BEGINNINGS OF THE METHODIST PROTESTANT CHURCH IN IOWA

by Jim W. Morris

The Methodist Protestant Church was, from the time of its beginnings in the controversies of the 1820’s, strongest in the northern states. From this strength, it grew westward as the frontier moved across the new nation. And though it was not nearly so influential in the development of the frontier as was the Methodist Episcopal Church, its contributions should not go unheralded.

The issues which were debated so heatedly in the East and which resulted in the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church, had far less meaning on the harsh, sparsely settled frontier. There, a Methodist was a Methodist. Most of the pioneers had not heard of the controversy, and distinctions between Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal work are not clearly drawn.

Also, on the frontier there were not as many ordained ministers, or even local preachers, as a romanticized conception of the frontier would indicate. The gospel was conveyed for the most part by laymen, and laymen on the frontier had little time for the quarrels of their eastern brethren.

For these reasons, although the Methodist work in Iowa began after the division, it is difficult to determine the exact origins of the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa. The population of the area was small, and in the earliest years there were not enough Methodists in the state for any sort of competition to exist between the two main branches of Methodist work in Iowa. It was not until 1843 that both denominations were established in a single town or community (Winfield, in Henry County, Iowa).

The first known Methodist Protestant minister in Iowa was Oliver Atwood, who worked in Muscatine County, near present-day Moscow. He was a licensed exhorter in the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. He was left without assignment in 1837, and moved to Iowa in the summer of that year, where he began farming. He did some work among his neighbors, few though they were, and held preaching services in his home. However, he did not begin a work which continued. After some three months in the area, he was killed (in September) by the Sauk Indians in reprisal for the murder by soldiers of a brother of Chief Poweshiek. With his death, work in the vicinity died.

The town of Winchester, in Van Buren County, Iowa, boasted a Methodist Protestant church “from its founding.” The town was

2 Ibid.
3 This date is arrived at by a comparison of the minutes of the Illinois Conference, Methodist Protestant Church, with the minutes of the Illinois Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church.
4 History of Van Buren County, a pamphlet issued at the centennial observance of the Van Buren County Fair, 1951.
platted February 29, 1840. It is certain that the church did not have a building for some years, and probably met in the homes of members. It did not have a regularly appointed minister in those early years, even though it sent reports yearly to the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. And even though it had no church building, several of the earlier meetings of the Iowa Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church met at Winchester. It retained an important place in the history of the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa over a period of several decades. (Finally the town disappeared, and the church went with it. Winchester is now a cornfield.)

The first organized class of the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa was organized, insofar as can be determined, by a society in English River township in Washington County in 1841. It was organized by William Patterson in the early summer of that year, and a class meeting was recorded as having been held May 3 of that year.

Patterson was an elder in the Methodist Protestant Church, and had been left without appointment by his conference, the Illinois Conference, for the express purpose of working in the new territory of Iowa. Rev. Patterson left the work in the hands of Joseph Hamilton, a physician who held a deacon’s license. The society was absorbed, however, into the Methodist Episcopal society in the community in the winter of 1842-43.

Other societies and classes were formed in the frontier communities along the Mississippi River and its tributaries; none of them, however, was able to exist for any length of time.

One of the earliest fields of labor undertaken by the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa was also one of the most ambitious. The new community of Iowa City had been designated the capital of the Territory of Iowa in 1841, after Burlington had been so designated from the time of the granting of statehood to Wisconsin and the simultaneous organization of the territory of Iowa in 1838. The new legislature, meeting for the first time in Iowa City, noted the lack of “the influence of religion” in its midst and offered a quarter block to each church which would erect upon it a building for religious or educational purposes. This offer was made April 24, 1841.

John Libby, a Methodist Protestant minister and a representative to the territory of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was instrumental in the passing of this piece of legislation. Immediately following its passage, he organized a Methodist Protestant Society on May 4, the lot was obtained the next day, and construction of a two-story brick building was begun. At the time the structure, which was rapidly rushed to completion, had the distinction of being the only brick building, the only two-story building, and the only church in the

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5 Journal of the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1840.
6 The Iowa Standard, April 24, 1841.
town. The cornerstone was laid on May 13, with Governor Robert Lucas as the principal speaker.7

The church was used for most of the large public gatherings in the new capital for some years; it was used from 1842 till 1844 as the meeting house of the territorial legislature. It also housed various educational enterprises, and was the earliest home of the Iowa School for the Blind, now located at Vinton, Iowa.8 The first public school in Iowa City met there, and the academic department of Iowa City College met there for some time.

