



The West Middlesex Camp Meeting began as a vision given to Brother Elisha W. Wimbish in Cleveland, Ohio as early as 1901. Sister Priscilla Wimbish described the vision he shared with her during their courtship, of "water bubbling from springs, hills, trees and lower lands, with crowds and crowds of happy people having church out in the woods where there were beautiful buildings among the trees." His nephew Brother Jerry Luck recalled further details of the vision: "A very large place on a hill and the people of God gathering from far and near to worship God in Spirit and truth. He also saw a part was lower farm land with a large house to shelter the saints in time of

famine and there was a cemetery to bury the old and poor saints as they pass on from labor to reward." Two weeks before they were married, they paid a visit to his nephew in Sharon, Pennsylvania and he began searching for the place he saw in the vision. The Wimbishes married, moved to Sharon, and joined a Baptist church there. Sister Wimbish started a prayer band called "The Brothers and Sisters of Love." God spoke to Sister Wimbish and said, "Come out." So she and seven followers left the Baptist church. They continued to meet on the streets and in their homes, and eventually built a meeting house on Cedar Avenue in Sharon. They affiliated with the Church of God after becoming acquainted with several Church of God ministers, including Brother John-

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ny Williams, Brother Grant Anderson, who attended the nearby Emlenton Camp Meeting, and Brother Rufus J. Smith, who had just moved from Freeport, N.Y. to pastor a congregation in Pittsburgh. Brother Smith "caught the vision" and began looking for the place in the Pittsburgh area. One day when Brother James A. Christman was hunting in the woods of West Middlesex, he came upon a place which reminded him of the vision Brother Wimbish so often mentioned. When Brother Christman showed Brother Wimbish the site, he said "Yes, this is the place." Aside from the natural beauty of the

hills, woods and streams of West Middlesex, what was so special about this location in western Pennsylvania in the early 1900s?

Why West Middlesex?

Several factors in the history of the region help to explain the attractiveness of this location as a site for the establishment of a camp meeting.

First is the legacy of hospitality to the refugees of slavery and racial oppression. Mercer County was a station in the historic Underground Railroad, an interracial network of homes, churches and progressively-minded individuals known as “conductors” who helped African Americans navigate their escape from slavery in the South and find safe passage to freedom in Canada. Prior to the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which removed legal protections for enslaved and free African Americans, a secluded rural settlement for escaped slaves was established in Liberia, now known as Stoneboro, by two conductors of the Underground Railroad, Richard Travis and Job Lawson. Two former slaves, Brother and Sister Armstrong, were the first residents of the temporary housing for the aged saints established in keeping with Brother Wimbish's vision. It was reported by Brother Frank Matthews that some former slaves were buried in a small cemetery on the camp grounds, but the exact location of the grave markers has been lost over the years.

A second consideration is the economic opportunity provided to African Americans and other ethnic groups by the 19th century technological revolution and emergence of factories in Sharon and Farrell for the production of tin and steel. In the aftermath of the Civil War and the end of slavery, waves of African American migrants from the South settled in Sharon and Farrell seeking employment in the mills. As many as 187 African American workers were employed by the American Sheet and Tin Plate Company in Farrell in 1918, and they earned more money than the average mill worker in western Pennsylvania. Among them were skilled craftsmen and inventors, for example, Brother James Elmer Matthews (1886-1976) who invented a shear guide to enhance the safety of tin production. Brother Daniel S. Phillips recalled that when each church member pledged \$60 to finance the initial purchase of the property in 1916, he was working in the tin mill for \$1.75 a day. The founding families of the West Middlesex camp meeting included hard-working people whose rural Southern roots made them feel at home as they took on the challenge of transforming 127 acres of wooded farmland into a place of worship.

A third factor that may help to explain the attractiveness of this area for the establishment of a camp meeting in West Middlesex was the flourishing of

African American entrepreneurial enterprises and leadership opportunities in nearby Sharon and Farrell. Brother James A. Christman (1879-1966), who first discovered the campground site while hunting in the West Middlesex woods, established and operated a transportation company in Farrell for 33 years, and served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Interstate Commerce Commission. Another example of African American leadership in business, culture and politics is Brother Michael Askerneese (1890-1975), a migrant from the South who owned a canning company in Farrell. He served as president of the Farrell Division Universal Negro Improvement Association, which hosted a visit and address by Marcus Garvey in 1923.

In summary, the pioneering individuals and families who started the West Middlesex camp meeting were enriched by:

- 1) the legacy of radical hospitality extended by residents of Mercer County to African Americans seeking freedom from slavery,
- 2) the job opportunities and income made available to all ethnic groups by the local steel industry, and
- 3) the strong families of entrepreneurs, inventors and visionaries who inspired and organized each other to buy into Elisha Wimbish's dream.

What became of the dream?



