

The Sunday School Movement in the Brethren in Christ Church ✓
in the Nineteenth Century

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Considerable obscurity surrounds the questions as to where and when Sunday School work began in the Church. We have no information for the period prior to the 1860's, but a fairly safe inference would be that there was no Sunday School activity during that time. One writer states that Bertie District in Ontario co-operated in a Sunday School which began in the Humberstone Schoolhouse in 1863.¹ Another author identifies Asa Bearss as the organizer and first superintendent of that School.²

Evidence at hand indicates that the above assertions which rest only upon oral tradition cannot easily be reconciled with each other. Asa Bearss was born in 1840 and "converted when about twenty-seven years of age."³ This would place his conversion approximately in 1867, or about four years after the reported opening of the Humberstone Sunday School. If, therefore, Bearss started that School, he either did so before he professed experiential conversion and united with the Church, or else it began later than 1863. The present writer seriously questions whether the Bertie brethren would have joined in such a new venture as Sunday School work with an unconverted man who did not hold membership in their group. Thus, the statement that the Bertie District co-operated in a School begun in 1863 would seem to require at least the qualification that such co-operation began some years after its beginning.

Asa Bearss' connection with the founding of a Sunday School in the Humberstone Schoolhouse is so firmly fixed in the traditions of his family that such connection is reasonably credible even in the absence of more satisfactory documentary proof.⁴ While one is inclined to look with more skepticism upon a specific date which is fixed only by oral tradition, the year 1863 is probably the best approximation we can hope to achieve for the Asa Bearss venture into Sunday School work. As pointed out above, such a venture in that year would have preceded by several years his experiential conversion and subsequent affiliation with the Church. This would not be surprising, for persons of many different religious viewpoints and emphases took an interest in the Sunday School movement.

We may surmise that when Asa Bearss professed experiential conversion about 1867, the Bertie brethren received both him and his Sunday School into fellowship. The situation which would have resulted under these circumstances could account for the Bertie tradition of co-operation in a Sunday School started in the Humberstone Schoolhouse in 1863. We do know that the Bertie people must have held Bearss in high esteem from the beginning of his affiliation with them, for they ordained him to the ministry only three years later when he was only approximately thirty years of age.⁵ This esteem for the man might well explain why the conservative Bertie group⁶ took a positive view of Sunday School work at a time when such work was almost unknown within the Church. Dr. A. W. Climenhaga's data assembled from questionnaires completed several decades ago by presumably knowledgeable individuals in various parts of the Brotherhood reveal no claims for Sunday School work antedating 1880, except in Bertie District and, possibly, at Sippo, Ohio. His Bertie informants mentioned the Humberstone School of 1863 and also stated that Sunday

School was held in the Bertie meeting house from the time of its erection in 1885.⁷ Conclusions and generalizations based only upon the oral traditions of localities must, of course, be regarded with much caution. Fortunately, however, we have documentary proof that Bertie District had a Sunday School in 1887, and the report of its activities suggests that it was not a recent innovation at that time.⁸

While more documentation would certainly be welcomed, the present writer's judgment is that the claims of Bertie District to the earliest Sunday School within the Brotherhood rest upon more substantial considerations than can thus far be brought forward on behalf of any other locality. He has also previously expressed the opinion that the account of Asa Bearss and the Humberstone Sunday School is generally credible, although the nature of the relationship of that School to Bertie District is by no means clear.

Interestingly enough, the earliest documentation of Brethren in Christ Sunday School activity does not relate to the long-established Bertie District where we believe the first Sunday School began, but to a small mission point in Columbus, Ohio. Here an interest in Sunday School work developed as early as 1876, for in that year the question as to whether the brethren at Columbus could have a Sunday School came somehow to the floor of the General Council (Conference). The minutes of the Council record the following action: "That it is granted that the Columbus Brethren may permit a Sabbath School to be held in their church provided they hold control of it."⁹ Although, as has been said, this is the earliest documentation of Sunday School activity within the Brotherhood, it in no way proves that Sunday Schools had not been started earlier elsewhere, say in Bertie District, Ontario.

The early Sunday School movement had to go forward against much opposition. Some of this may have been a psychological carry-over from an earlier period when the public ministrations of the Church largely disregarded the evangelization and spiritual nurture of children and youth.¹⁰ Various specific criticisms were advanced, however. Two such criticisms were stated and then challenged by "A Friend of S.S." as follows:

Some may oppose the institution on the ground that it is not an institution of the New Testament or that it was not recognized by the fathers of our society. We answer that the teaching of the Word is to the effect that the church take up works which are for the good of mankind as they present themselves though they may not have been practiced in the earlier times. Reading Phil. IV, 8, the apostle gives us to understand that there are things true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, etc., besides such as he had mentioned, and exhorts the brethren to think on these things, and, we doubt not, act accordingly, and elsewhere we are exhorted to be ready to every good work. If then this is a good work it would seem to be an easy matter to decide what our attitude towards it should be, and knowing our duty in the matter it remains for us to not be slow in performing it.¹¹

A later Sunday School apologist went to much greater lengths to answer those who objected to the Sunday School because it was new. Among other things, he wrote:

¹A. W. Climenhaga, "History of the Brethren in Christ Sunday Schools," Forward, V (April, May, June, 1953), p. 3.

²Alvin L. Winger, "Asa Bearss, the First Sunday School Superintendent," Ibid., p. 2.

³Asa Bearss obituary. Evangelical Visitor, XXXVIII (December 21, 1925), pp. 8,9. This obituary makes clear that he died in 1925 and not in 1921 as has been asserted. See Morris Sider, "History of the Brethren in Christ (Tunker) Church in Canada," p. 28. Unpublished master's thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1955.

⁴Alvin L. Winger, grandson of Asa Bearss, told the writer that the account of the founding of the Humberstone Sunday School has been commonly known and accepted within the family as long as he can remember.

⁵Asa Bearss obituary. Evangelical Visitor, XXXVIII (December 21, 1925), p. 9.

⁶The present writer's impression of Bertie conservatism in the 1860's may be unduly influenced by an anecdote told to him by M. L. Dohner. When, about the time indicated, the latter's grandfather went from the United States to Canada for visitation among the churches, the Bertie brethren hesitated to admit him to communion because he came in a carriage with springs. Apparently carriage springs suggested to them an affinity for the world.

⁷A. W. Climenhaga, "History of the Brethren in Christ Sunday Schools," Forward, V (April, May, June, 1953), p. 3.

⁸George Detweiler, "Report of Sabbath School," Evangelical Visitor, I (January 1, 1888), p. 75.

⁹Origin, Confession of Faith and Church Government, Together with an Abstract of the Most Important Decisions, Made by the General Council of the Brethren in Christ, Commonly Called River Brethren. 1871-1881 Inclusive (Wooster, Ohio, 1881), pp. 14, 15. This action is not included in any of the three subsequent compilations of General Council minutes in 1887, 1901, and 1904.

¹⁰Anthony Stoner, "I Am So Glad," Evangelical Visitor, IV (February 1, 1891), pp. 35,36.

¹¹Evangelical Visitor III (February 1, 1890), p. 45.

¹²Enos H. Hess, "The Sunday School," Evangelical Visitor, XIX (March 15, 1905), p. 16.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Minutes of the General Conference ... of the Brethren in Christ ... 1885. Article XI. Broadside in The Archives of the Brethren in Christ Church.