The intent of this paper is to examine the decisive role of Bishop John Louis Nuelson (1867–1946) in the German-American Methodist mission to Europe, during his long and influential episcopacy in Europe from 1912–1940. By tracing the historical development of Nuelson's mission thinking, which emphasized mission in a connectional and ecumenical manner, we have a unique window on how Methodism and its mission developed in the European context during the crucial years of World Wars I and II. Through the use of overlooked German language sources, we will follow Nuelson's struggle to maintain the European Methodist Church in mission contact with its transatlantic partners during the war years. We can therefore discern how these wars transformed not only the transatlantic Methodist mission connection, but also put to the test Methodist mission theology and praxis in Europe.

I

In the mid 19th century, German immigrants first exposed to Methodism in its westward mission expansion across America, returned to Europe as missionaries to establish the Methodist Episcopal Church in their former homelands. Using translations of Wesley's sermons, theology, and church discipline first prepared to evangelize German immigrants in America, German-American missionaries then returned to Europe, building a transatlantic partnership that proved crucial in the spread of Methodism throughout the continent.¹

The work of the German-American transatlantic mission connection reached a high water mark in the life and mission work of John L. Nuelson. Bishop John L. Nuelson represented the vanguard of the second generation of German-American Methodists who returned to their former ancestral homeland, in order to preach Methodist holiness and reform the German nation. Nuelson's roots were deep in the transatlantic mission. The son of a

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German-born American Methodist preacher, Franz L. Nuelson, John Nuelson was born in Zurich to a Swiss Methodist mother from Basel, during his father’s own long missionary service in German-speaking Europe. After he completed his secondary (Gymnasium) education in Switzerland and Germany, John Nuelson came to America to enter seminary and the Methodist ministry in 1886. Before his election to the episcopacy at the 1908 General Conference, Nuelson had served for 12 years as Professor of Theology at Central Wesleyan College in Warrenton, Missouri, and later at Baldwin-Wallace College. When he became bishop, John Nuelson was already a widely known and influential figure, not only in Methodist Europe, but throughout theological circles in German-speaking Europe at large. This was mainly due to many theological articles he published on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly through his work as editor of the *Deutsch-Amerikanische Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (German-American Journal for Theology and Church). Due to Nuelson’s theological acuity and familiarity with German theological circles, his fluent knowledge of German, as well as his close networks of relationships with the church in Germany, his episcopal appointment was viewed as a “coming of age” for German-speaking Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, Nuelson’s appointment to Europe as bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, further cemented the important nature of German-speaking Methodist connections for the ongoing mission in Europe.

Enter the field in 1912 with his episcopal seat in Zurich (his birth-place and the former location of his father’s missionary work as general superintendent), Nuelson’s missionary heritage and heart was soon apparent. He immediately threw himself into the work of binding together European Methodism as never before, with episcopal trips to oversee annual conference activity in such diverse places as Switzerland, southwest Germany, and northern Germany. Soon afterward followed travels to the more far-flung regions of European Methodism such as Scandinavia, Russia, France, Spain, Italy, and finally Austro-Hungary and the Balkans. This onerous round of

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2. Paul E. Hammer, *John L. Nuelson: Aspekte und Materialien eines biographischen Versuchs* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1974), 12–14; Nuelson attended Central Wesleyan College in Warrenton, Missouri for one year in 1886, to familiarize himself with German-American Methodism. In 1887, he entered Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, NJ, where Nuelson says he learned American Methodism, both in speech and in ecclesiology. He graduated in 1889, and was accepted on probation into the West-Deutsche Konferenz in Kansas City the same year.
5. W. Nausner, 11.
travel was conducted year after year from 1912–1936, all with the view of consolidating the Methodist mission through its wide connectional administrative structure which came later in 1925 to be known as the Central Conference of Central Europe.  

