AMERICAN METHODISM AND ITS HISTORICAL FRONTIER:
Methodism on the Twentieth-Century Urban Frontier

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The Episcopal Address of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1900 indicated an awareness of a challenging frontier for Methodists to master as they entered the new century. They said:

The American city is a conglomerate of all races, nations, tongues, faiths, customs, and political ideas; and by this fact, and that of an easily attainable citizenship, it is the menace of the American State and Church. To penetrate this alien mass by an evangelical religion is as difficult as it is imperative. The question of the city has become the question of the race. How to reach the heart of the city and to change its life is, indeed, the question of questions.¹

Thus they pointed to what was generally being recognized as the major frontier for Christian churches in the twentieth century. In calling the city a “menace” they were in keeping with deeply rooted traditions in Christianity and in American Methodism. In his famous “Valedictory Address” to William McKendree in 1813, Francis Asbury had exclaimed, “Were I to name cities, such as Jerusalem, Antioch, and Rome, with all the great cities, both ancient and modern, what havoc have these made in the Churches!”²

The fact of the city in Christian history was nothing new; for example, one scholar has spoken of the Reformation as an “urban event.”³ When the bishops made their statement at the dawn of the twentieth century, the cities had been burgeoning for some time; Winthrop S. Hudson observes that “During the three decades from 1860 to 1890, the population of Detroit and Kansas City grew fourfold, Memphis and San Francisco fivefold, Cleveland sixfold, Chicago [where the General Conference met in 1900] tenfold, Los Angeles twentyfold, and Minneapolis and Omaha fiftyfold and more.”⁴ Awareness of the revolutionary significance of what was going on was only slowly spreading among church people, however. With the advantage of historical perspective, we can now look back and see more clearly what was happening at the turn of the century. Frederick

³A. G. Dickens, The German Nation and Martin Luther (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).
A. Norwood has written that “One must remember that these decades witnessed the metamorphosis—no other term is strong enough—of American society from a predominantly agrarian collection of regional and local communities to a highly interrelated community founded on the industrial city.”5 Though the problems of the industrial city were felt first in the North, by the end of the century they were widely prevalent; as Richey Hogg put it, “By the turn of the century the industrialization of the South with giant textile mills and iron and steel manufacturing brought the problems of New England and Pittsburgh to North Carolina and Birmingham.”6 Urbanization was to be a pervading reality of twentieth-century life up and down the land.

The term “urbanization” is used here in a very broad way to refer to a number of realities that were going on at the same time and which were related to each other in complex ways, the details of which the experts continue to debate. Industrialization has already been mentioned; with it went increasing mechanization. Much recent literature has emphasized the importance of the flood of immigration, especially from central and eastern Europe, after 1880 and continuing until it was checked by World War I and subsequent legislation. Many of the new arrivals ended up uncomfortably in already overcrowded cities unprepared to receive them. For church life the increasing mobility of the population was often a disturbing factor, while for Methodists, particularly for the black components of the denominational family, the double migration of southern blacks, often first to the growing cities of the South and then to northern industrial centers, moves greatly accelerated by World War I, posed many problems and opportunities. Though the concepts of secularization and modernization are variously defined, it seems generally agreed that they are stimulated by the growth of cities. The necessities of trying to manage the expanding metropolitan centers had led to the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of life. This whole complex of realities and the human problems related to them came within the purview of urban church leaders, and the term “urbanization” can serve as a code word to refer to the whole and restlessly changing picture.

When we call to mind also how familiar patterns of thought were being shaken by new currents in science and technology and in philosophical, historical and theological understanding, we can sense the uneasiness of those who had to adjust simultaneously to both the great changes of city life and the challenges to familiar ways of thinking. Though of course those devoted to evolutionary hypotheses, to the idea of immanence in philosophy and theology, to the relativities of thinking in

historical terms, and to naturalism in literature could be rural as well as urban dwellers, still the rapid expansion of great universities was often in urban locales, and further fed the popular aphorism that "God made the country, but man made the city." The focus in this article, however, is not primarily on the frontiers of thought but on those of the wider patterns of life in the rapidly growing and spreading cities. Certainly the two types of frontier—intellectual and physical—intertwined in strange and significant ways, and the churches had to deal with both. It was in what is being considered here under the heading "urban frontiers," however, that increasing numbers of local congregations and their leaders found themselves involved on a daily basis, oftentimes in a threatening way. As did the bishops in 1900, time and again those guiding local churches saw the city as a menace, especially when they felt driven to uproot themselves and find new locations, following their people as they fled outward toward the developing suburbs.

