DENOMINATIONAL MODERNIZATION
AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY:
THE CASE OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Historians of religion in America frequently marvel at the resilience of the Protestant denominational structure. Although the denominational idea began in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the critical period in determining the shape of denominational organizations was the era between the Civil War and the First World War.1 It was by no means obvious that the major denominations would be able to maintain their popularity in the face of internal tensions caused by the increasing secularity of modern culture, the greater heterogeneity of American society, and the rapid proliferation of sectarian movements, many of which propagated an anti-denominational, anti-bureaucratic point of view. Despite these obstacles, however, the major denominations retained the loyalty of most of their members and even expanded their base of support within society.

Curiously enough, the modernization and rationalization of bureaucratic structures helped — rather than hindered — the denominations to meet the challenges of the new age. To be sure, this conclusion stands in contradiction to the modern predilection to consider bureaucratic structures as necessarily impersonal, and hence as “alienating.” Whatever truth there may be to this intellectual predisposition, it nonetheless fails to explain the practical outcome of denominational consolidation between 1865 and 1920. In reality, the bureaucratic revolution of this period was not something arbitrarily imposed on the masses from above. Although much of these changes was surely due to the inner logic of bureaucratic development and to the ambitions of denominational bureaucrats, the success of such changes depended on other factors. The denominations prevailed in this period because they discovered how to use supraparochial structures as vehicles for creating and sustaining denominational

1Russell E. Richey has brought together significant interpretations of the origin and function of the denominational pattern in Denominationalism (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977). Useful information on changes in denominational structures after 1865 can be found in Ben Primer, Protestants and American Business Methods (UMI Research Press, 1979).
identity and loyalty. This process succeeded to the degree that it related organizational consolidation to the desiderata of modern democratic culture and yoked organizational ideals to the aspirations of an ascendant middle-class culture.

The actual course of modernization, of course, differed from denomination to denomination. But a good illustration of the bureaucratic dynamics involved can be derived from the story of a denomination that flourished in this period: the Methodist Episcopal Church. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Methodism had suffered from a series of debilitating internal conflicts and schisms. While aggressive revivalistic techniques had produced numerical growth, they could not provide sufficient ballast against the winds of dissension. The heroic effort of the "holiness movement" to salvage denominational unity proved in itself to be divisive in a society becoming increasingly complex. By 1920, the situation had become reversed. Revivalism had waned as a mark of denominational identity. The denomination had instead evolved into a corporate body, and denominational loyalty was grounded primarily in a sense of corporate identity. Methodists found personal pride in belonging to a far-reaching organization that epitomized middle-class ideals. The rationale of the bureaucracy was that it could articulate and promote these values in the modern world. The relationship between the people and the bureaucratic structure was not supposed to be — although it often was — an impersonal, contractual arrangement. Rather, the denominational corporation saw itself as a working community of interests, whose purpose was to provide a role system in which the members could experience a feeling of mutual loyalty and commitment. Such an organization "provides to each member of the group much of the information, assumptions, goals, and attitudes that enter into his decisions, and provides him also with a set of stable and comprehensible expectations as to what the other members of the group are doing and how they react to what he says and does." In the modern corporate denomination, theological disputes need not terminate in ecclesiastical schism; for denominational engagement, actual or vicarious, not theological integrity, furnishes the cement in the denominational mortar.

The process of corporate consolidation in the Methodist Episcopal Church occurred in two basic stages. Between 1865 and 1872, the denomination as a whole became absorbed in benevolent enterprises and for the first time took direct responsibility for what had previously

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been voluntary operations. The climax of this phase happened when the General Conference, the governing body of the Methodist Episcopal Church, assumed complete legislative control over all phases of denominational life. The full consolidation and rationalization of the supraparochial agencies, however, did not come about until the progressive period, 1908 to 1920, when the General Conference assumed full executive, as well as legislative, responsibility for denominational operations. Each of these stages involved an expansion of denominational horizons and could not have succeeded without the active support of the Methodist laity.

