

130 Years In Fleetwood

(This is not a Cadillac)

James E. Mortland

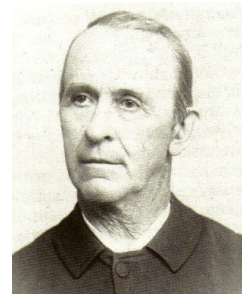
The Historical Society of the Bible Fellowship Church

Fleetwood, Pennsylvania

October 28, 2006

The later half of the 1860's marked a period of turmoil in the United States. The bloody Civil War had ended and people were attempting to return their lives to a degree of order and harmony. While the war had disrupted the economic and political life of the country, it had also caused disruption in the religious life in both the North and South. Pennsylvania, which had suffered great hardships during the war, was not exempt from this problem. Just prior to this period, a group of Pennsylvania Mennonite preachers began to recognize that there was a need to reawaken the call to evangelism in eastern Pennsylvania. They started to spread the gospel into the areas around Coopersburg, Quakertown, and Fogelsville.

On November 1, 1869, one of these men, William S. Gehman was given charge of two small Evangelical Mennonite missions, one in Fleetwood, and the other in what is now Zionsville, PA. At first the Fleetwood church met in a building that had a prior life as a whisky distillery, but within one year, the mission was meeting in a small, brick building built by the church's delegate on North Richmond Street. This group met together until 1890 when, for reasons not known to this day, relations were severed. This church continues to exist in Fleetwood and is now known as Fleetwood Bible Church (Austin P. Shelly, Anniversary Days, Historical Sketch Fleetwood PA, page 2).



In the late 1890's the Spirit moved and meetings started again. There was no permanent meeting place, but the church met in a hotel room rented by Brother and Sister Wentz for \$7.00 a month. During this time, Fleetwood was in a circuit with Reading, Blandon, and Athol. All shared Rev. J.G. Shireman as

pastor. For the first few years, there was no building. But, in 1901, Brother and Sister Wentz donated land on Elm Street to hold meetings. A tent was used at first, but very shortly

thereafter, a building was raised on the site, which was in use until 1950 when the present structure was built (Shelly, page 3).

The first pastor in the new location was E.N. Cassel. Rev Cassel was not involved in the building of the new church but was the first pastor assigned by Annual Conference. At this same time, 1901, there was a reorganization of the circuits and Fleetwood, Blandon, and Terre Hill were combined in one circuit sharing the same pastor. These churches worked together and members traveled weekly to the various churches as services were rotated between the locations (Interview with Robert Hummel September 2006). Older members of the church have fond memories of taking the trolley down to Blandon when the services were held there, or during winter bundling up in their parent's touring cars for the long, cold trip, or hot and dusty treks to Terre Hill in the summer months (Hummel, September 2006). If any Sunday was not the scheduled day for your church's worship service, you could also stay for prayer meetings at your "home" church (Interview with Glenna Faust, August 2000). This warm fellowship continued between the three churches up until 1947 when Terre Hill had their own pastor assigned, and with Blandon until 1959.



From 1901 to 1923, Fleetwood had nine different pastors. Most served less than five years. Notable among these men was B. Bryan Musselman who served as pastor from 1913 to 1918. B. Bryan was responsible for initiating the purchase of the first parsonage located at 119 N. Richmond Street in 1915. He later served as Pastor at the Reading church and in 1920 became the Pastor at Bethel Church in Allentown. He held this position for twenty-five years.



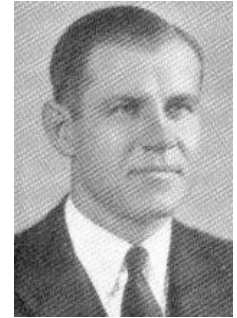
Mr. and Mrs. B. Bryan Musselman

From 1918 to 1923, G.F. Yost was the Pastor. According to those who remember him, he was a good preacher of the gospel. He was not an eloquent man, but he could clearly convince men that they were sinners and had a desperate need of a Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ (Hummel interview). During the second

decade of the church's existence in Fleetwood, average attendance at Sunday school went from 30 in 1910 to 85 in 1920. In 1925, the average Sunday school attendance was 83.

In 1923, A.G. Woodring became pastor. He served the church until 1945 and was Faith Church's longest serving pastor. Woodring was very much interested in reaching out with the gospel to the surrounding communities. In 1932, he started a mission into Kutztown.

These meetings were held in the Kutztown fire hall, the town hall, Grange Hall, F.O.E. Hall, and other places. Meetings continued well into the 1940's. In addition, for at least two weeks every year, outside evangelists were invited in to speak at the church and the others in the circuit for evangelistic crusades. At one baptismal service during this period, forty-five people were baptized (Faust interview). During Woodring's period of service here, the church continued to grow, and in the 1934, the building on Elm Street was enlarged and remodeled. Sunday school attendance averaged about 170 people. The mission to Kutztown was exciting. Workers from the Fleetwood Church would drive, or if no other transportation was available, walk to the Fire Hall (Faust interview). Often men came to Kutztown right from work. Frequently, Rev. B.B. Musselman would bring a forty-member male choir from Allentown down to sing (Hummel interview).



