

# Methodist Membership and Financial Contributions Before and After Unification

by Albert L. Gray, Jr.\*

Methodist contributions for missions and other benevolences increased more rapidly in the twenty-four years following unification in 1939 than in the twenty-four years prior to the merger. Likewise, the annual average rate of growth in total membership from 1940 to 1963 was greater than in the years from 1916 to 1939. These conclusions are drawn from an analysis of the available statistics as reported in *The General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of The Methodist Church*.

In 1949 the Statistical Office of The Methodist Church, then under the directorship of Albert C. Hoover, prepared a one-sheet summary entitled *Methodist History as Revealed in Statistical Form*. This data sheet gave the available figures on membership, benevolences, and ministerial support from 1790 to 1948 for each of the three separate Methodist bodies: The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South and The Methodist Protestant Church. Each year since 1948 the author of this article has tabulated the current annual statistics for The Methodist Church and other major Protestant denominations. These are available upon request.

## Membership

The combined membership of all three Methodist denominations in 1916 was 5,828,993. This increased to 7,590,411 in 1939 at the time of unification. This represented an annual average increase of 1.16 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The Methodist Episcopal Church, South grew more rapidly (1.40 per cent) than either the Northern Church (1.02 per cent) or the Methodist Protestant Church (0.65 per cent). During this same twenty-four year period the total population of the United States increased at the rate of 1.10 per cent each year. It may be

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<sup>1</sup> This is the geometric mean of the annual ratios of one year's membership to the prior year. The formula used was

$$\frac{1}{23}$$

Membership in 1939

$$\frac{\quad}{\quad} - 1$$

Membership in 1916

Starting with 5,828,993 members in 1916 and increasing the figure each year by 1.16 per cent, the computed or compounded membership in 1939 would be the same as the actual number in that year of 7,590,411. This type of formula was used to calculate all other average annual rates of change.

noted that from 1800 to 1940 the Methodist churches in America tended to grow more rapidly than the total population.

The membership of The Methodist Church grew from 7,360,187 in 1940 to 10,153,003 in 1963. This represents an annual average increase of 1.41 per cent, a noticeable improvement over the annual rate of growth of 1.16 per cent prior to unification. However, during this same period the population of the United States also accelerated at a more rapid rate, viz., 1.57 per cent per year. Thus since unification The Methodist Church, though it has grown more rapidly than in the quarter of a century prior to the merger, has failed to keep pace percentagewise with the growth of the population of the United States. Other major Protestant denominations have also failed in this regard since 1940.

**Table 1**      **Membership of The Methodist Churches**  
**Population of the United States**  
**Annual Average Rates of Increase**  
**1916 to 1939 and 1940 to 1963**

METHODIST CHURCHES					
Years	North	South	Protestant	Combined	Population of United States
1916	3,529,870	2,129,536	169,587	5,828,993	101,966,000
1939	4,459,746	2,933,680	196,985	7,590,411	131,028,000
Annual Rate	1.02%	1.40%	0.65%	1.16%	1.10%
1940				7,360,187	132,122,000
1963				10,153,003	189,060,000
Annual Rate				1.41%	1.57%

### Benevolences

Contributions for benevolences have increased at a spectacular rate in the twenty-four years since unification as compared with a similar period prior to 1939. The figures in table 2 represent the sum of contributions for World Service Apportionments, Annual Conference Benevolences, World Service Specials, Woman's Society Benevolences, and all other benevolences. In 1916 receipts for missions and benevolences to The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South totaled \$6,233,000. Data for The Methodist Protestant Church are not available. By 1939 the two major bodies gave only \$7,903,000 for an annual increase of only 1.04 per cent. In contrast, after unification the giving for total benevolences increased from \$11,552,000 to \$91,282,000 in 1963. This is an increase of 9.40 per cent per year.

Both periods show some similarities and one major difference. In World War I and again in World War II contributions for benevolences rose modestly each year. Then in each post-war period the

Methodist Church undertook a major fund raising effort. In recognizing and celebrating *The Centenary of Missions* in 1920 contributions reached \$22,327,624. Giving for benevolences declined steadily thereafter, as other phases of the church's program were promoted. In 1929 at the start of the great depression these contributions were down to \$14,980,236, and by 1935 they amounted to only \$7,410,909.

