METHODOISM—FOREVER BEGINNING

Bishop T. Otto Noll

The apt phrase that Charles Wesley gave us for our Bicentennial promises much for the decades and centuries ahead. Ours has been not so much a Methodist church as a Methodist movement, a restless and restless movement of the Spirit and the people. We must keep it so.

Those of us who, standing between the “no more” of the past and the “not yet” of the future, are entrusted with the task of interpreting our Methodist history, would do well to have both immediate and long range objectives. We cannot deserve or inherit the past unless we continue the Methodist interest in experience and experiment in the present.

We can help our people catch the spirit of Methodist movement by stimulating visits to shrines, landmarks and new sites that are meaningful in Methodist history. We can promote publication ventures like the Wesley Works Project, the Encyclopedia of World Methodism, Conference and church histories, and even paper back biographies of Methodist greats of other days. (With our concern for the future, the history of the Central Jurisdiction has almost escaped us.) We can initiate writing projects among young Methodists.

Furthermore, we can develop our archives, bringing together significant records and documents that ought not to be lost. We can bring together Methodistica (strange word for treasures that are often as close as the attic or a church basement) in depositories in our colleges and Annual Conference headquarters. A Union Catalog of Methodist historical materials will be published soon.

We can find ways to continue the evangelistic impact of the travel-stained but light-hearted circuit riders at Baltimore. How they stirred us with a glimpse of Methodism before we institutionalized our procedures, formalized our patterns, and laid the foundations for ecclesiastical self-consciousness and self-sufficiency. They whetted our interest in the new evangelism of a Methodist movement that is forever beginning.

These are immediate objectives; others beckon us down through the years. We can reach forward toward the promise of the future by developing history-minded attitudes in our people. College and seminary teaching, preaching that takes account of the new history (as different as the new mathematics!), history conscious curricular materials—these are a few of the methods.

We can strengthen relationships with other countries where there is a Methodist heritage. Fortunately, the World Methodist Council and the American Association of Methodist Historical
Societies have been associated closely, and many churches with some Methodist antecedents (like the United Church of Canada) have been eager to send representatives to the World Methodist Council. The unique contribution of our Methodist movement must not be lost in any ecumenical ventures that emerge. Christianity needs the Methodist spirit that is forever beginning new experiments and forever seeking new experiences of God.

Many other objectives for history-minded Methodists will present themselves. And we shall be forever celebrating (in the new and blessed meaning of that word) as we are forever beginning.