World War II put a strain on everyone. There was some division within the conference about



military service. A large number of men held to the traditional Mennonite non-service ideas while others served in the military. At war's end, Faith had a new pastor, Rev. J. B. Henry. The churches in the Fleetwood, Blandon, and Terre Hill Circuit continued to grow. In 1947, Terre Hill had grown large enough to have its own pastor and in the fall of the year left the circuit. The circuit was renamed the Fleetwood, Blandon, and Kutztown Circuit with churches in Fleetwood and Blandon.

Church attendance was growing considerably during the immediate post war era. By 1948, seating was becoming a severe problem in the Elm Street church, even though it had been enlarged only fourteen years earlier. In October 1948, the search started for a new location for a church building. The church already owned a piece of property on Washington Street in Fleetwood, but the lot size was too small to accommodate a building and the required parking.

There was no property adjacent to the lot that was available for purchase. However, property did become available just a short distance down South Richmond Street at the corner of Cedar Street. Clayton Weber, one of the elders in the church, served as building contractor and generously contributed towards the process of the construction. During the planning process,



there was some concern whether or not the church could afford to purchase and build a new facility. Many members felt that the debt load would be crushing. Nevertheless, the property was purchased and ground was broken on May 5, 1949 for the present building. Construction was a real community project. Many of the men of the church would come home from their jobs in the evening and on weekends and contribute their labor towards the erection of the building. Even the pastor pitched in. On August 21, 1949, the cornerstone was laid. The cornerstone contained a small Bible, a list of current members, copies of the groundbreaking and cornerstone laying programs,

and a copy of the Kutztown Patriot for the week of August 21. By February 1950, the exterior of the building was completed, and on March 5, the first service was held in the church basement. By May 1950, the building was complete and a dedication service was held on May 14, 1950. A week of special meetings was held to celebrate the new church building. Some of the speakers during this week of celebration were Reverends, E.N. Cassel, F.M. Hottel, G.F. Yost, A.G. Woodring, J.E. Hartman, and H.B. Musselman.

In October 1950, Pastor Henry left the church to become assistant to the General Secretary of the Africa Inland Mission (Reading Eagle August 16, 1950). He would later become the President of Africa Inland Mission. His replacement was Rev. C.E. Kirkwood, who served as pastor until 1954. In 1954, T.D. Gehret who had previously been the Presiding Elder of the Bethlehem District became pastor. The Lord continued to prosper the work. And on May 15, 1955, the mortgage was burned on the new property. During Rev. Gehret's period of service, the old parsonage at 119 N. Richmond Street was sold and a new parsonage was constructed at the corner of S. Richmond and Pine Streets. This is still in use as the parsonage.

In the mid 1950's a bus ministry for the Sunday school started. This served the surrounding townships of Richmond, Ruscomb Manor, Oley, and Pricetown. The bus ministry was very successful in reaching children who would not otherwise hear the Gospel. This success gave the

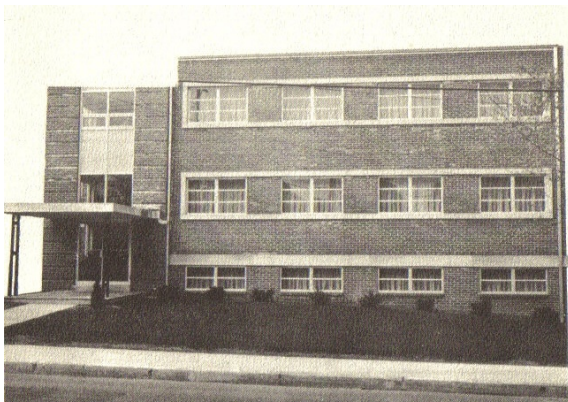
church the pleasant problem of not having enough space in the new church for the program. Something had to be done; the elders and congregation sought a solution through prayer. In January 1957, the board learned that the house next door to the church might be available. Inquiries were made and the house was purchased in May 1957 for use as a Sunday school annex. This building served this purpose for a few years without modification.

In January 1959, Trinity BFC in Blandon had grown to the point where it could support its own pastor. As a result, the old Fleetwood Blandon circuit was disbanded.

In 1962, Rev. T.D. Gehret resigned as pastor to become Presiding Elder of the Bible Fellowship Church. The new pastor, Rev. George Herb, was the first pastor called by the congregation instead of being appointed by a "stationing committee". Pastor Herb faithfully served up until 1970.



By 1963, the Faith Church was running into space problems. The Lord



had greatly blessed the Sunday school and bus ministry. Attendance was averaging between 250 and 300 per week. Space was at a premium. In addition, major repairs and maintenance were going to have to be performed on the annex in order to keep it useful. In January 1964, the church decided to demolish the annex and build an education building. Construction started in autumn 1964,

and on May 2, 1965, the new building was dedicated. At the same time and as part of the same project the opening of the balcony in the sanctuary was enlarged and a new foyer was constructed to tie the education wing to the rest of the existing building. This is how the building looks to this day.

