

To Everything A Season 1985 - 1990

As the year 1990 commenced, and the dust had begun to settle, very little remained of the Ebenezer Church whose anniversary was about to be celebrated. Certainly our historic church structure still stood, but the two congregations who had worshiped there for the past two hundred fifty years were no more. As the memory of those congregations slowly retreated into the mists of time, soon to be nothing more than a remembrance, many people began asking themselves what had really happened and, more importantly, why had it happened.

To attempt to comment on this period from a historical standpoint is difficult, given the limited vantage point afforded the historian by so few intervening months and years. A much fuller picture of this turbulent time will only be achieved when the passing years provide the clarity and the wisdom necessary to fully understand and interpret those events. However, to completely, and purposely, gloss over these events would itself be an injustice. For just as the historian today does not have the benefit and the perspective of years of interpretation, the historian of tomorrow is often not afforded the luxury of a firsthand account of the times. So, for those yet to come, we owe an accounting of these final years of Ebenezer Union Church, put forth as accurately as possible.

As the title says, to everything a season. So, too, was the case at Ebenezer. The season of the multi-congregation charge, and of the union church, had come and gone. The need they were created to meet had long since disappeared, completing their season of usefulness.

The last half-decade of Ebenezer Union Church's "season" began with the arrival of a new minister to the Lutheran congregation. The Rev. Daniel J. Cammarn first came to Ebenezer as vice pastor, upon the departure of Rev. Roper, in June of 1985. Eventually, he would be called, in May of 1986, as the congregation's pastor.

Rev. Cammarn was born in Cleveland, Ohio. In the year 1976 he graduated from Worthington High School, located in Worthington, Ohio. His initial college education would take him to Ohio State University where, in 1981, he received his Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering. At some point thereafter, he received his calling, and entered the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Upon graduation, he served an internship at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Mertztown.

Rev. Cammarn is married to the Rev. Ann Paynter. Together they were ordained on June 23, 1985, in Trinity Lutheran Church in Pottsville, just prior to his arrival at Ebenezer. Rev. Paynter has served in various positions in the Lutheran Church, including the Jacksonville Lutheran Parish. A very momentous occasion in both of their lives was the arrival of their daughter, Kathryn Ann, on November 28, 1988, during Rev. Cammarn's pastorate at Ebenezer.

Unfortunately for Rev. Cammarn, his pastorate was not to be of a great duration. Shortly after his arrival to his new congregation, the wheels were finally set in motion that would bring an end to that same congregation which he had been called to serve. At the same time, however, the U.C.C. congregation was dealing with its own problems.

Over the years, the problems with the Heidelberg Charge had grown to the point that they were almost overwhelming, and the time had finally come to do something about them. At the urgings of both Ebenezer and Heidelberg's U.C.C. congregations, a charge-study committee was formed. Its task was to review the future of the Heidelberg Charge, and make its recommendations to both congregations about what, if any, future there was for the charge.

Interestingly, these were not new waters that this group was charting. Almost twenty years previous, this same thing had been a topic of discussion at a U.C.C. Consistory meeting at Ebenezer. At that time already, the desire had been to dissolve the charge and call its own pastor. More likely than not, the arrival of Rev. Heintzelman put an end to further action at that time. Additionally, much credit should be given to Rev. Heintzelman for the remarkable job he subsequently performed for twenty years, successfully juggling both congregations. Obviously, it wasn't easy, and the idea of a one-church charge was probably thought of quite often by Rev. Heintzelman.

And so it was that the charge-study committee began to examine the problems that had faced the charge. First and foremost was the original need for this charge. That need, for a pastor whose expenses were shared by numerous congregations, as one could not afford him alone, had ceased to exist. Financially, it had long since become feasible to have a single, full-time pastor. From that standpoint, the charge was no longer necessary.

A second reason relates to a phrase that was bandied around quite a bit at the time. That phrase was the "both churches have a part-time minister." With congregations growing, especially at Heidelberg, more and more of Rev. Heintzelman's time began to disappear. The eventual establishment of the minister-of-visitation position provided but a brief respite from a hectic schedule for Rev. Heintzelman. The final result was that Rev. Heintzelman was carrying two full-time positions on one full-time schedule and salary. To be a more spiritual congregation, it was felt that what was needed was a full-time minister to provide church services fifty-two weeks of the year.

Another point that was brought out quite often at the time was that we were sister churches, but what did we ever do together? Our only real common threads were that we were locked in this charge agreement, we owned a parsonage together, and we shared a minister. Other than that, there was nothing.

