The Transition from Anglo to Mexican-American Leadership in the Rio Grande Conference

by Alfredo Náñez

The Constitution of the United Methodist Church declares that the Annual Conference is the fundamental body of the church,¹ yet, in practice, this fact has been far from being so in the mission work of the church, both in and outside of the United States.

In the particular case of the Rio Grande Conference, with its long history of over a hundred years, this discrepancy between the declaration of the Constitution and its practical application has been very obvious.

This paper will deal with the transition from Anglo leadership to Spanish-speaking leadership and with the effort of the conference over a long period of time to be recognized as a full annual conference, free from the domination of individuals or agencies. Because of the nature of its work and of its dependence, financial and otherwise, upon the church in general, the conference had not received this recognition in the past. The church and its agencies should give an annual conference its full recognition of the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are specified in the Constitution, whether financially, numerically or otherwise an annual conference is large or small, strong or weak.

To be able to understand this matter more fully, it is necessary to know something of the history of the Spanish-speaking work in the Southwest. It is important to keep in mind that the first Methodist missionaries who brought evangelical Christianity to the Spanish-speaking people of the region after the Declaration of Texas Independence in 1836 and the winning of the so-called "Mexican War" of 1846, did so not only because they were under the influence of the spirit of revivalism of the time, or because they saw a great spiritual need, but also because they considered the Spanish-speaking population in need of enlightenment.

By the time the Methodist Church started work among the Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest, it had already divided into the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the former doing most of its work in New Mexico and the latter in Texas.

From the very beginning the two branches of Methodism had a dual system of the ministry—a system with double standards. This system continued until recently and affected the work significantly. This double

¹ The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 1972. Article IV, Par. 10
standard brought about a discrepancy between the missionaries and the Spanish-speaking ministers. The missionaries were always Anglos. Although they were under appointment by the bishop, they were employees of the Board of Missions with better salaries and special benefits that followed them wherever they were assigned. They generally served as administrators or as teachers. Very seldom did they serve in the pastorate.

For example, Alexander Sutherland, one of the great missionaries of the M. E. Church, South, was appointed in 1874 as presiding elder of the first Mexican Missionary District of the West Texas Conference (now the Southwest Texas Conference) and he served continuously as presiding elder of different districts until 1893 when he was appointed as pastor of an English-speaking congregation in Chihuahua, Mexico. He was dissatisfied with this appointment and located at the end of that year.

Another great missionary of the M. E. Church, South, F. S. Onderdonk served continuously in a position of leadership in Texas from his appointment as Superintendent of the Texas Mexican Mission in 1914, later as presiding elder of the Texas Mexican Conference, until his death in 1936.

In New Mexico, with the Methodist Episcopal Church, a similar situation existed. Thomas Harwood served from 1872 until his death in 1917 as Superintendent of the mission with the exception of the last three years when he was appointed president of the Boys’ School in Albuquerque.

It is true that in both Texas and in New Mexico some Spanish-speaking ministers were also appointed as presiding elders, but they did not have status as missionaries and they occupied a secondary position. In Texas, in fact, before the appointment of the first Spanish-speaking presiding elder, Santiago Tafolla in 1881, Sutherland had frankly expressed his thinking that the Mexican ministers were not qualified to assume administrative positions.

However, both Sutherland and Harwood believed in developing a Spanish-speaking ministry and strived toward this end. The advantages were that they knew the language and the idiosyncracies of the Spanish-speaking population but also because it would be less expensive financially.

The first Spanish-speaking annual conference of the M. E. Church, South—the Mexican Border Conference—was organized in 1885 with four districts. Two of these, the San Antonio and the Monclova districts were under Santiago Tafolla and Alejandro de León respectively. The other two were under missionaries, J. D. Scoggins and Alexander Sutherland, the latter acting as general superintendent of the Conference.

From 1885 to 1914 the Spanish-speaking work of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South embraced the work in northern Mexico also.
The work extended as far as the western state of Sonora and in the United States as far as California. To help solve the problem of distances due to the vast extent of this territory, the Northwest Mexican Conference was organized in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1890. The dominance of the missionaries can be noted in the fact that during all these years not a single Spanish-speaking minister was elected delegate to General Conference.

It was during this same period that as a sign of protest against this domination, a group of leaders from several Protestant denominations in Mexico, many of whom were Methodists, left their churches and organized the Evangelical Mexican Church, an autonomous church formed entirely of Mexicans. This anti-missionary movement extended into Texas and for a few years affected the Spanish-speaking work of the Methodist Church in the Southwest, especially around San Antonio.

Due to the Mexican Revolution and other circumstances, the work in the United States had to be separated from the work in Mexico. In 1914 two missions were organized in our country: the Texas Mexican Mission covering the territory east of the Pecos River in Texas and the Pacific Mexican Mission west of the Pecos River. This latter one did include a few appointments in Mexico. In 1918 it became the Western Mexican Mission.

Throughout the history of these two missions, from their organization in 1914 to 1930, their superintendents were Anglo missionaries: Frank S. Onderdonk for the Texas Mexican Mission, J. F. Corbin, J. A. Phillips, J. P. Lancaster, Joseph Thacker, Lawrence Reynolds, and R. J. Parker for the Western Mexican Mission, which had two districts and the presiding elders acted as superintendents.

