

# Church on the Move: The History of Whitehall BFC

By Rachel Schmoyer, October 30, 2021

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In 1993, the congregation members joined hands and stood around the brick porch support in front of the glass door of the former hobby shop in Whitehall. As the group prayed together, a million thoughts rushed through their heads. Was buying this building the right thing to do? How long would it take to make the hobby shop look like a church? Thank the Lord for this big parking lot!

Moving Bethany Bible Fellowship Church from Catasauqua to Whitehall was a big step of faith, but it wasn't the first or the last big move the congregation would make. From its beginning, Northampton Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church which is known today as Whitehall BFC has been a church on the move, not just in physical locations, but also in following the Spirit's guidance.

## How the Northampton Class Started

According to the opening pages of the first quarterly conference records in 1893, there were five key groups of people who brought the Northampton class into being.

### Elmira Steinmetz

Sister Elmira Steinmetz became a member of one of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ classes in the Allentown area. She shared the gospel with her neighbors and "it was through her influence that others were enlightened of the Sanctification of baptism, too." Elmira also regularly hosted the small Catasauqua class in her home.

We don't know a lot about Elmira Driesbach Steinmetz, but she does have one claim to fame. In 1860, when she was five years old, she lived in Illinois and met Abe Lincoln. Elmira and her siblings remember climbing onto his lap and chatting with him in Pennsylvania German.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mcall.com/news/mc-xpm-2004-02-15-3523550-story.html>; Born in the Lehigh Valley, in 1858, her father moved the family west and temporarily resided in the DeWitt Hotel in Clinton, Illinois. In 1860, when Elmira was five years old, Abraham Lincoln was passing through town campaigning for the presidency. At the hotel, Abe Lincoln heard the Driesbach kids speaking in Pennsylvania German and asked mom and dad if he could talk to them. Christiana Driesbach (mom) said yes. Lincoln pulled up a chair and joined in their conversation in Pennsylvania German. Elmira and her siblings remember climbing onto his lap. The visit is well-documented because every year on Lincoln's Birthday they would retell the tale for the local newspapers.

Elmira was married to Jacob Steinmetz. Jacob worked for more than fifty years at Atlas Portland Cement in the Northampton plant as did many, many people in Northampton.<sup>2</sup>

### Mrs. Glasser

The second influential person in the start of the Northampton class is the evangelist Mrs. Glasser. In the fall of 1891 she held a series of meetings at a church in Catasauqua. W.B. Musselman, pastor in the Allentown class, and some of his people attended and a “goodly number were sanctified and made application for baptism.” W.B. Musselman organized a follow-up meeting at Applegate Hall<sup>3</sup> in Catasauqua, preached, and then baptized seventeen people. I was unable to find out any more about Mrs. Glasser. I don’t even know her first name! She came and went, but her influence was a marked point in the start of our church.

### Reuben Smith

Some of the people who were baptized were from Coplay. They asked W.B. Musselman to come and continue to preach to them in the home of Reuben and Sarah Smith. One of the people who was probably meeting at the Smith home was Thomas Rutman.

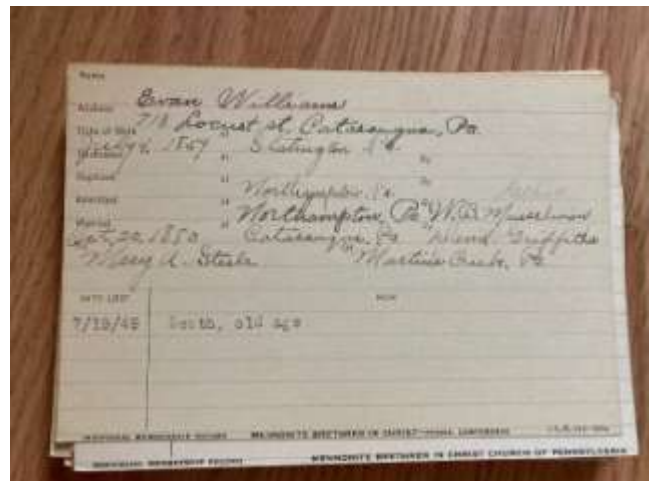
### Thomas Rutman

Thomas Rutman appears on the original deed of the Northampton church building as one of the trustees. The Rutman family was prominent in the area. Thomas’ brother John was a lock tender on the Lehigh Canal at Hokendauqua and was well-known in Lehigh and Northampton County.<sup>4</sup> His family reads like a who’s-who of Northampton and Lehigh County. His siblings married Troxells and Newhards and Kuhns.

Thomas Rutman is also an early example of how the BFC keeps things in the family. Thomas married Mary Smith, Reuben Smith’s daughter. Thomas’ nephew Elmer J. Rutman became a pastor in the MBC.<sup>5</sup> Although Thomas Rutman is one of the early members of the Northampton class, he does not stay long.

### Williams Family

Another group that joins the Northampton class is the group meeting for Bible study and prayer at Evan William’s home in Cementon. Cementon is in Whitehall just across the Lehigh River from Northampton and was called Siegfried’s Ferry in 1890 which is when we first hear about the group meeting in the Williams’ home.