As evidence of his clear commitment to mission, Nuelson delivered a celebrated series of lectures on Methodism and mission in 1913 at the Berlin "Zirkus Busch," which was the largest hall in Germany at the time. The lectures were warmly received by packed audiences and wide reportage in the Berlin press, after Nuelson had served only nine months as bishop. Drawing on his familiarity with both the German and American Methodist theological tradition, as well as wider contacts from academic and ecumenical circles, Nuelson propounded in his lectures a mature, global Methodist missiology. These lectures had a wide and continuing impact on the Methodist mission work in all areas served by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Moreover, after the formation of the Central Conference of Central Europe in 1925, Nuelson’s views on mission found an even wider audience across Europe which touched even the mission work in countries where the Methodist Episcopal Church, South labored. Let us take a closer look at these lectures, published in German as Methodismus und Weltmission (Methodism and World Mission) in 1913, to determine the nature of Nuelson’s vision of global mission partnership, which so clearly stamped 20th century Methodism in both west and east Europe, even today.

II

It is clear from the lectures at the Berlin “Zirkus Busch” and from other German language writings, that Nuelson stressed two ideas as the basis behind the Methodist expansion in Europe. First, Methodist mission needed to be expressed as a connectional, unified movement supporting Methodists throughout Europe, while also drawing upon its transatlantic link with America. Secondly, Methodism needed intentional ecumenical links, in order to locate itself as a constituent part of the European Protestant movement, especially in Germany where German Lutheranism was seen as an important force in promoting an indigenous German national identity (or Bodenständigkeit). Nuelson’s desire to base Methodist mission in Europe

1W. Nausner, 11.  
2W. Nausner, 11–12.  
3Wilhelm Nausner, Be Eager to Maintain the Unity of the Spirit Through the Bond of Peace (Zürich: 1977), 9, 16. The Methodist Episcopal Church South, through contacts made in its post–World War I relief efforts in Europe, began mission work in Poland, Czech-Republic, Slovakia, and in Belgium. In 1939 The Methodist Episcopal Churches North and South joined, bringing together their mission work in the Geneva Area of the Methodist Church, which was under Nuelson’s leadership until 1940.  
4J. A. Dwyer, 16.
on the principles of connectionalism and ecumenicity can be seen in the following comment, written shortly after he arrived in Europe to take up his episcopal duties:

It was clear to me already before the church sent me to Europe, that my task (Aufgabe) would be to act as a mediator between not only German and American Methodism, but still also between American and German Protestantism.¹¹

That Nuelson recognized a tension between maintaining some of the distinctives of Methodism's supra-national character, as well as the implied need for Methodism to become more locally grounded in German society through working with other German Protestants, is clear. Indeed, Nuelson's task became to steer the Methodist Church, particularly in Germany, between the Scylla and the Charybdis: namely, balancing Methodism's historical impulses toward globalism, with the opposite drive in Germany for churches to contribute to a German national identity based on Volkish (ethnic) thought.¹² Within his "Zirkus Busch" lectures, Nuelson therefore advocated the emphasis of connectionalism to keep Methodism alert to its supra-national character, while drawing attention to the ecumenical links with the German Lutherans in particular, in order to help Methodism avoid the charge of being merely an "Anglo-Saxon" sect.¹³ Mediating the simultaneous international and contextual demands upon the Methodist movement in the early part of the century, remained a challenge for Nuelson, and certainly served to focus his mission vision.

Yet if Nuelson saw his episcopal role as one of mediation, it was not because he believed Methodism should be embarrassed about its contribution within the history of Christian mission. On the contrary, he saw in Methodism, principles which opened the way for mission and offered stimulation for the mission work of other denominations. Such a view was propounded openly in his mission lectures in Berlin:

Methodism has been pioneer and preparer of the way for World Mission. Not that we alone bear this world mission; for all branches of the Christian church today are mission churches. But certainly however, Methodism has been a pioneer and preparer of the way. From Methodism, the world-mission has received its most powerful stimulations. That sounds very bold . . . but I do not say this in order to brag. No. It is a simple historical fact, that should be underscored here. Why? For about the Methodists on the European Continent, I should quite clearly say, that they belong to a church that has been allowed to do quite outstanding work under God's blessing; a work that is for the present-day historical position of Christianity, of epoch-making significance. No, the Methodists need not dodge around in small-corners and to sit in dull rooms, but they may greet all others, each Christian and friend of mission, and be thankful for the mission stimulations

