

**“MUST THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH CONDEMN
ALL USE OF MILITARY FORCE?”:
THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND THE
ENDORSEMENT OF WORLD WAR II**

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Progressivism took shape at the turn of the 20th century, toward the end of a thirty-year period of industrialization and urbanization in the post-Civil War United States. Before the 1890s, mainline Protestant clergy had been slow to recognize the economic forces shaping the existence of the urban poor. (The term “mainline” is generally understood to mean Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, the Disciples of Christ, the United Lutherans, and, at that time, the non-African-American communities of the Methodist and Baptist churches.) By the early twentieth century, however, “progressive” ministers had become social-reform activists. The doctrinal variances among Protestant denominations lost much of their earlier importance, and a theology transcending denominational differences gradually emerged. This theology, which came to be called the Social Gospel, taught that Christian churches not only had the duty to convert individuals and bring them to salvation through Christ, but must work diligently to create “a better world” here and now. By 1900, much of mainline American Protestantism and its most prominent seminaries had embraced the Social Gospel.¹ In 1908, the Methodist Episcopal Church adopted the *Social Creed*, a “progressive” statement that challenged Methodists, clergy and laity alike, to become politically active in support of various social changes. The Social Creed, like the Social Gospel, was oriented toward the domestic problems of early urban-industrial America, such as the working conditions of children and women, industrial safety, regulating businesses, and amending the U.S. Constitution to achieve “progressive” goals. By this time, the mainline churches had begun to divide, just as the Republican and Democratic parties had, into “progressive” and “conservative” wings.²

¹Emory Stephens Bucke (ed.), *The History of American Methodism*, Vol. II (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 388, 607; Emory Stephens Bucke (ed.), *The History of American Methodism*, Vol. III (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 388–99; Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. II (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 23–37. Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 130, 154, 157, 194–200.

²Bucke, *Methodism*, II, 388, 607; Bucke, *Methodism*, III, 390–92; Muelder, *Methodism and Society*, II, 48–50, 56–59.

When President Woodrow Wilson led the United States into the world conflict known as the Great War (1914–18) the intense nationalism generated by the war engulfed the Christian churches in America. The Christian clergy reversed themselves virtually overnight from a position of neutrality to support for American involvement. On April 4, 1917, two days before Congress voted to declare war, a conference of bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in New York City, published *Methodism and the Flag*, a position paper on President Wilson's war message. In a rhetoric emphasizing sin, suffering, redemption, Gethsemanes, and Golgothas in the lives of nations as of individuals, the bishops declared their solidarity with Wilson's democratic ideals and their support for a Congressional declaration of war against Germany and its allies.³

Both the northern and southern Methodist Episcopal churches rallied to the side of the State. "I intend that the world shall know the position of the church in the World War," vowed a California bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. "The Methodist Church is four-square with President Wilson. We will bring to the flag every atom of strength. We will fight as individuals and as a church. The Methodist Church will allow no other organization to outdo it in demonstration of loyalty and patriotism." When a Methodist Episcopal minister from California, Edwin Ryland, announced himself a conscientious objector, he was deprived of his pulpit. The *California Christian Advocate*, a Methodist newspaper, denounced him.⁴

At the Paris peace conference (January–June 1919), it was well understood that American military intervention on the side of the Allies had prevented a German victory. That fact gave President Wilson, personally representing the United States at the conference, great prestige and leverage. Had the three Western victors maintained their alliance, it is likely, or at least possible, that peace between the nominal winners and losers of the war also could have been maintained. But Wilson believed that "power politics"—what Bismarck in the 1860s called *Realpolitik* and Cardinal Richelieu, making French policy during the 17th century Thirty Years' War, had termed "*raison d'etat*" [i.e., that the interests of the State justify the means used to pursue them]—was wrong and immoral, operating "behind closed doors" and encouraging the secret treaties whose obligations (he believed) led to wars. Wilson could not accept that it was the breakdown of a balance of power itself that led to wars. The League of Nations, an organization insisted upon by Wilson as an integral part of the Versailles Treaty, established, he believed, a

³*Methodism and the Flag*, New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, April 4, 1917, 5–11.

