

Many Roots, One Church

By John Riggs

The dynamics of the Indiana United Methodist Church have been ever changing since the 1801 founding of its first 3 classes, Gazaway, Robertson, and Jacobs, in Clark County. A frontier church, its services originally were held in members' homes and available public buildings, including schools and taverns, until a church could be built. The circuits usually were hundreds of miles long, the classes small and scattered, and the accommodations crude at best for members and clergy alike. This was the era of the camp meeting and the stump preacher, when emotions ran high along with the rhetoric, and people were converted in mass by fearsome words that rang throughout the woods, clearings, and commons of original sin and eternal damnation.

As the 19th Century advanced, and communities became villages, and villages grew into towns and cities, the church followed the people, and its houses of worship went from one room log cabins, to white clapboard and brick and mortar, to large ornate edifices reminiscent of cathedrals. Sunday schools came into being. Music was added to some services, although not all. Slavery divided not just brother from brother and state from state, but church from church, as the "social gospel," the belief that the spirit of Christ is the solution to all social evils, became a part of our conscience, if not yet our doctrine.

We built colleges and campgrounds, elected governors and senators, and raised a mighty voice in religion, politics, and education.

By the turn of the 20th Century, most United Methodist ministers no longer rode a circuit, and most of its members no longer fermented with the evangelical zeal that spread the faith across the frontier. Having won the battle against slavery, the church and its people turned their attention to Prohibition, unfair labor practices, and the more mundane matters of earning a living and raising a family, and providing for the orphaned and the elderly in the form of children's homes and retirement homes. But the epic struggle of the two world wars and the Great Depression that dominated the first half of the century, and the struggle for civil rights and civil liberties, peace and world order that defined the second half took its toll on the church, as attitudes changed, membership declined, and its people often found themselves at odds with their faith and each other. A decade into the 21st Century, with terrorism on the rise, our standard of living in decline, the earth warming, resources dwindling, debt growing, and civil discourse all but lost in our national debate, the struggle continues.

Yet it has often been so. The Indiana United Methodist Church was at its beginning 3 separate churches, the Methodist Episcopal, the United Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Association. The African Methodist Episcopal Church would split from the ME Church in 1816; the Methodist Protestant Church in 1828; the Methodist Episcopal Church South in 1844. The United Brethren Church in Christ Old Constitution would split from the UB Church in 1889, and the United Evangelical Church would split from the Evangelical Association in 1891. At one time during the late 1800's what is now the Indiana United Methodist Church would count among its member churches 6 denominations and at least 16 separate conferences. Today there is one church and one conference.

In 1923, the United Evangelical Church re-merged into the Evangelical Association; in 1939, the Methodist Protestant Church re-merged with the Methodist Church and the Methodist Church South into the Methodist Church. In 1946, the Evangelical Association merged with the United Brethren Church in Christ into the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

In 1964, the segregated Lexington Conference of the Methodist Church merged its Indiana congregations into the existing Indiana conferences.

And in 1968, the EUB Church merged with the Methodist Church into the United Methodist Church. In Indiana, another merger would follow in 2008, when the North Indiana Conference and the South Indiana Conference became the Indiana Conference.

The richness of the Indiana United Methodist Church lies in its very diversity, from its varied ethnic, cultural, social, and economic origins to its bitter divisions over doctrine and politics. We have ripped ourselves apart, held the fragments up to the light, and stitched ourselves back together again. Yet throughout it all, we have never forgotten our mission, never turned our back on the enduring principles of "doing unto others" and "liberty and justice for all."

Many roots. One church. One faith. That is our history, our strength, and our legacy.