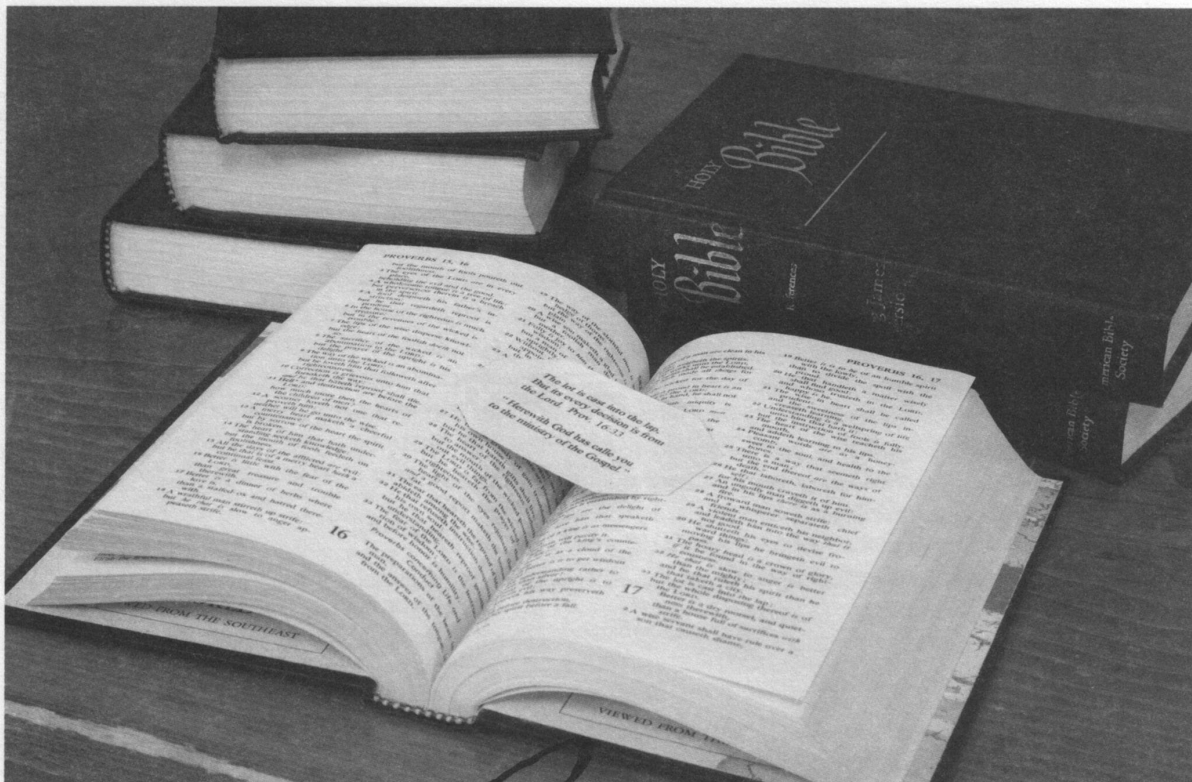


Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage



Volume 41, Number 2

April 2018



Hit by the Lot

*Stories of Conviction and Doubt
in the Mennonite Church*



Millwood Mennonite Church

"I believe I felt the Lord's call"

Reuben G. Stoltzfus

Millwood Mennonite Church, 1944

by Donna Stoltzfus

Reuben G. Stoltzfus had a wife and four young children when he learned that his name was in the lot on a Sunday night in the late winter of 1944. His youngest child had been born only three weeks earlier, quite ill and spitting up blood. When Reuben was ordained three days after he was nominated, Dorothy, his wife, did not attend the ordination. All of the children were sick that evening.

"We didn't have heat upstairs so I slept downstairs in the warm with the baby," Dorothy said. "That night I could not sleep, but the words of the song 'He Leadeth Me' came to my mind. 'Lord, I will cast thy hand in mine and never murmur or complain. Whate'er my lot may be, still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.' So then I could rest, and that is a favorite song today."