A final problem was that of church leadership. Congregations depend upon volunteers to serve as church leaders when asked.

However, by 1985 (and even earlier), volunteers had become a rarity. The problem was that, when people were asked to fill a position on the Consistory, they were not only committing themselves for meetings once a month, they were committing themselves for Consistory Committee meetings, Joint Council-Consistory meetings, Charge meetings and, before they knew it, their evenings and weekends were quickly evaporating. With today's hectic world, free time for one's self and family is a commodity that few are willing to give up.

With all of these problems facing the charge-study committee, the only viable answer was to split the charge, and for each congregation to call its own minister. It was decided that this decision should be put to a vote by both the Heidelberg and Ebenezer U.C.C. congregations. The vote at Ebenezer, though not unanimous, did go for the dissolution of the charge. Oddly, though, when voted upon by the Heidelberg Church, it did not gain enough votes to pass and, resultantly, the charge was not immediately split.

In an attempt to understand just what had taken place, the original charge-study committee was dissolved, and a new committee was formed, whose job it would be to examine the whole situation anew and to find out why the vote had not gone to the affirmative. This new committee consisted of most of the members of the first committee, and also some new members who had taken the place of others who had quit or left for whatever reasons.

This committee's first task was to ask itself what had made the vote fail. Three informational meetings were held. One thing that was then looked at were the comments that had been made at these three meetings regarding the splitting up of the charge. Another question it asked itself was whether the specifics of the dissolution had been explained well enough for all congregation members to understand.

After much hard thinking and hard working, it was, again, decided to put the question of the charge dissolution to a vote in May of 1987. This time the vote was successful at both Ebenezer and Heidelberg, and for the first time in their respective histories, both congregations became one-church charges.

The dissolution of the charge also meant the immediate termination of Rev. Heintzelman's nearly twenty-year long contract with them. Pastoral-search committees were formed by both congregations and, sadly, before either congregation could offer its position to him, Rev. Heintzelman left for a new pastorate at St. John's U.C.C. in Slatington. Citing the desire to allow both congregations to start anew, with no residual hardships over who had hired him, he left in January of 1988.

Pastor Heintzelman's departure was felt both by congregation members and by minister alike. His congregations were sorry to see him leave after nearly twenty years of faithful service and he, too, was sorry to take leave from these two churches. In his reflections on Ebenezer, Rev. Heintzelman writes of his congregation 's members, and how he and his family would always remember "the many wonderful people who supported our ministry, touched our lives with love, who came to our assistance in our times of need, and who shared times of fellowship with us. We thank God for them (and) for a score of cherished years."

While the pastoral-search committee diligently began its search for a new pastor, the position of U.C.C. pastor was temporarily filled by the Rev. Nelson J. Wenner. This interim pastor had been sent to Ebenezer by the Conference, and he was quickly approved by the Consistory. Rev. Wenner's interim pastorate was to continue only until a new pastor for the U.C.C. congregation could be found. As the pastoral-search committee was narrowing its list of candidates down to a very few, and was close to naming a successor to Rev. Heintzelman, another of Ebenezer's many

committees released its findings and recommendations, effectively putting a halt to the activities of the U.C.C. pastoral-search committee.

The recommendations, that were released by the union-study committee in the early part of 1989, were a long time in coming, and they had not been easy recommendations to make. They were based on exhaustive studies that were conducted by the committee, and cut directly to the heart of Ebenezer Union Church and its union-church agreement. The problems, that the committee had looked into, had not appeared overnight. They had been growing for a long time, and it was this committee's task to finally see what could be done about them.

Again, as with the charge dissolution of two years previous, the problems had become overwhelming. It was finally time for everybody to stop turning their heads and to face the problems head-on, and problems there were.

The problems were big and they were small but, unfortunately, they were not black and white. Had their origins been that clear-cut, they could have been dealt with years before. Since they weren't, they continued to grow. Only a fool would attempt to lay blame for what happened on any one specific action or with any one congregation. Sadly, much of the blame can only be placed on something that we, as two small-town rural congregations, never had and probably never will have much control over. That something is the world and the society in which we live.

From the end of World War II on, that world, and that society, had been changing, and in the wake of these changes were left the smoldering ruins of many groups, cultures, and institutions that had flourished for so many years. Certainly, no one would say that all of these changes had been bad. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was definitely one of the higher points of this type of societal change. But, on the other hand, the arrival of the free and easy life-style of the 1960s had left many mourning the days of chivalry, etiquette, and high society. One did not need to be a sociologist to see what had happened.

