even born in Pennsylvania.

Maurice and Blanche continued to commute to their church home in Philadelphia. I am sure that at some point they listened to the preaching and reports of W. G. Gehman who was in charge of the Gospel Herald missions and the Gospel Heralds who led them.

I suspect it may have happened like this. Maurice and Blanche approached Gehman after a meeting and asked to talk to him. When they had opportunity for the conversation, they probably suggested that Chester would be a great place to start a new work. They would have told him about the bustling streets and new houses. Perhaps Gehman made an appointment to come to visit them and see Chester for himself. We can't be sure how the conversation unfolded. What we can be sure is that Maurice and Blanche Hartzell were the human contact around which began a new work in Chester, Pennsylvania. And we can be sure that Gehman was eager to open new works. In 1925 alone, he oversaw 5 tent meetings, two in Jersey City, NJ, one in Harrisburg, one in Lancaster and one in York. And we can be sure that in the late summer of 1926, the Gospel Heralds began ministry in the city of Chester.

New works began with the assigning of Gospel Heralds. They came, held meetings, and waited for results. If there were significant results, the work would move to a more permanent stage.

The first Gospel Herald to come to Chester was probably Webster Stengele who came with his family in Gospel Herald fashion. A big tent for meetings was set up with a smaller tent for housing nearby.



Webster Stengele and Family in Chester

The tent meetings followed the evangelistic methods of the day. These evangelistic methodologies were rooted in an approach innovated by Charles Finney about 80 years earlier. This approach had been honed and perfected by the big name evangelists like D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday. Under the big tent, there would be lively singing and preaching followed by a convincing invitation to come and trust in Jesus as savior. Those who responded to the invitation would be counseled, prayed with and prayed for. They would be gathered together into classes, following a Methodist model for spiritual care which encouraged prayer, nourished growth and provided accountability.



First tent meetings in Chester

The tent meetings in Chester were apparently quite successful because within a few month steps were taken to move the work to the next level, the formation of a mission. A more permanent accommodation was found when a home was rented at 1104 West 7th Street. A building had obvious advantages over a tent. It would provide a place to hold meetings and to house the Heralds. This home was quickly replaced within a month or two when a more adequate facility was located about four blocks away at 721 West 7th Street. The report to Annual Conference for that year stated, "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 for many." (1926 Yearbook, page 34)



721 West Seventh Street

Eugene George was appointed the lead Gospel Herald for the Chester Mission. He was born and raised in Monroe County, Pennsylvania. He was 26 at the time of his appointment and had served previously in the Lebanon mission. Brother George, as everyone called him, was unmarried like many of the Gospel Heralds. He was joined by the 18 year old Arthur M. Sprock. Sprock was a product of the Gospel Herald Mission in Jersey City, NJ. Filling out the team was Chester O. Reed, a 19 year who came to the Gospel Heralds from the work in Shamokin. Reed was at Chester for nearly three years after which he was transferred. Sadly, he died in 1930 of natural causes. W. W. Hartman, one of the four Hartman brothers who served as pastors in the MBC, was assigned to the Chester work shortly after its inception.

This eager group of Heralds settled into their home at 721 West 7th Street and began an aggressive ministry of evangelism and discipleship that brought living stones to the church that Jesus was building in Chester. By day, they went to the homes in the surrounding neighborhoods to sell the Gospel Heralds which provided both a witness for Jesus and income for them and which, perhaps more importantly, allowed them to meet the people they had been sent to reach. By night, they led their meetings with lively singing, preaching and invitations to believe in Jesus.



Sprock, Hartman, Reed, George

The work of the Gospel Heralds in Chester had several observable characteristics:

1. Their evangelism was aggressive. Having secured the facility at 721 West 7th Street, they did not take up residence and wait for people to come. They went to the people. They sold the Gospel Heralds from door to door wearing out lots of shoe leather and seeking a hearing for a testimony about Jesus. They held street meetings at 6th and Market on busy shopping nights when a crowd could be gathered to hear the music and the preaching. They continued to hold tent meetings. In the summer of 1927, they held tent meetings at 8th and Lloyd even though the meetings were only about four blocks from the mission building.

2. Their evangelism was Germanic. Early core families were named Hartzell, Lindermath, Reichenbach, and Griest. Mrs. Carolyn (Keller) Harlan, who was another early convert, was a German immigrant who was a close friend of Mrs. Laura Reichenbach. Their most intimate conversations were in the German language.

3. Their evangelism was heavily geared to children. One of the strongest aspects of the ministry in the Chester mission was its outreach to children. Many of those who remember the early ministry and the personal impact of Brother George speak of him as though he were a sort of Pied Piper. R. C. Reichenbach says of 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 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 and sleep in the straw with us and we loved those times.

