

“A LITTLE MORE SWINGING AND UPBEAT:”
THE MUSIC TRADITIONS OF THE BOONE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

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Abstract

An African American neighborhood, known as Junaluska, formed in the mountains of Boone, North Carolina in the late 1800s. In 1918, a group of Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) missionaries established the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church (BMBC) there. This church would maintain prominent standing in the community, outlasting all other black churches in the town. While the BMBC stood as the center of the community, the music was the center of the church. Music played an important role in Mennonite religious history and, when this combined with the African American culture in western North Carolina, the music would come to encompass the unique cultural exchange of the Mennonite and African American traditions in the BMBC. Though the music has adapted to changes within the Mennonite Brethren denomination and the Junaluska community, it remains a testament to the church's rich cultural history.

Describing her years growing up in Boone, North Carolina, Nell Ray recalled that the town's African American neighborhood, known as Junaluska, had "nothing but the Church." She continued, "We was interested in religion, but most we went there for was to get together."¹ Throughout the twentieth century, the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church and the Boone Mennonite Brethren Church (BMBC) provided Junaluska blacks with a sense of community and pride. Like many other residents, Ray would join the BMBC when the membership of the Methodist Church began to decline in the mid-1900s. With the official closure of the Methodist Church in 1989, the BMBC became the only historically African American church in Boone.

While the BMBC stood as the center of the community, the music was the center of the church. Reverend Morris Hatton, a long-time music director of the BMBC, remembered the music of his choir as a "thorough mixture," exhibiting content from the Mennonite tradition through African American rhythms and styles.² Music played an important role in Mennonite religious history. When this combined with the African American culture in western North Carolina, the music would come to encompass the unique history and cultural exchange of the Mennonite and African American traditions in the BMBC. Though the music has adapted to changes within the Mennonite Brethren denomination and the Junaluska community, it remains a testament to the church's rich cultural history.

Over the past two decades, scholars have begun to examine the Junaluska neighborhood and its most successful religious institution: the Boone Mennonite Brethren

¹ Nell Ray, interview by Winston Kinsey, March 20, 1973, Miscellaneous Oral History Transcripts, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA, 10.

² Morris Hatton, interview by Audrey Thomas, January 29, 2015.

Church. In “Race, Religion, and Community: The Demolition of a Black Church,” Susan Keefe and Jodie D. Manross focused on the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church, chronicling the church’s impact on Junaluska, its interaction with the BMBC, and its slow decline during the twentieth century. As the Methodist Church waned in the 1940s and 1950s, the BMBC thrived in the community. Keefe and Manross argued that the BMBC became more popular than the Methodist Church for three main reasons. First, due to centralized funding and support, the Mennonite missionaries were able to offer financial support to those congregation members in need during the Depression of the 1930s and World War II. Second, many Mennonite men avoided the draft during World War II because of the Mennonite pacifist stance, whereas Methodist men could not. Lastly, Keefe and Manross contended that while older members of the Methodist Church passed away, the BMBC attracted the young generation of Junaluska blacks.³

Conrad Ostwalt has also chronicled the reasons for the BMBC’s success, focusing on the cultural synthesis that occurred between the Mennonites and the African Americans in western North Carolina. The small black community, he argued, quickly identified with the Mennonite people, who experienced discrimination in both Russia and the United States, and embraced the Mennonite principles of pacifism and the separation of church and state. Both the Mennonite and African American traditions contributed to a sense of solidarity within Junaluska. Notably, Ostwalt also indicated the importance of the worship style of the BMBC. Largely of a black tradition, it incorporates hand clapping, call and response, and enthusiastic music into the Mennonite worship service.

³ Susan E. Keefe and Jodie D. Manross, “Race, Religion, and Community: The Demolition of a Black Church,” *Appalachian Journal* 26, no. 3 (1999): 252-262, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/40933981>.

Ostwalt posited that the successful combination of Mennonite and African American theology and practices has led to stability and a sense of community in Junaluska.⁴

Like Ostwalt, Elizabeth Méaut Miller focused her research on the BMBC. Her argument revolved largely around the influence of Reverend Ronda Horton, who preached and served in the North Carolina Mennonite Brethren District from 1933 until his death in 1986. Horton maintained a strict conservative worship service. Miller asserted that when Horton died, the church experienced many changes. The music, for instance, became more expressive, experimenting with contemporary gospel songs and traditionally African American worship styles such as clapping, swaying, and percussion instruments. Moreover, the church physically expanded, adding parking lots, a “spill-over” room, and classrooms. As a testament to their African American heritage, a painter also restored a painting of Jesus adding features that made him look more African American. Besides these more noticeable changes, Miller recognized the subtle weakening of Mennonite traditions, such as footwashing and communion services.⁵

Though Miller acknowledged the significant changes seen in the musical developments of the BMBC in the 1980s and 1990s, music was not her primary focus. While this paper will incorporate much of the history and culture of the BMBC discussed by both Miller and Ostwalt, it will go further in its discussion of the music traditions and emphasize the important role that music has played in the community and in the BMBC.

The music traditions reflect the position of the BMBC in both the African American and

⁴ Conrad Ostwalt, “African-Americans in North Carolina: A Symbiotic Relationship,” *Direction* 23, no. 2 (1994), accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.directionjournal.org/23/2/african-americans-in-north-carolina.html>; Conrad Ostwalt, “Crossing of Cultures: The Mennonite Brethren of North Carolina,” *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association* 4 (1992), 105-112, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41445627>.