The laid-back life-style that was generated during the 1960s affected just about everything. People began casting of the starched-collar morality, and the Puritan ethics of their Victorian forefathers, only to replace it with the "if-it-feels-good-do-it" attitude of the 1960s. It is only now, thirty years later, that we are beginning to see the monster that those times created.

The religious significance of the Sabbath Day, so cherished by Christians the world over, was one such hallowed tradition that lost much of its meaning to many people during this period. One hundred years ago, the long-running joke about the man who was out playing golf on Sunday morning, rather than worshiping in church, would have been looked upon with disdain. The painting by Norman Rockwell of the father reading his paper while the rest of his family, dressed in their Sunday finery, marched off to church, would have been considered a disgrace. It most certainly would not have graced the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Yet today, these jokes and images of popular culture get laughs and are considered quaint. The strong value placed on religion by our ancestors has, in many places, eroded. The repeal of the Blue Laws, and the advent of Sunday-shopping hours at local stores and malls, has just helped to further our transformation into a secular society. There will always be the faithful; however,

those who were looking for excuses, why not to participate, had found them during these years of transformation. The reverence with which we were instructed to hold the Sabbath Day was considered passé by the "Me Generation" of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Understanding the transformation that took place during that period takes one a long way towards understanding the problems that it created. Much of the blame for the breaking up of the union church can be squarely laid here at the initial source of the problems that were to follow it. From this point on, things began to snowball, with every action and every change leading to something new. There was really not much that anyone could have done to stop it. Certainly, some actions could have been changed or modified; however, the end result would probably have turned out the same.

One example, of this transformation, was that for the first time in the church's history the church had to begin catering to the members. The years during which the church could enjoy "banker's hours" had all but disappeared. Church leaders began experimenting with different starting times, and also early church services, in order to accommodate its members' changing schedules and life-styles. In years past, church starting times for its numerous services were nonnegotiable items. Either you were in attendance or you weren't; it was as simple as that. A role-reversal had somehow taken place.

One other major factor did play a role in the break-up of the union. It was also a factor that had played a part in the break-up of the U.C.C. Charge two years earlier. That factor was the concept of church being held on alternate weeks only.

For one thing, this concept was foreign to many people who moved into the area and desired to join a local church. The area from which Ebenezer Church's two congregations drew its members had grown tremendously in the years since 1960, and many of these people who had made it grow did not understand the concept of the "union" church and its historic traditions. They wanted to be able to attend church on a fifty-two-week-a-year basis, if they so desired.

In addition, many members of both the Lutheran and the U.C.C. congregations felt that the only way they could become a more spiritual church was to have services on a weekly basis. In response, the Lutherans, coinciding with the establishment of their own one-church parish, as early as 1966, began to have weekly services, alternating late and early. The U.C.C. congregation decided to hold weekly services also . . . twenty-two years later. Starting on July 1, 1988, the church schedule was changed to reflect this. From that point the U.C.C. congregation met at 8:45 a.m. and the Lutheran congregation at 11:15 a.m. weekly.

Finally, it is probably safe to conclude that the Lutheran Synod and the U.C.C. Conference were not fans of the union church situation. Their experiences with Ebenezer, and probably others like her, during the 1960s had only proved to them the difficulty they would continue to have filling part-time positions with full-time ministers. Is it possible that these two groups wanted their congregations out of this union situation? Yes, it is possible.

Were there reasons besides personnel problems for their wanting out of the union agreement? Yes, that is possible, too. The word "new" has been used by advertisers for years to make people

stand up and notice old products that suddenly seem to have had some improvements. Churches are no different. Synod or Conference-sponsored building campaigns look good, and new" churches attract "new" members. It may be up to the historian fifty years hence to determine what role both of these organizations did play in this matter.

Sadly, as early as the 1960s, while the attempts at union-congregational unity were already beginning, the resultant problems of the previously-discussed situations were beginning to snowball. It is necessary to point out that, while the Lutheran congregation has been looked upon by many members and nonmembers alike as the loser in the break-up of the union congregations, we should never forget that had *the same set of continually snowballing circumstances befallen the U. C. C. congregation, the shoe could easily have been on the other foot*, and Ebenezer Church could now be a Lutheran congregation.

The first of these resultant problems to affect the Lutheran congregation was that of declining church attendance. Most assuredly, both congregations noticed the decline; however, the Lutheran attendance had dropped off by a much greater amount. A good example of this is shown by the attendance figures from the union summer services held in 1970. For each Lutheran member in attendance, there were approximately three U.C.C. members at the same service.