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Elmira’s father became a chaplain during the Civil War, but died of one of the camp diseases. Christiana Dreisbach moved back to the Lehigh Valley with her children.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/50825452/obituary-for-jacob-steinmetz-aged-74/>

<sup>3</sup> I’ve not been able to find out where or what this hall was. The handwriting is hard to read in places on the quarterly conference minutes from 1896.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/9959319/john-r-rutman-obituary/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/72546410/elmer-james-rutman>

The Williams family was not only instrumental in the beginning of the church, but stays active in the church for generations. For example, Ruth Williams who joined the Gospel Workers in 1922 was part of this Williams family. Ruth's sister, Irene Williams, had a daughter named Peg who married Bob Davies. Peg and Bob stayed in the church until its Catasauqua days when they moved to Bethel BFC in Emmaus. Bob and Peg's son, Larry, and his wife Michele are BFC missionaries.

### Official Organization and Building

In April 1892, the Quarterly Conference held in Bethlehem officially organized a class for Elmira Steinmetz's friends, the converts from Mrs. Glasser's evangelistic meeting, and the home groups from the Smith family and the Williams family to worship together.

A. B. Gehret was appointed to be the pastor of the class which added a third class to his circuit which already included Bethlehem and Catasauqua. Three classes is a lot for one man so Wilson Steinmetz is the first assigned preacher for the Northampton class.

In June of 1892 the Bethlehem conference provided funding to build a building. On October 28, 1892 a lot was purchased on 17<sup>th</sup> and Main Street for \$125 from Dr. Clinton Sieger and his wife Catherine.<sup>6</sup> Until the building could be built, the congregation met under a tent. Six months later on January 1, 1893, the building was built and ready for its first week of services. The building was plain with only one large room. There was a pot belly stove on each side, an outhouse at the rear of the building, and an outside

well with a pump. There were no musical instruments at this time, but the worship services were punctuated with the train whistle. The pastors learned to pause their sermon and wait until the train went by before speaking.



### Dedication Day

New Year's Day, 1893 was the first service at the Northampton MBC building. Presiding Elder W.B. Musselman and preacher A.B. Gehret spoke three times that day. The first service launched several weeks of nightly revival services at 7:30 pm. The newspaper advertisement boasted that "Great victory is expected on this day." And I'm sure there was great victory. If we were to attend a service like this today, we would say it's too

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Sieger was a prominent doctor in the area who went to medical school at Muhlenburg College. Dr. Sieger was an active member of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. I'm not sure why he sold the property or if there was any special connection that enabled us to get this property, but he also owned other property in Northampton including planned town lots on what is now Washington Ave.

charismatic. However, people were saved and started to attend the Northampton class! By the end of the 1893 there were 54 people enrolled in Sunday School.

The denomination was growing as well. In 1890, there were about 517 members in the Pennsylvania Conference of the MBC. Ten years later there were 901 members. The start of the Northampton class was part of that rapid growth.<sup>7</sup>

## Northampton Years

In the early years of the MBC, the pastors were assigned by the Presiding Elder. Each of these pastors is taking care of two or more churches on a circuit. One week they would preach in the morning at one church while the class leader took care of the service at the other church then they would flip-flop the next week. Sometimes there were three churches on a circuit. Throughout the time of the circuit, Northampton would be on a circuit with Walnutport or Nazareth or Catasauqua during the brief time a separate class was there. Quarterly, the classes on the circuit would have a joint meeting together with the Presiding Elder on a Sunday evening. The Presiding Elder would preach, give communion, lead the foot washing, and then have a business meeting to report on Sunday School attendance and offerings.

Here are the pastors of the early Northampton years and the years in which they came to the Northampton class:

*Wilson Steinmetz 1893*

As far as I can tell, Wilson is not related to the Elmira Steinmetz who was instrumental in bringing the Northampton class together. At least Wilson is not her husband or son.

*A.M. Clauser 1895*

Alfred Monroe Clauser was born in 1871 in Saegersville, Lehigh County. Growing up, his family manages a candy kitchen in the D.S. Wittwer building in Allentown. The Clauser Candy Kitchen was famous for its mouth-watering Clauser Bar. All the local shops had their candy. A.M. comes to know the Lord as his Savior in 1890. Then he studies for the ministry in the MBC. A.M. Clauser doesn't stay in the PA conference for very long. In 1901 he goes out to Illinois and Indiana to pastor and be district superintendent in the Missionary Church. He even opens the candy company in Indiana, too. His wife, Fanny, was A.B. Gehret's brother. Fanny's nephew was T.D. Gehret who is a preacher in the BFC, too, and is uncle to Doris Wire.



*A.M. Clauser*

*G.A. Campbell 1898*

G.A. Campbell fought in the Civil War. There was a rumor that he had killed a man in battle. G.A. Campbell was saved in 1876 at an evangelistic meeting where Jonas Musselman preached the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Shelly, p.156

<sup>8</sup> For more info on G.A. Campbell, see the paper written by Richard Taylor.  
<http://www.bfchistory.org/Campbell.htm>

*Lucy Musselman 1899*

Lucy is W.B. Musselman's mother and she gets excellent marks in the reading course set out for those desiring to be a licensed preacher. Lucy only stays a few months until the next preacher is assigned. There are several other women preachers in the MBC at this time, but this practice does not last long. The women are never called pastors, but are called licensed preachers. In 1898, the Gospel Worker's Society was created and the women who desired to be in full-time ministry were organized for street evangelism Salvation Army style in addition to printing work.<sup>9</sup>

*H.W. Feldges 1900*

H.W. Feldges was a member of the Gospel Herald Society which was a training program for men who wanted to enter the ministry. In 1904 he goes to Chile as a foreign missionary.<sup>10</sup> The 1934 yearbook says he is serving in Colombia.<sup>11</sup>

*L.F. Haas 1902*

*Wilson Steinmetz 1903*

*W.W. Zimmerman 1905*

*O.S. Hillegass 1908*

*V.H. Reinhart 1911*

*W.W. Zimmerman 1914*

It was during this time that several men from the church made a property improvement. They used a horse and scoop to dig out a new double outhouse. W.W. Zimmerman dug alongside the men of the church.

