

Stricklers and Shopes Mennonite Church  
Chronology of Significant Events

1778 First Mennonites (family of Abraham Gehman) moved to what is now Lower Swatara Township. Other early families were the Mummas and the Nissleys. The Gehman farm was owned by descendants for more than two centuries and included the families of Nathaniel and Martha (Gayman) Shope, Daniel S. and Sarah (Shope) Kohr, and Phares and Emma (Miller) Longenecker. This farm lay about one mile east of the Mennonite meetinghouse. The Mumma farm, now owned by the Williams family, was north of the meetinghouse. The Nissley farms were in the vicinity of Longview Drive and North Union Street. All of these families established graveyards on their farms. These early Mennonites probably worshiped in homes in the earliest years.

1816 Land was sold by John (1776-1859) and Elizabeth (Frantz) Mumma to the Mennonite congregation for erection of a meetinghouse at the intersection of what is now Lumber Street and Spring Garden Drive. He was a minister, later a bishop. This first log meetinghouse measured 20 x 30 feet and was known as Mummas. It was replaced in 1873 by the brick meetinghouse which still stands. The new building was known as Shopes.

1837 Land was sold by Ulrich and Elizabeth Strickler for a meetinghouse in Londonderry Township about three miles east of Mumma meetinghouse across the Swatara Creek. Built of limestone, it measured 28 x 42 feet. The congregation maintained both buildings, alternating regular worship services. This building was razed in 1922 and was replaced by the present brick building, measuring 42 x 70 feet, with stones from the original building forming the foundation of the new.

1858 Ordination of Nathaniel Shope (1815-1877) as minister. He came from a German Baptist (now Church of the Brethren) family in what is now Lower Paxton Township. He was a schoolteacher. In 1864 he was ordained as bishop, and his ministry included not only his own district but also places farther west and possibly northwest in Pennsylvania.

1877 Heirs of Nathaniel Shope deeded a parcel of ground for a cemetery for use by the congregation. The first burial was that of Nathaniel Shope. Known today as Shope Mennonite Cemetery, it is well maintained and continues to receive new burials.

Late 1800s Union Thanksgiving Day services at Stricklers began during the ministry of John Erb (1839-1913; ordained as minister in 1877). Participants included ministers and members of local Mennonite, Brethren in Christ (Hummelstown), United Zion, and United Brethren (Stoverdale) churches as well as Swatara Hill (a union church in early years, later Church of the Brethren). This annual service continues but has largely Mennonite participation.

1905 Ordination of David Z. Miller (1881-1971) as minister. He moved from Conoy Township in Lancaster County to a farm in Londonderry Township after he married Susie Ebersole (1878-1959), a native of Londonderry Township.

1904 or 1905 First Sunday School at Stricklers. It began as a union Sunday School, but a few years later it became required that all song leaders and teachers be Mennonite. Sunday School began at Shopes by 1909. Many people who attended Sunday School attributed their knowledge of the Bible to lessons learned in this setting. Young people and older ones gained ability in leadership through teaching classes, song leading, and other ways of helping out.

1906 First revival meetings were conducted by John H. Mosemann of Lancaster, Pa. This annual series of meetings, held each weekday evening as well as Sundays, were usually of two weeks' duration. They attracted community interest in the early years and provided an opportunity for such persons as well as members' children to confess Christ and join the church..

1913 Ordination of Harry L. Longenecker (1881-1978) as minister. He was a farmer in Lower Swatara Township. He married Irene Zimmerman (1881-1964), a native of Cumberland County and a granddaughter of Nathaniel Shope. His ministry along with that of David Z. Miller paralleled the time of increasing congregational activity during the first half of the 20th century.

1913 First regular Sunday evening service held in January. This was the occasion of John Erb's last sermon; his text was John 1:23, "I am the voice." Later these monthly services became known as young people's meetings, and many young and older people developed skill in public speaking as they presented "topics" and essays assigned to them.

1923 First "all-day" meeting held at Stricklers. Services for this annual Sunday event were held in the afternoon and evening in addition to the regular morning worship time. Visiting preachers gave sermons of Bible instruction and Christian doctrine and nurture. Visitors from other churches would attend, and meetings included a flavor of homecoming. Noon and evening meals were served in the basement between sessions. These all-day meetings sometimes marked the beginning of a series of revival meetings.

1930s. Membership reached a peak of 110 and continued to number about 100 through the 1950s. During the 1960s and 1970s membership declined as young people went away to college and church-related service and subsequently found other places to serve the church. As the rural landscape gave way to suburban development, some moved to other locations to continue farming. Older members died, and fewer Mennonites moved into the community from nearby Lancaster County. Occasionally people of other-than-Mennonite background joined and became active in the congregation.

