Methodism's Nature and Purpose

The early American Methodists saw themselves as the advance guard of an army which would conquer the land for Christ, and set up the reign of holiness in all of life. As the Christmas Conference put it in answer to the question, "What is God's purpose in raising up the Methodists?," it was "to reform the continent, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

The use of the term "army" is no casual analogy, for a military pattern was adopted by this energetic band. Bishop Asbury set the tone when he declared: "My continual cry to the Presiding Elders is order, order, good order. All things must be arranged. Temporally and Spiritually, like a well-disciplined army."¹

Peter Cartwright, the renowned 19th century Methodist leader, also made use of military terms and figures. On one occasion he said he leveled his "whole Arminian artillery against their Calvinism,"² and on another, in refuting a Baptist's charges, he replied to his antagonist strongly and "poured round upon round on him so hot and so fast, that he started for the door."³ When once tempted to turn back from reaching an appointment, he remembered his old Methodist motto: "Never retreat till you certainly know you can advance no further."⁴

He likened his camp meetings to military conquests. "In about thirty minutes the power of God fell on the congregation in such a manner as is seldom seen; the people fell in every direction, right and left, front and rear. It was supposed that not less than three hundred fell like dead men in a mighty battle. . . ."⁵

³Ibid., 136.
⁴Ibid., 328.
The Duties of a Presiding Elder

The presiding elder was the most significant officer in this "army." The bishops, for all of their power and authority, "floated" throughout the church and were not assigned to specific areas until church union in 1939. In the interim between conferences the presiding elders essentially ran the church. Bishop Asbury said of them: "I must repose great confidence in, and expect great help from, the presiding elders. They must be my committee of information, counsel, and safety."\(^6\)

The origin of the office of presiding elder is a bit difficult to trace. Like much of Methodist structure, it was developed on an *ad hoc* basis, and then was perpetuated through continued usage. While the office was not explicitly recognized by the *Discipline* of 1784, the Christmas Conference was the place of its beginning.\(^7\)

The primary function of these early elders was to visit the quarterly meetings and to administer the sacraments, since they were the only ordained ministers at that time. Coke and Asbury stated:

> The conference clearly saw that the bishops wanted assistants; that it was impossible for one or two bishops so to superintend the vast work on this continent as to keep everything in order in the intervals of the conference, without other official men to act under them and assist them; and as they would be only the agents of the bishops in every respect, the authority of appointing them, and of changing them, ought, from the nature of things, to be in the episcopacy.\(^8\)

In this "army" the chain of command passed from the bishops through the presiding elders.

The presiding eldership was recognized as having a specially intimate relation to the episcopacy. The presiding elder was regarded as the local arm of the general superintendency, and as the agent of the bishop in matters of local administration.\(^9\)

The introduction of the "governing" rather than "advisory" conference in American Methodism led to continual tensions between the concept of episcopal control and conference control. Some conference control as exercised in the yearly passing of the character of the preachers, but most control was still in the hands of the bishops and their assistants, the presiding elders.

Since during the nineteenth century the episcopate was not diocesan, but "general and itinerant," the presiding elders became a kind of "sub-

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\(^{8}\)Ibid., 216.

\(^{9}\)Thomas B. Neely, *The Bishops and the Supervisional System of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1912), 200-201.

\(^{10}\)Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Everts & Stewart, 1878), 733.
Bishop Simpson wrote that the presiding elder "supervises all the interests of the church within" the districts.

