Methodism "Over the Top":
The Joint Centenary Movement, 1917-1925

By John Lankford *

During the third week in September, 1917, one hundred ministers and laymen of the Methodist Episcopal Church met at Niagara Falls to plan for the celebration of the centennial of the Missionary Society. After three days of discussion this assembly adopted "a World Program which if carried out to its full conclusions will reach and stir with its inspiring appeal the last church and the last man in Methodism and should result in a revived and reconsecrated church at home and a church abroad adequately equipped, manned and munitioned for the conquest of the 150 millions whose evangelization is the accepted task of Methodism." 1

John R. Mott, Methodist layman and long-time leader in the American foreign missionary movement, addressed the meeting and urged upon the Methodist Church a plan of "enduring work." Mott warned the delegates, "Everywhere the age-old institutions are slipping. Their foundations are shifting sands. What alone can stand the strain such as it is now upon the world?" 1

The Niagara Conference approved tentative plans and surveys of proposed work to be carried out in the foreign mission fields. These surveys and reports were prepared by S. Earl Taylor of the Foreign Mission Board, who played a key role in directing the Centenary Movement until he accepted a call to lead the ill-fated Interchurch World Movement.

The September 1917 meeting issued a list of recommendations to the Methodist Episcopal Church. These recommendations included a vigorous affirmation of the foreign missionary work and the suggestion that $8,000,000 a year for five years be secured to cover the expanded undertaking in this realm. Further, the group suggested that during the years 1918-1919 a full-scale campaign be undertaken "by means of press, picture and pulpit" and that "a vital missionary organization be carried from Area, Conference and District, down to the last church" in Methodism. 1 To complement the emphasis on missionary activity, the Niagara Conference stressed the neces-

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1 The Christian Advocate (New York), September 27, 1917.
sity for "teaching of stewardship of life, character and possessions (the tithe) . . . as fundamental to Christianity." ¹ The 1918-1919 drive was to culminate in a grand denomination-wide celebration at the State Fair grounds at Columbus, Ohio, in June 1919. In conclusion the meeting voted to lay the program before the Board of Bishops.

The administrative structure which emerged from the work of the Niagara Conference comprised, on the national level, a Commission directed by S. Earl Taylor. This organization functioned through a series of ten departments and interested itself in almost all aspects of Church life. Its departments were concerned with such problems as education, spiritual resources, Christian stewardship, and publicity.

Aside from commanding an increasing amount of space in the denominational journals, both in terms of paid advertisements and news stories describing its activities, the Centenary Commission issued two major publications of its own. The Centenary Bulletin, a weekly newspaper, appeared between January 1918 and July 1919 and was devoted to general coverage of the Centenary in both the northern and southern branches of Methodism. The Stewardship Department of the Joint Centenary Commission published a monthly magazine, Men and Money (December 1917 to September 1920), in order to bring the cause of stewardship and systematic giving before the Church.

Although the apparent impetus for the Centenary came from the northern wing of American Methodism, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was involved from the beginning. Cooperation between the two denominations was formalized at a meeting held in Memphis in March 1918. W. B. Beauchamp served as Director General of the Centenary in the southern Church until elected Bishop in May 1922. He was succeeded as Director by his assistant, W. G. Cram. Generally, the same administrative structure served both branches of the Church and became in 1918 the Joint Centenary Commission. Plans and strategy were interchangeable and the national fund raising advisers served both denominations. The Southerners aimed at the same range of goals as did their northern counterparts. Missions, missionary education, the cultivation of stewardship and tithing, and a national campaign to solicit pledges for $35,000,000 to be used in carrying out the aims of the Centenary program—all these, plus cooperation with the Northern Church for the Columbus Celebration in 1919, made up the program for the southern branch of American Methodism.²

Early in 1918 the administrative machinery of the Centenary was

¹ The Christian Advocate (New York), September 27, 1917.
² The Christian Advocate (Nashville), March 28, 1918.
expanded by the creation of a National Board. A distinguished layman, John J. Stone, President of the Maryland Casualty Company and long active in foreign missionary work, served as the national chairman. The aim of this National Board was to carry the work of the Centenary to every Methodist in America. The national leadership of the Centenary was fortunate in securing the assistance of Charles S. Ward, “America’s champion fund-raiser,” who directed pre-war YMCA fund drives and masterminded the drives of the American Red Cross during the war years. In addition, the Southern Methodists had the assistance of A. C. Marts, soon to be one of the leading professional fund raisers in America.3

