"HOMELESS, I STOOD AMID A THOUSAND HOMES": THE PARSONAGE IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

J. DENNIS WILLIAMS

It was carefully wrapped in a manila folder. It was brought to me from a shelf somewhere in the bowels of the vault where only archivists go. I undid the string that allowed the folder to open, only to find another wrapper. Carefully it too was folded back, and there it was, on paper turned brown and brittle by the passing of years, An Address to Methodists, on the Importance of Building and Furnishing Parsonages.

This "Address to Methodists" had been read before the New London District Preachers' Meeting. The month was April, and the year was 1845. It must have been considered noteworthy, for, by vote of the preachers' meeting, this address was published that same year, though curiously the name of the writer is nowhere given. Where the name of the author would ordinarily be placed are the words "by an itinerant."

I

Though the name of the author is shrouded in anonymity, the thesis of the address is quite clear: "That a suitable Parsonage, properly furnished, is a necessary appendage of every Methodist Society." The itinerant turned polemicist argues that, as Paul implores Philemon, "to provide for him suitable accommodations in some conspicuous part of the city," so Methodists must provide suitable lodging for their ministers with all the "requisite paraphernalia, with which it is furnished." If this is not done, declares the author, there is no guarantee that there will be a home for the itinerant, let alone a proper one, for a proper time period.

The above is illustrated in this address in a telling manner. In 1845 the ordinary time for renting houses was April 1. Houses were usually rented for one year and then given up, or the lease renewed, when April 1 arrived. But "... our Conference," writes the itinerant, "does not hold its session till June or July." This meant that ministers with their families, because appointments

1 An Address to Methodists on the Importance of Building and Furnishing Parsonages (Norwich: Cooley Print., 1845), 3.
2 An Address to Methodists, 3.
would often be determined at Conference, could very well move several times in a year, and be moving at those times when the least satisfactory housing was available. This was traumatic for the family of the itinerant. It meant ministers were sometimes exiled to neighboring communities, because no housing could be found in the communities to which they were appointed. 3

If the well-being of the families of the preachers was not a sufficient appeal for "permanent and convenient houses," then the itinerant-writer asserts that "the usefulness of our preachers demands that such provision be made." 4 It is argued in the "Address to Methodists" that housing is a factor in one's position in a community. Therefore, it is important that a minister live in a "conspicuous place," so that the capability of the minister for doing good in that community is enhanced. It is also pointed out that the itinerancy is under siege because of the prevailing tendency to leave the traveling ministry and to settle or "locate" in one place.

Some of our preachers have already located their families, and are voluntary exiles therefrom the greater part of the year. The next move will probably be to bid adieu to "the itinerancy," and settle quietly in some peaceful village, leaving the world to perish, as far as special effort of theirs is concerned. 5

The Minutes of the Annual Conferences indicate that the writer of "An Address to Methodists" was correct in his observation of persons bidding "adieu to the itinerancy." His own conference's experience illustrates this.

Table: This table indicates by year the number of persons who were ordained elders and the number who located in the New England Conference and later the Providence Conference. It was in these conferences that the New London District, to which an "Address to Methodists" was delivered, was located. The sources of this table are the Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

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The above table indicates that, when the anonymous itinerant delivered his address in 1845 to the district preachers' meeting, preachers were leaving

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3 An Address to Methodists, 5.
4 An Address to Methodists, 7.
5 An Address to Methodists, 11.
the itinerancy at a high rate. The rate of attrition had slowed from earlier years, the 1810s, when the influence of Asbury discouraged marriage. But the rate of attrition in the 1840s, when the “Address to Methodists” was delivered, was still high. This meant that experienced preachers were being drained from the itinerancy. Their wisdom was being lost, for they were now disenfranchised and decision making was left to the less experienced.

It was the belief of the anonymous itinerant that this tendency to settle in one place and leave the traveling ministry could be arrested, when the well being of the preachers and their families would be considered, by providing “suitable” parsonages. And then, in case the aforementioned appeals would not suffice, it is suggested that the provision of “permanent and convenient houses” is cost effective and essential for the “salvation of the smaller societies.”