In 1945 at the close of World War II The Methodist Church sponsored *The Crusade for Christ*, which lifted benevolences to a total of \$43,153,260. For the next seven years these contributions declined as they did after World War I. But the great decade of depression which gripped the nation in the 1930's did not repeat itself in the 1950's or 1960's with the result that The Methodist Church has a new record every year in contributions for benevolences.

Comparisons of dollar figures over long periods of time can be misleading because of inflation and the decline in the purchasing power of the dollar. From 1916 to 1939 the Consumer Price Index increased 1.05 per cent each year on the average. Therefore this completely offset the similar rise in the dollar amount of giving.<sup>2</sup> In fact the Methodist Episcopal Church actually experienced an annual decrease in the purchasing power of its total contributions for benevolences during this twenty-four year period.

Prices also rose sharply in the twenty-four years from 1940 to 1963, the annual average rise being 3.46 per cent. Nevertheless the adjusted rate for The Methodist Church's contributions for benevolences was 5.74 per cent. The actual figures are given in table 2.

**Table 2**                      **Contributions for Benevolences**  
**Annual Average Rates of Increase**  
**1916 to 1939 and 1940 to 1963**

METHODIST CHURCHES			
Years	North	South	Combined
1916	\$4,694,000	\$1,539,000	\$6,233,000
1939	5,767,000	2,136,000	7,903,000
Annual Rate	0.89%	1.43%	1.04%
Adjusted Rate	dec. 0.16%	0.37%	0.0
1940			\$11,552,000
1963			91,282,000
Annual Rate			9.40%
Adjusted Rate			5.74%

<sup>2</sup> The Statistical Abstract of the United States, Department of Commerce, Washington, D. C. The current series uses 1957-1959 as 100. The index for 1916 was

38.0; for 1939 it was 48.4; for 1940 the C.P.I. was 48.8; and for 1963 the index had risen to 106.7.

### Ministerial Support

The financial benefits of the 1939 unification are also evident in the contributions for the support of the ministers of the church. The figures in table 3 include all payments to pastors and associate pastors plus travel allowances, the support of the district superintendents and the bishops as well as contributions for Conference Claimants and for the minimum salary fund. Using rates adjusted for price changes the 2.80 per cent annual change since 1940 exceeds the 0.30 per cent for The Methodist Episcopal Church from 1916 to 1939 and the 1.45 per cent for the Southern Church.

**Table 3**                    **Contributions for Ministerial Support**  
**Annual Average Rates of Increase**  
**1916 to 1939 and 1940 to 1963**

METHODIST CHURCHES			
Years	North	South	Combined
1916	\$18,331,000	\$ 6,160,000	\$24,491,000
1939	24,967,000	10,930,000	35,897,000
Annual Rate	1.35%	2.52%	1.68%
Adjusted Rate	0.30%	1.45%	0.62%
1940			\$ 36,169,000
1963			149,489,000
Annual Rate			6.36%
Adjusted Rate			2.80%

### Conclusions

The Methodist Church is fortunate in having statistical reports which make it possible for church statisticians to study the significant trends and developments. Figures are available for membership each year except one since 1773. Data on contributions for benevolences are available for The Methodist Episcopal Church from 1851 to 1939; and for The Methodist Episcopal Church, South from 1869 to 1939. Data on ministerial support are available from 1881 to 1939. My own statistics on The Methodist Church are available each year since 1939 and include contributions for building funds and local church expenses as well as benevolences and ministerial support. These sub-totals are combined to give the aggregate contributions. Comparisons with other major Protestant denominations were published by The National Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup>

Unification has been beneficial for The Methodist Church in so far as statistical results are able to measure growth and develop-

<sup>3</sup> "Trends and Cycles in Financial Contributions to Ten Selected Protestant Denominations, 1900 to 1954," Albert L.

Gray, Jr. National Council of Churches, Department of Stewardship and Benevolences, New York, N. Y., 1960.

ment. Membership has increased more rapidly in the twenty-four years since 1939 than in the corresponding twenty-four year period prior to unification. Likewise, contributions for benevolences and contributions for ministerial support have shown significantly more rapid annual rates of increase since the merger. Perhaps these statistics merit attention when our leaders consider possible church mergers in the days ahead.