BEGINNINGS OF INDIAN METHODISM IN OKLAHOMA
by Walter N. Vernon

The earliest record of Methodist preaching to Indians in the Oklahoma-Arkansas area is an account by the Rev. William Stevenson, who moved from Missouri to Western Arkansas in 1816 or early in 1817, and preached all over Arkansas and at least as far west as Pecan Point on Red River, south of Idabel. He does not date the incident but it was probably by or before 1820:

One poor Indian, a Choctaw, was converted under preaching: he could speak but little English, but I saw by his looks that he understood truth....He came to me, took hold of my hand, looked up and by signs told me that the Great Spirit had come down into his heart and he now loved him. This he told in his own tongue to an interpreter. Afterwards he was always glad to see me. I saw him a year after, with some eight or ten Choctaws: he ran to meet me, held me by the hand, spoke to the others and they all came up and took me by the hand and, in their tongue, called me brother. None can tell how I felt on this interview.1

But the main migration of Indians to what is now Oklahoma occurred in the 1830's, when many thousands of Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws from the southeast were removed by the government. As they went, they took their church membership with them, and in some cases were accompanied by their pastors, white and Indian, especially among the Cherokees and Choctaws.

Attitudes Toward Missions And Missionaries

Government officials, in the main, encouraged religious activities by Christian missionaries among the Indians. Thomas L. McKinney wrote to Governor Cass Clark Edwards on November 4, 1817:

...My conviction [is] that we all, as Americans, owe the

Aborigines a debt, which cannot be more acceptably, or justly cancelled, than by the promotion of those means which tend to Civilize and Christianize them. And what means are more likely than those which are used by men who go amongst them as messengers of peace and goodwill? without one mercenary consideration or desire for gain, but only to impress upon them the superior excellencies of the civilised over the Savage state. ²

Not all persons in the West gave entire approval to such mission work. Matthew Lyon wrote from Spadre Bluff, Arkansas Territory, on July 22, 1822, to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun:

The Missionary System is doubtless doing good wherever it extends...[The Dwight Mission; Congregational] is doing much good here...There is, however, one unavoidable misfortune attending the System. Those who devote themselves to this Service are generally Sectarians whose zeal for the prevalence of the peculiar tenets of their faith has induced them to enlist; thus the bent of their minds inclines them to dwell upon their darling doctrines rather than the Beneficence, the superior excellence, and rectitude of the Christian System of Morality on its broad extended base. ³

Methodist Beginnings in the Southeast

We cannot properly understand Indian Methodism in the Indian territory without a sketch of the earlier Indian Methodism in the southeast, where it all began. The first Indian missions in the southeast sponsored by Methodists were Asbury School and McKendree School, launched by William Capers among the Creeks in 1821-22. Among the youthful students there were Jim Henry, later a leader in defying the efforts at removal (and still later as James McHenry, an outstanding Methodist preacher in the Indian Mission Conference and for four years president of the Creek Senate); Samuel Checote, later a tribal leader and prominent minister; and George W. Steadham, later an outstanding Methodist layman and Chief Justice of the Creek Nation.

³Ibid., XX. 452.
Mission work began in 1821-22 among the Cherokees, and was quite successful, numerically and otherwise. By the early 1830's there were over 1,000 Cherokee Methodist members. Among these were the Principal Chief, John Ross, Richard Riley, Turtle Fields, Young Wolf, Arch Campbell, John F. Boot, Whirlwind, Tussawalita, John Brown, Joseph Blackbird, and the families of Edward Gunter, and Joseph and William Coody. The Rev. Alexander Talley was the chief missionary to the Choctaws, and he was popular and influential among them. He became a close friend of one of their chiefs, Greenwood Le Flore, half Indian and half French, who was raised in Nashville, Tennessee (in the home of a white family). By 1830 there were about 4,000 Methodist members among the Choctaws.

**Missionaries' Involvement in Removal**

Methodist mission work among Indians in the southeast began shortly before sentiment crystallized to remove them to the West. White settlers were crowding all around the Indians, and looked with jealous eyes on the land still held by the natives. Missionaries differed in their reactions to the agitation to move the Indians west--just as Americans in general differed on the proposal. Many whites in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi wanted the Indians to move west, but the citizens of Arkansas, where they were at one time scheduled to go, were not at all happy with the prospect. The *Arkansas Gazette* editorialized:

> It is no doubt good policy in the southeastern states to get rid of all the Indians within their limits as soon as possible; and in so doing they care very little where they send them, provided they get them out of the limits of their state. The practice, therefore, has been to remove those poor, deluded wretches into the weakest and most remote territories. This we consider the worst policy our government can pursue with the Indians.

John C. Calhoun when Secretary of War expressed this

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*Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), October 2, 1820.
feeling in 1820 about the Indians:

They are not in fact an independent people (I speak of those surrounded by our population)...They should be taken under our guardianship, and our opinion, not theirs ought to prevail, in measures intended for their civilization and happiness.⁶

The missionaries among the Cherokees--Methodist and others--championed the cause of Indian rights so vigorously that several of them were jailed by the Georgia authorities. Two Methodist missionaries, the Rev. J.J. Trott and the Rev. Dickson C. McLeod, were arrested and imprisoned for championing the Cherokee cause. They were sentenced to four years in the Georgia penitentiary, but upon agreeing to leave the state they were released.⁷ The missionaries to the Cherokees adopted a formal motion on September 25, 1830 that they felt removal of the Cherokees to the west “would, in all probability, be ruinous to the best interests of the Cherokee nation.”⁸ This concern of the missionaries for the human rights of the Indians was not considered a proper concern for ministers, however, by state and federal officials. Ben F. Currey, agent to the Cherokees, called the missionaries who opposed removal “professed disciples of our saviour” who were “misguiding a well meaning but ignorant people” and “their holy mission forgotten.”⁹ Another commentator regarding the missionaries to the Cherokees called them “a mischievous and intermeddling order of men” whose “active and violent opposition to the Government...requires their speedy removal.”¹⁰

