



Explorations Across the Faith Line #1*

Bishop Ezekiel B. Kephart: United Brethren Pioneer in Interfaith Exploration

*Michael G. Cartwright
Dean of Ecumenical & Interfaith Program*

* The Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs encourages students to learn more about other religious traditions even as the University chaplains invite students to live out their religious commitments on this campus. This first paper in the Explorations Across the Faith Line series invites readers to consider the possibility that we are not the first generation to encounter religious difference.



Ezekiel B. Kephart (1834–1906) is the first person to have been memorialized at Indiana Central University. At the beginning of the 1906–07 academic year, the ICU Chapel was named after this man who served for a quarter of a century as a bishop of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

After 1870, Kephart became known for his ardent advocacy for founding church-related colleges in that German-American Pietist denomination. He was deeply mourned throughout the United Brethren Church after he died while trying to raise money to establish the institution that we know today as the University of Indianapolis.

For the first 55 years of this institution's history, students would have been familiar with Kephart's name, if for no other reason than because they attended required chapel services in Kephart Auditorium, located in the building we now know as Good Hall. That space was eliminated when the second and third floors of Good Hall were renovated in 1962, and with it the memory of Kephart faded from our institutional memory.

More recently, the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs has initiated an award for "academic achievement in interfaith exploration," named after Bishop Kephart (see explanation below). This award is but one of the ways that the University is expanding its interfaith efforts as part of the EIP Office's strategic plan for 2011–13.

Some readers may be surprised to discover that we have chosen to use a name closely associated with the University's humble beginnings for this purpose. After all, some people might ask, isn't this an award that is intended to honor the forward-looking work of students at the University of Indianapolis who have the courage to engage in the quest for truth in matters interfaith? That is certainly a reasonable question to ask. I would also hope that contemporary faculty, staff, and students might be willing to consider the possibility that we might discover positive things to learn about interfaith engagement from the generation of United Brethren leaders who founded this university.

Persons who are interested to learn more about Bishop Kephart are encouraged to read the biography by Lewis John Franklin (a copy is available in the Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs Office) or visit the display about the history of interfaith engagement at Indiana Central and the University of Indianapolis in SC 203. An overview of Kephart's life can be found in Echoes of the Past in Conversations of the Present Booklet #1: United Brethren Memories in the University Heights Neighborhood by Michael G. Cartwright (a publication of the Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs Office of the University of Indianapolis).

As the EIP staff anticipates presenting this award for the first time in the spring of 2012, we thought it might be a good time to invite the campus community to become reacquainted with this important figure in our university's early history as well as its prehistory. We recently discovered a biography of Bishop Ezekiel B. Kephart that was written by Lewis Franklin John shortly after the bishop's death.¹ This memorial to Kephart's life and work includes an account of how Kephart died in the office of William Elder with President J. T. Roberts at his side.² The fact that the good bishop had died trying to help the fledging university get off to a sound start seemed appropriate to all who had known him across his lifetime of service as a statesman, educator, and church leader. Like many hagiographical texts written at that time, the 1907 biography contains an extraordinary number of eulogies that testified to Bishop Kephart's "all-around Christian character."

Diligence and Persistence: Daring to Proceed Even When the Way is Not Clear

Sometimes it is easier to sit back and let others tackle the hard chores of life. That attitude was alien to Ezekiel B. Kephart, who was known for his diligence in learning despite having had limited opportunities for most of his first two decades of life. Better known to his friends as "Zeke," Kephart displayed, even as a teenager, a determination and commitment to education that was uncommon for those who grew up on the American frontier in Western Pennsylvania. Kephart had to overcome significant obstacles in order to complete his bachelor's degree. He eventually graduated from Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, in 1865. But he was able to accomplish that life goal only after he had attended three other fledgling colleges (two of which closed as a result of financial struggles) in the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania.

