The Development of
The Methodist Protestant Church
Particularly in the Midwest

By Frank W. Stephenson*

This survey considers the development of the Methodist Protestant Church in the area west of the Alleghenies, north of the Ohio River, and west of the Mississippi River.

Of course, there was one Methodist Protestant Church, covering the east and the west, with one General Conference and other binding factors. There was a recognized unity even though there were two denominational papers, one published in Baltimore and the other in Pittsburgh, and even though the denomination was divided in 1858 along geographical lines over the question of slavery.

Certain characteristics distinguished the Methodist Protestants in the two sections. In the east and the south they were more conservative, with a stronger denominational consciousness and loyalty. In the north and the west they were more independent in spirit and less denominationally conscious. These differences were due in part to the fact that many who joined Methodist Protestant churches in the west came from varying denominational backgrounds and were not familiar with Methodist and its usages. Also, the people in the west were generally more independent in spirit with less respect for tradition and historical precedents.

Genesis

Of course, Methodist came before Methodist Protestantism in all sections. Pittsburgh was the base from which Methodist spread rapidly in the west. Generally speaking, the development of the Methodist Protestant Church in this area followed a pattern similar to the development of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It was characterized by extraordinary courage, unselfishness, personal sacrifice, and consecration. Men with no dependable means of support went everywhere preaching the Gospel of Christ. They asked nothing for themselves, only a chance to preach the word, to call sinners to repentance, to tell "the story of Jesus and his love," to press home forcefully the judgments of God, and whenever possible to organize societies and establish annual conferences.

* Dr. Stephenson was for sixteen years the Executive Secretary of the Board of Christian Education in charge of the Department of Educational Institutions of the former Methodist Protestant Church. Before becoming Secretary in 1924 he held pastorates in Michigan, Indiana and western Pennsylvania. At present his home is in Adrian, Michigan.
The settlers throughout the region were rugged and independent. Some of them had an unsavory record in the east whence they came, and in the freedom of the west they were reckless, lawless, and quarrelsome. The preachers unhesitatingly called them sinners. Some were angered by such preaching, others were deeply moved, repented, professed faith in Christ, and joined the church.

But religious conversion did not always remove prejudices or change ideas of independence. The people were conscious of being citizens of a free land, and they were jealous of their freedom. Methodism won converts, but Methodism was authoritative in its rules and government; it supervised the personal life of its members. To some this ecclesiastical authoritarianism seemed strange and they did not like it. Some adjusted readily to it, others did not.

Such was the situation when Methodists who were agitating for reform in the church appeared on the scene. Some of the reformers came from the east. Others were developed indigenously by reason of the spirit of the region described above. Those who came of their own accord or were sent from the east soon found among the church members in the west persons of similar mind and spirit. The result was the organization of the Methodist Protestant societies and the establishment of the Methodist Protestant annual conferences.

Some who led in the Methodist Protestant movement in the west were well educated. Others had few educational advantages but still demonstrated superior gifts of mind and heart which they dedicated to the cause. Some were able writers and outstanding speakers.

Nicholas Snethen was the most prominent advocate of reform. Bishop Asbury called him his "Silver Trumpet" and chose him as his traveling companion for one year. Snethen was secretary of the General Conference of 1800. In the General Conference of 1804 and 1812 he took the side of the Reformers. He served at one time as Chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. As a pastor he filled important pulpits, and was in demand to preach at camp meetings and to speak on important occasions. He published numerous articles. Always interested in higher education, he served as principal or president of several seminaries or colleges. Snethen was a scholar, a skillful writer, and an eloquent preacher. President Feeman of Adrian College referred to him as "the outstanding spokesman in Methodist reform." 1

George Brown, another leader in the Reform movement, was converted under the camp meeting preaching of Snethen, Asa Shinn, Alexander McCaine and others. Brown's educational advantages were limited, but he improved himself by wide reading. He taught school for a time, enlisted in the army, and then was converted