The most important event during the first stage of the transformation of the Methodist Episcopal denominational structure took place at the 1872 General Conference. This conference adopted the report of the “Special Committee on the Relation of Benevolent Institutions of the Church to the General Conference.” The report placed the benevolent institutions of the denomination “under the full control of the General Conference,” by stipulating that the boards of managers of the various benevolent agencies were to be elected by the General Conference itself.4 This decision seemed so sound at the time that the delegates scarcely debated the merits of the report and the religious press virtually ignored it. Yet this simple step was fraught with significance. It represented the culmination of a process that had begun a decade earlier with the General Conference expanding its authority over the operations of the denomination and committing the future of the denomination to the fortunes of an extensive network of executive agencies.

Alpha J. Kynett, who was at the time the corresponding secretary of the Church Extension Society and the person most responsible for the 1872 Report on Benevolent Institutions, knew exactly what the report signified. It meant that the General Conference, “the supreme legislative body of the Church,” would now command “all its great interests for the diffusion of Christian civilization” and “have a controlling power in all the missionary operations carried on in the name and behalf of the Church.”5 Kynett acknowledged that the decision also altered the operations of the benevolent institutions. The General Conference had converted the major benevolent enterprises from society-type to board-type agencies. According to Kynett, the “carefully matured plan” of the 1872 General Conference explicitly intended that the society structure “should be superseded by a Board to be elected by the General Conference, and to be placed under its

5Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1876, p. 204.
This decision involved a complete transformation of the traditional Wesleyan conception of the ministry of the church. Originally there had been a division of responsibility between the work of the clergy and that of the laity. The preachers constituted a "preaching order," governed completely by the bishop(s) "in conference" with the entire brotherhood of preachers. Clerical duties were mainly evangelical and spiritual in nature. The local congregations, or "societies," were neither parishes nor sects but voluntary communities gathered to edify and care for one another. Temporal matters, including financial obligations, were almost exclusively a lay responsibility. Thus, as late as 1868, a group of conservative laymen, protesting against proposed changes in Methodist polity, could sensibly argue that

as our Church is now governed there is a most happy separation of the spiritual and secular offices of the body. The ministry, as the servants of the Head of the Church, are at the head of the spiritual offices, while the laity hold and manage all Church property, the ministry having no legal claim even for their own subsistence.8

Until 1872, when lay delegates were admitted to the General Conference for the first time, this principle of the separation of responsibilities had operated as a limiting factor on General Conference power. For example, the 1828 General Conference, in rebutting charges of clerical dominion over the church, denied that it could exercise any such control. It unanimously adopted a report, written by Bishop Emory, which stated:

> We claim no strictly legislative powers, although we grant that the terms "legislature" and "legislative" have been sometimes used even among ourselves. In a proper sense, however, they are not strictly applicable to our General Conference.

The General Conference existed solely to regulate spiritual (i.e., clerical) matters: preaching, sacramental life, and moral discipline.9

Unfortunately for theory, the formation of Methodist benevolent societies in the 1820s and 1830s complicated the workings of the denomination. These agencies (primarily the Missionary Society [1819], the Sunday School Union [1827], and the Tract Society [1852] ) sought and received General Conference approbation. Local pastors were encouraged to support them "by forming [local] societies and making collections for these objects."10 Annual Conferences were expected to

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8Ibid., p. 603.

9According to John Kent, a similar transformation occurred in the British Wesleyan Connection as a result of the acceptance of lay representation in 1878. "This step . . . involved a definite break with the traditional Wesleyan view of the Ministry [sic]." The Age of Disunity (London: Epworth Press, 1966), p. 1.

10Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1868, p. 617.


12Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1832, p. 40.
keep meticulous records of the amounts raised in the conference for benevolent purposes. By 1852, the General Conference was applying even more pressure on behalf of these societies. "It will be expected," read the Discipline, that "in the examination [of each preacher] in the Annual Conference, reference will be had to the faithful performance of the duty of preachers on this subject in the passage of character."¹¹

Nevertheless, the benevolent societies were not organized as arms or agencies of the General Conference. They were purely voluntary and auxiliary institutions, not integral parts of denominational polity. The purpose they served was largely financial: to assist the ministry of the church by facilitating the redistribution of fiscal resources. The Missionary Society, for example, collected funds that were used at the discretion of the bishops and annual conferences of the denomination. The parent society did not decide missionary policy or devise strategy, although it did correspond with missionaries on the field for record-keeping reasons. The intention of the founders of the Missionary Society was simply "to call forth the ability and liberality of the Church."¹²