⁴Robert M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective*, Vol. I (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 187–95; Muelder, *Methodism and Society*, II, 80–82. In 1931, the Methodist Episcopal Church apologized to Ryland, and California Methodists invited him to return to his former pastorate; he accepted.

means to supplant the "immoral" old-style European balance-of-power diplomacy, replacing it with "collective security."⁵

Some American opponents of the League of Nations, and thus of the Versailles Treaty, were conservative American nationalists concerned lest an international organization usurp the Constitution and Congress in law-making or war-making. Others were liberals who thought the treaty was too harsh on Germany. Groups representing Irish-Americans, German-Americans, and Italian-Americans found various reasons for opposing the treaty. The United States Senate voted on and rejected the Versailles Treaty three times, twice on November 19, 1919, and once more on March 19, 1920. The diplomatic message sent by this act was that the United States accepted no permanent responsibilities in postwar Europe. World War I had destroyed the political and economic framework of pre-1914 Europe. England and France had demonstrated they could not contain Germany without American help. The United States, however, refused to recognize the power vacuum, much less fill it, until 1945, after the even greater devastation of World War II.

II

Only after World War I did Methodists begin to examine the doctrinal grounds for its corporate beliefs and practices related to issues of war and peace. The *Journals* of Conferences following the American Revolution (1776–83), the War of 1812 (1812–15), the American Civil War (1861–65), and the Spanish-American War (1898) were almost entirely silent on the subjects. During the American Civil War, in the pulpits of North and South, religion and patriotism became closely intertwined. Southern Methodist preachers rebuked their "Northern brethren" for having misunderstood the Southerners' point of view, thereby involving themselves in political questions of which they were unsound judges. Northern Methodist preachers enthusiastically returned the verbal fire. "Everything is sanctified by sacrifice and suffering," a Methodist publication editorialized in 1895, as the issue of Cuban independence from Spain began to gain public attention. "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of national sins or advance in liberal institutions." President William McKinley, an Ohio-born Methodist layman, searched earnestly for Divine guidance in making American policy toward the Philippine islands after the Spanish-American war (1898). The President told a delegation of visiting Methodist laymen that he had prayerfully concluded it was America's duty to "educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we can by them as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died." The Methodists, far from questioning this reasoning, agreed wholeheartedly with it.⁶

⁵Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 17–33, 124–37, 189, 226–45, 603–10, 743–45, 809–10.

⁶Cameron, *Methodism in Historical Perspective*, I, 89–94, 310–12.

In May 1912, when the Methodist Episcopal Church held its quadrennial General Conference, the Bishops' Address contained two paragraphs on "Peace," and the General Conference adopted a seven-line resolution endorsing the concept of international arbitration. In 1916, although the Great War raged in western Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, the United States maintained its neutrality. Neither the 1916 General Conference *Journal* nor the *Daily Christian Advocate*, the newspaper printed for the delegates, had a single reference to "Peace" or "War" in its indexes.⁷

The 1924 General Conference (May 1–29) in Springfield, Massachusetts, was the first General Conference in Methodist Episcopal Church history to take a specific action on the "peace" issue. Mandated by the "Springfield Declaration," Methodists founded the Commission on World Peace, which pledged them to develop the "Will to peace," the "Conditions for peace," and the "Organization for peace." Liberal clerical activists held the leadership positions, among them the Reverend Ralph W. Sockman, a convinced absolute pacifist, and the Reverend G. Bromley Oxnam (later Bishop Oxnam), whose pacifism was more flexible and political.⁸

Between 1927 and 1934, the World Peace Commission produced a steady flow of "Peace" literature: posters advocating peace, postcards and stamps promoting the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932 and the World Court (International Court of Justice, headquartered at The Hague) which the United States had refused to join, and teaching materials designed for Sunday School children, for Methodist adults and the general public. A series of Sunday School pamphlets for intermediate-level youngsters bore the titles, *The Bible and War*, *War*, and *How Can We Work for Peace?* The pamphlet *War* posed three questions: What is war like? Why do we go to war? What are the causes of these "causes"? The pamphlet taught these conclusions: that nationalism, economic imperialism, and insults to national honor were the causes of war, all of which were themselves caused by thirst for power, fear, and xenophobia.⁹