In these missions the dominance of the Anglo missionaries was complete. The only sign of dissatisfaction can be detected in the 1917 meeting of the Texas Mexican Mission when on the first ballot for delegates to the General Conference, a Spanish-speaking clergyman, E. B. Vargas, was elected. Due to a technicality, he was disqualified and F. S. Onderdonk was elected instead.

In 1929 the missions sent memorials to the General Conference requesting that they be elevated to the status of Annual Conferences. The memorials were accepted and in 1930 two new conferences were organized: the Texas Mexican Conference and the Western Mexican Conference.

The Texas Mexican Conference was to have two districts with F. S. Onderdonk and Frank Ramos as presiding elders. The Western Mexican Conference also was to have two districts, El Paso and Los Angeles, with R. J. Parker and Lawrence Reynolds as presiding elders. Since three of the presiding elders had missionary status, there was no financial problem for they were supported directly by the General Board of Missions. In the case of Frank Ramos, he was also appointed to serve a
local church in order to take care of his salary.

A significant incident occurred in the Western Mexican Conference in 1934, which shows that they were resentful of missionary dominance. The General Conference which met that year passed a Constitutional Amendment limiting the period of service of the presiding elders to four consecutive years "except in special cases in the mission fields and in the Texas Mexican and the Western Mexican Conferences." The Western Mexican Conference in its annual meeting of that same year voted overwhelmingly against the amendment because of the exceptions it specified. The exceptions had not been petitioned by the conferences. They had been sponsored by the delegates to the General Conference who were Anglos.

In the Texas Mexican Conference several things indicated that a change in leadership would come about. The very fact that one of the presiding elders, Frank Ramos, was a Spanish-speaking minister was very significant. The four-year term of service was applied to him and towards the end of 1934 the writer was appointed to take his place as presiding elder of the then Valley District.

That same year the writer was also recommended by the Conference as a clerical candidate to the General Board of Missions. Upon election he became the first Spanish-speaking minister to serve on one of the general boards of the church. This presented an opportunity to press for the discontinuance of the double standard of the ministry, a matter of vital importance for the future development of the conference.

The new secretary for Home Missions, Grover Emmons, heard with interest the arguments in favor of a single standard for the ministry in the Spanish-speaking work. During his time the practice of employing Anglo workers with missionary status was discontinued. Since that time several Anglos have served and are serving within the conference, but on an equal basis with the Spanish-speaking ministers.

Frank S. Onderdonk, the great missionary leader who did so much to extend the Spanish-speaking work, passed away in 1936. Immediately upon his death, several missionaries from other conferences made application to fill his place. But since Onderdonk had been the only missionary working within the Texas Mexican Conference at the time, the presiding bishop, Hiram A. Boaz, did not deem it wise to bring in an outsider for the leadership position. He appointed Frank Ramos, who had earlier served as presiding elder, to take Onderdonks’s place. So for the first time in the history of the conference the leadership was placed in the hands of Mexican-Americans.

In 1938 both Spanish-speaking conferences elected Spanish-speaking clerical delegates to the Uniting Methodist General Conference.

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2 *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1934, P. 128.5
which met in Kansas City and for the last time the lay delegates were wives of missionaries, Mrs. F. S. Onderdonk and Mrs. R. J. Parker.

The unification of Methodism in 1939 started a new chapter in the work of the Methodist Church among the Spanish-speaking people in Texas and New Mexico.

Representatives from the Texas Mexican Conference, the Western Mexican Conference and what was left of the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New Mexico and El Paso, Texas, met in Dallas, November 2-5, 1939, to reorganize the work in the two states into a single conference.

The new annual conference was organized November 3, under the name of Southwest Mexican Conference. It was to embrace all the Spanish-speaking work in the states of Texas and New Mexico. It was divided into three districts, the El Paso, Northern and Southern districts with N. B. Stump, Frank Ramos and José Espino as superintendents respectively.3

In 1940 the Southwest Mexican Conference sent to the General Conference two memorials which clearly show the yearning of the group to be on the same footing with the other annual conferences of The Methodist Church.

One of the memorials dealt with the elimination of the exception for the term of service of the district superintendents in the Spanish-speaking work. The second memorial requested that the special provision specified in the Discipline for membership for ministers in the Spanish-speaking annual conferences be eliminated. They wanted the requirements to be the same as those of the church in general.

These two memorials were accepted and the Southwest Mexican Conference became a part of the Methodist connection without any exceptions or limitations.

The territory covered by the new conference overlapped all or part of six English-speaking conferences of the South Central Jurisdiction and two of the Central Jurisdiction.

The constituency in this vast territory was heterogeneous. In the El Paso District the majority of the people were descendents of the original Spanish settlers who had come to that section during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The wave of immigrants in the first quarter of the twentieth century did not go to New Mexico.

In Texas, although many of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants were descendents of the original Spanish settlers, the majority were only first or second generation Americans of Mexican parentage. To be able to bring a sense of unity in the conference from such a diversity of people was no easy task.