As we think backwards to the geographical frontier of the early nineteenth century, we think of it often as moving frontier, as a line that moved steadily westward. In a quite different sense the urban frontier of the twentieth century has also been a moving frontier, ever changing, shifting, varying in its particular location, and with few exceptions in the first half of our century, an ever growing one, pressing beyond its boundaries to set new ones, and to cast its urban spell into the surrounding countryside. "In city after city," writes Marion L. Bell, "this meant a loss of unity; it meant the end of the walking city of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century; it meant a breakdown of face-to-face relationships." Christopher Lasch highlighted a major consequence of the perpetual restlessness of the city when he noted that "By the end of the nineteenth century the close-knit communities which had once been the characteristic form of society throughout the Western world, eroded by a long process of national centralization, had disappeared, except in backwaters isolated from the mainstream of modern life."

The impact of all of this on church life was immense; the pioneer sociologist of religion in America, H. Paul Douglass, put it in a dramatic way, "It has remained for urbanization, both in its rural and in its city phase, to give the church the greatest inner revolution it has ever known." The language of revolution is strong language indeed, and it highlights the discontinuities of the urban age with those that preceded it, even as

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it obscures some of the continuities. But it also dramatizes the sense of living on the frontier that has marked much twentieth century urban life. Emphasizing the frontier analogy, Sam Bass Warner, a major historian of the American city, in a book entitled *The Urban Wilderness*, explains in considerable detail his contentions that “a long history has accounted for the endless failures of Americans to build and maintain humane cities” and that we Americans “live in one of the world’s most urbanized countries as if it were a wilderness in both time and space.” He argues that three traditional goals of American life conflict in our urban history: competition, community, and innovation, contributing to our sense of living amid giant urban wildernesses. Small wonder that congregations have often felt themselves to be in a frontier situation! Quite appropriately a leading ecumenical home missions leader at mid-century, Hermann N. Morse, wrote a book called *Again Pioneers*, noting that “Today, more than ever before, there are actually more people living where churches are not yet effectively established, more even than in our great periods of frontier settlement.” We are, most of us, again pioneers, conscious of living on urban frontiers, which through the instrumentalities of modern methods of transportation and communication touch also every corner of rural America too.

The frontier terminology is used not only by historians and sociologists; theologians also resort to it. So when Robert McAfee Brown wrote a book entitled *Frontiers for the Church Today*, he explained his use of the word frontier, by saying in the preface “It remains only to indicate briefly why I have adopted the imagery of the frontier, beyond the obvious reason that the material was originally prepared for a Texas audience.” He relied on the familiar theme of challenge in his explanation, observing that “The church in our day is called to live out a frontier existence. It must cope not with one frontier but with many, and confront them simultaneously.” But it is the urban frontier that now provides the context for the others, and hence requires close attention.

The transition from nineteenth to twentieth-century frontiers was difficult for most Protestants, and perhaps especially for the various denominations of Methodism. Even a hasty survey of the annals of Christianity in America shows that there has been a persisting rural nostalgia, a stubborn tradition that religion is at home in the country but alien in the city. For Methodists the rural tradition was strongly emphasized by Francis Asbury, who greatly feared the cities. It was confirmed by countless others in the nineteenth century, and in a way sealed by the great success

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of Methodists in frontier, rural, and small-town America. The nostalgia for country life has persisted through the urbanization process—indeed, perhaps it has been intensified because of it. Even as famous a metropolitan minister as Ralph Sockman once remarked at a Methodist Convocation on Urban Life:

I grew up on a farm. There you could almost feel that what you were dealing with was the given of God. You put in the seed, God gave the increase. But in the city you are living with man-made things.

In view of such attitudes, we can well understand why the piety and patterns of the rural church long seemed normative for all church life. H. Paul Douglass, after a study of a thousand city churches in the early 1920s, found confirmed the hypothesis that "the city church is an evolved rural church."\(^{13}\)

Despite the nostalgia, however, Methodists at the turn of the century did turn their attention to the city. They had some able leaders who resisted the rural mystique and turned their energies to the urban frontier, then perceived as new. Frank Mason North left a college pastorate in which he had been supremely happy in the then quiet, rustic community of Middletown, Connecticut to become corresponding secretary of the New York City Church Extension and Missionary Society in 1892, and to edit a periodical, *The Christian City*. That very year he bemoaned that "There are people who do not perceive that God is at work in the secular world as truly as he is in the religious." Through a long career, the man who wrote the hymn "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life" sought along with others to direct Methodist attention to the needs of the cities. He shared something of the mood of Methodist confidence so strong at that time, as in his prophecy in the last year of the old century, "Who can doubt that when the twentieth century is half gone the historian of Methodism—then, please God, a united Methodism—will need not a page or two, but a volume, fitly to set forth the greatness of the philanthropies of Methodism."\(^{14}\)

