YOUTH MINISTRY IN AMERICAN METHODISM'S MISSION

J. Warren Smith

“To promote an earnest, intelligent, practical, and loyal spiritual life in the young people of our church, to aid them in constant growth in grace and in the attainment of purity of heart...,”¹ this clarion call appeared in *The Epworth League Book* soon after 1889. Goals were thereby set for a *society* which would have enormous effect on the young people of Methodism, influencing their outlook on missions for generations to come.

Early Youth Organizations

The few youth organizations previously in existence were, in theory, designed to cater to the religious needs of young people and young adults. This had been chiefly the twenty-year period following the Civil War. These *societies* were greatly influenced by heavy Wesleyan-New England puritanism. As a result the *societies* preached a staunch morality, tending to lecture their members. So ill at ease did the youth become that “at one time 75% of the young men in the nation were unchurched.”² A new course of thought and action was desperately needed.

Clearly there were two essential goals for a much needed Methodist witness in late 19th century America: (1) bringing the youth back into the fold, and (2) training Christian soldiers for the ministry. It was not until men such as Bishop John H. Vincent realized that morals could be taught not only through the preaching of good works but by getting the young Methodists involved in the actual doing of good works, becoming engaged in missions. The logic of the idea was that while young people are participating in good works--deeds of Christian charity--they would have no time to become involved in immoral activities. Furthermore, the leaders reasoned, youth would become so accustomed to doing that which is godly that if they were to

have time on their hands, they would not think of doing “the devil’s work.” For example, one can hardly engage in illicit sexual activities while visiting the sick in the hospitals. These noble ideals and ideas were set forth in the institution known as The Epworth League.

The Epworth League Era

The Epworth League was the union of five societies. The oldest society had been established in 1883, known as The Young People’s Methodist Alliance. The Oxford League was established by John H. Vincent. There were also The Young People’s Christian League, The Methodist Young People’s Union, and The Young People’s Methodist Episcopal Alliance, which barely had time to exist before the consolidation of the five into The Epworth League.

It was midnight, May 15, 1889 at Cleveland, Ohio, that the five societies agreed unanimously to unite. This union, called The Epworth League, was under the Board of Education, with a sub-board, the Board of Control. It was led by Bishop John H. Vincent, Bishop Edward G. Andrews, Jesse L. Hurlbut, James M. Buckley, and James M. Freeman—of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Youthful ministers Paul B. Kern and Ivan Lee Holt would later occupy places of leadership on a similar Board in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The Epworth League was formed almost five decades after the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church into the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Even so, The Epworth League of the M.E. Church, the M.E. Church, South, and the Methodist Church of Canada met in convocations, the second being held in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1895, nearly forty-five years before the formation of The Methodist Church which included both the M.E. and M.E., South Churches. The Methodist Protestant Church did not participate in The Epworth League. Until the unification of 1939 each Epworth League operated under the auspices of its parent church. Each had its own literature: for the M.E. Church, The Epworth Herald, and for the M.E. Church, South, The Epworth Era.
Today the definition of the term "youth" is not as broad as it was during the days of The Epworth League, or League, as it was commonly known. Ages of Leaguers started with the Junior Division, ages 10-12, continued through the Intermediates, 13-17 years, and culminated with the Senior League, 18-34 years of age.

Missions became the life blood of The Epworth League. It followed the true Wesleyan tradition of global evangelism which stated clearly "the world is my parish." In the realm of home missions The Epworth League worked through schools which provided both academic study as well as the manual arts.8 One such institution was Clark College which today is a leading school in the Atlanta University Center. The League also supported work in Appalachia to increase literacy which was just 13% at the turn of the century.9 In urban areas the young Methodists worked in such institutions as Bethlehem Community Centers and Wesley Houses. On college campuses attempts were made to provide students with religious, social life.

The Epworth League believed in missions through study programs, and stressed this concern in both national and international projects. Missionaries who returned on furlough were invited to speak; mission hymns were sung in the programs. Before 1906, issues were discussed which dealt with legal, educational, and business affairs. Elections were deliberated about along with the concept of total suffrage for mankind. The topic whether women should have the right to vote was raised. One of the study books concluded that a woman might not be able to vote but as a Christian citizen she had the responsibility of being concerned and knowledgeable about political and public issues.

