II. ENTERING THE MINISTRY

During the year he spent in his brother’s home he was influenced to join the church of which his brother was pastor. He also came to a decision to enter the Christian ministry. Doubtless his brother’s influence was a large factor, although other family influences were also important.

Having decided on the ministry as his calling, it was logical to go to the nearest Methodist college, which was Hendrix, at Conway, Arkansas. This was also his brother’s alma mater. He did not graduate—but did win a gold medal for an article on John Wesley that was published in the *Hendrix Mirror*. This event was a forerunner of a lifetime to be devoted to a study of John Wesley—and “the people called Methodists.”

Joining the Conference

In 1908 Elmer attended the St. Louis Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South at Charleston, Missouri, with no thought of taking an appointment. But his preacher brother, Charles Newton, who was nine years his senior, and S. H. Wainright, presiding elder of the St. Louis District, persuaded him to take the new work which was then being established at Thomas Station on the St. Charles Rock Road in St. Louis County. Elmer said, “I knew nothing about preaching or the ministry but I secured a register, visited around the neighborhood, and secured thirty-five charter members.”

It was during that pastorate in St. Louis that Elmer’s interest in Methodist history was continued and sharpened. He learned that John Clark, a Methodist later turned Baptist, had in 1798 preached the first Protestant sermon west of the Mississippi River and that his grave was at Bridgeton, a nearby settlement. Elmer found the grave and made a picture of the weather-beaten stone.

The 1909 session of the St. Louis Annual Conference admitted Elmer on trial, and he went to Vanderbilt University for one year. Here, he says, he learned to study and made a fair record, especially in church history. He added to his income by coaching some of the other students in church history. He also made numerous life-long friends at Vanderbilt, including Clare Purcell and Costen J. Harrell, who later became bishops, and Jesse Lee Cuninggim, who later served as president of Scarritt College for more than twenty years.

An Itinerant

At the close of the academic year he was sent to Kansas City, Missouri, to relieve the pastor of the Seventh Avenue Church, and he remained there through the summer of 1910. In the fall of that year the Conference appointed Clark to Oran, a small town in southeast Missouri. He led in a building program, and at the end
of the year a nice brick church had replaced the one-room wooden structure in Oran.

In 1911 Elmer was assigned to New Madrid on the Mississippi River in the southeastern corner of Missouri. The first Methodist preacher had arrived at New Madrid in 1810 and the charge appeared under its own name in 1812. Clark found the old quarterly conference records which dated from the beginning, and wrote a history of the church entitled, "One Hundred Years of New Madrid Methodism."

New Madrid was a predominantly Roman Catholic community, and saloons had been there as long as people could remember. Elmer decided to challenge the liquor interest, though he received little encouragement. He began by staging a spectacular revival which featured Steve Burke as the preacher. Burke was a former federal marshal in Oklahoma and captor of a noted band of outlaws. Conversions were numerous and some of the most prominent men in the town were received into the church. Clark organized committees, circulated petitions, called for an election, and found himself in the midst of a bitter campaign. About that time the area experienced one of the worst floods in its history. People were evacuated from their homes and the only means of travel was by boat. Clark's anticipation of events to come caused him to buy all available gasoline in the county, and on election day the "dry" boats were the only ones able to operate, and the election was won by a large majority.

In 1912 Clark was sent to University City Church in St. Louis. Christy Memorial Church, St. Louis, was his appointment for 1913, and there again he led in the erection of a new building. In 1914 he was appointed to the Shaw Avenue Church, St. Louis, where he employed visitation evangelism to reach the people, an evangelistic method which was later widely used in the entire church.

The Church and Politics

During his years in Missouri he learned something of the ins and outs of politics. He became well acquainted with several prominent state political leaders—state senators, ward bosses, the governor, and national figures such as William Jennings Bryan, with whom he developed a personal friendship. The chief political activity of churchmen in those years was against the illegal—and legal—sale of alcoholic beverages, and Elmer Clark was active for a few years in opposing the liquor interests. However, he reported that he felt forced into a number of situations that were personally distasteful to him. At the same time, he recognized the need to correct some of the social wrongs of his times.