

# CHAPTER 8



POLITY ~ OUR UNITED  
METHODIST TRADITION

# Thoughts on United Methodist Traditions

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## *TRADITIONS IN GENERAL*

We use the word “tradition” every now and then, usually to mean something old, and often something worn out. But the word really has more special meanings. It literally means “something worth saving”. Coming from Latin – as many of our words do – a tradition “may be handed down by word of mouth or example from one generation to another without written instruction”. It becomes “an inherited pattern of thought or action (as a religious practice or social custom) “. Thus tradition gives us “cultural continuity in social attitudes and institutions”.

United Methodists follow these definitions, at least part way. We do have certain “religious practices;” we definitely think we have social attitudes and institutions that give us continuity. We like to think that we carry our witness forward by example. But we certainly do not have to depend on word of mouth. After all, did not Methodism begin with the Wesley brothers, who were educated men, and who grew up in a family that valued education for all its members, sons and daughters alike? And their movement depended in large part on the printed word.

## *Tradition in United Methodist Doctrine*

Doctrine – that is, the teaching of the Church – begins with the Holy Bible. Scripture is basic to our teaching. We study Scripture with the assistance of Tradition, Reason, and Experience. These four make up what has been called the Wesley Quadrilateral (four sides); but Scripture comes first. Here “tradition” means that God’s presence continued after New Testament times, and we value those parts of Christian history in which God’s presence can be seen most clearly. Thus in worship we use the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. Our hymnals include varieties of church music. And we bring to our teaching and learning certain insights from reason and from experience; thus we keep our human contact with God. Above all, we seek to combine, as John Wesley did, “knowledge and vital piety”.

### *Tradition in United Methodist Institutions*

The whole structure of United Methodist institutions begins with John Wesley's habit of being orderly. That, we recall, gave our movement the name "Methodist". When Methodism came to North America and soon became a separate Church, its printed record of what went on came to be called the Discipline (now Book of Discipline). This volume spells out our arrangements for the local church, for the district (made up of several local churches). The Book also gives details for jurisdictional conferences and for the General Conference. Likewise the Book gives arrangements for working units of the annual conference ("boards and commissions") and for boards, commissions, and councils of the general Church. [NOTE – the current Book of Discipline has more than 800 pages]

### *Tradition in United Methodist Clergy*

Methodism has always included laity. Wesley's preachers were lay persons. His plan of classes, bands, societies, ect., was of, by, and for lay people. When Methodism separated in America (after the American Revolution), the preachers became ordained clergy. Organizing and governing the local churches also depend on laity, of course. But when clergy proved to be fewer in number than local churches, lay pastors were enlisted to serve. Methodism grew mightily through the activities of these clergy, and of the lay people who worked with them. In the words of one of the clergy, "God's design ... was to reform the continent, and spread scriptural holiness through these lands". Eventually the clergy included two orders, deacons and elders. Today the process of "clergy recruitment" involves laity, both at the local church and the annual conference levels. [Note – women became eligible for clergy status and ordination in Methodism in the 1950s]

### *Tradition in the Superintendency*

"Superintendency" is a fancy term for "what bishops and district superintendents do". When the American Methodists separated from their British cousins in 1784, they created the "Methodist Episcopal Church". The lay preachers now became ordained clergy. Their chief, Francis Asbury, was designated by Wesley to superintend the preachers in America. Soon he was being called "Bishop", and he served the American Methodists as superintendent for the rest of his life — 32 more years. His successors were elected by general conferences for the next century and a half. In 1939 a union of three Methodist denominations brought the jurisdictional conference into existence; its chief function was to elect bishops and assign them to their areas of superintending. From Asbury's day on, bishops had to travel through the "connection", being assisted by district superintendents. Condensing a lot of detail, those United Methodists who came to the union of 1968 from the Evangelical United Brethren had a similar pattern of government. The 1976 General Conference revised the system of making appointments

to local churches; the principle new word was “consultation”. This meant that the bishop and the district superintendents (“cabinet”) would consult the local churches in appointing pastors. [NOTE – women have been elected bishop by jurisdictional conferences since 1980]

### *TRADITION IN EDUCATION*

American Methodists have followed the Wesley’s in being committed to education. From earliest days Methodism created elementary and secondary schools; and we remain strong supporters of public-supported education, grades K – 12. The General Conference of 1820 charged each annual conference to set up a college. (Our Oklahoma City University dates from 1904.) Private groups and annual conferences began to create theological seminaries in the 1830s. The church union of 1939 set a high goal for ordained clergy – college education plus seminary. Thus United Methodism today supports thirteen seminaries, through the Ministerial Education Fund. Perkins School of Theology and Saint Paul School of Theology, respectively located in Dallas and Kansas City, are two such seminaries in our jurisdiction. We have many clergy who are graduates of Phillips Theological Seminary, based in Tulsa and operated by the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ. We also offer, through the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, a “course of study” that is an alternate path of education leading to ordination; “second-career” candidates for ministry often use this path.

### *TRADITION IN PUBLISHING*

The United Methodist Publishing House today proudly claims the year 1789 as its founding date. Through these 200-plus years the Publishing House has produced many books, no under the “Abingdon” name. It provides many “Cokesbury” retail bookstores, including units in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. It offers a newsletter ([Newscope](#)) and a magazine for clergy ([Circuit Rider](#)). It publishes several varieties of literature for church school classes. General boards also publish devotional materials ([The Upper Room](#)) and mission-minded magazines ([Response](#)). Through the years many Methodist newspapers have appeared. The Dallas-based [United Methodist Reporter](#) is our current example; they produce our Oklahoma Conference paper, [Contact](#), and other editions for many local churches.