One of the founders of the church, William B. Snyder, issued the first religious periodical ever printed in Iowa, the Iowa City Colporteur.9 It was launched in 1841. However, in the sparsely settled and religiously indifferent Iowa countryside there were few who were interested in such a periodical, and the little monthly died after only six issues.10

William Snyder and his brother, Thomas, had been leaders in the reform movement in Cincinnati. Both had come west to set up a dry-goods store in Iowa City. Both were men of some financial means, and both brought their interest in reform with them. Without their presence, the church could not have been built, as they contributed over two-thirds of the cost of the structure. Their contribution was in the form of a loan, and this amount ($1200) eventually contributed to the demise of the church.

The congregation at Iowa City was not strong enough to support its ambitious program. Having gone into debt to erect its building, it was unable to support it. In addition, its minister, Rev. Libby, found it necessary to preach at the Universalist church in Iowa City to remain financially solvent. Of a proposed salary of $250, he received only $43.81.11 The church, in that year, was reported to have had 23 members.12

Despite the small congregation and the financial problems encountered, a greater and still more ostentatious project was begun the following year. Libby was moved, and William K. Talbott was appointed to the Iowa City field. Since Iowa City at that time lacked a school, Talbott opened a common school with himself as the teacher.

The Snyder brothers gave encouragement to their young pastor. A preparatory department was added, and then a "college." Attached to this "college" was a theological department to assist young men who were preparing themselves for the ministry.

This whole educational complex, probably the first of its kind in Iowa, was entered into with all seriousness. The first catalog of the school states that it was designed to "afford the youth of Iowa City

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p. 63.
10 Ibid.
and the surrounding area facilities for completing their education without leaving home." 13

Its first year found the school with a faculty of four, including W. B. Snyder who was listed as Professor of Sacred Music. The quality of the faculty may be indicated by the inclusion of a dry-goods salesman as a professor. A charter for the school was granted by the territorial legislature meeting at that time in Iowa City. 14

The ambitious nature of this project was perhaps best indicated by the choice of presidents for the institution. The trustees selected Nicholas Snethen, a man of great stature in the Methodist Protestant Church. Snethen, a native of New England, had become a Methodist minister in 1791 at the age of 22. He was an early minister in Vermont and for two years had been Bishop Asbury's traveling companion. 15

When the controversy over lay representation arose in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Snethen took the side of the reformers. He was a contributor to both Mutual Rights and The Wesleyan Repository. It was Snethen who prepared the reformers' memorial to the General Conference of 1828. 16

When the reformers broke away, Snethen went with them. He was president of the Maryland Annual Conference for a number of years, and at least twice he served as President of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. For several years he served the Methodist Protestant Church in Cincinnati, the largest church in the Methodist Protestant connection. Here he became acquainted with the Snyder brothers. He had been a leader in the Methodist Protestant educational work, and had been active in public affairs.

At 75 years of age, Snethen accepted the offer of the presidency of the new school which was to bear his name. He visited Iowa City during October of 1844, during which time he acted as chaplain at the opening session of the first state constitutional convention. 17 Soon, however, he left to attend the session of the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. There he secured an endorsement for his school, and a system of subscription was set up. A set of rules for the administration of the seminary was outlined, with the objectives being defined as follows:

"to educate gratuitously the children of itinerant preachers and ministers of the Methodist Protestant Church, as well as young men who are desirous of preparing for the Gospel ministry." 18

Having promised to assume his duties as soon as a class of six students was assembled, Snethen returned to his Cincinnati home

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13 Snethen Seminary Bulletin, I (1843), p. 3.
14 Harvey, op. cit., p. 64.
17 Harvey, op. cit., p. 64.
where he proceeded to write some 100 lectures, select textbooks, and perform other duties preparatory to his work at the school. In March the class was assembled, and Snethen set out for Iowa City. He stopped to visit his sister and son in Princeton, Indiana; there he contracted pneumonia, and died May 30, 1845.19

Even though his death was a blow to the seminary, it probably would not have survived in any event. In a town of some 1000 persons, six academies had sprung up. All of them folded. Talbott kept Snethen Seminary open for one year at his own expense. Then in conjunction with some of the faculty members of these other institutions, he founded Iowa City University, which met at first in the Methodist Protestant church building. This University was the precursor of the State University of Iowa.

