THE BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION—
ALIVE TO GOD

By Harold H. Hughes

A letter written by Devereux Jarratt to Thomas Rankin in 1776 uses the phrase "alive to God," which appears in the title of this paper. Jarratt, of course, was the rector of the Anglican Parish in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, from 1763 to 1801. Stirred by the evangelical zeal of the Methodists, Jarratt was friendly to them from the time he first met Robert Williams. Referring to what took place in a Methodist quarterly meeting at Boisseau's Chapel, which was within the bounds of his own parish, Jarratt said, "... the multitudes that attended ... returning home all alive to God, spread the flame through their respective neighborhoods, which ran from family to family..." 2

"All alive to God, they spread the flame!" That is how Methodism affected people at the outset in America. Is it too much to hope that the occasions, events, and services related to the Bicentennial Celebration in 1966 will bring people “alive to God” and impel them to spread “the flame through their respective neighborhoods?”

Now our Annual Conference historical societies are aware of the difficulty of interesting Methodists in Methodist history. Some are indifferent because they believe the great facts of our history are irrelevant for the church today. They see little advantage in dwelling on the experiences and the deeds of the Methodists of two hundred years ago when the whole church in our day is staggering under heavy loads and overwhelming problems. William W. Sweet said in *Men of Zeal*, lectures given at Drew Seminary on the sesquicentennial of the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, "It has been my experience that it is not an easy task to interest Methodists in their history, interesting and glorious as that history has been.”

But we may agree with Sweet that:

There are at least two great reasons why it is not only expedient, but quite necessary, that at least the leaders in the church should recall the past. The first reason is because loyalty, intelligent love of the church, and all for which the church stands grows largely out of the past. ... There is one essential without which there can be no church, and that is, there must be common memories of common struggles and sacrifices, of defeats and losses, of triumphs and victories. A people to be welded into a church, worthy of the name, must possess a common past. It is at the altar of history that great loyalties are created. A second reason why a consideration of the past is worth our while is because it is the past which unites us. We need the knowledge of the past to help keep us a united church; to counteract the many divisive influences of our time. 3

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Methodists should ever be aware of the important role of the past in shaping the present. Halford E. Luccock in that attractive book, *Endless Line of Splendor*, put it this way, "The great hour must be molded by great men and women who bring the heritage of the past as a power for the task of the present." If we are to look with clear eyes at the responsibilities which confront Methodism today, we must also take a look backward to its history.

In an address of welcome to the Eighth Ecumenical Methodist Conference at Oxford in 1951, W. F. Howard spoke of how John Wesley combined the forward and the backward look. "Mr. Wesley, like a strong and skillful rower, looked one way, while every stroke of his oar took him in the opposite direction." The same point is strikingly illustrated in Jan Struther's book, *Mrs. Miniver*. On a trip through northern England, Mrs. Miniver noted a number of places where she had had interesting experiences on previous journeys to that region. Pondering how much the things of the past contributed to her enjoyment of the trip then in progress, the rearview mirror beside the windshield suddenly became a symbol to her. She wondered why it had not occurred to her before that "you cannot successfully navigate the future unless you keep always framed beside it a small clear image of the past."

But now while we should not "remove the ancient landmarks which our fathers have set," still there should be no blind idolatry of the past. We need a nicely balanced relationship between our present and our past, a relationship that enables us to get on with our current responsibility while always being strengthened by our roots that sink keep into the meaningful past. The late Senator Theodore E. Burton of Ohio was once quoted as saying, "Without tradition there can be no civilization; without discarding tradition there can be no progress."

One objective of the Bicentennial Celebration is to help Methodists who thus far have had little interest in history to see that Methodism cannot successfully navigate the future unless we have framed beside it a clear image of its past. If the Bicentennial program in 1966 cannot accomplish this, there is little need for us to beat the drums for it. Our people must realize that The Methodist Church will not be celebrating dead glories in 1966. It will be trying to use the great experiences of the past as launching pads for orbiting our faith into the marvelous wonders of the space age.

Emory Stevens Bucke, General Editor of the three-volume *History of American Methodism*, says in the closing lines of his preface, "But that, dear reader, is how it goes when a history is written concern-

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*Luccock, Endless Line of Splendor*, p. 96.