Norman Harris, one of the children reached in these early years, remembers how the

youthful Gospel Heralds came to play baseball and football in the vacant lot across the street from the mission. The young boys loved playing their games with the Heralds. A number of them came to Christ as a result of the relationships that developed.

While some of the children reached in these early days drifted away, many of them stayed and grew to maturity and even entered ministry in some form.

4. Their evangelism was rooted in the neighborhoods around the church. Plotting the homes of the early members of Grace Church shows that they lived around and near the church. The stories of how members came to new life in Christ often include mention of neighbors who gave invitations and provided transportation to church meetings.

5. Their evangelism was personal. While evangelistic meetings did bring people to the Lord, many came to the Lord through conversations with neighbors. The Griest family was unusual in their response. During evangelistic meetings at the church, the entire family responded to an invitation. The response was genuine and lasting in each member of the family. It seems the greater numbers came through personal contacts. E. R. Lindermuth had an influence on those who worked for him in his store. One of those was Bud Spedden who became part of the church and served as Sunday School superintendent and for a number of years as the delegate to Annual Conference.

The Gospel Herald Mission in Chester was clearly a success. In May, 1927, they began a Sunday School with sixteen people in attendance. The Sunday School was another important step on the road to becoming a full fledged church.

Sunday School was a step beyond evangelism that continued evangelism and moved into discipleship as the word of God was taught to the eager children and adults.

On October 2, 1927, the new mission celebrated its first fruits in a baptism held in the Delaware River near the dock of the Chester Ferry which is today located beneath the Commodore Barry Bridge. Seven people were baptized.



Baptism - October 2, 1927

A second baptism in the Delaware River was held on April 29, 1928. Among the ten persons baptized that day were 3 future preachers and 2 pastors wives. Three of the families represented that day would be significant to the ministry of Grace Church.

R. C. Reichenbach, one of the future pastors baptized on this special day, remembers it

very well.

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.

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. In 1910, while living in Auburn, he 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 Hohls in Marcus Hook. Elmer was by now a foreman at the Congoleum plant. Later they moved to their own home at 35 West 10th Street. During a crisis in his health, Elmer met with Brother George who led him to trust Christ as his savior. 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 entered the ministry 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 and has given valuable leadership to Grace Church. The Lindermuths were baptized together as a family and became a backbone family for Grace Church. They 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 served for many years as treasurer of Grace Church.



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

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 for the Baldwin Locomotive Works. He was married to Laura. Together they had three children, Wilmer, Harold and Robert. Harold died within a few months of his birth of 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 Herald 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.

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, Clarence, Donald and Willard. Mary had already known the heartbreak of death. She was the daughter of Oscar and Catherine Taylor, but her father too 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 at 713 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 Herald and 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 ministry. Donald was a significant leader in the development of the new doctrinal statements of the church during the 1960's.



R. C. Reichenbach



C. E. Kirkwood



Willard and Donald Kirkwood

Following the April 29, 1928 baptism, another baptism was held 3 months later for 16 people. In 1928, the young mission celebrated 26 baptisms. Clearly, Chester was fertile soil for a church seeking to take root.

By 1930, the facilities were becoming inadequate. The Yearbook reported, "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 people." (1930 Yearbook, page 47) The Brosius brothers of Sunbury were hired to raise the roof and make more room. Windows were brought from the Bethlehem Church and installed to make it look like a church.



After the make over, 1930

The aggressive outreach of the church did not abate. A decision was made to start a new work in nearby Trainer, a community just south of Chester. The same process was followed. Tent meetings were held, a building was rented, and Sunday School classes were begun. The Sunday School classes in Trainer were held in the afternoon to allow the teachers to serve in both places.

The outreach meetings continued. In 1932, meetings were being held in Chester, Trainer, Upland and Wilmington. The report to Annual Conference was full of enthusiasm and encouragement because of the success of the work in Delaware County:

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



Baptism, Ridley Creek, May, 1932

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. (1932 Yearbook, page 35)

In 1932, another notable baptism was held for 17 people. On this occasion, the baptism was moved inland to be held in the Ridley Creek, near Brookhaven. This occasion of baptism involved many of those who had been reached in Trainer.

Each of these attempts to reach out with new missions ended differently. The work in Upland never seemed to go anywhere and nothing much was heard from it. The work in Wilmington showed a great deal of initial success but eventually was closed. E. W. Bean headed the work and was later replaced by E. George. The work was moved several times in its short life which may have contributed to its demise. The work in Trainer might have succeeded, some thought, on its own. However, a decision was made to combine that work into the Chester Mission.

By 1933, the Chester Mission had put down its roots and was moving on. The 1933 report to Annual Conference was another of progress and accomplishment.

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.

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. (1933 Yearbook, page 36)

In 1933, Rudy Gehman was appointed as the lead Gospel Herald. He was replaced three years later by Ernest B. Hartman. In 1936, the Chester Church seated delegate Maurice Hartzell in the Annual Conference and Hartman was recognized



Rudy Gehman (right) and Sunday School Staff

for ordination. The mission had become a church. The ministry continued to thrive.