⁵ Elizabeth Méaut Miller, “How Firm a Foundation: Denominationalism and Congregational Identity at an African American Mennonite Brethren Church,” (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997), 25.

Mennonite Brethren history, encompassing the unique cultural exchange that has occurred and contributed to the church's success.

In the late 1800s, Junaluska formed off the main road in Boone. Most of its residents were African American and interconnected through blood and marriage.⁶ Originally comprised of about four or five farming families in 1895, the close-knit black neighborhood developed from land either sharecropped, given to, or purchased by the former slaves of Jordan Council. Over the past century, the area has emerged as the center of a thriving African American community, one that has largely gone unnoticed by the region's white population.

Junaluska does not have clear-cut boundaries. In a series of interviews conducted in 1989, residents defined the physical Junaluska community in various ways. Some were largely inclusive, such as Kenneth Mayes, who said, "It starts at the bottom of the hill and goes to the top." Others, like one unnamed resident, applied more descriptive and specific boundaries to the neighborhood:

Starting on Depot Street and North Street – that's officially where the community is supposed to start. It runs back to the old VW building, right there where Junaluska Park is at the top. It covers all the way to Carolina and that's where Carolina starts. The white section is Carolina and Summit. The second portion ... the family ties pick up on Junaluska Road, starting with Summit to the city limits of Boone where it connects with Howard's Knob. It's interesting how the community developed that way. There was no planned scheme.⁸

Though its exact boundaries remain imprecise, Junaluska has managed to survive over the past century due in part to the impact of Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) missionaries in establishing the BMBC.

⁶ Ray, interview, 8.

⁷ Keefe and Manross, "Race, Religion, and Community," 254, 256.

⁸ Jodie D. Manross, "A Cultural History of the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church," (senior honors thesis, Appalachian State University, 1996).

Even before the end of the Civil War in 1865, northern missionaries had already begun evangelization efforts throughout the South.⁹ Although interested in converting whites, most missionaries devoted themselves to improving the lives of newly freed slaves. Denominations and individual churches, especially Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, supported schools, teachers, and Sunday Schools in hopes of educating and converting the black population. The Protestant-based American Missionary Association (AMA) established more than 500 African American schools in the postwar South. The Freedmen's Bureau often partnered with the AMA or other Northern churches to provide educational facilities and resources for southern blacks.¹⁰ Missionaries also provided African Americans with clothing, food, and other essentials.¹¹

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many northern white missionaries and churches had left the region. White southerners began recovering from the detriments of war and southern blacks had formed independent congregations. Much to the dismay of the missionaries, racial segregation, disfranchisement, lynching, and economic exploitation also became rampant across the South.¹² In addition, the missionaries faced discrimination. In a report from the Freedmen's Aid Society, one missionary wrote: "Being isolated from every human protection, we are in great fear and peril ... in constant expectation of being murdered or burned out."¹³ Missionary life proved difficult during

⁹ Daniel Stowell, "Post-Bellum Period," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, ed. Samuel S. Hill, Charles H. Lippy, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005): 20.

¹⁰ Randall Miller, "Churches," in *Encyclopedia of the Reconstruction Era*, ed. Richard Zuczek (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006): 144.

¹¹ Loren Schweninger, "The American Missionary Association and Northern Philanthropy in Reconstruction Alabama," *The Alabama Historical Quarterly* 33 (Fall and Winter 1970): 129, accessed April 9, 2015, http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/L_Schweninger_American_1970.pdf.

¹² Stowell, "Post-Bellum Period," 21-22, 23; Miller, "Churches," 144.

¹³ *Report of the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 86, accessed April 9, 2014, Google Books.

the Reconstruction era, causing many missionaries to become disillusioned and demoralized over the slow progress of education and moral reform of blacks in the South.

While missionaries' attention to African Americans in the South diminished at the end of the nineteenth century, local color writers were promoting regional stereotypes of Appalachian whites. Popular among white, middle-class Northerners, writers such as William Goodell Frost, Mary Noalles Murfree, and John Fox, Jr. instilled the idea of a backwards, ignorant, impoverished, and isolated Appalachia. These works reinforced an idea of Appalachian "otherness," marginalizing the region as different from the rest of America.¹⁴

With the "discovery" of Appalachian poverty, missionaries began to redirect efforts intended for southern blacks to mountain whites.¹⁵ With local color literature, white Appalachians were characterized as deficient, plagued by geographical isolation and poverty, though worthy of aid. This literary movement emerged during the same time when many missionaries became disillusioned over their perceived failures to uplift blacks in the South. As such, some missionaries increasingly turned their attention to white Appalachians, allowing them to work without the threat of racial tension. By 1920, seventeen Protestant denominations had founded over 200 mission schools throughout Appalachia.¹⁶

¹⁴ Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 124-128; Ronald L. Lewis, "Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia," in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 21-22; and Kenneth W. Noe, "Deadened Color and Colder Horror: Rebecca Harding Davis and the Myth of Unionist Appalachia," in Billings, *Back Talk from Appalachia*, 67.

¹⁵ James Klotter, "The Black South and White Appalachia," *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 4 (1980), 832, accessed October 29, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1887639>.

¹⁶ Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, 122.

