Nicholas Snethen lived from November 15, 1769, until May 30, 1845.

During a period that spanned over one-half a century, Nicholas Snethen enriched American Methodism as an itinerant minister, author, publisher, orator, educator, presiding official at various annual conferences and several historic conferences, advocate of democratic policies in church government, and as one of the founders of the Methodist Protestant Church.

He was born six years before the signing of the American Declaration of Independence, while this country was still a part of the British Empire, and he died on the eve of an unpopular war with Mexico, only sixteen years before the bombardment at Fort Sumter which saw the beginning of what has been called “the Second American Revolution.”

Nicholas Snethen was a close friend of the sometimes rather autocratic Bishop Francis Asbury and yet he became the “ministerial father of Lay-Representation in America.” Indeed, one Methodist historian has referred to Snethen in the somewhat paradoxical terms, “Prophet, Priest, and King of Methodist lay-representation.”

For Snethen, like John Wesley, the whole world, it seemed, was his parish. At least, the world of America in the Early National Period, including New England, the Mid-Atlantic States, the South, and the Mid-West (where he was to end his ministry and his life) — provided an extended field for Snethen’s Christian labors.

By all standards of comparison, Nicholas Snethen was one of the most distinguished leaders who belonged to the second generation of American Methodist ministers: that group of men who evolved in roles of important leadership during the closing years of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth century.

Snethen was one of the earliest Methodists to espouse the issues which eventually led to the establishment of the Methodist

---

1Edward J. Drinkhouse, The History of Methodist Reform and the Methodist Protestant Church, I (Baltimore, 1899), p. 4; also, II, p. 21.

2Ibid., II, p. 341. “Snethen’s contention from 1800 to his death was for laical rights — he was a lay-representative pure and simple.” I, p. 458. Dr. Lyman Edwyn Davis has referred to Snethen as “the first among equals in the bright galaxy of the fathers and founders of the Methodist Protestant Church.” Lyman E. Davis, Democratic Methodism in America (New York, 1921), p. 209.
Protestant Church: opposition to episcopacy and the presiding eldership and support of lay representation in all of the councils of the church. His deeply-felt convictions concerning laity rights and democratic representation may be seen today, from a purely objective, non-denominational point-of-view, to coincide significantly with the democratic fervor and climate of the 1820s, which culminated with the election of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States only a few short weeks before the assembling of delegates at the first annual conference of the Methodist Protestant Church at Whitaker's Chapel, near Enfield, in historic Halifax County, North Carolina, on December 19-20, 1828.3

Without question, Snethen is worthy of our recognition and our appreciation and Methodist historians should pause to pay tribute to this outstanding Methodist leader in this, the 150th anniversary year of the founding of the former Methodist Protestant Church.

In looking at the various references to Nicholas Snethen which appear in the histories of the Methodist Protestant Church, one is impressed by the many areas of leadership in which the man was accorded a place of preeminence. More than any other single leader of the democratic movement within Methodism in the 1820s, Snethen is referred to with superlative terms.

He is cited as one of the most eloquent of the early Methodist speakers.4 Bishop Asbury, himself, with whom Snethen traveled for several years at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is said to have referred to Snethen as his "silver trumpet."5 Methodist Protestant historian, Ancel H. Bassett, considered Snethen to be "a man of extraordinary pulpit power" who was also a "profound scholar."6

In an article entitled, "Our Leaders of the First Quarter Century," written for The Methodist Protestant magazine in connection with the centennial celebration of 1928, Dr. Frank T. Benson has left a vivid picture of Nicholas Snethen as a man "great in body with a fine classical head, covered with dark brown hair, luminous in countenance shining with 'the rays of intelligence,
benignity and love.’”7 Benson refers to the “massive intellect” of this man who was a “pioneer by nature, but prepared by grace.”

