

COKESBURY COLLEGE, AN 18th CENTURY EXPERIMENTAL MODEL

By Gerald O. McCulloh

In American Methodism educational institutions have been the structured expressions of a founding vision which has never been surrendered. At Cokesbury College that vision first took form as a working model upon these American shores.

The first American Methodist ministers assembled in General Conference in Baltimore on December 24, 1784, and organized themselves as the Methodist Episcopal Church. One of their first actions in that famous Christmas Conference was "to make all needful provisions for the wants of the people who looked to them for pastoral oversight and religious instruction."¹ One of these provisions was for the founding of Cokesbury College. It stemmed from a vision born in the mind of Francis Asbury, a dream engendered in conversation with John Dickens at Fishing Creek in North Carolina in 1779; the vision was formulated into a plan in discussion with Thomas Coke after his arrival in America in 1784. The vision foresaw an institution to provide for the education of the youth in Methodist families and others who would accept the rigors of the kind of educational experience which was proposed. In the founding of Kingswood School at Bath in England, and of Cokesbury College at Abingdon in Maryland, the Methodists in both the old and new worlds were led by a vision of the growth of vital religion together with sound learning. This vision has been and continues to be a constant characteristic of the Methodist movement.

John Wesley's experience at Oxford, his founding of schools and his lifelong publishing of educational materials for the Methodist people served to set a pattern that has guided and begotten the educational vision of every subsequent generation of Methodists. The clear intent is that when mind and heart are in full accord, then life shall make a vaster music than is possible when either knowledge or piety is permitted to try to go it alone without the other.

The United Brethren in Christ, a branch of The Evangelical United Brethren Church with whom the Methodists have recently united, had a similar vision of their educational responsibility. Bishop Philip William Otterbein, who shared in the first Methodist ordination in America and founded the United Brethren in Christ, was born into the household of the rector of the Latin School in Herborn, Germany. Throughout his life and ministry he encouraged an educational concern among his people and supported local schools attached to his churches.

Wherever Methodism has gone she has given attention to instruction. Our church in Sunday schools, day schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries at home and abroad, has maintained its

¹ A. W. Cummings, *The Early Schools* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1886), pp. 20 f.

educational vision. It has been my personal privilege to share in the educational enterprise of Methodism throughout the years of my own education and subsequent ministry in this country, in Great Britain, in the Orient, the isles of the sea, and as far down under as Wesley College, at Perth in Western Australia. My own college years were begun in a United Brethren-Methodist Protestant college, Kansas City University, in Kansas City, Kansas. My minister father and I were graduates of a pioneer Methodist college, Baker University, in the prairie state of Kansas. I am a lifelong debtor to the Methodist vision of educational institutions.

But let us turn again to Cokesbury College as the first experimental model. When the edifice of which we have dedicated a replica was begun, it was almost all vision. Only twenty-five hundred dollars were in hand. The remainder of the fifty thousand was contributed by the bishops, the ministers, and by many other small gifts from a host of generous people. The size of the undertaking is seen when we are reminded that the entire membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was then about eighteen thousand.

It is true there was a difference of opinion among the founders as to whether this was to be a school or a college. The decision was formally for a college. But the distinction seems to have been somewhat fuzzy at times during the following decade. Whether school or college, the Methodists were articulating their vision and purpose of providing education for their youth.

This vision still abides. At the recent Uniting and General Conferences of The United Methodist Church, some of the most forward looking actions taken were in the field of education. These actions included resolutions on curriculum materials and methods, instruction for confirmation, the support of schools and colleges, and the new church-wide provision for a ministerial education fund. In the new union The United Methodist Church has determined to support ministerial education in significant strength.

In the Episcopal Address, the bishops through Bishop Lloyd C. Wicke renewed the vision of our institutions of higher learning in The United Methodist Church. He said:

We cannot provide educational opportunity for our entire citizenry. We can provide a quality of instruction in the classrooms, and of life upon the campuses of these institutions which bears the mark of Christian concern, insight and determination.

Academic excellence must be the bench-mark of our institutions. Their faculties should be regarded, not as civil servants, but as seekers after truth and sharers of its treasures. Students in these institutions . . . will be looked upon as persons of absolute worth, learners, adventurers, preparing for life's journey along His way.²

Thus the vision which begat Cokesbury College moves onward. It enters the life of The United Methodist Church to beckon and be-token realizations and institutions yet to be.

