ONE of the major instruments in the expansion and consolidation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century was the weekly denominational newspaper or “Advocate.” Technological developments in printing before 1850 made the publication of newspapers relatively inexpensive, and the church was not slow to perceive the possibilities in this medium for evangelism and for the edification of the faithful.

The factors in the establishment of the \textit{Central Christian Advocate} in St. Louis in the 1850's reveal the interest of the church people in denominational papers and show what they expected them to do for the church. Also, the story of this paper demonstrates the dedication and the enthusiasm of the leaders who started it, as well as their overconfidence and lack of business acumen and realism in projecting such an enterprise. Still further, the early record of this newspaper in St. Louis indicates that the Methodist Episcopal Church desired through it to make a witness against slavery in a region where that church had only a tenuous foothold after the division of 1844.\(^1\)

Before 1850 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church established several weekly newspapers. The \textit{New York Advocate and Journal}, launched in 1826, was for general circulation. The \textit{Western Christian Advocate}, begun in Cincinnati in 1834, was one of several regional papers, and in 1852 it had a circulation of 21,000 in the Old Northwest.\(^2\)

By 1849 there was a demand for an official church paper in the upper Mississippi Valley. It was claimed that the \textit{Western Christian Advocate} with its already overcrowded columns could not adequately serve the Methodists in that region, and that besides the growth of the church and the population there justified the projection of a new church paper.\(^3\) The Iowa Annual Conference took

\(^1\) Since most of Missouri Methodism adhered South in 1845, the Methodist Episcopal Church in that state was weak for some years. However, it became strong enough to reconstitute a Missouri Annual Conference in 1848.

\(^2\) Boston \textit{Daily Zion's Herald, May 11, 1853}, p. 29.

\(^3\) When the General Conference established an official paper it elected the editor from among the traveling ministers and placed its business affairs under a book agent who was also elected from the clergy. Papers in the West were under the auspices of the book agents, Leroy Swarmstedt and Adam Poe, at Cincinnati. In addition there was to be a publishing committee, usually consisting of a representative of each annual conference served, whose responsibility it was to examine accounts and affairs of the paper annually and report to the annual conferences. The General Conference openly discouraged
official action on the project in 1849. Its Committee on Periodicals stressed "the wonderful power of the periodical press in fashioning public taste and morals." 4 Joseph Brooks was appointed to confer with representatives of neighboring annual conferences and join them in choosing a place for the publication of the proposed paper. Four other conferences—Illinois, Rock River, Wisconsin, and Missouri—supported the move.

Brooks met with the representatives of the other annual conferences in Bloomington, Illinois, in 1850. They prepared a report which marshalled the arguments in favor of an Advocate in and for their own part of the country. They noted that in some weeks when the weather was bad the people in their area did not receive any church papers. They said that an official paper was needed in their section to advertise local interests, to serve as a unifying influence for a scattered membership, to encourage the writing talents of the preachers in remote places, and to diffuse religious and general intelligence among the people. They argued that a new regional publication would achieve a circulation "twenty times" greater than that of existing papers in their conferences. 5

The issue was discussed further in 1851, and the northwestern annual conferences sent memorials to the 1852 General Conference asking for the services of a new weekly paper for their region. The General Conference voted to establish a paper and a book depository in Chicago which was to serve the Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Rock River, and Northwest Indiana annual conferences. Unconvinced that this arrangement would adequately serve their area, the Methodists in southern Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and southern Illinois continued to advocate the inauguration of a weekly paper and a book depository at St. Louis.