For high school students, the World Peace Commission designed the *Christian Comradeship Series*. This series bore these titles: *Comrades of the Way*, *Toward World Comradeship*, and *Thinking It Through: A Discussion on World Peace*. Alvin C. Goddard, the Executive Secretary of the World Peace Commission, authored *Toward World Comradeship*, in which he identified seven major issues: the economic bases of war, propaganda, the futility of war,

⁷*General Conference Journal* (1936), 139–140. A delegate to the 1936 General Conference reviewed "peace" advocacy in Methodist institutional history.

⁸*G. C. Journal* (1924), 721–22; Robert Moats Miller, *Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam: Paladin of Liberal Protestantism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 102, 142–43.

⁹*G. C. Journal* (1936), 139–40; *G. C. Journal* (1932), 1638–43; Joseph B. Matthews, *The Bible and War* (Chicago: Dept. of Epworth League, 1927), 1–12; Joseph B. Matthews, *How Can We Work for Peace?* (Chicago: Dept. of Epworth League, 1928), 1–10; Mary Hunter Walsh, *War* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1928), 1–11.

military training, disarmament, outlawing war, and pacifism. Goddard stated that the underlying purpose of the pamphlet was to persuade the high school student to give an affirmative answer to the question: "Would absolute loyalty to the teachings of Jesus lead you to the pacifist position?"¹⁰

The World Peace Commission directly produced or indirectly authorized the production of peace textbooks, peace plays, and peace hymns to be used in church-school classes. Adult study groups received copies of a pamphlet called "The Words of Christ Commonly Quoted For or Against War." During the quadrennium 1928–1932, the executive secretary Alvin C. Goddard and other members of the WPC provided Methodist publications with sixty-three articles on various aspects of world peace. Over 48,000 copies of the pamphlet *Methodism and World Peace* were distributed to pastors, Sunday School teachers, public school teachers, colleges, and women's organizations.

The World Peace Commission developed an early prototype of the 1960s teach-in. "Peace teachers" and "Peace squadrons," trained in international politics by the "Peace Section" of the American Friends Service Committee and like organizations, conducted classes on peace issues. Goddard's pamphlet *Toward World Comradeship* was an outgrowth of field experiences in "teaching world peace in 152 Epworth League Institutes," wrote Sockman and Oxnam, Chairman and Secretary respectively of the World Peace Commission, in their *Report* to the 1932 General Conference. The WPC spread its information through circulating libraries, radio broadcasts, and peace petitions. In these ways the World Peace Commission "kept peace ideals before the Church constantly," Sockman and Oxnam stated.¹¹

These tactics fostered a backlash. At the 1932 General Conference, opponents of the WPC succeeded in reducing its budget from \$60,000 to \$12,000 for the next quadrennium. In the 1928–1932 quadrennium the WPC had been budgeted at \$60,000, that is at \$15,000 per year. A *Majority Report* submitted by members of the WPC asked the General Conference to approve a slightly reduced budget of \$50,000 (i.e., \$12,500 per year) for its 1932–36 quadrennium. But the *Majority Report* and its budget request were rejected. Instead, a coalition of Methodist laity and clergy adopted the *Minority Report* submitted by twenty delegates (12 lay, 8 clergy) setting the WPC budget for 1932–36 at \$12,000. This amounted to a spartan \$3,000 annually. Membership on the WPC was reduced from fifteen members to ten. Since the position of executive secretary could not be funded, Goddard was released. Its financial independence gone, the WPC's educational work continued under the supervision of the Methodist Episcopal Church Board of Education.¹²

¹⁰Evelyn Riley Nicholson, *Thinking It Through: A Discussion on World Peace* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1928), 1–100; Alvin C. Goddard, *Toward World Comradeship: A Sourcebook on Seven Major Peace Problems* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1932), 1–70.

¹¹*G. C. Journal* (1932), 1638–43.

¹²*G. C. Journal* (1932), 645.