He was an orator whose passion was so tremendous that he moved his audience with rapture and dismay. In the awful stress of his words he sometimes fell in the pulpit overcome with the intense emotion of his stirred soul. Thousands were converted under his ministry. He was a statesman bold and fearless. He was profound and convincing upon the floor of the great councils of the church. In the pulpit and upon the forum he was a master of men. He lived a saint and died in the perfect confidence of his faith, completing his life with a triumphant death. For him awaited the fadeless crown of those who have been heroic in the strife.8

Snethen was familiar with the Greek, Latin and French languages as well as with the various branches of science and was “considered almost a cyclopedia of general information, never at a loss in any subject in literature.”9

Over fifty years ago, Dr. Lyman Edwyn Davis, in his volume, Democratic Methodism in America, cited Snethen as being at the head of the “roll of honor” among the founders of the Methodist Protestant Church and complimented his

...heaven-born genius for persuasive leadership...his equal proficiency in the knowledge of books and of men...his well-poised and noble character...his sincere and thorough devotion to the rights of the people, and, above all else...these lofty human qualities were enriched and crowned with an unfailling faith in God and in the final triumph of liberty in every province of the Kingdom of Christ.10

From such epitaphs Snethen seems, quite obviously, to have been a man whose philosophy and ideals were far ahead of his own day. He seems amazingly contemporary and would, one feels, be very much at home in the democratic upsurge within the present-day United Methodist Church. Methodist Protestant historian Thomas H. Colhouer declared many years ago that Snethen not only seemed “to hear the footstep of coming generations, but by intuition to anticipate their wants and the means and manner of supplying them. His zeal for the cause of Christ was as great as his sagacity, and (was) limited only by his ability to do good.”11

Snethen has been credited as “the father of camp meetings

7Centennial Anniversary of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1828-1928, Memorial Volume (Baltimore, 1928), p. 87. See, also, the description of Snethen, given by an “early friend,” and quoted in Bassett, op. cit., p. 401.
8Centennial Anniversary, op. cit., p. 87. Snethen’s picture appears on page 11 of this volume under which there is a caption referring to him as the “man most prominent in advocating the reform of the government of the Methodist Episcopal Church so as to admit laymen into the Councils of the Church...”
9Bassett, op. cit., p. 408. Snethen had “great versatility of talent, a voice of wonderful timbre and penetration, education above his peers, deep spirituality, and developed a mind more philosophical and logically prescient than any other man ever produced by early Methodism.” Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, pp. 482-483.
10Davis, op. cit., p. 56.
11Thomas Colhouer, as quoted in Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, p. 341.
among the Methodists." Indeed, he held the first camp meeting in Maryland in 1803 and in September of the following year attended and participated in the first camp meeting in the State of New York. One of the people present for this camp meeting later recalled "the wonderful displays of the power of God under a sermon ... from the text: 'The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God.'" As a result of his recognized oratorical ability, Snethen could, it was observed, "move vast congregations as forest trees are moved by mighty winds."

Snethen has been cited as a "power in the Christian literature of his day." He served as the Corresponding Secretary of the Union Society founded in Frederick County, Maryland, and he contributed frequently to *The Wesleyan Repository and Religious Intelligencer*, a semi-monthly periodical which first appeared on April 12, 1821. This paper was printed at Trenton, New Jersey, and was edited by William S. Stockton. It, and its successor, *The Mutual Rights*, to which Snethen was a prolific contributor, was devoted to the principle of lay representation within church government. As a result of the liberal sentiments expressed in these papers, they were condemned by the hierarchy of the church and were secretly subscribed to by many supporters of the reform movement and were widely circulated among them.

In 1834, Nicholas Snethen became one of the co-editors of *The Methodist Protestant*, which was published in Baltimore. He was to become the author of two books, one published in 1835 and the other in 1839, on the Methodist Protestant movement.

---

12Bassett, op. cit., p. 407. For an interesting account of the development of the camp meeting among the Methodists, see: Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists*, (Baltimore, 1810), pp. 279-280. Lee does not credit Snethen with being the founder of the camp meeting.


14Bassett, op. cit.


17Davis, op. cit., p. 58.

18Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, pp. 31-33.