### *TRADITIONS IN MISSIONS*

Methodism has steadily acted out John Wesley’s statement, “The world is my parish.” The Methodist Episcopal Church had a Missionary Society as early as 1820 and a Women’s Foreign Missionary Society by 1869, followed by a Women’s Home Missionary Society in the next decade. Other branches of today’s United Methodism had similar

units. These societies sent missionaries, and money to support missions, to stations world-wide---China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Africa, Europe and Latin America. Closer to home, missionaries went to immigrants in the USA, to Native Americans, to slaves on pre-1860 plantations, to people in city slums. “Uplift” was a common goal, with the Christian gospel as a means of “civilizing” the needy. The tone was often condescending, and missions frequently ignored proper elements of other cultures. By the 1930s “rethinking missions” was under way, with an added goal -- to create in each mission a group of leaders to take over management, and eventually support, of the enterprise. Today’s United Methodism has Central Conferences that carry out much of this goal.

### *TRADITION IN SOCIAL WITNESS – RACE*

John Wesley bore witness against what he saw as social evils; his article “Thoughts of Slavery” is especially eloquent in denouncing that institution. Methodists in America began with the same opinion, urging their members to free their slaves. Alas, official actions soon softened that criticism. Yet some Methodists continued to criticize slavery, joining many non-Methodists in urging abolition. Some African American Methodists left to form local churches and denominations by themselves; others remained with the larger Church. The USA officially abolished slavery by 1865. But basic racial attitudes remained; segregated local churches were still the norm, and segregated annual conferences with them. Church union in 1939 brought together three Methodism’s into one, but “The Methodist Church” that resulted created a sixth “Central Jurisdiction” for African Americans; it chose bishops and general church board members. During a long generation Methodists white and black urged an end to segregated structures, including annual conferences. The Central Jurisdiction disappeared, partly at the insistence of Evangelical United Brethren, from the United Methodist Church that emerged in 1968. United Methodism shortly combined the African American annual conferences with the other existing structures. [NOTE: South Central Jurisdictional Conferences, beginning with Bishop Ernest T. Dixon, Jr. in 1972, have elected five bishops who were African American; Bishop Robert E. Hayes, Jr. is the most recent, having been elected in 2004].

### *TRADITION IN OTHER SOCIAL WITNESS*

Wesley and his people carried their message to persons in all walks of life, especially those in prisons and hospitals. American Methodists continued this witness. As populations increased, notably in cities, Methodists joined others in creating a host of charitable institutions. By the year 1900 churches were urging government action to bring about social reforms. A resolution embodying many of these programs, adopted by the 1908 General Conference (ME), became a model for other denominational bodies, being known as the Social Creed of the Churches. Today’s Board of Church and Society continues this witness. Specific statements of Social Principles occupy thirty

pages in the Book of Discipline, climaxing in “Our Social Creed”. The Board of Church and Society, and many other United Methodists, recommend specific documents of social witness for study by persons in local churches; only when adopted by General Conference do these statements become ways to “speak officially for The United Methodist Church” (Book of Discipline 2004, Paragraph 509). Such statements appear in the Book of Resolutions, a volume of more than 900 pages. In Oklahoma Annual Conference we support several institutions of social witness, including the Circle of Care, Urban Ministries in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, and Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries.

### *TRADITION IN ECUMENISM*

Methodists have frequently joined with persons from other Christian denominations and faith groups in common actions -- some detailed above as social witness. A favorite text in such endeavors is from John’s Gospel, chapter 17, verse 20: Jesus’ “high-priestly” prayer for “those that will believe in me ... that they all may be one.” Many Methodists have seen this prayer as leading them to church union. Certainly the denominational unions of 1939 and 1968 – and the Evangelical United Brethren unification of 1946 – have been actions along that road. World Methodist Conferences have brought together Methodists from dozens of countries in fellowship and cooperation. The United Methodist Church has participated in conversations with other communions, notably the Churches United in Christ and the Commission of Pan-Methodist Cooperation and Union; likewise we have engaged in “bilateral” conversations, notably with Lutheran and with Roman Catholic representatives. We have been charter members of leading ecumenical bodies – the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and the World Council of Churches. In Oklahoma our annual conference is one of seventeen Christian communions cooperating in the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, through its two divisions, Faith & Order and Life & Work. Our United Methodist Women are leaders in Church Women United. And individual United Methodists join with representatives of Jewish and Muslim communities in common concerns.

### *TRADITIONS IN AMERICAN UNITED METHODISM*

Our “cultural continuity”, to cite the dictionary definition in our first sections above, has brought to United Methodism a richly varied set of traditions. One social attitude seems to combine most if not all of these—the principle of inclusiveness. This appears as a whole article (Division One, Article IV) in the United Methodist Church’s Constitution, which declares that “all persons are of sacred worth,” and then spells out details for The United Methodist Church: “All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, upon taking vows declaring the church in the connection.” Perhaps the spirit

of inclusiveness can be best caught in a phrase popular among United Methodists about the year 2000 — “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” Praise God!