In fact, at one point Kephart was specifically encouraged not to finish his college degree. After all, senior church leaders told him, he was doing fine as United Brethren preacher. There was no need to seek additional credentials. And there was some truth to that advice. But Kephart had an inner need to engage in lifelong learning, and he believed that in order to fulfill his vocation, he needed to complete his education at least at the undergraduate level.

The fact that there was almost no financial support available did not deter this Western pioneer.

This commitment to lifelong learning was part of what propelled Kephart throughout his lifetime to be involved with making educational opportunities possible for children as well as adults of all ages. During the years that he was living in Iowa (serving the United Brethren Church), Kephart also served in the state legislature, where he helped draw up the standards for public education. For most of the time, he served as president of Western College in Westmar, Iowa. There he taught Moral Philosophy in addition to leading the faculty in offering the possibility of higher education in

frontier circumstances. The fact that there was almost no financial support available for the fledging United Brethren college on the expanding frontier did not deter this Christian pioneer.

In 1900, the United Brethren in Christ Church celebrated its centennial. There was no question who should write the story of the first five decades of Christian higher education in the United Brethren Church. Over the previous two decades, Ezekiel B. Kephart had led the denomination through a difficult period as it began to engage the challenges of the wider world, including training missionaries and clergy leadership.

As he cast a glance back over the period in which he and others had offered such unstinting leadership, Kephart marveled at what had been accomplished given how little preparation pioneers in United Brethren higher education like himself brought to the venture: "It has always been a surprise to me, and now is, not that we have made some mistakes in our educational work, but that we have made so few."³

On this same occasion, Kephart invited United Brethren clergy and laity to stand on the threshold of the new century, filled as it was with possibilities and challenges, and exhorted them to be "true" to the task that lay before the church as it entered its second century. Five years later, Kephart retired after serving twenty-five years as bishop. During the greater part of that time, he also led the Church's Board of Education, the body responsible for helping fledging institutions of higher education like the one that would be founded the following year in the University Heights neighborhood south of the city of Indianapolis.

When we recall the fact that Kephart had been retired for less than a year before he answered the "Macedonian call" (Acts 17) to go to Indiana to raise money for the new university for the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, the picture of a lifelong commitment to higher education begins to emerge. For Ezekiel Kephart, education was about more than achieving the kind of credentials that can be a means to a greater end. He believed that lifelong education was an important moral quest to overcome ignorance—in himself as well as in others—by engaging the challenge to learn all that it is possible to know.

Confidence and Humility: Here and Now, We Know in Part

Kephart's life displayed an uncommonly rich combination of confidence and humility. Lewis F. John's biography also contains a few sermons and speeches by Kephart that are genuinely interesting for what they tell us about Kephart's own intellect. One of these texts is a fascinating sermon entitled "Human Knowledge Limited," which Kephart appears to have given before an audience of undergraduates at one or more of the colleges of the Church United Brethren in Christ.⁴ This sermon appears to have been remembered by United Brethren clergy and laity by the four-word biblical phrase—"We Know in Part" (I Corinthians 13:9)—that is the focus of Kephart's expository remarks. The fact that Kephart's biographer chooses to conclude his volume with this text is an indicator of how important the substance of the sermon was for understanding his life and work.

Courage: Throughout Our Lives, We Dare to Face New Truths

In this sermon, Kephart repeatedly affirms that human beings “know only in part.” Yet even as he testifies to the incomplete character of what we can know this side of eternity, the bishop also testifies to the compatibility of “science and all true learning” with the knowledge of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In the first two parts of the sermon, Bishop Kephart looks back at the evolution of human society and the history of scientific discoveries.⁵ He reminds his readers that the quest for learning has been used for idolatrous purposes.

But, Kephart insists, that is not the whole story. In the midst of the “spread” of ignorance, persons of insight and maturity like Moses or Jesus (or, as he also lists, Menes, Buddha, Confucius, or Zoroaster) have called the world out of the darkness of ignorance and “directed it into truer paths of knowledge.”⁶ Here we see Kephart’s receptivity as a Christian to learning what other religious traditions have to teach us.