19Snethen collected the essays he had written for the reform papers (1820-1829) and published them in a volume entitled, *Snethen on Representation*, in 1835. In these essays, Snethen stated his views on representation and the church government. "This work should have a place in the library of every Methodist Protestant. To those of us, his fellow-labourers in the cause of representation, who have read his essays many times over, there is still found, on a reperusal, a freshness and excellence that never fails to please and instruct." James R. Williams, *History of the Methodist Protestant Church*, (Baltimore, 1843), pp. 329-330. The Methodist Protestant Book Committee published *The Identifier of the Ministers and Members of the Methodist Protestant Church*, by Snethen, in 1839. James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House*, I (Nashville, 1968), p. 288.
Snethen was chosen in 1836 to serve as the president of Dearborn College, a newly-founded institution located near Lawrenceburg, Indiana. Unfortunately this school was destroyed by fire and discontinued three years later. In 1844, Snethen accepted an invitation to serve as the president of a seminary to be known as “Snethen Seminary” (or “Snethen School for Young Ministers”) which was to be located in Iowa City, but his death two years later prevented any active service in this worthy endeavor.

Nicholas Snethen was certainly no ordinary man nor was he an ordinary preacher nor was he, in any sense of the word, an ordinary Methodist.

A native of Long Island, New York, he was converted at the age of 21 and entered the Methodist itinerancy in 1794. For the following four or five years he served Methodist circuits in Fairfield and Tolland, Connecticut (1794 and 1795), Vershire, Vermont (1796), and at Portland, Maine (1797).

In 1796, he was ordained as a deacon and in 1800 he was made an elder.

Snethen was stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1799. He was to spend some four years, at different times, as minister within the Baltimore area. He was stationed in New York for two years.

Snethen served as Bishop Asbury’s traveling companion for several years and often filled Asbury’s place as preacher and presiding officer in the various annual conferences that had come into existence within the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Snethen was stationed in Georgetown in 1809 and soon thereafter was elected to serve as the chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. In this capacity, he was to become a friend of such well-known statesmen of the day as Henry Clay and John Randolph of Roanoke.

There can be little doubt that the experience of being associated with men who were active in guiding the business of Congress inspired and impressed Snethen, for after his retirement from the itinerancy and his assumption of the status of a local

---

21 Davis, op. cit., p. 57.
23 Drinkhouse, op. cit., I, p. 495.
minister in Frederick County, Maryland, he was induced to accept the nomination of the Federalist Party for a seat in Congress.

There is an interesting and amusing account of a debate in this political contest.

The opposing candidate, a Mr. Gaither, was a gentleman of great influence and popularity in the community, while Mr. Snethen stood unrivaled as a pulpit orator. Once it was arranged for the two candidates to meet for a public discussion. On the occasion, a vast assemblage of people were brought together. Mr. Snethen delivered an address of great clearness and power, in which it was supposed that he fully carried away his audience.

When Mr. Gaither rose to respond, he undertook no reply, but very pleasantly complimented the former speaker for his very able deliverance. He uttered not a word of disparagement, or even criticism, but proceeded, however, to state some reasons why he considered that the people should elect himself to go to Congress, without taking his eloquent friend from a still higher calling, for which (Snethen) was . . . so eminently qualified. 'For,' said he, 'Mr. Snethen is too eloquent a man in the house of God, to be spared from that sacred work to go to Congress!' This expression, so wittily, and yet so kindly uttered, at once caused an outburst of applause, which rang through the entire audience. Mr. Snethen heartily joined in the merriment, and being at that time of portly proportions, it is said that he fairly shook his sides with laughter. The result was, the people elected Mr. Gaither to go to Congress, and Mr. Snethen to continue his eloquent services, in the house of God.25

The politician within Snethen was not silenced, however, by this experience, for we find that he was later also an unsuccessful candidate in his bid for a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates.