Stillwater, Oklahoma

Theodore Agnew



To know where we're going, we have to know where we have been.

This is why The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008 begins with a listing of all United Methodist bishops past and present and then a historical statement (pages 9-20) that tells the history, life, and hope of our denomination. Take the time to read through this section of our Discipline and follow those historical footsteps to the doors of your church and life today.

## HISTORICAL STATEMENT

On April 23, 1968, The United Methodist Church was created when Bishop Reuben H. Mueller, representing The Evangelical United Brethren Church, and Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke of The Methodist Church joined hands at the constituting General Conference in Dallas, Texas. With the words, “Lord of the Church, we are united in Thee, in Thy Church and now in The United Methodist Church,” the new denomination was given birth by two churches that had distinguished histories and influential ministries in various parts of the world.

Theological traditions steeped in the Protestant Reformation and Wesleyanism, similar ecclesiastical structures, and relationships that dated back almost two hundred years facilitated the union. In the Evangelical United Brethren heritage, for example, Philip William Otterbein, the principal founder of the United Brethren in Christ, assisted in the ordination of Francis Asbury to the superintendency of American Methodist work. Jacob Albright, through whose religious experience and leadership the Evangelical Association was begun, was nurtured in a Methodist class meeting following his conversion.

### Roots, 1736–1816

The United Methodist Church shares a common history and heritage with other Methodist and Wesleyan bodies. The lives and ministries of John Wesley (1703–1791) and of his brother, Charles (1707–1788), mark the origin of their common roots. Both John and Charles were Church of England missionaries to the colony of Georgia, arriving in March 1736. It was their only occasion to visit America. Their mission was far from an unqualified success, and both returned to England disillusioned and discouraged, Charles in December 1736, and John in February 1738.

Both of the Wesley brothers had transforming religious experiences in May 1738. In the years following, the Wesleys succeeded in leading a lively renewal movement in the Church of England. As the Methodist movement grew, it became apparent that their ministry would spread to the American colonies as some Methodists made the exhausting and hazardous Atlantic voyage to the New World.

Organized Methodism in America began as a lay movement. Among its earliest leaders were Robert Strawbridge, an immigrant farmer who organized work about 1760 in Maryland and Virginia, Philip Embury and his cousin, Barbara Heck, who began work in New York in 1766, and Captain Thomas Webb, whose labors were instrumental in Methodist beginnings in Philadelphia in 1767. African Americans participated actively in these groundbreaking and formational initiatives though much of that contribution was acknowledged without much biographical detail.

To strengthen the Methodist work in the colonies, John Wesley sent two of his lay preachers, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore, to America in 1769. Two years later Richard Wright and Francis Asbury were also dispatched by Wesley to undergird the growing American Methodist societies. Francis Asbury became the most important figure in early American Methodism. His energetic devotion to the principles of Wesleyan theology, ministry, and organization shaped Methodism in America in a way unmatched by any other individual. In addition to the preachers sent by Wesley, some Methodists in the colonies also answered the call to become lay preachers in the movement.

The first conference of Methodist preachers in the colonies was held in Philadelphia in 1773. The ten who attended took several important actions. They pledged allegiance to Wesley's leadership and agreed that they would not administer the sacraments because they were laypersons. Their people were to receive the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper at the local Anglican parish church. They emphasized strong discipline among the societies and preachers. A system of regular conferences of the preachers was inaugurated similar to those Wesley had instituted in England to conduct the business of the Methodist movement.

The American Revolution had a profound impact on Methodism. John Wesley's Toryism and his writings against the revolutionary cause did not enhance the image of Methodism among many who supported independence. Furthermore, a number of Methodist preachers refused to bear arms to aid the patriots.

When independence from England had been won, Wesley recognized that changes were necessary in American Methodism. He sent Thomas Coke to America to superintend the work with Asbury. Coke brought with him a prayer book titled *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, prepared by Wesley and incorporating his revision of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Two other preachers, Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, whom Wesley had ordained, accompanied Coke. Wesley's ordinations set a precedent that ultimately permitted Methodists in America to become an independent church.

In December 1784, the famous Christmas Conference of preachers was held in Baltimore at Lovely Lane Chapel to chart the future course of the movement in America, a gathering that organized the movement as The Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Most of the American preachers attended, probably including two African Americans, Harry Hosier and Richard Allen. The conference took a forceful stand against slavery and made that witness a featured commitment in the new church's Discipline. Regrettably the church steadily retreated from that courageous stand.

In the years following the Christmas Conference, The Methodist Episcopal Church published its first Discipline (1785), adopted a quadrennial General Conference, the first of which was held in 1792, drafted a Constitution in 1808, refined its structure, established a publishing house, and became an ardent proponent of revivalism and the camp meeting.

As The Methodist Episcopal Church was in its infancy, two other churches were being formed. In their earliest years they were composed almost entirely of German-speaking people. The first was founded by Philip William Otterbein (1726–1813) and Martin Boehm (1725–1812). Otterbein, a German Reformed pastor, and Boehm, a Mennonite, preached an evangelical message and experience similar to the Methodists. In 1800 their followers formally organized the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. A second church, The Evangelical Association, was begun by Jacob Albright (1759–1808), a Lutheran farmer and tilemaker in eastern Pennsylvania who had been converted and nurtured under Methodist teaching. The Evangelical Association was officially organized in 1803. These two churches were to unite with each other in 1946 and with The Methodist Church in 1968 to form The United Methodist Church.

