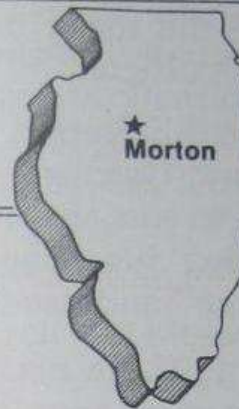

MORTON, ILLINOIS

MORTON, ILLINOIS
225 East Jefferson Street



Almost from the beginning, the Morton church was destined to eventually become a large one. Located in an area flanked by Dillon and Tremont to the south, Congerville to the east, and Roanoke and Peoria to the northeast and northwest respectively, Morton could draw—in the early days—on the

vast number of farmers in adjacent areas who had Evangelical Baptist and Mennonite backgrounds. This, coupled with the fact that Morton became semi-industrialized early in its history, led to the swelling of membership as the decades unfolded. By 1980, the church had grown to include more than 650 members and 370 families making it the largest Apostolic Christian Church in Illinois, and the second largest in the denomination nationally.⁵⁴

Big numbers seem quite common to the Morton Apostolic Christian Church. Already in 1894, the church enjoyed a tremendous "in-gathering" with 119 persons baptized during that year. In subsequent years, waves of conversions transpired totaling

65 in 1906
109 in 1922
49 in 1947
31 in 1970
44 in 1974
39 in 1975

From 1894 through 1976, the Morton church baptized 1,192 persons.⁵⁵

The first settlers came to the Morton area as early as 1826, and primitive log cabins soon began to dot the area. From 1830 to 1836, a steady stream of immigrants arrived in Morton. By 1837, names like Ackerman, Belsley, and Hartman began showing up in the general vicinity.

Christian Ackerman, who was born on Christmas Day in 1813, in Bavaria, Germany, was the first person who eventually became associated with the Apostolic Christian Church in Morton. It is likely that he was of Mennonite extraction. At age twenty-four, he arrived in New York City. He started his trip west on foot and by wagon train and settled on a farm in Ohio for approximately six months while accumulating enough money to continue pushing west.

Ackerman eventually traveled by riverboat to Spring Bay, Illinois, where he found work as a farm laborer. It was here he married Anna Belsley who had just arrived in America. After two years, the couple moved to a farm between Morton and Pekin, Illinois. Later they moved to a spot north of Morton where they built a two-room log cabin.

The early development of the Apostolic Christian Church in central Illinois seemed to center on areas such as Dillon, Congerville, Peoria, and Partridge Prairie (Metamora). Several persons of this faith resided in the Morton vicinity but attended church in the early days at these villages. The trip to Partridge Township was quite tiring, but nonetheless, many made the trip either walking or by wagon.

Benedict Weyeneth was instrumental in guiding the early church in central Illinois. He was active in the Morton area as early as 1853, but a church was not built until 1867.⁵⁶ The precise extent of his initial labors in Morton remain unknown. It is surmised that the few early church families residing in Morton attended services at churches in the villages already mentioned.

Church families who were among those to come to Morton in the late 1850's and early 1860's were names such as Voelpel, Welk, Rapp, Beyer, Getz, Hauter, Frank, Miller, Balzer, Dauchert, Reuter, and Freidinger.

In 1866, when Elder Henry Geistlich of Switzerland visited Morton, there was no church building. Instead, brethren met in the woods on the Ackerman farm. Geistlich said:⁵⁷

As I saw this place, I thought of the plains of Mamre, as we find in the Scriptures, where Abraham lived. Also, I had a real feeling of love toward the Ackermans who were very hospitable.

The momentum of the early assembly at Morton had advanced to the point of building a small church in 1867. A small white frame building was built on the corner of what now is Jefferson and Third Streets. The church was lighted by kerosene lamps that hung from the ceiling. Interestingly, this little church contained two dining rooms—one for men and one for women. There were no screens on the windows, and in the summertime, during the lunch hour, some of the sisters would go up and down the aisles using fly chasers to chase the flies away from the tables. The fly chasers consisted of paper streamers attached to long pieces of wood.

George Welk became the first resident Elder of the Morton church. He was born December 29, 1829, in Germany, the son of Daniel and Juliana Herbolt Welk. He and his wife, the former Hanna Getz, along with their infant daughter Katherine, and his wife's parents, Peter and Katherine Gress Getz, emigrated to America in 1859.

The Welks lived with Ludwig Getz and family near Dillon, Illinois, for five years. Ludwig Getz, who later became Elder at Tremont in 1881, then purchased a farm northeast of Tremont and sold his farm to George Welk. In 1871 or 1872, Welk was persuaded by the Morton brethren to purchase some choice, well-drained land two miles east of Morton. He purchased the land and sold his Dillon farm to Kasper Koch.

George Welk, after serving as Elder for almost three decades, met an untimely death on March 17, 1895. A few days previous to this, he was standing beside his buggy when the horses inadvertently backed up and pinned him between the buggy and the wheel, leaving him badly crushed. Somehow, he managed to walk one block to the residence of his daughter, Mrs. Julia Rapp, wife of Barthol Rapp. He lived for a few days, but the injuries he sustained were so severe he soon expired.

The mantle of church leadership subsequently fell on Andrew Rapp, who was the husband of Welk's other daughter, Katherine.