Meanwhile, in 1848 the trustees and faculty of McKendree College, Lebanon, Illinois, about 23 miles east of St. Louis, began the publication of the Illinois Advocate and Lebanon Journal. Claiming a circulation of 700 the first year, the paper won the approbation of the preachers in the Illinois Conference for its service to them. 6 However, this journal was never considered a substitute for an official weekly supported by the resources of the denomination. Spokesmen offered the Illinois Advocate to the General Conference if it should decide to establish a paper and a book depository at St. Louis. The preachers were interested in a book depository be-

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5 Ibid., November 1, 1848, p. 117.
cause they knew that it would make books readily accessible on credit for distribution by the circuit riders.\textsuperscript{7}

The policy of the General Conference in establishing weeklies was to begin conservatively in order to keep the subscription price low and to enable the paper quickly to become self-supporting.\textsuperscript{8} It was therefore with some reluctance that the 1852 General Conference and the Book Agents accepted the following conditional mandate:

Resolved, That the Book Agents of Cincinnati be, and they are hereby authorized and instructed to establish a depository for books, and a weekly paper, to be denominated by such title as they may select, in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, to be under the direction and control of the Book Agents at Cincinnati: Provided, that in the judgment of the Agents such depository and periodical can be established and sustained with safety to the interest of the Book Concern.\textsuperscript{9}

The legislation further stipulated that in case a paper was established, an editor was to be appointed by the bishop upon recommendation of the publishing committee consisting of representatives from each of the patronizing annual conferences.

At their 1852 sessions the Illinois and Iowa annual conferences requested the book agents to exercise their discretion and immediately launch a paper, and they suggested that it be called the Central Christian Advocate. The Illinois Conference elected Peter Cartwright to the publishing committee, and recommended another member, William D. R. Trotter, as editor and book agent.\textsuperscript{10}

Apparently the book agents in Cincinnati did not believe that it would be in the interest of the denomination to project a paper in St. Louis until late in 1854. Unwilling to wait any longer, representatives of the annual conferences concerned undertook the establishment of a paper on their own. Trotter assumed the editorship, and the first issue of the Central Christian Advocate was printed in St. Louis in January, 1853. Members of the publishing committee were: Joseph Brooks, Iowa; Peter Cartwright, Illinois; Levin B. Dennis, Missouri; James B. Corrington, Southern Illinois; and Richard Bird, Arkansas. The subscription price was $1.50.\textsuperscript{11} From the outset the project was subsidized in large part by the editor.

The men who started the Central Christian Advocate were sure

\textsuperscript{7}Daily Zion's Herald, May 24, 1852, p. 74.

\textsuperscript{8}This the Northwestern Christian Advocate was nearly able to do in four years. It achieved a circulation of 10,033 by 1855 and experienced a loss of only $4,653.30 for the first quadrennium.

\textsuperscript{9}Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Boston, Mass., 1852, pp. 72, 100.


\textsuperscript{11}Chicago Northwestern Christian Advocate, January 5, 1853, p. 2.
that the area could and would support it and that it would soon have a subscription list of 5,000. Optimistic statements were issued. Early in 1853, Peter Cartwright returned from a trip to Cincinnati with an encouraging word concerning the future of the paper. The 1853 Iowa Annual Conference received a report that all expenses for setting up the office and publishing the weekly had been met, except for $180 and the salary of the editor. Cheered by this announcement, the conference fully expected the paper to be transferred to denominational control by the end of the year. The optimism soon proved to be unfounded.

As early as May, 1853 the *Central Christian Advocate* was in financial difficulty. An unnamed St. Louis businessman who had been supporting it gave notice that he would be unable to make further contributions after July 1. Trotter announced that the paper must have subscriptions in sufficient number to compensate for this loss if it was to continue. To make matters worse, Editor Trotter became incapacitated by an extended period of illness, beginning in July, 1854. John L. Conklin of the recently formed Southern Illinois Conference then became editor pro tem and was closely associated with the affairs of this privately sponsored weekly until it ceased publication in 1855 or 1856.

Early in 1854, Trotter was ready to admit that the *Central Christian Advocate* was in serious financial straits; he was quoted at length to that effect by James V. Watson, editor of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*. Trotter reported a loss of 1,000 subscribers at the end of the first year. Iowa fell off by one-half, Illinois and Southern Illinois were below the first year, and there were scarcely any subscriptions from Missouri and Arkansas in spite of the editor's best efforts to make the paper useful in those states. In the meantime, Trotter's expenses had increased by one-fourth. He estimated that eventually the paper must have a circulation of 10,000 if it was to meet expenses and pay off its debts. It would require 6,000 subscriptions, he said, to pay expenses for one year, and he had only 3,000. He wrote somewhat bitterly:

We are satisfied that full ten thousand subscribers could be obtained in the territory claimed for our patronate, if all were alive to the inestimable value of a "central" newspaper organ for the Methodist Episcopal Church in this part of the West. Perhaps the feeling of the importance will come when delays and failures would have made it hopeless.