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1 "Francis Asbury's Silver Trumpet." Harlan Luther Feeman. P. 39.
and joined the Baltimore Conference in 1816. His first appointments were in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. In 1823 he was appointed presiding elder of the Monongahela District. When the Pittsburgh Conference was set off he was a member there, and in 1826 he was appointed to the church in Steubenville, Ohio. In 1830 he joined the new Methodist Protestant Church and organized the first church in Pittsburgh. He was president of the Ohio Conference from 1831 to 1833 and then of the Pittsburgh Conference for four years. Brown traveled incessantly, organizing societies and congregations, especially in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. He served as president of Madison College, and as president of the General Conference. W. G. Smeltzer says Brown was “the major leader in the founding of the Methodist Protestant Pittsburgh Conference, was an elected delegate to the organizing Convention of the denomination in 1830, and later was a delegate to nine General Conferences and Conventions.”

Some laymen demonstrated capacity commensurate with that of their ministerial associates in the Reform movement. William S. Stockton was an editor and author and a staunch supporter of the causes of temperance and abolition. He exerted a powerful influence on behalf of reform in the church.

As the controversy within Methodism, that is, between the Reformers and those who defended the Methodist Episcopal Church as it was, grew in the west, it became sharp, ill-tempered, and acrimonious. There were deep wounds which left lasting scars. In all fairness, it must be said that the Methodist Protestant Church in the west was indebted to Bishop Robert R. Roberts and others of similar spirit. Bishop Roberts' episcopal assignments took him to the west where he was convinced Methodism had a great future. He settled in Lawrence County, Indiana, and worked out from that point. He was moderately sympathetic with those in the church who were seeking reform. Personally and officially he was considerate and conciliatory, and for this he was sharply rebuked by some of his associates. His gracious spirit was felt throughout the west and it made an indirect contribution to the principles advocated by the Methodist Protestant Church.

As we read the record today we may be shocked by the bitter and uncharitable nature of the quarrel. But historians admit that there was provocation. The General Conference of 1824 declared that its decision not to make any changes in the constitution could not be construed as denying to any minister or member any liberty of speech. Yet the Conference said in reply to many memorials seeking representation of the laity, “Pardon us if we know no such rights or comprehend no such privileges.” Luccock and Hutchinson

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say, "It is difficult to understand why things we today accept as normal, reasonable and right were so grudgingly opposed and finally granted." 3 W. W. Sweet adds, "From this distance . . . looking at the whole matter with as nearly an unprejudiced eye as is humanly possible, free speech and the right of free press were denied the Reformers, in that the official press of the church was closed against them. If the official press had been opened to a fair discussion of the whole issue, the expulsion of members and ministers would not have taken place, and very probably some of the reforms would have been granted." 4

In retrospect it appears that a more conciliatory and understanding attitude, especially on the part of the episcopal leadership in the early days might have averted the breach which culminated in the organization of the Methodist Protestant Church.

**Religious Characteristics**

The character of the religious life of the Methodist Protestant Church in the midwest a century or so ago differed little from that of other denominations, including the mother church. A few of the characteristics common to Methodism may be mentioned.

First, there was the revival or camp meeting. Revivals were expressions of the more earnest type of religious life. They were intended to "win souls to Christ," or "to save souls." That they effected permanent transformation for good in the lives of many people cannot be doubted. They reached people who would not have been moved by a more formal type of worship or more conventional preaching.

Second, there were religious debates between those who believed in immersion and those who did not; between those of the Calvinistic persuasion and the Arminian; between the ritualists and those who abhorred formality of any kind. Sometimes the debates dealt with trivia—the wearing of ornaments, dancing, card playing, membership in secret societies, musical instruments in the church, the free mingling of the sexes, and attending the theater, circuses and games.