Snethen was a member of three General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church — in 1800, when he served as the secretary of the conference, and in 1804 and in 1812. He was to have the distinction of presiding at the annual conference which convened at Mount Gerrizim, Kentucky, on October 2, 1803, the only Methodist conference to have been held, at that time, in the west.26

At the General Conference of 1812, which assembled in Baltimore, Snethen proposed that the nomination of presiding elders by the bishops be confirmed by the various annual conferences. He actively debated on this proposition, which was lost by a vote of 49 to 43. Snethen later declared that he would never appear again upon the floor of any General Conference to legislate for the church unless he was sent by the vote of the governed, both laity and ministerial.27

Apparently, Snethen's liberal views on church government


26This was near Ruddle's Mills, Bourbon County, Kentucky. Basset, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

frequently caused discussion between him and Bishop Asbury. The two men, one is led to believe, talked with great freedom on the question of unlimited episcopal prerogatives and, despite their differences in opinion, the friendship remained between the two leaders to the close of Asbury's life.28

Snethen criticized the blind and obstinate attachment of many colonial Americans to the tyranny of the political government of pre-revolutionary days. He wrote: "Absolute government is wrong in principle, and confidence in it is wrong . . . Men are given to change, but principles are immortal." He admonished Asbury for what Snethen termed his "English prejudices."29

In 1822, Snethen wrote:
When Mr. Asbury used to contrive to get the votes of the General Conferences to request him to continue to serve the connection (another) . . . four years, that circumstance first set us to thinking whether it would be lawful, or expedient, to have an actual reelection of bishops, or choose them only for a term of years; and the strongest objection to such a plan seemed to us, like to the divine right of kings, viz.: they are the Lord's anointed, and so we left it.30

But, Snethen also wrote in 1822:
The bishops will make the presiding elders and the elders the bishops. Mutual interests will give rise to mutual fears. No sensibilities are more instinctive than those which belong to ambition. All this commerce for places may be carried on by dumb signals or indirect hints.31

Snethen was to state further:
Truly, if the people care not how the Church is governed, their governors will, in process of time, care little how they govern them. This indifference is one of the awful and undoubted evidences of the effects of an absolute government.32

As the issue of lay representation and ecclesiastical powers became more and more a subject for concern and debate among Methodist leaders in the early and mid-1820s, Nicholas Snethen became more and more vocal about his own thoughts and convictions.

"Constitutions were designed to set bounds to power," he wrote. "The people of the United States, in 1787, made a constitution to prevent absolute monarchy, not to confirm it. The barons of England met at Runnymede to set bounds to the power of the kings, and not to form a great charter of despotism . . ."33

29Ibid., p. 527; also, Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, p. 21.
30Ibid., I, p. 493.
31Ibid., p. 527.
32Ibid., p. 424; Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, p. 20.
33Ibid., II, pp. 15-16. Henry Clay observed of the Methodist Protestant Church: "I am glad I have lived to see the day when the founders of a church have been wise enough to frame a church polity which is modeled after the republican principles of the United States." Day, op. cit., p. 11.
Drawing an analogy between the political and religious struggle for greater representation, Snethen declared:

For bishops and traveling preachers to employ ... restrictions only to restrain the hands of those who labor to promote liberty makes them appear so much like tyrants that, let them assert to the contrary ever so loudly, people will say, "Actions speak louder than words!"

Snethen further wrote: "It cannot be long, I am fully persuaded, before the traveling preachers must give up their supremacy." In 1823, Snethen wrote, nay, predicted:

Is it not evident, that if the friends and patrons of the legislative rights of the church are resolved to maintain them ... and the traveling preachers refuse to surrender them, there must be a division? ... let the Church give the traveling preachers a reasonable time and a fair opportunity to make a surrender with as much willingness as possible.

Snethen observed that: "To inform and not divide is much more difficult in Church than in State." He advised, in August, 1823: "Let us furnish history with at least one example of a church achieving its rights from the hands of its preachers, without the loss of confidence and affection, and without division."

"Church representation," Snethen wrote, "is perfectly compatible with any fair construction of either the restrictions of episcopacy and of the general superintendency." He realized, he said, that it would "require time and judicious management" for the traveling preachers to overcome their attitudes, but, he emphatically stated: "I place the greatest reliance upon time."