In contrast to the missionaries to the Cherokees, Alexander Talley felt that removal would be best for the Choctaws. In fact, he is credited with drafting one of the treaties¹¹ by which the Choctaws would give up lands in

⁶bid., April 15, 1820.
⁷Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald, May 20, 1831, p. 151; June 24, 1831, p. 171; October 21, 1831, p. 29-31.
⁸ibid., October 29 1830, p. 34.
⁹Letter from Ben F. Currey to Elbert Herring, Bureau of Indian Affairs, November 7, 1831.
¹⁰Letter from J.W.A. Sanford to Governor George R. Gilmer of Georgia, May 5, 1831.
Mississippi in return for compensation plus western lands. He evidently agreed with Andrew Jackson that “removal and removal alone would determine the survival and the future happiness of this noble breed of men,” as Dr. Sam B. Smith has concluded. Smith (who is editor of The Papers of Andrew Jackson) has come to this...tentative point of view after studying the record at some length that Andrew Jackson had little choice in what he did and that he set in motion the process of removal out of a genuine belief that he was saving the Indian and his culture.  

Talley reported that the Choctaws felt that “they must either remain in a body...or be torn to pieces and removed in small parties.”

**Talley Helps the Choctaws Move West**

Because of Talley’s close relationship to Choctaw Chief Greenwood Le Flore and the great respect in which he was held by many of the Choctaws, he played an unusually significant role in Choctaw removal. He was asked by Le Flore to go west early with a few Choctaw captains and a small group of emigrants to investigate the new land and to evaluate the areas best suited to farming, hunting, fishing, and so forth. He left Washington, Mississippi about the second week of November, 1830, going by way of Natchez where a Mrs. Curtis and her friends gave him $47.37 1/2 to help feed the emigrating Choctaws. He reached the Kiamitia area near to what he called “the ruins of Cantonment Towson” about the middle of December. About 100 Choctaws soon followed, reaching the same area about the middle of February after camping in forty-two places, spending five weeks in preparing a boat to ferry a river, and losing one person from cold and hunger. About half of these were Methodists and began at once to hold regular Saturday and Sunday services. Talley also arranged for friends (probably Methodists) to supply

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13*Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, August 13, 1830, p. 198.
future emigrants with corn at suitable points between the Washita and Kiamitia rivers. He put up $400 of mission funds to make these arrangements with the expectation of collecting it later from the government, but was never able to do so.

Additional groups of emigrants arrived from time to time; by fall of 1831 there were permanent settlements above the fort on the Kiamitia and on Little River, east of the fort, and a Methodist church at each of these places. During the first year Talley employed two Choctaw teachers who conducted a school for children, and a native full-blooded traveling preacher. Two valuable church members died in the first year: John Choctawmatahaw, a promising exhorter; and Captain Kuleshubby, “of a character of intellect above ordinary.” But membership increased as more emigrants arrived—and as new converts joined—until by June, 1831, there were nearly 500 members among the Choctaws.


15Ibid., March 9, 1832, p. 110; and March 23, 1832, p. 118.
A large number of Choctaws, chiefly full-bloods, settled southwest of Fort Smith under the rule of Chief Mushulatubbe, a bitter foe of Christianity. In fact, Mushulatubbe and others wrote the Secretary of War in June, 1831, that they did not “wish for any of the present missionaries to go with us beyond the Mississippi; and Doctor Talley—may be ordered out.” But in July, 1832, Talley was able to report that in May a reconciliation had occurred between the head men of the district above us...at the close of our meeting, the chief Mushulatubbe came forward...and invited our people and preachers to visit his people and teach them the good way.

Talley expressed the belief that a new opportunity had thus opened for spreading the Christian faith. This account also verified that Greenwood Le Flore had temporarily lived in the Kiamitia area, for Talley referred to Mushulatubbe “and Colonel Le Flore and his people,” adding that “the two chiefs and their people closed their council by the strongest demonstrations of friendship.”

We are fortunate that we know the names - and the names of locations - of the early congregations of Choctaw Methodists. The list below is taken from the record of the First Quarterly Conference of the Choctaw Mission held March 5, 1936 by the Rev. C.I. Carney, superintendent of the Mission, who presided and also served as secretary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Name of Church</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Creek</td>
<td>Bethel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tобlee Chubbee's</td>
<td>Salem</td>
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<td>Holitahoma's</td>
<td>Mt. Moriah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Spring Hill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Col. Folsom's</td>
<td>Shiloh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthony (?) Turnbull</td>
<td>Turnbull</td>
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16Grant Foreman, op. cit., p. 50.
17Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald, August 24, 1832, p. 236.
18The minutes of the Quarterly Conference of the Choctaw Mission, covering many years (now available on microfilm as Methodist Indian Mission Conference Records: XI-766 from the Oklahoma Historical Society) are the oldest extant original records of Oklahoma Methodism.
Jacob’s .............................................. Jerusalem
Isaac [?] Pisahonabbi’s .............................. Bethlehem
Upper Kiamichia ..................................... Arabia Deserta
Capt. Tobila’s ....................................... Pisgah
Capt. Shields’s ..................................... Canaan
Doaksville ............................................. Rehoboth

The settlement of Clear Creek was west of present-day Idabel, and southwest of the town of Valiant in McCurtain County. The postoffice there in the early years was about three miles north of Red River; the area was on the old Military Road that came southwest from Little Rock. Undoubtedly here was the location of Bethel congregation, one of the two first Chcotaw Methodist churches in the Indian territory. Bethel may well have been the first church of any faith in what is now Oklahoma.\(^{19}\)

By the fall of 1832 Talley reported 312 members in two of the churches, Sabbath schools under the care of full-blood natives, four regularly licensed exhorters, and two assistant preachers—William W. Oakchiah and Moses Perry. Perry was also a teacher, as was another assistant, Thomas Myers.