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12 "Minutes of the Tenth Session of the Iowa Conference, 1853," *Yearbook*, p. 231.
13 Northwestern Advocate, *May* 4, 1853, p. 70; *Ibid*., May 25, 1853, p. 82.
14 *Ibid*., November 1, 1854, p. 82. To the best of the author's knowledge there are no extant copies of the privately published *Central Christian Advocate* and it has not been possible to determine the exact date of its demise.
Trotter chided Watson for a lack of sympathy and later went so far as to imply that Watson had opposed the founding of the *Central Christian Advocate*. Denying this, Watson declared that he had appreciated the feeling of need for the paper. He admitted, however, that he had counseled caution when the project was proposed, and cited his own "painful" experience as editor and proprietor of the *Michigan Christian Advocate* as justification for his position. Watson said that expenses for new papers were usually three times the amount estimated, while subscriptions were about half the number expected. Originally Watson was under the impression that the *Central Christian Advocate* was supported financially by the annual conferences of the region. When he learned that the paper was a private enterprise managed by Trotter, he apologized for giving out information about its financial difficulties. He said that under the circumstances he understood Trotter's "chastisement" of him, and he accepted it in good grace.

Peter Cartwright also criticized Watson's attitude toward the *Central Christian Advocate* and spoke sarcastically about the failure of the book agents to help.

We have resolved to try to sustain our paper another year at least, and we have no fears but that we shall sustain it, make it meet its past liabilities, and *walk and talk*, and no thanks to the tender mercies of book agents. If our friends within the bounds of the circulation of the *Northwestern Advocate*, who have been so fortunate as to take large draughts from the pap of the Book Concern, knew our real necessities, I do think their compassionate hearts would pity us, and send us some relief by giving us subscribers.

A few months after these exchanges—August, 1854—the book agents in Cincinnati were ready to act on the instructions of the 1852 General Conference. They notified the patronizing annual conferences that they would begin publishing a weekly paper at St. Louis in January, 1855. The promise was not fulfilled for two reasons. First, as the book agents explained to the 1856 General Conference, a temporarily severe financial panic in the Cincinnati area tied up the funds of the Western Book Concern. Second, the decision of the United States Supreme Court at this time favoring the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in its suit for a settlement of the property question following the division of 1844, compelled the Cincinnati Concern to pay the southern church a large sum of money.

The developments in the situation, or lack of developments, meant that the question of an official church paper at St. Louis would come up again in the 1856 General Conference. Delegates from the annual

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., March 1, 1854, p. 34.
18 Ibid., February 1, 1854, p. 18.
19 *Daily Western Christian Advocate*, May 9, 1856.
METHODIST HISTORY

conferences concerned brought memorials on the subject to the General Conference. One resolution proposed establishment of the paper on the condition of assurance in advance of 6,000 paying subscribers. Peter Cartwright moved to eliminate the proviso, declaring confidently that not 6,000 but 10,000 Methodists would soon subscribe to the paper.

One delegate raised a significant objection to Peter Cartwright’s proposed amendment. He declared that in the 1852 General Conference the proponents of the establishment of a paper in St. Louis opposed the launching of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* in Chicago, and he said they intended to make the proposed new paper in St. Louis “the organ of that portion who are in favor of the Discipline as it is on the subject of slavery, and opposed to progress.”

The truth was that from the beginning the question of slavery had been a vital factor in determining support for and opposition to the establishment of a church paper in slave territory. Anti-slavery radicals opposed such a venture on the ground that it would dilute the position of the church on the question of slavery; church members might seek to make peace with pro-slavery people. On the other hand, many moderates in the church supported the proposal for a paper in slave territory, believing that it would sustain the church and promote its growth and thus gradually undermine the institution of slavery. These divergent views were expressed in an exchange between John L. Conklin and James V. Watson, editors of the *Central Christian Advocate* and the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, respectively.