*A.G. Woodring 1917*

A.G. Woodring was a well-respected pastor. The church took up a collection to get him a bicycle. His suitcase of sermons are in the archives.

Growing Pains: the Long Quarterly Conference meeting

In the first three years of the Northampton church, Sunday School attendance was rapidly growing. In December of 1893, there were a total of 54 enrolled. In November of 1895, there are 73 total enrolled. In September of 1896, there are a total of 113 total enrolled, but this is when the growing pains break out into trouble.

On September 11, 1896, Presiding Elder W.B. Musselman was running late. At 7:00 pm, A.M. Clauser, pastor of the circuit, gets started without him by reading some scripture and W.B. takes over when he shows up. The impressive Northampton Sunday School statistics are approved and so is the treasury report. Then Brother John Dickert brings up that there "is trouble existing between Brothers Clauser and Rutman." Through the unusually transparent conference minutes, we find out the details of the trouble. Some members were giving offering money directly to the pastor as salary rather than giving the money first to Thomas Rutman who is the one appointed to take up and account for this collection.

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<sup>9</sup> Eventually the men in the Gospel Herald Society (like a training ground for young preachers who also take care of starting new missions) take over the evangelism work and the Gospel Workers are left with the printing work which moves out to Ohio with W.B. Musselman in charge. The printing house is still in operation today as Union Gospel Press.

<sup>10</sup> Wire, p.16

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1934.htm>

“Brother Musselman demanded an explanation” is the exact quote from the minutes.

One brother accused Rutman of using the money personally. Then Brother Rutman spoke up and brought charges of rude expressions against Brother Clauser and charges of jealousy against his wife, Fanny. Brother Clauser says he has tried to do his duty by Brother Rutman, but he neglects the meetings because of sickness in his family or because of his business. He doesn't keep his word when he promises to repair something around the church.

The discussion continued until Brother Rutman had enough.

“I'm resigning. There is no justice done.” And he left.

W.B. appointed a committee to continue to resolve the conflict.

“After earnestly exhorting the class to stand by their pastor, Brother Musselman closed the meeting in prayer.” The meeting was adjourned at 1:30am.

I can imagine the exhausted participants trudging home in the dark, stumbling into bed, yet lying awake, having a hard time settling down after all the hard words that were spoken, maybe even shouted, at the meeting. I can imagine the heaviness in their hearts the next day as they cooked, did farm chores, and worked at the cement mill, all the while worried about the division in their church family.

It took ten days for the committee of C.H. Brunner, H.B. Musselman,<sup>12</sup> and Abel Strawn to meet with Thomas Rutman at his house along with Reuben Smith and A.M. Clauser and Fanny Clauser. All parties confessed their errors and asked and received forgiveness. However, Reuben Smith and Thomas Rutman withdrew their connection.

I bring up this episode for several reasons, first of all, to show that painful times in church life are not new. But neither is the healing power of forgiveness.

Secondly, this episode shows that growing pains are not unusual when a church is on the move. This conflict hurt the growth of the three year old church. There were 112 in Sunday School the day of the conflict. The next quarter there are 78 and the quarter after that there are 58. Despite the decline, this episode was not the end of the church. I'm thankful for the remaining members who picked up and carried on in hope after the hard time.

Also, church conflict can refocus those who remain. After this episode there is an encouraging shift in the tone of the minutes. Instead of a dry report of numbers of attenders and how much offering was given, there are additional comments about the spiritual condition of the church. For example in October 1897, they qualify that the classes are “in good condition (spiritually) peace, love and unity existing.”

### Laypeople in Northampton

In contrast to the quick turn over of the pastors in the early years, there were faithful laypeople who provided stability and intimacy of fellowship in the congregation.

In the early 1900s, the Williams family moved from Cementon to Catasauqua, but continued to attend the Northampton class. The family made the easy four mile walk to church although they took the

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<sup>12</sup> the presiding elder's brother who will later go on to be a long time presiding elder himself

trolley when they could afford it. That wasn't easy when they were raising nine children on a dollar a day rolling mill worker salary.

### Deppe Family

In 1906, Alfred and Delilah Deppe joined the class. Alfred was a licensed lay preacher in the Leighton class before the family moved to Northampton. There were five Deppe children: Burton, Arthur, Clara, Esther, Russell.

Burton became a Christian in 1908 at the age of 14 when W.W.

Zimmerman was pastor. He remembers being baptized in December. "The slush and ice floating in the Northampton Canal did not deter the candidates or Pastor Zimmerman. Everyone shivered, but no one became sickened." Burton was elected trustee of the church when he was 15 years old.