**Other Tribes Move West**

The removal of other Indian tribes to the west followed somewhat the same pattern as that of the Choctaws. There were pressures by state and national governments on the Indians to move, proposals by white negotiators, counter-proposals by the Indians, pressures by the President, harassment by local whites, debates in the Senate, rejections of treaties by the Senate or by the Indians, and so on, round and round. But a brief summary will indicate the general trend of other removal efforts.

More than two thousand Cherokees voluntarily went to Arkansas in the early part of the nineteenth century, and afterward in 1828 exchanged their holding there for what later

\(^{19}\)Data on early locations from Louis Coleman, Idabel, Oklahoma.
became their permanent home in the present Oklahoma. After the Indian Removal bill of 1830 was enacted several thousand more were persuaded to move west. But the greatest number (some 13,000) were moved in thirteen parties on overland journeys in 1838-39, on which some 4,000 died.20

Efforts to remove the Creeks from Alabama to the west began in the early 1830's. At one point the president sent Francis Scott Key to Alabama to try to bring peace between federal, state, and local military or police officials. One of the leading Creek warriors who held out against removal was Jim Henry, called in the Army and Navy Chronicle a “fiend in man’s shape.”21 Later in the Indian Territory he was known as James McHenry; he joined the Methodist Church and for years was a loyal and influential minister. He joined the conference in 1855 and died in 1883.22 Gradually Creek resistance to removal declined and from time to time small contingents of Creeks would go west. When Jim Henry was captured and placed in chains in 1836, the Creek resistance ended. Sixteen hundred of them were escorted by three companies of armed soldiers (with 300 Indian leaders in chains) to Montgomery where with 800 others they were put on board boats for the trip west. Later migrating groups numbered 2,700; 3,022; 2,000; and 2,320. Altogether about 15,000 Creeks were moved across the Mississippi River by November, 1836. Their deprivations and sufferings were almost unbelievable.

The Chickasaws of Mississippi were the other group among whom there was Methodist work. Related to the Choctaws, they were slower to agree to emigrate, finally deciding by 1837, with their removal accomplished within a year. They settled in the western part of the Choctaw domain. Methodist missionaries were sympathetic with the plight of the Chickasaws in Alabama. The Rev. Robert Rogers wrote in

1829 from Asbury School:

As to the progress of the gospel among the native adults, our prospects were very gloomy. White men, unrestrained by the principles of religion, and possessing some control over the Indians, exert an unfavorable influence upon them. These and other causes operate powerfully against us in our work.23

In addition to these four southeastern tribes where the Methodists had mission work in the earlier years, reports to the Methodist Missionary Society show that there were numerous other tribes across the nation where Methodists carried on efforts at evangelizing;24 and these tribes, too, eventually settled in Oklahoma. Among these were the Delaware, the Cayuga, and the Onondaga to whom the Rev. Alvin Torry preached about 1822-23; and the Potawatomi Indians at Ft. Clark on the Illinois River, to whom Jesse Walker and Peter Cartwright preached about 1825-26. The Shawnee, Delaware, Iowa, Sac, and Peori Indians were the objects of evangelism in the Missouri Conference in the 1830s; and the Kaw or Kansas Indians were a mission station in the Kansas Conference in the 1830s. There was a Methodist Kickapoo Mission in 1834; a meager beginning among the Senecas in 1843, in the Arkansas Conference; and a new Quapaw Mission in 1843.

This brief account cannot do justice to the story of the hardships on all these emigrating Indian tribes on their trek to the West. The moving, with few exceptions, was poorly planned, inadequately managed, and haphazardly financed. Disease, poor food—or none at all, and inadequate shelter all combined to make this an unbelievably tragic and pathetic tale of unnecessary and sometimes cruel suffering for the emigrants.25 There are many examples of this mismanagement and confusion. The New York Observer for March 3, 1832, reported on a group of 1,950 emigrants at Vicksburg, just before crossing the Mississippi into Arkansas:

23See Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 1834 through 1843.
24The classic account of this complicated story is Grant Foreman's Indian Removal, mentioned above.
25Foreman, Indian Removal, op. cit., p. 57.
"They have taken their annuity for this year; much pulling and hauling, swearing and drinking. The Indians are in a great hurry to spend the little money they have, and the whites are quarreling for the privilege of cheating them."\(^{26}\)

Emigrating Indians who had Christian leadership sought to avoid some of the problems as they traveled. In one group, we are told, "the Christian Indians appointed a company of light horse to prevent the introduction of whisky into camp by white men which was accomplished with difficulty."\(^{27}\) One observer testified that another group of Choctaws, traveling part way by boat, showed excellent conduct: "They had morning and evening prayers and spent much of their time on board the boat reading and singing hymns; a part of this company belong to the Methodist church."\(^{28}\) Several groups of Cherokees were led on their way west by ministers; three of these were Evan Jones and Jesse Bushyhead, who were Baptists, and Stephen Foreman, a Presbyterian. They had an agreement that they would stop to rest on Sundays and hold religious services. One sympathetic traveler wrote his impression of this practice:

One fact which...seemed a lesson indeed to the American nation is, that they will not travel on the Sabbath...when the Sabbath came, they must stop, and not merely stop--they must worship the Great Spirit too, for they had divine service on the Sabbath--a camp meeting in truth.\(^{29}\)

**Methodist Involvement**

We have found some details of occasions when Methodists along the removal route showed a spirit of compassion and helpfulness toward the Indians moving through or living in the state, and there were undoubtedly others not recorded. In 1827 the people of Hempstead County, Arkansas, who included a strong Methodist element, sent food to a group of neglected Quapaw Indians

\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 58.