The sense of superb confidence in the future was characteristic of the time; the Episcopal Address of the northern General Conference the following year expressed it in global terms: "The Christian area enlarges; the Christian populations gain on the non-Christian; the Church itself was never more sound in its faith, more pure in its life, more influential within Christendom, more aggressive and hopeful without."\(^{15}\) The other bran-


\(^{15}\)Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . 1900, p. 77.
ches of the Methodist family shared in the glowing anticipation that the twentieth century would be a Christian one at home and abroad. For example, as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Connection celebrated its centennial in 1896 and looked ahead to the next hundred years, the bishops, in their Quadrennial Address, exclaimed, "But now kingdoms are tumbling and empires are falling before the giant sway of Republican reform, and ere the close of another century we predict that there will not be a king, monarch nor emperor known in civilization but that the Christian world will be united into one international Republican family, with Christ as their King." When the bishops of the United Brethren in Christ issued their Quadrennial Address in 1901 their cup of hope seemed to be overflowing as they exclaimed:

The Christian leaven is working among the nations, as seen in the overthrow of slavery, greater political liberty and equality before the law, and in the growth of that spirit of altruism, which is but another name for love, that is leading many a rich man to consecrate his riches to care for and relieve the defective and dependent classes in a manner truly Christian. More money has thus been given to make better the lot of the unfortunate of earth in the past ten years than was given in the first thousand years of the Christian era. First

One could easily multiply illustrations as to the way Methodism was sharing in the optimistic mood of American leadership in that period, which Henry F. May has described as a "mixture of exuberant innovation, cheerful mysticism, insistent spontaneity, and certainty that everything was turning out superbly." An apt summary can be found in Robert Moats Miller's fine essay on "Methodism and American Society, 1900-1939":

Methodism in 1900 shared many of the characteristics of American society. By every statistical measurement, the Methodist bodies were the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful of all Protestant denominations. Methodism faced the new century in confidence. After all, the nineteenth had been a great century for world Christianity and a glorious age for American Methodism.

So with splendid self-assurance, though a little reluctantly, Methodism faced the challenge of the urban frontier, took it on in the spirit of Frank Mason North's cry, "The city will test the Church and decide its competence." Slowly at first, but with growing and perhaps uneven momentum, Methodism began to direct a part of its concerns and instrumentalities of evangelism and mission toward the city. One of the early steps was the

formation of the National City Evangelization Union in 1892, authorized by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and led by the able North, who in addition to his other duties assumed its corresponding secretaryship in 1898 and held it for more than a decade. It had considerable influence in redirecting Methodist energies, especially through its yearly conventions in large cities. The northern church formally organized its Department of City Work in 1912, thereby committing a portion of its immense missionary resources to the urban frontier. Its work grew through the years as it encouraged the spread of industrial schools and institutes, pointed to examples of successful missions and "institutional churches" in downtown areas, served to encourage and help congregations on the firing line in difficult city contexts, and widened the understanding of specialized ministries among immigrants, blacks, and other minority groups. By the 1950s it was conducting massive convocations on urban life; by this period it was becoming clear that, except for native Americans, the great majority of nonwhites lived in urban areas.

All this is familiar enough to us now, but when seen against the nineteenth-century background its innovative aspects can be better appreciated. Some aspects of urban work were stronger than others; Norwood has concluded that "Methodism has never had outstanding success in dealing with recent immigrants," though Robert Miller finds that a serious effort was made.

The development of urban work in the South was slower, for, at the dawn of the century, in Kenneth K. Bailey's words, "The rural homogeneity of the South was little disturbed by immigration, industrialization, new intellectual currents, and all those other forces which were elsewhere transforming society." But in the 1920s and 1930s, so Robert W. Sledge informs us in Hands on the Ark, the urban frontier became an increasingly visible reality in the South. Containing about a quarter of American urban population in 1920, the South a decade later had about a third of that population, "thus becoming the most rapidly urbanizing section in the nation." Sledge explains that changes in the society, "including the growth of urbanization, mechanization, industrialization, liberalization..."
and secularization, moved against the grain of the mores and culture of the rural South, and particularly against the grain of its major conservative religious bodies." But, in part because of changes in the culture, the southern Methodist Church was changing too, so that the communion which in 1918 was looking to its past was by 1939 a progressive one, "asking what new patterns might be needed in order to help it bear its witness most effectively."25

