

History of Calvary Mennonite Fellowship

Background in Virginia

The story of Calvary Mennonite Fellowship began many years before the first worship service was held on January 21, 1990. Calvary was but the latest development in a lengthy chain of events within the history of Virginia Mennonites, as reflected in the life and times of its founder, George R. Brunk, II.

Beginning in approximately 1930, the Virginia Mennonite Conference, which represents the majority of Mennonites in Virginia, intensified its efforts to regulate lifestyle applications that were binding on all its congregations. Apparently the attempt to require outward application of biblical truths resulted in a focus on the requirements themselves and bred a spirit of rebellion (anti-regulation) in some.

As time went on breaking the rules and daring the ministry to do something about it became more common. Brother George was a long-time member, pastor, evangelist, writer, and seminary professor and administrator in the conference. What he viewed as apostasy within his home church conference proceeded in two concurrent streams. On the one hand there was a de-emphasis on Biblicism, specifically in the disciplines of theology. On the other hand there was ongoing erosion in lifestyle applications of biblical principles.

By about 1970 it became apparent to some Virginia Conference ministers and congregations that the progressive tide in conference could not be stemmed, and they chose to separate from conference; this group became known as the Southeastern Mennonite Conference. At the time Brother George remained in Virginia Conference even though he held growing concerns about the erosion of right beliefs accompanied by the loss of biblical applications. The "last straw" for him, however, came in 1988 when conference approved the ordination of women to the ministry. He withdrew from Virginia Conference and became part of the Timberville Mennonite Church for several years.

The vision for a new church in the Harrisonburg area was largely carried by George R. Brunk II and was supported by the Timberville congregation. George strongly believed in a believers' church and felt the need for a new congregation to hold high the historic Anabaptist tradition. From his vantage point, the Anabaptist academic community was theologically adrift and no one was reaching out to those who found themselves between the right wing of Virginia conference on the one hand and the Southeastern conference on the other.

The Beginning of Calvary Mennonite Fellowship

After considerable planning and preparation, fifty-five persons gathered for the first Sunday service of Calvary Mennonite Fellowship at Eastern Mennonite Seminary

Chapel on January 21, 1990, four hundred sixty-five years after the first official Anabaptist adult baptism in Switzerland. With Brother George serving as pastor, the congregation grew steadily for several years. The first members were received in February, and the first communion service was held in June. The formulation of a church constitution began in March, 1991. Average Sunday morning attendance grew from the fifties in 1990 till it peaked in the eighties in early 1993. The 1993 Calvary Church directory listed fifty-five members. .

Leadership also expanded. On December 9, 1990, Danny P. Berry was ordained as minister as served until 1996. Samuel Witmer served as deacon from 1990-1994. Larry Wilkins served as Sunday School superintendent in the early years and was appointed to serve as deacon in 1996; later he was ordained.

Beginning in early 1994, a decline in attendance occurred. While gradual at first, it accelerated and resulted in a crisis in 1996. Several matters were underlying the church difficulties. Some concerns had been festering under the surface for some time and others arose to precipitate the crisis. One matter was the effect of the Contemporary Christian Music movement in the Calvary services, an issue that received mixed reactions and some strong disapproval. Attendance dropped into the thirties or forties for the rest of 1996. In June, 1998, the Church Council led the small congregation through a discussion about the future of Calvary and considered the question of whether or not the church should continue.

A NEW PASTOR, A NEW BEGINNING

At the invitation of Brother George, Paul M. Emerson, a minister in the newly formed Biblical Mennonite Alliance, visited the Calvary congregation with his wife Gail in August, 1998, to mutually explore the possibilities of a pastoral relationship. The Calvary congregation subsequently extended a unanimous call to the Emersons. After prayerful consideration Brother Paul and Sister Gail accepted the call and on December 14, 1998 moved from Ohio into a rented home at the west end of Mt. Clinton Pike. The same month Brother George, age 87, relinquished all leadership responsibilities and turned the pastoral leadership entirely over to Brother Paul. Brother George continued at Calvary until his death in 2002, the supportive visionary founding pastor whose character, culture, and vision had shaped the congregation more than any other man.