By the time of Asbury's death in March 1816, Otterbein, Boehm, and Albright had also died. The churches they nurtured had survived the difficulties of early life and were beginning to expand numerically and geographically.

#### The Churches Grow, 1817–1843

The Second Great Awakening was the dominant religious development among Protestants in America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Through revivals and camp meetings sinners were brought to an experience of conversion. Circuit riding preachers and lay pastors knit them into a connection. This style of Christian faith and discipline was very agreeable to Methodists, United Brethren, and Evangelicals, who favored its emphasis on the experiential. The memberships of these churches increased dramatically during this period. The number of preachers serving them also multiplied significantly.

Lay members and preachers were expected to be seriously committed to the faith. Preachers were not only to possess a sound conversion and divine calling but were also to demonstrate the gifts and skills requisite for an effective ministry. Their work was urgent and demanding. The financial benefits were meager. But, as they often reminded one another, there was no more important work than theirs.

The deep commitment of the general membership was exhibited in their willingness to adhere to the spiritual disciplines and standards of conduct outlined by their churches. Methodists, for example, were to be strictly guided by a set of General Rules adopted at the Christmas Conference of 1784 and still printed in United Methodism's Book of Discipline. They were urged to avoid evil, to do good, and to use the means of grace supplied by God. Membership in the church was serious business. There was no place for those whom Wesley called the "almost Christians."

The structure of the Methodist, United Brethren, and Evangelical Association churches allowed them to function in ways to support, consolidate, and expand their ministries. General Conferences, meeting quadrennially, proved sufficient to set the main course for the church. Annual Conferences under episcopal leadership provided the mechanism for admitting and ordaining clergy, appointing itinerant preachers to their churches, and supplying them with mutual support. Local churches and classes could spring up wherever a few women and men were gathered under the direction of a class leader and were visited regularly by the circuit preacher, one who had a circuit of preaching placed under his care. This system effectively served the needs of city, town, village, or frontier outpost. The churches were able to go to the people wherever they settled. The earlier years of the nineteenth century were also marked by the spread of the Sunday school movement in America. By 1835 Sunday schools were encouraged in every place where they could be started and maintained. The Sunday school became a principal source of prospective members for the church.

The churches' interest in education was also evident in their establishment of secondary schools and colleges. By 1845 Methodists, Evangelicals, and United Brethren had also instituted courses of study for their preachers to ensure that they had a basic knowledge of the Bible, theology, and pastoral ministry.

To supply their members, preachers, and Sunday schools with Christian literature, the churches established publishing operations. The Methodist Book Concern, organized in

1789, was the first church publishing house in America. The Evangelical Association and United Brethren also authorized the formation of publishing agencies in the early nineteenth century. From the presses of their printing plants came a succession of hymnals, Disciplines, newspapers, magazines, Sunday school materials, and other literature to nurture their memberships. Profits were usually designated for the support and welfare of retired and indigent preachers and their families.

The churches were also increasingly committed to missionary work. By 1841 each of them had started denominational missionary societies to develop strategies and provide funds for work in the United States and abroad. John Stewart's mission to the Wyandots marked a beginning of the important presence of Native Americans in Methodism.

The founding period was not without serious problems, especially for the Methodists. Richard Allen (1760–1831), an emancipated slave and Methodist preacher who had been mistreated because of his race, left the church and in 1816 organized The African Methodist Episcopal Church. For similar reasons, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was begun in 1821. In 1830 another rupture occurred in The Methodist Episcopal Church. About 5,000 preachers and laypeople left the denomination because it would not grant representation to the laity or permit the election of presiding elders (district superintendents). The new body was called The Methodist Protestant Church. It remained a strong church until 1939, when it united with The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to become The Methodist Church.

The Slavery Question and Civil War, 1844–1865

John Wesley was an ardent opponent of slavery. Many of the leaders of early American Methodism shared his hatred for this form of human bondage. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became apparent that tensions were deepening in Methodism over the slavery question. In this matter, as in so many others, Methodism reflected a national ethos because it was a church with a membership that was not limited to a region, class, or race. Contention over slavery would ultimately split Methodism into separate northern and southern churches.

The slavery issue was generally put aside by The Methodist Episcopal Church until its General Conference in 1844, when the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions clashed. Their most serious conflict concerned one of the church's five bishops, James O. Andrew, who had acquired slaves through marriage. After acrimonious debate the General Conference voted to suspend Bishop Andrew from the exercise of his episcopal office so long as he could not, or would not, free his slaves. A few days later dissidents drafted a Plan of Separation, which permitted the annual conferences in slaveholding states to separate from The Methodist Episcopal Church in order to organize their own ecclesiastical structure. The Plan of Separation was adopted, and the groundwork was prepared for the creation of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Delegates from the southern states met in Louisville, Kentucky, in May 1845, to organize their new church. Their first General Conference was held the following year in Petersburg, Virginia, where a Discipline and hymnbook were adopted. Bitterness between northern and southern Methodists intensified in the years leading to Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 and then through the carnage of the Civil War. Each church

claimed divine sanction for its region and prayed fervently for God's will to be accomplished in victory for its side.