These presiding elders act under the direction of the bishops, report to them officially, and advise and counsel with them touching the ministerial appointments and arrangements; and thus minute supervision of the church . . . is secured, while at the same time the number of bishops is comparatively small.11

The supervision was indeed minute, and deviations were few. As Weisberger expressed it:

Elders continually visited their subordinate circuits, and bishops wore themselves into exhaustion by constant rounds of inspection covering whole conferences. . . . Circuit riders could not strike off into schismatic paths, carrying faithful congregations with them. Bishops and elders were always appearing to test classes for doctrinal soundness. In addition, the circuit riders themselves were shifted to a new circuit every year or two. . . . So in spite of the fact that frontier Methodist ministers were completely on their own for months at a time, the church had a remarkable unity.12

The specific duties of the Presiding Elder, as spelled out by the Discipline, were:

1. To travel through his appointed district.
2. In the absence of the bishop, to take charge of all the elders and deacons, traveling and local preachers, and exhorters in his district.
3. To change, receive, and suspend preachers in his district during the intervals of Conferences, and in the absence of the bishop, as the Discipline directs.13

In traveling through the district, the major task was to hold quarterly meetings in all the circuits. For many years the number of circuits in a district was limited to about twelve, so "that the presiding elder might visit each one every three months, and hold quarterly meeting services embracing Saturday, Sunday, and sometimes Monday and Tuesday."14 At these meetings, the presiding elders were "to oversee the spiritual and temporal business of the church."15

The Spiritual Business Consisted of the Following:

1. Preaching and administering the sacraments at the quarterly meetings. Since only the elders could administer the sacraments, it was necessary for them to make regular rounds of their circuits. Thus developed the Methodist tradition of quarterly Communion. The business part of

11Ibid., 733.
14Matthew Simpson, Cyclopaedia of Methodism (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1878), 733.
15Ibid., 733.
the meeting was usually taken care of on Saturday. Then came the main attraction, the preaching. Here the presiding elder was expected to excel, and most did.

... under the mighty sermons of those brave pioneers upon a susceptible people—rude, frank, honest, fearless, not yet gospel-hardened—almost miraculous effects took place when hundreds even of the opposers were felled as a blow, and whole communities were changed from dissolute frontier settlements into moral God-fearing towns, which have remained to this day models for all the world.\textsuperscript{16}

2. Counseling converts. This was accomplished by the presiding elders who talked to the converts, explaining the six-months probationary period, stressing the necessity of regular attendance at the class and circuit quarterly meetings, and explaining the requirements of the \textit{discipline} to them.\textsuperscript{17}

3. Defending the doctrines and practices of the Methodist Episcopal Church. As James Leaton in \textit{Methodism in Illinois} described the early years:

These were years of some religious prosperity, but at the same time of almost constant controversy with the Calvinists on decrees and unconditional final perseverance, and with the Baptists on the mode and subjects of baptism. Every preacher was expected to be always prepared to defend his own doctrines and practices, and to refute the errors and heresies of others; yet much of this controversy necessarily, from their position and experience, fell to the lot of the presiding elders; and it was often the case that the Sunday morning sermon at a quarterly-meeting was a long-drawn-out attack upon and refutation of some form of error prevalent in the neighborhood. It was not uncommon then for a quarterly-meeting sermon on some disputed doctrine to be from three to four hours long; and if the preacher was a fluent speaker the people would listen to it with apparent interest to the end.\textsuperscript{18}

4. Enforcing the rules for the instruction of children.

\textbf{The Temporal Business} was cared for at the Quarterly Meeting Conference, later shortened to Quarterly Conference. Among the usual agenda items were the following:

1. The promotion of the benevolent and educational interests of the church. This included such things as the Chartered Fund, "for the relief and support of the itinerant, superannuated, and worn-out preachers . . ., their wives and children, widows, and orphans,"\textsuperscript{19} mission and church extension societies, academies, and other institutions.

2. Deciding all questions of law, subject to an appeal to the president of the next Annual Conference. In effect, the presiding elders were

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17}Johnson, \textit{Frontier Camp Meeting}, 143-144.
  \item \textsuperscript{18}James Leaton, \textit{Methodism in Illinois, from 1793 to 1832} (Cincinnati: Walden and Stowe, 1883), 223.
  \item \textsuperscript{19}Simpson, \textit{Cyclopaedia of Methodism}, 200.
\end{itemize}
to act as "umpires" between the preachers and the people. Preliminary investigation of charges against preachers was conducted, and then taken to the Annual Conference for final action.\(^{20}\)

3. Examining and licensing exhorters and local preachers. These local workers were properly approved at the quarterly meetings. While many remained local workers, this was the point of origin into the traveling preacher ranks.