Alfred Deppe, Pastor O. S. Billegren



Delilah Deppe

Arthur Deppe married Florence Henry who was the Sunday School Superintendent among other things at the church.<sup>13</sup> Arthur and Florence are Doris Wire's parents. Arthur was a long time class leader and delegate to conference. He was excellent with woodworking and mechanically inclined. He fixed so many pastor's and people's cars on his own time. Florence Deppe was also a generous person. Once she tore off a piece of her petticoat to provide a diaper for an unprepared visitor.<sup>14</sup>

Clara Deppe married Oliver Beil and were the parents of Pauline Beil and James Beil. James was a pastor in the BFC for 20 years and was the founding administrator at

what is now Fellowship Community.

Esther Deppe married Pastor T.D. Gehret who ministers for a long time in the denomination including a time as presiding elder.

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<sup>13</sup> The most well-known Florence Deppe story happens when Presiding Elder H.B. Musselman was preaching to the congregation. Here's how Doris Wire remembers it:

*H.B. had a forceful personality and was autocratic leader. He was strict in his self-discipline and expected others to be the same. Although all women were expected to wear hats to church, H.B. did not approve of wearing hats with feathers or any other expensive finery. Florence Deppe once wore a Stetson hat with a feather. H. B. said from the pulpit, "You should not spend money on expensive clothes or hats with a feather, like THAT one," pointing to her. "Instead the money should go to missions and the Lord's work." She answered, "I already paid for this hat and I gave to the missionaries, Now please go on with your sermon."*

<sup>14</sup> Wire p.31



These families and others were the hosts of Cottage Prayer Meetings, similar to today's small group meetings. The group would sing choruses in English or Pennsylvania Dutch. The class leader read and explained scripture. Everyone knelt to pray. Sometimes they would pray out loud all at the same time. This was called a season of prayer.<sup>15</sup> Faithful church member Oliver Bartholomew held Cottage Prayer Meetings in his home at 404 East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Northampton. His grandchildren Kathryn and Oliver Beil remembered the house being so full they had to sit on the steps. But they were still expected to give their complete attention!<sup>16</sup>

The close-knit church knew one another's needs and lifted them up in prayer. In 1922, four year old Vance Deppe got diphtheria and was not expected to live. After church on a cold night, Pastor Woodring, the Oplinger girls, the Williams girls, and Arthur Deppe stood outside the home wrapped in their big coats and prayed for several hours. Vance attributes his survival to their prayers.

After thirty years of pastors staying a short time, in 1923, H.K. Kratz is assigned to the church and stays for twenty years.

H.K. Kratz 1923

Harvey K. Kratz was born in Souderton in 1879. He became saved at the age of 21.<sup>17</sup> In 1904, he married Laura D. Gehman and they had two children. Sadly, Laura passed away young and in 1911, H.K. Kratz married Attie Schaden.<sup>18</sup> Brother Kratz entered the ministry in 1906 and became ordained in 1909.

H.K. held many different denominational positions including recording secretary of conference and the registrar which means he was known as faithful, reliable, and trustworthy. In his younger years, he was one of the Associate editors of The Gospel Banner. The paper noted that "his spicy contributions are well-known all around." Perhaps some of the spice had worn off by the time H.K. came to Northampton. Doris Wire was born while he was pastor and she simply remembers him and his wife as nice, elderly people. She can still hear the nasally way Mrs. Kratz would say "oh, Doris, how are you?" when they saw each other on Sundays. However her parents thought well of him and had him in their home often.

There are a few changes that come about when H.K. Kratz is pastor. In the 1930s a piano was introduced in worship. Music had been a part of worship since the beginning but it was sung acapella. Minnie Rinehart had been invited to church by her silk mill coworker Helen Oplinger. Within two year Minnie



*H.K. and Attie Kratz*

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<sup>15</sup> Wire p.24

<sup>16</sup> Wire p. 24

<sup>17</sup> The History of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church written in 1920

<sup>18</sup> Harvey Kratz Obituary, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/94367275/harvey-kulp-kratz>



trusted Christ as her Savior<sup>19</sup> and became the first piano player at Northampton MBC. Then the congregation learned how incorrectly they had been singing the songs from the Rose of Sharon Hymnbook.<sup>20</sup>

It was about this same time that the congregation stopped sitting with men on one side and women on the other.

Why did H.K. Kratz stay so long? Many MBC pastors stayed for a long time in the 1920s-1940s. One possible reason for the lack of moving in the 1930s and the 1940s was the cost of moving and inflation during the Great Depression and the War years.<sup>21</sup>

When H.K. Kratz is assigned elsewhere in 1943 for his last couple of years before retirement, the church is gearing up for more change.

D.E. Thomann 1943

From 1943-1945, D.E. Thomann comes to town with his three young children. Dave joins the men of the church to dig out a basement for a new heater and for two Sunday School classes and an indoor



bathroom. One day they had to remove the iron grate on the floor for the heater install. They forgot to cover the hole. One of Russell Deppe's boys ran down the aisle and fell right into the hole! He was alright, but it caused quite a stir.

A.M Sprock 1945

The post-World War II era brings in changes for the church at large as American society changes. Clubs and organizations pop up all over including the Menno Youth

Fellowship. This was for teens and young adults together. Northampton MBC kept minutes of these meetings from 1947-1962. They were home meetings with skits, Scripture readings, devotionals, games in which "great fun was had by all" and is meticulously recorded in the minutes. They talked about purity and being a backslider. They had special guest speakers like in 1961 Russ Allen, former NFL football player, pastor in the MBC, and Dave and Dan Allen's father.

