



Alpha Hall the oldest building on the campus of Elizabethtown College

It is the month of May and this means commencement exercises at Elizabethtown College. Let us reflect on the 118 year history of Elizabethtown College as students prepare to graduate.

Lancaster County is well known as the home for large populations of religious sects associated with the Anabaptists such as the Mennonites (1525), Amish (1693), and Brethren (1708). British Quaker (1650) and Baptist (1609) founders of Pennsylvania, sharing similar theological principles with the Anabaptists, made the colony attractive to these refugees fleeing persecution in Europe.

The origins of Elizabethtown College are firmly rooted in the history of Anabaptism, the Pietists, the Historic Peace Churches, and particularly the German Baptist Brethren which since 1908 are referred to as the Church of the Brethren. Anabaptism arose out of the religious and social ferment of the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648).

"Anabaptist" is a Greek word meaning "rebaptizer," used in church Latin since the 4th century. The Anabaptists of the Reformation repudiated infant baptism because they denied the readiness of an infant to receive the sacrament. They called for baptism only of adults on confession of faith.

The Anabaptists denied infant baptism was baptism at all and hence argued they were not "rebaptizers." The term was never used by the Anabaptists themselves and they vigorously objected to the designation because of the criminal character attached to the name.

The criminal character attached to the name Anabaptist was attributed to the imperial law code from Justinian's time (A.D. 529) making rebaptism a heresy penalized by death.

The narrative of the execution of the Anabaptists is recounted in stories and illustrations in the book: *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660.*

Originally published in Holland and then between 1745-1749 it was translated into German and printed at the Ephrata Cloister (1732).

The Anabaptists were persecuted because they believed the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) and Roman Catholic Counter Reformation (1545-1648) did not go far enough to establish a church based on a literal interpretation of the New Testament.

The Anabaptists created a church with two distinctive departures from Protestants and Roman Catholics: first the insistence on adult baptism and second a commitment to nonviolence based on an interpretation of Jesus Christ as a pacifist. Thus the association of Anabaptism with the Historic Peace Churches.

Historic Peace Churches is a label referring collectively to the Mennonites, Quakers, and the Church of the Brethren. The term first appeared in 1935 at a meeting of the three denominations held at Newton, Kansas.

Though the three churches were in contact over the centuries, modern joint endeavors were triggered by challenges growing from the First and Second World Wars regarding support for conscientious objectors and alternatives to military service.

In addition to pacifism and nonresistance, Anabaptism emphasized social justice based on the influence of Pietists. The Pietism movement began in the late 17th century. Pietism emphasized a personal emotionally charged conversion experience. The evidence of a personal religious conversion was demonstrated through engaging in social justice. Pietism required nonconformity to the world by rejecting secular literature, abstaining from consuming tobacco and alcohol, forbidding gambling, dancing, and attending the theater or secular festivals/amusements.

This Pietist emphasis on servant leadership and social justice within the context of nonconformity extended to personal appearance regarding "plain dress." Plain clothing is a strong political statement as it has historic roots in rejecting military uniforms reflecting rank and accomplishment. Plain dress is an ideological statement symbolizing a belief in pacifism and nonresistance. Dressing plain means you are a member of a church which emphasizes humility, egalitarianism, and conformity to community.

Typically plain clothes for men means a dark suit with the lapels removed and this is called a standing collar "plain coat" sometimes accompanied by broad fall pants. Men wear a felt or straw hat, the size of the brim can indicate their leadership role in the church. Plain dressed men do not wear neckties.

A plain dressed woman's wardrobe is defined by what is called a "cape dress" often accompanied with an apron, worn even when not in the kitchen, and can symbolize her husband or father's leadership role in the church. Their hair is grown long, worn pinned up, and finished with what is called a "covering" which is a prayer veil and can be topped with a bonnet. Plain people do not wear cosmetics or jewelry.