Antislavery radicals in the church were advocating a change in the *Discipline* which would forbid laymen as well as preachers to hold slaves. On the other hand, many members in border states opposed this as impractical. Watson editorially supported the change in the *Discipline*. Conklin took issue with Watson. In reply Watson said he was convinced that the denomination would be willing to subsidize a paper in St. Louis to the extent needed only if it opposed slavery in a less conservative sense.

Peter Cartwright also took issue with Watson, declaring that an ecclesiastical and political war was raging in the course of which ministers and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in slave-holding areas were being attacked and falsely represented. “We must have a press on the soil of riots and press-demolishing mobs,” wrote Cartwright, “to defend and set ourselves right.” He said that Watson was throwing “ultra-abolition firebrands” which hindered the work of those who were trying to clear from the Southern mind

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21 *Northwestern Advocate*, June 13, 1855, p. 94.
the notion that the Northern church was radically abolitionist. Cartwright said that Watson's extreme stand on the issue shut off both the slaveholder and the slave from the more moderate and true antislavery influence of Northern Methodists.22

A question entirely apart from slavery entered into the General Conference discussion regarding the establishment of a paper in St. Louis; W. D. R. Trotter announced that his losses in publishing the *Central Christian Advocate* as a private enterprise amounted to $7,264.25 (the figure included back salary as well as actual out of pocket losses for two years), and he desired compensation. After some debate, the General Conference adopted two resolutions pertaining to the matter. First, the book agents at Cincinnati were directed to establish the *Central Christian Advocate* at St. Louis. Second, the agents were not under obligation to assume the liabilities of the former paper, but if they deemed it expedient they could purchase Trotter's equipment. The General Conference also voted that Trotter should receive compensation from the profits of the new paper to be published under denominational auspices.23 But since such ventures were not expected to yield a profit for several years, the action was irrelevant.

The final order of business in connection with the projection of a church paper at St. Louis was the election of an editor by the General Conference. Joseph Brooks of the Iowa Conference, a leader in the move to start the weekly, was elected editor on the second ballot.24 The first issue of the new paper appeared in January, 1857.

During the next quadrennium, Trotter's losses in connection with the ill-fated privately sponsored *Central Christian Advocate* were the subject of considerable discussion and some action. The annual conferences felt some obligation to Trotter, because at the outset when they found that denominational support for a paper could not be had at once, they urged the establishment of an independent one, and Trotter did just that. The Illinois Conference, of which Trotter was a member, undertook to raise some money in 1855 to help retire the paper's debt. Some $300 was subscribed.25 In 1856 the same conference appointed a committee to look further into the matter. This committee asked the help of the other annual conferences concerned. Representatives from the several conferences met in May, 1857 with John L. Conklin, who had been in charge and had served as editor pro tem during Trotter's illness. Since the books of the paper had been poorly kept, they found it difficult to determine the exact losses on specific items. However,

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22 Ibid., September 5, 1855, p. 141.
23 Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Indianapolis, Ind., 1856, pp. 155-158.
24 Ibid., p. 167.
they concluded that the deficit with interest at six percent amounted to $2,930. To this they added $1,000 per year as salary for Trotter for two years, making a total of $5,930 which they felt should be paid.

On the basis of membership, the representatives apportioned the $5,930 debt to the several conferences as follows: Illinois, $1,584.64; Southern Illinois, $1,041.50; Missouri, $306.00; Iowa, $1,190.00; Upper Iowa, $622.00; Arkansas, $107.00; Kansas and Nebraska, $78.45. The Illinois Conference representatives asked to be assessed for a larger part of the obligation and offered to pay interest at ten percent, but they yielded to the judgment of the majority.