One religious denomination that would soon greatly impact the Junaluska community was the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. Described by Mennonite theologian H.S. Bender, the KMB were “deeply religious in nature” and marked by “an intensely serious and strict manner of life.”¹⁷ The KMB upheld stringent rules regarding appearance and conduct, instituting dress regulations and discouraging extravagance. The KMB forbade tobacco, alcohol, voting, theatre, and jewelry and segregated men and women during church services.¹⁸ They also exhibited a passion for mission work and evangelism, leading them to establish many charities, missions, schools, and other philanthropic institutions throughout the United States.¹⁹ In addition to their conservative values and missionary passion, the KMB emphasized pacifism and separation of church and state.²⁰

The KMB first entered into western North Carolina after Emily Prudden sent a request for help with a mission school in Elk Park in Avery County. Prudden, who had already established mission schools for both blacks and whites throughout North Carolina, originally hoped to make an integrated school there. However, when confronted with opposition from local whites, she decided “to follow the custom of the churches in the South.”²¹ She purchased four acres of land on a hillside and built a school in Elk Park in 1894 to serve only African American children from Avery, Mitchell, and Watauga counties. Though, in her autobiography, Prudden wrote that “hampered by deafness from the age of seventeen, I could not enter ways of large endeavor,” her school became an

¹⁷ John E. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), 184.

¹⁸ Miller, “How Firm a Foundation,” 13; Alberta Pantle, “Settlement of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren at Gnadenu.” *Kansas History* 13, no. 5 (February 1945), accessed January 10, 2015. <http://www.kshs.org/p/kansas-historical-quarterly-settlement-of-the-krimmer-mennonite-brethren/12990>.

¹⁹ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 185.

²⁰ John Roth, “About Mennonites,” last modified October 2, 2014, <http://history.mennonite.net>.

²¹ Katharina Tschetter, *My Life-Story (Mrs. Joseph W. Tschetter) 1880-1945* (Chicago, 1945), 11.

anomaly for mission schools in Appalachia because of its support for the black community.²²

Due to racial tension in the area, Prudden found it difficult to retain teachers at her African American focused mission school. In 1900, however, Henry and Elizabeth Wiebe, two Krimmer Mennonite Brethren missionaries from Kansas, arrived in Elk Park and opened the Salem Mennonite Mission shortly thereafter.²³ In 1903, Jacob and Katherine Tschetter joined the Wiebes, who served until 1907, and there stayed until 1912, the year the Salem Mission officially closed. Joseph and Katharina Tschetter arrived in Elk Park in 1911 and, along with Peter and Katherine Siemens in 1925, founded several Mennonite churches in western North Carolina. These churches would form the North Carolina District, the only historically African American district of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the United States.

Upon arriving in Elk Park, the KMB missionaries met many hardships. Wanting to help the black population attain the same opportunities as whites, the Mennonites encountered what Katharina Tschetter deemed “deep experiences” from whites in the community.²⁴ In an early instance, the Wiebes found a note on their door warning them that, “We the citizens of Elk Park will not allow a white man to stoop so low as to teach niggers. They have enough of their color to teach them, Your time is up this day.”²⁵ The Wiebes continued their work despite such hostility. “There still were some people who

²² Emily Prudden, “An Autobiographical Sketch,” *American Missionary Magazine* 68, no. 3 (1914), 737, Google Books; Phoebe Pollitt, “Emily Prudden and Her Schools” (unpublished paper).

²³ Conrad Ostwalt and Phoebe Pollitt, “The Salem School and Orphanage: White Missionaries, Black School,” in *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South from Slavery to Segregation*, ed. John C. Inscoe (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 239; Conrad Ostwalt, “Crossing of Cultures,” 106-107.

²⁴ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 12.

²⁵ Katherine Siemens Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain: the Story of the North Carolina-Tennessee Mennonite Mission* (Fresno, CA: Jet Print 1984), 4.

tried to scare us out by bombarding the place with giant firecrackers at night,” Elizabeth Weibe recalled later.²⁶ Some protestors even threatened to assault the missionaries. When a group of men, intending to kill him, approached Jacob Tschetter, he began praying for the group. Fortunately, when he looked up, they had left.²⁷

Throughout the 1920s, Elk Park’s white residents continued to target the missionaries. Members of the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, met Joseph and Katharina Tschetter and the Siemens in one of the Mennonite Brethren churches. Katharina described what happened next:

While we were yet shaking hands and saying farewell to our dear brethren and sisters ... a group of men in white garments and white hoods on their heads lined up about forty feet from our church door ... He stated that we had too much fellowship with the colored people. Brother Tschetter explained to them our reason for having fellowship with the colored race; to preach the Gospel to them and to build up a church work among them.

After their discussion, the leader of the KKK group decided that the Mennonites posed no harm and the hooded men left.²⁸

The Mennonites often dealt with name-calling and rock-throwing, but they were never physically injured.²⁹ Indeed, although never accepting of the Mennonites, local whites tolerated their presence in Elk Park. After describing the more difficult experiences, Katharina Tschetter reminded her readers, “We do not want to create the impression ... that the people in the South are mean or half civilized ... The people in the South as a whole are friendly, polite, and accommodating.”³⁰

²⁶ Ostwalt and Pollitt, “The Salem School and Orphanage,” 241.

²⁷ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 12.

²⁸ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 13, 15.

²⁹ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 12-13.

³⁰ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 16.