There were some memorable debates. Smeltzer cites one between Valentine Cook, pastor of the Pittsburgh Circuit, and Samuel Porter, a Presbyterian pastor of the Congruity Church. Presbyterians attended by the thousands, for then as now they were numerous in western Pennsylvania. Since the Pittsburgh Circuit had only 151 members, some thought it was like pitting David against Goliath. Anthony Benning, who lived near Connelsville, acted as Cook’s second and timekeeper. Cook vanquished his opponent so effectively that "it gave a mighty impetus to the respect in which

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3 "The Story of Methodism." Luccock and Hutchinson. P. 327.
both the Methodist preachers and Methodist doctrines were held throughout the region, and its influence was felt through the region for a generation or more, as frequent references indicate.” While most of the Methodist preachers of that day had little formal education, Cook was an exception. He spent two years at Cokesbury, and was the first college trained man to serve west of the mountains. His success in the debate with the Presbyterian Porter enhanced his reputation and inspired self-respect in the hearts of his fellow Methodists.

Education

The resources of the Methodist Protestants in the west were not great, but they tried to measure up to recognized needs. Some who were identified with the educational work of the church deserve mention. Francis Waters, after considerable administrative work in education in the east, was for a short time president of Madison College in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Nicholas Snethen, another easterner already mentioned, cast his lot with the west and was connected with several institutions as principal or president. George B. McElroy, a teacher and president at Madison College, was later a member of the faculty at Adrian College, and president 1873-1880. John Clarke purchased 250 acres of land near Lawrenceburg, Indiana, where Dearborn College was established. After one year fire destroyed the Dearborn building and the project failed.

The Methodist Protestant Board of Ministerial Education was organized in 1866 with J. B. Walker as the corresponding secretary. He labored diligently for twenty-five years, enlisting young men for the ministry and raising funds to assist them in college and seminary. This board became the Board of Education, and in 1916 the Board of Christian Education, with George H. Miller as Executive Secretary. The Board aroused interest in education, raised educational standards, and worked for larger financial support for Methodist Protestantism's seminary and colleges.

Through the years a number of colleges were launched by the Methodist Protestants in the west only to fail sooner or later for lack of adequate financial support. Of all the colleges started only Adrian survives, and for over a century its existence was precarious. But for extraordinary sacrifices on the part of its faculty and its presidents, Adrian College too would have died. The marvelous developments at Adrian College in the past eight years crown the faith, hopes, and sacrifices of the previous one hundred years.

From the beginning Methodist Protestant annual conferences set up "Faculties of Instruction" or a "Committee on Itinerancy and

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Orders,” or some similar group, to provide and direct a course of study for men entering the conference.

As time passed increasing attention was given to the needs of the young people. A “Board of Young People’s Work” was organized in 1908 with Charles H. Hubbell as Executive Secretary. This Board gave special attention to the Sunday school and the Christian Endeavor. In time there was emphasis on summer camps, Jumonville in the Pittsburgh Conference, Sabina in Ohio, Gull Lake (Midland Park) in Michigan, Marion in Indiana, and Depler Springs in Illinois being the most prominent ones.

The Annual Conferences

A word about the preachers and the annual conferences is in order. Generally the preachers were patient and resourceful in the face of privation and hardship. They were committed as pastors and preachers, loyal to Christ and his church.

In the annual conferences in the west, the debate over the rights of the laymen, and discussions of the dangers inherent in contemporary episcopacy, were as warm and as earnest as in the east. But there were fewer expulsions, and the resentment was not so deep-seated. Some cast their lot with the Methodist Protestants out of conviction. But even so, the growth of the denomination did not come so much from the atmosphere of controversy as from revivals, camp meetings, and from proximity. As might be expected, there was some proselyting, but this was not practiced on a large scale.

Also, the very spirit of the west contributed to the success of this more democratic Methodism. There was less concern for tradition, little interest in English authoritarianism, and no loyalty to stated procedures. The love of freedom was strong. Resistance to too much governmental authority was pronounced. Individualism was rampant. In such a milieu a democratic Methodism with a Congregational slant was certain to have some appeal.