Since Trotter apparently had invested nearly all of his limited means in the paper and since his needs at the time were pressing, the respective annual conferences were urged to raise quickly the amounts allotted to them. But aside from $29.60, which came from two different sources in the Illinois Conference, there is no evidence that any money was collected for Trotter. In 1858 the Illinois Conference urged that each preacher raise $10 for Trotter, but again there is no indication that anything was done, although interest in the matter continued.

In 1859 the Illinois Conference memorialized the approaching General Conference on Trotter's behalf. Emphasizing the contributions which Trotter's sacrifices had made to Methodism in the Southwest, the memorial went on to speak of his age, his poor health, and his dire poverty, and declared that under the circumstances the Illinois Conference felt that "equity and justice" called for immediate relief by General Conference action. But the Committee on the Book Concern in its report rejected the appeal for aid to Trotter on the ground that funds entrusted to the Book Concern were specified for uses that did not allow "either in law or in equity, for the payment of debts incurred by the publisher of the *Central Christian Advocate* while it was in Dr. Trotter's own hands, or, at all events, *not* in the hands of the Concern." With some expressions of sympathy and regret, the General Conference sustained the report of the Committee, thus closing the Trotter case.

In the meantime, the now official *Central Christian Advocate* in St. Louis was not flourishing, a circumstance which was somewhat embarrassing to those who had optimistically urged its creation. Anticipated losses during the first year were $6,000, an item which the Book Agents circulated among the supporting annual confer-

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27 Minutes of the Thirty-Fifth Session of the Illinois Annual Conference, September 22, 1858, p. 10.
ences. The conferences expressed grave concern, pledged themselves to various efforts and ways of securing enough subscribers to make the paper self-supporting, and implied at the same time that greater economy should be exercised in operating the enterprise.\textsuperscript{30} The severe panic then in progress forbade undue optimism, but there was no thought among the conferences of giving up the paper.

The financial losses in publishing the paper mounted. The deficit at the end of the first three years was $15,213.09, and the book agents in Cincinnati warned the 1860 General Conference that the shortage for the fourth year would be about $4,000. They expected to lose 2,000 subscribers in 1860, due in large measure to the controversy over slavery which was making the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church more difficult in the Southwest.\textsuperscript{31} In 1859 to 1860 Northern Methodism was completely suppressed in Texas, and it was shrinking rapidly in Arkansas and Missouri. The report continued in a pessimistic vein, saying that the continuation of the paper at such a loss and with such uncertain prospects was not justified. The agents pointed out that the papers at Chicago and Cincinnati could readily serve most of the \textit{Central Christian Advocate}'s constituency if the latter were discontinued.

The book agents clearly indicated that the desire of the Methodist Episcopal Church to make a witness against slavery in slave-holding territory was the main reason for trying to maintain a paper in St. Louis. They cited figures to show that it was not reaching many people in the region with its witness. In the fall of 1859 southern and central Illinois furnished 5,521 subscribers in a list of 8,016. Missouri had 994, Iowa 887, Kansas 213, and Nebraska 69, with a few scattered elsewhere. Also, they cited current figures to show that the Methodists in Iowa apparently found militant anti-slavery publications more to their liking than the \textit{Central Christian Advocate}. The agents then urged the discontinuance of the paper if it did not return a profit during the following year. They added that the denomination would not hesitate to drop such a losing enterprise if it were located in Ohio or Indiana.\textsuperscript{32}

The General Conference Committee on the Book Concern readily admitted the financial embarrassment facing the \textit{Central Christian Advocate}, but expressed the hope that by materially cutting expenses the loss could be eliminated or reduced, and then went on to recommend the continuance of the paper provided the deficit did not exceed $4,000 over a period of four years, because "situated where it is, its discontinuance would be a serious calamity to

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\textsuperscript{31} Journal of the General Conference 1860, p. 352.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
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our cause." The General Conference accepted this report, and then proceeded to elect Charles Elliott, a veteran editor widely known for his published attacks on slavery, as editor of the paper. Apparently Joseph Brooks was dropped as editor because he was too mild on slavery to suit the majority of the General Conference, although he may have differed little from Elliott on abstract questions pertaining to slavery.