African Americans appreciated the commitment of the KMB missionaries. Rev. Hatton explained, “They came in at a time that – technically – it was still against the law to teach black people how to read and write and they stayed through it ... the people knew that the missionaries loved them because they put up with what they put up with.”³¹ Racial difficulties prompted other missions to abandon efforts within the area, whereas the Mennonites persevered through “threats of inclement weather, little or no money, hard physical labor, the ridicule of strangers, loneliness and the seemingly impossible traditional Southern barriers.”³²

African Americans in the region never forgot these struggles and remained grateful. Following a ten-year absence, Jacob Tschetter returned to Elk Park in 1922, amazed that “the people still remembered us.” Henry Wiebe, on a visit to western North Carolina in 1923 after being gone for 15 years, said, “We were treated almost as though we were angels.”³³ These feelings remain alive today, as Sandra Hagler, a Junaluska resident, described, “The Mennonite Brethren churches in the North Carolina district are the direct results of these people who came and loved and established when their involvement was not the norm. ... I will be forever grateful for the white Mennonite Brethren missionaries.”³⁴ There was a mutual affection between the African Americans and the Mennonite missionaries at the Salem Mission. Katharina Tschetter put it simply, “They loved us and we loved them dearly.”³⁵

Due to their intense dedication, the KMB missionaries aided the African Americans at Elk Park significantly. At the Salem Mission School, the missionaries and

³¹ Hatton, interview.

³² Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, v.

³³ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 24-25.

³⁴ Sandra Hagler, e-mail message to author, December 27, 2014.

³⁵ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 11.

several black teachers promoted education, helping to increase black literacy in the region. In fact, Rev. Hatton explained that the school program was so effective that blacks soon could read and write better than white residents. This sparked anger and frustration among whites in the community, contributing to the eventual demise of the Salem Mission.³⁶ The Mennonite missionaries also opened an orphanage for African American children. After accepting one child, Elizabeth Weibe commented, “the homeless children kept coming.”³⁷ The KMB mission board supported the orphanage with clothes, fuel, flour, money, and other supplies.³⁸ Moreover, Peter Seimens played an instrumental role in establishing Freedman High, the first African American high school in Lenoir, North Carolina.³⁹

After the Salem Mission closed in 1912, the KMB began to establish churches throughout western North Carolina. The thirteen churches eventually founded would constitute the North Carolina District Conference. Today, seven churches remain in the conference in Boone, Ferguson, Newland, and four in Lenoir.⁴⁰ According to Rev. Horton, the KMB “didn’t go in like a lot of churches, just go in a community and establish a church there when they had churches. They’d go there and work with the people and get a church started ... And the Krimmers, they’d go over there and see if they’d like to have services and start a church.”⁴¹

³⁶ Hatton, interview.

³⁷ Pollitt, “Emily Prudden and Her Schools.”

³⁸ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 6.

³⁹ Hatton, interview.

⁴⁰ Ostwalt, “Crossing of Cultures,” 106.

⁴¹ Ronda Horton, interview by Cheryl Claassen, July 31, 1984, Miscellaneous Oral History Transcripts, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA, 7.

Many Junaluska residents had attended the Salem Mission School in Elk Park, making Boone an obvious choice for a new church. Rev. Morris Hatton remembered stories from his mother, whose father worked in Avery County:

My mom and her brothers and sisters and our family on that side went to school there at the orphanage. They were not orphans but they went to school because most of the industry was in Avery County in the Elk Park area because they had mines ... They lived here but they would catch what is now Tweetsie ... what they called "swing the train." Catch it on the morning before school and catch it on the way back in the evenings.⁴²

Due to the interest from the Junaluska community, in 1911, Joseph Tschetter began running services in Boone and the conference built a physical church there seven years later.⁴³ Ordained in 1912, Brother Joseph Morrison took over when the Tschetters retired in 1920.⁴⁴ Described as "a great blessing to both colored and white," Rockford Hatton was ordained in 1927, followed by Ronda Horton in 1933. Peter Siemens testified to Horton's ability, proclaiming him "a real Mennonite; true to God, a good speaker and a Bible scholar."⁴⁵ Both Hatton and Horton would emerge as significant leaders in the BMBC and the Junaluska community.

In addition to the BMBC, Junaluska supported the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church. James McQueen, a black resident of Boone, remembered, "In the beginning, there was one church and the community formed around it."⁴⁶ Built in 1898, the Methodist Church acted as the only African American church in Boone until the founding of the BMBC and had a huge impact on the community. The 1920s and 1930s saw the Methodist Church's most successful years. A fulltime preacher lived in Junaluska and the

⁴² Hatton, interview.

⁴³ Horton, interview by Cheryl Claassen, 3; Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 54.

⁴⁴ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 16-17.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 55, 58.

⁴⁶ Manross, "A Cultural History."

church boasted a large choir and an active congregation.⁴⁷ Virtually every African American in Boone attended or knew an attendee of the church. McQueen remarked, “Yes, everybody has a heritage there.”⁴⁸

The BMBC and the Methodist Church stood 200 yards from each other, occupying the geographic and symbolic center of Junaluska. The two churches interacted closely as community hubs in Boone, often holding similar meetings and events on alternate nights to ensure availability of religious activities on any given night. Many community members participated in events held by both the BMBC and the Methodist Church.⁴⁹ Rev. Ronda Horton explained, “The two churches thrived because of each other.”⁵⁰

In the 1930s, however, many blacks, searching for better economic opportunities, left Boone, resulting in a decline of church membership. Horton explained, “About all there was to do was work around on the farm ... and a lot of our people then left,” going to larger cities in the North to find employment.⁵¹ While the BMBC survived throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Methodist Church lost much of its congregation. Many attendees of the Methodist Church were also drafted during WWII, whereas the Mennonite community was exempt due to its firm belief in pacifism. BMBC congregates also received aid during these times of need from the Mennonite conference, further encouraging Methodists to convert.⁵² Eventually, the Methodist Church adopted a circuit preacher, holding services once or twice a month until it was closed in 1989.

⁴⁷ Keefe and Manross, “Race, Religion, and Community,” 254.