Following the general organizational principles used by Charles S. Ward in his earlier campaigns, American Methodism divided itself into units, groups and sub-groups with teams and leaders. These teams were to be responsible for the actual gathering of subscriptions. According to a writer in the New York World, “No such publicity campaign was ever undertaken by a church organization. Not only the church press, but the secular press and the labor and trade journals will be utilized.” The editorial continued by analyzing the sources from which the Methodists got their ideas and promotional techniques. “Liberty Loan drives gave them their cue. Billboards, posters, motion pictures, special rallies indoors and out—no way of letting the great American public know that the drive for worldwide Christian democracy is on will be overlooked.” 4 The Methodists adopted the Minute Men, a technique used during the Liberty Loan campaigns, to serve as publicity agents for the Centenary. It was reported by the New York World that an army of 100,000 such Methodist Minute Men had been recruited, “largely from the very men who did similar service for Uncle Sam in his war for democracy.” 5 As John T. Stone summed up the fund-raising program of the Joint Centenary Commission:

The most up-to-date money raising methods culled from the experience of the big Liberty Loan, Red Cross and United War Work Campaigns are being used. There are, and will be more, posters, time payment booklets and stamp cards. No plans or brains are being spared to make this part of the campaign a great success. The well tried system of an extensive campaign of education followed by a brief but vigorously intensive financial drive will be used. This drive is being planned by C. S. Ward and others.6

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5 The Christian Advocate (Nashville), December 6, 1918.
6 World Outlook, March 1918.
Both denominations increased the tempo of their educational campaigns during 1918. Stewardship and missionary education were stressed in the local churches in preparation for the intensive financial campaign which took place May 18-25, 1919.

Although some feared that the Centenary financial drive, following as it did the last of the great Liberty Loan campaigns, would suffer because of competition, C. S. Ward assured Methodists that he had not the slightest doubt of the success of the canvass. "It is more than significant," Ward reasoned, "that every previous campaign for war work, such as the two great Red Cross campaigns and the United War Work Drive, followed immediately after Liberty Loans and as is well known, they were remarkably successful. Probably the same thing will result as to [the] Centenary." 7

The promotional methods employed by the Joint Centenary Commission, including sermons, a veritable flood of articles, advertisements and pamphlets, and the work of the Methodist Minute Men, brought results. Who could refuse to pledge to the Centenary Fund under such pressure as the Nashville Christian Advocate (Feb. 7, 1919) exerted? "What Would John Wesley Say?" asked one full-page advertisement. "Let Us Have No Slackers," it continued. "It Is The Duty Of Every Methodist To 'Carry On,' If The World Shall Be Won For Christ." Other writers urged the wartime custom of wheatless and meatless days during the Centenary canvass, suggesting that the money thus saved be pledged to the cause. Men and Money offered its readers a list of ten points to keep in mind during the coming financial campaign. These ranged from the purely spiritual to the purely financial and were couched in the extreme promotional jargon of the day:

1) CELEBRATING. Sure, all of us! Great time we've had—100 years past. Frontiers gone. Uncle Sam a teetotaler. Germany gone Democratic.
2) AWAKENING. Time to settle down, come to ourselves, get a good job with big wages and lots of work. We need 'em. Begin to save now. Pass the thrift stamps.
4) DETERMINING. We're going to stick to this. Our word is given. Cluttered old world must be cleaned up. Somebody must do it. We're somebody. Our hat's in the ring. Here goes.
5) PAYING. Well—yes, we'll pay, too. Bills must be met. $100,000-000 is a lot of money. By H.C.L. [High Cost of Living?] we feel poor. But it's 9 for me and 1 for Him. Sounds stingy. Wonder if they'd accept more.

6) ACKNOWLEDGING. That's where the tithe comes in. Proves we mean business with all we have. Established credit with Father. He backs His boys. Competition stiff after war. Watch your credit.

7) ADMINISTERING. Who's a tightwad? The covetous. "By their works"—not by Father's. "He gave" (John 3:16). Pay your acknowledgment. You can't say it.

8) PERSONALITY is self-directing. Volunteer! Enlist! Shout, if you're hurt, or can't help it. Fight, if you're fit. Form a fighting front. Life enlistments, good wages—pensions.