During the 1932–36 quadrennium, the WPC concentrated on gaining influence with activist pastors and laity, building organizational ties with other peace groups, and recruiting college-age youth to the doctrines of pacifism. The WPC declared that, “War is sin.” It advocated nationalizing the “arms industry,” reiterated its opposition to military training for Methodist college and university students, demanded that “weapons designed primarily for aggressive warfare be abolished,” and urged the United States to lead the world in a “progressive reduction of armaments.” In defending these activities, Oxnam explained that the WPC sought to “mobilize the conviction of the church and have it expressed by wire, letter, and petition to the proper persons,” namely senators, congressmen, congressional committees, and the President.¹³

At the 1936 General Conference, the World Peace Commission succeeded in freeing itself of lay control. The General Conference approved the WPC’s request to be placed under the supervision of the World Service Commission. This group was composed of twenty-four members—18 *area representatives* and 6 *leaders*. Of the 18 area representatives, 9 were clergy and 9 were laymen. Of the 6 leaders, 3 were bishops, 2 were clergy, and 1 was a layman. The oversight committee thus contained a 4-vote clerical majority. “War has been unmasked and will never again be blessed by the Christian Church,” asserted the World Peace Commission in its *Report* to the 1936 General Conference. In view of the rising tensions in world affairs in the 1930s, the issue of *absolute pacifism* as Methodist policy cut across the church hierarchy, the local pastorate, and the laity, dividing each into factions of support and opposition. “The question relating to world peace was a late-comer into our official records,” the Methodist Episcopal Church bishops stated in their Address to the 1936 General Conference. “The World War proved a tragic stimulus toward peace sentiment.”¹⁴

Pacifism became a powerful political current within Methodism during the 1920 to 1940 “interwar” era. *Pacifism* means the principle of maintaining universal peace, adjusting all differences by non-violent means, and refusing under all circumstances to bear arms or to kill. Pacifists, during the interwar period, were particularly intent upon de-legitimizing war in the eyes of youth. The rise of pacifism in America, including American Methodism, can be traced to the shifting public perception of World War I. The Great War had not made the world safe for democracy. It had not ended war. By 1928, the American Methodists’ view of the Great War had become ambivalent. Germany was no longer widely regarded as its lone instigator. The bishops confessed they could not “untangle the cords of guilt” and fix responsibility

¹³*G. C. Journal* (1932), 520–21. See also, Rembert Gilman Smith, *Moscow over Methodism* (Chicago: John J. Swift, 1936), passim.

¹⁴*G. C. Journal* (1936), 114–16, 139–40, 1207.

for the war. Even if they could, “the men who fell in battle would not come back.”¹⁵ Postwar revisionism was reinforced by the war memoirs and war novels that flooded the literary market between 1928 and 1932. The war writers seemed to warn readers they should at all costs stay out of another European war.

The Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference of 1932 meeting at Atlantic City, New Jersey (May 2–25) voiced concern over the issues of militarism, armaments, and war. As they had in 1928, the American bishops, British Methodist guests, and other speakers denounced all compulsory military service as immoral and reiterated that the Christian church always was obligated to help conscientious objectors refuse military training. The bishops insisted that the U.S. government must stop subsidizing military training in high schools and colleges. They asserted that militarism was “the chief enemy of humanity” and vehemently opposed the manufacture or sale of war-weapons as a profit-making business run by private corporations. They also opposed increasing the stockpile of existing weapons. By the early 1930s, the Great Depression—beginning with the Wall Street “crash” of October 1929—had become an international economic disaster. Unemployment reached 25% of the American workforce (at least 13 million persons by the spring of 1932). Germany’s Weimar Republic, its weak Centrist governing coalition riven with personal rivalries and nearing paralysis as German unemployment rose (to 6 million), polarized into its National Socialist (NSDAP, or Nazi) and Communist (KPD) extremes. The 1932 General Conference adopted two resolutions dealing with U.S. foreign policy. The first concerned German reparations, stating: “[W]e believe . . . sole guilt of the German nation for the World War cannot in justice be maintained. . . . Further reparations based upon this article shall not be demanded of the German people.”¹⁶ The other dealt with the “war debts” issue. The Methodists asked the U.S. government to seek a new settlement of the Allied war debts that would be based on current depressed economic conditions and would be contingent upon drastic reductions of armaments and military expenditures. “Total abolition of such weapons as tanks and heavy mobile guns, airplanes, carriers, and gas, would greatly enhance the significance of the [Kellogg-Briand] Peace Pact . . . and insure the success of the [Geneva] Disarmament Conference.”¹⁷