Why, in the middle of the 1840s, did the writer of this address feel it necessary to parade such arguments before his readers? As early as 1800, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church had made provision for the building of parsonages. The Journal of that Conference reads:

Brother M'Claskey moved, that it be recommended to the traveling preachers to advise the circuits in general to purchase a lot of ground in each circuit, and to build a preacher's house thereon, and to furnish it at least with heavy furniture, and to lodge the same in the hands of trustees, appointed by the official members of the quarterly meeting conference, according to the deed of settlement published in our form of Discipline. Agreed to.

In addition to the above motion, it was agreed, that . . . in cases where they are not able to comply with the above request, to rent a house for the married preacher and his family, when such are stationed upon their circuits respectively; and that the annual conferences do make up such rents, as far as they can, when circuits cannot do it.

The General Conference of 1816 not only continued the recommendation for churches to build houses and furnish them with heavy furniture, but added the following: “It shall be the duty of the presiding elders and preachers to use their influence to carry the above rules, respecting building and renting houses for the accommodation of preachers and their families, into effect.” As if that wasn’t enough to encourage parsonages as the norm, The Book of Discipline (1816) states that those who refuse to live in the houses provided, unless their families are already established in the boundaries of the circuit, “shall be allowed nothing for house rent, nor receive anything more than quarterage for themselves, their wives and children, and their traveling expenses.” In short, non-residence in the parsonage would not be rewarded.

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6 An Address to the Methodists, 10.
9 The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Tottem, Printer, 1816), 175.
The parsonage, by such General Conference actions, became the official and expected way of housing Methodist Episcopal preachers and their families. And yet 45 years after the General Conference of 1800, an anonymous itinerant was still appealing to churches to provide “suitable” housing for their ministers. Why is that? The writer did so because “a large proportion of our circuits and stations have made no such provisions.” And that was true. For example, in 1857 there were 8,335 churches, but only 2,174 parsonages. Why this lack of effort to provide suitable housing?

II

“Homeless, I stood amid a thousand homes.” These words of Wordsworth describe how it was for the traveling preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the early years. Parsonages, in the beginning of American Methodism, were not an issue. An Address to Methodists on the Importance of Building and Furnishing Parsonages would have seemed a wonderment. The reason for this was that itinerant Methodist preachers were constantly on the move. They had no need for parsonages. They were usually young and single. “As late as 1809, of the 84 preachers in the Virginia Conference, only 3 had wives.”

John Wesley would have welcomed this lack of married preachers. In his Journal he wrote, “I cannot understand how a Methodist preacher can answer it to God to preach one sermon or travel one day less in a married than a single state. In this respect surely ‘it remaineth that they who have wives be as though they had none.’”

Bishop Asbury also opposed married itinerants.

Marriage is honorable in all—but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location.

Despite the grumbling of Asbury, the number of married preachers grew, especially after his death in 1816. His ideal of a legion of traveling, unmarried preachers who were unfettered to wives and homes did not prevail.

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9 An Address to Methodists, 14.
10 Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the year 1857, Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. VI (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 535.
Allen Wiley was one of that growing number of married preachers. Before becoming a traveling preacher, he had been a farmer. The farm enabled him to feed his wife and five children. When he became an itinerant, his wife stayed home raising the children, supporting the family through the farm, and not seeing her husband for three-month periods.\(^{16}\)

It was not uncommon for the wives of circuit riders to work the farm in the absence of their husbands and not leave the homestead. This was because churches either would not or could not provide a dwelling for the preacher, nor adequate support for his family. They were saying, “If you are determined to have a family, you must provide for them yourself. With wives and children we have no concern. We have enough to do to care for you.” This attitude caused William Pope Harrison to write in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* that “The cheapness of the [minister] commended [Methodism] to many.”\(^{17}\) In 1800 the maximum allowance for a Methodist preacher was eighty dollars. This was at a time when the average yearly income of a Congregationalist minister was approximately four hundred dollars. And there was no guarantee that the Methodist minister would receive his allowance in full.\(^{18}\)

It was this cheapness that was a factor in the lack of effort to provide “suitable” housing. With married itinerants came the demand for homes for their families to live in, but, as Asbury clearly perceived, this increased the expenses of the churches and the conference.

