

# AMERICAN METHODISM'S BICENTENNIAL— AN INSPIRING CELEBRATION

Baltimore, Maryland, April 21-24, 1966

(Resumé of the three-day Celebration, prepared by Winston Taylor of Methodist Information and Dr. Albea Godbold.)

American Methodism celebrated its Bicentennial, April 21-24, at Baltimore, Maryland, with an eye and ear to the future as well as to the past. The theme "Forever Beginning" was projected through history and heritage and through challenge to involvement in society and in the ecumenical movement. Some 2,300 persons registered for the occasion, and crowds at the evening mass meetings ranged up to 9,000.

Bishop Gerald Kennedy of Los Angeles delivered the keynote address to a large audience on the evening of April 21, saying that Methodism's strength is a theology of freedom and salvation in which every man can think of himself as forever beginning until he dies. He declared that we are forever beginning to discover how God made us more than we think we are. Drs. W. Walker Lee and Robert A. Nelson, Presidents, respectively, of the British and Irish Methodist Conferences, were among fraternal delegates who addressed the gathering following Bishop Kennedy's message.

President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke on Friday night, April 22. He referred to the Social Creed in the Methodist *Discipline* as a "perfect description of the American ideal" in that it calls for "social justice for all men." The President pledged that he will strive for a more bountiful America and will endeavor to "break the grip of disease and ignorance and discrimination and poverty" in this land.

Nineteen historical papers dealing with Methodist biography, doctrine, and movements were presented on the mornings of April 22 and 23. Surprisingly they were heard by large audiences, as many as 500 people attending in some instances. The Methodist Historical Association will publish the papers in a book.

On Friday afternoon the assembly had some "forward looking history" spelled out for it in "Vital Issues Facing the Church"—race, peace, society, and the arts. Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights movements leader, said the church should reaffirm the "immorality of racial segregation," educate against the notion of inferior races, help overcome poverty, and further the principle of non-violent change as against the dangers of violent action.

Centering attention on ecumenism on Saturday afternoon and evening, the assembly heard Bishop F. Gerald Ensley, Columbus, Ohio, declare that the ecumenical movement is "the great religious fact of our time." He said the requirements for the successful

church of the future will be "viable organization," "responsible stewardship," and "service to the total life of man." A panel of four denominational leaders warned that spiritual unity is more important than organizational unity in the days ahead. They voiced reservations about the present-day consultations looking toward the merging of eight religious denominations in America. However, all were enthusiastic about the proposed merger of the Methodist and the Evangelical United Brethren churches.

On Saturday evening Lawrence Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore and Charles C. Parlin, a Methodist layman who is one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches, spoke to an expectant audience. A choir of nearly 2,000 voices led the music. It was the first time a Roman Catholic cardinal had ever addressed a national Methodist gathering. Cardinal Shehan recalled the long period in which Roman Catholics and Protestants stressed their differences and remained poles apart. Then he detailed actions of the Second Vatican Council which have contributed to a new spirit of understanding and cooperation. He said that today we are emphasizing "the many doctrines which we hold in common." He counseled continued inter-faith dialogue, mutual prayer, and extended cooperation in "meeting and solving the great problems common to our society."

In his turn Mr. Parlin lauded "the breath-taking speed" at which inter-faith tensions are disappearing in our time. He spoke of the forms of unity which we are witnessing in Christendom today—co-operation, councils, and organic union both within and across "families of churches." In his opinion, the followers of the ecumenically minded John Wesley can do no less than explore the ways, means, and possibilities of broader Christian unity. He declared that "we have fallen short of the ecumenical goal" until Protestants and Catholics find a conciliar and working relationship. Mr. Parlin drew applause from the audience when he proposed that the Association of Methodist Historical Societies explore the possibility of a joint Bicentennial Celebration in Baltimore in 1984 with Roman Catholics. He pointed out that the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was organized in Baltimore in 1784, while the first Roman Catholic archbishop (of Baltimore) in America was appointed very near that date.