A religious sect among the Anabaptists, Pietists, and Historic Peace Churches is The Church of the Brethren. This denomination originated at Schwarzenau, county of Wittgenstein, Germany. In 1708 a group of Pietists, led by Alexander Mack (1679-1735), heavily influenced by the Mennonites and Amish, distinguished themselves by insisting adult baptism be done through triple immersion. They also accompanied the observance of communion with a fellowship meal called the love feast.

Their leading teaching concerning baptism by immersion gave them the name "Tunkers" or "Dunkers." Since this would be a German equivalent of "baptist," the name German Baptist was often used for them when they settled in Pennsylvania in 1719. Originally they adopted no name and did not think of themselves as a denomination. They referred to one another simply as "the brethren."

The denomination spread through Pennsylvania, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and westward to the Pacific coast. The Brethren established six colleges and one theological seminary. The denomination's headquarters are in Elgin, Illinois.

In 1874 the Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren was established as a mission directed by the Chiques Church of the Brethren (1856) in Manheim. The congregation met in the Mechanic Street School east of the Square parallel to East High Street. In 1888 they built a church on Washington Street east of South Market Street. In 1902 the congregation was established as a church and no longer sponsored as a mission. In 1954 they built a new church on the corner of South Mount Joy and Cedar Streets near their campus of Elizabethtown College.

The denomination held its first Annual Conference in 1778. Plain dress was universally adopted by the Church of the Brethren at their Annual Conference in 1804. It became a requirement for all baptized members of the church.

In 1885 Elizabeth Myer (1863-1924), a member of the Conestoga Church of the Brethren (1724) in Bareville, enrolled as a student at the Millersville State Normal School (1855). Elizabeth Myer was the only student at Millersville dressed in plain clothes. She was discerning leaving the school until Principal Benjamin Franklin Shaub (1841-1913) promised she would be respected for her convictions.

Dr. Shaub was a Mennonite and therefore sympathetic to plain dress. Student and faculty opposition to Shaub's support of Elizabeth Myer forced him to resign as principal in 1887. In the same year, Elizabeth Myer graduated and delivered the salutatorian address for the class of 1877. She taught in the Lancaster County public schools for 14 years. Elizabeth Myer's success inspired other Anabaptists of the plain sects to attend state normal schools and teach in public schools.

In the same year Elizabeth Myer entered Millersville State Normal School as a student wearing plain garb, the right of teachers to wear religious dress in public schools was challenged, for the first time, before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1894 in the case *John Hysong v. School District of Gallitzin Borough*.

This public school district employed Roman Catholic nuns who wore the religious garb of the order of The Sisters of St. Joseph (1650). Certain Protestant parents wanted the nuns removed from the public school. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania rejected the contention of wearing religious garb amounted to sectarian teaching. The following year, the Pennsylvania legislature effectively annulled the decision by prohibiting the wearing of religious dress in the public schools, and the state supreme court upheld the legislation.

In 1895 the state legislature passed the Pennsylvania Garb Law: PL. 395-S.L. Sec. 4801: "No teacher in any public school shall wear in said school or while engaged in the performance of his duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such a teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination."

This legislation prompted discussions among Anabaptist groups in about establishing a private institution of higher education for students from plain sects in Lancaster County. There was little support for establishing a college among the Mennonites. The Church of the Brethren, on the other hand, had established 5 colleges (actually private Normal Schools) across the nation.

In 1899 Elizabethtown College was established by members of the Church of the Brethren. The first faculty member the College hired was Elizabeth Myer. This was a clear statement of how the College was formed in response to the Garb Law by hiring the champion of defending plain dress in state normal schools and public schools.

In the first Elizabethtown College catalog, for the 1900-1901 academic year, it states "All those who are members of the Brethren should bring their certificates of membership and it is expected that all such conform to the order of the church in all her doctrines, plainness of dress, and daily Christian deportment."

In 1908 Lillian Herr Risser (1887-1988) graduated from Elizabethtown College. The Board of School Directors for Mount Joy Township hired Risser, a plain dressed Mennonite from Lebanon County, to teach in the public schools. In 1909 the Board of School Directors of Mount Joy Township was brought under investigation for violating the 1895 Plain Garb Law. Certain non-Anabaptist members of the local community demanded the directors of the school, in compliance with the law, remove Lillian Risser from the classroom and the school directors subject to pay a fine.