⁴⁸ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

⁴⁹ Keefe and Manross, “Race, Religion, and Community,” 254.

⁵⁰ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

⁵¹ Horton, interview by Cheryl Claassen, 7.

⁵² Manross, “A Cultural History.”

Losing its members, the Methodist Church began to operate less, thereby forcing people to find alternative church services. Many African Americans soon turned to the BMBC. Annie Grimes, a Junaluska resident, described the gradual process of changing membership: “Up here, we’d have church on the second and fourth, and when they didn’t have it up there, I’d go to the Mennonite.” Continually rotating between churches, explained Horton, “interrupted programs. Many people were good paying members of the church and had to choose an active church.”⁵³

Other African Americans in the community departed from the Methodist Church and the BMBC for the Little Rock Zion Missionary Baptist Church and other churches in the area. Nell Ray remembered that some left the BMBC because “they didn’t like the rules.”⁵⁴ When two family members created a Holiness Church, members of the Hagler family joined that new congregation. This church eventually dwindled because, as McQueen explained, it “was very loud and very emotional ... A lot of jumping, running, singing, and shouting. People were not used to that.”⁵⁵ Despite efforts to establish new churches, none of these lasted long. The BMBC, however, remained an enduring presence in Boone, providing strength and a sense of community to African Americans.

The success of the BMBC has much to do with the contributions and synthesis of Mennonite and African American traditions, most notably seen in music. Music has played a significant role throughout the histories of the KMB and the Mennonite Brethren (MB). This musical tradition has formed a unique intersect with African American traditions in the historically black dominated North Carolina District. While Mennonite music varies quite a bit between denominations and between individual churches, what

⁵³ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

⁵⁴ Ray, interview, 3.

⁵⁵ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

many consider “traditional” stems back to German Romantic choral music and nineteenth-century evangelical hymns.⁵⁶ From the beginning, the KMB stressed a strict discipline in their worship services, forbidding instruments and part singing. Due to a “hyper-literal” interpretation of the Bible, the KMB objected to musical instruments on the basis of Eph. 5:19, where Christians are told “to make melody in their heart to the Lord.”⁵⁷

The KMB missionaries brought their music to North Carolina and quickly taught African Americans Mennonite hymns. Rev. Morris Hatton explained that the Mennonites “were very strong hymnal people and we learned every hymn in the hymn book.” He continued, “We sing everything that the Mennonites, the missionaries taught us.”⁵⁸ The black community, however, would combine their own musical style with the Mennonite hymns, embodying their own cultural heritage while also representing its place in the KMB and MB traditions.

From the beginning, the musical abilities of African Americans impressed the KMB missionaries. Katharina Tschetter, who sang while her husband preached, praised the African Americans, saying, “They like good lively Gospel preaching and singing.”⁵⁹ In evaluating the progress of new Mennonite churches in a 1929 conference report, Peter Siemens remarked that the black congregation in “Boone is very good in singing” and a “blessing in our churches.”⁶⁰ The music of the BMBC continued to touch Mennonite visitors throughout the twentieth century. In 1950, Mrs. Henry G. Bergen, a Mennonite

⁵⁶ Jonathan Dueck, “Binding and Loosing in Song: Conflict, Identity, and Canadian Mennonite Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 55, no. 2 (2011), 229, accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.55.2.0229>.

⁵⁷ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 184-185.

⁵⁸ Hatton, interview.

⁵⁹ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 16.

⁶⁰ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 73-74.

from Goessel, Kansas, visited North Carolina, where she “enjoyed the evening, especially the beautiful singing of our colored people.” “The special music,” she recalled, “was a high light of the service and a very special treat for us. It is something different and beautiful when the voices of our colored Christians harmonize in song.”⁶¹

While a cappella singing remains important in KMB history, the denomination began to allow instruments in its services during the 1910s. Katherine Seimens, one of the last Mennonite missionaries in western North Carolina, grew up in a musical family. Both of her parents sang and her father led the church choir. She learned to play the pump organ and the piano and brought these talents to the Salem Mission.⁶² There, Katherine and her daughter, Ruth, played for church services and other events. In the early 1900s, the mission used an organ. However, when they finally acquired a used piano, “it was quite a step forward.”⁶³ Katherine also taught other members piano, giving “free lessons to anyone who would practice.” “Eventually,” she remembered, “each church had a pianist.”⁶⁴

Another important aspect of the BMBC’s music involved the choirs, which gained traction in MB communities in Russia before migrating to North America in the 1870s.⁶⁵ In the 1920s, the choir in Boone, consisting of eight to twelve people, sang from the hymn book.⁶⁶ During this time, Cory Williams and Ronda Horton formed a quartet with two other men in the church. According to Katherine Seimens, “they had excellent

⁶¹ Mrs. Henry G. Bergen, “A Visit to North Carolina,” *The Christian Witness*, March 15, 1950, 7-8.

⁶² Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 173.

⁶³ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

⁶⁴ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 111.

⁶⁵ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 241; Wesley Berg, “The Music of the Mennonite Brethren of Saskatchewan to 1923,” *American Music* 4, no. 4 (1986), 459, accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3052230>.