In a series of letters addressed to the "Reformers" throughout the Methodist Episcopal Church, Snethen urged the use of petitions. "But if they remain inflexible ... we then (must) proceed to organize ourselves into a kind of patriotic societies, for the purpose of obtaining, and securing to ourselves, the right of ecclesiastical suffrage."

It was this sentiment which, of course, led to the founding of the famous "Union Societies," first in Maryland, then the "Roanoke Union Society" in North Carolina, and then elsewhere, wherever the reform movement was strong. Snethen urged restraint to those reformers who would have precipitated separation from the Methodist Episcopal Church and pled for peaceable discussion and cooperation. Still, he maintained: "I do believe, that it is the

34Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, pp. 15-16.
35Ibid., II, p. 64.
36Ibid.
37Ibid., p. 66.
38Ibid., p. 65.
39Ibid., p. 35.
inherent and unalienable right of every Church or body of christians [sic], either personally or by their representatives, to have a voice in the making, forming, and altering the rules and regulations, by which they are to be governed.”

Snethen observed:

The love of power has not been universal among priests, nor even among monks. The man who led the way in the reformation was a priest and a monk, and several of his contemporaries and successors were priests. Shall Germany, and France, and Britain, only, furnish champions and martyrs for the rights of Churches against priestly supremacy? Let us hope better things of American Methodist traveling preachers.

In reference to the General Conference of 1824, Snethen wrote, nine months before its opening:

My plan . . . is that we continue to encourage our friends to write, and by their writing to disseminate principles, and leave the General Conference as free from any cause of fear or restraint as may be, and then give them a fair opportunity to make a voluntary surrender of a power, the right of which they ought to disclaim.

Two years earlier, Snethen had penned:

For an official man to request preachers or members to withdraw, is an offense which can only be exceeded by expelling them unjustly. What right has a man to browbeat another out of his fellowship because he is dissatisfied with an existing rule which is made alterable by its own enactment?

After several of the reformers were expelled or “excommunicated” from the Methodist Episcopal Church for their treasonal beliefs, Snethen wrote an “Address to the Friends of Reform,” which was published in the Mutual Rights.

It will — I know it will — it must be asked, now that the time is come to try men’s souls . . . Where is the man who was among the foremost to challenge us to the cause of representation; where is Snethen? I trust that while he is among the living, but one answer will be given to this question — he is at his post, he is in the front of the contest, he is shouting, on, brethren, on . . . Of the labor of seven years I make no account. I was not a lamb among wolves. My courage, my resolution, (were) . . . not put to the test. I have never been questioned, never called to account, not even threatened. The fiery trial has come upon (the Rev. Dennis B. Dorsey) . . . and I yet go free! Mysterious providence! . . . I can not now desert the cause, and be innocent before God or man. I can not now be silent and be harmless.

When Nicholas Snethen finally withdrew, as an act of conscience, from the Methodist Episcopal Church, it was in good standing as a local preacher.

Snethen took an active part in the General Conventions of the Reformers which met in 1827 and 1828. In fact, he presided over both conventions. Fifty-seven members attended the 1827 con-

---

40Williams, op. cit., p. 79.
41Ibid., p. 86.
42Drinkhouse, op. cit., II, p. 65.
43Ibid., p. 74.
44Bassett, op. cit., p. 404.
vention and over 100 delegates from Ohio, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, Vermont, Delaware, Tennessee, Alabama, New Jersey and the District of Columbia were at the second convention. Many of the men who were present for these historic conventions were aged and respected Methodist leaders who felt that they were being forced into an uncompromising position because of their advocacy of lay representation.

At the General Convention of 1828, Snethen served on a committee appointed to prepare a system of government for the organization of the Methodist reformers who now sought to unite into an "Association" or federation of churches.

Nicholas Snethen was present at the organization of the Maryland Annual Conference of the Associated Methodist Churches on April 2, 1829, and was chosen to serve as the president of the conference. He was also present for the first session of the Virginia Annual Conference on May 1 and for the first session of the Pennsylvania Conference which assembled in October of that year.