What began primarily as a means of publicity, the "Saddlebags East" reenactment of circuit-riding preachers of other days, not only attracted the attention of the nation to the Bicentennial Celebration, but also proved to be one of the program highlights and an inspirational venture. All twelve of the riders reached Baltimore on time, after covering a total of more than 7,500 miles on horseback. Their preaching and publicity along their routes, covering the eastern half of the nation, were credited as being a notable venture in evangelism. Garbed in styles of a century ago, the riders attracted

autograph-seeking groups wherever they went in Baltimore, and they spoke to some 1,100 persons at the largest luncheon held during the celebration. Church leaders are exploring the possibility of continuing evangelistic witnessing on a regional basis by means of circuit riders.

The Bicentennial observance looked ahead as it recognized youth. Young people conducted the entire closing service, and honors were accorded Miss Barbara Ruttle of Ballingrane Church, Ireland, a descendant of Barbara Ruckle Heck, who brought about the first Methodist preaching in New York City in 1766; to Robert Benjamin Strawbridge of Baltimore, whose namesake ancestor started the first Methodist congregations in Maryland and Virginia; and to Bonnie Lou Muliolis of Danbury, Connecticut, who was introduced as "Miss Methodist Student Nurse" of 1966; Bonnie Lou is in training at Brooklyn Methodist Hospital, the oldest Methodist institution of its kind in America.

Another look to the future was taken when a time capsule was buried on Sunday afternoon in the Bishops' Lot at Mount Olivet Cemetery, Baltimore, alongside the remains of Francis Asbury and other early American Methodist bishops. Containing many current documents of the church and souvenirs of the Bicentennial Celebration, along with tape-recorded messages from bishops and other Methodist leaders, the capsule is to be raised by the Methodists of the year 2066 A.D. Prayer for the capsule ceremony was led by retired Bishop James H. Straughn of Baltimore, lone survivor of the three bishops who clasped hands at Kansas City in 1939 to symbolize the merging of three branches of American Methodism to form The Methodist Church. Bishop Straughn expressed confidence that "God has given the other two bishops a holiday to see this" event. He petitioned that "we be dedicated to the time in which we live who are controlled by time, but who look forward to sharing eternity." One of the enclosures in the capsule was a message from the General Bicentennial Committee, expressing the hope that today's Methodists will "find a solution to the old problem—the oneness of all men in Christ in utter defiance of difference of race."

The climactic feature of the three-day celebration was a drama, "Warm Hearts and Saddlebags," by the Reverend Dr. E. Jerry Walker, Duluth, Minnesota. The drama featured an interplay of scenes of Methodism in history and today. It interspersed both serious and humorous incidents out of Methodism's past with serious calls for the church to "recapture the spirit and discipline" of former days. The presentation was interrupted by frequent applause, as when it was suggested that the church of today might do well to stress "total commitment" even if it should mean fewer members. The audience was startled when a group of Negroes appeared in the back of the auditorium carrying signs and singing "We Shall Over-

come." They were of course a part of the drama. They declared that the play was "ignoring the main issue confronting the church" from the beginning until today. This led into a portrayal of the ways in which the church has taken stands for freedom and justice in the past, along with its pledge today to seek true brotherhood among all men.

Among other occurrences of the week was the complete closing down of the bar in the center of the headquarters hotel lobby.

Sponsors of the Bicentennial Celebration, under authority of the General Conference of 1964, was the American Association of Methodist Historical Societies, Bishop T. Otto Nall, President, and Dr. Albea Godbold, Executive Secretary. A General Bicentennial Committee, Bishop Paul N. Garber, Raleigh, North Carolina, Chairman, and eleven Sub-Committees, spent more than a year in preparation for the Celebration. Bishop John Wesley Lord, Washington, and Dr. Frederick E. Maser, Old St. George's Church, Philadelphia, served as Co-Chairmen of the Program Committee. Local Chairman was the Reverend Edwin Schell, Baltimore pastor and Methodist historian.

The "main tent" also drew a number of before and after "side shows" in other Methodist meetings, including the General Board of Evangelism, the Commission on Worship, the first Methodist Convocation on Worship, and the Coordinating Council.