⁶⁶ Manross, “A Cultural History.”

harmony and sang for many churches.”⁶⁷ In celebrating choral music, Mennonites introduced choral festivals, such as Saengerfest.⁶⁸ The North Carolina conference also created a popular singing convention in this tradition that featured choirs, quartets, and soloists.⁶⁹

However, the music of the BMBC did not remain static. It changed with transitions in the Junaluska community and developments in the Mennonite church. In the 1960s, for instance, the KMB and the MB, both having formed in the 1860s with similar doctrinal beliefs, merged under the latter name.⁷⁰ The MB expressed a more liberal attitude regarding worship services, originally splitting from the main church partly due to its formal, serious approach. They sought personalized expression from their music over objective worship songs.⁷¹ Informal and spontaneous meetings marked the early MB church, emphasizing a warmer and more enthusiastic response to their faith. In 1861, representatives of the Ohrloff Mennonite Church evaluated a MB service. They found that the MBs “do conduct themselves more freely than is customary in our services” with lively songs, hand clapping, and interjections. Nonetheless, they deemed the behavior of the MB acceptable and inoffensive.⁷²

A movement called Froehliche Richtung, originating with Evangelical Separatists, gained supporters in MB churches during the early 1860s in Russia. It emphasized excessive emotionalism over biblical study. Leadership excommunicated any dissenters until the “June Reform” of 1865, when MB protestors regained their positions in the

⁶⁷ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 57.

⁶⁸ Berg, “The Music of the Mennonite Brethren,” 462.

⁶⁹ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 111.

⁷⁰ Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 288, 290, accessed October 2, 2014, EBSCOhost.

⁷¹ Berg, “The Music of the Mennonite Brethren,” 459.

⁷² Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 57.

church and reformed the worship practices. Froehliche Richtung taught the MB that “zeal without knowledge is destructive.”⁷³ The MB soon became increasingly focused on order and preaching, though it continued to celebrate personal and upbeat music through German Protestant folksongs and gospel hymns.⁷⁴

These gospel style hymns often featured basic harmonies. Because of the early church’s lack of hymnals, a lead singer would recite a hymn line, which the congregation would sing back, usually in unison. However, four-part singing was gradually introduced into the congregation through choirs.⁷⁵ Rev. Hatton, who served as the BMBC music director in the 1960s, recalled: “Our folks ... naturally sing harmony and they were always taught to harmonize. We start off and learn the melody and I would tell them [to] add the harmony and they would do it just naturally and come out with some beautiful stuff.”⁷⁶

The choir also helped introduce newer gospel songs to the MB congregation.⁷⁷ Beginning in the 1960s, for instance, Sandra Hagler sang with Rev. Hatton’s choir. Hatton introduced his choir to contemporary gospel music, including the works of Andraé Crouch. Hagler also remembered learning new songs from the radio. Hagler recalled that the incorporation of contemporary gospel music was “a major change” in the worship service.⁷⁸ While there was some resistance to new music within the congregation, the choir slowly brought it into the church.

While the KMB had banned musical instruments until the early 1900s, the MB

⁷³ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 58-66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 239.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 241.

⁷⁶ Hatton, interview.

⁷⁷ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 248.

⁷⁸ Sandra Hagler, email message to author, January 16, 2015; Sandra Hagler, interview by Audrey Thomas, March 3, 2015.

did allow the use of a variety of instruments to create a livelier, more spirited atmosphere. In one instance during the late 1800s, the MBs used the harmonic and violin in a worship service at the home of A. Peters, though “not in an unrestrained manner.”⁷⁹ It soon became common to hear flutes, reed organs, and, later, pianos, electric organs, and guitars at MB services. In the 1960s, percussion instruments, such as drums and tambourines, and electronic amplification began to appear more frequently. Young people were especially drawn to the use of instruments in worship services.⁸⁰ Although becoming more popular, instruments were not present at every MB church. Rev. Hatton and his choir often visited other Mennonite churches to perform and found the pianos rarely used and, sometimes, they found no instruments at all.⁸¹

Even with a denomination which historically embraced lively worship and instruments, the BMBC formed in the KMB tradition. Much of the Junaluska community grew up with KMB missionaries who preached conservative ideals. Though many congregates supported the changes of the music program, others resisted. Born in 1885, Ronda Horton attended the Salem Mission School and became an original member of the BMBC. Ordained in 1933, he maintained a strong community presence for over fifty years, earning the title “the Moses of the North Carolina Churches.”⁸² Horton’s nephew, Rev. James Isbell, described his uncle as being “by the Book.” He “had a different style from all the other ministers,” Isbell explained. “He dealt with the scriptures and focused not with an emotional, but from the standpoint of giving you exactly what the Word is

⁷⁹ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 239.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 250.

⁸¹ Hatton, interview.

⁸² Miller, “How Firm a Foundation,” 18.

saying and without the emotion. He didn't have the flair for being charismatic."⁸³ Horton preached in the tradition of the missionaries who had taught him with quiet and unemotional services. Hatton recalled, "He was brought up on hymns, brought up on other songs that were part of our heritage ... sometimes bringing in new things for older people can be interesting."⁸⁴ Raymond Walters, a BMBC deacon, remembered that during Horton's services, "there was no clapping, no moving."⁸⁵

Indeed, the inclusion of newer gospel music created some tension within the church. Hagler described this divide: "We wanted a more contemporary style of music. [Reverend Horton] didn't like it any more than the mini skirts we wore."⁸⁶ She elaborated, "It was later on that we got drums and people with guitars and all kinds of music. But when we first started it was just the piano. He was against change. He thought that was more secular music ... He just really had a thing against guitar for some reason for a long time. Gradually, he changed."⁸⁷ BMBC members eventually compromised and blended a more "traditional" Mennonite service with a "contemporary" one. During devotion, the choir sang hymns; however, they could perform other music throughout the rest of the service.⁸⁸ Ostwalt noted this compromise in his description of early-1990s services: "Enthusiasm often builds, climaxes with emotional fervor, and subsides during prayer time and sermons."⁸⁹

Before his death in 1986, Ronda Horton became "a little more emotional" and the congregation began to express themselves more. Isbell testified, "It wasn't until his latter

⁸³ Miller, "How Firm a Foundation," 20.