Japan’s occupation of the northern Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931 had evoked only a muted protest from the European Powers. When the League of Nations completed an investigation that *de facto* washed its hands of the matter, yet named Japan as the aggressor, its report provoked the Japanese government to withdraw from the League. The Methodists’ 1932

¹⁵*G. C. Journal* (1928), 190.

¹⁶*G. C. Journal* (1932), 188, 647–49.

¹⁷*G. C. Journal* (1932), 647, 777–79.

General Conference voted to commend President Herbert Hoover and Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson for taking the position that the American government "will not recognize any situation, treaty, or agreement which may be brought about by violation of treaty agreements." This U.S. "non-recognition policy" soon became known as the Stimson Doctrine.¹⁸

Throughout the 1930s the average American voter remained strongly isolationist, an attitude reflected in the powerful isolationist bloc in Congress. Many citizens now believed erroneously that in 1917 the United States had been tricked into war by bankers, munitions-makers (the "merchants of death"), and British propaganda. Congress enacted a series of strict neutrality laws in the years 1935 to 1937, which forbade American loans, export of munitions, or use of American shipping facilities to any belligerent when the President certified that a specific situation was a state of war.

The Methodist General Conference of 1936 (held in Columbus, Ohio, May 1-19) produced a number of political pronouncements, resolutions, and proposals. Although the Methodists decided to commend the League of Nations for achieving "much progress in defining aggression and specifying that aggression in certain cases," they were aware that the policy of "reasonable, fair, and responsible negotiations" was faltering. The bishops regretted that Italy and Japan, the "condemned nations," had not retreated from their conquests. "Abyssinia [Ethiopia] today being largely overrun; while China's territory, since September 1931, month by month and year by year, is increasingly occupied by foreign troops."¹⁹

Several Methodist delegates proposed that the U.S. government establish a Department of Peace. This idea, first floated at the 1932 General Conference, envisioned a Peace Department of equal status with the War Department and whose secretary would hold Cabinet rank. The Department of Peace would be financed with an appropriation amounting to 5% of that spent for national defense, and it would study the "causes, cost, and waste of war."²⁰

In their General Conferences of the 1930s, Methodists frequently reaffirmed their commitment to the goals of the Springfield Declaration of 1924, in which they aspired to create the *Will* to peace, the *Conditions* for peace, and the *Organization* for peace. They redoubled their efforts to discredit war in the eyes of youth and uphold conscientious objection to war as the Christian ideal. The Methodist bishops, in their message to the 1936 General Conference, urged that "the element of personal and corporate greed should be removed from the trade in munitions." As if to blunt the criticism of conservatives, they declared that war is "the most socialistic enterprise in which a nation ever engages, . . . In many of its phases war is communistic."²¹

¹⁸*G. C. Journal* (1932), 647-48.

¹⁹*G. C. Journal* (1936), 230.

²⁰*G. C. Journal* (1932), 647-48; *G. C. Journal* (1936), 521.

²¹*G. C. Journal* (1936), 141.

III

For American Methodists an event of historic significance took place in 1939: the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—divided since the American Civil War—and the Methodist Protestant Church, another branch of Methodism, united as The Methodist Church. Although reunion had been discussed in Methodist circles for fifty years, it was the shock of World War I that promoted the push for unification. The delegates to the Uniting Conference, meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, mirrored the divisions of opinion within Methodism. A proposed re-wording of several sections of the Social Creed elicited heated discussion. Section 7, which dealt with “social planning,” was deleted on a close vote. Alfred M. Landon, of Kansas, a well-known Methodist layman and the defeated 1936 Republican presidential candidate, moved that Section 16 of the Social Creed be referred back to committee, in order to “harmonize” it with a political resolution adopted in an earlier session. That resolution called for a national boycott against the sale of munitions to Japan. Landon argued that the anti-Japan resolution amounted to an incitement to war, while the support simultaneously extended to conscientious objectors could be criticized as an attempt to evade the possible consequences. If both resolutions were adopted, Landon concluded, The Methodist Church would be placed “in the position of interfering in the delicate foreign relationships of this country and refusing to accept the responsibility for our interference.” Landon’s analysis led to impassioned debate. In the end, his motion to refer was defeated, and the section supporting conscientious objectors remained in the Social Creed.²²

