

**“AND ARE WE YET ALIVE”:  
REFLECTIONS ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**CHARLES YRIGOYEN, JR.**

In 1749, Charles Wesley published a poem in a collection titled, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. The poem was located in the section of the book designated “Hymns for Christian Friends.” Since the time of the Wesleys, Charles’ poem has been the opening hymn of the British Methodist Conference and has often opened many other annual conferences of world Methodism. Some of its words, but not all, are especially appropriate for the celebration of the first twenty years of our Historical Society. Many of you know the hymn, #553 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*: “And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face? Glory and praise to Jesus give for his redeeming grace.”

Just twenty years ago this week our Society was born here at Lake Junaluska. Three hundred fifty people were present for the launching. The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Albert C. Outler, world renowned scholar of the Wesleys, outstanding theologian, and leading ecumenist. At the time we did not know it would be Outler’s last public address, the consummation of a brilliant career. Some of those present this evening attended that event and became charter members of the Society. Others attending that evening have crossed the threshold from this life to the next.

The organization of the denomination’s Historical Society was an indication of United Methodist interest in our church’s history. Interest in our past began at least as early as John Wesley’s attempt to lay out for his people and others an account of the origins and early development of the movement he and his brother founded. John’s *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1749),<sup>1</sup> is a brief narrative of Methodism’s birth and development into its second decade. In Wesley’s estimation, the people called Methodists, their sympathizers, and even their opponents needed to know how and why God raised up the Methodist movement and the manner in which it evolved.

As Methodism took root in America and became a growing church, American Methodist historians took up their pens to tell its story. By its third decade the first major history of the church, Jesse Lee’s, *Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* (1810), was published. Over the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, The Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:253-281.

next two hundred years a number of important works on American Methodist history appeared including those by Nathan Bangs,<sup>2</sup> Abel Stevens,<sup>3</sup> Matthew Simpson,<sup>4</sup> Holland McTyeire,<sup>5</sup> James M. Buckley,<sup>6</sup> and Halford Luccock and Paul Hutchinson,<sup>7</sup> names unfamiliar to most outside the academic community. Generally, these studies told Methodism’s story in an optimistic and triumphal manner. After all, despite its severe nineteenth-century problems with schisms and slavery, American Methodism was a numerical success by any measure and its prestige had grown enormously across the nation.

Since those earlier works historians of American Methodism have continued to unearth and interpret the stories of its events and personalities, to measure its strength, and to assess its influence on national and world culture. Fresh examinations of primary and secondary sources have revealed stories which had been told poorly, or never at all. New interpretations have been formulated, misreadings and misunderstandings corrected, and increasing attention paid to the cultural context of Wesley’s American offspring. A steady stream of books and articles, too many to mention, have continued to narrate and interpret our history. A small sampling includes the three-volume *The History of American Methodism*,<sup>8</sup> Frederick A. Norwood’s, *The Story of American Methodism*,<sup>9</sup> J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller’s, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*,<sup>10</sup> the recent six-volume United Methodist History of Mission series,<sup>11</sup> as well as a host of surveys, regional, gender, and biographical studies, and other books and articles. Later this year we will see a fresh new biography of Francis Asbury and probably next year a new survey volume titled *The Methodist Experience in America*, Volume One, by Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. From the vast literature on Methodist history recently published and yet to appear, it appears that interest in it is not waning.

Furthermore, a quick survey of our *Books of Discipline* from the earliest years to the present shows that summary accounts of our denominational

---

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols. (New York: Mason and Lane, 1838-1841).

<sup>3</sup> Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, 4 vols. (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1864-1867).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1876).

<sup>5</sup> Holland McTyeire, *A History of Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1884).

<sup>6</sup> James M. Buckley, *A History of Methodism in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1898).

<sup>7</sup> Halford Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926). A revised edition of this work included two additional chapters. See Halford Luccock, Paul Hutchinson, and Robert W. Goodloe, *The Story of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1946).