¹¹J. L. Nuelson, "Gottes Walten in Meinen Leben," *Apologete,* August 4, 1940; my translation.
¹²J. A. Dwyer, 13–17; this tendency began after the Revolution of 1848, intensifying until WWII.
¹³J. A. Dwyer, 16.
which have started out from Methodism. God has brought forth and trained each and every [church] as a tool, each after their own nature and requirements [of the situation], and God is also continuing to do this today. God’s kingdom stands higher than the special denomination. [Our mission] is not about fighting, or who is biggest, but about learning from one another in active service and ministry.14

An an early date in his episcopacy we can see Nuelson’s developed view that the Methodist mission must be connected within itself and with other churches, to operate on a broad front, and thereby mutually to stimulate and support one another. Yet within this, Nuelson had a clear sense of Methodism’s historical contribution and therefore, its contemporary role to play in the ongoing mission of Europe and the world. Nuelson did not see supporting the ecumenical mission in Europe as mutually excluding his goal to strengthen the self-confidence of the European Methodist minority. Indeed he often reminded the Methodists in Europe of their own world-wide mission connection.15 Consequently, Nuelson was against the idea of subsuming Methodism’s identity and unique gifts under the ecumenical idea of “organic” unity, that is, joining diverse denominations into one administrative structure. Instead Nuelson believed in an ecumenical movement that supported mission:

as a working community that emphasizes the large issues that unite us in loving toleration of the smaller issues that divide us, working on a common front against a common enemy, in common service to the people, each church after its own particular contributions, mutually stimulating one another, and spurring each other to a deeper grasp of the Word of Truth, and spurring each onward to more extensive applications of the vitality of the gospel, to more loyalty follow the one Master, this is the unity that is possible and necessarily strives to honor God, for the salvation of people. . . . The future does not belong to those who react, but to those who promote the thoughts of ecumenical activity [in this manner].16

Nuelson’s approach, promoting ecumenical mission that worked in unity without erasing the distinctives of denominations, was clearly Wesleyan in origin. However, the usefulness of such an approach was confirmed to Nuelson through his participation at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910. He wrote in his Berlin lectures of 1913, drawing upon Wesley’s words: “Unity in essentials, freedom in unessentials; this is the basic condition for world-mission—certainly nothing came out of Edinburgh in 1910 with more clarity and necessity.”17 With such a theology in mind, Nuelson never lost an opportunity to remind Methodists, that they should be thankful for the deeds God does through the other churches, par-

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14J. L. Nuelson, Methodismus und Weltmission, 6; my translation.
17J. L. Nuelson, Methodismus und Weltmission, 18; my translation.
particularly the Landeskirche (state-supported Lutheran Church) in Germany—for all churches were "tools of God." In this regard, Nuelson wrote later in 1925 in one of his episcopal addresses:

May it be far from us Methodists to fight the Landeskirchen [state churches throughout Europe]. I hope to never hear stressed from a Methodist pulpit a contrary word against state-churches. We do not underestimate the streams of blessing which flow from all true witnesses of God, including the state churches of the people [Volk]. Our fight is not with other churches, but the powers of evil and sin. 18

For such an ecumenically based mission approach, Nuelson also drew often upon Wesley’s statement, "Is your heart made right (justified) as mine is made right, then give me your hand. Let us not over opinions and words destroy the work of God" (my translation).

What then would be the message that tied together this ecumenically linked mission expansion in Europe? For Nuelson, the way forward for unity movements and for all churches was to focus upon proclaiming the Kingdom of God; to avoid promoting particular confessional traditions, but to preach the Kingdom of God through claiming each church’s particular vision of that worldwide rule of God which relativizes all nationalist powers, and which therefore orients and unites supra-national Christendom:

all Christendom has occupied itself increasingly with the question of the Kingdom of God. We may not for a long time, if ever, reach a plainly defined teaching on the Kingdom of God. We may have still differing views for a long time over that which people must do to erect the Kingdom of God. But this is in any case already clear: The more God and His Kingdom becomes the focus of our thoughts and actions, the more the individual is pushed into the background [is indeed lost] and what he [or they] have managed to accomplish through the outer church organizations is seen less as decisive in meaning. In the place of “my-Christianity” [Ich Christentum] or denomination and confessional-Christianity [Konfessions Christentum] or Church-Christianity [Kirche Christentum] the Kingdom of God comes [and takes center]. The center is the Kingdom of God, from which the individual, denomination, church community and all meaning draws upon. Individuals and their church are not dissolved, not swallowed up and engulfed, but they receive orientation and harmony for the Kingdom. 19

