METHODIST WOMEN AND INTERRACIAL FAIRNESS
IN THE 1930S

ALICE G. KNOTTS

In the 1930s interracial problems, mission studies, unequal treatment of women and experiences of being outside Methodist power structures all contributed to a growing concern of the Woman's Missionary Council (WMC) of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for fairness in race relations. Leaders of the Council emphasized a change from mission work for to work with women of color. Race relations programs became political and influential. Sustained emphasis in race relations emerged, characterized by committee work and local efforts in the areas of rural development with its concern for the economic condition of tenant farmers and the rural poor, schools for black children and youth, the plight of domestic workers, and leadership training for women of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.

Opposition to Lynching

Of all the interracial activities of the WMC in the 1930s, the anti-lynching program was largest, most visible, and most supported and sustained. The race relations work on these issues, coordinated by interracial leadership, contributed to the development of a spirit of independent judgment and agency on the part of the Woman's Missionary Council which set them at odds with the mainstream opinion of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, concerning the up-coming merger with the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Protestant Church. The WMC opposed plans for the Central Jurisdiction. The ability to take a stance on race relations which differed from that of their denomination as a whole carried into later years and facilitated organized Methodist women's efforts to change racial attitudes and policies in The Methodist Church.

Two experiences provided the primary sources of communication between black women and white women. One was the summer Christian Leadership Schools in which leaders of the Woman's Missionary Council provided leadership training for leaders of the Colored Methodist Episcopal women's missionary societies. Living and studying together for a week gave opportunities to white leaders to hear the concerns of educated black Christian women who were leaders in their own communities and conferences. White women were invited to visit the leadership schools. Auxiliaries contributed toward the expenses of black women sent from their communities and invited those who attended to give reports in person to the white auxiliaries. Bertha Newell, Superintendent of the Bureau of Social Relations of the Woman's Missionary Council, commented that the follow-up local contacts between women who had attended these schools and the white auxiliaries had been "one of the finest products of our experiments in interracial cooperation." The process of supporting a local black delegate to attend these schools, then studying community needs with her and her associates, and gradually working together on local projects united women across racial lines in Christian service. Interracial contacts generated by the leadership schools for CME women touched the spiritual lives of white women:

The letters from white counselors and instructors give the same testimony—that the blessing which has come to them has been great, too deep for expression. They came to help and were helped. Like effects are felt in the local churches which aid women to go, as they hear "delegates" recount their experiences.

A second source for black awareness came from the Woman's Department of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). The members of the Woman's Department were drawn initially from the leaders of the Woman's Missionary Council and its state organizations and from the National Association of Colored Women.

White women who guided Methodist women in the interracial movement and the anti-lynching campaign held positions in the Woman's Missionary Council, the Woman's Department of CIC, and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Along with Jesse Daniel Ames, who headed both the Woman's Department of CIC and the ASWPL, these leaders included Bertha Newell, Superintendent of the newly reorganized Bureau of Social Relations of the Woman's Missionary Council; Estelle Haskin, Editorial Secretary of the Board of Missions of the MECS; Louise Young, Chair of the Committee on Interracial Cooperation of the WMC; and later Dorothy Tilly who became secretary of the Committee on Rural Development of the WMC and eventually succeeded Ames as Director of the Woman's Department of CIC.

The overlap in leadership led to many forms of mutual cooperation. The WMC requested that conference women's missionary societies endorse the ASWPL and designate their conference superintendents of Christian Social Relations and representatives of Christian Citizenship and Law Observance as members of the state associations of ASWPL. Under the direction of Jesse Daniel Ames serving in her capacity as Director of Woman's Work for CIC, Bertha Newell participated as a member of an Advisory Committee of six women, three white and three black, which reorganized and reactivated the women's work of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.

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Their religious convictions about race led Ames, Newell, and other leaders of the Woman’s Missionary Council to stand outside the accepted norms of southern society.7 A number of socially concerned women’s organizations had a similar experience. Their posture, cultivated by awareness of racism and sexism, fostered independence from the MECS and nurtured interdependence among women’s organizations.