⁸⁴ Hatton, interview.

⁸⁵ Miller, "How Firm a Foundation," 21.

⁸⁶ Hagler, email, January 16, 2015.

⁸⁷ Hagler, interview.

⁸⁸ Hagler, email, January 16, 2015.

⁸⁹ Ostwalt, "African-Americans in North Carolina," 39.

days that people began to clap their hands, to sway, to say ‘amens’ which you don’t hear any of. After his passing it became more of the charismatic style that we have now.”⁹⁰ In 1991, Isbell described the BMBC as in transition from a mission church to an independent church. During this time, members began focusing more on social issues important to African Americans and embracing their black heritage.⁹¹ After Horton’s death, the BMBC incorporated traditionally African American worship styles. Worship continued to bear more expression into the 1990s, with more contemporary music, new gospel quartets, and increased instrumentation. Descriptions of the BMBC church music now began to echo Chris Eidse’s 2012 depiction: “The front door of the church is open and pouring out is the sound of clapping, exuberant vocals, wailing guitar solos and a driving bass guitar and drum beat.”⁹²

By the 1990s, the church certainly exhibited the hallmarks of African American style worship with long services full of swaying, clapping, and expressive singing.⁹³ In a 1991 interview, Rev. Isbell remarked that “a starched-in-the-collar Mennonite would raise his eyebrows at what goes on in the Boone church.”⁹⁴ Church members also often labeled services as more “Baptist” or “Methodist” in style, largely due to the rarity of such practices in other Mennonite churches.

⁹⁰ Miller, “How Firm a Foundation,” 24-25.

⁹¹ Ostwalt, “Crossing of Cultures,” 110.

⁹² Chris Eidse, “We Got It Right,” *Christian Leader*, Feb-March 2012, 10. The changes in the BMBC’s music coincide with a larger trend in the Mennonite Brethren Church toward liberalization of music traditions. As seen in a 2003 study, church service music saw changes in format, repertoire, and style beginning in the mid-1980s. Whereas in the decades before, most church services remained largely identical, by the 1990s individual churches were developing their own unique and distinct worship service encompassing traditional hymns and contemporary praise choruses. See Bradley D. Vogel, “Music Styles of Tabor College and MB Southern District Churches, 1961-2002,” *Direction* 32, no. 1, (Spring 2003), accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.directionjournal.org/32/1/music-styles-of-tabor-college-and-mb.html>.

⁹³ Similar descriptions of African American worship are seen in Gunnar Myrdal, “The Negro Church in the Negro Community,” in *The Black Church in America*, ed. Hart M. Nelsen, Raytha L. Yokley, and Anne K. Nelson (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 82-89.

⁹⁴ Ostwalt, “African-Americans in North Carolina,” 39.

At first, an unnamed church member recalled that this change “felt strange to us ... We felt uncomfortable.”⁹⁵ Most church members, however, soon adjusted and responded positively to the modified music though some older residents remained resistant to the change. One elder congregant, for instance, felt the “morals went down with that type of music.” He continued, “I think that the church ought to be the church, and the world the world. You should see a difference. I think it’s wrong.”⁹⁶

The music of the BMBC did not completely abandon its Mennonite tradition. Most services incorporated Mennonite hymns with contemporary gospel and instrumentation. Tony McNeill, a past music director for the BMBC, detailed the music repertoire in a 1994 interview: “We sing a variety of songs, from contemporary to traditional gospel songs. We focus on a cappella singing, too.”⁹⁷ The choir celebrated not only their African American heritage, but also their Mennonite Brethren heritage, integrating both styles. Hatton described playing Mennonite hymns “a little more swinging and upbeat [than] the average hymn.”⁹⁸ He termed the singing method “blight ... It’s not traditional black and it’s not all white ... it’s just a good mix.”⁹⁹

These practices have continued to develop and evolve into a more contemporary style of music. Rev. Hatton explained, “The Mennonite influence in the music is strong because the older generation, my generation, all of us knew every hymn in the hymn book. The young people don’t know that anymore.”¹⁰⁰ As the older generation has passed on, the Mennonite influence has increasingly waned. Consequently, the African

⁹⁵ Miller, “How Firm a Foundation,” 28.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 26.

⁹⁷ Derek Edmisten, “This Choir Raises Its Voice to Carry a Special Message,” *The Watauga Democrat* (Boone, NC), September 27, 1994, 1a.

⁹⁸ Hatton, interview.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

American style has become more common. “I would just say it’s more African American,” said Hagler, commenting on the current state of the BMBC music.¹⁰¹

Despite ongoing changes in the history of music in the KMB, MB, and BMBC, the importance of the music has remained constant. As early as the Protestant Reformation, Anabaptists had relied on music to strengthen the fellowship of its members in praising God.¹⁰² When they began to be persecuted and martyred, Anabaptists also used music to confirm their beliefs. In a 1546 account, for instance, four Anabaptists “boldly and joyfully sang” as they were led to their deaths.¹⁰³ The emphasis on singing found in Mennonite communities was largely based on Bible passages that praised the act. Notably, Mennonites traced the singing tradition to a hymn sung by Jesus and his disciples after the Last Supper.¹⁰⁴ Mennonites bolstered the importance of singing with singing schools, conductors’ workshops, and church music workshops. Moreover, the general conference established music committees to create improved and revised hymnals.¹⁰⁵

Music has served many purposes for church members. As one Mennonite testified in a 1992 survey on music throughout Mennonite congregations, “singing is the glue that holds worship together.”¹⁰⁶ Another participant found that “music can speak when sermons just cannot.”¹⁰⁷ The 1992 study found a wide variety of reasons for why music and singing had remained important: “Singing can gather the congregation; it can become

¹⁰¹ Sandra Hagler, interview.