*Jan Struther, Mrs. Miniver*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940, p. 120.
ing a movement that will not hold still!" The Bicentennial Celebration should help keep it so alive to God that we and those who come after us will spread the flame with the zeal and earnestness which characterized our fathers.

It is encouraging to note as we come to our Bicentennial year that the early American Methodists were successfully spreading the flame at the very time John Wesley was becoming concerned lest the zeal of the Methodists everywhere abate. In August, 1786, Wesley wrote, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid that they should exist only as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power."

In writing those words did John Wesley take into account what Methodism had achieved in America against real odds in the preceding decade? The Revolutionary War years were not easy for the Methodists in this country. The American Methodists were under a cloud during the war because they were considered Anglicans, because their leaders were British, and because some of those leaders openly preached loyalty to the crown, and because John Wesley himself wrote a pamphlet upholding the British side and urging the Americans to accept the status quo. The situation for the Methodists became such that all the preachers sent over by Wesley except Asbury returned home or ceased preaching, and Asbury himself was forced into retirement for a time during the war. There was some persecution of the Methodists. Yet, as indicated above, in September, 1776, Devereux Jarratt could write about a mighty revival of religion in Virginia which vitally involved the Methodists.

The growth of the Methodist movement in America from 1776 to 1786, in spite of the difficulties that beset it, is cause for pride. In 1776 the Methodists had 24 preachers and 4,921 members in America. In 1783 there were 82 preachers and 13,740 members in the societies. In 1784 when the Christmas Conference organized the Methodist Episcopal Church and sent the preachers off in all directions to evangelize the continent, there were 83 Methodist preachers and 14,988 members in the societies. Apparently on the American side of the Atlantic in 1786 there was little cause for Wesley’s concern that Methodism might become a dead sect maintaining the form but not the power of religion. American Methodism had both form and power at that time.

Methodists who are discouraged by all the problems and difficulties facing the church today need a rearview mirror, so to speak, in which they can see the thrilling picture of what Methodism did.

in the past. The business of the Bicentennial Celebration is to mirror the dramatic story of the deeds of our Methodist fathers and thereby inspire present day Methodists to go forward and do great things for the kingdom of God.

Many Methodists in the Virginia and Washington areas knew the late Jacob Simpson Payton, and they appreciated his interest in Methodist history and his writings in that field. In his later years he lived within the bounds of the Arlington District, Virginia Conference, which this writer now serves. Among Payton's writings is a little volume which gives the story of the founding of Methodism in western Pennsylvania. Explaining the purpose of the book, Payton wrote, "This little volume is an attempt to recover out of a day long gone certain facts either lost or forgotten; to set the old circuit riders cantering off to their preaching places, and to lead forward into clearer view certain figures long enshrouded in the mists of the years." 9 The program for the Bicentennial Celebration should do something like that for us.

In recovering certain facts which have been long lost or forgotten we may be able to make clear Methodism's contribution to the religious life of this nation. Sweet says, "Methodism neither has been understood nor have its contributions received adequate historic recognition. . . . It had a definite character of its own and contributed in distinctive ways to the religious life of America." 10 We should learn more about what our church contributed to the spiritual undergirding which has helped to make this nation great. Perhaps it will make us aware that the things of the spirit are as important today as ever in our national life.

Methodism followed the frontier in America until the geographical frontier was no more. The frontiers are different today, but keeping up with them and proclaiming a vital, meaningful, helpful message is as important today as ever. If the Methodists in the Bicentennial year of 1966 can feel the thrill of the witness to spiritual reality which our fathers made on the frontiers of their day, their church will be inspired to minister to the needs of men in the space age.

Last spring Bishop John Wesley Lord issued a pastoral letter regarding the elimination of the Central Jurisdiction in which he said, "There are times when God 'bares his arm' and is seen to be redemptively at work in current happenings. Men call such hours turning points; historians call them 'hinges of history.'" 11 Historians have testified that the appearance of Methodism under the dynamic leadership of John Wesley was a hinge on which the total life of England turned. A close examination of American history might

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9 Jacob Simpson Payton, Our Fathers Have Told Us, Ruter Press, 1938, p. 9.
reveal that as Methodism followed the frontier and helped to keep the pioneers in contact with spiritual reality, it was also a hinge on which history turned.