Eight years earlier, in 1931, at the Sixth Ecumenical Methodist Conference (October 16–25, held in the Wesley Memorial Church in Atlanta, Georgia) Judge Orville A. Park, one of the 477 delegates and a southern Methodist layman from Macon, Georgia, had articulated the basic question: What position ought the Christian church take toward war? “Must the Christian church condemn all use of military force?” asked Park. There was a growing conviction in some quarters, he continued, that Methodism must say “an absolute and devout *NO* to war.” The Reverend Robert Bond, a delegate from the British Wesleyan Methodist Church concurred: “The business of the Church is to put the war business out of business.” But the Reverend Charles C. Selecman, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and President of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, demurred. It was “conceivable,” he said, that “emergencies” might arise that would “justify forceful opposition to selfish aggression, injustice, or invasion.”²³ By 1939, the anti-war stance of The Methodist Church approached absolute pacifism. The bishops’ message to the Uniting Conference stated: “We believe that war is

²²*G. C. Journal* (1940), 664–67; Bucke, *Methodism*, III, 471–72.

²³*Sixth Ecumenical Methodist Conference* (1931), 290–95, 401–07.

utterly destructive and is our greatest collective sin and a denial of the ideal of Christ. We stand upon this ground, that The Methodist Church cannot endorse war or participate in it.”²⁴

Spring 1940: the “phony war” of late 1939 was over. Adolf Hitler’s *blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”) struck the West. In three weeks, April 9–30, the German army occupied Denmark and invaded Norway, crushing all resistance. On May 3, the German military opened a decisive ground and air offensive against Belgium, the Netherlands, and France. Hitler’s ally in the East, Josef Stalin, adhering scrupulously to the terms of the Nazi-Soviet Pact [signed August 23, 1939] which had cleared the way for the destruction of Poland, supplied the German war-machine with food, fuel, and raw materials. On May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill replaced Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Three weeks later the trapped British army, some 328,000 men, was extricated by a sea evacuation from the beaches at Dunkirk, France. By mid-June 1940, the Third French Republic capitulated. The English people, suddenly alone, braced themselves for the battle of Britain.

The Methodists’ General Conference met April 24–May 6, 1940, in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Its stance was firmly pacifist and neutralist. The delegates approved a revised statement on war: “The Methodist Church, although making no attempt to bind the conscience of its individual members, will not officially endorse, support, or participate in war.” *Report #9, on Peace*, adopted May 3, 1940, asserted that it was the church’s duty “to teach fearlessly that the State and Nation belong to the sphere of relative, earthly values, and He alone has a claim to our unconditional loyalty.” The Methodists listened to, but rejected, the urgent pleas for American support made by their British Methodist guests. Holding to their convictions of the previous twenty years, the American bishops, in their Address to the General Conference declared: “Peace right now will be best served by American neutrality. . . . We must not yield to the fallacy that the United States must get into the war if it is to establish a new peace basis. We can serve best by staying out.”²⁵

The bishops recommended that the U.S. government continue its efforts to end the European conflict with a negotiated settlement. After such a settlement, the bishops believed the United States must join other countries in a “federation of nations,” through which the world community could achieve its desire for peace and “universal disarmament.”²⁶

World War II was far from over when American Methodists assembled April 26–May 6, 1944, in Kansas City, Missouri, marking the second General Conference of the unified denomination. At issue before the Methodists in 1944

²⁴Quoted in Miller, *Oxnam*, 143.

²⁵*G. C. Journal* (1940), 644–67, 168–72.