The support of our preachers, who have families, absorbs our collections, so that neither do our elders nor the charity school get much.\(^{19}\)

Alas! what miseries and distresses are here. How shall we meet the charge of seventy married out of ninety-five preachers—children—sick wives—and the claims of conference? We are deficient in dollars and discipline.\(^{20}\)

Asbury understood that married preachers, with a need for homes in which their families could live, would increase expenses, putting pressure on budgets and absorbing “our collections.” This in itself could account for the lack of effort to provide suitable housing, prompting appeals as “An Address to Methodists.” But another factor for this lack of effort may have been the belief that unmarried preachers were better than married ones. Asbury wrote, “Our preachers get wives and a home, and run to their dears almost every night: how can they, by personal observation, know the state of the families it is part of their duty to watch over for good?”\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\)Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Vol. I, under the date November 3, 1789, 612.


\(^{21}\)Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, Vol. II, under the date June 17, 1810, 639.
Whatever the causes for the lack of effort to provide "suitable" housing, they did not prevail. The necessity for providing homes for the preachers was becoming an accepted practice in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In the 25-year period from 1857 to 1882, there was a net gain of 116% in the number of churches, but a 186% gain in the number of parsonages. During this period there was an increase of 4,050 parsonages. As early as 1875, the Board of Church Extension was providing plans for church parsonages. In a catalogue produced by the Board of Church Extension in 1889, there were 21 different parsonage plans noted. The justification for such plans was that "the hundreds of unsightly and inconvenient parsonages prove conclusively the need of providing suitable plans."

In 1885 Bishop R. K. Hargrove commented, "The need of the gospel in many places is great, but I had not the heart to send men where they and their families would have to suffer because there is no provision for them." The Bishop saw parsonages as essential to the success of the itinerant system. In his eyes, parsonages were as essential for homeless preachers, as churches were for homeless congregations. The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1886 authorized a Women's Department of the Board of Church Extension to provide homes for the itinerant preachers. Miss Lucinda B. Helm became the first Secretary of the Women's Department. Her motto and that of the department became, "a parsonage in every charge." The die had been cast. The parsonage had become an institution embraced by Methodism. The nature of the itinerant system, as the "Address to Methodists" declares, demanded that this happen. The preachers and their families deserved better than standing, "Homeless . . . amid a thousand homes."

III

Mary Orne Tucker lived through that period in the life of Methodism when the churches moved from a few parsonages to the expectation of having a house for every preacher. She knew what it was like before there were "suitable" parsonages that were "properly furnished," but she also knew what it was like to live in that "suitable" housing.

Mary's courtship with the Rev. Thomas Wait Tucker was brief and anything but romantic. She had been recommended to Tucker as a person who would make a fine minister's wife. The day after their initial meeting she says that he asked, "how I should like traveling about." He proposed that they, 22 The Methodist Centennial Year-Book for 1884, ed. W. H. DePuy (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1883), 80.
23 Catalogue of Architectural Plans for Churches and Parsonages (Philadelphia: Board of Church Extension Methodist Episcopal Church, 1889), 81.
24 Paul N. Garber, The Methodist Meeting House (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension, The Methodist Church, 1941), 70, 71.
25 Garber, Methodist Meeting House, 71.
“should share the joys of life together,” that she “should seriously weigh the matter, and, if after mature acquaintance we found that our feelings were congenial, a decision could be made.” Though the music of romance was lacking in this proposal, what was not lacking was honesty. If she married him, they would be on the move and living in all kinds of dwellings. He wanted to be sure that she knew this and would be comfortable with it. On April 25, 1816 they were married.