Here Methodism would take its missionary stand in Europe, on the Kingdom of God and reforming the continent. Nuelson persuaded his preachers that Methodism’s role was to be a pointer to the Kingdom of God. The effect of Methodist mission was not limited to its own ecclesiastical boundaries or the lives of its members. Instead the locus of Methodist mission was in the stimulation of other churches and the world. Nuelson had therefore come to the conviction that in order to engage in mission on the

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18 J. L. Nuelson, Der Methodismus in kirchlichen Leben Europas (Bremen: 1925), 17; my translation.
European Continent, Methodists must take seriously the principle that the Kingdom of God stands higher than any denomination—the Methodist Church and State Church included. To that end, Nuelson wrote tirelessly that Methodism’s activist mission ethos included a clear role for the church, but that its role was not to serve itself, “but the Kingdom in the world.”

However, Nuelson’s project to base Methodism in Europe firmly within an ecumenical mission to preach the Kingdom of God rather than a denomination, would face serious historical challenges. At the time of Nuelson’s service, world mission in the areas where State Churches dominated was still regarded as a political act and threat to the government, as well as a spiritual threat to the hegemony of the church. The law of the Reformers (ius reformandi) which read: “cuius regio, eius religio (who reigns the region, decides the religion) still formed a hindrance to Methodist mission on the European continent, even during the first half of the 20th century. And clearly Nuelson opposed the view that Free churches should not missionize in State Church areas. In this regard he wrote:

This claim [against Free Church mission by the State Churches] must be with all brotherhood, but also with all decisiveness rejected as un-Protestant, unevangelical, and anti-Christian.

With such ideas in the background, Nuelson carefully and respectively in his mission lectures in Berlin, contrasted Luther’s failure to engage in mission, with Wesley’s motto, “The World is my parish”:

Luther’s work remains standing and valid, even if we frankly admit his barriers or limits. Neither Luther, nor the other Reformers—still less the later Lutheran Theologians—had an understanding for the mission to the pagans. . . . In contrast to these views, Wesley’s motto has become the word to today’s missionaries—“The world is my parish.” Methodism has gifted Protestantism with a world-view and mission.

“The world is my parish” rang in Nuelson’s ears, driving him ultimately to announce the end of ecclesiastical territorial claims. Otherwise, Nuelson claimed the whole world, “which God so loves,” would be divided into a thousand ghettos. In this way Nuelson saw Wesley’s motto as a mission message of great comfort, particularly for those Free churches in Europe (like the Methodists) facing State Church resistance. For in this view, all fences that divide, such as abstract and national borders, dioceses, parishes, or other borders such as ethnicity and class, are proven un-Christian and untenable. The message of the cross, particularly, could not be limited to any national church expression, nor offered on the basis of any

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22 J. L. Nuelson, Methodismus und Weltmission, 13; my translation.
23 Quoted in W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 19; my translation.
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ethnic exclusivism. On this topic he wrote in his mission lectures at Berlin: “The message of the Cross is not limited to a people, race, a language. The message of the Cross is world-wide and Christ was broken for the needs of the entire world.”

Furthermore, Nuelson added:

One of the dangers which threatens Christianity today is nationalization. . . . There is no German Christianity, no German God, no German Faith, just as little as there is an English or American [Christianity, God, and Faith]. Christianity is supranational. . . . In the Kingdom of Christ there are no trenches and no customs borders.

Nuelson saw in such ideas, the theological mandate to engage in Methodist mission within all the State Church controlled countries within his episcopal charge, including Germany, Switzerland, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Scandinavia, and all Eastern Europe.