What became of the dream? Brother and Sister Wimbish sold their home and donated the proceeds to purchase the 127-acre property known as Leslie farm. Records at the Mercer County Courthouse filed on May 10, 1917 show the names of seven campground trustees who entered into an agreement to purchase the farm for \$5,500: James Abraham Christman, Jr., Daniel S. Phillips, Raymond H. Pryor, Roy E. Roddy, H. Russell

Wayne, Littleton P. White and Elijah W. Wimbish. Members of the Sharon and Pittsburgh churches worked on Saturdays to cut down trees and clear the grounds to make space for a tent. Housing was provided in the farmhouse and barn on the property. The first camp meeting was held in 1917 with a crowd of 600 in attendance on the final Sunday. The camp meeting organizers legally incorporated

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in the state of Pennsylvania as the Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio Camp Ground Association. The first president of the new association was Brother R. J. Smith, and Sister Matilda Matthews was the chairperson. In later years the name of this association was changed to the Gospel Industrial Association of the Church of God of the Evening Light Saints, and in 1943 it became known as the National Association of the Church of God. Brother Smith served as president until 1924, and was succeeded by Brother Wimbish. The following year Brother George R. Dixon, pastor of the Church of God in Sharon, became the third president of the association. He also served as campground manager until Brother Joseph Crosswhite, Jr. filled the post in 1927. Brother Crosswhite was a licensed general contractor who did building and construction in Ohio and Pennsylvania. He and his wife Emma Crosswhite planted the Church of God congregation in Washington Court House, Ohio.

The original tabernacle was built in 1918. However, it had to be demolished in 1931 due to its structural deficiencies. Starting with a meager building fund of \$100, Brother Crosswhite directed the construction of a new tabernacle in 1932 during the height of the Depression without incurring any additional debt. He also supervised the creation of a water supply system of wells, pumps and reservoirs to serve the needs of 14,000 camp visitors. Under Brother Crosswhite's leadership from 1927 to 1960, two dormitories were built, Frisby Hall and Wimbish Hall. The Joseph Crosswhite dormitory



was dedicated in his honor in 1965. Adjacent to Frisby Hall is the Mary B. Terrell Memorial Dining Center, named for the first treasurer of the association and dining center supervisor. R. J. Smith Auditorium, named for the first president of the association, is located on the lower level of Frisby Hall. Wimbish Hall was demolished in 2009 to make way for the construction of a women's conference center, Wimbish-Benn Hall. The contractors for the new construction are Charles Mitchell and Benjamin Gibbs, Jr. The tabernacle in current use was built and dedicated in 1974 under the leadership of Benjamin Gibbs, Sr. Following the death of R. S. Jackson in 1983, this structure was renamed the R. S. Jackson Auditorium in 1984. The worship facilities on the camp ground not only accommodated the regular camp meeting worship services and prayer meetings, but also the occasional baptisms, weddings and funerals.

One hundred years after the initial purchase of the 127-acre site for \$5,500, the land and buildings of the West Middlesex camp grounds are now valued at \$3.2 million, featuring a tabernacle for worship, administrative and dining facilities, concession stands, conference and camping facilities, three dormitories, and 100 permanent and private residences served by a network of privately-owned utilities supplying electricity, water and sewage.

For a century the West Middlesex camp meeting has provided opportunities for leadership development, preaching, worship, Christian education, missions, and mass communications. Leading pastors who served as chairmen of the General Ministerial Assembly (GMA) include such notables as R. J. Smith, George R. Dixon, Samuel J. Taylor, Charles A. White, Raymond S. Jackson, Clifton M. Morgan, Marcus H. Morgan, Leonard Roache, Lawrence Wyatt, Ronald Fowler, Benjamin Reid, Timothy Clarke and Robert S. Davis, Sr. The administrative roles and structures evolved during the past 50 years, from camp ground manager to executive secretary, general overseer, presiding elder and chief operating and development officer, with a governing board of directors. These

various administrative leadership positions have been filled with distinction by many persons, too numerous to name here, but among the most memorable ministers and lay leaders who have served as camp ground managers and executives are Luther M. Turner, Armelia Ray, James Cray, George Suddeth, Robert Culp, Robert Leeper, Ambrose Campbell, Joseph Dixon, Benjamin F. Gibbs, Sr., Burnett G. Terry, Charles Mitchell, Gilbert Hammond, Robert S. Davis, Sr., William Frank Matthews, Alvin Lewis, Robert McClure,