In the annual conferences the democratic processes appeared at both their best and their worst. The tendency toward independent action was so pronounced that at times it caused concern to leaders who perceived the need for denominational responsibility. The presidency of the annual conference was an elective office. The president chaired the conference sessions; he traveled the district, and usually received a better salary. Since he was dependent on the votes of his brethren to remain in office, he was disposed to exercise due caution! Therefore, at times dubious procedures were permitted, and there were some unusual interpretations of the law as found in the Discipline!

The questionable practices mentioned in the preceding paragraph were more prevalent in the smaller annual conferences where men were often elected to elder’s orders without having met disciplinary
were fairly happy; there was no need to take up the time of the
conference, the president found that all parties in a Green Pastures
attitude, such an appearance was unnecessary. If, in his visits to the
people, the President wanted to return for another year and the people were
not so disposed, he would be induced to appear. When
if the did not seek an audience, he would be invited to be heard.

Proper deference to the annual conference had a right to be heard.

consideration

had done his best, with charity, kindness, understanding, and

ience and judgment were invaluable.

were elected after a year in the growing knowledge of the

and every scion of the Stewardship Committee were

Sometimes the Laymen on the Stewardship Committee were

sometimes possible for every pastor to pass on to the

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pastoral charge. It was composed of the

most important of the latter, being the Stewardship Committee which

received certain selected officers, and the necessary committees, the

Protestant Church, to elect the usual officers—President, Secretary,

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advance authority of their numerical superiority.

writer knew, there was never an influence when the ministers took

which influence between Laymen and Preachers, this is far as this

that all the superintendent ministers could vote for a

The annual conferences were organized on a simple and workable

was the President’s prestige enabled him to ex-

The President’s prestige enabled him to ex-

he people had more respect for the President than

organ and required him to reveal throughout the conference, that
did not achieve uprightly. Gradually the conference recognized

Responsible General Conference representatives wished at times for

Responsibilities of the annual conference, there were efforts to effect men who-

Requirements. Occasionally, there were efforts to effect men who-

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Committee at the annual conference. On the whole, this system of making the appointments worked well.

The origin and development of the Michigan Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church may be taken as typical of all. A number of families moved to Michigan from New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio in the 1820's and 1830's and afterward. Some were active Methodists, acquainted with the Reform movement. Others were already Methodist Protestants. These people settled in the Pontiac, Jackson, Lapeer and Saginaw regions, and societies were formed. Dr. George Brown held a meeting in the vicinity of Adrian, Michigan in 1830 and started a small society. The group in Franklin was organized in 1840, the first Methodist Protestant church in Michigan. In 1842 a meeting was called at Franciscoville, Washtenaw County, with seven elders, one deacon and two laymen present. They proceeded to form the Michigan Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, embracing the lower peninsula and the northern tier of counties in Indiana. James Gay was elected president and eight men were received on trial. Two pastors were assigned to each of five charges and one each to three. The two lay delegates represented Lapeer and Franklin.

Brothers All

From the beginning the Methodist Protestant Church had a desire for closer ties with other denominations. This was especially true in the midwest. There were conversations and negotiations for union with churches of similar convictions and practices, such as the Wesleyan Methodists, the Primitive Methodists, the Congregational Methodists, the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Free Methodists, and others. These efforts came to naught because of differences of opinion over matters that now seem relatively unimportant.

As indicated above, the Methodist Protestant Church itself divided in 1858 over the question of slavery. In 1877 the Conventions of the two groups met in separate churches in Baltimore, adopted a basis of union which had been previously worked out, marched side by side to Starr Church and consummated the reunion. There was genuine rejoicing throughout the fellowship, and the ties grew stronger as the years passed.