In October 1970, Rev. Herb resigned, and Austin G. Shelly became pastor. The Lord continued to bless the work and outreach at Faith Church. At this time, the bus ministry in the Sunday school had grown to the point that the church was using two buses to pick up children from around the community. The church was growing and facilities were again starting to get

crowded. In January 1976, the property next door, on S. Richmond Street became available, but the congregation decided not to purchase the property. By this time, it was difficult for late arrivals to get a seat in the sanctuary for the worship service. The pews were crowded and often families had to separate in order to have any seat at all.

In May 1976, the Elders decided that the best course of action would be to establish a sister church in Oley Township. A poll of the membership revealed that approximately two-thirds of the congregation would support such a move. By August 1976, a group of charter members for the Oley church had met and plans were under way to start up the work in October of the year. Agreement was made that the "Oley Charter" members would not have to serve on any of the committees in Faith Church so they would be able to dedicate themselves to the work in Oley Township. In October 1976, the Elders passed a resolution to be presented to Annual Conference to recognize the Church at Oley and be authorized to extend a call for a pastor when it became possible. By November 1977, New Life Bible Fellowship Church had started meeting in Oley and had their own pastor in their own building.

The area around Fleetwood was changing. With the completion of Interstate 78 across northern Berks County and Route 422 between Douglassville and Philadelphia, the demographics of the region had shifted. No longer were the Pennsylvania Germans a dominant culture. The area was becoming more cosmopolitan. Many strangers were moving into the area bringing in new ideas and different attitudes both into society in general and into the church in particular. In the early 1980's attitudes within the church started changing. People were used to cooperating with one another, and most people agreed on how things should be done and how to go about it. However, many people were moving into the area bringing new ideas and attitudes regarding church. These new attitudes began to have an effect on Faith Church. The church stopped growing. Prior to the development of New Life BFC in Oley, Faith Church was growing slowly but steadily; its major limitation continued to be the amount of space available. After Oley left, even after accounting for the families that left to form New Life BFC, Fleetwood never wholly recovered. There was a steady decline in membership. In addition, tension and acrimony arose between the Elders and within the congregation.

In April 1982, Pastor Shelly resigned from the pastorate at Faith Church. The church was without a pastor until July 1983, when Rev. Robert Stringfellow was called to serve as pastor. He assumed his duties in August 1983, but in January 1985, after just sixteen months at

Fleetwood, he resigned. The church was again without a pastor until late in 1985, when Rev. Frank L. Herb assumed the ministry at Faith Church. This period in the 1980's had a dramatic effect on the whole church. Many hard working, faithful members of the church left during this tumultuous period. Pastor Herb retired from the ministry in August 1990, but graciously agreed to stay as pastor until the church called a replacement. In March 1991, the current pastor, R.J. Brush assumed this area of ministry.

Throughout the 1990's the bus ministry gradually declined. A greater number of parents, who did not themselves attend church on a regular basis, saw no need to give their children any type of religious education. As a result, in the late 1990's the bus ministry was discontinued.

Tensions have continued within the church almost to the present day. As the culture of the area changed, the membership of the church seemed to change also, but many in the church, at times, have been reluctant to accept the change in the demographics. Many were just stubborn and did not want to adjust to any change. Happily, this situation appears to be corrected. Faith Church now appears to be growing again although there are difficulties. We are looking forward to reaching out into the community with the gospel.

Note: You may be wondering, why the subtitle? In 1909, the Fleetwood Metal Auto Body Company was founded in Fleetwood just down the street from the church. Many of the men in the early church worked in the plant. Shortly before the 1929 stock market crash, General Motors bought Fleetwood Metal Auto Body, and merged it into Fisher Body Division. The plant in Fleetwood closed down shortly thereafter. The name, though, carried on until the early 21st century as the Cadillac Fleetwood, General Motor's top-of-the line car.

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Interview with Glenna Faust, August 2006

Interview with Robert Hummel, September 2006

Photo credits:

Page 1: W.S. Gehman; The Bible Fellowship Church, Bible Fellowship Historical Society, Bethlehem PA 1992

Page 2: Elm Street Church; Glenna Faust, Fleetwood PA

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Page 3: A.G. Woodring; The Bible Fellowship Church, Bible Fellowship Historical Society, Bethlehem PA 1992

Page 3: J.B. Henry; The Reading Eagle, Reading PA August 16, 1950

Page 4: Members working on new church building, Archives of Faith Bible Fellowship Church, Fleetwood PA

Page 5: Education annex, Archives of Faith Bible Fellowship Church, Fleetwood PA

Page 5: New education building, Archives of Faith Bible Fellowship Church, Fleetwood PA