In the area of public charities, Leaguers discussed and took stands concerning the poor houses and pauper legislation as well as the morality of the labor camps. Youth learned about prison conditions not only through the printed page but also through visitations in those institutions, where they held services of worship and song. As early as the 1920's when the Ku Klux Klan was exceedingly active and lynchings were common, The Epworth League took stands against lynchings and sent aid to the families of some of the victims.10

Fund raising for missions was a priority. The League might have a social, such as a "rubber fellowship"11 party at which the members

8Brummitt, pp. 207-208.
9Ibid. Also see The Epworth League (Nashville: Publishing House M. E. Church, South; Chicago: Methodist Episcopal Church, Board of Education, 1928), manuals and program materials, a number of years are covered.
11Brummitt, p. 230.
would be divided into groups which would go through the neighborhood collecting items such as old tires, galoshes, and boots. Later, at a designated time, all would meet at the church; the rubber would be weighed. The group which collected and sold the most rubber would receive a prize, such as a box of candy. Of course there were missions outside the local community, similar in nature to some of the projects at home.

The Epworth League was zealous about securing money for missions. Once in a five year period, 1919-1924, during the Centenary thrust the League gave "an offering of $380,000 for Africa at home and abroad."12 Today that sum would be worth in excess of $2,000,000. League giving was stimulated by the use of mission hymns and scripture. What did St. Paul have to say about giving when he sought to raise money? Even League benedictions might employ scriptural references to giving.13 Of the total budget—that pledged, given, and raised—two-thirds of the monies went to missions in the local communities and abroad. Giving for home missions was labeled "Mercy and Help Money." It might be used to aid a person after some tragedy had struck—such as paying the rent for temporary housing for a family whose home had burned.

In local missions, personal involvement as well as giving was important. One such work was the League's assisting a Deaconess by going with her to her assigned responsibility in the hospital, or the "orphanage," or the "old folk's home," or even the "insane asylum." Youth would then report to their church about the Deaconess's ministry in the community. They thus helped to educate others about the mission of the Deaconess and solicit continued support for her work.

Visitation was an integral part of the mission of The Epworth League. Youth would visit the sick in their homes, in the hospitals on Sunday afternoons; shut-ins were called on. Special occasions, such as Thanksgiving or Christmas, became a time when young people carried traditional baskets. Rather than just pleasant conversation, Leaguers would hold devotional and religious services in the homes. If a stranger came to town, it was an opportunity to call on the person, or new family, and extend an invitation to become involved in the church.

13Brummitt, p. 230. "Bible reading on one or more of these topics: 1. The obligation of Christian Stewardship. (Mark xii, 14-17; Deut. xiv, 28, 29; Prov. iii, 9; 2 Cor. vii, 7; 1 Cor. iv, 1, 2; Titus i, 7; 1 Peter iv, 10)." The author also suggests "motive of giving," Luke xxi, 1-4; Lev. xxiii, 10, 11. There is "method" of Stewardship, 1 Cor. xvi, 1, 2. We find "withholding that tendeth to poverty," Luke xii, 16-21; Mal. iii, 8 and "rewards of Christian Stewardship," Mal. iii, 10 and Prov. xi, 25.
Youth even went door-to-door on Sunday mornings to tell people about the worship services, encouraging them to attend. Another important aspect of visitation was that between various Epworth League Chapters. On a set date, League A would visit League B and give a devotional and program. On a later date A would host B. It was great fellowship.

The Methodist Youth Fellowship

In 1939, with the unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church, The Epworth League became The Methodist Youth Fellowship--MYF as it was better known. The ages for membership were changed. No longer were those thirty-four years and the ten-year-olds in the same organization. Now, the ages were between twelve and twenty-four.

The missions stressed by The Epworth League were now reaffirmed and enlarged by the MYF. The Program Area of Christian Outreach included National Missions; World Missions; the ecumenical movement; overseas relief and reconstruction; peace and world order; and giving to the Methodist Youth Fund for missions. In the local church, visitation, evangelism, and churchmanship became a separate program under the heading of Christian Witness.