#### Reconstruction, Prosperity, and New Issues, 1866–1913

The Civil War dealt an especially harsh blow to The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Its membership fell to two-thirds its pre-war strength. Many of its churches lay in ruins or were seriously damaged. A number of its clergy had been killed or wounded in the conflict. Its educational, publishing, and missionary programs had been disrupted. Yet new vitality stirred among southern Methodists, and over the next fifty years its membership grew fourfold to more than two million.

The African American membership of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had declined significantly during and after the war. In 1870 its General Conference voted to transfer all of its remaining African American constituency to a new church. The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now called The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) was the product of this decision.

It was during this period that Alejo Hernandez became the first ordained Hispanic preacher in Methodism, although Benigno Cardenas had preached the Methodist message in Spanish in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as early as 1853.

The Methodist Episcopal Church did not suffer as harshly as southern Methodism did during the war. By the late 1860s it was on the verge of major gains in membership and new vigor in its program. Between 1865 and 1913 its membership also registered a 400 percent increase to about four million. Methodist Protestants, United Brethren, and Evangelicals experienced similar growth. Church property values soared, and affluence reflected generally prosperous times for the churches. Sunday schools remained strong and active. Publishing houses maintained ambitious programs to furnish their memberships with literature. Higher educational standards for the clergy were cultivated, and theological seminaries were founded.

Mission work, both home and overseas, was high on the agendas of the churches. Home mission programs sought to Christianize the city as well as the Native American.

Missionaries established schools for former slaves and their children. Missions overseas were effective in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Women formed missionaries societies that educated, recruited, and raised funds for these endeavors. Missionaries like Isabella Thoburn, Susan Bauernfeind, and Harriett Brittan, and administrators like Bell Harris Bennett and Lucy Rider Meyer, motivated thousands of church women to support home and foreign missions.

Significant Methodist ministries among Asian Americans were instituted during this period, especially among Chinese and Japanese immigrants. A Japanese layman, Kanichi Miyama, was ordained and given full clergy rights in California in 1887.

Two critical issues that caused substantial debate in the churches during this period were lay representation and the role of women. First, should laity be given a voice in the General Conference and the annual conference? The Methodist Protestants had granted the laity representation from the time they organized in 1830. The clergy in The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, The Evangelical Association, and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ were much slower in permitting the laity an official voice in their affairs. It was not until 1932 that the last of

these churches granted laity these rights. Even more contentious was the question of women's right to ordination and eligibility for lay offices and representation in the church. The United Brethren General Conference of 1889 approved ordination for women, but The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, did not grant full clergy rights until well after their reunion in 1939. The Evangelical Association never ordained women. Laity rights for women were also resisted. Women were not admitted as delegates to the General Conferences of The Methodist Protestant Church until 1892, the United Brethren until 1893, The Methodist Episcopal Church until 1904, and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, until 1922. The period between the Civil War and World War I also was marked by other theological developments and controversies. The holiness movement, the rise of liberal theology, and the Social Gospel movement were sources of considerable theological debate. The Methodist Episcopal Church demonstrated its regard for social issues by adopting a Social Creed at its 1908 General Conference. Social problems were also a spur in the movement toward ecumenism and interchurch cooperation. Each of the denominations now included in The United Methodist Church became active in the Federal Council of Churches, the first major ecumenical venture among American Protestants. The era closed with the world on the threshold of a great and horrible war.

#### World War and More Change, 1914–1939

In the years immediately prior to World War I, there was much sympathy in the churches for negotiation and arbitration as visible alternatives to international armed conflict. Many church members and clergy openly professed pacifism. However, when the United States officially entered the war in 1917, pacifism faded. The antecedent churches of United Methodism were not unlike other American denominations in expressing their national loyalties.

When the war ended, the churches were again free to expend their energies in other directions. One of their perennial concerns was temperance, and they were quick to recognize it among their highest priorities. They published and distributed large amounts of temperance literature. Members were asked to pledge that they would abstain from alcoholic beverages. The United Methodist Church still encourages such abstinence.

There was significant theological ferment during this period. Liberal Protestant theology, an important school of thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was questioned. It was attacked by a militant fundamentalism and later by neo-orthodoxy, which accused it of undermining the very essence of the Christian message. Since all three of these theological parties—liberal, fundamentalist, and neo-orthodox—were well represented in the forerunners of United Methodism, it is not surprising that heated doctrinal disputes were present in these churches.

Despite the internal theological differences that the churches experienced, they continued to cooperate with other denominations and acted to heal schisms that had taken place earlier in their own histories. For example, a division that had occurred in The Evangelical Association in 1894 was repaired in 1922, when two factions united as The Evangelical Church. A more important union, at least by statistical measurement, took place among three Methodist bodies—The Methodist Episcopal Church, The

Methodist Protestant Church, and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Representatives of these churches began meeting in 1916 to forge a plan of union. By the 1930s their proposal included partitioning the united church into six administrative units called jurisdictions. Five of these were geographical; the sixth, the Central Jurisdiction, was racial. It included African American churches and annual conferences wherever they were geographically located in the United States. African American Methodists and some others were troubled by this prospect and opposed the plan of a racially segregated jurisdiction.

The majority of Methodist Protestants favored the union, although it meant accepting episcopal government, which they had not had since their church was organized in 1830. Following overwhelming approvals at the General Conferences and annual conferences of the three churches, they were united in April 1939, into The Methodist Church. At the time of its formation the new church included 7.7 million members.