² The Episcopal Address of the Bishops of The United Methodist Church, Dallas, 1969, pp. 44 f.

Actuality

In the actualization of this educational vision Cokesbury College was established. In view of the careful recording of procedures at The Uniting Conference at Dallas, and having spent a significant part of my life reading minutes of Methodist conferences, I find it hard to believe that there are extant no minutes of the Christmas Conference, 1784. But such is the case. The conference began, we are informed, at 10:00 A.M., December 24, 1784, with Thomas Coke presiding as John Wesley's representative.³ After adoption of the plan for the new church upon a resolution offered by John Dickens, the conference unanimously elected Francis Asbury as superintendent, as it did also Thomas Coke. The services of ordination and consecration followed.

The church thus organized then acted in regard to the establishment of a college, named, as we know, Cokesbury for the two superintendents, and it was located at Abingdon, twenty-five miles from Baltimore. Coke's description of the location was rhapsodic. "The situation," he wrote, "delights me more than ever. There is not, I believe, a point of it from whence the eye has not a view of at least twenty miles, and in some parts the prospect extends to fifty miles in length. The water front forms one of the most beautiful views in the United States; the Chesapeake Bay, in all its grandeur, with a fine navigable river—the Susquehanna—which empties into it, lying exposed to view through a great extent of country."⁴ The inner city not then being thought to be where all the significant action is, this site being away from a population center was regarded as advantageous for the college.

The actual building was begun when the bishops had succeeded in raising two thousand five hundred dollars. The edifice was one hundred eight feet long, forty feet wide, and three stories high. This building housed the classrooms, the chapel and hall, the bedrooms, and provisions for boarding.⁵ It cost nearly forty thousand dollars.

It will be remembered that Bishop Asbury is recorded by an early biographer to have preached the foundation sermon of the college on June 5, 1785, "attired in his long silk gown, and his clerical bands floating in the breeze."⁶ He must have taken no small amount of criticism for this flight of "fancying up," for this liturgical indulgence seems to have served as a vaccination against further more serious inflection. We hear no more of gown and bands on Mr. Asbury. But Strickland, in the record of the corner-stone laying, makes this further observation regarding the Bishop:

The spirit of the Lord was with him as with Elijah at the school of the prophets at Bethel. As he dwelt upon the importance of a thorough religious

³ *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Elmer T. Clark, Editor. 3 Vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958) I, 474n.

⁴ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in 2 volumes (New York: Mason Lane, 1839) I, 240.

⁵ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Magill & Clime, 1810), 116-17.

⁶ W. P. Strickland, *The Pioneer Bishop* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1858) 163.

education, and looked forward to the effects which would result to the generations to come from the streams which would spring from his opening fountain of sanctified learning, his soul enlarged and swelled with rapturous emotion.⁷

On December 6, 1787, Asbury writes in his Journal, "We opened our college, and admitted twenty-five students. I preached on, 'Trust in the Lord and do good.'" ⁸ This is a brief mention, but it is the rapier thrust of fact. The college was opened. This vision became a working reality.

The rules were strict, the curriculum was demanding, the project was costly, and seems to have been received by the Methodist public with some misgivings. The objects were to provide educational opportunities for the sons of the married preachers and ministers, for orphans, and for the children of friends; to offer education, ". . . where learning and religion may go hand in hand; where every advantage may be obtained which may promote the prosperity of the present life, without endangering the morals and religion of the children through those temptations to which they are too much exposed in most of the public schools."⁹

The regimen of the school was rigid. The rules required early rising, no play, and rigorous study in languages, the arts and sciences. Recreation was to be taken only in agriculture, woodworking, or architecture. The students bathed under the eyes of a preceptor, and for no longer than one minute. The Cokesbury bell was the punctuating and ordering agent of the school's activities, sounding the call for rising at five, breakfast at seven, dinner at one, supper at seven, and bed at nine. We may be somewhat surprised at the name "college" when we discover that children were admitted at seven years of age.¹⁰ By 1794 however the school was incorporated and was granted the authority to award degrees as well as other scholastic privileges.¹¹ The college may have reached 100 students at its maximum enrollment.