The Committee of Women’s Activities of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation secured the leadership of equal numbers of white and black members, thirty-six in all, representing all major black or white Protestant denominations and women’s organizations in the South. The roster of black leaders reads like a Who’s who listing: Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Janie Porter Barrett, Jennie B. Moton, Mary McLeod Bethune, Juliette Derricotte, Eugenia Hope, Nannie Burroughs, Mattie E. Coleman, Mrs. H. L. McCrory, Sallie Stewart, and Marion Wilkinson among others.8 These were churchwomen, educators, clubwomen, social workers, andYWCA secretaries. They adopted a ten-year program whose objectives were quickly reflected in the program of the Woman’s Missionary Council. In 1933 at a Church Woman’s Conference sponsored by the Woman’s

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Department of CIC white and black were once again represented almost equally in a discussion of what church women could do about race relations. Ten black women represented nine denominations and theYWCA. Seven white women represented the MECS, Presbyterian denominations, various Southern Baptists, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Frank discussion of ways to increase local interracial religious fellowship, increase appreciation of the abilities of both racial groups, and ensure legal justice led to hopes that many states would plan similar conferences of concerned churchwomen.9

Interracial discussions provided complex analysis of southern racial and social issues. Even the all-white ASWPL relied on interracial discussions to guide its understanding of the double standard which contributed to the practice of lynching. Interracial dialogues also informed leaders as to the institutional nature of racism.

The white race dominates and determines almost exclusively the expenditures for improvement provided by public and private funds for both races. It provides opportunities for the Negro on as low a basis as is possible under the Constitution and the laws of the United States. In shutting off opportunities vital to the spiritual and mental growth of people, the white race stunts and dwarfs the lives of Negroes and provides its own proof of the contumacy that Negroes are unable to achieve.10

In 1933 the Committee on the Status of Women noted that the question of the place of women in church and society with which they had been dealing had a built-in bias which established that man’s place was the norm and woman’s place, therefore, a variant. They concluded, “A better understanding of the values contributed to society by women will produce a more normal estimate of the relative place of men and women.”11 This revelation concerning social standards for women is similar to the understanding of the ethnocentricity of southern culture emerging about the same time from the interracial meetings. It is possible that the two informed each other.

It was clear to southern women that if the South were to attract major financial investments in industrialization which would contribute to economic recovery, the South needed to demonstrate that its race relations were manageable and not potentially explosive or lawless. The Executive Committee recommended that missionary societies study lynchings and their causes.12 The Bureau of Christian Social Relations urged that

9Church Woman’s Conference, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, June 10-11, 1933, Jesse Daniel Ames Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.
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by delegating to one missionary society at the county seat responsibility for: interesting every organization, men and women, in the county in this campaign; securing signatures of county officials, preachers and teachers in the county and of officers of all organizations, civic and religious in the county. 13

In 1933 they reported that several thousand women had signed the pledge and that sheriffs were signing, too.

In 1935 the Committee on Christian Citizenship and Law Observance of the WMC stepped up its activities and visibility in the campaign against lynching. Methodist women approached leading citizens and police officers and obtained many new signatures for the pledge against lynching. Women made certain that candidates for governor in various states were interviewed concerning their attitudes toward lynching. Across the South in Methodist women's circles the Costigan-Wagner bill had been discussed. 14

In 1938 when the U.S. Senate was close to a vote on the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill, a few southern senators effectively used a filibuster to stop its passage, which led Methodist women to lobby for the end of filibusters. Women continued to work with the ASWPL for stronger state laws and a mandatory change of venue for the accused. 15

The widely publicized case of the lynching of Claude Neal on October 26, 1934, convinced previously apathetic citizens that prompt federal anti-lynching legislation was needed. Neal was taken from a jail in Brewton, Alabama, and lynched in Marianna, Florida, in a carefully orchestrated episode "involving unspeakable cruelties and barbarity and witnessed by several thousand persons ...." 16 The lynching created headlines nationwide and publicized the incongruity between a nation proud of its democratic principles and its Christian faith, and the broad public support for racism as a law unto itself.