#### Movement Toward Union, 1940–1967

Although Methodists, Evangelicals, and United Brethren each had published strong statements condemning war and advocating peaceful reconciliation among the nations, the strength of their positions was largely lost with American involvement in the hostilities of World War II. Nevertheless, throughout the war many churches continued to express their disdain for violence and their support for conscientious objection. As the war ended, the churches actively worked to secure world peace and order. Many laypeople, pastors, bishops, and church agencies supported the establishment of a world organization to serve as a forum for the resolution of international social, economic, and political problems. In April 1945, their labors contributed to the founding of the United Nations.

During this era, 1940–1967, there were at least three other important matters that occupied the attention of the churches that now compose United Methodism. First, they maintained their concern for ecumenicity and church union. On November 16, 1946, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, The Evangelical Church and The United Brethren Church were united into The Evangelical United Brethren Church, after twenty years of negotiation. At the time of union, the new church included about 700,000 members. The Methodist Church was also interested in closer ties with other Methodist and Wesleyan bodies. In 1951 it participated in the formation of the World Methodist Council, successor to the Ecumenical Methodist Conferences that were begun in 1881. As expressions of their wider ecumenical commitment, Methodists and the Evangelical United Brethren became active members of the World Council of Churches, founded in 1948, and the National Council of Churches, founded in 1950. These assemblies provided a means for their members to engage in cooperative mission and other ministries. The two churches also cooperated with seven other Protestant denominations in forming the Consultation on Church Union in 1960.

Second, the churches demonstrated growing uneasiness with the problem of racism in both the nation and the church. Many Methodists were especially disturbed by the manner in which racial segregation was built into the fabric of their denominational structure. The Central Jurisdiction was a constant reminder of racial discrimination. Proposals to eliminate the Central Jurisdiction were introduced at the General

Conferences from 1956 to 1966. Finally, plans to abolish the Central Jurisdiction were agreed upon with the contemplated union with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, although a few African American annual conferences continued for a short time thereafter.

Third, clergy rights for women were debated by the churches. The issue was especially critical in the creation of The Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Evangelical Church had never ordained women. The United Brethren had ordained them since 1889. In order to facilitate the union of these two churches, the United Brethren accepted the Evangelical practice, and women lost their right to ordination. Methodists debated the issue for several years after their unification in 1939. Full clergy rights for women were finally granted in 1956, but it took a decade more before the number of women in seminaries and pulpits began to grow significantly. When Methodists and the Evangelical United Brethren united in 1968, the right of women to full clergy status was included in the plan of union.

As this period ended, negotiations between The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church were proceeding toward their anticipated union into The United Methodist Church.

#### Developments and Changes Since 1968

When The United Methodist Church was created in 1968, it had approximately 11 million members, making it one of the largest Protestant churches in the world. Since its birth, United Methodism has experienced a number of changes in its life and structure. It has become increasingly aware of itself as a world church with members and conferences in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States. While its membership in Europe and the United States has declined noticeably since 1968, membership in Africa and Asia has grown significantly.

An increasing number of women have been admitted to the ordained ministry, appointed to the district superintendency, elected to positions of denominational leadership, and consecrated as bishops. In 1980 Marjorie Matthews was the first woman elected to the Church's episcopacy.

The Church has endeavored to become a community in which all persons, regardless of racial or ethnic background, can participate in every level of its connectional life and ministry.

United Methodism has struggled with a number of critical issues. It has created and refined theological and mission statements. It has discussed and acted on matters of social importance such as nuclear power and world peace, human sexuality, the environment, abortion, AIDS, evangelism, and world mission.

The Church has been concerned with the faithfulness and vitality of its worship. It published a hymnal in 1989, which included a new Psalter and revised liturgies for baptism, the Lord's Supper, weddings, and funerals. Its 1992 General Conference authorized a new Book of Worship. A Spanish language hymnal, *Mil Voces Para Celebrar*, was published in 1996. A Korean language hymnal, *Come, Let Us Worship: The Korean-English United Methodist Hymnal* was published in 2000.

The United Methodist Church represents the confluence of three streams of tradition: Methodism, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and The Evangelical

Association. With other churches that are also members of the body of Christ, it humbly and gratefully offers up its praise to God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit for creating and sustaining grace. It seeks further grace as its ministers to the world.

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# ***"Has He a Horse?"***

***The Saga of the Circuit Riders*** by Richard Rupp and Mark Minnick

Settlers on the frontier had a saying to describe stormy weather: "There is nothing out today but crows and Methodist preachers." Certainly few preachers of the gospel have shown the courage and perseverance of the Methodist circuit riders. They were agents of the Great Awakening in the West, the establishers of Methodism in this country, and most important, the messengers of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to thousands of lost souls.

Rooted and grounded in love, settled and established in sound doctrine: but in every else he should be as movable as a soldier on the land or a sailor on the sea." Such was the philosophy that motivated a group of America's hardest frontiersmen, the circuit-riding preachers. It is to the dogged persistence of the circuit riders that Christians owe much for the intrinsically religious fiber our nation retains today.