\(^{27}\)Ibid.

\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. 306.

and enlisted governmental concern for them.\textsuperscript{30}

A group of Cherokees on their way west reached Batesville, Arkansas, on December 15, 1838, and stopped to get wagons repaired and horses shod. Here some of them had an unexpected welcome from an old friend, the Rev. George W. Morris, newly appointed presiding elder of the Methodists in the Batesville District. Morris had first known the Cherokees when he and his wife taught in a Methodist mission school at the “lower mission in Creek Path” and maintained three Methodist societies.\textsuperscript{31} Now he was able to bring a friendly greeting and welcome to the tired travelers and to find encouragement himself in learning that many of the early converts were still faithful. He wrote an account of the visit for the local newspaper and closed with these lines:

\begin{quote}
O Jesus, the Cherokee save  
And bring them at last to thy rest;  
And when they shall leave the cold grave  
May they then be found with the blest.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{31}The Batesville (Arkansas) News. December 20, 1838.

The most prominent of all Cherokee Methodists at that time, Chief John Ross, had a hard and also a sorrowful experience in the removal. The leaving itself was a distressing occasion. One of the soldiers assigned to help with the removal, John Burnett, later wrote about his recollections:

I saw the helpless Cherokees arrested and dragged from their homes and driven by bayonets into the stockades....I saw them loaded like cattle or sheep into six hundred and forty five wagons and started toward the West....Chief Ross led in prayer and when the bugle sounded...the wagons started rolling.33

In the same account Burnett reported on the death in Little Rock of John Ross’s wife, Quatie, due to hardships and exposure enroute to Oklahoma.

Several Cherokee Methodist ministers removed west with their Indian members. Among those we know of are D.B. Cumming, Arch Campbell, Weelooker, Turtle Fields, Young Wolf, William McIntosh, Tussawalita, and John F. Boot. Boot was ordained in 1832 and was the first Indian to administer the Lord’s Supper to Cherokee Methodists. At least one Methodist minister, the Rev. Hosea Morgan, died on the trip to the West.34

The removal experience was not helpful to the cause of Christianity among the Indians. In fact, it was called disastrous to the cause of religion and ruinous to the missionary work which had been so hopefully carried on...before...removal. Disheartened by their suffering and embittered by the sense of wrong inflicted upon them by the white man, many of them lost faith in the white man and they distrusted the gospel because it came through him. The Christian religion was rejected by many who turned away from the new faith, which they had once accepted, and went back to their old ways.35

Bishop Joshua Soule said, appropriate to the whole removal enterprise (but writing about the removal of the Creeks), “May He who has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the whole earth, have mercy upon our country, have mercy upon the Indians.”36

33Our Brother in Red, March 3, 1888.
35Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald, April 2, 1830, p. 122.
The Methodist Approach to Indian Missions

As the nation was divided over the methods to follow in relating to the Indian, so was the church. Leaders in society and in government debated whether the Indian should adopt white ways in language, government, and religion or hold to his own customs, language, and tribal structures. "The hunter state, we all admit, is inconsistent with civilization. The Indian must be courted from his forests by objects more alluring than the pursuit of game...", editorialized the Delaware (Ohio) Gazette on July 21, 1821. The paper continued by declaring:

It has always appeared to us to be labor lost to attempt to civilize a race of hunters and warriors by book and cross, before they are made to understand the use and advantages of the axe and the plough...It appears to us absurd to say, they [Indians] cannot be incorporated with a white population....

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which carried on extensive Christian preaching and teaching, especially among the Cherokee and Choctaws, had considerable tension over the issue of slavery. Slavery was prevalent among the Indians; probably 1,500 slaves were among the Cherokees and 2,000 among the Choctaws. Negro slaves were not allowed to own property of any consequence, or to carry weapons; free Negroes were not allowed to remain in Choctaw or Chickasaw country unless they had Indian blood; it was against the law to teach Negroes to read and write, or to sit at a table with them.  

The Boston officials of the American Board probed the moral issues of slavery with the Cherokee and Choctaw churches, and became very unpopular as a result. In fact, by 1847 the American Board withdrew from sponsorship of schools in the Choctaw Nations. Methodists avoided this conflict by virtue of the fact that the Indian work after 1844 was under the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which opposed the precipitous freeing of the slaves. However, some of the Methodist missionaries were from the North and when

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the Indian Mission Conference voted to become a part of the Southern Church, they returned to the North.

Among some denominations it was debated whether preaching or teaching was the best approach. As Methodists evangelized, they usually felt preaching and teaching belonged together. In the 1830's there were as many schools listed as there were preaching places, and the appointments were listed as "Cherokee Missions and Schools," "Creek Missions and Schools," and "Choctaw Missions and Schools." The Indians (especially the children) were taught English chiefly so they could read the Bible; they were preached to in order to convert them to the Christian faith. The missionaries used regular Saturday and Sunday preaching services and also made considerable use of camp meetings.

The tendency of Christian missionaries was to present the Christian faith as a complete break with the Indians' concepts out of their own heritage. Scholars such as J.R. Swanton felt that, among the Chickasaws, for example, there was belief in a supreme being or spirit, accompanied by a number of subordinate spirits,38 and that the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Creeks believed in one superior being, closely associated with the sun, and that all four tribes believed in survival after death. "Most of the tribes of the lower Mississippi had buildings set apart for purposes of a religious character which may properly be called temples,"39 he wrote. He added that some of the tribes believed God created man out of kneaded clay--made a little clay man and then breathed on his work. Most missionaries, however, did not look for elements of belief on which to build the Christian doctrines, but dismissed all Indian "religious" beliefs as being pagan.