The children who had been part of the church since its beginning were coming to adulthood as World War II began. The close relationships of these children were now to be undone as they began to scatter. Some went off to war, choosing to serve some form of conscientious objection or to take up arms. Some went off to Christian service. Significant changes were coming to the church.

The church had drawn from the city's closest neighborhoods but the end of WW II meant that people were more likely to drive into the church from farther away. The children who had formed such a significant part of the ministry were now adults. Those who were still in the church were buying homes outside of the immediate area around the church. The church was having a wider impact and beginning to draw people who did not live in Chester. Some of the older members who lived nearby were no longer able to maintain their homes. Grace Church was getting bigger and wider. It would no longer have the close connections of the neighborhoods to bind it together.

Following the ministry of E. B. Hartman, J. B. Henry came to lead the flock. He was replaced by John Golla who gave vibrant leadership that brought even more growth. During his ministry, another significant remodeling project was undertaken to provide more room. A new entrance and boiler room were constructed. Golla was replaced by Willard E. Cassel. After Cassel came John A. Riggall.



Remodeled, 1942

Under the ministry of Jack Riggall, the changes that were coming to the church brought a re-evaluation of the facilities. The leadership became aware that the building that had served it so well in Chester could no longer accommodate the growing ministry. A search for a new location was begun. They looked to the southwest of Chester in Chichester but nothing seemed right.

A property was located north of the city in Nether Providence Township in an area called Wallingford. Dr. Wally Journey, one of the young men who had grown up in the church, had moved with his wife Norma into one of the new developments that were beginning to be built in the area. He became aware of a property on Providence Road that had fallen into disrepair. The original part of the house on the grounds had been built in 1839 and belonged to one of the Sharpless families who were some of the earliest settlers in Nether Providence. In 1912, the land had been purchased by Dr. Walter Roberts who had nearly doubled the size of the original stone house with frame additions. From 1941 until the time the church purchased the land, three different

families lived in the home. The church desired to purchase more of the available land but the owners were unwilling to sell more. The land the church wanted to buy ultimately was sold to developers who built the houses that now surround the church property.

In order to purchase the new property, the church would need to sell its property on 7th Street and move into temporary quarters. The decision was made. For 3 years, Grace Church made its home in the Chester YMCA. Holding services in the YMCA created demands on the people. They had to set up chairs for the services and store them after. In spite of the difficulties, the church actually grew in its temporary quarters.

In 1963, the new facility on Providence Road in Nether Providence Township was completed. A new era of ministry for Grace Church began.

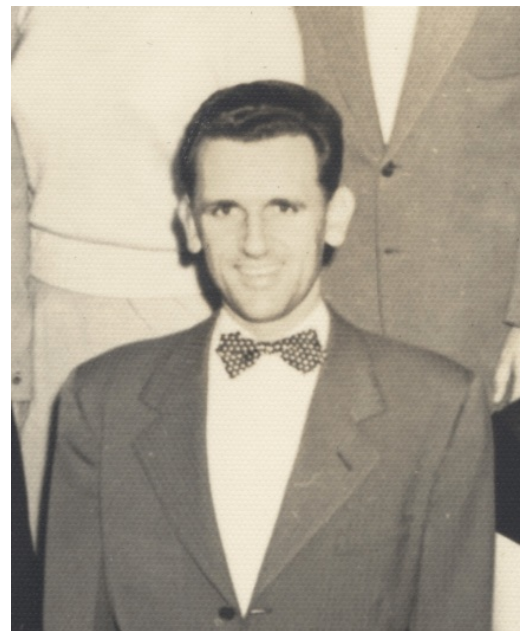
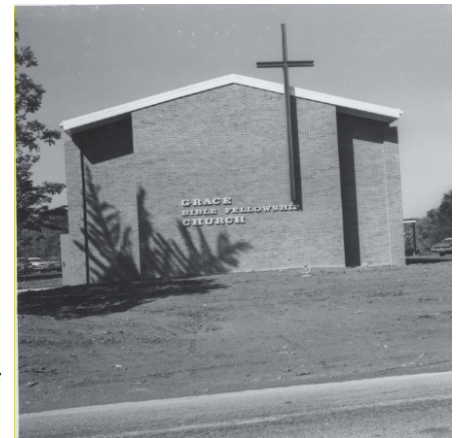
The changes that had begun during the final years in Chester now came in full force. The housing developments along Providence Road came quickly after the church building was completed. Now, Grace Church was a suburban commuting church. Very few of those who attended the church actually lived near. Gone were the neighborhood connections. Those who had been part of Grace Church were scattered throughout the area. People were willing to drive to be able to attend. While Grace Church was no longer a neighborhood church in Chester, it was not a part of the upper middle class neighborhoods that were growing up in Nether Providence. Yet, some of its most effective work began with the relocation.