Kephart displayed both respect for other religious traditions and a striking confidence in his own faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that Kephart thought that all religious traditions were created equal. Indeed, he was also very confident in the integrity of the Christian witness. Kephart calls attention to the 1893 Columbian Exposition, at which the first World Parliament of Religions took place, as evidence for his claim that it is possible to see how religion and science have “kept pace with each other” in human history. From Kephart’s point of view, this was an occasion at which “the world placed on exhibit its very best art, its very best science, its very best religious and its very best thought on all the achievements of human knowledge.”⁷

Kephart provided a dramatic description of this gathering in Chicago at which “Gentile and Jew, pagan, Mohammedan, and Christian” met in “the Babylon of the new world, to shake hands, and to record in all the languages of earth the achievement of the brighter epoch in human history.”⁸ For him, this event is reminiscent of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the earliest Christians, thereby reversing the division of the earth that occurred after the fall of the tower of Babel, when God dispersed the peoples of the world into different languages.

Kephart concludes his sermon by inviting his “young friends” to take the measure of the difference between all that is known now and what will be revealed when “the new heavens and the new earth” have taken the place of all that now is.⁹ In the meantime, Kephart reminds them of “the wonders of the Hebrew scriptures,” which he proudly regards as superior to any knowledge produced by “modern materialistic philosophy and science.”¹⁰

The dramatic picture that Ezekiel Kephart paints of the 1893 gathering in Chicago displays both his own optimistic outlook and the way that he was attempting to integrate this event into the framework of Christian teaching about the end of human history. These are but a few examples of the ways that Kephart displayed both respect for other religious traditions and a striking confidence in his own faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Kephart’s biographer described his intellectual disposition as that of a “progressive conservative.” I think that is an apt description because Kephart was attempting to straddle two sensibilities that often clash. In addition, Ezekiel Kephart lived during a time of scientific discovery and technological advances that over and over again forced him and his peers to re-evaluate what was possible to know about the world and oneself. He embraced the challenge of incorporating “new truths” and he thought that Christian preachers should be “forced into the field of investigation in order that out of his treasury, he may bring to his people ‘things both new and old.’”

To sustain this kind of “both/and” disposition—openness to the new, and fidelity to what we have received from the past—was not easy then or now. It requires courage as well as the capacity to recognize the fragility of knowledge.

Bishop Kephart displayed the kind of inquiring intellect that was open to making adjustments in the midst of a changing world.

The “progressive conservative” stance that Kephart embodied in his lifetime required the capacity to make continual adjustments in what one thinks he or she knows along with the kind of disciplined memory that could make connections between past and present. According to Jesus’s teaching, to be a “scribe of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:52) requires wisdom and discernment. Bishop Kephart could be quite demanding when it came to advising pastors about how they were to deal with the challenges of science.

On the one hand, Kephart argued that the United Brethren pastor “must not be too ready to proclaim as gospel truth all that science . . . may assert . . .” On the other hand, he contended that a faithful preacher “must not be too ready to accept all that theology in the past, as well as in the present, has declared. He must be a gleaner of truth, to separate the gold from the sand . . .”¹¹ And that is all the more reason why Bishop Kephart counseled the United Brethren of his time and place to have humility about what human beings do not (yet) know about themselves, God, and the world around them.

Throughout his life, Bishop Kephart displayed the kind of inquiring intellect that was open to making adjustments in the midst of a changing world. In addition to the fact that Kephart was an enthusiastic supporter of the National Geographic Society, he had an insatiable curiosity about other peoples and cultures. He probably was the United Brethren leader who traveled the most, in part because of his responsibilities to “travel the connection” to visit the mission endeavors of the Church. And thanks to his biographer, we have access to some of the journals that he kept during his travels in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe for almost a decade. He recorded his impressions of visits to the Mosque of Omar and the al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem alongside his reflections about the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

There is no question that his encounters outside the soil of the United States gave him much to think about that challenged the way he had been taught to regard non-Christians. For example, consider his reflections that he wrote down after having been deeply moved by the sight of a Muslim man engaged in prayer while visiting a village in West Africa.