9) PRAYER. Keep in touch with headquarters. No absence without leave. Orders direct from Commander. Use the wireless—Pray.

10) STEWARDSHIP. Your firm and your profits. Work because you want to. Obey orders same way. Don’t forget the council meetings. Get busy.

Both branches of American Methodism “went over the top” in their drives. The Southern Church received a total of $35,787,338 in subscriptions and the northern branch received $113,741,455 in subscriptions. The Methodist Episcopal Church far exceeded its original goal during the campaign.

Both branches joined in a gala celebration held in Columbus, Ohio, during June and July 1919. It must have been a poor man's World's Fair. Exhibits showing the work of American Methodism in the mission fields served as the main attraction. There were pavilions devoted to China, India, the South Seas, Africa and South America. Whole Indian villages were set up and young people modeled native costumes. Revivals and prayer meetings were a daily occurrence, in addition to such nationally known speakers as William Jennings Bryan. A special pageant took place each evening depicting the historical development of Methodism in both Great Britain and the United States. As one turns the pages of The Centenary Bulletin and examines the list of events and the pictures, the impression is gained that the Joint Centenary celebration must truly have lived up to its slogan, “The World at Columbus.”

The northern wing of Methodism took immediate steps to appraise the Centenary and to conserve its benefits. Meeting at Cleveland in June 1919, the bishops and lay leaders of the denomination asked themselves the question, “After the Centenary What?” The group declared that it was “a matter of thanksgiving that the financial canvass has been accompanied and followed by significant spiritual victories. Laymen and ministers alike declared that the

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8 Men and Money, March 1919.
9 The Christian Advocate (Nashville), June 6, 1919; (New York), July 31, 1919.
Centenary is the greatest revival the Church has ever known.” 10 Out of the Cleveland meeting grew a Conservation Program which stressed two points. The denominational leaders wished to keep two departments of the Centenary and make them permanent. The Fellowship of Intercession would keep alive evangelistic fervor and enrich the spiritual life of the Church, while the Stewardship League would, in effect, assure the financial success of missionary work undertaken as a result of the Centenary. Concerning the role of stewardship the Cleveland Conference concluded, “We reaffirm the emphasis which the Centenary has put upon the tithe as the acknowledgment of God’s ownership, experience having demonstrated its deep spiritual significance. From now on, we must also put large emphasis upon God’s rights in the whole range of Christian ownership.” 10 Southern Methodists agreed with their northern brethren and stressed the need for a continuation of the revivalistic spirit engendered by the Centenary.

The fate of the Joint Centenary Movement is typical of the circumstances which befell the other great drives undertaken by American Protestant denominations between 1917-1920. It must be remembered that the Joint Centenary Movement took pledges and subscriptions to be paid over a five year period. Although the drives “went over the top” as far as promises to pay at a future date were concerned, the denominations were not assured of actually collecting the sums pledged. The intensive campaign was merely the first step toward fulfilling the financial goals set by the national Church leadership and subscribed to by American Methodists. However, the directors of the missionary boards adjusted their plans to fit a radically increased income and undertook new work on the basis of the prospect of full payment of pledges and subscriptions during the five year period.

In the fall of 1919 the New York Christian Advocate (Nov. 6) reported that the revenues for home missions work were falling. The writer commented that “there are some who feel that since the money has been subscribed the work is done. But,” he concluded, “the task of collecting the money and remitting it to headquarters is more important than that of securing the pledges.” The Southern Church exerted even stronger pressure, for their Centenary organization ran a full-page advertisement in the Nashville Christian Advocate (Oct. 3, 1919) under the caption, “No Shrinkage, But An Increase.” The advertisement continued, “Methodism will not fall short of her self appointed task. The Church that promised more than she was asked will pay more than she promised.”

10 The Christian Advocate (New York), July 3, 1919.
As of February, 1920, the Northern Church found collections running 32 percent behind the level of maximum payments.\textsuperscript{11} The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was in the same condition. According to the final adjusted figures, the membership had pledged $36,903,532 to be paid in over a five year period. By the end of the fiscal year a little over $14,500,000 should have been paid in pledges. However, only $5,800,000 had actually been collected from Southern Methodists.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1920 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church reorganized its Commission on Finance into a Council of Boards of Benevolence, made up of representatives from the boards, the Bishops and the regional areas of the Church. This resulted in a greatly increased membership. The new Council was given power to determine the askings of the various benevolent boards and to unify their activities. Further, it appointed a Committee on Conservation and Advance which was responsible for apportioning the needs of the benevolent boards to the Annual Conferences, missions, districts and charges. This Committee would also direct public relations, supervise all fund-raising campaigns and promote stewardship.