4. Collecting and apportioning "quarterage." Quarterage was a quarterly payment for the support of the ministry, and was solicited in advance of the meeting and distributed or paid to the preachers at the meetings. The money was divided on a percentage basis between the presiding elder and the preacher in charge.\(^{21}\)

The work of the presiding elder was not confined to these public activities. Bishop Simpson summarized the work of the presiding elder thus: "The functions of the office are chiefly twofold—supervision and aggressive action. The first is especially required where the preachers are young and inexperienced; and the second, for the commencement of new charges, and the encouragement and strengthening of Churches."\(^{22}\)

The aggressive action of starting new preaching points was always on the mind of the presiding elder. In his travels throughout the district he was continually on the lookout for such places. These could be wherever he found them—in homes, barns, schools, or elsewhere. From these preaching places it was hoped that classes and churches would be developed.\(^{23}\)

The second and third duties spelled out by the *Discipline* were also very broad. Since the bishop was absent most of the time, the presiding elder was almost continually in charge of the preachers of the district. As Brannan puts it:

> The powers of the presiding elders grew steadily as the geographical extent of the church increased. More and more the bishops had to rely upon these intermediate officers for the information and knowledge of the local area.\(^{24}\)

In his supervision of the preachers, the presiding elder "had final responsibility to see that the disciplinary rules of the church were uniformly

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 734.


\(^{22}\)Simpson, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism*, 724.


enforced throughout his district. Enforced loyalty to the Methodist Church and iron obedience to superiors in true military tradition were demanded" of the preachers. "Their methods of appointment and advance­ment . . . was indicative of rigid supervision." Presiding elders and even fellow preachers could file delinquency reports on their co-workers, which would be followed by the Annual Conferences which "acted as judicial bodies in bringing to task violators of the rules." The 1841 Illinois Con­ference voted that the presiding elder had the right to arrest preachers who refused to do what the Discipline requires and suspend them until the next Conference session.

Presiding elders were likewise responsible for the education and training of the young preachers. On their quarterly visits they would examine the trainees as to their progress. Later, the Illinois Conference prescribed a course of study for the preachers.

Peter Cartwright As A Presiding Elder

Despite the fact that Peter Cartwright served as presiding elder for fifty years, he professed to be uninterested in the office. In his Autobiography he wrote:

I have often wondered at the aspiration of many, very many Methodist preachers, for the office of presiding elder, and have frequently said, if I were a bishop that such aspirants should always go without office under my administration. I look upon this disposition as the outcropping of fallen and unsanctified human nature, and whenever this spirit in a large degree gets into a preacher, he seldom does much good afterwards.

Yet, in spite of this profession, no attempts at his removal from officer were successful. How, then, did Peter Cartwright carry out the tasks of being a presiding elder? Bishop E. S. Janes, at the Cartwright Jubilee, held at Lincoln, Illinois, October 24, 1869, affirmed:

The office is one of many difficulties and great delicacy. The condition and interests of the churches are to be comprehended, the special gifts, aptitudes of preachers, are to be perceived and rightly estimated. The office requires him to be the loving, wakeful overseer of the churches committed to his care, the special friend and judicious advisor of the pastors of his district, and the competent and faithful counselor of the bishop who presides at his conference. A failure in either of these respects renders a presiding elder unacceptable, and works his displacement from the office. Standing in this relationship for half a century establishes abundantly the capacity of the

25Johnson, Frontier Camp Meeting, 160.
26Ibid., 162.
27Ibid., 162.
29Leaton, Methodism in Illinois, 163-164.
man... None but a man of inherent power, of careful observation, of great sagacity, of comprehensive views, of sound judgment, and of practical wisdom, could have taken and held with honor and usefulness this high position in the church for fifty years.31

In addition to this official endorsement, just how did Cartwright carry out the many roles of a presiding elder?

