

## Bethel and Her Church

BETHEL UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH is located in the southern part of Indiana County, about one mile south of the William Penn Highway at Clyde, Pennsylvania. The church was organized under the direction of the Presbytery Monongahela, but the year in which the organization was effective does not appear on the records of the Presbytery and consequently only an approximate date may be affirmed. These records mentioned Bethel as though it were an organization in the year 1812 and there are reports of supplies who have preached at Bethel previous to this time. On the other hand the Session records of the congregation, which were complete from the beginning but which were destroyed by fire in 1901, are said by those who read them, to have placed the date of the organization of the Church in the year 1808. This date is further strengthened by tradition and so far as we know has never been called in question.

However, this was not the beginning of Bethel's history, for there were religious services held at irregular intervals for many years previous to the formal organization of the Church. In the records of both the Monongahela and the Chartiers Presbyteries there is trace of preaching in the vicinity as far back as the closing years of the eighteenth century. The first religious services of the locality were held near the village Armagh, October 7, 1786, and were under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. From this time on, services were held occasionally at different places in the vicinity, by the Associate, the Associated, Reformed and the Presbyterian Churches. This locality seems to have been a link between the fields of Indiana and Ligonier Valley. Thus it may be said that Bethel's beginning dates back to the days when we had no president and when the present Constitution was not yet adopted.

The organization of the congregation was perhaps hastened by the formal organization on the part of the Presbyterians in or near Armagh, during the late years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In that day there was so great a gulf between the two churches that they could not worship together and so our people soon after followed their example with the aid of some new families that arrived about that time established their Church in the year above named.

While the Presbyterians were the first to have an organization they were not the first to have a house of worship for in this Bethel anticipated them by about two years, the first church house being erected in the summer of 1818. During the ten years previous to this the religious services were held in the woods in the nice weather, and in case of rain they would go to a large barn on the place now owned by Joseph Wagner. In the winter-time the services were conducted in the homes of the members for the most part.

The location of the church building was ideal and was quite in harmony with what we know of the Church of the Colonial days. Bethel was and is yet surrounded by "the murmuring pines and the hemlocks"; the primeval oak and chestnut stand guard for her against the stormy blasts of winter and in the heat of summer afford her a kindly shade.

The proverbial spring fed brook, with its perennial stream of sparkling water, winds its way amid a leafy retreat, furnishing refreshment for man and beast. It was fitting that the first House of God in this part of Pennsylvania should be so located as to be sheltered by Nature as token of that shelter afforded by nature's God, which so many have found within the Church. In the same lot with the church is God's acre, whose granite monuments silently bear witness to the transitory character of this life, while the house of God as silently, points to life and ending.

The first church built in 1818, was constructed of stone which was obtained from a quarry near by, and the timbers used in its erection were hewn from the trees from within site of the house. The lath and lap-shingles were split out by hand almost within a stone's throw from the building. The few nails used in the framework were hammered out by hand by a local blacksmith whose name is forgotten, and the iron out of which the nails were made was likely obtained from one of the furnaces which once dotted the hills of the locality. The lime for the mason-work was manufactured in the vicinity also, and that is all the material used in the building of the church was supplied by Nature and the men who erected it were all local men under the direction of a man named Mahan. We feel safe in saying that no community in the United States could today construct a like building with the same tools in a life time.

The stone church served as a place in which to worship until 1851, when it was deemed unsafe for further use, and so, leaving the old church standing, they erected a new building 40x50 feet about one hundred feet to the south. This house was a frame structure somewhat larger than the stone church and more comfortable. It was built under the direction of Alexander Dickie, an uncle of our Rev. A. B. Dickie, of Cameron, Texas, at a cost of about \$1800.00. This building burned to the ground on Monday morning, October 16, 1865, as the congregation was assembling for the concluding service of their communion session and congregational meeting. The present house was built the following summer at a cost of about \$2400, under the supervision of Jacob Overdorf. The building at the time stood for the best in rural church architecture and was adequate to the needs of the large number of worshipers that then met at Bethel. Although the building has stood for 52 years the paint is yet doing good service. The roof has been replaced three times---the present roof being put on this summer. In 1903 the church was partitioned so that it might be more easily heated---the entire room not being needed after the Heshbon church was organized. The house will not accommodate about 150 seated comfortably but there is additional room for perhaps twice that number in an emergency.

In 1898 a parsonage was built at Clyde for the Pastor, Rev. Tinker. The stone for the foundation was obtained from the old stone church and the cornerstone of the parsonage is the cornerstone of the old stone church with the figures 1818-1898 chiseled upon it. While we are mentioning past dates it is not out of place to add that the Bible now used in the Bethel pulpit, which is in good condition bears the following inscription," From the Ladies of the community to the Bethel A. R. Church. 1856."