Charles S. Johnson, a noted sociologist from Fisk University, cited churchwomen for their courage:

Certain of the women's church organizations have taken the boldest stand of any group in the South against mob violence and lynching, and they are the chief support of the active interracial committees. 17

Unlike most southerners who retreated when rumors of a lynching circulated, a few ASWPL members descended on the troubled area by car, bus, or train. Not many people would willingly confront angry mob leaders, yet members of the ASWPL such as Dorothy Tilly did just that. She would talk the community leaders into preventing a lynching on the grounds that courts and systems of justice would duly punish offenders.

Dorothy Tilly once described the instance of a small town pastor who heard rumors that there was to be a lynching that night. The pastor, not knowing what to do, didn't do anything, and the lynching occurred. Tilly and other women were visibly upset.

When women prevented lynchings they found cause to celebrate. In 1934 the ASWPL announced that there had been fourteen lynchings and fifty-five prevented lynching. 18

In her 1936 annual report to the Women's Missionary Council, Bertha Newell made broad and bold claims about the significance of Methodist women's interracial work.

The Church women are the main dependence for awakening the women of the South on the menace of lynching. Conference Superintendents and other of our officers make up a large portion of active workers in the Central and State Councils of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Despite an ominous rise in the number of lynchings during 1935 our work has not been in vain, as attested by the number of prevented lynchings in which we have positive proof that both women and men who had signed the pledge against lynching were the factors that protected the accused from mobs and insisted that the law should not be hindered. 19

Changing Attitudes and Public Policies

Gradually the Woman's Missionary Council was changing its theology of Christian mission and its understanding of the relationship of the church to public policy. Bertha Newell was leading the Woman's Missionary Council to move away from the former concept of missions defined in terms of institutional service to see missions as opportunities to cope with human relations by addressing the attitudes which create barriers to communication and life fulfillment. The Methodist women were beginning to put pressure on public agencies to serve citizens regardless of race. Motivation for change came from the women's own broadening understanding of social service which had emerged from bringing together in one bureau the issues of Christian citizenship, international peace, interracial cooperation, industrial relations, and rural development. The new closer relationships, wrote Newell, "stimulated the growing consciousness of the depth and width of social obligation that underlie human relations; and that are the heart of missions, binding us in a fellowship of service." 20

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\textsuperscript{14}Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1935, 140.

\textsuperscript{15}Twenty-eighth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1938, 162.

\textsuperscript{16}Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1935, 142.


\textsuperscript{19}Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1936, 124.

\textsuperscript{20}Twenty-second Annual Report of the Woman’s Missionary Council, 1932, 108.
Methodist History

The Woman’s Missionary Council expanded its relationship to political and social struggles. Bertha Newell appealed to women to respond to the rapidly changing social conditions and national life. “It is time when women may play an influential part in bringing them [racial, industrial, rural, national and international relationships] more and more under the domination of our Lord’s ideals.”

In 1930 the Woman’s Missionary Council reorganized its administrative structure giving the Bureau of Social Service increased stature and voice within the WMC as one of two bureaus. The newly constituted Committee on Interracial Relations overtly declared its intent to develop more Christian attitudes, to conduct experiments in race relations and incorporate the results into the program of the new Bureau of Christian Social Relations of the WMC.

Interracial work took new directions. The Committee on Christian Social Relations called for Methodist women to become involved in promoting more Christian race relations in their home communities by initiating an interdenominational women’s study of Negro life in their own community, using an outline prepared by the Woman’s Department of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. After conducting the interdenominational study the white women were to organize and conduct a Bible study class for black women using the International Sunday School Lessons. The Bible class members were to help form a community club for black women which would meet following the Bible class with “the white women remaining for the meeting and helping whenever their help is needed and desired.”

The white women were to pass on to their missionary societies the information and insights gained from their weekly meetings with the black women. The Bible class and community club were to be “continued over a considerable period of time in order to make their impress on race relations in the community.”

In 1932 at a one-day workshop of the WMC’s Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Ames presented the plan for Bible study groups emphasizing that the cooperation of both black women and white women would be more rapidly achieved if church women worked together from the start. The Methodist women present were inspired by reports of mutually helpful contacts established in small towns and villages between women of both races “and of the growth of community co-operation for better schools, better churches, better homes, and better lives for all people. It was evident that such fundamental changes could best be brought about by the united efforts of all Christians.”