First of all, he was a dependable "organization man," believing in the system and working with all his might to uphold it. This support is seen in several different ways.

The keystones of the "system" were circuits and itinerancy.32 From the days of Asbury on, motion was the key principle. One of Bishop Asbury's early traveling companions said of him: "There was nothing in this world he so much dreaded as a preacher who was not always in motion."33 With this system, most of the societies within a hundred miles could be served. By preaching every day, sometimes taking Monday off, the minister could cover twenty to thirty, or even more, preaching places.34

However, by the end of the third decade of the nineteenth century, there was a growing trend toward a stationed ministry. Peter Cartwright did not view this trend with favor, for in his opinion it tended to locality and congregationalism; and it would have been far better for the Methodist church had it never had a station. His advice was: "Put all the work on circuits, and put on as many preachers as the people need, and are able to support, and let the church be blessed with the spice of variety and the constant interchange of preachers.35

Cartwright always contended for the Methodist usages—camp meetings, class meetings, prayer meetings, and love feasts. He deplored any deviation from them.36

His support of the "system" is also reflected in his attitude toward the slavery controversy. He had left Kentucky because of his intense dislike for slavery, and ran for the legislature the first time to help overcome an attempt to alter the constitution of the state to allow slavery.37 But he disliked abolitionists and the Underground Railroad equally as much.38

Daniels summed up Cartwright's attitudes about the slavery issue:

32Sweet, The Methodists, 45.
33Brannan, Presiding Elder Question, 11.
34Sweet, The Methodists, 44.
35Cartwright, Autobiography, 503.
36T. G. Onstot, Pioneers of Menard and Mason Counties (Forest City, Illinois: T. G. Onstot, 1902), 118.
On the subject of slavery, Cartwright had clear and distinct opinions of his own. He believed it to be a sin to buy and sell human beings, and a misfortune to have the responsibility of their ownership and management, but especially did he regard it as a sin for ministers or laymen to agitate this question in such a manner as to imperil the peace and unity of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In harmony with the views of President Lincoln concerning his duty of preserving the Union, Cartwright would save the Church if he could with slavery, and if not, he would save the Church without slavery. 39

Support of the “system” also shows in his attitude toward lay representation in the church. He believed in the church system the way it was and abhorred any change in it. 40 As Sweet observed: “He had little patience with innovations either in theology or church organization; 41 he “was an uncompromising defender of the church as it was fashioned by Asbury and McKendree.” 42 Cartwright ridiculed the Reform movement:

They have tried to their hearts’ content their Presbyterian form of government and their lay delegation. Their operations remind one of an old horse-mill with about one-third of the cogs out of the main wheel. There is a mighty jarring and jolting, and often a mighty strife about who shall be the big man. Woe to them that kick against the pricks. 43

Defense of the church’s positions was a frequent topic in his preaching, both structurally and doctrinally. On one occasion, at least, he denied a “religious crackpot” the right to preach, believing himself “accountable to the people as to the Lord for the doctrines advanced from the stand. 44 “His sermons consisted of shrewd arguments against predestination, antinomianism, exclusive immersion, and such like errors,” as well as against the well-known vices of the neighborhood. 45

One element of the role of presiding elder Cartwright took to with great alacrity was that of being a “sub-bishop.” As one of his contemporaries noted: “During much of this time he wielded almost episcopal powers. . . .” 46 This was not, however, a usurpation of powers, for this was the nature of the office. However, he seemed to feel that along with this authority should go deference from others.

For example, in 1841, McKendree College conferred a D.D. on Peter Akers. “Brother Cartwright could not let it pass without a variety of hints,

40Chamberlin, “Cartwright,” 51.
42C. Hobart, Peter Cartwright (Red Wing, Minnesota: Red Wing Printing Company, 1889), 14.
43Cartwright, Autobiography, 162.
44Ibid., 228-229.
45Daniels, “Western Pioneer,” 323.
46Ibid., 325.
nods and illusions intended to create a laugh at Dr. Akers' expense.” To which Dr. Akers replied: “Never mind! Only wait until we have another meeting of the board.” The next year Cartwright was also made a D.D. From that time on, he seemed to regard it as a personal affront when he was not addressed as “Doctor.”

