A clergyman in The Methodist Church is normally called “Reverend,” “Pastor,” or “Minister,” but his historic title is “Traveling Preacher.”

The section of the Discipline of the Methodist Church dealing with the Ministry is captioned “Traveling Preacher.” The traveling preacher is one who originally “traveled” around the circuit and was under orders to go where he was appointed. Methodism’s origins are rooted in the traveling preacher, of whom Francis Asbury is the premier example.

Arriving in America on Sunday, October 27, 1771, Asbury’s journeys kept him in ceaseless travel throughout the country until the very eve of his death, at the home of George Arnold, about 20 miles from Fredericksburg, Virginia. He had been making his way through Tennessee and the Carolinas, heading for Baltimore and the General Conference of 1816, when the end came on March 31, 1816. Shortly before, his Journal had recorded, “I live in God, moment by moment.”

“The Reverend Bishop Asbury, North America,” was the way Thomas Coke once addressed a letter to him. And Ezra Tipple, in his biography of Asbury, says that when he preached in Washington, nearly everyone turned out to hear “this man that rambles through the United States.” Once Asbury declared, “I am always on the wing, but it is for God.” A man of “no settled dwelling place,” his home was the saddle, his family, the preachers, and members of the societies, his wealth in heaven, his heart with his Lord and his life in transit for the redemption of the world.

By 1773, shortly after Francis Asbury came to America, there were 10 Methodist preachers and 1,116 in the Methodist societies. By 1844, some 70 years later, there were 4,000 preachers and 1,000,000 members.

Early Methodism was sparked by its traveling preachers, and Asbury, during his lifetime, ordained some 4,000 of them. This is our heritage.

The genius of the Methodist movement rested in them:

They were preachers, and their proclamation of salvation related to their own experiences.
Committed to Christ, they had a clear call and a sure Gospel.
They sought out the people. They went where the people were.
They combined evangelistic urgency with social concern. As early as 1780 they were requiring preachers to release slaves and on one occasion Asbury and Coke called on General Washington to join them in urging the legislature to outlaw slavery.
They censored those who distilled grain to make liquor.
They preached in the poor houses and prisons.
They were Methodists: they organized the converts into societies.
They were adaptable: they moved outside the organized church, but sought to stay within it.
The sacraments were means to grace, not fixed ends in themselves.
Doctrine was subordinate to the realities of Christian experience.

This is our heritage.
In the concept of the traveling preacher is also our hope.
Any religious movement that can again penetrate our nation, in my judgment, must have something of these same dimensions:

There must be a preaching ministry, out where the people are, who are beyond the church.
We must get out beyond the walls of our sanctuaries and beyond the fixed rituals of the church to speak a sure word of saving grace and hope on the growing edge of the secularism of our day.
There must be a committed ministry, with a sure Word for a generation caught between the despairing atheism of Sartre and Camus, and the ludicrous Christian atheism of Altizer and Hamilton.
This ministry must combine evangelism and social concern.
The sure Word of saving grace for the transformation of the individual, must be within the context of agonizing concern for the transformation of the world.

Any religious breakthrough beyond the church must have a method that will preserve its impact and give shepherding care to each soul.
The “class meeting” and “society” are workable units in our own time, though now we talk of prayer cells, coffee houses and of group dynamics.
We used to talk about revival. Now we speak about the need for renewal. The fundamentals are the same.
Any religious breakthrough will have to be adaptable.

In an earlier day liturgies were changed to suit the people’s needs. Music for the soul was developed in terms of the musical interests of the times.
In an earlier day, people heard the Word around the campfire, on the courthouse steps, in a home, at a brush arbor revival or at a summer camp meeting as well as in chapel and in church.
So again, we must learn how to preach the Gospel where the lost are to be found.

The nation and the world desperately need spiritual renewal.
Our own land cannot sustain a democracy without an undergirding morality, and morals, if they are to be lifted above the level of expediency, must be grounded in eternal values.
Our morality, and our democracy, are fast eroding now, because a growing portion of the nation has lost all concept of the eternal.
So, the idea of the traveling preacher is both our heritage and our hope.
What are the specifics of this hope:
Out of our churches must come an enlarged stream of young men and women with vision who will be willing to give themselves to the penetration of our times with the Gospel of Christ for the sake of a lost world and a sufficient Savior.

Our seminaries must be able to send out trained and dedicated men who are capable of renewing the church and leading the church toward the redemption of the world.

The masses will languish until men and women come into Christian leadership and willingly, like Asbury, lay their all on the altar of love—for Christ’s sake and the world’s sake.

In the traveling preacher and all he symbolizes is to be found Methodism’s genius—this is our peculiar contribution to the ecumenical movement—and to the renewal of the church in our time.