"I couldn't talk very much that day," Reuben recalled. "The old church building isn't there anymore, but I believe I can go to the very spot where I stood. I believe I felt the Lord's call."

After Reuben was ordained he had to remain at the church to meet with others in the congregation. A neighbor who had been at the service stopped in to see Dorothy. "Oh, Reuben was ordained today," she said. Dorothy tried to absorb the news while she took care of the children and waited for Reuben to come home.

Many visitors stopped by to see the new pastor and his family. This was expected but not always easy. Dorothy recalled one visit in particular. "The people stayed and stayed. We couldn't put our children to bed. The baby was still sick and needed attention. And the other children had viruses. I was pretty tired, and finally I felt I just couldn't take any more so I ran into the other room where I slept with the baby. I started to cry. Dale, who was seven years old, came into the room and saw me crying. He went out and told. The families left soon after that. I learned many lessons in these thirty-seven years. One of them was not to stay too long when you go to visit the sick."

Reuben and Dorothy lost their baby daughter, Dorothy Jean, on March 31. "She had started to grow," said Dorothy, "but we lost her." This was the second child Reuben and Dorothy had to bury. Kenneth Glenn had died at two years of age in 1937.

Reuben worked at Glick's Plant Farm in Smoketown, Pennsylvania. He enjoyed his responsibilities as a manager at a cannery on the farm, where they canned meat for Mennonite Central Committee for relief and CPS (Civilian Public Service) camps. But after the ordination, Reuben often had to be away from home to attend to church business. "He had far to go to the churches," said Dorothy, "so we thought it wise to move and look for other work."

The family moved to a farm near Gap, closer to the church. "The farm was run down so there was a lot of hard work there," Dorothy said. "When we moved, some people from church helped us get started on the farm. They gave us a new Plymouth. That was one of the few new cars we ever had. Reuben did not get a salary from the church, but our people were good to us."

As the years passed, Dale, the oldest son, remembered the farm work often being his responsibility.

*... the words of the song
"He Leadeth Me" came
to my mind. 'Lord, I will
cast thy hand in mine
and never murmur or
complain. Whate'er my
lot may be, still 'tis God's
hand that leadeth me.'"*

"When Dad had church work, I was in charge of milking the cows and the field work on the farm," Dale said. "I remember being eleven or twelve and driving through heavy snow on the tractor to the end of our long lane to pick up Dad after a meeting. I knew he couldn't drive any further to the farm, and we didn't have a plow so that was how I got through the deep snow."

Six months after Reuben became pastor at Millwood, the church split. There had been disagreement over conference affiliation for years, and the more traditional minority decided to join the Lancaster Conference under the leadership of Bishop John Kennel. This group continued to worship in the Millwood church building with Reuben as pastor.

"There were many meetings and a lot of tension at this time," Dorothy said. "This was before we had moved to the farm, and Reuben developed a bleeding ulcer. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital. Later our daughter Betty said, 'One time Daddy died, and then he came back to life again.'"

"Reuben had another bleeding ulcer on the farm," Dorothy continued, "but he did not go to the hospital again. We had an old-fashioned doctor who made house calls, and I guess he knew we were poor."

In 1949 Reuben was one of four men who were nominated for the lot for bishop in the Millwood Mennonite District. Another congregant received the call.

Reuben served the Millwood congregation for thirty-seven years. At a service honoring his retirement, one member of the congregation shared: "I'm glad that we had a faithful pastor. I always appreciated Reuben and Dorothy. They were kind to others. I remember one time being in the hospital and seeing this big white bouquet. I wondered where it came from. It was given by Dorothy."

Reuben offered to help the new pastor during his first six months in his new role. "I am so grateful that he's still here," said Frank Menkin, who replaced Reuben. "I guess he's seen people come into this position and all of a sudden take everything on at once."

"Some people think when the new pastor comes in, the old one should move out. Well, I wouldn't know where to go," Reuben said to the congregation. "I think I'll stay here as long as they permit me to stay here. By the grace of God, I'd like to do that. Lord bless you."