During the early years in Illinois, Cartwright's travels took him over most of the state, where he had to get about without the aid of roads or bridges, or shelters to spend the night, often in much want and privation. After these early years, the districts became much smaller, and contained not more than a dozen circuits in each one. This smaller number of circuits was necessary to exercise the kind of close leadership and direction which was the pattern for the presiding elders. He was strongly opposed to the movement to increase the number of circuits under a presiding elder, "because he clearly saw that this increase would make impossible such work as he had been doing and would eventually change the very conception of the duties of the office." Of eastern districts that contained 30 to 40 circuits he said: "The presiding elder goes round mostly to preside in trials of complaints or appeals, and as a kind of fiscal agent."

As he made his rounds of the circuits, Cartwright conducted the items of business expected of a presiding elder. He examined the members and the preachers on certain moral issues, especially concerning alcohol. "Cartwright made use of the general rules as a temperance pledge, and insisted that those who came into the Methodist Church should leave that devil outside." On at least one occasion, he succeeded in having a local preacher expelled for drinking drams.

In an old circuit record book in the archives of First United Methodist Church of Springfield, Illinois, there is an account of the Fourth Quarterly Conference of the Buckheart Circuit in 1839:

Resolved 1st that the Quarterly Conference of the Buckheart Circuit be constituted a Temperance Society
Resolved 2 that we will abstain ourselves from and discountenance in others the use of intoxicating Liquors
Resolved 3 that each member pledge himself to use his best endeavors to promote the principle of total abstinence especially in our church
Resolved 4 that we will do all we can to assist the Circuit Preacher from time to time in discovering bringing to account and expelling from the church all that will not conform to Discipline in this matter the above resolutions seconded and adopted.
One of the duties of a presiding elder was keeping the people reminded of their duties in regard to benevolences. In this Cartwright was recognized as something of a financier for his effective work in promoting these causes.\(^{53}\) He made a motion at the 1831 Illinois Annual Conference to organize and promote Sunday Schools and other benevolent institutions.\(^{54}\) The cause of missions was never far from his heart. He was an officer several times in the Conference mission society, was a life member of it, and assisted the Pecan Mission Quarterly Meeting Conference form itself into a missionary society.\(^{55}\)

The cause of education was never far from Cartwright’s heart, either. Despite his reputation for being against education, he was actively involved in promoting several academies, served as president of Pleasant Plains Academy, agent for Springfield College, and had a hand in establishing MacMurray College and Illinois Wesleyan University. On one occasion he had a letter published in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, calling for pious young men and women to come to Illinois to teach in his district alone. “We expect,” he said, “our conference to form itself into a common school education society.”\(^{56}\)

The duty of discipline was not neglected by Cartwright, so much so that one of his contemporaries says that

> during the last half of his life his relations to the kingdom of God appear to have been chiefly disciplinary and official, and his memory is oftener recalled in connection with some controversial witticism or some crude exhibition of pugnacious piety. . . .\(^{57}\)

In true military fashion, “no excuse” was acceptable for not performing one’s duties. One who particularly felt the sting was William S. Crissey, who had repeatedly missed Conference because of illness. “Toward illness, Cartwright felt no sympathy,”\(^ {58}\) And Crissey was castigated before the Conference and sent to a lesser appointment.\(^{59}\) Cartwright frequently brought charges of neglect of duty, maladministration, and unacceptability in performing the duties of a preacher.\(^{60}\)

The collection of quarterage was not neglected. Old circuit record books note payments to Cartwright for quarterage, table expense and traveling expense. At the third quarterly meeting of the Tazewell Circuit