The concern for the urban frontier also played an important role in the impact on Methodism of the social gospel, which in turn had a part in further alerting the people to problems of the city and its industrial life. Though Methodism may have been tardy in facing up to the social gospel, by the early twentieth century it was on the way as a force to be contended with, even though many opposed it. In 1904 a fraternal messenger of what was then the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, in addressing the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, pointed to the whole great Methodist church as one which, "in fraternity, moral reform, civic righteousness, education and human uplift, stands now, as ever, in the very forefront of Christianity's progressive hosts."26 In 1907 the social gospel cause was promoted vigorously by the founding of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, later to become the controversial Methodist Federation for Social Action. Out of a meeting of the leaders of the new Federation came a giant step in the history of the social gospel as they prepared what became the Social Creed of Methodism, and worked for its adoption by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1908. It was amended from time to time, and in one or another of its forms was adopted by the southern church in 1914 and by the Methodist Protestant Church two years later. In the very year it was written, primarily by Harry F. Ward, then a pastor in the Chicago area, it was also adopted at the founding meeting of the Federal Council of Churches, and, later revised, became known as the Social Creed of the Churches, one of the major contributions of Methodism to the social gospel movement. With its focus on the problems of labor in the burgeoning industrial system, it concentrated attention on one of the most difficult areas of the urban frontier.

Though it seems strange to us now in view of the history of the passage and then the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, the Temperance movement, so strong in Methodism in the first half of the century, then "had the profoundest kinship with the Social Gospel," to quote Paul A. Carter's

book, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel.* From the point of view of most if not all of the social gospel leaders of the progressive era, moral and social reform in the metropolis and the elimination of vice, crime, poverty, and corruption could not succeed without curbing the problems of alcohol and the saloon. The support given to the Temperance cause by the social gospel gave that somewhat controversial movement a certain credibility in Methodism which it otherwise might have lacked, and further focused attention on urban America as a frontier to be faced.

The whole complex story of Methodism's role in dealing with social thought, situations and problems was discussed up through the first half of the twentieth century in the four volumes of the "Methodism and Society" series published by Abingdon Press in 1961-62; there is much evidence for Walter G. Muelder's conclusion that "Methodism in the twentieth century has developed an impressive social witness. It has made a significant transition from the individualistic evangelism of the nineteenth century to the inclusive personal and social evangelism of the present." The social gospel played an important part in that important change, but one has to keep it in proper perspective. An observation by F. Gerald Ensley that "... generally speaking, Methodism has identified itself with the middle class on social issues" helps us to do that.

The encounter with the urban frontier also served to heighten the interest of Methodists in church cooperation, federation, and unity. Frank Mason North saw the value of closer relationship among the denominations if the urban wilderness were adequately to be served. "The dream of a united Church has no field for its actualization nearer or more appealing than our great American cities,” he exclaimed, for “division and conflict here are the betrayal of a sacred trust.” The Episcopal Address of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1904 went even further as the bishops declared that "The pronounced tendency to unity of spirit and cooperation in Christian work, and, indeed, to organic union, is hailed with delight." Urban church workers, Methodists prominent among them, were conspicuous in the development of three important cooperative agencies in 1908: the Home Missions Council, the Council of Women for Home Missions, and the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Three major concerns were expressed in those agencies: those

30As quoted by Lacy, *Frank Mason North*, p. 125.
31*Journal of the Twenty-second Quadrennial Session of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* . . . 1904, p. 74.
of mission, of social Christianity, and of what we now call ecumenism. Not all cooperative efforts were narrowly channeled through the official agencies of the denominations or their boards; a significant illustration was the development of Goodwill Industries out of the Morgan Memorial Methodist Church in Boston. What began early in the century in the vision of one young minister grew into a nationwide interdenominational social service undertaking that employed persons often considered unemployable; aided by one of the Home Missions departments of The Methodist Church, by 1960 Goodwill Industries had been established in 124 American cities.32 Its work in the city intensified Methodism's commitment to ecumenical life in its various forms in important ways.