<sup>8</sup> *The History of American Methodism*, Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 2003-2005).

history have occupied a premier spot in our official books of order. We really don't know who we are, from whence we have come, and how God has blessed us (often in spite of ourselves) without remembering our past. The 2008 *Book of Discipline*, as its predecessors, includes a "Historical Statement," and a ten-page section on "Our Doctrinal History." One wonders how many United Methodists pay much attention to these two important and informative documents. There are also hundreds, even thousands, of local church and annual conference histories. Some of them are simple one-page bulletin inserts; others sizeable volumes printed on slick paper with color photographs, all of them indications of our respect for our past.

There are, of course, other signs that history is an important key to our identity. Our connectional system reflects respect for history as a signpost to who we are. Every local church is "strongly recommended" to elect a church historian and may have a committee on records and history (§247.5). Our *Discipline* requires every annual conference to name members to a conference commission on archives and history and to maintain a depository (§641). Every jurisdiction is directed to have a jurisdictional commission on archives and history (§532). At the general church level the General Commission on Archives and History, one of the thirteen general agencies of our denomination, financially supported by the church and occupying an outstanding facility with a superb staff on the Drew University campus in Madison, New Jersey, is evidence that United Methodism cherishes its history. Few denominations provide the cooperation and funding, or possess a facility which we too often take for granted. The Archives and History Center in Madison, completed in 1982, houses an exceptional treasure trove of historical records, documents, photographs, and artifacts related to United Methodism and its predecessors. Some of you have visited the Center and are familiar with its rich collections of primary and secondary sources. At every level of the connection, at least in the United States, there is confirmation of our respect for history.

We gather to recognize yet another evidence of our interest in United Methodist history, the official Historical Society of our denomination. While it was formally born in 1989, its lineage reaches back to ancestor societies in both the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches.

The Evangelical Association (later, Evangelical Church) and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ demonstrated their high regard for history when each authorized published accounts of their past within a few decades of their founding. In 1885, the United Brethren formed a denominational Historical Society. In 1922, when two churches—the United Evangelical Church and the Evangelical Association, divided for several years, united to form the Evangelical Church—the Historical Society of the Evangelical Church was organized and an official depository established at Evangelical School of Theology in Reading, Pennsylvania. When the United Brethren and Evangelicals joined in 1946 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church, its General Conference authorized the creation of an Historical Society and established a depository at United Theological Seminary in

Dayton, Ohio. The Society offered no memberships; it was governed by a fifteen-member Board of Trustees (eight elected by the General Conference and seven through their general church positions). The Historical Society of the Evangelical United Brethren Church is a predecessor to our current organization.

The story of organizing historical societies on the Methodist side of our parentage is likewise important. It began in May, 1923, in Baltimore, Maryland, when a few interested persons officially formed the Association of Methodist Historical Societies in which annual conference and other Methodist historical societies could hold membership. Its first annual meeting was held on December 10, 1925, in Philadelphia. The Association’s purpose was “. . . cooperation in the preservation, presentation and display of Methodist historical material and the dissemination of information concerning the same.” A few years later the Association was given official recognition by the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1936) and Methodist Episcopal Church, South (1938). After the Methodist Church was created in 1939 its first General Conference endorsed the Association and provided for historical associations in jurisdictions and annual conferences.<sup>12</sup>

Another significant development was the formation of the International Methodist Historical Society, organized in 1947 at the World Methodist Conference in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was the forerunner of the World Methodist Historical Society for which Dr. Robert J. Williams effectively serves as General Secretary.

When the union of the Evangelical United Brethren the Methodist churches was consummated in 1968 to create the United Methodist Church the two denominational historical societies were united to form the General Commission on Archives and History with headquarters, library, and depository at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. The newly-formed church made provision for a denominational historical society in its 1968 *Book of Discipline* (§1407)—“[The general] commission may organize a Historical Society of the United Methodist Church and encourage individuals to become members of it for the purpose of promoting interest in the study and preservation of the history of The United Methodist Church and its antecedents . . . . Once each quadrennium the [general] commission may hold a Historical Convocation.” Accepting Drew University’s invitation to locate its ministry in a new building on its campus, the General Commission moved its offices and library to the new facility in 1982. Over the next five years the Commission began to lay plans to inaugurate both a Historical Society and an Historical Convocation. These came to reality in 1989 with the first annual meeting of the Society at the first quadrennial Historical Convocation—just twenty

---

<sup>12</sup> By 1948 the Northeastern, Southeastern, and North Central jurisdictions had Historical Associations and 75 annual conferences had more or less active historical societies. The South Central and Western jurisdictions were organized in 1952 and 1964 respectively.

years ago.<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning the Historical Society's duties have incorporated an effort to keep alive the stories of our past by "promoting interest in the study, preservation, and dissemination of [information regarding] the history and heritage of The United Methodist Church and its antecedents."