At the beginning of 1999, Calvary had twenty members and an average attendance on Sunday of up to thirty-five. In his first month as pastor, Brother Paul introduced the Biblical Mennonite Alliance. The congregation voted to apply to the Alliance for membership and subsequently joined in February as one of the charter congregations. Congregational involvement in the life and ministries of BMA has been significant over the years. A number of members have served on various boards and committees of BMA. The congregation has hosted the annual Alliance convention in 2000, 2005, and 2012.

Under the vision and leadership of Brother Paul, Calvary went through a significant phase of growth beginning in 1999. She assisted in starting several

churches; Heritage Mennonite Church, Millbank, Ontario, Blue Ridge Christian Fellowship, Radiant Virginia; Believer's Fellowship, Waynesboro, Virginia; New Hope Mennonite, Upper Strasburg, Pennsylvania; and Grace Haven Mennonite, Lemasters, Pennsylvania. The Calvary men drew up the following congregational Mission Statement:

"We are a caring community of faith in full dependence on the Holy Spirit - committed to glorifying God, magnifying Christ, sharing the Good News with all people and edifying our fellow pilgrims - through the exposition of and obedience to God's sufficient written Word."

For the first ten years Calvary had rented facilities at Eastern Mennonite Seminary for their services. By mid 2000, the congregation was looking for a more permanent location. When the old public school at Mount Clinton was to be sold, Calvary offered a sealed bid which was accepted. Their new home was occupied the beginning of January, 2001. Part of the facility was remodeled for use as a sanctuary; the older part became a home for Calvary Christian Academy opening with thirty-seven students in August, 2001.

The congregation was steadily growing so that by the end of 2004 the average Sunday morning attendance was nearing 170. Such growth called for additional leadership in the ministry team. In 2000 Jerry Bentz and Larry Wilkins were licensed as deacons and the following year they were ordained. During 2001 ongoing discussions were held concerning the need for additional pastoral leadership. In a selection process that fall and again in 2003 no candidate received sufficient support for selection. In 2004, after a day of prayer and fasting, the congregation selected two candidates, Linford Berry and Stephen Byler. Both were licensed as ministers that fall and were subsequently ordained in October, 2005. More recently Jason Beachy was licensed and then ordained in 2012 as an additional deacon. James Groff was selected to serve as an associate pastor and was ordained in 2013 after a year of licensure.

Since 2006 Calvary families have met in 5-7 small "discipleship groups" twice a month for strengthening relationships within the congregation. These groups typically meet in a home and include a time of food, sharing, book study, and prayer.

Under the auspices of Calvary's Board of Education, the Shenandoah Christian Music Camp was birthed in June, 2006 as a one-week concentration on music literacy and leadership in a cappella singing. Hosted at Calvary the annual camp attracts students and faculty from across the United States and Canada.

Beginning in the fall of 2010 the congregation initiated a more deliberate focus on the biblical training of the children in the Sunday School program. An assembly for the children preceding their Sunday School classes provides systematic teaching of the Bible, doctrine, songs, and scripture memory. A curriculum is being developed for the children's classes.

In 2012 a second Calvary campus was opened in Staunton, VA, an extension of the life and witness of the congregation into another city. Calvary pastors preach in the 1:30 PM Sunday service in a rented church to a small group who gather for worship.

From its beginning Calvary has had a vision to share the gospel with the unsaved. Under the leadership and supervision of the Calvary Board of Missions a variety of opportunities have been opened for members to participate. A weekly ministry in a local housing development, mostly to children, has been staffed by young adults. Various short-term missions activities have been supported. Currently, the Calvary congregation is supporting two young families who are serving in Africa; a young lady serving in Central America and a couple preparing for work in South East Asia. The highest goal of the Calvary mission program is to enable Calvary people to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the "uttermost part of the world."

TRANSITIONS

At the end of 2012 another milestone in the life of the Calvary Mennonite Fellowship was reached. Brother Paul Emerson retired as Senior Pastor and moved to Elnora, IN to serve as principal of the Elnora Bible Institute, a ministry of Biblical Mennonite Alliance. Stephen Byler was installed as Senior Pastor. Under Steve's leadership the congregation is solidifying organizational structure, extending its ministries, and clarifying its mission.

- Information for this document is adapted from *A History of Calvary Mennonite Fellowship 1990 - 2010*, written by Paul and Gail Emerson.