The relationship between the benevolent societies and the denomination was therefore an ambiguous one. Membership in the Missionary Society, for instance, depended on a two-dollar contribution; and the board of managers, who were laymen living in the vicinity of New York City, were elected at an annual meeting of the society. Yet, in spite of the autonomy of the board of managers, every Methodist preacher was an ex officio member of the board (a relatively inconsequential matter except for a handful of New York clergymen), and the General Conference reserved the right to appoint the corresponding secretary. In 1844, the General Conference created a General Missionary Committee, composed of church-wide representatives, to work with the board of managers. But this measure was less an attempt to infringe on the independence of the society than an effort to facilitate communication between the society and the conferences.

By the 1850s, the unsatisfactory nature of these arrangements had become clearer. Increasingly, the societies functioned as important adjuncts to the ministry of the church. Yet they were forced to rely on voluntary support and had no real leverage to exert on local pastors other than exhortation. Moreover, neither the General Conference nor the societies could initiate new policies or set missionary priorities. The societies were forced to work within the constraints of immediate interests and local demands.

This situation changed dramatically in the 1860s. For one thing, throughout the denomination interest in benevolent causes surged. The

¹¹Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1852, p. 194.
¹²Bangs, pp. 81ff.
expansion of the middle-class base of Methodism meant that attention was ever more directed beyond local concerns to broader interests of a national and idealistic nature. The receipts of the existing societies rose rapidly, as the following reveals: 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Society</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1855</th>
<th>1859</th>
<th>1865</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missionary Society</td>
<td>$108,000</td>
<td>198,000</td>
<td>248,000</td>
<td>643,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School Union</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>11,400</td>
<td>12,800</td>
<td>17,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tract Society</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>4,100</td>
<td>13,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first thing to notice is that the expansion of receipts began in the early 1850s, before the Civil War, but during a time of heightened national consciousness. 14 The second thing to notice is that the figures for 1865 are not quite so impressive when the Civil War inflation rate of sixty percent or more is taken into account. 15 The figures become significant, however, when one realizes that these older societies had to compete with a host of new charitable agencies and causes, which were generated by war-time needs. 16

The popular enthusiasm for benevolent causes continued during the reconstruction era, as several new denominational agencies came into existence. In 1865 the Church Extension Society was incorporated at Philadelphia and began its work with considerable fanfare and hope. 17 The Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church appeared in 1866, and in 1868 the General Conference created the Board of Education to invest the money received during the Methodist Centenary campaign of 1866.

This Centenary celebration was itself evidence of the support generated in this period for benevolent purposes. The Centenary Committee had anticipated the collection of two million dollars in donations by October, 1866. Instead, it received over eight million

14 John Higham has recently directed scholarly attention "to certain crucial changes in American culture that were already clearly visible in the 1850's — changes that mark the emergence of a pattern of consolidation." From Boundlessness to Consolidation: The Transformation of American Culture, 1840-1860 (Ann Arbor: William L. Clements Library, 1969), p. 15.
dollars. More than sheer idealism accounts for this outpouring of philanthropy. In part, denominational pride was involved. Abel Stevens, promoting the centenary movement, wrote that since the Methodist Episcopal Church is

the leading Church of the country, it bears, before God and man, the chief responsibility of the moral welfare of the nation. The better consecration of its wealth to the public good is therefore one of the principal responsibilities of its future. Bishop Matthew Simpson, the most eminent figure in post-bellum Methodism, reminded the denomination that it must cultivate its "social power" if it wishes to stay a step ahead of the other denominations in growth and influence.

The most frequently reiterated reason for promoting benevolence, however, was one that has since been virtually ignored. Lay and clerical spokesmen alike related the educational and charitable enterprises to immediate denominational needs, particularly to the need for denominational unity and identity. Many were beginning to realize that the benevolent work of the church provided church members with a sense of common purpose. The urgent necessity of such a purpose was expressed eloquently during an impromptu convention of clergy and laity at Boston's Tremont Temple in June, 1866. What did the convention hope to achieve?