The lodging they endured was often uncomfortable. In one of the towns on a certain circuit, a rather well-to-do member of the circuit had built a frame house. It was the only frame house in the town. Out of respect, the preacher and his wife were expected to stay at the member’s home. The weather was cold that night. It put a chill into the bones of Mary and Thomas. The house had been loosely constructed. There were numerous openings, which made it as cold inside as out. Mary and Thomas crawled into bed and huddled under a buffalo skin. They wrapped clothing around their heads to protect themselves from the snow, which drifted into the room through sieve-like openings. In the morning they were greeted by a bed and floor that were covered by a fleecy, white mantle of snow. This prompted their host to appear, as they awakened, with a shovel, and with that shovel he “removed the snow, which was ankle deep.”

Such incidents of travel took their toll upon the traveling preachers and their wives. The writer of “An Address to Methodists” tells us, “It is among the strange things of the present age to find an itinerant’s wife in the enjoyment of good health, especially if she had been for any considerable length of time in the field.”

In her memoirs Mary Tucker informs her readers that she mentions such incidents of the “ankle deep” snow “not for the purpose of ridiculing the honest people who extended their rude hospitalities to a young preacher and his wife, but to show by way of contrast the experiences of the early preachers when compared with the treatment at the present day of our ministers.” Things were better now, as Mary Orne Tucker saw it. With the provision of “suitable” housing, “properly furnished,” such incidents in her mind could be relegated to the attic of memory to be dusted off and retold only when young preachers and their families might complain about the tribulations of parsonages.

Mary Orne Tucker gives us a glimpse as to what “suitable” housing was sometimes like in the mid 1800s. On July 20, 1843 she and her husband said farewell to their circle of acquaintances at Sunbury and headed to their new appointment, New England Village.

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28*An Address to Methodists*, 8.
When we arrived in New England Village, we found, as usual, that no tenement had been provided, and we accepted the hospitality of Brother John Phillips, until a place of shelter was provided. As before remarked on these pages, it is one of the peculiar sins of omission on the part of our societies, that no provision is made to accommodate the preacher and his family upon their arrival at a station. Men hardly treat dumb animals so badly; for their is always a stable and something to eat for a horse, but the preacher has to shift for himself,—a very easy thing for a single man, but hard when encumbered with wife and children.  

Several days after arriving, they succeeded in finding housing. She writes, “It cannot be said that we are not ‘getting up in the world;’ for our back chambers are six stories from the ground.” Mary Tucker seldom grumbled about her life, yet she was so upset with arranging her household goods in this place, that she complained to a parishioner that "she was getting tired of this traveling life. The following conversation ensued:

... he rather coarsely replied, “Wal, what did you git intew it for? Yew knew what it was afore you commenced. Yew orter got used tew it before this.” In reply to this rather crude speech, I said, “Friend, did you ever have the toothache?”—“Yes,” said he. “Well,” said I, “was it any relief to your suffering that you knew beforehand the nature of toothache?” Scratching his head thoughtfully a moment he replied, “Sister Tucker, I guess I’ll drop the subject.”

Living in a dwelling that might be rented by the circuit or in a parsonage that the church owned, though better than living in a room in some parishioner’s house, had its own set of shortcomings. As with Mary Tucker and her husband at the New England Village charge, you could not always be certain that a house had been rented prior to your arrival. But even if it had been rented or the charge owned a parsonage, you could not always expect the following account by a preacher’s wife, concerning the parsonage in Plaquemine, Louisiana, to be the case.

As this parsonage is of quite recent erection, a short notice of it through your paper may not be uninteresting. It is situated on a spacious lot in the rear of the Methodist Church, a garden intervening. The house contains six comfortable rooms, and a front and back-gallery, convenient out-houses, and a large cistern. . . .