The Women's Missionary Society was also active during this time. Although the church always had a heart for missions, this was a special way for the women to provide practical things like bandages and button cards to our missionaries overseas.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wire P. 32

<sup>20</sup> Wire p.33

<sup>21</sup> The Bible Fellowship Church, Harold Shelly, p.240

<sup>22</sup> Over time, the needs changed and by the time I came to Bethany BFC in 2009, WMS was holding monthly meetings with a missionary speaker and collecting offering for the missionary who came. WMS was disbanded around 2015 due to lack of attendance and because the organizers were getting older.



E.N. Cassel 1948

Next, E. N. Cassel, Carl Cassel's grandfather, was pastor from 1948-1951 as his last pastorate before retirement. E.N. Cassel is remembered as loving, fatherly, and highly-respected.

Denominationally this is when Berean Bible School begins and many of our pastors and other leaders graduate from this school including Jim and Pauline Beil. Pauline Beil directed the first VBS at Bethany BFC in 1956. They put up a large tent in the backyard and some neighborhood children came and joined the Sunday School from that event.

John Riggall 1951

John Riggall was instrumental in a big move for the Northampton congregation. When Jack came, Nazareth and Northampton were on a circuit together. It only took two months for him to realize that the churches would never grow with this schedule. He had a different idea. If one of the churches would do Sunday School first and then the service and the other would do the opposite, he thought he could

make it in time to leave the one church and drive the 15 miles to the other so he could be at both churches each week. John asked the District Superintendent for permission which was granted. He continued to alternate the Sunday evening services and when John was in Nazareth in the evening either James Beil or Donald Deppe would preach in Northampton. Both men were in Bible college at the time.<sup>23</sup>



233 Walnut St Catasauqua

Three changes during John Golla's time John Golla came in 1958 and during his three short years he navigated the congregation through three major changes. First of all, the denomination changed its name to Bible Fellowship Church<sup>24</sup>. Doris Wire mentioned that everyone seemed to handle the change well although she does remember one person

<sup>23</sup> The Lord had prepared John Riggall for this tiring schedule. It was nothing to him who had previously worked as a pastor/missionary in the mountains of Kentucky who regularly conducted five services each Sunday. He did mention that it was sometimes a challenge for his kids who had to go to two services and two prayer meetings and two youth groups. But overall it was a blessing to get to know people from both congregations.

<sup>24</sup> Sometimes the church was called Bethany and other times Ebenezer. I have not been able to find out a timeline of when it was called what since the official minutes always use the location name.

saying "I feel as though we let go of our heritage."

The second big change that John Golla navigated was the move from Northampton to Catsauqua.



*Catsauqua parsonage*

Why did the congregation move from Northampton? The congregation was no longer in a rural, minimally educated society. The society was more organized, well-educated. The plain building just wasn't cutting it anymore. The board was concerned about the lack of growth of the congregation, the limitations of the church building, and the limitations of being on a circuit.

In 1959, John Golla heard that the Evangelical Congregational Church at Limestone and 233 Walnut St in Catsauqua was up for sale. The brick building with a cathedral ceiling, steeple, and stained glass

window was grand. After some prayer and negotiations, they purchased the church building and the parsonage on December 22, 1959.<sup>25</sup> They turned the parsonage into two apartments so they could rent it out and pay off the debt from the building.

The Northampton MBC church was sold and was turned into a store. Eventually it was torn down to make way for a gas station. Now, if I have it right, the space is a parking lot for the Gin Mill restaurant.

The third big change under John Golla was that the Nazareth and Northampton churches petitioned conference to sever the circuit so each church could have their own pastor. Conference agreed. John Golla stayed in Nazareth while Alva Cassel was moved to the Catsauqua congregation.

Alva Cassel 1961

The ladies of the church got the upper apartment ready for the Cassel family. After their two daughters were born, they took over the whole parsonage. The Cassel family stayed until 1968. And they were a blessing to the congregation. Laura Ziegler Cassel was a wonderful musician with perfect pitch and taught the congregation how to actually sing!

During this time, the congregation acquired a second church building for \$1.00 from Emanuel Evangelical United Brethren who was merging with another congregation. The second building was at 701 Second St Catsauqua and was used for Sunday School classes, dinner meetings, and other large events. The large auditorium was used as a gym most notably when Joseph Wire started a Boys Club. Harold "Sonny" Fatzinger lived in the neighborhood and started to come to the Boys Club which he loved. As a young adult he and his wife, Cindy, returned to church with their four children and have remained faithful to this day as well as their grown daughter, Heather Royer. Their son Danny faithfully attends Northern Lehigh.

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<sup>25</sup> The June 1959 minutes show that 26 were in favor of moving to Catty and 6 were against.

Then the denomination's form of government changed to elder rule. The position of presiding elder was no more. There was no more stationing committee. Now the church would be able to choose their pastor after one last assignment.

#### Brian Butler 1968

In 1968 the Cassels moved on to a ministry in rural Maine. At conference, Arthur Deppe was asked if he would consider having a foreign pastor for a short time, Brian Butler from England. They held a season of prayer to ask the Lord's guidance and listened to a tape of his preaching and then the congregation said yes to this unusual appointment. Brian Butler attended seminary in the United States while pastoring. Mrs. Butler took initiative to reach out to the community of Catasauqua. She started a Bible study in the parsonage for neighbor ladies. She also started Pioneer Girls.