We answer, the first and prime object is to revive and strengthen the old connectional bonds of Methodism. All else is subordinate. It is not for division, but harmony. It is not to widen, but lessen breaches. It is that all may see that we are, as a Church, in practice what we are in theory,—a unit. Revivals alone, the speakers implied, could not produce this unity of spirit. What the church requires is an effort "to expand and intensify certain [benevolent] agencies," for "these are ligaments that unite, and forces that vitalize, the ecclesiastical body." Indeed, Abel Stevens indicated that the organizers of the church-wide Centenary movement wanted "to promote the Connectional spirit of Methodism, and to bind anew, in cords of fraternal love and of devotion to the common cause, the East, the West, the north [sic], and the South." Only by means of a tangible demonstration of harmony, that is, "by the grand unit of our vast societies," could the spirit of secession, both national and denominational, be overcome.

19Ibid., p. 225.
21Ibid., p. 17.
22Ibid., p. 150.
23Stevens, p. 267.
The prospect of directing the idealistic and benevolent impulses of the laity into channels of denominational pride and unity was enticing. In order to put it into effect, the denomination as a whole would need to assume responsibility for benevolent work. Not surprisingly, the General Conference delegates in 1872 were disturbed that "as our benevolent societies are now constituted and governed, they are practically controlled in their election of boards of managers by a few of the members who live near the places of meeting, and they are really irresponsible to the Church through any of its authorities." Basic assumptions had changed. The benevolent enterprises now appeared in an entirely new light, not as auxiliaries of the church, but as executive agencies of the church. Considering the sums of money that these agencies now controlled and the desire to develop coherent policies for the use of that money, one can comprehend why few resisted the actions of the General Conference. Certainly the corresponding secretaries of the benevolent societies did not resist, since they were the ones who had the most to gain from the new state of affairs.

What ultimately insured the success of the report on restructuring the benevolent societies was the decision in 1872 to admit lay delegates into the General Conference. It was no coincidence that Alpha J. Kynett, the report's sponsor, was also an ardent advocate of lay representation. If the General Conference were to assume full responsibility for benevolent operations, then it could no longer justly exclude the laity from General Conference deliberations. The whole church now became the constituency of the benevolent boards, and the whole church would have to play a role in defining the responsibilities and delegating the powers of the boards. The General Conference was the only body that could claim to represent the whole church. So, overnight, the argument against lay representation became an anachronism.

24Quoted in The Christian Advocate, 30 May 1972, p. 171.
25An explicitly stated reason for turning the benevolent societies into denominational boards was the desire "to close the door against the possibility of danger [of financial mismanagement] in the future." Journal, 1872, p. 297. The delegates were concerned about this issue at the 1872 General Conference because John Lanahan, assistant agent of the Methodist Book Concern, had charged that the senior agent of the Book Concern was guilty of mismanagement and possible fraud. The 1872 General Conference devoted considerable time to the scandal, but was unable to reach a verdict because crucial evidence had been destroyed. See the various reports and conflicting evidence in the 1872 Journal. See also: John Lanahan, The Era of Frauds in the Methodist Book Concern at New York (Baltimore: Methodist Book Depository, 1896).
26Proponents of lay representation argued that "the continuance of the exercise of such [legislative] powers by the ministry alone must in time give to a General Conference of ministers the appearance of exercising lordly authority. A General Conference in which the laity and ministry are both represented can, with the best reason, lay its command upon both." Journal, 1868, pp. 612f.
Rather than bemoaning the change in the character of the General Conference, the new generation of Methodists welcomed it. As lay spokesmen told the clergy in 1868, “it is impossible to carry forward Methodism, now that it has grown to be so vast, without the use of large legislative powers.” 27 The Episcopal Address of 1876 revelled in the thought that now “under the government and direction of the General Conference as her supreme authority,” and by means of “the great agencies of the Church,” Methodism had become an army “having unity of purpose and action.” 28 The centralization of denominational power in the hands of the General Conference was a fait accompli.