Alexander Talley reported on his approach in preaching to the Choctaws:

Our plan of preaching to them was, to convince them of their guilt, misery, and helplessness by reason and experience; not appealing to the Scriptures as the law by which they were condemned, but to their own knowledge of right and wrong; and the misery felt

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39 Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald, March 13, 1829, p. 110.
from the consciousness that they have done wrong.  

After professing faith in God through Christ, an Indian convert was nurtured regularly in a class meeting with other new converts. After six months or more he was examined by the preacher and then received into membership--as were whites. Class leaders and stewards in Indian churches were appointed by the preacher. Quite early in Indian mission work, Methodists authorized Indian converts as missionaries (or preachers) to convert their fellow Indians. Many of these were local preachers, and the Indian churches today have (in proportion) many more local preachers than do the white churches. At the same time, supervision and decision-making remained largely in white hands until fairly recently.

**Reestablishing the Churches in the West**

We have already seen how the Choctaws in the first few years in the West set about continuing their church life under Alexander Talley and his assistants. A preacher for Indian work was designated in the 1830's by the Missouri Conference (which embraced all Methodist work in the West except for Louisiana). But there was no preacher available, so Bishop Robert R. Roberts (then in charge of the Conference) went to the Tennessee Conference in 1831 and asked for volunteers to serve in the West. Eight preachers responded, among them John Harrell and Allen M. Scott, both of whom were assigned to preach to the Cherokees. Andrew D. Smyth, presiding elder in Little Rock, was also named superintendent of the Indian Mission.

*The Creeks.* Smyth made plans at once to serve Indian needs and held a two-day meeting in the Creek Nation on May 19-20, 1832. He was assisted by "Mr. Vaill of Union Mission, Rev. Mr. Alvin Baird, the Methodist missionary, and Mr. Addear, from the Cherokee Nation [evidently one of the numerous Adairs and a lay preacher]."  

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40Arkansas Gazette. June 20, 1832.
The account of the two-day meeting, sent to the *Arkansas Gazette* by Mr. Smyth, continued:

...Seriousness arrested many under the first sermon, and it continued to increase...until our ears were saluted with the cries of penitents and the shouts of converts. About 32 joined the Society; 75 communed at the Lord's table, spread in the wilderness; 33 spoke in Love Feast on Sunday morning, 12 of whom spoke through an interpreter. Two of the latter were Chiefs, who did not profess to have religion, but...wished...the prayers of the church for their salvation...

A sermon to the chiefs of the Creek Nation was delivered by Smyth in the summer of 1833 and printed in the *Arkansas Gazette* on September 4. It seems to be the only sermon by any minister in the *Gazette* from 1819 to 1866. Presumably, Smyth lived in Little Rock, and he evidently had a close friendship--or influence--with the editor! The sermon is long and by our standards today, not too well adapted to an Indian audience. But it did make clear the honest and friendly intent of the Methodist missionaries to the Indians:

*We came to you as Missionaries, not to take citizenship in your country, but to remain on our mission, visiting your different neighborhoods, and publishing to you the goodness of the Gospel. Our Savior ate with publicans and sinners; we only want to mix with you in the same way that he did; to do you good, and such fare as you set before us, we partake thereof with hearty thanks....*

*Only look back to last year, when brother Baird came to your nation, your people were in darkness and sin; but now look around you, and you will find many who have turned their backs upon the things of the world and are trying to serve God and get to heaven...We have...selected a place to hold Camp meeting. Now we want you to grant us the privilege of holding Camp-meeting at this place.*

*In some respects the Creek Nation was the hardest for Christian missionaries to serve. The Creeks still felt a deep distrust of the white man’s culture and there was still bitterness over their removal experiences, which had created divisions and factions among them. Nevertheless, in 1832 the Presbyterians reported 81 members among the Creeks, the Baptists 65, and the Methodists 200. “The majority of the members were Negroes, but a number of young Creek men*
were actively assisting the missionaries and it was believed that
the old hostility was rapidly disappearing."42 Henry Perryman,
a Creek Christian, wrote to the Rev. Jacob Sexton in
Washington County, Arkansas, in 1831 asking for the
Methodists to send missionaries to them. He reported that he
had been doing what he could, and that "some religious black
people assisted me."43

One reason for Creek opposition to Christianity was
expressed by Chief Roley McIntosh; "We want a school, but
we don't want any preaching; for we find that preaching
breaks up all our old customs--our feasts, ball plays and
dances--which we want to keep up."44 McIntosh backed up his
feeling with a law that anyone preaching the Christian faith
was subject to a flogging of 50 lashes.

42Mary Greene, Life, and Three Sermons and Some of the Miscellaneous Writings of Rev.
43The Five Civilized Tribes, op. cit., p. 179.
44Mrs. Rella Looney, "Early Methodist Missions in Indian Territory," mimeographed paper, p.
6.
Tradition has it that...Samuel Checote had been caught twice holding Christian services in a river bottom canebrake and had been severely whipped both times by Creek officers. In 1844 he pleaded his case before Creek Chief Roley McIntosh and the law that made it a crime to preach the Christian religion was abolished....