In the fall of 1920 the missionary boards of the Methodist Episcopal Church issued an “emergency appeal.” This appeal assured churchmen that “This is no frenzied appeal of regulation form. It is a calm statement of actual facts soberly considered. Unless measures are taken and a general response is made, the Board of Foreign Missions and the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension . . . will be under the necessity of reducing the appropriations for 1922 . . . 10 to 25 per cent.”\textsuperscript{13} The Council of Boards of Benevolence announced that in view of shrinking pledge payments there were two alternatives: to cut the administrative staffs of the various boards and reduce salaries, or to summon the Church “to a great and holy crusade to get subscriptions from all members . . . to the full sum which we have advertised to the world has been laid on the altar by Methodist people.”\textsuperscript{14}

The sharp but short-lived post-war economic recession did not help the situation. Just as church members had earlier thrilled at watching the big clock-like device used by C. S. Ward to chart the progress of subscriptions, so now they viewed with sorrow and regret the unwinding of that same clock as the payments fell farther and farther behind the levels at which they ought to have been in terms of

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\textsuperscript{11} The Christian Advocate (New York), April 1, 1920.
\textsuperscript{12} The Christian Advocate (Nashville), April 23, 1920.
\textsuperscript{13} The Christian Advocate (New York), October 6, 1920.
\textsuperscript{14} The Christian Advocate (New York), November 25, 1920.
of monies pledged. Homer C. Stuntz, bishop in the Northern Church, lamented “the tragedy of a shortage in Centenary collections,” because “it puts the honor of the Church in pawn! And this is on a world-wide scale.” He cautioned members of the denomination that “Mormonism has heard of our plans. Mormon leaders are waiting to sneer at their breakdown—are beginning to sneer already because only 72 percent of the subscriptions now due have been paid.”

But the threat of Mormon sneers was not enough to stop the trend. The leadership of the Northern Church pleaded with its members to bring their giving up to the level of their pledges. A special conference was held in the fall of 1921 to urge upon the Church its duty. Bishop William F. McDowell outlined the great fields open to the Church if only the necessary funds could be secured to allow her to assume the work. “We have never had an hour like this, we never shall have another like it. We are passing through a bit of destiny.” Even such an appeal was not enough to stem the tide.

In the fall of 1922 the Northern Church resorted to a special drive. Noting that the Board of Missions was faced with a deficit of approximately $2,000,000, the leaders organized the “I Will Maintain Fund.” The fund was aimed at strictly cash support and church members were asked to take up blocks of the debt at $100 per share. Even with this device, the total giving on Centenary pledges was $2,000,000 below the giving of the previous year.

Southern Methodist Bishop Warren A. Candler warned that if the Centenary Movement failed, it would “bring backsliding at home and dishonor abroad.” The editor of the Nashville Christian Advocate (July 29, 1921), reviewing the adverse conditions which hampered collection of the Centenary pledges, felt that economic recession was no excuse for the situation which confronted Southern Methodism. He suggested that if giving in good times was a blessing, giving in times of hardship would be even more of a blessing. “We must meet the pledges already made,” he concluded, for “great enterprises of the Kingdom await the payment of these sacred obligations.”

The Southern Bishops stood firm in the face of the declining payments and urged that “any recession from the standard of pledged giving which the Church has taken would, it seems to us, be fraught with great danger.” The editor of the Nashville Advocate (Nov. 28, 1924) attributed the decline in benevolent giving to what he

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16 The Christian Advocate (New York), November 24, 1921.
loosely termed "postwar conditions," but found comfort in the be-
lief that here and there were to be found "devoted Christians who
have kept up their gifts for the spread of the Kingdom after their
incomes have decreased." Indeed, "here and there a subscriber has
been known to borrow money to make payment" on his pledge. The
College of Bishops begged the members of the Church to pay just
half of the pledges and the Annual Conferences to meet their as-
sessments in full. On this basis, the bishops reasoned, the missionary
activities of the Church could be kept going.18