1933 A Sunday School with teachers from Stricklers began at Waltonville in Derry Township. Sunday School was held on Sunday afternoons and sometimes included preaching services. It continued for about three years until the former schoolhouse was no longer available.

1936 Another Sunday School began in Steelton. Along with the Elizabethtown congregation, several young people from Stricklers became involved at Steelton, which developed into an established Mennonite congregation that continues to the present time.

1938 Ordination of Pharos Z. Longenecker (1906-1975) as deacon to succeed Edwin E. Run (1862-1941). He married Emma Miller (1904-1992). He was a great-grandson of Nathaniel Shope and was the last ordained deacon in the congregation.

1947 First Summer Bible School held at Stricklers. For many years it was held for two weeks. It was the earliest Summer Bible School in this rural community and attracted a large number of children with attendance in the high 200s and low 300s being usual in the earliest years. Some children were transported to and from Bible School in school buses. This provided another opportunity for young and older people to develop teaching skills.

1947 Ordination of Russel S. Zeager (1915-2002) as minister to work alongside David Z. Miller and Harry L. Longenecker. A native of West Donegal Township in Lancaster County, he married Anna Mae Givens, who has been active at Stricklers her entire life.

1948 First women's sewing circle held. This was a mission-oriented activity to provide clothing and other material goods as well as funds for needy people in other countries. About this time several rooms in the basement at Stricklers were partitioned off to provide space for sewing activities as well as classrooms.

1950(ca.) First "Lord's Acre" project For a number of years a fanner in the congregation would donate a plot of land to grow a crop of corn or potatoes, etc. Young people of the church would tend the crop, then harvest it and donate the proceeds for mission projects. This later developed into an organized youth group with year-round activities.

1950(ca.) Sunday School began to be held at both Shopes and Stricklers simultaneously each Sunday. Worship services continued to alternate between both meetinghouses each Sunday, with services at Shopes on a given Sunday and at Stricklers the next Sunday. Semi-annual communion services were held at Shopes in the spring and at Stricklers in the fall. A preparatory service was held the Saturday afternoon before communion. Baptisms in the meetinghouse or in a nearby stream customarily took place during the preparatory service.

1965 James E. Keener was ordained as minister to work alongside Russel Zeager after the resignation of David Miller and Harry Longenecker in 1963. He married Sara Ann Martin, a native of Lancaster County. A great-great-grandson of Nathaniel Shope, he grew up on a farm a short distance west of the Shope meetinghouse. He served as minister until moving to Franklin County, Pa., in 1972.

1965 The congregation decided to conduct all Sunday services at Stricklers. The Shope meetinghouse did not meet the standards of more rigid building codes for an increasingly suburban community, and the declining membership did not provide an incentive to renovate the building. It continued to be used occasionally, especially for prayer meetings during the summer months. In 1976, the congregation agreed to donate the building to the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions for the development of a new, community-oriented congregation named Garden Chapel. This congregation renovated and enlarged the building and occupied it for 15-20 years, after which they built a new and larger church a few miles away near Highspire just off Rosedale Avenue. After standing vacant for several years the former Shope meetinghouse became a residence.

1980 Elmer K. Breneman, a native of Lancaster County and married to Esther Harnish, began serving as minister. During the mid-to-late 1970s other ministers, including Lester M. Hoover (born 1921) and Omar B. Stahl (1927-2002), had come to work alongside Russel Zeager for short periods of time, but Breneman's arrival marked the beginning of another long-term pastorate. They continued to serve together in the ministry until the resignation of Russel Zeager in 1992. During the time of Breneman's ministry, Mennonites from other congregations and people from the nearby community have become part of the congregation. With this influx of new members with young families and despite the death of older, longtime members from time to time, the decline of membership has reversed and once again is moving upward.

2000 The congregation voted to discontinue its membership in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, with which it had been historically connected since its beginning. Issues of difference with the Conference included membership in Mennonite Church USA and declining stress by the Conference on nonconformity to secular society. The congregation is not presently affiliated with a conference but continues its Mennonite identity and associates with likeminded Mennonite churches.

2001 Elmer K. Breneman was ordained by the congregation as minister. Up to this time he had served with a ministerial license.

2002 Edward N. Meyers was ordained by the congregation as minister to work alongside Elmer Breneman. Having grown up in the Church of the Brethren in Franklin County, Pa., he obtained employment in Dauphin County and joined the congregation in early 1980s. He married Jane Brandt.

-- Compiled by Lloyd Zeager for Stricklers-Shopes  
homecoming event on August 14, 2004