In 1971, the Butlers returned to England with Brian as a missionary/faculty member at Moorlands Bible College.

#### Roger Reitz 1971

Roger was passionate about starting a bus ministry, like many people were at this point in history. He also started Junior Church for the kids. Roger Reitz left in 1978 to go to Philadelphia with Church Extension.

#### Dave Thomann 1979

Although the young Dave Thomann was only at the church for a little under two years, there is tremendous growth in the church during his time there. Very quickly he gathered 20 people who wanted to be baptized and several months later 7 more people are baptized. Many of these people also joined the church as members. Pat Thomann prepared a marriage enrichment seminar for couples. The elders meeting minutes have a different tone during Dave Thomann's time as compared to the other pastors from the Catasauqua days. There are still plenty of notes about building repairs, but there is also an exhorting to the elders to shepherd the people. There are also lots of "pastor said we are going to do..." statements. There is talk about buying land somewhere so the church can move. Dave Thomann is taking leadership by the horns and is prayerfully leading the church forward, quickly. Unfortunately for Bethany BFC, Dave Thomann moves on to Lancaster in 1980 where he stays for the remainder of his ministry.



*David A. Thomann*

Phil Morrison 1980

Phil Morrison came in 1980 for his first senior pastorate and he left in 1985 to be the senior pastor of Stroudsburg BFC. In 1991, Phil and Jan and their children went to the mission field in Kenya. The Morrisons continued to minister in Kenya until 2020 when they moved back to Pennsylvania but continue to minister to Kenya from afar.

Tom Barshinger 1987

Then Tom Barshinger and his wife Beth (Phil Morrison's sister) came from 1987-1991.

An Evaluation of Catasauqua Years

For a full picture of the joy and fellowship of the Catasauqua years, ask Sue Heffentrager, Tara Sistrunk, Sonny and Cindy Fatzinger, Heather Royer, Jay, Linda and Joel Titmas about their wonderful testimonies of the close-knit church family who cared about one another and who grew in the Lord together. Each of the pastors felt this keenly that they were welcomed into a warm, loving family of believers.

But there were some challenges in the Catasauqua years, too.

First of all, it was hard for a congregation of under 100 people to keep up with three old buildings. The elders' meeting minutes are consumed with building repairs like water leaks from rain run-off and remodeling like the 1973 Gleaming Avocado carpet install in the Walnut Street Church.

Second of all, except for Dave Thomann's year, there was not significant numbers growth from the outreach efforts of the church.<sup>26</sup> This was not for lack of trying. All the pastors and the congregation worked hard to reach Catasauqua for Christ.

I appreciate Tom Barshinger's honesty when he said:

*"The ministry in Catasauqua did not grow as we would have liked to have seen it grow. The people in the town simply did not respond to the gospel. They were grateful to us as a church for the work we were willing to do with their children; however, they were not at all interested in the message we were seeking to share with them as well as with their children. We had many evangelistic dramas and musicals and used Christmas and Easter for outreaches. We contacted every new family that moved into Catasauqua. But no matter what we did, beyond dropping off their kids for VBS, the community simply did not respond. This was the greatest disappointment of our years at Bethany."<sup>27</sup>*

So why was church growth such a hard thing during the Catasauqua years 1959-1991? Bethany BFC was not the only church to experience this slow-down. The denomination as a whole slowed down in growth. And, depending on who you ask, church in America in general was experiencing less people interested in churches. Culture was changing. The baby boomers were all grown up in the 70s and 80s and many of them did not desire a relationship with the church that looked like their parent's relationship with church.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Although some of the people Pastor Thomann baptized stayed in the church, many petered out their attendance.

<sup>27</sup> Wire, p. 79

<sup>28</sup> In 1969, there was a discussion during the local conference business meeting about why people weren't coming out to Sunday evening service. One suggested there was psychological pressure of other churches being closed on Sunday night. Some might say it's repetitious to go Sunday evening when we just went in the morning. One

Also, the town of Catsauqua as a whole was experiencing declining church attendance. Many mainline churches were closing or merging. That's why the church buildings we purchased were available. Plus, the town had already reached its peak population. In 1900, Catsauqua had 5,000 people and was a wealthy town with the highest percentage of self-made millionaires in the country. In 1980, after many of the mansions had been turned into apartment buildings and the iron, coal, and slate industries were in decline, there were only 6,711 people and from there the population declines. Also, the town of Catsauqua had no room to grow. Sandwiched between the Lehigh River and Allen Township, Catsauqua is only 1.3 square miles. There is physically no room for growth.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, not many people in Bethany BFC lived in Catsauqua itself. Many of the members lived in Allentown, Whitehall, Northampton, or Laury's Station. So everyone coming to church including any friends or neighbors they invited were driving in and looking for a parking spot. This was not easy! There was no parking lot. You had to hope and pray for an onstreet parking spot in the small town.<sup>30</sup>

All of this was not lost on our pastors. Each pastor had some opportunity to make a move or change. Some didn't work out.<sup>31</sup> Others were not pursued.<sup>32</sup>

### In Need of a Change—Gene Smith Comes

In 1990, Tom Barshinger had left, and Gil Kitchen from Pinebrook Junior College was the interim pastor. The congregation needed a new pastor, a new location, and some vision and encouragement.