The case was heard by Charles Israel Landis (1856-1932), President Judge of the Courts of Lancaster County. Judge Landis was an Episcopalian descendant of Swiss Mennonites from Paradise who was sympathetic to plain garb. Judge Landis ruled the Act of 1895 was contrary to Sections 3 and 4 of Article I of the Bill of Rights.

The Junior Order of United American Mechanics (1844) held their annual convention in Lancaster. This group was anti-Roman Catholic. They supported the 1895 Garb Law as a way to prevent nuns from teaching in public schools. At their convention they appropriated \$1,000.00 toward the expenses of testing the Lillian Risser case and appealing to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

Elizabeth Myer, editor of the Elizabethtown College's newspaper "Our College Times," featured a call to the campus and community to raise funds, "not less the \$500.00 to pay the costs of testing this case in the above courts. If any of our readers or friends of the College are disposed to contribute to this fund, please send your contribution to H. K. Ober Acting Treasurer of Elizabethtown College."

The Reverend George Bucher (1845-1923), founder of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren (1898) in Quarryville, among the founders of Elizabethtown College, one of the first members of the Board of Trustees, wrote a series of articles in 1908 defending plain dress, published in the "Daily New Era" newspaper and later printed as a booklet entitled, "The Garb Law An Argument on The Pennsylvania Garb Law in Relation to Public School Teachers."

In 1910 the case was presented before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in *Commonwealth v. Amos R. Herr*. The justices upheld the Garb Law of 1895 and found the school directors of Mount Joy Township in violation of the law.

In 1949 the Garb Law of 1895 was absorbed into the Public School Act Section 1112. "Religious Garb, Insignia, etc., Prohibited; Penalty.--(a) That no teacher in any public school shall wear in said school or while engaged in the performance of his duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect or denomination." The law still stands today in Pennsylvania.

Plain dress and other related teachings of the Church of the Brethren became more consistently embraced when the denomination assumed ownership of Elizabethtown College during the First World War. While Elizabethtown College was established by members of the Church of the Brethren, it was not legally owned by the denomination for the first 18 years.

With the First World War looming and concerns about conscientious objection and options for alternative military service for Elizabethtown College students, on April 25, 1917 ownership of the college was assumed by the Church of The Brethren's General Education Board. For 75 years the college was legally owned, governed, and funded by the Church of the Brethren.

On December 3, 1992 a Mutual Expectations Committee produced a "Statement of Basic Understanding" establishing a covenant rather than legal relationship between the church and college. Accordingly the "church cannot and should not control the college, and the college cannot and should not expect the church to totally finance its operations and assume all of the legal responsibilities of ownership." On October 23, 1993 the Board of Trustees amended the College's Articles of Incorporation, giving the board sole power to elect its members.

All but the last three presidents of Elizabethtown College were ordained clergy in the Church of the Brethren and several were evangelists such as President Ralph W. Schlosser (1886-1978), class of 1907, who held 225 evangelical revival meetings in the course of 55 years in over 10 states. Many of the presidents, deans, and faculty were alumni of the college.

Most of the students were right off the local farms in southeastern Pennsylvania, six of the past presidents could speak the Pennsylvania German dialect fluently. Although Elizabethtown College is rooted in Anabaptism and strongly influenced by the local Pennsylvania Dutch culture, the institution has always been ecumenical.

In the original charter for the College it is clear the school was not established only for members of the Church of the Brethren but "shall be open to all such as desire to avail themselves of its privileges."

According to a statement crafted by faculty and students appearing in 1904 in the school newspaper "...the doors are open to everybody, regardless of creed, and they are not to be intimidated on account of their honest, religious convictions. While Elizabethtown College is loyal to its immediate fraternity, yet no one on account of his religious convictions, shall in any way be embarrassed while making his sojourn with us; but that he shall always feel at liberty to hold his honest religious convictions, even though they may in some degree be at variance with others."