## **Souls with Heavenly Fire**

Circuit riding took its precedent from the fluid examples of Britons John Wesley and George Whitefield, both of whom carried their ministries from city to city. Wesley said, "The world is my parish," and the early Methodist itinerants showed every evidence of having captured his spirit. It was largely the Methodist denomination that made use of frontier circuit riders. The Presbyterian, Baptist, and Congregational groups were characterized by ponderous progress, a peculiarity that added much to the religious prominence Methodism enjoyed in nineteenth-century America. One historian records that in 1784 the Methodists had fewer than 15,000 members, 43 circuits, and 83 itinerants. By 1844 the denomination had 1,069,000 members, almost 4,000 circuit riders, and more than 7,000 local preachers. Such a phenomenal growth in only sixty years was largely the result of Methodism's practical structure. With the founding of a new settlement and ordinary layman would often take the initiative in inviting his neighbors to his cabin for religious services. A religious "society" would be formed and brought under the "wing of a circuit rider who answered to a conference bishop, the church official responsible for supplying several circuits with preachers.

The arrangement was flexible; yet it was this advantage that contributed heavily to the strain endured by itinerants. There simply were not enough preachers to man the circuits. Often a rider would have more than two dozen preaching stations and spend as long as a month making a single round. It is no wonder that Dr. Abel Stephens, a leading Methodist historian, states: "Nearly half of those [circuit riders] whose deaths are recorded [by the end of the eighteenth century] died before they were thirty years old; about two thirds died before they had spent 12 years in the laborious service." Had

these preachers been looking for an easy ministry they certainly would have avoided the circuits.

One of the worst hardships of the itinerancy was the days of endless travel. The book of Methodist regulations, *The Discipline*, had as a "rule of thumb" that the preachers rise at four in the morning to allow time for travel. We might think that in the desolate frontier a man might easily avoid such a technicality and "sleep in" on occasion, but even had a rider wished to bend such a rule the sheer bulk of miles between preaching stations ruled out all possibility of indulging himself. And it was not only the distance they traveled that strained the circuit riders. The terrain itself was a rugged factor to be reckoned with daily. A pioneer preacher in Louisiana wrote, "Every day I travel I have to swim through creeks or swamps, and I am wet from head to feet, and some days from morning to night I am dripping with water. My horse's legs are now skinned and rough to his hock joints, and I have rheumatism in all my joints...what I have suffered in body and mind my pen is not able to communicate to you." This would be a bleak commentary had the preacher ended here, but hastening on he records, "But none of these things shall move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy." "This was the spirit that conquered America. That a circuit rider was in continual peril on the lonely trails was a matter of course. That he might be weary, burn with fever, or shake with the ague was insignificant. Everything, including his very life, must be subservient to the grand task of carrying the message of God's word.

### **An Air of Establishment**

The circuit-riding preachers were in one sense the first to truly tame the wilderness. To be sure, rugged souls ventured to build cabins and clear paths through the forests, but the settlements never really lost their wildness until the pioneers had a preacher. The desolate wilderness could penetrate even the hardest of pioneer spirits with discouragement and despair, benumbing entire settlements. But with the arrival of the circuit rider came an air of secure establishment that bred confidence in the most forlorn surroundings.

The itinerant preachers themselves served the great influence they held in fostering the moral constitution of America, and had it not been for this sense of responsibility, they surely would have deserted their posts. It was certainly not material prosperity that kept them in the saddle. In principle the Methodists paid their preachers, but the discrepancy between principle and practice was sometimes tragedy. There are accounts of preachers selling their boots to feed their families or parting with precious wool top coats to pay for the shoeing of a lame horse. Henry Bascom, a well-known West Virginian itinerant, traveled more than three thousand miles and preached to more than four hundred congregations during one particular year. For that service he received twelve dollars and ten cents. In addition to sheer poverty, the circuit riders were often placed in the worst accommodation; and yet no matter how crowded, smelly, filthy, or

insect-and-disease-ridden the cabins, he was bound by the very nature of his calling to accept his lodgings without complaint.

Such sacrifice was not entirely without reward, and the names of such itinerants as Bascom, James Axley, Francis Asbury, Jacob Young, and Peter Cartwright became almost household words for the pioneers. At times their recognition extended even to the political leaders of the day. Cartwright tells an amusing story about Axley and himself as guests of Governor and Mrs. Edward Tiffin of Ohio. During the meal Axley acquired a number of bones on the side of his plate. Seeing a dog in another room, the well-meaning frontiersmen whistled for it and threw the bones on the floor next to the table. The amused governor had difficulty repressing his laughter. Later, when Cartwright told Axley that he had committed an error in etiquette, Axley was chagrined. No one had better intentions than this rough-and-ready preacher who had been looking forward sleeping for the first time in a plastered house.

Perhaps the greatest award, though, was seeing churches spring up all across the land. Jess Walker, a circuit rider of the early nineteenth century, entered St. Louis in 1818 with the words, "I have come in the name of Christ to take Saint Louis, and by the grace of the God I will do it." God was with him in his efforts, for within a year he had a church of sixty members and a free school for poor children. It was this same man who introduced Methodism to a tiny settlement perched precariously on the south shore of Lake Michigan in 1830; the cluster of cabins later became known by a universally recognized name-Chicago.

### **Asbury's Wide Circuit**

A better insight into the life of an itinerant can be produced through a glance at possibly the best known of all circuit riders-Francis Asbury. For more than forty years this man of God braved the elements day and night that he might turn the whole of America into one great circuit.