The bishops were the examiners and seem to have exercised this function whenever their itinerating brought them to the vicinity of Abingdon.

We need not dwell on the short life and seeming ill fate of the college. A fire was discovered in a closet in the early years but was extinguished without serious damage. However, a decade after the school was established (i.e., in 1795) the school was burnt to the ground. The loss with the library was estimated at fifty thousand dollars.

How does one reckon the worth of such a decade of service? The names of two United States senators, outstanding preachers, and other distinguished citizens are traced to the student rosters. There was growth by faculty, students and the church. But these are strictly internal values.

⁷ Strickland, *op. cit.*, 164.

⁸ Asbury, *op. cit.*, I, 555.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 44 f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹ J. W. Lee, *The Illustrated History of Methodism* (New York: The Methodist Magazine Publishing Co., 1900), 268.

My own view of the value of Cokesbury College is that it demonstrated that the vision could become actual because it had been done. Asbury, in a melancholy moment, expressed the opinion that the Lord had not called the Methodists to build colleges. In this I think our revered forebear was wrong. The task of providing for religious as well as intellectual growth during the "learning years" is a task which the branches now making up United Methodism have from the first accepted and in which they have demonstrated their ability to perform. And the beginning was in this place 181 years ago with the opening of Cokesbury College.

Aftermath

Our first word was vision, our second was actualization, our third is aftermath. That which was done here at Abingdon was done again and again as the Methodists moved in mission and ministry across this continent.

Asbury's later plan provided for the establishment of schools in all parts of the country to which Methodist youth might turn for the higher branches of learning. It is true that Asbury indicated his relief from the burden of supporting Cokesbury, but within twenty-five years the General Conference (1820) passed a resolution calling for the establishing of a literary institution in every annual conference.¹² "During the 1840's and 1850's the founding of Methodist colleges became a crusade."¹³ Two hundred were founded between 1835 and 1860.

It has been estimated that Methodists have been involved in founding over a thousand schools in this nation. Today eight great universities, 121 colleges and secondary schools, 8 elementary and special schools, and 14 schools of theology in this country alone are directly related to The United Methodist Church. Student groups in more than 250 centers of learning receive sponsorship and support from Methodist leadership and finance.

Today educational institutions, procedures, and practice are in the midst of rapid change in our country as well as throughout the world. With the pyramiding of costs in higher education, and the lack of clear direction in respect to financial and other cooperation of the public and private sectors of support for the educational enterprise in the present and immediate future, we do not know what the years ahead will disclose. Perhaps entirely new patterns of church sponsorship of higher education will emerge. The university as we know it will undoubtedly take on new directions and descriptions. Yet whatever the pattern I am sure that The United Methodist Church will be active in behalf of its youth in higher education.

Steps in the union of churches already taken and toward which we confidently look through future consultations and ecumenical cooperation will further alter the shape and programs of our United

¹² *The History of American Methodism*, Emory S. Bucke, Editor. 3 vols. (New

York: Abingdon, 1964), III, 202.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Methodist institutions of higher learning. But I express both a confident hope and a firm resolve that The United Methodist Church will be attentive to the task of providing opportunities for religion and learning to go hand in hand in the "learning years" in the lives of its membership. This will include young children of seven and persons of maturer years. This will surely include ministers and lay members. This will combine the arts, culture, and sciences and the study and practice of the Christian faith and life. Perhaps campuses as we know them will soon cease to be. Educational experience in small task forces may disperse the large university centers. Educational television may return a large measure of instruction to the home.

The vision and actualization at Cokesbury has had and will have its aftermath. Its continuing influence will be felt in the life and experience of The United Methodist Church. And we shall bring our educational determination and experience to the total church of Jesus Christ in the days ahead. There is no branch in Protestantism which has more educational experience and institutional resources to bring as we share in the ecumenical realization of Christian Unity in the household of faith.

We look not only backward but forward as we celebrate this day. At Abingdon in the late 18th century there was developed an experimental working model of a Methodist educational institution. This actualization was for a time the prototype of many institutions which followed. Its aftermath will continue in the ongoing renewal of life and faith. Wherever in the church we shall succeed in the conjoining of the disciplines of learning and devotion, there the vision which we here celebrate and the model we here dedicate shall have their living memorial.