By an historical paradox, the expansion of benevolent enterprises peaked in the year 1872. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a difficult period for the new denominational boards. The corresponding secretaries of the boards had hoped that the change in status of the benevolent agencies would rally the church behind them. Instead, the secretaries discovered that the growth of benevolent giving was slowing, as the following table demonstrates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1875</th>
<th>1885</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Missionary Society</td>
<td>$640,000</td>
<td>603,000</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>1,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday School Union</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>17,500</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tract Society</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>16,600</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>22,600</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Extension</td>
<td>67,000</td>
<td>61,300</td>
<td>100,500</td>
<td>155,500</td>
<td>131,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedmen’s Aid</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>44,200</td>
<td>77,300</td>
<td>109,200</td>
<td>125,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only major increase in benevolent giving occurred during the five-year period between 1885 and 1890. The reasons for this particular rise in charitable contributions needs further investigation. It may be the result of an increase in missionary enthusiasm, especially on college and university campuses; or it may be a reflection of the growing size and affluence of Methodist congregations. Between 1885 and 1890, for example, the value of Methodist Episcopal churches and parsonages soared: the value of churches increased 22%, while the value of parsonages increased 35%. 29

In any case, the demand for services from the boards surpassed the resources available. Board secretaries were forced to operate cautiously and to devise new strategies to meet financial exigencies. Alpha J. Kynett, who remained corresponding secretary of the Board of Church Extension, was again the one who initiated new policies. Kynett operated his board on modern banking principles. He created a permanent loan fund, to lend-money to needy churches, and solicited contributions to the work of the Board by selling life annuities, which he then invested at high

27 Ibid.
28 Journal, 1876, pp. 400f.
29 The data are taken from the General Conference journals for these years.
interest rates. He was also the first secretary to make effective use of the board's denominational status by organizing a rigorous apportionment system, which prescribed a minimum contribution from every local church, and by reducing appropriations to annual conferences that failed to meet their apportionments. Despite these attempts to rationalize benevolent finances, all of the boards, except the Board of Education, found themselves in serious financial debt in the 1890s.

Part of the difficulty was that the General Conference, despite the 1872 decision, was reluctant to take an active role in the operations of the boards before 1900. This reluctance distanced the work of the boards from the General Conference. The boards remained semi-autonomous agencies in the sense that their policies continued to be set by powerful corresponding secretaries, who guarded their territory zealously. Periodic attempts by delegates to get the General Conference to consolidate and to supervise the work of the benevolent agencies came to naught before 1900.

The General Conference hesitated to act in these matters because its attitude toward benevolent operations was still undergoing transition. The General Conference had assumed full legislative authority over the denomination. It was not yet willing, however, to assume full executive responsibility as well. In fact, it preferred to delegate executive authority to the corresponding secretaries and to the bishops of the church. The bishops were the ones expected to supervise and coordinate the work of the boards. That is why the bishops did not oppose the General Conference's actions in creating denominational boards. The Episcopal Address to the 1876 General Conference, for example, strongly supported the reorganizational measures, while reminding the delegates that

the General Superintendency has always been, and still continues to be, a strong bond of unity. . . . Owing to the great extent of the connection, we can perceive no other way by which a uniform administration can be maintained; and without uniformity — without oneness of executive authority and administration — we do not see how the unity, the connectional character, of the Church can be preserved. Our profound convictions on this subject have led us to great care and constant effort to secure a uniform administration.

As late as 1896, the bishops resisted General Conference attempts to establish special commissions to study the operations of the boards. They reminded the General Conference that "we superintend the expenditure of millions of dollars; the precise unity of the Church is conserved by our semi-annual meetings for the consideration of the work as a whole."

The progressive period, however, brought about a changed attitude

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31 *Journal*, 1876, pp. 621f.
on the part of the lay delegates to the General Conference. They felt more assured of their competence to supervise the work of the denomination and were convinced that the application of progressive business techniques to the work of benevolence would benefit the whole denomination. Moreover, most of the older, authoritarian secretaries and bishops in the denomination had died or retired by 1900, giving the new generation of delegates a freer hand to work its will.