Methodist Women and Interracial Fairness in the 1930s

themselves reflected their growing commitment by adopting individual goals for work in each home community.

In 1933 Mrs. Newell reported that the Bureau of Christian Social Relations was giving focused attention to projects for Negro public school betterment. Newell and Young, as members of the Administrative Committee of CIC, were actively involved in planning school surveys being conducted interdenominationally throughout the entire state of Alabama.

The community surveys revealed unexpected problems:

New discoveries are being made of the difficulties colored families have in getting an education, of the disparity in division of funds between schools for the two races in given counties, of ominous lacks in sanitation for schools and homes. New understandings are arrived at and misconceptions brushed away on both sides of the color line.

Methodist women responded with various forms of assistance to black public schools. Louise Young, chairperson of the Committee on Interracial Cooperation, reported that one committee member had served on a state committee “to examine public school text books with a view to appraising the accuracy and adequacy [sic] of their treatment of the Negro.” Upon finding many omissions and some inaccuracies, the committee recommended supplementary materials. Young added:

Similar studies are being made in all the southern states and the committee hopes that our missionary women all over the South will co-operate in enriching studies in school and in church, to the end that more intelligent and more Christian attitudes may be cultivated in our children.

A Methodist women’s auxiliary from Tennessee reported:

One Committee visited every Negro school in the country, organized a P.T.A. in each. The school inspector says, “the Methodist women are doing more for the schools than any other group.”

A woman’s missionary society from Baltimore reported that they reorganized the home economics department in one [presumably black] high school, offered to furnish groceries for the students to use in their cooking classes, and persuaded the school district to pay teachers and furnish the kitchen.

Southern Methodist women, aware that the economic base of the region was suffering badly from the depression, increasingly turned their

22 Ibid., 366.
24 Ibid., 134.
25 Ibid., 141.
The Woman's Missionary Council expanded its relationship to political and social struggles. Bertha Newell appealed to women to respond to the rapidly changing social conditions and national life. "It is time when women may play an influential part in bringing them [racial, industrial, rural, national and international relationships] more and more under the domination of our Lord's ideals."

In 1930 the Woman's Missionary Council reorganized its administrative structure giving the Bureau of Social Service increased stature and voice within the WMC as one of two bureaus. The newly constituted Committee on Interracial Relations overtly declared its intent to develop more Christian attitudes, to conduct experiments in race relations and incorporate the results into the program of the new Bureau of Christian Social Relations of the WMC.

Interracial work took new directions. The Committee on Christian Social Relations called for Methodist women to become involved in promoting more Christian race relations in their home communities by initiating an interdenominational women's study of Negro life in their own community, using an outline prepared by the Woman's Department of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. After conducting the interdenominational study the white women were to organize and conduct a Bible study class for black women using the International Sunday School Lessons. The Bible class members were to help form a community club for black women which would meet following the Bible class with "the white women remaining for the meeting and helping whenever their help is needed and desired." The white women were to pass on to their missionary societies the information and insights gained from their weekly meetings with the black women. The Bible class and community club were to be "continued over a considerable period of time in order to make their impress on race relations in the community."

In 1932 at a one-day workshop of the WMC's Commission on Interracial Cooperation, Ames presented the plan for Bible study groups emphasizing that the cooperation of both black women and white women would be more rapidly achieved if church women worked together from the start. The Methodist women present were inspired by reports of mutually helpful contacts established in small towns and villages between women of both races "and of the growth of community co-operation for better schools, better churches, better homes, and better lives for all people. It was evident that such fundamental changes could best be brought about by the united efforts of all Christians." The Commission members themselves reflected their growing commitment by adopting individual goals for work in each home community.

In 1933 Mrs. Newell reported that the Bureau of Christian Social Relations was giving focused attention to projects for Negro public school betterment. Newell and Young, as members of the Administrative Committee of CIC, were actively involved in planning school surveys being conducted interdenominationally throughout the entire state of Alabama. The community surveys revealed unexpected problems:

New discoveries are being made of the difficulties colored families have in getting an education, of the disparity in division of funds between schools for the two races in given counties, of ominous lacks in sanitation for schools and homes. New understandings are arrived at and misconceptions brushed away on both sides of the color line.

