

# What's old is new again

## At its tricentennial, historic Germantown church breathes life into its neighborhood

by Walt Wiltschek

**T**he following story is about a congregation that has become a church in, of, and for its community.”

That's how authors Ron Sider, Philip Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh begin a case study in their 2002 book *Churches That Make a Difference*—a case study about Germantown Church of the Brethren in Philadelphia, Pa. It described the congregation as “visible and available” and “invested—financially, relationally, and spiritually—in the

holistic well-being of its neighbors.”

Nearly two decades after that book's publication, and on the verge of Germantown's 300th anniversary as a congregation, that's still what Germantown strives to be. It may be the oldest congregation in the denomination, but it's no quiet historical museum. Three centuries into its life, the “mother church” is still working hard to take care of its ever-changing family.

“The congregation with its unique positioning and longevity has been one of the major anchors in the community, providing a safe and convenient place for the community to gather and be a hub for social, human, and educational services,” says Germantown pastor Richard Kyerematen, who has now been leading the congregation for more than a tenth of its life—arriving in 1989.

“Our greatest gift to the community, though, is our incarnational ministry, worshipping the Lord for close to 300 years on the same grounds and providing a lifeline to all by proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore.”

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**The first Brethren arrived in Philadelphia** from Europe in 1719 and soon clustered in Germantown, then a distinct community north of the city and largely populated by Mennonites and other German speakers. Four years later, the group held its first baptisms in North America in the nearby Wissahickon Creek and formally established a congregation under the leadership of Peter Becker.

Brethren founder Alexander Mack Sr. arrived in 1735, bringing a fresh dose of energy, and by 1770 the Brethren were constructing their first permanent meetinghouse. The years that followed saw ebbs and flows as populations shifted, with the congregation sometimes sputtering and even ceasing to meet on a few occasions.

But each time, revival came. Missionary Wilbur Stover led one such wave when he came to Germantown for a few years in the 1890s. M.C. Sweigart built on that wave in the





Glenn Riegel

early 20th century, taking the congregation from about 60 members in 1906 to more than 450 in 1934, necessitating an expansion of the church building.

By the mid-20th century, decline had set in again, with most of the congregation's white members, and many other white members of the surrounding community, moving to the suburbs as Germantown became more urban and increasingly African-American in its demographics. By the 1960s, the building was primarily used as a Brethren Volunteer Service site.

In the 1980s, Atlantic Northeast District executive Earl Ziegler contacted Kyerematen, who had moved from his native Ghana to Europe and then the US for academic pursuits and was a student at Lancaster (Pa.) Theological Seminary. Kyerematen answered Ziegler's call and moved to Germantown shortly after his graduation. He's brought his energy and evangelistic passion to the congregation ever since.

"Under Richard's ministry, the church has come back to life," says Jeff Bach, director of Elizabethtown (Pa.) College's Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies

and a member of the denomination's Germantown Trust, which helps care for the historic meetinghouse. "It is now again a church of its own neighborhood. The people who worship there reflect the neighborhood now—African-American, Afro-Caribbean, a few white members. It really is a multicultural church. They know the neighbors, and the neighbors know them. That helps a lot."



**Kyerematen made those community connections a priority** when he came to Germantown and never wavered from that emphasis. He is well known on the surrounding streets and has become engaged in a variety of local organizations.

In *Churches That Make a Difference*, Kyerematen said that local residents had come to think of Germantown "as a white church, because when most black people moved into this neighborhood they didn't feel welcomed here."



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“The church has made significant progress in dispelling these myths in recent years,” the book said, “particularly through its combination of social ministries, persistent but patient witness, and warm fellowship.” One church member told the authors, “The outreach programs and the open doors, it’s like a big welcome sign on the outside. And people get a lot of love when they come here.”

Kyerematen says one of the greatest blessings during his three-plus decades as pastor is “to see so many lives transformed both spiritually and socially, and to see babies who were dedicated here now attending worship services.” Two women who grew up in the congregation both became pharmacists, he says, with one now serving as a lecturer at a local university.

