

Perkasie Mennonite Church History

During the evening of January 15, 1909, William M. Moyer, a local businessman and layman from the Blooming Glen Mennonite Church, visited several others in an attempt to generate support for a new meeting house and Sunday School program in Perkasie. This was in response to a vision earlier that day by his neighbor Annie Hunsicker. His enthusiasm and imagination were contagious and quickly captivated others including Blooming Glen Mennonite's bishop Henry Rosenberger. Within ten days after collecting pledges and funds, drawing up blue-prints, and purchasing the lot at the corner of Fourth and Chestnut, the decision was made to build. By August 8 the stately Neo-Federalist structure was completed and the first meeting was held.

From 1909 to 1948 Perkasie Mennonite functioned as a daughter establishment of the Blooming Glen congregation. Its primary focus was the afternoon Sunday School which had an average attendance of 130 during its early years. Preaching was held on Sunday evenings once a month. In 1914 Sunday Evening Young People's Bible Meetings began. This feature had wide support from youth and young adults in the surrounding congregations. So many attended that the program was given twice in the same evening. The meetings became a training ground by providing opportunities for leading singing, moderating the meeting, and giving talks. Small music groups, such as male quartets and ladies' trios as well as duets and solos which were banned in other congregations, were an integral part of the evening's program. An important feature of these events was the initiative taken by lay persons. Offerings taken at the event provided support for missionary George Lapp in India and the Aaron King family in Cuba.



In the late 1930s support for the program began to wane. Consideration was given to terminating the work and selling the building for use as the local post office. However rejuvenation occurred after Blooming Glen Mennonite, the mother congregation, found six new couples who were committed to continuing the Perkasie ministry. By 1945 significant progress was made which led to the decision to have Sunday School in the mornings on a weekly basis.

In early 1948 the Franconia Conference gave its approval for Perkasie Mennonite to function as an autonomous congregation. Richard C. Detweiler, a young college student from Souderton was ordained for pastoral leadership. That August the congregation held its first annual Summer Bible School and in September five applicants were baptized and taken into membership. In December of the same year Norman Benner was chosen by lot and ordained as the only deacon the congregation ever had.

In May 1950 a tract was purchased at the corner of South Perkasie Road and Callowhill Street for use as a cemetery. In July the Sunshine Band became officially known as the Mennonite Youth Fellowship. In 1956 in order to accommodate growth the adjacent textile factory building was purchased and used for Sunday School classes and boys' and girls' clubs. In the early 60s

Richard Detweiler became committed to further seminary training and phased out his pastoral leadership. On July 7, 1963 James M. Lapp, son of Franconia Conference bishop John E. Lapp, was ordained. After nine years of strong leadership the Lapps moved to Oregon and Jim Burkholder was called to fill the vacancy. He served from 1973 until 1989.

During the Burkholder pastorate a constitution with membership covenant was adopted, an annual congregational retreat was initiated, a newsletter called The Stepping Stone was begun and the use of nominations and balloting for filling leadership roles was replaced by a procedure of discernment by consensus.

In September 1987 after considerable deliberation, Perkasio Mennonite committed itself to using the gifts of all members without consideration of gender, and installed Barbara Esch Shisler as the assistant pastor. In 1989 the Burkholder family departed when Jim Burkholder accepted a call to a pastorate in Adams County, Pennsylvania. At that point an interim staff consisting of Harold Krieder, Barbara Esch Shisler, and Beth Ranck Yoder was put into place. From November 1990 to September 1993 Wilson Kratz and Beth Ranck Yoder shared the pastoral responsibility. After two more years of interim leadership, on September 10, 1995 Craig Pelkey Landes, Barbara Esch Shisler, and Beth Ranck Yoder began their service as a pastoral team. Each was eventually ordained to the pastoral ministry and served as a team until March 2001 at which time Craig Pelkey-Landes discontinued his service when he accepted a position with Mennonite Resources Network under the auspices of the Franconia Mennonite Conference. Barbara Esch Shisler and Beth Ranck Yoder continued their leadership until Barbara's retirement in August 2003. From August 2003 until September 2004 Beth Ranck Yoder assumed sole responsibility for pastoral leadership. In September 2004 Mark Weidner, a native of Eastern Pennsylvania, who had been on the staff at Mennonite Associated Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, accepted the call to serve with Beth Ranck Yoder on a half-time basis.

During the past decade the congregation engaged in dialogue on the question of what it means to be "a people of invitation." As a result, some significant changes were made in program and facilities. In 1999 the congregation, in cooperation with neighboring Trinity Lutheran Church, began an annual participation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network which assisted several families by providing shelter in the church building, as well as food and necessary transportation for a month. In 2000 the congregation instigated a community youth program in a vacant store across the street which was known as the Epicenter. (This was later relinquished to the local YMCA.) In 2004 as an effort to be more intentional in meeting local community needs, a calendar of "Monthly Opportunities to Share with our Neighbors in Need" was adopted. In 2003 major building renovations were undertaken. A priority was placed on making facilities more accessible for those who were physically challenged. This included improved signage and ramps, but the major project was the installation of an elevator which provides easy access at four levels. In 2003, the congregation agreed to purchase the adjacent building made available when the North Penn Auto Parts Company went out of business. These steps were taken as the congregation sought to fulfill its mission which is stated, "As members of the

body of Christ, we seek to grow as a welcoming community, participate in God's loving work in the word, and invite all to experience the living Christ."

From its beginnings Perkasie Mennonite charted a progressive path and its motto "Every Member a Minister" suggests a high level of lay participation in discerning and leading the congregational program of worship, spiritual growth, and community witness.

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