For the older youth, those eighteen through twenty-four, missions was reaffirmed. On college campuses there were programs to get students interested in the mission field, with a strong emphasis on missions as vocation. By 1948, after World War II, there were short-term mission projects beginning with the J3's, in which a college graduate would spend three years in Japan. In successive years there were the A3's (Africa) and the I3's (India) whereby an older youth could be associated with the mission program of The Methodist Church in that particular part of the world. At home there were the US2's in which a young person spent two years working in some area of home missions: a Bethlehem Community Center, a Wesley House, or a Children's Home.

In the 1940's and into the 1950's, the Methodist Youth Caravan

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14 *Handbook of the Methodist Youth Fellowship* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1953), pp. 213-216. “Look at the questions we must answer:... What effect would peace-time conscription or universal military training have on democracy in the United States? Can conditions that make for peace be developed in a world that is preparing for war?”

15 *Ibid.*, see chapter VIII.
was a successful summer activity for older MYF members. A group of carefully selected college students and counselors would meet at a central location for a week of intensive training. At its close, the group was divided into teams, ideally two girls, two boys, and a counselor, to be sent to five or seven churches which had requested them. The team would spend a week serving in that church: working with the MYF, assisting in Vacation Church School, visiting, surveying community needs, taking part in any activity which the local pastor and church leaders indicated as needed. All of this in one week! Then on to another church. No wonder a strong Christian camaraderie developed between Caravan brothers and sisters.

In the 1940's and 1950's, when interracial meetings were virtually unknown, especially in the South, Methodist students met together. One such meeting was held annually on the campus of Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. Here, for the first time, many young persons met on equal ground. They learned about each other's culture. Lasting friendships were formed, some of which were renewed when Annual Conferences from the Central Jurisdiction and the Southeastern Jurisdiction were united in the 1960's and 1970's.

The United Methodist Youth Fellowship

With the union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968, forming The United Methodist Church, the MYF became The United Methodist Youth Fellowship. Youth work in the EUB Church was known as Christian Endeavor. Again there were changes, in ages, for example. No longer are college students, young service people or nurses in training involved in UMYF. Only Junior and Senior high school ages are included. Missions seem to be more specific--one particular mission is supported. A retirement home may be visited or a work-weekend held at a Children's Home. Instead of "rubber fellowships" there are paper drives, car washes, slave days when youths perform services for church members, or rock-a-thons, all for the purpose of raising money for the Youth Service Fund, which is the term used for monies for missions. Some UMYF groups have worked all year to raise money in order to go on a work mission in the summer. The group may travel to Mexico or to Appalachia to work in one of United Methodism's Missions. The work may include teaching in a church school, helping to construct a roof, refinishing floors, or whatever is needed.

"Youth Crusade and Caravan Material" (Nashville: The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1939), "The Caravan Came to Town" and "Youth Crusade Caravans Summer 1940."
World Concern

The work of The Epworth League and the MYF has had international effect. For instance, the Peace Corps begun by President John F. Kennedy was not so much the brain-child of the President as it was an adaptation of the US2's and the J3's, the A3's, and the I3's—all started in program involving Methodist youth in missions. The main thrust of the government program is a humanitarian emphasis. The central theme of the church was, and is, the message of Jesus Christ.

Youth ministry has changed with the new demands of new years. Yet certain fundamental emphases have remained. There has always been the desire to build character. In 1900 James Atkins said of The Young People's Hymnal, just published:

> We would, in one word, remind pastors, superintendents, and other leaders of religious work how vast a power resides in good music for insuring attendance upon meetings of every kind, and for the refinement and enlargement of character in all who are brought under its charming influence.  

For years the theme remained.

The central message was, and must remain, "Christ Above All!"

Methodist youth prayed, and still pray:

> May God be in this fellowship and Christ be real to each one of us. May His life inspire us, His way be our guide and His spirit go with us until we, ourselves, become new persons and all of us become one in the brotherhood of man. Amen.

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