This parsonage is furnished not only with the comforts of life, but some of the elegancies, and from our sojourn here will date some of our happiest hours. Ah! there is a magic in the word home that none can more fully appreciate than the family of an itinerant Methodist minister; especially when that family has moved eight times in nine years. True it may be home but for a short time—perhaps only a year; but while we are here it is our home, and when we are gone, it will be the home of another, whose life is devoted to the same work.

Not all parsonages provided such ideal accommodations. In *Annals of New York Methodism*, which is a history of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City from 1776 to 1890, this description is given of the John Street Church parsonage:

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*Tucker, Itinerant Preaching*, 107, 108.
The old building, in antique Dutch style, ... which stood partly in front of the chapel, was the "Preachers' House." It was a small frame building, one story and a half high, with a basement partly above ground, which was the home of the sexton, whose wife generally kept house for the preachers. Stairs in the rear connected it with the chapel. It was a gloomy place, with very few windows, and cold as a barn in winter. It was, however, better furnished than many a Methodist parsonage fifty years later.33

Usually the furnishings of a parsonage were a collection of hand-me-down-pieces that harmonized like a chorus of tone deaf choristers. The ledger of the furniture provided for one parsonage has a page titled, "Furniture bought for the Preaching House." The list includes: "1 Bedstead and Safe, 1 Feather Bed, Boulster and Pillow . . . Small Furniture, Pr. new Sheets." On the next page of the ledger is a list of "Furniture borrowed for the Preaching House and from whom." It is interesting to note that this list is much longer. It reads in part:

4 chairs, 1 night-chair, 5 pictures, 3 tables . . . Chaving-dish, Tongs and shovel, and two Iron pots, from Mrs. Taylor.
1 Set of Bed curtains and Small Looking-glass, from Mrs. Trigler.
2 Blankets, from Mrs. Newton.
1 green window curtain, from Mrs. Jarvis.
1 green window curtain, from Mrs. Bininger.
4 Tea spoons, from Mrs. Sauce.34

A picture begins to emerge of the parsonage as being a place where "every piece of furniture in it clashes with every other piece, each having been contributed by rival women."35

IV

As one looks at this story of the Methodist Episcopal Church moving from no parsonages to their being the norm, certain observations can be made. *First, the parsonage, as a "necessary appendage of every Methodist Society," helped preserve the itinerancy.* Though Wesley and Asbury preferred their preachers to be unfettered to wives and homes, the young preachers, like the Rev. Thomas Wait Tucker, did marry. Many of them were not willing to spend months away from their families, seeing their wives and children but several times a year.36 Those wives who traveled with their husbands found their lives to be hard. All of this led to married preachers bidding adieu to the itinerancy by the hundreds.37

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36Peggy Dow writes in 1815 in her journal *Vicissitudes: or the journey of life*, page 15 that the Rev. Lorenzo Dow in proposing told her that she might "not see him, perhaps, one month out of thirteen."
"Homeless, I Stood Amid a Thousand Homes"

The itinerancy was in trouble, for some of the brightest and best were not staying. So the establishing of parsonages, "as a necessary appendage of every Methodist Society," became a way of stopping the exodus of such pastors and, therefore, of preserving the itinerancy. It was an acknowledgment that preachers will marry and the well-being of their families is important. And so it was that the itinerant was more likely to be married, to live in a parsonage, and "to travel less extensively and devote his time to fewer churches." The itinerancy would be preserved, though it would be different from that which Asbury had envisioned.

Second, a "suitable parsonage, properly furnished" improved the quality of life for the preacher and his family. To sleep, as Mary Tucker did, in quarters where the snow was "ankle deep," or where the enemy of a host had planted enough gun powder under a corner of the host's house to blow all in the house "high in the air" was downright unsettling, let alone dangerous. With the parsonage as "a necessary appendage of every Methodist Society" such incidents of travel were minimized, life was physically easier, and the preacher and his family now had some space for privacy. Granted your "properly furnished" home may have had every piece of furniture in it clashing with every other piece, and there was the Parsonage Aid Society with which to deal, but living was far better with parsonages than it had been without them.