Resultantly, a natural by-product of this declining attendance was that money coming into the church coffers began to slow considerably. Again, references in the Lutheran Council minutes support this. Numerous entries make note of the fact that it had become necessary to borrow sums of money from banks to cover its current expenses. A particularly expensive foray, by the Lutheran congregation, further intensified the problems.

Within a few short years of the purchase of the Lutheran parsonage, the Lutheran Council decided that it would build a new parsonage. This proposed building, lot and all, was slated to cost in excess of \$35,000. A lot was purchased and plans were begun. What eventually became of these building plans is not clear; however, the transaction for the piece of land did go through, leaving the Lutheran congregation to pay off its purchase, further increasing its indebtedness.

A still further result of this snowballing was a by-product of owning an aging church. It is only natural that a building, quickly pushing one hundred years of age, would require modifications and improvements necessary for an aging building, built by construction methods of a century earlier. However, when it came time to make these much-needed improvements, funds were not available.

As early as 1964, both Lutheran and U.C.C. congregation members had been made aware of state regulations that would have to be met in order to make the church building fireproof. New, more stringent fire regulations still present a problem to the church today. These funding problems just served to further intensify the growing problems between the two congregations at Ebenezer, problems that had finally become insurmountable.

Sadly, for the Lutheran congregation at Ebenezer, by the time the union-study committee was looking into the future of the union-church agreement, the last days of Lutheranism at Ebenezer

were already coming to a close. Probably nothing that the committee could have recommended, other than a breaking of the union-church agreement, would have worked. So that is what they recommended.

As stated before, none of the recommendations had been easy to make. The final recommendation, which was to vote to break the union-church agreement, had come after a number of realizations on the part of the committee.

First, they must have realized the legitimate desire of the two congregations to hold services every week. The two congregations themselves had realized that it was the only way to be a more spiritual church and, on a much lower plane of thought, attract new members from the burgeoning districts surrounding Ebenezer Church.

Second, the committee must have come to the realization that the Lutheran congregation, faced with a declining membership and dwindling funds, could not go on the way that it was. There were projects that needed to be completed and regular building maintenance that had to be performed. These projects could not be put off for too many more years.

A final realization that the committee had come to had only required them to take a look around. Upon doing so, they saw that almost every one of their neighbor churches had already taken this course... Jacksonville, Weisenberg, and Lowhill. The only union churches left directly around us were Heidelberg and Lynnville, and even their futures are not certain. So, just as the season for the multi-congregation charge had come and gone so, too, had the season of the union church come and gone.

The final recommendation, made to both the Lutheran Council and the U.C.C. Consistory by the union-study committee, was that the two congregations vote to approve the dissolution of their respective congregations, and that they then consolidate to form a new United Church of Christ congregation. This recommendation was followed through by both groups of church leaders.

Oddly enough, as so many events of this period seem to have been foreshadowed by events in the 1960s so, too, was this. An entry in the U.C.C. Consistory records for October of 1965 notes that Rev. Marks, who by this time was in his position with the Conference, was to be contacted to see if he could help with an approach to the Lutheran congregation, with regards to uniting with the U.C.C. congregation. Obviously, though, this never came to fruition at that point in time.

A vote was taken of both congregations in April of 1989, regarding a dissolution of the union-church agreement and the formation of a new U.C.C. congregation. The outcome of the vote was to the affirmative. The union church was to be dissolved and a new United Church of Christ congregation would occupy Ebenezer Church.

The final months of 1989 were both happy times and sad times at Ebenezer. On the one hand, people were happy to see the problems that had built up over the years, from the operating of a union church, finally come to some solution. The slate had been wiped clean, and the new U.C.C. congregation that was being formed would come into a church free from all of those

problems of the past. Their future successes, and mistakes, would from now on rest on their heads, and their heads alone. Ultimately, the accountability would be theirs, and blame could now be placed nowhere else.

With the opening of a new charter, former members of both congregations were invited to join the new U.C.C. ministry at Ebenezer United Church of Christ. To date, many former members of both congregations have joined, and continue to join, this new congregation with a bright future ahead of it.

On the other hand, a profound sense of sadness has also prevailed at Ebenezer. We, as both former congregations, deeply mourn the loss of everything that our union church had represented, over the past two hundred fifty years. The historical tradition of the union church, alive since the days of Washington and Franklin, has died and been buried, along with other relics of days gone by... the one-room schoolhouse, the country store, and doctors who make house calls. Its season of usefulness is over and done.