In the midst of the discouragement, the pastoral search team received a letter from a pastor in the Midwest looking to move back to his beloved PA Dutch country and serve the Lord in the community.

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possible solution was offered. Maybe the Sunday evening service should be changed to a church history lesson. This strikes me as a perfect example of the generations being out of touch with one another and their needs.

<sup>29</sup> Within the last decade, the new Catsauqua High School was even built on land in the Northampton School District.

<sup>30</sup> In 1971, Brian Butler noted that the biggest liability the church had was few number of members with roots in the Catsauqua community. (P.85 black binder of local conference minutes)

<sup>31</sup> In 1984, Pastor Morrison and the elders start a building program. They take a congregation vote about pursuing the purchase of the property at Schadt Ave and Mauch Chunk Rd just in front of the current site of Fellowship Community Retirement facility. The majority of people voted to pursue the purchase of the property (24 yes, 4 no). They started a campaign to raise funds. Our church offered \$30,000 for the property and the return came back that we had to put out \$12,000 for water lines. The board decided to offer \$3,000 and that's it. But then they voted to pay it and negotiate a lower settlement price. By March of 1985, they received a check back from the property owner as if they weren't interested in the property anymore. In 1990, Jim Beil from Fellowship Manor met with the Pastoral Search team and proposed the idea of moving the church to the campus of Fellowship Manor. The courts were not built at the time. There was a chapel but no rooms for Sunday School. They could build on the property, but that would be expensive and the road issues and working with the township. This was not pursued further. They also thought about buying land from Richard Deppe in Laury's Station. But this eventually came to a halt.

<sup>32</sup> October 1973 board minutes showed a Spanish church was renting out the lower church building four days a week for their activities. They offered to buy the church. However, Bethany BFC said no to selling it, but no reason was given for the decision. Maybe they thought it wouldn't be right to sell it when they had received it for only \$1.00. Maybe they needed the rental income since the Intervarsity, Northampton High School, and Forever Family regularly rented the property. Or perhaps they just needed the space for Sunday School.



Gene Smith had grown up in Topton and didn't speak English until he went to public school. Although he attended church and played the organ while growing up, he did not come to know the Lord as His Savior until he was an adult.

As a pastor he was (and still is) gifted in evangelism and visitation. By the time he approached the search committee of Bethany BFC he had already been the senior pastor in several congregations in The Missionary Church, all which had experienced rapid growth.

When Gene Smith came to interview the search committee, he said "If you chose me to be the pastor, we will move out of Catasauqua and we will grow!" This was an encouragement to the search committee. They chose Gene Smith to be the next pastor.<sup>33</sup>

True to his word, Gene Smith led Bethany BFC out of Catty. The two church buildings and the parsonage were sold. And they found a hobby shop for sale at 3300 7<sup>th</sup> Street in Whitehall. The building was filled with pegboard partitions for crafters to display their things. There was a life-sized train caboose in the backyard. But there were 61 parking spots! And it was easy to find since so many people drove by the church building each day.

#### Bethany BFC Moves to Whitehall

On June 6, 1993 there was a dedication service for the new air conditioned building in Whitehall. Rev. Jansen Hartman spoke at the service encouraging the congregation to be alert and dedicated to improving the tone of the community. Clarence Kauffman played the organ. Mrs. Betty Buchmiller, the Whitehall Township Executive, presented a Key to Whitehall Township to Pastor Gene Smith.

The church grew quickly when it moved to Whitehall. In October of 1990, the attendance was often less than 40. As of September 1993, attendance was usually 90 or 100.<sup>34</sup>

New people started to come to the church like Mike and Judy Helfrich, Rob and Diane Hodge, Mark and Karen Nielsen as well as Jodi and



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<sup>34</sup> Doris Wire's invitation letter to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary banquet



Daryl Crawford, Vernetta Milander, and the Montgomery family. Some families started to attend in Catasauqua just before the move to Whitehall like Loretta Miller and Bill and Patsy Piskula. The church started the AWANA program with Sara Smith as the commander. Just like in the past, the laypeople of the congregation created a caring, warm environment in which disciples of Jesus Christ lovingly grew.

As the congregation grew, they began to save for a building addition. Not only did they need more space, but when a person walked through the glass doors, they would walk right into the sanctuary without any foyer or lobby area. So awkward for first time visitors! And loud and distracting when people walked in a little late.

Although he loved the church, Gene Smith knew he did not have the energy to go through a building program. In 2006, he announced his retirement.<sup>35</sup>

Tim Schmoyer

Bethany BFC started the search process for a senior pastor. They received applications from a number of people but no one seemed to be the right fit. After two years, they reached out to existing pastors in the BFC. Someone suggested Tim Schmoyer, the young senior pastor at Camden DE BFC. At first he said no thank you, but six months later, in January of 2009, Tim felt the Lord was leading him to move from Camden. He had heard that Whitehall already had a candidate, but decided to send in a resume anyway. To his surprise, he got a call. The other person did not work out.



Tim and Rachel Schmoyer and their three young children with one on the way came for a trial sermon and an interview in May 2009. As everyone else has said, the church was warm and friendly and welcoming filled with

cheerful people who loved to clap their hands along to Victory in Jesus. It was because of the people that the church was actually growing during the long 2.5 years they had not had a pastor.<sup>36</sup>

In August of 2009, Tim Schmoyer became the Senior Pastor of Bethany BFC in Whitehall and remains the Senior Pastor at the time of this writing, 12 years and counting!