Does God smile on this, his child, and is he well pleased with his devotions, or is it all idolatry and sin? Oh that Christians here in Africa lived up to their profession as do the followers of the Arabian prophet! If it is so that he that giveth even a cup of cold water to one in the name of the prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, they will be remembered, because they have all treated me kindly."¹²

A few days later, as he traveled through the Strait of Gibraltar, Kephart writes an entry in his journal that displays how he wrestled with the ways in which Christians of the past have engaged in "holy war" against Muslims and Jews as he recalled the "horrors" of the Spanish Inquisition and the "eight hundred years of war that was waged to secure the banishment of the crescent from Spanish soil."¹³

The Enduring Challenge: Daring to Engage the Quest for Truth

Ezekiel B. Kephart was by no means a perfect person. He was fallible like you and me. As the previous example shows, this United Brethren leader was capable of being quite critical of Christians across the ages, but he was much more likely to criticize Catholics than Protestants. Like all of us, he had his blind spots, and it is all too easy for those of us looking back on his life from our twenty-first-century vantage point to find fault with some of his perspectives. His interest in interfaith engagement was largely dominated by his concern to offer a reasoned defense of the Christian gospel.

In retrospect, Ezekiel Kephart relied too much on the arguments of Scottish Common Sense Realism¹⁴ as he and his generation attempted to engage philosophical challenges and scientific advances at the end of turn of the century. However interested he seems to have been in the prospect of interfaith engagement with non-Christians, it cannot be said that Ezekiel Kephart was hospitable to Roman Catholics any more than he appears to have been able to imagine persons exercising responsible consumption of alcohol.¹⁵ In both respects, he was guilty of some of the same forms of prejudice that other American leaders displayed at the turn of the century.

It would be interesting to know what Kephart might have thought about the intellectual challenges that his spiritual descendents have faced in church-related universities like the University of Indianapolis. Shortly after his death, the United Brethren Church found itself facing a new set of intellectual challenges that unfolded in the context of the controversies between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists in American culture. And for a time, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ drifted back into its anti-intellectual disposition in matters of theology and science.¹⁶

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If he had lived another decade, Bishop Kephart also would have struggled with these developments just as much as leaders such as President J. T. Roberts struggled to sustain something like the "progressive conservative" stance at the fledgling Indiana Central University. The world of the mid-twentieth century was not an easy terrain to negotiate for leaders of church-related higher education who attempted to be open to learning what they did not know while also living as faithful witnesses to the life, death, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Conclusion

I have found the story of this man's remarkable life to be a source of encouragement as well as an inspiring example. Ezekiel Kephart deserves the admiration and respect of the faculty, staff, and students of the University not because he got it right all the time, but because he dared to keep learning even when he was forced to correct his own ignorance. That takes courage.

When we consider that Ezekiel Kephart grew up in a world in which even elementary education was scarce, it is remarkable how much effort he expended in order to complete his college degree. To do so requires uncommon diligence and persistence. Kephart is also an example of the kind of person who was willing to submit to learning about his own ignorance. To do that requires real humility. As he became aware that he did not know what he did not know, Kephart corrected himself. Gradually he became a person of wisdom to whom others in the United Brethren Church looked for guidance.



Ezekiel Kephart certainly is not the only exemplar that the UIndy community of learning needs in order to cultivate the virtues necessary for interfaith exploration that dares to cross what Eboo Patel has called “the faith line.” However, we think he is a particularly encouraging example for those of us who come from Protestant traditions like

the United Methodist Church (the denomination that was formed in 1968 when the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church came together to form a new church). And we invite our friends and colleagues from other religious traditions to consider the ways in which Kephart’s life may be regarded as an example of the kind of intellectual and spiritual generosity of spirit that is one of the legacies that contemporary United Methodists have been blessed to have received.