Of course finding the mediator’s position between a supra-national (and foreign appearing) Methodism on the one hand, and an indigenous (perhaps overly nationalized) Methodism on the other hand, would clearly remain Nuelson’s challenge throughout his episcopacy. Yet even with the challenges of State Churches and the rising spectre of war, Nuelson remained committed to the mission theology articulated in the “Zirkus Busch.” A connectional mission guarded the Methodist mission from becoming too nationalistic, while an ecumenical mission with other State Churches assisted Methodism to indigenize slowly across Europe. Thus, Nuelson attempted through his mission theology to balance the church between extremes of a global, foreign appearing church (connectionalism gone to the extreme) and nationalism (indigenization taken to the extreme). This allowed Methodism to maintain its international mission and ecumenical links, while at the same time focusing upon becoming ever more relevant in its ministry to the European soul. Nuelson’s ecumenical and connectional approach to mission, and his attempt to maintain Methodism’s local and international distinctives, has had a deep and lasting impact, continuing today not only in the ministry of German-speaking Methodism in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, but in the wider connection throughout Central and Eastern Europe as well.

III

As World War I broke out across Europe, Bishop Nuelson was convinced that humanity, no less than Methodist mission, was entering a new

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turning point.\textsuperscript{27} With new networks developing to execute the purposes of war and trade, Nuelson saw in a visionary manner even in 1913, during his lectures on mission in Berlin, the emergence of a new globalism. It was a type of secular world-wide connectionalism, in which chaotic events in the Balkans designed to overthrow Austro-Hungarian colonialism affected events worldwide, anticipating the emergence of a global village.\textsuperscript{28} Nuelson clearly saw that war on a world-wide basis to protect Western economic and nationalistic interests, would effectively render the world-wide Western Christian expansion untenable, putting to lie any multiethnic unity based on Christianity. Indeed, war would only bring Christian division, and would seriously weaken the very basis of his Methodist mission theology and praxis, based as it was on a supra-national, multiethnic connectionalism. He wrote on 6 August, 1914:

\begin{quote}
The whole idea of War is nothing but a nightmare, which appears impossible, but would be a cruel blow for everyone in our Christian civilisation who glorifies God. This war is nothing other than an outgrowth of national hard-heartedness (Hartherzigkeit) and economic rivalry.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Nuelson’s greatest fears were recognized within five days, as Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, countries in which Methodists were represented and Nuelson had come to know intimately in the course of his missionary episcopal duties, found themselves at war with each other. A short time later Great Britain, the home of Methodism, entered the deadly conflict, while Italy and Bulgaria joined the fray in October 1915, lands in which Methodist mission had long labored.\textsuperscript{30} Nuelson lamented, “Every-where the followers of Wesley are drawn instead by the flag of their country into the war.”\textsuperscript{31} Half of Methodist membership in Europe lived in countries engaged actively in war, while the other half of the membership lived in neutral Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, thus destroying the unity of the European Methodism right from under Nuelson.\textsuperscript{32} Yet Nuelson still attempted bravely to hold out hope and to maintain a remnant of unity among Methodists in Europe and among the German-American connection. He wrote, prescriptively if not descriptively, “I would like for my Methodist brothers to know, no matter if they are French, German, Austrian or Russian, that these powers of hell, which in this godless war have been let loose, will never be a strong enough match to destroy

\textsuperscript{27}W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 27–28.
\textsuperscript{28}W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 3.
\textsuperscript{30}W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 27, 28.
\textsuperscript{32}W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 28.
the bond of Christian love and fellowship among Methodists, even if they are engulfed in this war.33

However, neutrality was going to be a difficult position for Nuelson and the world-wide Methodist mission connection to maintain. Nuelson tried unsuccessfully to use his personal influence with President Woodrow Wilson to prevent American support and entry into war.34 Then, articles quickly began to spring up in the English-speaking Methodist press, such as Methodist Review, The Epworth Herald, and in the eight regional editions of The Christian Advocate, in which all things German were attacked, including the religious sincerity of church people throughout Germany.35 Although Nuelson was aghast at this breach of Methodist neutrality, his written rebuttals were to little avail. In the hysteria after the U.S. entered the war in 1917, Nuelson found himself and the German Methodists attacked on one side by the American press. On the other side, Nuelson had to convince the German authorities that the international Methodist mission was not a political organization hostile to German nationalism and was actually committed to principles of neutrality.36 This failed, and the Methodist church in Germany was forced to distance itself from its international Anglo-Saxon contacts by changing its name. At this low point, to add insult to injury, Nuelson’s darkest day came when his own son joined the Allies to fight in this war.