Methodist women responded with various forms of assistance to black public schools. Louise Young, chairperson of the Committee on Interracial Cooperation, reported that one committee member had served on a state committee "to examine public school text books with a view to appraising the accuracy and adequacy [sic] of their treatment of the Negro." Upon finding many omissions and some inaccuracies, the committee recommended supplementary materials. Young added:

Similar studies are being made in all the southern states and the committee hopes that our missionary women all over the South will cooperate in enriching studies in school and in church, to the end that more intelligent and more Christian attitudes may be cultivated in our children.

A Methodist woman's auxiliary from Tennessee reported:

One Committee visited every Negro school in the country, organized a P.T.A. in each. The school inspector says, "the Methodist women are doing more for the schools than any other group."

A woman's missionary society from Baltimore reported that they reorganized the home economics department in one [presumably black] high school, offered to furnish groceries for the students to use in their cooking classes, and persuaded the school district to pay teachers and furnish the kitchen.

Southern Methodist women, aware that the economic base of the region was suffering badly from the depression, increasingly turned their

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22 Ibid., 366.
24 Ibid., 134.
25 Ibid., 141.
attention to rural development. The agricultural base of the economy depended on the labor of tenant farmers, both black and white, who were generally poor and powerless. Tenant farmers suffered from depressed market values of crops and lack of control over rents or the prices of feed, seed, and farm implements. As the poorest of the poor in the South, they faced the most deprivation of adequate housing, sanitation, food, health care and education.

The Woman's Missionary Society responded by cooperating with the National Rural Administration, where they were represented by Dorothy Tilly, and by developing a program of sister societies. Each town or city missionary society, led by its superintendent of Christian Social Relations, was urged to find and adopt a rural missionary society. Together they were to work out a program for mutual benefit. This arrangement supplemented the more academic as well as on-location studies of rural development. Each rural missionary society was encouraged to discover ways in which that society might best serve its environs. Methodist women designated the year 1933-1934 as one in which they would gather facts about rural conditions in communities under 1,000 population.

It is not surprising, then, that in 1933 progress in race relations of Methodist women was provided in the report of the Commission on Rural Development given by Mabel Howell, chair, and Dorothy Tilly, secretary. The lateral movement of interracial work from the exclusive purview of the Committee on Interracial Cooperation to its incorporation in the ongoing life of the Commission on Rural Development and the Committee on Christian Citizenship and Law Observance marked an important change in perspective within the WMC. It suggested that within the Bureau of Christian Social Relations, racial issues were being considered whenever and wherever they surfaced and would not automatically be shunted off to a specialty group.

The Methodist women's Committee on Interracial Cooperation encouraged white women's missionary societies to extend invitations to church women of color to participate in local schools of missions, World Day of Prayer, and other meetings.

Although the reports never mentioned such terms as "segregation" or "integration" it is clear that the leaders were appealing to local groups to extend Christian hospitality to others and that such courtesy and friendship were in the face of southern custom. Rather than make an issue of segregation the leaders nudged local groups by establishing new expectations for southern hospitality.

In 1934 the Committee on Interracial Cooperation also recommended that local societies make studies in their own home communities of the white primary. The purpose of the Methodist women's investigation was to find out to what extent the right of voting in primaries is limited to white citizens; to study the bearing of such restricted voting in effective participations [sic] in government on the part of responsible Negro citizens; and to discern the best methods of correcting such abuses as are found.

This first venture of the WMC into the area of voting rights indicated that attitudes had changed. That which had been so "dangerous" that Carrie Parks Johnson removed it from the statement prepared by ten black leaders who met at Tuskegee in 1920 had now come to be a form of injustice recognized by the leaders of the Woman's Missionary Council.