The most serious Methodist Protestant move looking toward union with other churches came in the early years of the twentieth century and it involved the Congregational Church and the United Brethren in Christ. When extended negotiations gave promise of success a special session of the Methodist Protestant General Conference was called to meet in Columbus, Ohio in 1912. Enthusiasm was running high until it became known that the Maryland Conference was not sending delegates to the General Conference. It became evident that some of the leaders felt that it would be more logical to work
for Methodist union. Some Congregationalists said that union with the Methodist Protestants and the United Brethren in Christ was not a “natural” for them, and the United Brethren announced that their people were not ready for union. So amid considerable disappointment the movement for union of the three churches collapsed.

As is well known, an address by Thomas Hamilton Lewis, President of Western Maryland College and also President of the Methodist Protestant General Conference, at the 1908 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church initiated the move that finally led to the union of the three largest branches of American Methodism in 1939. Lewis had been one of the most ardent defenders of “mutual rights,” but one hearing his address would scarcely have guessed it. His effort in 1908 will go down in Methodist history as one of the most eloquent and stirring addresses ever made by any Methodist on any occasion. J. M. Buckley, Editor of the New York Christian Advocate, said in an appreciative editorial that the address should be recommended to all Methodist ministers in training. Lewis delivered the same message before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1910. While it did not create a sensation in the South, it was well received. At that time some thought that Methodist union would come soon. But in retrospect we perceive that in truth serious negotiations looking toward Methodist union were just beginning and that it would take thirty years to achieve the goal.

It seems fair to say now that a key move in the efforts on behalf of Methodist union was made by two Methodist Protestant pastors, J. W. Hawley and A. J. Allen. A major move to unite the two Episcopal Methodisms came to nothing in 1925 when the required majority of the Southern Church’s annual conferences failed to approve the proposed plan of union. A few years later Hawley and Allen, convinced that Methodist union was still possible, approached Bishop Herbert Welch, resident bishop of the Pittsburgh Area. Bishop Welch advised them to confer with Bishop William F. McDowell, Chairman of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s Commission on Church Union, and with John C. Broomfield, President of the Methodist Protestant General Conference. This move was the precursor of renewed negotiations between the two Episcopal Methodisms and the Methodist Protestant Church which finally issued in the formation of The Methodist Church at Kansas City in 1939. Thus the initial action of two Methodist Protestant ministers, somewhat obscure and unnoticed, led to the long desired and devoutly hoped for union of American Methodism.

Social Concerns

Most of the congregations of the Methodist Protestant Church in
the midwest were in rural areas and small towns. This meant that they were affected little by the social unrest and problems of the times. It might be said that they were not indifferent to social issues, they were just not involved. With monotonous regularity the annual conference minutes show that the church condemned intemperance, gambling, lotteries, sabbath desecration, theater going, dancing, card playing, horse racing, divorce, and going to law to settle differences. But these matters, of course, pertained more to personal conduct than to social issues.

The Methodist Protestant General Conference in 1916 appointed a Committee on Christianity and Social Service which presented a long report based largely on the Social Creed approved by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. The General Conference adopted the report with little debate. But this social creed had little effect on the conscience of the Methodist Protestant Church in the west or the east.

Conclusion

The Methodist Protestant Church prospered for the first three-quarters of a century after it was organized. During this period the church in the midwest produced a number of outstanding editors, general secretaries, missionaries, and General Conference presidents. Several efforts to establish a theological school at Adrian College and other places failed.

About the beginning of the twentieth century, the Methodist Protestant Church began to decline. This was due in part to the fact that the issues for which Methodist Protestantism had contended had been largely accepted by the two episcopal Methodisms. Methodist Protestant shibboleths were muted. Also, the decline was due in part to the fact that denominationalism was on the wane. Many people were no longer interested in the old controversies or in a particular denomination as such. In choosing a church they were less interested in denominational theology and polity than in satisfactory worship, congenial Christian fellowship, and good religious training for their children.

Thus the Methodist Protestant Church throughout its territory, after trying faithfully to fulfill its mission, to make an effective witness, to be faithful to its Methodist heritage, and to share the truth of the gospel with others, was content to be one of the branches of Methodism which united in 1939 to form The Methodist Church.