Third, parsonages did not change the feeling of standing "Homeless... amid a thousand homes." Mary Orne Tucker, with her children, was on a stage headed for Bristol, Rhode Island. They were going to stay with some friends for a time. While on the stage, this incident took place.

A lady in the stage asked one of our children, "Where do you live, my little dear?" The poor little fellow, after being shifted about so often, was at a loss for an answer, but replied, "I don't know," then with artless simplicity looked up to me and asked, "Ma, where do I live?" I was as much puzzled as the child, but replied, "You live here in the stage to-day, my boy." Not feeling satisfied, he again queried, "Ma, where is our home, haven't we any home?" It is impossible for me to describe the strange sensation which came over me as I realized how homeless we were; but the thought that we might claim a heavenly home soothed and comforted me, and I mentally cast my burden upon the Lord.

The Rev. Thomas Wait Tucker and his family, in actuality, had no church provided housing when this incident took place. He was without appointment. They were literally homeless. But what is particularly interesting in this incident is Mary Tucker's comment in response to her son being asked, "Where do you live, my little dear?" She writes, "The poor little fellow after being shifted about so often was at a loss for an answer," which is to say that he had no sense of a home base or roots anywhere. He lacked a connectedness to a place, any place, where there were ties of blood and community, and where existed the feeling that he belonged there, and the place belonged to him. Mary Tucker confides in this vignette that she had the same feeling herself.

38 Dunlap, Perspectives on American Methodism, 429.
39 Tucker, Itinerant Preaching, 51.
40 Tucker, Itinerant Preaching, 78, 79.
She stood “Homeless . . . amid a thousand homes.” And the only thoughts that evidently soothed her aching heart were that she one day “might claim a heavenly home,” and that she could cast her “burden on the Lord.”

There were reasons for Mary Orne Tucker feeling the way she did. They had been “shifted about so often.” That was certainly a reason for the lack of a sense of place. Itinerant preachers and their families often moved once a year, and sometimes more than that. Herrick Eaton, in 1851, described the life of the traveling preacher’s wife in this manner: “But soon the parting season comes round again, when she must ‘pack up and move.’ Thus here life passes away—her career is that of a pilgrim and a stranger, having no continuing city, from the time she leaves her paternal abode till she enters upon her final rest.”

“Having no continuing city,” being shifted about often, was one reason why the parsonage, though it improved the quality of life for the itinerant and his family, did not change the feeling of being “Homeless . . . amid a thousand homes.”

Another reason why the parsonage seemingly did not change this sense of a lack of place has to do with the very nature of the parsonage. Parsonages are the churches’ places and not the itinerants’. The furnishings belonged to the church, often donated by various people of the circuit or station. There was always the Parsonage Aid Society and the Stewards or Trustees with whom the parsonage family would need to deal. It was quite clear to whom the parsonage belonged, and it was not the preacher.

I have my own home,  
To do what I please with,  
To do what I please with,  
My den for me and my mate and my cubs,  
My own![42]

There is a human need, perhaps stronger in some than in others, for a place where you feel that you belong and that it somehow belongs to you. It is your own place “to do what [you] please with.” The parsonage has served the itinerancy well by facilitating the easy movement of pastors. It has enabled persons to live in houses in which they, in many instances, could not have afforded to live. But the parsonage, even with pastorates that became longer than the early itinerants could have imagined, and with furnishings that are one’s own, does not meet the need for “My den for me and my mate and my cubs, My own!”

Standing “Homeless . . . amid a thousand homes” was tenable for those early Methodist Episcopal preachers who did not locate, because their passion to spread the gospel and to awaken scriptural holiness in the land seemed much more important than having a place where you felt that you belonged and that belonged to you. Besides, they thought of themselves as having a “heavenly home” that awaited them. But there was an ache in them. It was not easy to stand “Homeless . . . amid a thousand homes.”

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41 Herrick M. Eaton, The Itinerant’s Wife: her qualifications, duties, trials, and rewards (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 68.
42 Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1920), 30.