

Rev. John Casper Bucher's reflection on his early work in the Middletown Valley, including the founding of the Burkittsville Reformed Congregation.

“I moved to Middletown in the latter part of December, 1829. On the first day of January, 1830, my pastorate commenced here - the first resident Reformed pastor Middletown enjoyed. With the aid and sanction of the Maryland Classis, I organized this charge, consisting of Middletown congregation and a very feeble congregation seven miles north of this, commonly called Jerusalem Church [*Located near present-day Myersville*]. These two constituted my charge and I assumed it on a stipulated support of \$300 per annum, a free parsonage, and fuel. A slender support, indeed, but I lived on it three years, when it was raised to \$400, with the aid of two out congregations - Jefferson and Burkittsville - which I gathered and organized in that time and added to the charge.

The congregation was comparatively small and much scattered, and after I succeeded in marshaling all together I found only 117 communicant members at my first communion, held on the 9th of May, 1830; but the Lord turned the hearts of the people so successfully and efficiently through the simple preaching of the gospel that at our second communion, held on the 11th of September, the same year, we added 36 new members. In the Jerusalem congregation I found only 37 members, and these, added to the Middletown membership, made only 154 souls - the entire strength of my charge in the beginning.

I was not here long before I was most earnestly solicited...to visit that place (Jefferson) and reorganize that dilapidated and long neglected congregation. This village, in the absence of regular preaching of the gospel, had become so demoralized that it obtained the unenviable sobriquet of “Traptown,” on account of gambling, cockfighting, horse racing, and swindlers. This condition of morals distressed the pious families who resided in the place and vicinity; hence, they urged me to visit them and give them occasional preaching. To this my Consistory assented.

I entered upon this unpromising theatre of usefulness with diffidence and trembling; yet the Lord opened to me a wide and effectual door, and blessed the preached word so signally as to root out the Sabbath desecration, cock-pit and gambling in a few months, remodeled and reformed the moral habits of the community to such an extent as to restore the proper name of Jefferson to the village...Here I held my first communion on the 15th day of May, 1831, and 36 members, all told. But the Lord gave me such success in this congregation that by concentrating my labors I was enabled to organize the Jefferson Charge, ordain and install over it its first pastor, Rev. George W. Willard...This work was consummated on the 31st day of October, 1840, in nine years and a few months after the commencement of my ministry here.

In the first year of my ministry in Middletown, having several prominent members residing near a newly-surveyed village called by the name of its proprietor, Mr. Burkitt, now called Burkittsville, I was solicited to give occasional preaching at the house of the late lamented John Willard, father of Rev. Dr. George W. Willard, who lived east of Burkittsville, and had six miles to come to church here with his large family. I could not deny this solicitation, and in the spring of 1829, I began to preach in his barn-floor, and during the succeeding winter in his large parlor. My success here was so signal that on the 18th of July, 1830, I was able to organize a congregation, which of course, took away quite a number of my Middletown flock. The first communion was held in Brother Willard's parlor on the 21st of November, 1831, when I confirmed five applicants, whom I previously prepared by catechetical instruction in Brother Willard's house. Now the new congregation consisted of 21 members.

This little flock was so earnest and zealous that they procured a lot of ground in the woods at Burkittsville, felled the timber, and laid the foundation of the brick church now occupied by the congregation... In the building of the church the congregation suffered a severe and discouraging loss in the sudden and unexpected death of its most active and energetic elder, Brother John Willard, who felled a large tree on his own mountain land for a girder in the church. The falling of this tree striking another, cast back a broken limb, almost quick as lightning hitting Brother Willard on the head, killed him instantly, on the 19th of February, 1831. I was called upon to perform the sad, disheartening task of burying his mortal remains on the church ground of his selection. This was a sad shock to the pastor and the youthful congregation. Still, the Lord did not forsake the enterprise, but encouraged the people to arise and build the house of God, to hasten its completion and dedication.

The great Head of the Church crowned my labors in this congregation so signally that its influence soon reached to Pleasant Valley, Washington County, into which I was soon encouraged to come to begin stated preaching at the house of the late George Knode, which soon culminated in the organization of a congregation. These two new interests grew and expanded so rapidly that in ten years from my first efforts here a new self-supporting pastoral charge was organized, which still exists, and is known as the Burkittsville Charge...this is the second pastoral charge which grew out of my labors in this valley.”

Excerpted from remarks prepared by the Rev. John Casper Bucher in 1881 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the incorporation of Christ Reformed Church in Middletown. The remarks are transcribed from *A History of Christ Reformed Church United Church of Christ Middletown, Maryland* by Paul Ellsworth Fogle (1995).