The effectiveness of the work may have revolved around two men who were key at this point in the public ministry of the church.

Dr. Wally Journey had developed into a skilled teacher whose Sunday School classes were taught in the sanctuary to accommodate the numbers who attended. Wally had grown up in Grace. His parents had come to the church in



723 South Providence Road



Dr. Wally Journey

Chester after returning from serving as missionaries in Burma. They were dissatisfied with their church and were delighted with the ministry of Grace Church. Wally had served in WW II as a medic and returned from the war to attend college and medical school at the University of Pennsylvania. He had developed a successful practice and had a reputation as a sensitive caring physician and was beloved and respected by his patients. As a young man he had been very diligent in studying the Scriptures and had developed a teaching style that drew many. With his wife, Norma, he developed an extensive ministry of counseling which had ministered to many people in the church and out.



Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Kirkwood (center) at retirement

The other leader was also a son of the church, C. E. Kirkwood. Pastor Riggall had served the church for 8 years at a time when a 9 year time limit was in force. He had led the church through temporary quarters, a building program and relocation. When he left to begin ministry in York, Pastor Kirkwood was called in 1968. Kirkwood had grown up in the church. He began his life's ministry with the Gospel Heralds. He was a gifted teacher and preacher and had recognized leadership abilities. After serving as a pastor, he had been called to serve as the District Superintendent of the Bible Fellowship Church. He served the church from 1968 to 1974. During the years in which he served as pastor, the attendance in the Sunday peaked at nearly 300. He was an excellent administrator and provided leadership that involved the people of the church in a maximum way.

The numbers of people who were attending the Sunday School were beginning to fill available church building space. The original house was utilized for class rooms. A second dwelling on the north side of the church was purchased. It contained a full basement which was remodeled and converted for class room use.

Pastor Kirkwood's ministry was followed for a brief time by that of David Branning who was in turn replaced by William A. Heffner. During these pastorates, the demands of running a Sunday School in three buildings were becoming more difficult. Just before 1980, a decision was made to add to the building in a way that would allow all classes to be held under one roof. It was also determined that a gymnasium should be constructed to provide for the active and vital youth ministry that had become part of the program. This new addition nearly tripled the space available for education and youth ministry.

Unfortunately, the cost of the new building overran the original financial projections of \$500,000.00 by \$300,000.00 plunging the church into a financial morass from which it

did not emerge for over 15 years.

I was called to serve as the pastor of Grace Church in September, 1982. Since 1982, Grace Bible Fellowship Church has continued its ministry. There were no more building projects nor dramatic events that brought some sort of decline or advance in the ministry. Of the time since



1982, there is simply little to tell. However, Grace Bible Fellowship Church has seen significant change as have many other churches. These changes tell the story of God's work in the last 25 years.

1. Programs to people - In 1982, the church was highly programmed for its ministry. Many committees functioned to accomplish many tasks. Over the years, the programs have receded to be replaced by a focus on relationships. In some ways, relationships were the heart of the church when it began. People were drawn to people in relationships that were sincere and committed. While the church has not returned to its neighborhood feel, relationships are what draw and hold people.
2. Pastor to ministry support staff - Grace Church had experience with multiple staff before 1982. However, in 1982 the budget allowed for a single pastor. Since that time, the church has been able to call several to serve who have made significant contributions. At the time of this writing, the ministry support staff includes 3 full time pastors, 2 part time directors of children's and teen ministry, an office manager and a sexton. The demand for multiple staff comes not so much from the numbers of people who attend but the changing demands of leadership and pastoral ministry. The need for pastoral and personal care have grown as the complexity of modern life and schedule have placed greater stress on individuals and families. The leadership structure has changed from a pyramid to a web which requires greater availability and interaction of the leadership.
3. Choir to Worship Teams - Grace Church has had a great heritage of musical ability and is even now blessed with musical gifts. Like many other churches, Grace has experienced the turmoil of changing worship styles. While the organ is not used much and rare are choral presentations, yet the musical giftedness continues. Grace Church has 20 or more people who are involved in its worship teams who guide the worship services.
4. Elder Rule to Pastoral Care - The role of elder in 1982 was that of leadership and oversight. Elders were expected to chair committees and participate in decision making. Their meetings at that time were primarily dedicated to facilities and

maintenance. Over the years the role of the elder and the expectation of the congregation has changed. Now, elders are often the primary contact for pastoral concerns and prayer. Elder meetings include prayer and discussion about the needs of people and how best to care for them.

What began in Chester in 1926 is continuing in Wallingford 80 years later. The ministry of the church has changed as the world has changed. What is significant is what has not changed - the needs of people and God's ability to meet those needs.