Before the law was repealed, however, "small earnest groups met secretly, sang Negro spirituals and the portions of Creek hymns they could remember, and listened to the instruction of ignorant slaves." Before the law was repealed, however, "small earnest groups met secretly, sang Negro spirituals and the portions of Creek hymns they could remember, and listened to the instruction of ignorant slaves."46

In 1833, 1834, 1835 and 1836 there were six Creek schools listed in the Methodist appointments with Harris G.S. Joplin, John N. Hamill, Alvin Beaird, Andrew D. Smyth, Pleasant Tackitt, Learner B. Statler, and John Harrell listed as teachers one year or another. By the fall of 1836, however, only one school was listed. This occurred about the time of the tragic forced migration in 1836 of some 15,000 Creeks from Alabama and Georgia. About the same time rumors arose about the moral character of one of the Methodist preachers in the Creek Nation. He was tried by the conference and acquitted. But his effectiveness was destroyed and he was transferred elsewhere.47 Partly because of this--and of other--incidents all missionaries were banned for about five years, except for two or three illiterate preachers. By 1842-43 some missionaries were able to return, among them Methodists W.D. Collins and Thomas Bertholf, who organized a church, held several camp meetings, and called a quarterly conference in which Samuel Checote, Peter Harrison, and Cornelius Perryman, all Creeks, were licensed as local preachers. By 1845 they had three local preachers, 16 exhorters, and 375 members. The same year James Essex started a small school at Little River Tallassee town, in the face of some threats.48

While cooperation between denominations was general, there were occasional incidents of competition. One was reported by the Rev. Learner B. Statler in 1834 when he was

45Debo, op. cit., p. 118.
47The Five Civilized Tribes, op. cit., p. 181.
48Mary Greene, op. cit., p. 67.
in charge of the West Creek Nation Mission:

While the Methodist missionaries were gone to conference, the schools were left without teachers, and the interpreters were free from our employ. It was then that the Presbyterian missionary...employed our interpreters for a year, and...went into our school house, took our books, and commenced a Sabbath school. This place was our strong-hold in the Nation, there being more than one hundred members in that class...It is said that they stand and wait at the nearby Presbyterian Church for people as they pass and persuade them to go into their meeting.49

To this letter he added an appropriate footnote. "The Lord never blesses such unrighteous measures."

In addition to Checote and McHenry, who got their basic training and faith at Asbury School in Alabama, was another: Mary Capers Brown, a daughter of the celebrated war chief, William McIntosh (who repudiated Mary’s mother, and the daughter took her mother’s family name; Mary was a half-sister to Chilly McIntosh). Mary Capers was named for Dr. (later bishop) Capers who had founded the school and was the first Creek Indian (Capers said) who ever received Christian baptism or professed the Christian faith. Capers praised her being “tractable, intelligent, industrious, and...eminently pious. The mission family loved her tenderly.”50

What was likely the first Christmas Watch Night among the Creeks--or in the Territory--was held in 1832 by the Rev. H.G. Joplin, pastor at the McIntosh Mission and School. Fearing that the Christmas night would be spent in wild frolicking, Joplin announced a meeting to start Christmas Day and to go into the night, when a Watch Night service would be held, with

....as many sermons preached as might be thought necessary....We had a crowded congregation; sixteen souls were happily converted...ten joined the Methodist Episcopal Church...the people of God were abundantly blessed, and it proved effectual in breaking up the frolic for that night...51

49Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald, November 19, 1830, p. 46.
50Ibid., March 15, 1833, p. 114.
The Cherokees. Since there were Cherokee Indians in western Arkansas even before most of them arrived in Indian Territory, Methodist preaching to them began in northwest Arkansas by 1832 under the guidance of the Rev. John Harrell, one of the great leaders in Indian Methodism, and spread to the Cherokee Nation by 1833 under Harrell, Burwell Lee, Thomas Berthold, and Richard Overby.

Several loyal preachers to the Cherokees in the east came west with their Methodist members. Among these were Tussawalita, Young Wolfe, Turtle Fields, John Fletcher Boot, Arch Campbell, Weelooker, Isaac Sanders (all of whom were Indian) and D.B. Cumming. Not all of the Indian preachers continued immediately in the ministry.

Young Wolf moved to Oklahoma by 1834, and lived in the only house in Tahlequah at that time. It also served as a hostelry with a sign carrying the name of his son, John: "Travelers Home, J. Wolfe, Proprietor."52 When Ethan Allen Hitchcock made a trip through Indian Territory in 1841 he stayed at "Traveler's Home" and attended religious services held there by Young Wolf. Later he attended services among the Creeks attended by Indians, "half-breeds and negroes," and was impressed by the solemnity and sincerity of the worshippers.53 When Wolf died in 1843, Chief John Ross praised him in his message to the National Committee and Council, of which Wolf had been a member.

Turtle Fields had been outstanding in his ministry in the east; he was called "a man of superior talents, of great modesty, and undoubted piety."54 He went west in 1837 with a group made up largely of the Ridge and the Fields families, by flatboat from Chattanooga to Decatur, Alabama, thence by train to Tuscumbia, and thence by keel boat to Little Rock.55 Fields was one of the signers of a friendship pact with the Creeks made at Tahlequah in 1843. He was also present once at the home of Sequoyah when the latter was trying to

53The Holston Conference Messenger, January 6, 1826.
54"Diary of Dr. Clark Lillybridge," quoted in article, "Marine Exodus of the Cherokees" by T. J. Campbell in the Chattanooga Times, April 12, 19, 1936.
convince a person that his alphabet was genuine. Sequoyah wrote “Turtle Fields” on a paper and Sequoyah’s daughter read it out from her father’s writing.

John Fletcher Boot was a man of courage and steadfast commitments. Before his conversion in the east in 1826 he answered a call for help to resist attack made on a small party of Cherokees who had migrated west to the Arkansas River area. He and others marched 800 or 900 miles to help their tribesmen. Soon after conversion he was licensed to preach and was the first native Indian to administer the Sacrament among the Cherokees. He was a member of the Cherokee Executive Council, of the Cherokee Bible Society, and the Temperance Reformation. He died enroute to preach on Sunday, August 8, 1853.56

Tussawalita had been a preacher in the east and continued in the west, serving with some interruptions until 1857. He was a humble, sincere Christian and was especially helpful during the era of Cherokee feuds and internal strife.