One of the college's benefactors, Mennonite Elmer Esbshade (1881-1967) wrote in 1967 how he believed "every youth, regardless of race, creed, or color, ought to prepare themselves for life by securing an education that will qualify them for some worthwhile vocation." Adding how the world needs individuals who "will influence not only their own destiny, but also serve the interests and welfare of human kind."

In 1967 a committee was appointed to review the purposes of the College. The committee issued the statement, "While the College does not expect that the total Faculty be Christian or reflect any one point of view, it does expect that the goals and the purposes of the institution will be respected by all Faculty." Consistent with this history, Elizabethtown College offers a Bachelor of Arts degree in Interfaith Leadership Studies.

Elizabethtown College is still firmly rooted in the Anabaptist and Pietist tradition within the context of the Historic Peace Churches.

The College is home to The Galen S. Young (1912-2006) Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies (1989). This research center sponsors The Young Center Fund for Student-Faculty Research in Conflict Resolution and Ecumenical Studies as well as the Dale W. Brown Peace Endowment.

The Elizabethtown College Alumni Peace Fellowship works closely with the College's Center for Global Understanding and Peacemaking. These two groups sponsor the Paul M. Grubb, Jr. (1932-1985) class of 1955 Student Peace Award; Eugene P. Clemens, Professor of Religion Emeritus, Student Peace, Tolerance, Social Justice Award; and the Mary Dilling Herr, class of 1957, Peace Fund.

The College's Center for Global Understanding and Peacemaking annually hosts the Ware Colloquium on Peace Making underwritten by Paul and Judy S. Ware class of 1968.

The College offers a minor in Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, as well as a minor in Peace and Conflict Studies. The College curriculum features classes such as "Anabaptist and Pietist Movements," "Amish, Brethren, and Mennonites in the U. S. Since 1875," "Amish Society;" "Peace, War, and Nonviolence;" "Peacemaking and Social Justice in the Bible."

The President of Elizabethtown College, European Historian Dr. Carl J. Strikwerda, a member of the Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren, regularly teaches the course "Peace and War in a Global World."

The College library is home to the Church of the Brethren Archives located in the Earl H. and Anita F. Hess, Class of 1953, Archives and Special Collections.

The Office of Church Relations is part of the Institutional Advancement division and is a bridge between the College and the Church of the Brethren's Atlantic Northeast and Southern Pennsylvania Districts.

The College financial aid office features the Church of the Brethren Scholarship to students who are active members of the Church of the Brethren.

The campus hosts the Susquehanna Valley Ministry Center which was established in 1993 in collaboration with the Church of the Brethren Bethany Theological Seminary (1905), and the Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership.

The offices for a study abroad program called Brethren Colleges Abroad have been on campus since it was created in 1962.

In his inaugural address as the 11th president of the College, on November 5, 1977, The Reverend Dr. Mark C. Ebersole (1921-2011), class of 1943, said, "Through philosophy, history, legend, poetry, religion, and all other liberal studies, the human spirit is stirred to probe more deeply for the truths that make life worthwhile, for those values that will bring sublimity of purpose and character."

President Ebersole's words are echoed in the purpose of the college as described by the Board of Trustees in a statement issued in 1927, "...the ideals and purpose of the founders of the college...harmonious development of the intellectual, moral, physical, and spiritual life of the student."

On Saturday May 20, 2017 the senior class of Elizabethtown College will commence on a journey of lifelong learning. They have been prepared for this quest through four years of an ecumenical liberal arts education steeped in a tradition of peace, nonviolence, and social justice established by the Anabaptists, Pietists, and Historic Peace Churches of Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.

Text by Jean-Paul Benowitz, Historian, Elizabethtown College Director of Student Transition Programs & Assistant Director of Academic Advising.

Illustrations by Shanise Marshall, Elizabethtown College Class of 2015, History major with a Fine Arts-Art History and Religious Studies minors.