From the first, the editorial policy of Brooks had reflected the dilemma of both the Central Christian Advocate and the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Southwest. Abolitionism was objectionable to many church people in slaveholding areas, while at the same time nothing less than vigorous anti-slavery sentiment was satisfactory to large numbers of loyal church members in the North. Extremists in the Northern annual conferences went so far as to suggest withholding funds from mission conferences in the Southwest. As editor, Brooks defended Northern Methodist mission workers in Missouri against their brethren who criticized them for not taking a more pronounced stand against slavery. At the same time he objected to Southerners branding Northern Methodists as abolitionists. Also, Brooks took strong positions on public issues involving the question of slavery in the area. For example, when emancipation by civil action was mentioned as a possibility for Missouri, Brooks said he considered it his religious duty to support such a policy. However, he disavowed at the same time any intention of interfering with existing civil authority or with the civil relations of master and slave. He believed that any plan for doing away with slavery should include compensation to slave owners and colonization of the Negroes; everything should be done in a "lawful, peaceful manner."

Brooks' middle of the road editorial policy on slavery satisfied neither the North nor the South. His stand on emancipation with compensation and colonization aroused strong criticism in the press of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, especially in the St. Louis Christian Advocate and the Nashville Christian Advocate. Brooks publicly identified himself with other controversial issues of the time. He personally knew Dred Scott and expressed shock at the "monstrous inhumanity of the decision" of the supreme court which denied Scott his freedom. His stand pleased members of the annual conferences which supported the Central Christian Advocate, but the editors of such papers as the New York Christian Advocate and the Northwestern Christian Advocate were not satisfied; they still questioned the mission of the Method-

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33 Daily Christian Advocate, May 28, 1860.
34 Central Christian Advocate, February 4, 1857, p. 18.
35 Minutes of the Fifteenth Session of the Iowa Annual Conference, 1858, pp. 18, 19; Central Christian Advocate, April 8, 1857, p. 54.
ist Episcopal Church in the Southwest along with the policy of the editor of the Central Christian Advocate.

In view of the criticism from both sides, Brooks tried to clarify and defend his position on slavery. He said he had resisted pressure to ally himself with extremists and had stood aloof from intra-church party organizations. To those who complained that he devoted too much time and space to the discussion of slavery, he replied that his was the only paper of the church published in slave territory, that human beings were oppressed by the system, and that the oppressed had few defenders. He said the plight of the enslaved bothered him more than his own dilemma. "We hate and abominate the accursed system," he wrote. "To let it alone would be treason against God, cruelty to man, and disgrace to the church." Brooks said he could not stand by and say nothing about a bill then pending before the Missouri legislature which was designed to expel all free Negroes and confiscate their property. He would leave a policy of quiet submission "to those who are blinded by prejudice and trammelled by party influence." 36

To Northern Methodists who criticized the expenditure of mission funds to maintain a moderate version of Methodism in slave territory, Brooks declared that the church's money was not used to "build up oppression." He said that not a man in the Missouri Conference would stay in his pulpit another day if he thought he was doing this. Also, Brooks cited the hostile reaction of slavery propagandists in Missouri as proof that the presence of Northern Methodists in Missouri was regarded in the South as an effective challenge to slavery. 37

As the new editor, Charles Elliott faced the same problems with which Brooks wrestled, some of them proving more difficult to handle during the war years than before. The paper continued a struggling, subsidized existence for several years before achieving solvency. During these years economies designed to keep the paper's losses within the prescribed limits could be effected only at the expense of the editor; however, he was later reimbursed.

After reviewing the story of the early years of the Central Christian Advocate, one concludes that only the desire of the Methodist Episcopal Church to maintain an anti-slavery witness in slave territory prompted it, contrary to its normal policy, to continue for several years to subsidize this losing publishing enterprise. And even with modest financial support from the church, the project required dedicated and sacrificial service on the part of the editors.

36 Central Christian Advocate, December 21, 1859, p. 410.
37 Ibid., September 2, 1857, p. 138.