In these efforts to deal with the urban frontier through changes in evangelism and mission, through social gospel teachings and church cooperation, Methodist church women found a significant and growing role. As is made clear in those two good volumes on Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition, despite the difficulties they faced women were pioneers on the urban frontier before the turn of the century. Rosemary Keller writes, “By the late nineteenth century, when urbanization and immigration created new frontiers in the inner cities, single women deaconesses became instruments of service to meet pressing needs.”33 Women were prepared for these new roles in training schools; among the pioneers in this form of education was the Chicago Training School for City, Home and Foreign Missions, founded in 1885 by a determined Methodist woman, Lucy Rider Meyer, with the help of her husband. Within two years two students from the school moved into a rented flat near the school and opened what became the first Methodist Deaconess Home in the country.

Young women from rural areas often held frightening images of the city and only slowly learned to see the opportunities for service there. They often did encounter heart-rending scenes of poverty, destitution, ignorance, and disease. But they persisted, and made significant contributions to the rise of social Christianity. Other Methodist schools like the one in Chicago were soon opened, such as the New England Deaconess Home and Training School in Boston in 1889, its work expanded a few years later by the building of an associated hospital. Southern Methodist women under the leadership of the resourceful Belle Bennett founded Scarritt Bible and Training School in Kansas City, Missouri in 1892; at first its major attention was given to foreign missions, but after the southern church authorized deaconesses in 1902, the school secured Mabel K. Howell to teach in the emerging field of sociology and many of its graduates went into urban

32Bucke, ed., The History of American Methodism, pp. 120-21, 542.
work. The roles of leaders like Bennett and Howell in southern Methodism has been traced by John Patrick McDowell in *The Social Gospel in the South*. He shows how their work was influenced by the well-known northern leaders of that movement, though in the South there was apparently somewhat less emphasis on the right of labor to organize.

As Methodism moved into the second half of the twentieth century, its role in facing the urban frontiers was well established; some of its scholars, for example, Murray H. Leiffer and Frederick A. Shippey, had written standard books in the field, and such urban convocations as those operated by The Methodist Church were impressive events. But an undercurrent of unrest runs through the literature on the urban church of this period. The superb confidence of 1900 was running out. Shippey undertook an explanation of it in 1952 with these words:

> The rapid growth of cities has induced a state of crisis and confusion among Protestants. No matter what else may be said, all is not well with the city church. . . . The simple confidence of former days among leaders has given way to vacillating concern. So intensive and so extensive is the urban impact it has shaken the institution to the very bottom of its life.

The changes had been so great that much that had been part of the Methodist heritage seemed no longer relevant, and indeed some things so important in times past no longer were. An underlying theme in some of the convocation materials was that it may take a long time to do a satisfying job in an urban location. In practice, of course, the Methodist denominations have long since adjusted to that, but the old mystique of itinerancy persists and seems still to cause guilt feelings. The circuit riders of the nineteenth century had to be on the move to reach people settling down on the frontiers; the urban worker of the twentieth has to minister to a very mobile population and it may take a long time, even a lifetime in one location, to work effectively at the job.

Yes, the simple confidence of earlier days is gone for many reasons; issues on the urban frontiers are often complex and too frequently come down to a choice between unsatisfactory alternatives. We hear a lot these days about the increasing spectrum of religious pluralism. For ministry,
especially in urban America but not only there, that may focus not so much on the differences between denominational families as it does on the internationalization of that pluralism within a given congregation of almost any denominational background. Most of our congregations today, of whatever formal ecclesiastical commitment, in fact serve as community churches. That breaks up the homogeneities of old, and presents both difficulties and challenges for those who labor in such situations. Though the way we live it out may of necessity be quite different, the faith of those who organized this great American Methodist denominational family two hundred years ago, rooted as it was in the revelation of God in Christ, is adequate for today and any day. The faith of those who carried the gospel to the western frontiers of a hundred and fifty years ago can inspire us still, though we may need to put it into idioms and practices suited to our urban frontiers.

In the introduction to each of the four volumes in the “Methodism and Society” series a sentence of Ernst Troeltsch is quoted: “Faith is the source of energy in the struggle of life, but life remains a battle which is continually renewed upon ever new fronts.” Even the words of that dominant figure who helped the twentieth century churches to respond to the challenge of the urban frontier must be revised as we face our battles. In 1900 Frank Mason North said “Not with the despair of pessimism, but with the courage of confidence in God, the church must go forward to the conquest of these citadels of power.” We have learned the hard way that the word “conquest” no longer fits; the days of ecclesiastical triumphalism and imperialism are over. Let us learn to say, “With the courage of confidence in God, the church must go forward to minister and to witness before the citadels of power, secure in the knowledge that God’s amazing grace is sufficient for our every need.”

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