During its first year the Historical Society's membership grew to 1,117. In addition to invitations to attend its annual meetings, members received a subscription to *Methodist History* (published quarterly by the General Commission since 1962 as the official historical journal of United Methodism) and the quarterly newsletter *Historian's Digest* (also published by the General Commission). Annual meetings of the Society were held in a variety of locations across the country

In his inaugural presidential address to the Society, Dr. Robert W. Sledge, while disclaiming the "risky business" of occupying the role of a prophet, projected a vision for its future. He recognized the important role of history in our faith and our denominational history as a source of renewal, and spoke of the tasks that lay before the new Society.<sup>14</sup>

This is a good a time to pay tribute to a few of those who in our lifetimes pioneered the organizational life of our denominational history and laid the foundations for both its connectional structure and the origins of our Historical Society. They were friends on earth, now they are friends above—Elmer T. Clark, Albea Godbold, John Ness, and Louise Queen. We also pause to recognize those who have occupied the presidency of our Society—Rob Sledge, Faith Richardson, John Sims, and Pat Thompson.

This twentieth anniversary occasion is an appropriate time not only to remember our Society's past, but also to ponder our future. It begins with a question—perhaps the most important question we could ask. Do we think history is important? Not merely as an exercise of entertainment or nostalgia. But a necessary discipline to help us understand who we are, where God has led us, and how our history may assist in meeting the challenge of mission and ministry in our time. If history is important, then there is a place to provide for it in our connectional structure and a place for our Historical Society.

There are several secondary matters which also deserve our consideration. First, whenever and wherever the Society gathers, and whatever it does, it should reflect our commitment to the important place which history occupies in our church's life and ministry. Consideration of our history may inform, inspire, and guide us to better understand who we are, from whence

---

<sup>13</sup> For more detail on the predecessor historical bodies see Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), II:1128-1129. See also C. Faith Richardson, *A Methodist Chronicle: Organized Attempts at Maintaining American Methodist History Leading to the Historical Society of The United Methodist Church and Its Beginnings* (1999). Richardson's booklet is the only published source tracing the origin and development of the Historical Society through 1999.

<sup>14</sup> The address was published. See Robert W. Sledge, "Envisioning the Future of our Society" in *Methodist History*, 28:2 (January 1990), 133-142.

we have come, and how we may respond to God’s direction in our time. Our meetings, our programs, our publications should not only inquire about the past, but assist us to employ insights from the past as we grapple with current issues and decisions.

Second, we need to be concerned about the current status of our membership. Initially, twenty years ago we enrolled more than 1,100 members. The very next year approximately 30% of the membership did not renew. Ever since, our membership has dwindled.

If we believe that the Society has an important role to play in our denominational life, it deserves our support. Each of us might not only renew our Society membership, but also identify prospects for membership and invite their participation. Furthermore, a critical feature of our annual meetings must be attractive and worthy programs if we are to keep newly recruited members.

Third, identifying and selecting the best leadership for our Society is a continuing priority for our life together. Our leadership must be committed, competent, and visionary—leading us in developing a respect for the Society’s place in our church.

Fourth, we affirm that the Society partners with the General Commission on Archives and History in the collection and conservation of records, documents, photographs, artifacts and any other materials of historical importance to the life of our local church, annual conference, jurisdiction, and general church life. We join the General Commission in promoting efforts of careful historical research and writing in the local church, annual conference, and general church. Practical workshops for local church and annual conference leaders, such as those held during this week’s meeting, are a venue for this.

“And are we yet alive?” On this anniversary occasion we are grateful to God that we are alive and recognize that in Dale Patterson’s words “our past has a future” in our connectional concern for history—a prominent partner of which is the Historical Society of The United Methodist Church.