Methodism and other churches including the Roman Catholic are striving hard to come to grips with the unusual problems and the thrilling possibilities of life in today's world. We are confronted with much that is perplexingly and unbelievably new. We are baffled by the rapid changes which are taking place in human relationships. We find it all but impossible to grasp the reality or the significance of the scientific explosion of the postwar years. Fascinated and awed by the miracles of science, overwhelmed and discouraged by the complex problems of life in the space age, what should we do? This writer does not have all the answers, but he believes that in our Bicentennial year we should look back at our heritage. The "sound of running history" can give us perspective. It can help our church to rise to the demands and to minister to the needs of the present day.

Jesse Lee, the first American Methodist historian, once told Thomas Ware that Methodism could live wherever men could live. Unless we Methodists today are as confident of that as Jesse Lee was in his day, Methodism will cease to be a truly national church with live congregations in all sections—north, south, east and west, in the inner city and in the suburbs, in the country and in the towns, among the migrants and in settled communities. Early American Methodism without doubt had a faith and an organization peculiarly suited to the needs of the time. Does it have such today? The Methodist Church has prided itself that it is willing if necessary to rewrite its *Discipline* every four years in order to keep the church organization abreast of the times. Recovery of the facts of Methodist history and the proper interpretation of them in the Bicentennial year should help The Methodist Church to keep both its faith and its organization relevant to the needs of the new day.

Methodists generally may not be interested in their history, as Sweet said nearly a generation ago. But they do not have to remain uninterested in history. This writer has been agreeably surprised to note the interest which quickly develops when somebody somehow "gets through" to people the stirring story of Methodism in former years. The thrill of the story "got through" to the writer at the sesquicentennial of the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Baltimore in 1934 and at the Bicentennial of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience at Savannah in 1938, and he will be eternally grateful for it.

Great souls had a part in the making of the history of early American Methodism. It will be a great thing for Methodism if in the Bicentennial year we can catch something of the spirit of the men and women who planted Methodism on these shores. Think of
George Shadford, one of the missionaries whom John Wesley sent to America in 1773. Wesley wrote to Shadford that it was time for him to take the boat for the New World, and then added, “I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America. Publish your message in the open face of the sun, and do all the good you can.”

Think of Francis Asbury and his courage, determination and loyalty when the Revolution came. Thomas Rankin, his superior, wrote to Asbury in 1775 that it was time for the English preachers to return home. Asbury replied that for him to leave would be like a shepherd forsaking his flock in time of danger, and that he was determined to remain in America no matter what happened to him. It took courage for Asbury to “go it alone.” It meant criticism, misunderstanding, loneliness. It meant that he never returned to England even for a visit in the remaining forty-one years of his life, though he desired to do so. It is challenging to remember the long road of hardship and sacrifice which Asbury followed as the leader of the Methodist circuit riders up and down and across the newly born nation in America, establishing that iron discipline of life for himself and his preachers apart from which Methodism would not have known such phenomenal success in the early days. Think of the tremendous faith and confidence of those young preachers at the Christmas Conference in 1784. About sixty of them gathered, spent a week organizing the Methodist Episcopal Church, and then went out to spread scriptural holiness over these lands. If Methodists today can be inspired by the faith, sacrifice, and heroism of the early American Methodists, the Bicentennial Celebration will be worthwhile.

To put it another way, the Bicentennial Celebration should develop in us a sense of participation, the realization on the part of Methodists today that we along with the pioneers are actors in a tremendous drama. Methodist history is not something dead and gone; it is rather something alive and growing; it is an unfinished drama to which this generation of Methodists should make a significant contribution. When we think of Philip Embury and Robert Strawbridge, Captain Thomas Webb and Barbara Heck, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, Francis Asbury and William Watters, and many others, we should understand that “they, without us, cannot be made perfect.” With them we will seek to become more alive to God and spread the flame in our day.

In the preface of his Letters to Young Churches, J. B. Phillips says something about the early Christians which may be appropriately applied to the stalwart men and women who blazed the trails in the beginning years of early American Methodism. Phillips says, “Many Christians today talk about the ‘difficulties of our times’. . . . It is heartening to remember that this faith took root and flourished

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amazingly in conditions that would have killed anything less vital in a matter of weeks. These early Christians were on fire with the conviction that they had become, through Christ, literally sons of God; they were pioneers of a new humanity, founders of a new kingdom. They still speak to us across the centuries. Perhaps if we believed what they believed, we might achieve what they achieved." 13

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