



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

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### FAITH OF OUR FATHERS AND MOTHERS

This past fall I was invited to participate in a couple of church anniversary celebrations, which got me to pondering the risk-taking gumption expressed by our German Reformed and Congregational ancestors.

I was helped in my ruminating by one of our pastors, the Rev. Kathleen Jones, who came up to me at Annual Meeting and shared with me some of her research into her own Pennsylvania Dutch background. Rev. Jones began by saying, “I don’t think we folks today truly appreciate the kind of audacious faith that our first generation of ancestors to the New World possessed, a faith that drove them across the Atlantic Ocean to a strange new place.”

She went on to explain how the German Reformed migration began in earnest after William Penn’s heirs decided in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that they needed some kind of human buffer between the English colonists who had settled in the Philadelphia area and the hostile indigenous Americans who lived in upper Pennsylvania and upstate New York. So the Penn brothers sent an agent over to the Alsace-Lorraine area (and the Palatinate) to speak in the various German Reformed churches, telling these war-weary peasants of a lush and verdant land that would be theirs for the taking if they just pulled up their stakes and moved to Penn’s Woods.

What impressed her—and me too—is how these people of robust Christian faith, simply on the word of a man they did not know and whose integrity they could not validate, were able to put enough trust in him (and God!) to undertake a difficult and dangerous voyage down the Rhine River to Rotterdam, and then across the Atlantic to the *wild, wild west*—a.k.a. the Lehigh Valley.

(And when I say *wild, wild west* I mean it; these were the days before and during the French and Indian War, when English/German settlers faced a clear and present danger from their enemies to the north—as the book/movie “Last of the Mohicans” illustrates. More to the point: one of our churches—St. Paul’s UCC in Indianland/Cherryville—was actually burned by an Indian raiding party during this period!)

*(By the way, I learned on my visit to St. Peter’s Union Church in Shumans/Bloomsburg that a second bold migration of Germans from the Lehigh Valley to the unsettled land west of Hazleton took place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century...)*

Anyway, the German Reformed colonists displayed a tremendous amount of pluck, perseverance, and faith in God as they came into our area. Their risk-taking faith reminds me of that passage in the New Testament, which reads:

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, ...** (Hebrews 12.1-2 NRSV)

I bring up the example of our ancestors’ faith (both in colonial times and in the biblical period) because today we find ourselves confronted by a new, life-shattering challenge that demands a similar kind of risk-taking faith if we are to overcome it. Now I’m not talking primarily about terrorism or world economic recession—both of which I’ll admit are major threats to our way of life.

Rather, I’m talking about a seismic cultural shift taking place in this country that is bringing many staid old churches with rich histories to the end of their institutional lives. Like a vast tidal wave, changes in the way younger people perceive the significance of community-based religion is sweeping over our nation. And unfortunately, many congregations find themselves ill-prepared to adapt successfully to these changes. As a result, one to two churches in our own Conference close their doors *each year!*

When our German and English (referring to the Congregationalist side of the UCC) ancestors found their faith communities threatened by war, poverty, and virulent persecution, they took the risk of giving up doing “business as usual” so that they could move to a new, mysterious, and sometimes foreboding land and began a new way of life. But note: their faith paid off!

We too must take risks in this new cultural age, if we are to survive. We simply cannot afford to hold tightly to lifeless tradition if the weight of that tradition prevents us from being able to bob safely to the surface as the cultural tidal wave rolls over us. *And the wave is upon us at this very moment!*

May God grant us the kind of risk-taking faith the “witnesses” who came before us demonstrated through the course of their own courageous lives!

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