¹⁰² Calvin Buller, “Brotherly Love: We Sing So That Others May Live,” *The Choral Journal* 18, no. 5 (1978), 18, accessed January 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23545280>.

¹⁰³ Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 110.

¹⁰⁴ Lester Hostetler, *Handbook to the Mennonite Hymnary* (Newton, KS: Brethren Publishing House, 1949), xii.

¹⁰⁵ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 249-50.

¹⁰⁶ Kropf and Nafziger, *Singing*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

the vehicle of praise, confession, and intercession; it can speak the word of God; it can transform and empower a people. It not only carries the actions of worship forward, it *is* the primary action of worship.”¹⁰⁸ Describing the significance of the BMBC choir’s music, Tony McNeill explained, “There is a message of hope in our music. Things are never as bad as they seem. We believe with a positive attitude and courage, anything can be accomplished.” During his time as music director, McNeill was also met with “overwhelming” support from the Junaluska community at concerts and fund-raisers, suggesting that African American congregants maintained a commitment to and pride for the music of the BMBC.¹⁰⁹

Music has also served to attract young people to the church.¹¹⁰ The missionaries had initially used music to encourage religious participation from the young. In his 1929 conference report, Peter Siemens wrote that youth meetings were “held with much music and Bible verses and stories.”¹¹¹ At the BMBC Bible School, the missionaries taught children songs and Bible verses. Nell Ray described the BMBC as a community center for “the young folks.” She explained, “They have a choir and they get up there and they practice up at the Mennonite Church.”¹¹² The Whittingtons, members of the BMBC, recalled, “the children all sang together, so their father and others of the ministry began taking them to church meetings to sing.”¹¹³ As a teenager in the 1960s, Hagler and “all [her] teenage friends sang in a choir directed by Morris Hatton.”¹¹⁴ Hagler cited the

¹⁰⁸ Kropf and Nafziger, *Singing*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Edmisten, “This Choir Raises Its Voice to Carry a Special Message,” 1a.

¹¹⁰ Berg, “The Music of the Mennonite Brethren,” 459.

¹¹¹ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 74.

¹¹² Ray, interview, 9.

¹¹³ Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 188.

¹¹⁴ Sandra Hagler, email message to author, February 21, 2015.

availability of Bible School, where she learned Bible songs and verses, as part of the reason her family left the Boone Methodist Episcopal Church for the BMBC.

Outside the church, music also provided a social purpose for the Mennonite Brethren in a variety of scenarios. Katharina Tschetter's family employed music during difficult times as consolation or to express testimony. They also used music to strengthen family bonds. She recalled, "As we were several brothers and sisters in our home all were interested in singing, much time in the evenings was spent in singing Gospel songs. We made a regular family choir."¹¹⁵ In Boone, music became a recreational outlet to gather and sing together and solidify community bonds for black Junaluskans.¹¹⁶ Rhonda Horton explained, "We had a lot of singing, not always at the church. We would gather together, especially the young people, and would go to the neighbors on Sunday and sing, especially on Sunday evenings. We would get together, sing, and have a good time."¹¹⁷ Singing often occurred during meals, family worship, and other events at home. Many families incorporated pianos and violins into the music at their houses.¹¹⁸ Morris Hatton, for instance, began taking piano lessons at age nine. After a few years, he became instrumental in the BMBC choir and later majored in voice at Tabor College, a MB college in Hillsboro, Kansas, before attending seminary in California.¹¹⁹

While in seminary, Hatton discovered that the geographical location of the BMBC in the Appalachian Mountains may have also had an impact on the music of Junaluska. When asked if she thought there was an Appalachian influence in the music of the BMBC, Sandra Hagler replied, "I don't think so. Now, maybe now. I don't sing with the

¹¹⁵ Tschetter, *My Life Story*, 3-7, 33-34.

¹¹⁶ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 253.

¹¹⁷ Manross, "A Cultural History."

¹¹⁸ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 240.

¹¹⁹ Hatton, interview; Richert, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 56.

choir now and I know that their style of music has changed somewhat ... It wasn't when I was there. We were like a novelty."¹²⁰ However, Morris Hatton testified that he was unaware of any Appalachian influence until a black professor in California identified a "yodel effect," characteristic of mountain singers, in Hatton's vibrato.¹²¹ Hatton attributed this influence to the history of generally peaceful race relations and inter-racial socializing that occurred in Watauga County and other parts of western North Carolina. He continued, "Our style of music and our singing comes with that in mind."¹²²

Music has played a significant role within both Mennonite and African American church history. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther emphasized music as "an endowment and a gift of God."¹²³ The *Mennonite Hymnal Handbook* describes the long history of music within the Mennonite church: "Throughout the four hundred years of our existence as a church, we have been a singing people, in times of persecution as well as in times of peace."¹²⁴ This history has merged with the African American music traditions of the BMBC. While the BMBC music has changed over the past century, it continues to encapsulate the history of the church through its unique fusion of Mennonite hymns and black worship styles.

¹²⁰ Hagler, interview.

¹²¹ Hatton, interview.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Kropf, *Singing*, 109-110.

¹²⁴ Hostetler, *Handbook*, xxix.

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