A significant part of the Morton Apostolic Christian Church's history reaches back to Burgberg, Baden, Germany, a small village in the beautiful Black Forest region. It was here that fifteen children were born to the union of Christian and Mary Weisser Rapp. Two of their sons, Andrew and Barthol, would later perform significant leadership roles in the Morton congregation. Also, their family business venture would grow—for a time—into one of Morton's leading industries.

The Rapps came to America to avoid compulsory military service. Andrew, the family's oldest boy, had served in the German Army during the War of 1870, and his military experience was made difficult due to his religious convictions.⁵⁸ In 1874, his commander suggested he leave the country (perhaps not believing he would actually do so).

As fate would have it, that evening a farmer with a load of hay came along and suggested that Andrew crawl under the hay, and he would take him to the French border. That very evening, after reaching the border, Andrew met a group going to America who invited him along and financed his ocean trip as well as the overland trip to Forrest, Illinois.⁵⁹

His parents were unaware of his desertion from the armed forces and were later questioned sharply by military authorities.

His younger brothers, Barthol and Christian, who also faced military conscription, soon made the trip to America. Their ocean voyage was quite hazardous. Their ship sank in mid-ocean, and they spent several days and nights in life boats prior to being rescued. They arrived in America with no personal possessions.

In 1875, the father and mother and the rest of the Rapp family emigrated to America to join their three sons. They settled in Forrest, Illinois.

When Andrew Rapp was a lad of fifteen in Germany, he took courses in stone masonry and architecture. Arriving in Forrest, Illinois, he sought employment in this realm only to be directed to Morton, a booming town. Brick and tile were in great demand, so he traveled there to seek economic opportunity. So brisk was the demand for brick that in 1875 he summoned his two brothers, Barthol and Christian, to Morton to help him. Eventually, all six Rapp brothers came to Morton.

From this beginning, the Rapp Brick and Tile Company realized rapid growth. Tile was used to drain the swampy, prairie grassland, making it more suitable for tillage. When land was properly tiled, it added to the value. Thus, demand for tile was strong.

The firm also made pottery, and by 1916 the sons of Andrew Rapp started the Morton Pottery, a firm which shipped its products nationwide. The firm became quite well known.

Thus, the size of the large Rapp family, together with the jobs their enterprises offered, gave a significant boost to the Morton church. Also, the Interlocking Fence Company, operated by the Getz family, was beneficial to church growth by providing jobs.

Andrew Rapp, who fathered fifteen children, was ordained Elder in 1895. He served until his death on May 2, 1911, and was succeeded by his younger brother (by two years), Barthol. Barthol was ordained in 1911 and served until he died on January 24, 1924. Barthol was born August 15, 1854, in Konigsfeld, Germany.⁶⁰

By 1891, the first little church building became too small, so a larger one was built on the same site. To the rear of the building was a row of stalls which accommodated the horses as well as the hearse used for funerals. John Zobrist usually furnished a team of stately black horses to pull the hearse.

Because the roads and yards were quite muddy in those days, a planked platform was constructed on the west side of the church. It was here buggies would unload and pick up their passengers.

The twelfth day of the twelfth month of the twelfth year—December 12, 1912—bode ill for the Morton congregation. On this fateful day, the church—now twenty-one years old—burned to the ground. The fire was set by an arsonist. It was the second Morton institution to succumb to an arsonist's flare. In 1868, the Morton Library had also fallen victim to arson.⁶¹

The church fire broke out at 4 a.m. on a Thursday morning, and its intensity caused a great commotion. Mary Getz, who lived with her parents four blocks from the church, recalls that sparks from the blaze blew on the snow in their yard. People living near the church were terrified the fire would spread and consume their homes. Accordingly, they began gathering their clothes and personal belongings in order to flee the area, if necessary.⁶²

Ringling fire bells and a huge crowd at the scene provided an unusual atmosphere of excitement, but it eventually subsided as efforts to contain the blaze and protect surrounding homes proved successful.

Construction of a new church building began in 1913. A year later, at a cost of \$50,000 and seating capacity of 750, this building was completed. J.C. Ackerman and Valentine Wick helped every day on the construction. This two-story building, with the sanctuary on the second floor, was still serving the church in 1982. Many physical improvements have been made over the years. A large remodeling project was initiated in 1957.

Carl Rassi, a native of Bavaria, Germany, was ordained as Elder in 1932. He died July 4, 1952. He was succeeded by Joe A. Getz who served from 1948 to 1966. He was the first American-born Elder to serve at Morton.

Russell Rapp, a descendant of the large Rapp family which came to Morton in the 1870's, was ordained Elder December 11, 1966. For health reasons he stepped down as Elder in 1974, although he remained a minister. In 1979 he resigned his membership in the Apostolic Christian Church.

MARCHING TO ZION

CHAPTER V

Joe J. Braker was installed as Morton's seventh resident Elder on September 8, 1974.

Morton, Illinois, is the site of the Apostolic Christian Home for the Handicapped, a sprawling and beautiful complex on Veteran's Road.

Restmor Nursing Home on the southeast edge of Morton is operated by the local Morton congregation.

A fellowship hall was built north of the Home for the Handicapped in 1975.

The church at Morton is symbolic of the change in church membership from basically rural to urban. In the early decades, the occupational composite of the membership was decidedly farming, but over the years as farms filled up with settlers and technology reduced the number of farms and farm laborers, members of the church became more urban oriented. Consequently, the Morton church—as well as many Apostolic Christian Churches across the land—consisted of more and more non-farmers.