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J. Douglas Walls, M. Tyrone Cushman and Wallace Matthews. For many years the prime preaching assignment on the final Sunday morning was given to the GMA chairman. James Earl Massey, a prince of the West Middlesex pulpit in his own right, offers a short list of preachers of “legendary” status at West Middlesex in his 2005 historical account African Americans in the Church of God: Daniel F. Oden, J. D. Smoot, Samuel J. Taylor, Hamy Jeter, George R. Dixon, Luther Hill, W. W. Naylor, Agnes Coleman, Hattie Towers, James S. May, Sethard P. Dunn, Blanche K. Wilson, Goff D. Young, Naomi Shelton Patterson, Ozzie G. Wattleton and Horace W. Sheppard, Sr. The camp ground program for the 1967 Jubilee provides a snapshot of some of the leading preachers in the association at the midpoint of its history, and some who served the Church of God at large: Dale Oldham, James Cray, Lawrence Wyatt, Wendell Wallace, E.J. Morris, J. Horace Germany, George S. Wilson, Sr., Edward Foggs, Harold E. Harrison, Rudolph Smith, Gladys B. Walker, Gabriel P. Dixon, Leonard Roache, Nancy Ford and Orida Thurman. The leaders now in place as the association enters a second century are presiding elder Miki Merritt and chief operating and development officer, Charles J. Myricks, Jr.

Exhilarating worship

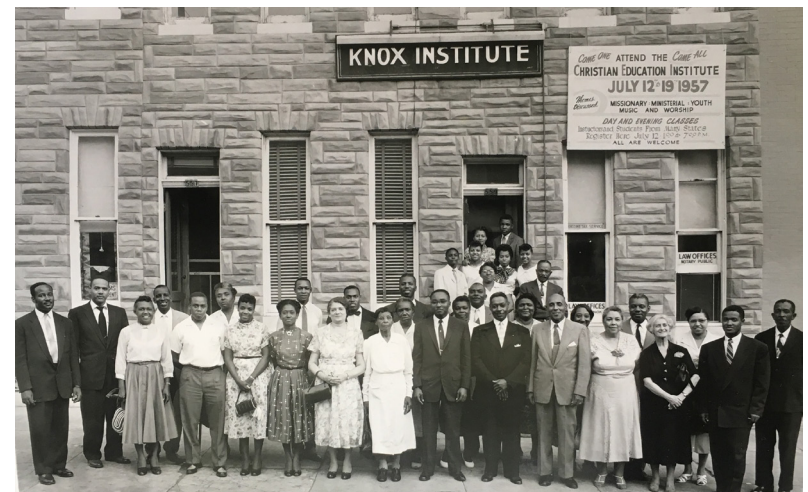
The West Middlesex camp meeting has a longstanding reputation for exhilarating worship led by gifted vocalists, instrumentalists and choir directors. Noteworthy among them in Dr. Massey’s account are Ceola Abney, Mabel Wilson, Calvin Delph, and Norman Minor. Mabel Wilson and Gladys B. Walker served for decades as ministers of music and are noted in the 1967 jubilee year program. Many other musicians and directors have served with distinction in the later years, including Cleo Myricks, Quincy Fielding, Sr., Arnetta Fielding, John R. Foster, Edward Eddy, Joyce Foggs, Cynthia Davis, Doris Davis and Dorothy Catus, Patrick Roache, Evelyn Simpson Curenton, Bill Robinson, Leslie Parker Barnes, Bernadette Salley, Kishna Davis Fowler, Darrilyn Robinson, Quincy Fielding, Jr. and Scott Cumberbatch. Historically, the camp ground worship repertoire has been dominated by Church of God hymns, gospel songs, choruses and anthems, such as “O Church of God,” “’Twas Sung by the Poets,” “We’ve Come This Far by Faith,” Bessie Covington’s rendition of “I Am Resolved,” Marcus Morgan’s solo “Zion’s Hill” and the congregational inclusive singing of the eponymous anthem “Let Mount Zion Rejoice.” Special recordings of camp ground music have been published over the years, and the musical “Paul: A Musical Journey” by Charles J. Myricks, Jr. was performed in 2006.

The National Ushers

The National Ushers have played an important role in support of the camp ground worship services. The first Ushers Convention was held in 1954 under the leadership of Esther Culp. This auxiliary has been blessed with a succession of presidents, including Robert Rhodes, Jewell Johnson, Sybil Chisholm, Betty Thomas, Betty Lawson, Elizabeth Gaddis, Laura Pharr, Donna Ravenell and Esther Deans.

