



OUR RICH HERITAGE

by Tim Hodge

Charis Fellowship has an incredibly rich and fascinating history spanning well over three hundred years. The story of our Fellowship began on the banks of a river in Germany in 1708 as eight individuals who wanted to live according to the teachings of the bible made the choice to be baptized as adults who had chosen to “count the cost” and follow Jesus no matter what. This was a bold and controversial move as it was effectively a rejection of the infant baptism that was practiced by the post-Reformation government-controlled churches of the time.

The events of that day resulted in a story far beyond what those eight believers could ever have imagined, a story that would end up spanning continents and impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people over the next three hundred and fifteen years (and counting). Efforts are currently ongoing to preserve our historical records and to make our fascinating history more easily accessible. The following time-line overview highlights some details from our rich Charis Fellowship history.



Tim Hodge has served as the Charis Fellowship coordinator since October 2020. Tim is a graduate of Grace College and Grace Theological Seminary. He previously served as a pastor for 17 years at Grace Family Church in New Holland, Pa. He currently serves on the executive committee of the Charis Alliance. Tim and his wife, Heidi, have been married for 22 years and they have four children.

- 1708** Eight men and women are baptized in the Eder River at Schwarzenau, Germany, establishing the first Brethren congregation.
- 1719** Peter Becker leads a large group of Brethren from Germany to Pennsylvania in response to an invitation from William Penn.
- 1723** The first Brethren congregation in America is established on Christmas day with a baptism and love feast in Germantown, Pa.
- 1729** Alexander Mack and most of the remaining Brethren arrive in Philadelphia.
- 1738** Christopher Saur Sr. begins a printing establishment near Philadelphia that rivaled the printing business of Benjamin Franklin.
- 1782** Annual meetings of the Brethren (which began in 1742) repeatedly make statements in clear opposition to slavery.
- 1836** “Fraternity of German Baptists” adopted as official name for registering property held by congregations.
- 1851** Henry Kurtz begins publishing a periodical specifically for the Brethren, called the “Monthly Gospel Visitor.”
- 1865** Henry Holsinger begins a weekly publication called “The Christian Family Companion” from his home in Western Pennsylvania.
- 1865** Annual Meeting states that Brethren who enthusiastically supported the Confederacy should be disciplined by their churches.
- 1871** The name “German Baptist Brethren” is adopted by Annual Meeting for use by congregations in issuing letters of membership.
- 1878** Henry Holsinger and Joseph W. Beer begin publishing the “Progressive Christian,” a new weekly newspaper.
- 1881** After being frustrated by new innovations, the Old Order withdraws and becomes known as the “Old German Baptist Brethren.”
- 1882** Henry Holsinger is disfellowshipped for his vocal criticism of traditionalism and the lack of reform in ministry methodology.

- 1883** A large number of Brethren join Holsinger and reorganize in Dayton, Ohio, taking the name “The Brethren Church.”
- 1896** The Brethren Church holds its National Conference in Winona Lake, Ind., the first of many Brethren conferences to be held there.
- 1898** Retained by the Brethren Church, Ashland College is reopened after financial collapse and is placed on a more stable footing.
- 1900** What is now Encompass World Partners (formerly the Foreign Missionary Society) is first organized in Winona Lake, Ind.
- 1912** Louis S. Bauman becomes a key leader in the Brethren Church and a strong proponent of Premillennialism and Missions.
- 1918** James and Florence Gribble, Estella Myers, and Mae Snyder leave the US to establish a new mission field in Central Africa.
- 1921** National Ministerial Association adopts “Message of the Brethren Ministry” to try to end a decade of theological controversy.
- 1930** Alva J. McClain helps to establish and open Ashland Theological Seminary in connection with Ashland College.
- 1937** Schism takes place at Ashland between its seminary leaders resulting in Grace Theological Seminary opening in Akron, Ohio.
- 1938** The Brethren Home Missions Council is organized, leading the way in church planting efforts for the following decades.
- 1939** Grace Theological Seminary moves to Winona Lake, Ind., and classes begin in what is now Mount Memorial Hall.
- 1939** National Brethren Bible Conference, a forerunner of the National Fellowship of (Grace) Brethren Churches, is organized.
- 1940** With the Brethren Evangelist newspaper retained by Ashland churches, the first issue of Brethren Missionary Herald appears.

- 1948** In partnership with the Seminary, Grace College opens with two-year programs and majors in English, History, Greek, and Bible.
- 1951** Dedication of McClain Hall, the first building constructed on the Winona Lake campus built to house the growing Seminary.
- 1952** Brethren Construction Company, later Brethren Building Ministries, is established to help construct new church buildings.
- 1953** Grace College’s undergraduate division becomes a four year liberal arts college offering a choice of 13 majors.
- 1955** Brethren Investment Foundation (now known as Grace Financial) is established.
- 1961** John Whitcomb and Henry Morris publish The Genesis Flood, moving the Seminary to the center of the creationist movement.
- 1966** Sunday School and Youth Boards merge to form a Board of Christian Education, now known as Momentum Ministry Partners.
- 1969** A newly written Statement of Faith of the National Fellowship of Brethren Churches (Grace Brethren) is adopted.
- 1992** The Fellowship experiences a schism with some churches leaving to establish the “Conservative Grace Brethren Churches International.”
- 2008** The Commitment to Common Mission, drafted by Grace Brethren leaders around the world, is adopted by Charis churches.
- 2015** The Charis Alliance Charter is adopted by the delegates from our global family at a Forum held in Bangkok, Thailand.
- 2016** The Commitment to Common Mission, a fresh expression of our shared doctrine, is adopted by the Fellowship of churches.
- 2017** The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches is officially rebranded as “Charis Fellowship.”
A more detailed account can be found at CharisFellowship.com/History.