\(^{53}\)Chamberlin, “Cartwright,” 53.
\(^{54}\)Illinois Conference Journal and Yearbook, 1831, 119.
\(^{55}\)“Quarterly Meeting Minutes,” Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.
\(^{57}\)Daniels, “Western Pioneer,” 328.
\(^{59}\)Ibid., 37.
\(^{60}\)Illinois Conference Journal and Yearbook, 1825 ff. passim.
in 1830 he was allowed $9.75 and traveling expenses of fifty cents.\(^{61}\) The Flat Branch Circuit Quarterly Meeting Conference promised to pay him $5 quarterly.\(^{62}\)

As Cartwright had been instructed by his presiding elder, so he did the same for the young men in his district. Of his own experience he said:

We had at this early day no course of study prescribed, as at present; but William M'Kendree, afterward bishop, but then my presiding elder, directed me to a proper course of reading and study. He selected books for me, both literary and theological; and every quarterly visit he made he examined into my progress, and corrected my errors, if I had fallen into any. He delighted to instruct me in English grammar. . . . and I say that I am more indebted to Bishop M'Kendree for my little attainments in literature and divinity, than to any other man on earth. And I believe that if presiding elders would do their duty by young men in this way, it would be more advantageous than all the colleges and Biblical institutes in the land; for they then could learn and practice every day.\(^{63}\)

**Conclusion**

In assessing Peter Cartwright as a presiding elder, it is difficult to determine whether he was more or less effective than his contemporaries in the office. The evidence clearly indicates that he successfully carried out the role as the church then understood it, that he was indeed a "sub-bishop" and thoroughly enjoyed it. Obviously, he was not always popular. Brother Snow regularly brought charges against him for misuse of office, i.e., being dictatorial. "But this was his well-known temperament and he was regularly acquitted."\(^{64}\) Others thought he was "a disgrace to the M. E. Church,"\(^{65}\) or that his "eccentric and 'bull-dozing' propensities gave him a continental reputation and notoriety."\(^{66}\) But in time "he came to be regarded as the symbol and father of Illinois Methodism."\(^{67}\) Phillip M. Watters said of him:

He quickly discovered the strength and weakness of men, saw where they could do most good and least harm, and gave to every man his work. With rare wisdom, born of wedding common sense and experience, he directed the preachers and administered the affairs of his district.

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\(^{61}\)S. R. Beggs, *Pages From the Early History of the West and Northwest* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 252.

\(^{62}\)Flat Branch Circuit Minutes, Archives of First United Methodist Church, Springfield, Illinois.


\(^{64}\)"The Trial Records," *Central Illinois Historical Messenger*, 4 (July-August-September, 1972), 3.


\(^{67}\)Williams, "Church Trials," 26.
He was a strategist of broad and clear vision. When the campaign was being planned or the battle being pushed he was quick to determine the true lines of march, and to seize the points of vantage. In those days of marvelous growth, when the population was sweeping westward so quickly that circuits were quickly developing into districts, and districts into annual conferences, the presiding elder had great need for strategic wisdom; and in this few could excel Peter Cartwright.  

At a meeting of the Illinois Conference Historical Society in 1888, Rev. George E. Scrimger said of Cartwright:

With all his brusqueness, boldness and eccentricities, he possessed a sympathetic nature, and I am told by one who knew him well, that he was quite modest, when it came to considering his own attainments and ability. Fitted in mind and body for great endurance, and bold movements, he shrank not from the most arduous toil. Positive and commanding in his type of character he largely directed our Conference affairs for many years; and ever ready to defend our doctrines and usages, he was a “tower of strength” to our early Church in the west.

Nor was it only the preachers who testified to his leadership and the respect in which he was held. At his last visit to Carlinville, the Quarterly Conference unanimously passed a resolution praising “our venerable and esteemed Presiding Elder,” approving the cause he had taken, and assuring him of their “affectionate sympathy and prayers for his happiness and usefulness to the close of his life.”

Perhaps John E. Hallwas was correct when he wrote: “One suspects that Cartwright’s contemporaries viewed him much like the American people viewed the late John Wayne in recent years—as not really the superman that his public image projected him to be, but still, a little larger than life size.”

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68 Watters, Peter Cartwright, 115-116.
71 Hallwas, Western Illinois Heritage, 34.