In 1830, he moved to the west; in September he united with the Ohio Methodist Protestant Conference at its second annual session, held in Cincinnati, transferring his membership from the Maryland Conference. He was later to serve Methodist Protestant churches in Zanesville and Louisville and was particularly active in the work of his denomination in Cincinnati. Dr. Davis has observed that to Nicholas Snethen must be given the credit for carrying "the torch of Mutual Rights across the Alleghenies."

Snethen was elected to serve as the president of the First General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church which met in Georgetown, D.C., on May 6, 1834. There were thirty representatives present. It was at this meeting that Snethen and Asa Shinn were appointed to edit The Methodist Protestant. They began their work on June 1, 1834; Snethen was, however, to retire from this position after one year.

Snethen visited the new Methodist Protestant Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in the spring of 1835, and described the

---

45Williams, op. cit., pp. 100; 263-264; Bassett, op. cit., pp. 297 and 405.
46Williams, op. cit., p. 264. For the Preamble and "Articles of Association" of the Associated Methodist Church, see Williams, pp. 282-287. The name was changed to "Methodist Protestant Church" at the General Convention of 1830. Williams, p. 303.
48Davis, op. cit., p. 57.
49Williams, op. cit., pp. 324-325; Bassett, op. cit., p. 298.
structure as one which would hold about 1,200 persons.\textsuperscript{50}

In September, 1844, Snethen attended sessions of three annual conferences of the Methodist Protestant Church: the Illinois Conference at Rushville, early in the month, where he preached five times; the Ohio Conference at Cincinnati on September 11, where he spoke with “thrilling eloquence and pathos, as well as overflowing love . . . for the space of two hours”; and, at the close of the Ohio Conference, he journeyed to the first session of the North Illinois Conference at Princeton on September 25.\textsuperscript{51}

It was the North Illinois Conference and the Illinois Conference which made the arrangements for the establishment of an institution of theological learning at Iowa City, and it seemed only logical that Nicholas Snethen, the grand old man of the Methodist Protestant Church, should be chosen to serve as its principal.\textsuperscript{52}

Snethen visited in Iowa City, where he officiated as chaplain at the opening of the session of the Territorial Legislature, and promised to return from Cincinnati, where he was to spend the winter, when six young men were prepared to enroll as students for the ministry.\textsuperscript{53} During the winter he prepared theological lectures for his classes and in March, 1845, he was informed that the students were waiting for him to come and open the school.\textsuperscript{54} En route to Iowa City, he visited his children in Princeton, Indiana, where he became ill and died on May 30.\textsuperscript{55}

If Nicholas Snetthen were alive today he would still, no doubt, be known as a “Methodist Protestant,” or, perhaps, as a “Methodist Protesting” — a term all Methodists might consider adopting — a “Methodist Protesting” against any form of tyranny or injustice or prejudice or intolerance, whether found within our church or within our secular governments.

No single individual has done more to contribute toward the democracy which today characterizes the United Methodist Church than the courageous and fearless Nicholas Snetthen.

\textsuperscript{50}Williams, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 333. This church was expected to expand into the South Carolina Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church. The church was destroyed by fire in the spring of 1838. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 334.

\textsuperscript{51}Bassett, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 405. The North Illinois Conference included Iowa and the entire Northwest.

\textsuperscript{52}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 162 and 406.

\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 406.

\textsuperscript{54}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 406-407.

\textsuperscript{55}Snetthen’s son, Worthington G. Snetthen, planned a ten-volume work on \textit{The Life and Works of Nicholas Snetthen}, which, unfortunately for the Methodist historian, was never published.
A pioneer is one who goes ahead and makes the way easier for those who follow.

A pioneer blazes trails, overcomes handicaps and hardships: he lays foundations, develops concepts. A pioneer leads, guides, directs. He stands out from the crowd. He fights, when necessary, for the right as he sees the right.

Nicholas Snethen was, indeed, a pioneer.