Not only did the Snethen Seminary disappear; the church at Iowa City also vanished from the records of the Annual Conference in Illinois. By 1845 the membership had declined to ten, and the church did not ask for a minister, as it was felt that one could not be supported. The following year the Iowa City society was not even represented on the first rolls of the Iowa Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church.

The building was lost because of non-payment of the debt, and the Methodist Episcopal Church took over the building (and the debt).20 This whole legal transaction occurred under a cloud, and the issue was not finally settled until 1879, when the Methodist Protestant Church finally relinquished its claim for a settlement of $300.21

When the undertaking in Iowa City is viewed in the light of the strength of the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa at this time, the unfortunate end of these plans is not surprising. There was, in the whole state, only one minister who was regularly appointed (Talbott). There were in addition only two other circuits in the state, with a total of 37 preaching points, and only six groups organized as churches. Both of these circuits were served by laymen.

There were, in the whole territory of Iowa, only 235 members reported to the Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1845, the last year the record of the Iowa churches is to be found in the statistics of that Conference. In the following year, the Iowa Annual Conference of The Methodist Protestant Church was formed.

There had been considerable development of the Methodist Protestant Church within Iowa before the time of the establishment of the Iowa Annual Conference, but most of this development had taken place entirely apart from other fields in the state. The relationship with the Illinois Annual Conference was very tenuous. The work was done for the most part by ministers who had requested the supernumery relationship from other conferences and had moved

20 Aumer, op. cit., p. 280.
21 Harvey, op. cit., p. 65.
to Iowa as pioneers, by missionaries sent out by the Illinois Annual Conference, or by laymen.

But in May, 1846, the General Conference, meeting in Cincinnati, authorized the establishment of an Iowa Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. In October of that same year, the Methodist Protestant ministers of Iowa met in the New School Presbyterian Church in Iowa City to organize the Iowa Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. Those present were William Patterson, George Pierson, Oliver Kellogg, Alexander Caldwell, Preston Friend, and Henry Nesmith. The last two were lay representatives.

The Conference was called to order by William Collins of the Illinois Annual Conference, an emissary to aid in the organization of the new conference. The meeting was opened by scripture reading and a sermon by Collins, who was elected an honorary member of the conference, and served on most important committees. He acted also as mediator in a fruitless attempt to straighten out the affairs of the Iowa City church and seminary.

The Iowa City situation was discussed at length, but it had become so confused that no easy solution was possible. Heavy debts complicated the problem.

The ranks of the Annual Conference were swollen this first session by the addition of three ministerial members. One was also rejected. The characters of all the ministers present were passed.

Apparently work had been done in some fields in the previous year. Three circuits made reports to the conference, with salaries for the coming year to total $1020.

The permanent organization of the conference resulted in the election of William Patterson as President for the year to come. He was to give half service to the district, as that was all the time for which he could be paid.

Appointments were made by a stationing committee a day prior to the adjournment of the conference. This was done in order to allow dissatisfied brethren time in which to appeal for adjustment of their appointments. No such appeals were forthcoming, however.

Rules were set up regarding what constituted a mission, a circuit, and a station. Missions were regarded as fields of work with less than 40 members. Circuits were fields of work with 40 members or more. A church was designated a station when it came to have 60 members. Missions were not subject to the constitution and discipline of the Methodist Protestant Church, but circuits and stations

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
were.\textsuperscript{28} There were three circuits and two missions which were recognized as fields of labor at this first Annual Conference.\textsuperscript{29}

An attempt to resurrect the Snethen Seminary was made. New trustees were appointed, and every minister was made an agent of the seminary to receive donations.\textsuperscript{30}

This brought to a close the first session of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in Iowa. The little church now had an organization which could facilitate and coordinate work in the state.