The denomination assisted in renovating several abandoned buildings near the meetinghouse, and about 15 years ago the congregation purchased an adjacent building that now serves as a fellowship hall, bustling with life as it hosts a wide range of meetings, meals, and events. On any

given week, tutoring sessions, music groups, youth events, Bible studies, audio recording workshops for children, and even a small cable TV operation bring people to the church. Worship services are

broadcast live to the community each week, and numerous outreach ministries operate.

Others have noticed. A 2017 feature article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* carried the headline: “Germantown Church of the Brethren: Long heritage of outreach, love goes unabated.”

“As pastor, Richard is visionary regarding the needs of the area, but members join into that as well,” Bach says. “There’s a lot of good collaboration. It’s a really blessed coming together of both outreach and internal commitment to help make it happen.”

“They worship very energetically, with a strong faith, directed to God,” he adds. “They’re so welcoming and gracious. It’s a great experience. Germantown church is very Brethren—doing what Brethren faith values and considers important, and they do it in a way that’s congruent to their own makeup and the neighborhood they’re in, and I think that’s a great thing.”

The congregation says it clearly on its website ([gcob1723.com](http://gcob1723.com)): “We fervently desire to be conduits of (God’s) glory in our immediately community, and the world at-large.”



**For the next few years**, the congregation’s life will include some additional celebrations as it marks its tricentennial—not an occasion that many churches of any denomination can claim.



## A brief timeline of Germantown Church of the Brethren

**1719** The first Brethren arrive in North America.

**1723** The first congregation in North America is organized in Germantown under Peter Becker’s leadership. Germantown at the time is a distinct community north of Philadelphia. The first baptisms are done in Wissahickon Creek.



**1735** Brethren founder Alexander Mack Sr. dies.



Cheryl Brumbaugh-Coyford

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“It is a significant milestone in the life of every living institution, and its beneficiaries should make no apologies in celebrating, but Brethren being bashful, we plan to tone it down,” Kyerematen jokes.

The festivities kicked off last March with a special worship featuring a sermon by current Atlantic Northeast District executive Pete Kontra and words from denominational Office of Ministry director Nancy Sollenberger Heishman. Ziegler, now retired, came to preach at the Palm Sunday service. And each year’s Christmas concert at the church is also being tied in as a special celebration event.


Annual Conference moderator Paul Munday has been invited to preach at a worship service this year, and Kyerematen says a special culminating worship celebration will take place in the summer or fall of 2023. He has also had conversations with Bach about possibly hosting the Brethren World Assembly in Germantown that year.

And he says the congregation has another ambitious goal that he hopes will be the crowning celebration: “a million-dollar ministry endowment fund to ensure ministry visibility and viability into the next century.”

## LIFE ABOUNDS

“There is a vitality there that continues to find meaningful witness to Christ and Christian service and outreach,” Bach says. “As the area around it changes, the Germantown church has been pretty remarkable at being able to do that. They’ve had tough times over their history, but overall with 300 years of existence it’s pretty remarkable they’ve continued to do that. It could be just a historical building, but they’ve figured out ways to get back up and get going again.”

So if you’re in the Philadelphia area over the next few years, stop by Germantown and visit the old stone meetinghouse along Germantown Avenue. Check out the history, but check out the living, energetic Brethren congregation and the vibrant community it embodies, too.

“God is not finished with the Germantown Church of the Brethren yet,” Kyerematen says. “The fire that was lit almost 300 years ago is still burning, and Germantown will be the new frontier for the Brethren to engage urban America.” 



Glenn Riegel

**1894** Alexander Mack Sr.’s remains are moved to the congregation’s cemetery.

**1896–1897** An addition is made to the original meetinghouse.

**1915** Another addition is made to the original meetinghouse.

**1989** Richard Kyerematen is called as pastor.

**1995** Historical displays are created for the original section of the meetinghouse.

**2007** The congregation hosts a service launching the Church of the Brethren denomination’s 300th anniversary celebration.

**2019** Germantown kicks off a celebration of its tricentennial.



Cheryl Baumhugh-Coyford

**1770** The congregation builds its first meetinghouse.

**1890s** Wilbur Stover leads an era of revival at Germantown.