In 1925 the Southern Church decided on a concentrated effort to
collect as much of all outstanding and delinquent pledges as possible
and then close out the Centenary. The period from January 15 to
March 15 was set aside for this work. Some of the old machinery
from the post-war drive was reactivated and the Methodist Minute
Men made their last appearance before southern churchmen. The
Board of Lay Activities contributed speakers and supervised much
of the work. The Centenary Commission finally offered "to make
reasonable and satisfactory arrangements" with any church which
would close out its pledges. The Commission did not care how this
was done and even offered to accept funds raised by an "approved"
and "capable" collector who would receive a "liberal commission."
The interest of the Commission was focused solely on "a cash
compromise."19

Southern Methodist leaders were of two minds in their evaluation
of the Centenary. Elmer T. Clark, director of much of the promo-
tional work of the Church, viewed the closing out of the Centenary
Movement as "one of the most serious tragedies ever encountered
by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South." 20 He sorely lamented
the new work which was entered into in the expectation of higher
standards of support and which now had to be abandoned. Further,
Clark saw the end of the Centenary as a "retreat." He cried, "Our
morale is broken. Once admit defeat, and we may never—certainly
not in this generation—regain the ground we give up. We suffer
shamefully in our prestige, influence, and self-esteem." 20 Clark
concluded, "Few worse calamities could befall us. In the history of
Christianity God's favor has never rested on any Church which
has failed in its missionary obligation." 20 E. H. Rawlings, Foreign
Secretary of the Board of Missions, took a more optimistic view.
He considered the $20,000,000 in new money raised during the five
year period as "no small thing." Before the Centenary, "It was

18 The Christian Advocate (Nashville), January 9, 1925.
19 The Christian Advocate (Nashville), July 17, 1925.
20 Clark, Elmer T.: The Task Ahead: The Missionary Crisis of the Church, Nashville,
1925, p. 28.
difficult to get as much as $100,000 or $50,000 outside of regular collections." Further, Rawlings pointed to the example set by the Methodist Joint Centenary Movement and noted how other Protestant denominations borrowed the idea.

After the "I Will Maintain Fund" the benevolent income of the Northern Methodists continued to fall behind expectations, and the boards were driven first into debt and then to an over-all reduction in their work. A note of desperation was sounded when the editor of the New York Christian Advocate (June 26, 1924) suggested that the men of the denomination give their gold watches to save the mission boards from further debt. By this point the foreign work was over $2,000,000 in the red. It was suggested that the Foreign Missions Board issue bonds against its debt and that these bonds be sold to churchmen. The leaders rejected this scheme.

At the end of the five years through which the Centenary collections had run, it was reported that 70 per cent of the subscriptions had been paid. Considering the nature of the American economy during these years, probably 70 per cent was a good showing. American economic life never fully or uniformly recovered from the sharp post-World War One recession.

However, the real damage was psychological. The hopes of many members and of the missionary leaders were far too high. Plans were implemented which never received financial support from the Church at large. In spite of the large sums collected, debts and demoralization followed in both branches of the American Methodist Church. Finally, missionaries were called home from the fields. Undaunted by all this, the editor of the New York Christian Advocate (March 26, 1925) declared in answer to those who saw the Centenary as a complete failure:

The Church made a tremendous Centenary effort in 1919—why belittle it by reckoning the per capita giving?—and fairly kept the faith. Not many pledges were defaulted. The shrinkage was no larger than was to have been expected in a subscription extending over a five-year period and written by optimists, who rashly multiplied by five every pledge, though positively signed up for but a single year.

The failure of the Joint Centenary Movement, like the failures of the other drives undertaken by major Protestant denominations at the end of the first World War, was more apparent than real. Substantial monies were collected and churchmen moved toward new conceptions of world-wide responsibility. Further, the Centenary brought with it the need for an overhauling of the administrative machinery of the denominations. This was especially true in the case

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of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the final result was the creation in 1924 of the World Service Commission, which replaced the Council of Boards of Benevolence. This created a new administrative approach to the problem of raising funds for the philanthropic work of the denomination and, in the long run, this method was adopted by the unified Methodist Church after 1939.

For American Protestantism the years between the World Wars were a time of "religious depression." However, the lessons learned during the era of the great drives were of value to the American Churches in general, and to American Methodism in particular, in the years after 1939. Cooperation, administrative reform and increased responsibility were all to prove vital lessons as Methodism entered a new period of challenge.

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22 Robert T. Handy in Church History, March 1960, pp. 3-16.