The first indication that the General Conference was prepared to assume executive control of denominational boards came in 1904. The General Conference in that year reduced the number of boards to three: the Board of Foreign Missions, the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension, and the Board of Education, Sunday Schools, and Freedmen’s Aid. This effort at reduction was anachronistic, however, for the upswing of interest in benevolent enterprises in the progressive period produced an expansion of benevolent operations. Thus by 1920, there were ten denominational boards in operation, rather than three.

Between 1900 and 1905, the receipts of the benevolent agencies increased about 30% to 50%. In addition, new extra-parochial organizations multiplied: the Epworth League, the deaconess movement, the National City Evangelization Union, the Methodist Federation for Social Service, the Temperance Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Brotherhoods of Men, and others. The drift of the times tended toward greater lay support and participation in the benevolent work of the denomination. The push for expansion came from below, not from above. It is time, said the general secretary of the Methodist Brotherhood, for a “harnessing of our manhood to the big problems of the Church of Jesus Christ — a putting of our strong manhood back of the program of Jesus Christ.”

The fruits of this movement were a more general interest in the work of the boards and a desire to consolidate the power of the General Conference in relation to them. The initiative of the laity, with the concurrence and contrivance of the new generation of socially-minded clergy, produced a complete transformation in the administrative and financial structure of the Methodist Episcopal Church between 1908 and 1920.

The group most responsible for this transformation was the Laymen’s Missionary Movement, which organized a strong Methodist auxiliary in 1908. The Laymen’s Missionary Movement had two objectives: to increase benevolent giving within the church at large through high-pressure promotional campaigns and to demand greater efficiency and rationality in the operations of the boards. The two goals were interrelated, of

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course, because efficiency was being touted as the remedy for lackluster denominational performance.

At the 1912 General Conference, the Laymen’s Missionary Movement presented what it called “The New Financial Plan.” This plan sought to replace the endless rounds of collections for the various benevolent causes with a unified benevolence collection from each congregation. Church members could be relied on to support the principle of benevolence giving in general. Duplex envelopes were to be used for the weekly collection, in which the donor designated a portion of his contribution to local church expenses and gave the rest to denominational enterprises. The advantages of this system were many. Church members would be encouraged to see themselves as participants in the entire ministry of the denomination. Stewardship would become systematic and regular. Local churches would find it easier to meet benevolent obligations, and a church-wide apportionment system could be instituted. Boards would now have a relatively guaranteed and predictable source of income, and they could plan future operations with more assurance of success.

The New Financial Plan was adopted in 1912, although everyone knew that it meant a major readjustment of the administrative structure. A central accounting agency would need to be created to determine apportionments and to fix the level of appropriations by the various boards. This function became the responsibility of the newly approved General Conference Commission on Finance. The boards accepted the situation because they had already decided to abandon their autonomy in return for financial stability. As compensation, the corresponding secretaries were assured a vote on the Commission on Finance. The bishops, more and more overwhelmed by executive duties, eagerly turned the supervision of the boards over to the General Conference and the Commission on Finance. As the 1912 Episcopal Address to the General Conference stated, in recommending the adoption of the New Financial Plan:

> the church [should] forecast her needs and consolidate her estimates for all connectional demands — not by the uncertain process of five or six boards and committees sitting apart and acting independently, if not competitively, but by a competent connectional board or commission — in which or before which all interests may be represented — and with final authority to fix the aggregate budget and properly apportion the total amount among the Conferences.

The bishops hoped that they could now concentrate on the “spiritual” oversight of the church.

With these steps, denominational identity advanced further in the direction begun in the 1860s. Methodists now belonged to an ec-
clesiastical corporation, which sought to promote church unity by means of the responsiveness of its executive agencies to the religious ideals of the whole constituency. Speeches given at the national convention of Methodist Men, gathered in Indianapolis in 1913, articulated this theme with astonishing regularity. “While Methodism was growing in numbers and expanding her world parish,” noted one speaker, “she built up an ecclesiastical organism combining firmness with elasticity, democracy with strong central power, unity of aim and purpose with adaptability to local needs and conditions.”36 The convention’s watchword for the denomination was “unification, co-operation, co-ordination.”37