In 1934 the Committee on Interracial Cooperation asked that the study of domestic employment focus on the situation in their own homes. No longer would the study be anonymous or generalized. Now the Methodist women were to examine their own terms and contracts with employees. How many hours of work were expected for how much pay? Was the pay adequate? Were the hours excessively demanding? Could a family be supported on the basis of pay given for household work? A guide for this study, including such specific questions and a tally sheet were distributed in the educational packets on race relations and industry. The new study was based on standards of domestic service established by CIC and the YWCA, organizations which had collected massive data in the preceding years from domestic workers and housewives. The results of the study of domestic service persuaded the WMC that throughout the South the standards needed to be raised. They recommended that "Competitions, auxiliaries, and missionary women cooperate with the federal WPA and NYA training projects for household servants [and join] with Junior Leagues, Y.W.C.A.s, and Women's Clubs in improving conditions of household employment."

As Superintendent of the Bureau of Christian Social Relations Bertha Newell succeeded in convincing southern Methodist missionary society women that it was their responsibility as church women to use their influence and Christian values in the public arena. Newell made her position explicit in her annual report to the Woman's Missionary Council in the spring of 1936, relating the significance of public action both to the public good to be gained and the benefits accruing to women. She wrote:

Our women are grasping certain fundamental concepts through repetition.

One of these basic concepts is that of the value of making public opinion. The next is that each one of us has her share in making public opinion. A third fundamental is that every public issue with a moral content has a direct bearing on our personal lives. Out of these grows the fourth, that each woman who sees this series of fundamentals as it works out in any human relation has a responsibility to do her best.

²²Ibid., 128.
attention to rural development. The agricultural base of the economy depended on the labor of tenant farmers, both black and white, who were generally poor and powerless. Tenant farmers suffered from depressed market values of crops and lack of control over rents or the prices of feed, seed, and farm implements. As the poorest of the poor in the South, they faced the most deprivation of adequate housing, sanitation, food, health care and education.

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as well as her bit, in “spreading the news,” which is another way of saying “Whoso heareth this gospel and doeth it not....”

Newell’s report substantiates the claim that the Woman’s Missionary Council intentionally set out to change race relations in the South. Although their work in race relations extended to other races and other regions of the country, their work on black-white relations in the South was more sustained because of the proximity and intensity of the issues. White southern women did not have to seek out justice issues. The issues came to them. Once Carrie Parks Johnson and Estelle Haskin decided to hear from the black women gathered at Tuskegee in 1920, the ears of the Woman’s Missionary Council began to open to hear the needs of the black race. People hear what they are sensitive to, knowledgable about, and trained to perceive. White women began to bring to conscious awareness things they knew deeply underneath the surface. As this happened, white women found that they were in a position where they could make a difference and where their faith called for change.

The worship life of nineteenth century American Methodism drew its energy to a great extent from the revival and the camp meeting with their fiery preaching, gospel songs, and altar calls. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the liturgical practices of the period were simply equivalent to revivalism. The Ritual continued to be published in the Discipline and authorized hymnals were produced which gave relatively little place to “gospel songs.” Moreover, while concern with liturgical matters among some Methodists was limited to doctrinal debates over the administration of baptism, there were a few Methodist leaders whose interests in liturgy were more broad and who actively contributed to the development of Methodist worship. Thomas Osmond Summers, the chief book editor for the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South from 1850 until 1882, and the first dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, was without question the most important figure in the development of liturgy in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the influence of Summers can still be seen in the worship practices of many United Methodist churches in the southern United States.

T. O. Summers’ name will likely be familiar to students of American Methodism, since it was attached to virtually every book which issued from the Publishing House under his tenure as book editor. This article will present a brief account of his life and work with special attention to his work in the area of liturgics.

Summers’ life

T. O. Summers was born on October 11, 1812, on the island of Purbeck, in the county of Dorset, England. His parents died while he was still a small boy, and he was reared to adolescence by his maternal grandmother who was a member of an independent church in England. His grandmother had a strong influence on his early religious formation, teaching him the value of prayer and, especially, of John Calvin. At the age of sixteen, Summers broke with the Independents and began attending both the Church of England and a Wesleyan chapel. His connection with the Wesleyans caused him to question the Calvinist teaching of his

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