Mergers and Church Plants

Although Bethany BFC has not moved locations since 1991, there has been a lot of moving by following the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>35</sup> He and Sara did not move out of the area. They attended Calvary BFC in Walnutport to help there since they had faced significant decline over the years. Later, when Pastor Tim Schmoyer was established at Whitehall BFC, Gene Smith asked permission to return to Whitehall. The elders and Tim gladly gave permission. Gene became the part-time visitation pastor and has been a tremendous blessing and encouragement to the church and personally to Tim.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Ruth was the interim pastor. He and his wife, Elaine, stayed on at the church for a time after Tim Schmoyer came on as pastor with Dick as a part-time visitation pastor. Richard Ruth had gone to Berean Bible School and started his ministry with Church Extension, but left the denomination to pastor elsewhere.

In 2010, broke ground on the building project to add on a new sanctuary, new basement, elevator shaft, and to remodel the bathrooms. Dave Krapf took early retirement from his work at Alpo to be the volunteer foreman for the job. Don Green was his right hand man. Dave McLaughlin was the one whom Dave trusted to drywall and spackle. It was a big job, stressful at times but desperately needed. Before the sanctuary was built, every sit in the pew was filled and people were sitting in folding chairs around the room each Sunday morning. There were sometimes 12 toddlers and babies in the small nursery.

In November 2011, the first service in the new sanctuary was held.

Shortly after this time, the Lord was working to take care of Calvary BFC in Walnutport. Dave Allen, Executive Director of the BFC, asked Tim to consider taking on the members of Walnutport BFC while the close Calvary and then replant in the area. Tim had always had a heart for church planting,<sup>37</sup> and this was an exciting challenge. Tim read everything he could get his hands on about different models of church planting and was intrigued by the multi-site church model. A church would plant a new congregation in an area, but there would be one elder board over both locations. A lot of the administration work would be simplified by keeping it central.

Tim presented the idea to the Whitehall elder board and after much discussion, prayer, and a lot of nail biting at home during the long meetings from this pastor's wife, the elders agreed to pursue multi-site church planting beginning with closing Calvary BFC in Walnutport and absorbing their members.



The elders sent a proposal for a merger/replant to the interim pastor and elders at Calvary BFC. The plan was rejected at first<sup>38</sup>, but after some more people had left Calvary, the plan was accepted. After some more prayerful, sit-on-the-edge-of-your-seat meetings, the

congregation at Whitehall BFC also accepted the plan with the small change that the replant in Walnutport would not stay a multi-site church forever, but would eventually graduate as its own particular church.

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<sup>37</sup> Tim was the first Church Extension intern when he lived and worked with Dennis Spinney in the summer of 2001 in Connecticut.

<sup>38</sup> We were told that Bob Salzman held the stapled packet of papers over his head and said "we will never accept this!" as he threw it to the ground. For some reason, Bob did not trust Tim. After Bob moved, the church continued to decline. Al Dommel became the new interim pastor and helped the church accept the merger proposal. Al Dommel stayed on staff for a short time after the merger. Bonnie, his wife, is a delightful woman, wonderful piano player, and was a terrific help during the merger and during the launch of Northern Lehigh BFC.

The plan went through by God's grace, mercy, and provision<sup>39</sup>. He provided Pastor Aaron Smith at just the right time to be the church planter of what is now Northern Lehigh BFC. Aaron's enthusiastic and impulsive energy are exactly what the church plant needed. He reached out to the people in the community and the Lord has saved many people through the work in Northern Lehigh and it continues to grow.

There were many laypeople who helped out with the launch of Northern Lehigh, too. Jason Musselman (yes, from THAT Musselman family) grew up at Cedar Crest BFC with Tim Schmoyer and messaged Tim out of the blue and asked if he needed a worship leader. Jason was feeling the Lord leading him to pursue music ministry somewhere else besides Cedar Crest BFC. Tim told him and his wife Meggan about the plans for Northern Lehigh and they were both on board. Tony and Jen Tophoney agreed to attend and help with Northern Lehigh for a time, especially to help with Children's Church. Janice and Harry Ahner from Calvary BFC enthusiastically stayed to help as well as Robyn and Don Dengler. Rebekah Transue and Rich and Donna Kane also left Cedar Crest to join Northern Lehigh.

This was not the last move God would have the congregation make in faith.

In October 2019, the BFC that met in Fellowship Community officially became a part of Whitehall BFC as one last step of severing the corporate ties between Fellowship Community and the BFC. Rock of Ages BFC continues their own worship services with Pastor and Chaplain Phil Yerrington.

In 2021, Christian Evangelical Arabic Church of the Lehigh Valley who had been renting space from their worship service for several years has now merged to be the Arabic congregation of Whitehall BFC. They will continue with their Arabic language service, but will have increased fellowship with the English congregation.

From its beginning, Bethany MBC of Northampton which moved to Catasauqua and then to Whitehall has been a church on the move, not just a church who moves from town to town but moves in obedience to the Holy Spirit.



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<sup>39</sup> There were some growing pains at this time. Mark and Karen Nielsen, although initially enthusiastic about the church plant, later had second thoughts and ended up leaving the church. In my opinion, they also had difficulty adjusting to leadership style changes. They also encouraged several other families to leave the church.