3 In 1941 the name of El Paso District was changed to Western District.
The very name of the conference, because it contained the word "Mexican," became a source of dissension from the very beginning. The word had been used in all the names which had been given to the Spanish-speaking work in Texas: Mexican Border Mission District, Mexican Border Conference, Northwest Mexican Conference, Pacific Mexican Mission; Texas Mexican Mission, Western Mexican Mission, Texas Mexican Conference and Western Mexican Conference.

In New Mexico the Methodist Episcopal Church in naming the organizations working among the Spanish-speaking people never used the word "Mexican." The names used were: Spanish-speaking District, Spanish Mission, Southwest Spanish Mission, Latin American Provisional Conference.

Finally, the annual conference of 1947 asked the Jurisdictional Conference to change the name. This was done in El Paso, Texas in 1948 and it became the Rio Grande Annual Conference.

In the efforts to become an annual conference, not only legally but also in practice, some serious problems were encountered. One was the support of the district superintendents who in the past had been missionaries. Covering such a large geographical area, the conference was first divided into three districts, later into four, although the membership per district is relatively small.

Another problem has been the adequate support of the ministry. This problem has lingered because of the nature of the constituency and the small size of the congregations. Related to the support of the ministry has been the development of a pension program. In 1940 the amount of $395.70 was raised for the support of five retired ministers and widows of ministers. By 1975 the conference had some $100,000, which made it possible to pay sixty dollars per year of service to its retired clergy.

In spite of its limitations, the Rio Grande Conference has always accepted and paid one hundred per cent of its share of World Service and has contributed gladly to every cause the Church has sponsored.

During the forties, as Missionary Secretary and Executive Secretary for the Board of Education, this writer kept pressing for recognition of the importance of the Spanish-speaking work by the National Division of the Board of Missions. These efforts were finally heeded and in 1948 a director for Spanish-speaking work was appointed with residence in San Antonio. The appointment was timely and the work benefitted from it. Unfortunately the National Division did not make a job description for the position, particularly in regard to the director's administrative relationship to the Rio Grande Conference. The director was left on his own with promotional, administrative and financial responsibilities. The paternalistic approach to the work created from the beginning resentments, friction and misunderstandings between the leadership of the conference and that office.

Because of these conflicts, Edward Carothers, the new Associate
General Secretary for the National Division, called a meeting in 1965 at Southern Methodist University to consider these matters. Out of that meeting came the suggestion that upon the retirement of the director for Spanish-speaking work, the new appointee should serve under the Joint Commission of Education and Cultivation of the Board of Missions with no administrative responsibilities in the conference. The suggestion was accepted by the Board of Missions and in May, when the Rio Grande Conference met in annual session in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the new policy was announced by Dr. Carothers and Miss Mary Lou Barnwell, Assistant General Secretary of Home Fields. They both stated that the new director for Spanish-speaking work would serve under the Joint Commission of Education and Cultivation rather than the National Division and that he was not to have any administrative responsibilities in the conference. The responsibility of the new appointee was to be in the field of promotion and interpretation. They also announced that the Conference Board of Missions was to be the body to make decisions about the minimum salaries for pastors receiving mission aid and for church extension projects, as well as all recommendations related to the conference board’s responsibilities to the National Division.

This new policy was reiterated by Harry Komuro and Darwin Andrus, executives of the National Division, when they met with the Board of Missions of the Rio Grande Conference on April 22, 1966, in Houston, Texas. Dr. Komuro introduced the Rev. William Cheyne, the new director for Spanish-speaking work, to the Rev. Roy D. Barton, chairman, and members of the conference board. Quoting Dr. Komuro in part:

> The active administration of the mission aid program and related services is the responsibility of the National Division working through this Board of Missions of the Rio Grande Annual Conference. This means that the Board of Missions of the Rio Grande Conference has the responsibility of determining the actual askings for the various items needed for salary support, administrative costs, church extension loans, grants, etc.

With the official announcement of this new policy, the relationship of the conference to the National Division of the General Board of Missions was clarified and another new day was started for the Rio Grande Conference. The conference was to be trusted by the National Division like any other conference in Methodism, regardless of its numerical or financial limitations. With the declaration of this new policy plus the earlier end of the double standard of the ministry, the Rio Grande Conference came of age.

In closing, please allow me to recall the words of Bishop Hiram A. Boaz on the eve of a meeting in 1936 which he had called in San Antonio to name a replacement for Dr. Frank S. Onderdonk. We had been talking for over two hours about the future of our work in preparation for the

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meeting the following morning. As he walked with me to the door of his hotel room, he said: "Alfredo, I intend to appoint one of your men to take Dr. Onderdonk's place. The time has come for the leadership of the conference to be in your hands. If you fail, it will be your failure, not mine nor the Church's failure. But I am confident of your success." His words have been well justified. In spite of all the difficulties that followed, the Rio Grande Conference has kept pressing forward and today, with many of its leaders serving on national boards, the Rio Grande Annual Conference is on an equal basis with the other conferences of the United Methodist Church.