Joseph Blackbird was a local preacher in the east, and in the west served as solicitor for the Skin Bayou District Court. Archibald Campbell was a loyal Methodist, east and west, also served on the Cherokee Executive Council, and was praised by Chief John Ross when he died.

Ross himself was a Methodist, as we noted earlier, from his early years in the east; preaching services were held in his home near Chattanooga. In the west he was frequently consulted by visiting bishops and mission executives, such as Dr. (later bishop) Edward S. Ames, Dr. E.H. Sehon, and especially the Rev. John Harrell, a long-time friend. In 1860 the Home Circle (publication of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South) carried a picture of Ross on its cover and in an inside editorial praised him as an outstanding Methodist layman. Ross undoubtedly had a hand in seeing that the Cherokee Constitution provided that an office holder must believe in “a God and in a future state of reward and punishment,” and that there should be “the free exercise of

56The Cherokee Advocate, April 3, 1845.
religious worship and serving God” in the nation.\textsuperscript{57}

A good summary of Cherokee Methodist strength was provided by P.M. Butler, U.S. agent for the Cherokees, on September 30, 1843:

The Methodist society has employed in the nation twenty-seven preachers, of whom fifteen are local; of the 12 that have been sent by the society to labor as circuit preachers, four are natives. There are 1400 communicants. There are also Sunday schools in many of the societies, in which instruction is given both in the English and native tongue, reported to be in a prosperous and increasing condition.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{The Chickasaws.} Methodists were slower in ministering to the Chickasaws, and their efforts were less extensive. We know that Christian preaching was going on in 1830, for their agent, John L. Allen, reported in that year:

Many of the Chickasaws profess Christianity; I attended a camp meeting in Novr. last at the missionaries. Divine worship was performed alternately by white, and red men, in the English and Indian Languages; and for the first time I saw the Sacrament taken by the Indians....\textsuperscript{59}

In 1836-37 the Mississippi Conference assigned the Rev. Robert Alexander as head of a Chickasaw Mission. (Two years later Alexander was to be one of the three first official missionaries to Texas.) The next year the Chickasaws migrated to Indian Territory and settled close to the Choctaws, and were at first associated with Choctaw Methodism. In 1844 the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church carried a report for the first time of mission work with Chickasaws—in Indian Territory. The Rev. E.B. Duncan was listed as their missionary. He served one society of about 30 members, and mentioned rather meager results, but with some promising signs—one being 40 or 50 new members. There was talk of starting a school, and some effort was made to build. The Chickasaws were located on the western front of the more settled or “civilized” Indians, and were considered in a favorable location to influence for good the “savage borderers” or “wild tribes” further west—Apaches and Comanches.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., October 5, 1844.
\textsuperscript{58}Quoted in \textit{The Five Civilized Tribes}, op. cit., p. 98.
By 1845 the proposed school was officially authorized as Chickasaw Academy, with Wesley Browning appointed to superintend the building program. What with labor troubles, inflation, and scarcity of materials it was 1851 before the academy was in operation. No wonder that Grant Foreman referred to his "obvious inefficiency"! With the building complete, the Rev. J.C. Robinson was named superintendent and soon had the full quota of 120 students in attendance. It was located 12 miles northwest of Fort Washita. The Methodists opened another school in 1854 at Perryville called Colbert Institute, but moved it in 1856 to a site 18 miles north of Wapanucka.

**High Place for Education**

This policy of locating schools alongside chapels or churches was an established practice of Methodists among the Indian tribes. The list of schools started in Indian Territory between 1832 and 1845 numbered over 40, although some of those listed may have been a continuation of older schools with new names. Many, though not all, were conducted by preachers. The philosophy behind this policy of starting schools was stated by the denomination's Missionary Society in these words in 1844:

> It is now generally conceded, by those best acquainted with the peculiarities of the Indian character, that however powerful the gospel may be, in itself, to melt and subdue the savage heart, it is indispensable, if we would secure the fruits of our missionary labours, to connect the blessings of civilization with all our Christian efforts.⁶⁰

Among these "blessings of civilization" education ranked high in the view of the Methodists. This emphasis on education for the Indian was general among whites who wanted to see the Indian incorporated into white society. The *Arkansas Gazette* as early as March 31, 1821, reprinted a sentiment from *Niles Weekly Register* that declared:

> In general the missionaries to Indians are in too great a hurry; they desire to build the structure before they have laid the foun-

dation. Hence it is that we are always more pleased to hear of the erection of a school house than of the building of a church and to learn that an Indian had been holding a plough than listening to a sermon. He must be civilized before he can be a fit subject for Christianity.

The Methodists usually provided both the plough and the sermon. The schools in the main were practical; the children were taught basic English and agricultural and homemaking skills—all from the white perspective, of course. An indication of the work done in these schools is found in this report from Moses Perry, the itinerant preacher-teacher among the Choctaws, who signed himself “USS Teacher”:

My school is prosperous [...] my number of pupils is thirty [...] eighteen males [...] twelve females that reads [...] twenty that spells in four syllables [...] five in two letters [...] four that spin [...] one that weaves [...] their ability for learning is very good [...] all except one [...] I teach by the word of mouth [...] I spend one hour in each day to learn them to talk english [...] it pleases them very well...61

The names of some of those who taught in these schools are enough to indicate the quality of the work done: Andrew Hunter, Dr. and Mrs. J.W.P. McKenzie, James Graham, Nathan Scarritt, William H. Goode, John H. Carr, J.C. Robinson, Ellen J. Downs and John Harrell. The schools varied in quality, depending on the ability and integrity of the teachers. William Armstrong, Acting Superintendent in the Western Territory, commented on this in 1837, declaring:

Where suitable persons have been sent among the Indians as Missionaries, to teach as well as preach, and who practice what they preach and show by their conduct and their exertions, their benevolent intentions, the Indians are not long in becoming convinced of their good intentions...Such of the kind as are in this [Choctaw] and the Cherokee nation, Mr. Washburn, Mr. Kingsbury, Mr. McKenzie and others, are very useful in every way—by their deportment and conduct, render themselves popular... Men... without talent, industry, energy or the proper spirit... should be prohibited from coming among the Indians.62

In spite of occasional denominational rivalry, there was in

62Byington Letter Collection, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.
the main fine cooperation between the missionaries from various churches. Great credit goes to the missionaries of the American Board (Washburn, Kingsbury, Byington) for this cooperative spirit. The missionaries conferred and visited with each other from time to time. For example, Bishop William Capers along with John Carr, Andrew Hunter, and some others spent the night at the Byington residence in the Choctaw Nation on November 26, 1847, enroute away from a meeting of the Arkansas Conference. However, the denominations varied in their approach to the Indians. Angie Debo has characterized three of the major denominations in their dealing with the Indians thus: "Less cultured than the Presbyterians, and less dogmatic than the Baptists, the Methodists held a sort of intermediate position in educational and evangelistic work."

The American Board was especially helpful in making their Union Press available to print Methodist materials in the native languages, or to sell to the Methodists books that could be used in common. Chief among Methodist materials printed was the *Methodist Discipline*. But most of the publications could be used by any Christian group, such as spelling books in Cherokee, Choctaw, Ojibwa, Seneca, Osage, Ottawa, Abernaquis, and Sioux; books of hymns (issued in several Indian language versions); and miscellaneous booklets on temperance, marriage, the Sabbath, Old Testament stories, and some of the gospels. By 1850 the Union Press had printed 173,800 copies of publications, amounting to a total of 7,889,100 pages.

In the main, the missionaries had friendly, cooperative relations with government officials related to Indian affairs—but there were dramatic exceptions, as we have seen in Georgia and Mississippi. Most government agents welcomed the missionaries, feeling that they (1) helped to keep peaceful relations, (2) encouraged sobriety and thus lessened crime,
(3) assisted in building a stable society. But the officials did not want their decisions questioned—as occurred chiefly over removal issues. It was, of course, the general opinion that religion and government were separate worlds—and “never the twain should meet.” Bishop McKendree wrote to fellow-Bishops Soule and Roberts in 1824: “It is scarcely necessary to caution our missionaries against entering into any questions involving civil politics.” In the Georgia conflict the missionaries were charged with being “forgetful of their holy character,” and in Mississippi the missionaries were ordered to leave the Dancing Rabbit Creek grounds in September, 1830, where a treaty was to be considered. The missionaries there were told by John Eaton and John Coffee that their area of concern was “improving and civilizing the Indians...teaching them the necessity of true and evangelic repentance and forgiveness...We...wish that you will retire from the treaty ground.” When Quaker missionaries to the Shawnees dared to counsel the Indians in 1837 that they should not go to war against the Seminoles (whom the government was seeking to conquer with Indian fighters), Superintendent William Clark of St. Louis wrote that the missionaries must “confine themselves to the exercise of their legitimate functions and duties” and that to propose that the Indians act in any way contrary to government directions would be “highly objectionable” and would undoubtedly cause “their removal from the Indians’ country....”

Moving Toward Autonomy

By 1840 there was growing sentiment that the Indian work was so distinct in its character and needs that it should be organized as a separate conference. The General Conference of 1844 authorized the organization of an Indian Mission

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66Letter of Sanford to Gilmer, op. cit.
67Letter from Eaton and Coffee to the American Board Missionaries to the Choctaws, September 18, 1830; Oklahoma Historical Society, Indian Archives Division, Foreman Transcripts, Vol. 3, p. 38.
68Clark to Moses Pearson, January 17, 1838, National Archives Microfilm Publications. BIA Microfilm Roll No. 778.
Conference; and this occurred in Riley’s Chapel, near Tahlequah, beginning on October 23, 1844. In many senses the new conference was the daughter of Arkansas and Missouri Methodism, and with many ties to Tennessee and Mississippi Methodism.

In the main, Methodist work with Indians in these various states may be considered successful. In most cases Christian leaders, clerical and lay, were accepted as sincere and trustworthy. They created in the Indian a desire for education --and helped to provide it. They lifted moral standards by discouraging theft, fighting, and drunkenness. They assisted the Indian in adapting to a more settled life.

But there were problems and failures as well. The Methodist itinerant system, so well adapted to pioneer conditions in general, did not fit a ministry to Indians where a longer tenure was needed to understand and appreciate Indian culture and language. The failure of many whites with whom the Indians had contact to live up to their Christian profession made it hard for the missionaries to explain the discrepancies. Not all Indians welcomed the new faith, for this meant giving up their earlier faith. And the tendency to forbid all Indian culture and ceremony was shortsighted, even though well-intentioned. But overall, the efforts to educate and Christianize the Indians for whom Methodists felt responsible brought genuine benefits.

These benefits were such that the Missionary Society in New York felt it could say in 1843:

The wigwam, the bow, the moccasin, and blanket--the badges of savage life--are fast disappearing. Their principal dependence for subsistence is no longer on the chase, but on the products of the soil. They are abandoning the wild and erratic habits of their fore-fathers and becoming a pastoral and agricultural community....Their old heathenish rites, superstitions, and ceremonies, will soon have passed away; and order, law, and justice will occupy their place...The Society...can perceive that...its work and labour of love have not been in vain in the Lord.69