Persons from Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions of Christianity or Christian renewal movements associated with Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity no doubt are able to name others who display courage, humility, and diligence among other virtues that are important for sustaining interfaith engagement on the UIndy campus. My EIP colleagues and I would like to think that in the coming years we will have occasion to lift up other examples of religious figures whose lives and work have influenced persons and groups associated with the University of Indianapolis.

We are also eager to learn about the lives of religious leaders who have inspired interfaith exploration in religious groups represented on this campus that have non-Christian origins. And we invite students, faculty, staff, and alumni to share those stories with us (please contact Lang Brownlee at lbrownlee@uindy.edu for follow-up conversation). This is but the first in the Explorations Across the Faith Line series that is being commissioned by the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs for use by the students, faculty, and staff.

In the meantime, we are grateful to be able to lift up the life of Bishop Ezekiel B. Kephart as a source of inspiration that comes from the Church of the United Brethren in Christ—the religious community that founded this university—as well as a person of courage and intellectual integrity who dared to ask questions that sometimes led him to uncomfortable conclusions.

The qualities that are so evident in the life and ministry of Ezekiel B. Kephart turn out to be the same marks of excellence that we hope to see embodied in the lives of students at the University of Indianapolis. The following prayer is an apt summary of both our aspirations and our university’s brief association with the prophetic witness of Bishop Kephart.

From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,
From the laziness that is contented with half-truth,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
Good Lord, deliver me. Amen.¹⁸

Recently, the staff of the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs decided (in consultation with selected faculty and administrators) to name the recently established “award for academic achievement in interfaith exploration” after Bishop Ezekiel B. Kephart (1834–1905). This award will be given for the first time at the end of the 2011–12 academic year. Nominations may be submitted to any member of the EIP staff. The deadline for submissions is February 15, 2012.

Endnotes

- 1 Lewis Franklin John, *The Life of Ezekiel Boring Kephart: Statesman, Educator, Preacher and for Twenty-five Years Bishop of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1907).
 - 2 Ibid. 298-300
 - 3 Ezekiel B. Kephart, "The History and Development of Education in Our Church" in *A Century: Addresses Delivered at the Centennial Celebration of the Founding of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1901), 90.
 - 4 John, *The Life of Ezekiel Boring Kephart*, 397-406.
 - 5 Ibid., 398.
 - 6 Ibid., 400-402.
 - 7 Ibid., 403.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Ibid., 404.
 - 10 Ibid., 405.
 - 11 Ibid., 367-368.
 - 12 Ibid., 229.
 - 13 Ibid., 231-232.
 - 14 Common Sense Realism originated in the ideas of the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment. Among others, the philosopher Thomas Reid taught that every person had ordinary experiences that provided intuitively certain assurance of (a) the existence of the self, (b) the existence of real objects that could be seen and felt; and (c) certain "first principles" upon which sound morality and religious beliefs could be established. This philosophical "school" was attempting to combat the skepticism associated with the philosophical views of "idealists" such as David Hume, who called Christianity into question. For a lucid explanation of the ways that Scottish enlightenment led to developments in American Protestantism, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Second Edition, (New York, NY: Oxford U. Press, 2006).
 - 15 John, *The Life of Ezekiel Boring Kephart*, 234.
 - 16 For a very helpful study of the changes and development of theological thinking in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, see William Henry Naumann's study of "Theology and German American Evangelicalism: The Role of Theology in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and Evangelical Association" (Yale University Ph.D, 1966).
 - 17 Although in a different way, United Brethren leaders like I. Lynd Esch, the president of Indiana Central College from 1945 to 1970, also might be said to have embodied this intellectual tension.
 - 18 Prayer from Kenya, No. 597 "For the Spirit of Truth" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).
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