With this slogan in mind, the Laymen’s Missionary Movement asked the 1916 General Conference “to consider the advisability and practicality of unifying the benevolent work of the Church.”38 The General Conference responded by drawing up a plan of unification for the 1920 General Conference. This latter General Conference adopted a report on the “Correlation and Coordination of the Benevolent Boards.” A permanent executive agency, the Council of Boards of Benevolence, replaced the Commission on Finance. The mandate of the new agency was to “review and determine the administrative budget of each constituent Board.” More importantly, it was empowered to prepare a “Four-Year Plan” that outlined the goals and programs of each board. The overall objective was to fashion “one harmonious and unified world program of missionary, educational, and benevolent activities.”39

This entire program was designated “The World Service Program of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” It held rallies throughout the denomination to generate enthusiasm for the new aspirations of the General Conference and promoted the motto “To Serve the Present Age.” There were four elements to the World Service Program: evangelism, stewardship, “life-service” vocation, and “an adequate, systematic, general financial program that will reach every member.”40 Although the last item was the immediate objective, the more idealistic items were not slighted. The World Service Program organized an active Department on Christian Life Service, which attempted to interest young people in missionary work and social service vocations. The four items were all interrelated. The evangelism that was promoted stressed denominational service, not individual piety. Thus, in the words of the

37“Message to the Church,” in ibid., p. 222.
committee, "it is highly important that any church-wide program should so combine these activities that no section and no committee or commission can mistake the unity or can break the correlation." 41 So important was the World Service Program to the interests of the General Conference that its budget in 1922 was $787,000, second in size only to the Board of Foreign Missions, the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension, and the Board of Education. Indeed, the General Conference was investing an extraordinary sum of money in its attempt to integrate the work of the denominational boards with the religious concerns and personal aspirations of the laity.

By the 1920s the General Conference had assumed supremacy over all phases of denominational life. The historical significance of this fact, however, does not lie simply in the degree of bureaucratization and centralization that such a development entailed. More profound was the transformation of denominational self-understanding, a transformation which bestowed a measure of legitimacy on the process of bureaucratization. Methodists had never relied upon doctrinal uniformity to facilitate denominational fellowship, but rather upon evangelistic zeal. The basic difference after the Civil War was that such evangelism was considered not only the responsibility of the individual preacher or the individual society member, but also the responsibility of the denomination in its corporate capacity. Thus Kynett, for example, could defend "organized forms of church-work" by explaining that "the command [of Christ] is 'Go'; and the life-impulse is 'Go,' and the result is organized going — the Church as a body obeying the command of its Master and Head, and the impulse of its life." 42 For many Methodists in the twentieth century — although certainly not for all — denominational commitment meant an allegiance to this corporate conception. No longer could a sharp line be drawn between the vocation of the clergy and the vocation of the laity, for both shared in this corporate ministry to the world.

Despite certain peculiarities of the Methodist case, the other major denominational bodies probably underwent a similar reorientation of denominational self-understanding. Every major denomination was affected by the trends of society and culture between 1865 and 1920. These trends — the trend toward participatory democracy, the trend away from absolute distinctions between secular and sacred, the trend toward bureaucratic rationalization, the trend away from theological divisiveness — all produced extensive adjustments in religious thought and ecclesiastical expectations. Such adjustments necessarily put a strain on denominational ties; and few denominational bodies were so secure, or

41 Ibid.
42 Kynett, p. 269.
so conservative, that they could ignore the need to reckon with this strain.

Whether this reorientation of denominational self-understanding was ultimately good or bad is a vital question, but one which cannot be answered on historical grounds alone. In yielding to a corporate self-understanding, the denominations may have betrayed their religious mandate. Certainly the dangers of ecclesiastical positivism and theological nihilism are all too evident. Stripped of its spirit of boosterism, however, the corporate redefinition was a sincere effort to translate the Christian ideal of an inclusive, serving community into a modern idiom. If the corporate ideal threatened to erode the transcendent ground of Christianity, it may also have helped to prevent Christianity from becoming merely a sectarian backwater in the floodplains of modernity. In whatever manner one decides to answer this question, one ought at least to be scrupulous enough to acknowledge the ambiguities and paradoxes of the denominational search for religious identity.