²⁶*G. C. Journal* (1940), 644–67, 168–72.

was a position paper called *The Christian Church and War*. The delegates had to decide whether to accept the "Majority Report" or the "Minority Report" concerning that document. The "Majority" urged the delegates to uphold their previous stands against sanctifying any war and to reaffirm the pacifist position of the 1940 General Conference. The "Majority" asked the delegates to approve equally those Methodists who were serving the nation in uniform and those who may have refused military service. A minority on the committee led by Charles C. Parlin—a graduate of Harvard Law School (1922), Wall Street lawyer, partner in the important New York law firm of Shearman and Sterling, and now emerging as one of the most powerful laymen in American Methodism—drafted a "Minority Report." Quoted below in its entirety, the "Minority Report" signed by seventeen committee members (14 laity, 3 clergy) attacked the underlying rationale of the pacifist "Majority."

GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE METHODIST CHURCH, 1944

MINORITY REPORT

The Christian Church and War

There is no better way of entering upon the discussion of the relationship of the Christian Church to war than by raising such questions as those propounded in the Episcopal Address. We must ask the detailed questions which the Bishops there stated. Each one of these questions, pursued to its ultimate meaning, brings us at last stark against the question: Must the Christian Church condemn all use of military force?

As members of a Church with world-wide relationships, we must remember that our deepest responsibility is to speak the truth. We must be willing to face the stern judgment of God upon evils in our own national life. By the same token we speak unequivocally regarding the attack upon civilization which has been made by the forces of aggression.

In this country we are sending over a million young men from Methodist homes to participate in the conflict. God himself has a stake in the struggle and he will uphold them as they fight forces destructive of the moral life of man. In Christ's name we ask for the blessing of God upon the men in the armed forces and we pray for victory. We repudiate the theory that a State, even though imperfect in itself, must not fight against intolerable wrongs.

While we respect the individual conscience of those who believe they cannot condone the use of force, and staunchly will defend them on this issue, we cannot accept their position as the defining position of the Christian Church. We are well within the Christian position when we assert the necessity of the use of military forces to resist an aggression that would overthrow every right which is held sacred by civilized men.

We must face the fact that the victory itself will be judged by the use we make of it. Our treatment of men and women in enemy countries in the postwar world must be in harmony with those principles for which we fight. We must assert for every person in the world, of whatever race, color, or nation, those very rights which we prize for ourselves. In the hour of victory our Christian loyalties will meet their supreme test.

(Signed) Charles C. Parlin
Chairman of Minority

(Followed by the signatures of 16 committee members.)²⁷

²⁷*G. C. Journal* (1944), 386–91. For information about Charles C. Parlin, see Miller, *Oxnam*, 147, 179, 574–75, 588.

The "Minority" rejected the pacifist argument that war is the greatest evil. The "Minority" specifically rejected pacifism "as the defining position of the Christian Church." They implied that this was a "just war" and openly prayed for military victory. Yet, the "Minority's" pro-war position of 1944 differed strikingly from that of the Methodist bishops in 1917. Avoiding the appeal to nationalism, the "Minority" expressed its view of American interests in the moralizing, global Wilsonian rhetorical style. By a vote of 373–300, the General Conference delegates adopted the "Minority Report" and rejected that of the "Majority." The breakdown of the vote follows: Voting *AYE*, to substitute the "Minority" for the "Majority" Report, was an alliance of 203 laity and 170 clergy. Voting *NO* were 169 clergy and 131 laity. A recent author (1990) in describing the 1944 General Conference debate leading to the Methodists' endorsement of World War Two, stated that "the minority report was adopted *by a margin of one ministerial vote*" [emphasis added]. This is inaccurate and also misleading. The delegates adopted the "Minority Report" by a margin of 73 votes (373–300). Of that 73-vote margin, *one* vote was cast by a clergyman, but the other 72 were cast by laity.²⁸ On May 4, 1944, American Methodists turned against twenty years of pacifist leadership and endorsed World War II by a 55% to 45% majority.

²⁸*G. C. Journal* (1944), 386–91. See also Robert Moats Miller, *Oxnam*, 278–79.