Christian Education

Christian education played a key role in fostering leadership development at West Middlesex. In addition to the classes and other educational activities that were incorporated into the daily camp meeting schedule, other programs were developed to provide focused opportunities for spiritual growth, biblical instruction, ministry and service. Brother Wimbish’s vision of the West Middlesex campground included a school. When the association determined that they lacked the resources to establish a school, the decision was made to offer a one-week summer institute to equip persons already “in-service” as pastors, ministers, teachers, youth leaders and youth, and also to engage anyone with leadership potential and an interest in Christian service. Pansy M. Brown, Josie Frisby Greer, Ruth Reynolds Keith and Harry B. Mitchell proposed the development of the **In-Service Training Institute** in partial fulfillment of this dream. The first ISTI was held in Baltimore, Mary-



land during the summer of 1957, with Pansy Brown serving as director and Josie Rogers as dean. The ISTI was hosted each summer thereafter by a variety of churches and universities located throughout the nation for nearly 60 years. In recent years the Leadership Development Board has redirected its resources to the Leadership Academy for young men and women ages 16-21. In addition, the Children's Corner remains a vital part of the West Middlesex camp meeting, providing activities and music performances for children under the direction of Jimmie Curtis, Eunice Wade and Jeff Newell. Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop (YEPAW), led by Leslie Parker Barnes, offers service opportunities and performance activities during the camp meeting for youth from Akron, Ohio and surrounding urban areas.

Youth Ministry

The first youth convention was held in Chicago in 1938 at the Church of God Temple on Langley Avenue, with Sethard P. Dunn as host pastor. Gabriel P. Dixon was the first president, and there were 617 persons in attendance.

tion was convened in hotels in various cities each year between Christmas and New Year's Day when the young people were not in school. The list of NIYC presidents includes many who excelled in their subsequent roles as pastors and leaders in the church at large: Louise Crosswhite Terry, James Earl Massey, John T. Olds, Robert A. Culp, Benjamin F. Reid, Edward L. Foggs, Ronald J. Fowler, Richard Goode, Gideon Thompson, M. Tyrone Cushman, Timothy Clarke, Diana L. Swoope, Richard Prim, Deborah Gillard,

Jimmy Terry, Kerwin Manning, Michael Thigpen, Kevin Osbourne and Kevin Earley. Emery Williams was the first director of the Youth Camp, later known as Camp Middlesex, beginning in 1949. Russell C. Phillips, Sr. became the director in 1959. The Williams-Phillips Youth Building is named for these two directors. The current youth camp director, Sherill Durham Sanders, is the daughter of former business manager, Joseph Durham.

The Foreign Missionary Board

The Foreign Missionary Board at West Middlesex supported foreign missions for several decades until 1967, when its work was transferred to the Missionary Board of the Church of God. Missionaries who served abroad under the auspices of the association prior to 1967 include Wilhelmina Fraser in Antigua and St. Kitts, and Clemmie and Alezine Mayes, Joseph and Mary Robinson, Carl and Mamye Flewellyn in Bermuda. Hattie Downer served a home missions assignment as National Youth Field Worker for the association in the 1930s and 1940s. The Women's Home Missionary Society, the Women's Organization and the Men's Organization have supported the missions and service of the association throughout the century.

The Official Publications

The official publications of the association have enabled effective communications, sharing of information and preservation of the history of the camp grounds and its leaders, including their testimonies of faith, struggle, healing and hope. Moreover, the periodical gathering and dissemination of information from such a large number of churches, pastors and organizations helped to forge a national identity for the West Middlesex camp meeting and the association. The semi-monthly magazine known as **the Shining Light Survey** was first published by Theodore Wilson in 1932, who wrote: "From the beginning my object in publishing this paper was for the purpose of assembling and printing up news of importance to our local churches, as well as the national work at West Middlesex, Pa." Each issue was a compilation of sermons, doctri-



nal articles, testimonies and announcements of upcoming events. Evans Marshall became managing editor in 1938, and continued as editor-in-chief of the Shining Light for 47 years. Wilfred Jordan served as editor-in-chief from 1984 until publication ceased in 2000. For many years the journalistic outreach of the association and the work of these editors was supported by the Board of Mass Communications chaired by Victor Phillips, Sr. Two books published by the Shining Light Press document important aspects of the history of the West Middlesex camp grounds and the mission of the association: *Zion's Hill at West Middlesex* by Katie H. Davis and *The Church of God in Black Perspective*. The first book is a compilation of testimonies, biographies and photographs from the pioneers and founders of the camp grounds, and it includes clippings and field reports from the churches and mission field as published in the Shining Light Survey. The second book contains the proceedings of the Caucus of Black Churchmen in the Church of God held in Cleveland, Ohio in April 1970. Beginning with a foreword by Ronald J. Fowler, papers by Edward L. Foggs, Sethard A. Beverly, Robert O. Dulin, Marcus H. Morgan, Benjamin F. Reid, Thomas J. Sawyer and Charles R. Pleasant, Jr., address such topics as "The Black Christian and Social Action," "The National Association: Present Crises and Future Shape," "The Black Church's Stand with Reference to Revolution." The book ends with a sermon entitled "The Face of Jesus," by James Earl Massey. His definitive historical account of the association and the West Middlesex camp meeting, African Americans and the Church of God, was published by Anderson University Press in 2005. The modern means of communication now used by the association--web page, mobile app and social media--are managed by Tatum Osbourne.

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