As much as an open invitation has been given to all former Lutheran members at Ebenezer. Those former U.C.C. members should try to imagine what it would be like were the shoe on the other foot. The spiritual progeny of Martin Luther, nursed so caringly for so many years by the likes of Revs. Fegley and Ebert, must be feeling as though they were driven from their own church, a church that they and their families before them had helped to build and maintain.

Certainly, this has been a bitter pill for some to swallow, and rightfully so. For as much as people have poo-pooed tradition over the years, it is that same "tradition" that provides the continuity from one generation to the next. To not be able to carry forth in the same fashion, and in the same hallowed places as our ancestors, represents a very sad ending to this story, no matter from what perspective you yourself choose to view it. As much as our two churches were the same, and we grew up attending services of both denominations, it will never again be that which it once was.

And so, as one more historic institution passes away-that of the union church, another victim of the changing times-we, sadly and somewhat reluctantly, close the final chapter of this great and glorious two-hundred-fifty-year history of Ebenezer Union Church. We are all the better for having been a part of this history.

With the decision made, and the vote taken to dissolve the union, it was once again time for the U.C.C. pastoral-search committee to go back into full swing. Picking up where they left off, the committee went back to the remaining few choices they had whittled their original list down to, and that is where they began.

Realizing the short time frame in which it had to perform its task, consolidation of the two congregations was set for January of 1990. The pastoral-search committee began the final stages of choosing a minister, all over again. The committee's choice, recommended in late summer, 1989, was the Rev. Timothy L. Helms.

Rev. Helms was born in Greenville, South Carolina, a son of the Rev. Hal M. and Helen Helms. At an early point in his life, the family moved to Guilford, Connecticut, where Rev. Helms subsequently graduated from Guilford High School in 1966.

Rev. Helms' post-high-school education was received first at Thomas A. Edison College in Trenton, New Jersey. He graduated from that institution with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1977. His Master of Divinity was received at the Bangor Theological Seminary in Bangor, Maine, from which he graduated in 1978. Pastorates followed in the Augusta Charge, Sunbury, and then at the Gladeland Parish in Manns Choice. He served this congregation from February of 1980 until his call to Ebenezer came in November of 1989. Rev. Helms has brought with him to Ebenezer his lovely wife, Lisa. They are the parents of three children: Jeremy, Sarah, and Rachel.

The arrival of Rev. Helms at Ebenezer, in the beginning of November, 1989, also signalled the departure of both Revs. Wenner and Cammarn. Rev. Cammarn, upon his departure, was assigned by the Northeastern Synod to a pastorate at St. Paul's Lutheran in Tower City, starting there on November 7, 1989. Rev. Wenner, it is assumed, has gone back on the Conference's list of available interim pastors.

The pastoral-search committee, it seems, has done a remarkable job in choosing a new minister for Ebenezer. They were able to anticipate what the times called for, and to find the candidate to fit the bill. Rev. Helms has become well-liked by everybody and, during times such as these, that is important. Rev. Helms, it seems, embodies the best qualities of many of his predecessors. He is unconventional, like Rev. Nevin Helffrich; he is outspoken and frank like Rev. George Smith; he has the friendly demeanor of Rev. Russell Heintzelman; and, lastly, he still uses the Bible, like Rev. Thomas Bachman. A man of lesser qualities might not be able to shepherd us through as transitional a period as this has been.

As we stand on the brink of the next two hundred fifty years, many are probably wondering what the future will hold. Only God knows for certain, but as we bring to a close this historic year of celebration, there are many things for us to remember. First, we have been left a legacy by our forefathers—a historic church building that has already reached its one-hundredth birthday. Before any well-intentioned plans are put forth for modification and so-called improvements to our already beautiful structure, let us not forget that we are only caretakers in this life. We have a responsibility to pass things on to the next generation, in the same condition that we ourselves have received them. Our ancestors had the foresight to build a church of great beauty, which remains fairly unaltered today. To compromise the architectural integrity of this building, either inside or out, would be inexcusable. To preserve this piece of the past, and to be able to pass it along to the next generation of Ebenezer members, would be the most fitting tribute to the history of both the Lutheran and the U.C.C. congregations who worshiped at Ebenezer Union Church, in the village of New Tripoli.

In addition, once the celebrating is over, do not lose interest in the congregation and the church. Someone had to be responsible for the years prior to our anniversary year. Many things could happen to our new congregation, if there are not people to look out for it during the next two hundred fifty years. If asked to serve, consider it a privilege and an honor, not a nuisance.

As long as the caring and concern that have helped us through the past year continues, and as long as our effective leadership continues, we will survive and be strong. The future of Ebenezer United Church of Christ will only be as bright as we make it.