Appointed by Wesley in 1771 to fill the position of "general assistant" for the work of Methodism in America, Asbury was twenty-six when he entered the itinerancy. From that point, the name of Francis Asbury dominated the American religious scene until his death in 1816. Wherever he went new churches were formed, new circuits laid out, and hosts of preachers rose to carry the gospel to remote villages. He is described as roving anywhere. If a poor itinerant was in trouble with local officials, Asbury was ready with personal influence to protect him or with his purse to pay any fine. If there was a man posted in an almost inaccessible region and in want of fellowship, Asbury's path was sure to cross his so that the lonely preacher might be encouraged. And wherever a little band of adventures planted themselves in the forest they were sure to soon be taken into Asbury's ever-extending circuit.

Asbury, like most circuit riders, was without the benefit of higher education, but his devotion to the Word and exercises in prayer were almost without parallel. Having no place to study but the saddle, he nevertheless gained a superior knowledge of both the Greek and Hebrew testaments, and it is said that he was the intellectual peer of all most any man he met.

In prayer Asbury especially distinguished himself. There are records in his Journal of set seasons for this devotion. During one period he prayed for at least three hours everyday. Later he spent ten minutes of every waking hour praying and wrote, "My desire is that prayer should mix with every thought, with every wish, with every word, and with every action, that all might ascend as a holy, acceptable sacrifice to God.

At one point in his ministry, Asbury was driven by sheer necessity to seek a short rest near the White Sulphur Springs (now in West Virginia). A friend recorded that during that vacation Asbury "[reads] about one hundred page a day; usually prays in public five times a day; preaches in the open air every other day; and lectures in prayer-meeting every evening." Such a schedule for regular pastoral duties is enough to bring consternation to most preachers, but as a vacation the thought is intolerable!

### **Wives of Rare Caliber**

Asbury often recommended that his circuit riders give themselves to celibacy, for the most taxed area of an itinerant's life was his family. The meager income of most circuit riders made it impossible for them to maintain families without "locating" when they married. The majority took Asbury's advice and gave themselves to lives of solitude, but for those who ventured to raise a family the hardships of the ministry were compounded considerably. Though he might reside in a given community, the preacher was still responsible for a broad area, and even his residence had to be periodically uprooted due to the two-year maximum any preacher was allowed to spend on a given circuit.

Perhaps it was the wife of such a man, though, who had the hardest lot. Stretching pennies until they covered days and struggling to maintain the barest semblance of a home amid constant activity called for a woman of the rare caliber. The preacher himself could always fall back on the exaltation of the preaching to fill his soul and compensate for the loss of worldly goods and natural comforts, but for his wife the loss of all security spelled an extreme test of dedication and faith to meet each unpromising day with a thankful heart. Hers was the task of serving while rarely seeing the results of her husband's ministry for which she sacrificed so much.

### **Methodists Everywhere**

Despite the hardships of the ministry, circuit riding seemed to attract the strongest young men, and by the time of Asbury's death he had seen hundreds join the ranks. The

circuits were large, and the 1800s brought a tremendous surge in population; yet somehow the Methodist itinerants appeared everywhere. An amusing example of this is recorded from the life of a rugged preacher by the name of Nolley, who was in a remote section of Mississippi when he noticed some wagon tracks that appeared to be quite recent. No circuit rider worth his salt ever ignored the possibility to make a new contact; so Nolley followed the wagon tracks until they ended in a fresh clearing. A settler had just a few moments before he begun to unload his wagon. Nolley introduced himself to the new family, but when the settler found out who the visitor was he expressed the greatest disgust, exclaiming, "Another Methodist preacher! I left Virginia for Georgia to get clear of them. There they got my wife and daughter. So I come here, and here is one before I can get my wagon unloaded!" My friend," said Nolley, "if you go to Heaven you'll find Methodist preachers there; if you go to Hell I'm afraid you'll find some there; and you see how it is on earth, so you had better make terms with us and be at peace." The "before I can get my wagon unloaded" incident became a standard joke at later conference meetings. There's humor in the incident, but it also indicates the splendid determination and spirit that played major roles in taming this country.

### **The Rider's Vision**

In Washington, D.C., stands the statue of a worn rider astride a weary horse. The horseman is a bronze likeness of Francis Asbury, a tribute to him and all the hundreds of young circuit riders who traced the trails of early America. Faithfully rendered by the artist with every detail of extreme exhaustion, the statue bears one attribute that escapes all but the keenest scrutiny. Out from under the brim of the low hat peer eyes alive with spiritual strength-eyes so true to the character of circuit-riding preachers, for the eyes reflect a sense of a great calling, dreams for a mighty nation, and the indication of purpose to call a great country to devotion to God.

"Has he a horse?" was the query of the old Methodist bishops when considering a new candidate. No preacher-carrying horses use the roads of America today, but God have mercy on this land if she lacks men with the vision of those who rode their horses so well.

#### Suggestions for Further Reading

Peter Cartwright: .Autobiography of Peter Cartwright

Keith J. Hardman: "Apostles on Horseback: Francis Asbury and the Methodist Circuit Riders" Christian History, vol. 8, no 3 pp. 22-23

The Spiritual Awakeners.

Charles A. Johnson: The Frontier Camp Meeting

L.C. Rudolph: Francis Asbury