Yet Nuelson was not one to abandon his missionary convictions or his commitment to pacifism and neutrality. In response to the American church’s accusations, Nuelson wrote a series of articles defending German Methodists, which were published in the Methodist press in the areas of the U.S. heavily populated by German Methodists. Yet these articles on the topic of “Who is to blame?”, calling for a nuanced and neutral view of the question on the causes of war for the sake of maintaining Methodist unity and mission, brought Nuelson in direct conflict with the secretaries of the Board of Mission in New York. George P. Eckman, editor of the New York Methodist Christian Advocate sat down with S. Earl Taylor and some of the secretaries of the Mission Board in order to devise a plan to muzzle Bishop Nuelson. The result was that Nuelson was instructed to desist from any pro-German publishing, and to distance himself from any position that would hinder the work of missionaries with the Board of Missions—which was tantamount to asking him to abandon his neutrality. Although he complied with the injunction against publishing openly pro-German articles, Nuelson stood by his position that the Methodist Episcopal Church should remain committed to neutrality on both sides of the Atlantic, and that Methodist

[^34]: J. L. Nuelson to President Woodrow Wilson, unpublished letter, 30/7/1915, Archiv Bibliotheca Methodistica, Zürich; quoted in Voigt, 54, 58.
mission should continue to operate in a manner that promoted peace and unity. He wrote in 1915, "The question becomes, whether the Methodist Church is a world encompassing organisation with a world-view and message for the entire world, or if she is to become ultimately a mere national power, which responds to world-wide questions only from the standpoint of limited national borders and receives only the nationalistic views observed in its time, and loses the ability to see the other side in times of world-crisis." 37

In the interest of putting mission with a world-view first in his agenda, and to save Methodism in German-speaking Europe to forge its links again at a later time, Nuelson surrendered the allied part of his episcopal charge in France, Finland, and Russia to Bishop W. F. Anderson in London. Nuelson was clear that he abandoned his neutrality in order to better serve his charges in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria. And although such a breach of neutrality was ironic and painful for Nuelson, the move restored the integrity of his commitment to German-speaking missions in Europe among his flock. His courageous stand saved the Methodist Church from disintegrating in Germany during the war, although it sustained heavy personal and property damage.

Even as Nuelson's mission ecclesiology was forced by the First World War and its divisiveness to concede the weakness of the Methodist connection, he nevertheless clung to a Methodist view of the Kingdom. He went on to write later, even after World War I had shattered the hopes of Edinburgh's World Missionary Conference for a unified world-wide evangelization within a generation: "Methodism and its mission in Europe serves to remind all that the Church is not the Kingdom of God. The Churches are not Christianity. Church questions are not always questions of the Kingdom of God." 38

If the First World War brought a crushing blow to the churches and their unity in Europe, Nuelson continued to see hope that God's Kingdom and God's mission would go forward. When the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in 1916 in Sarasota Springs, Nuelson called for the rebuilding of the Methodist connectional work in Europe after the war, but also called upon Methodists to be a part of international church and governments to bring restoration in Europe. At the same time, Nuelson urged Methodism to more tightly identify with the needs of the countries it operated in Europe. He felt this would help Methodism participate in the new ecumenical and organization relief efforts there. Nuelson's work through the war was appreciated by Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, the General Conference of 1916 then moved to recognize Nuelson's "costly efforts to maintain the integrity and the unity of the Methodist

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38 J. L. Nuelson, Der Methodismus im kirchlichen Leben Europas, 19; my translation.
church in Europe, in between the most confusing conditions of war. Nuelson had strengthened the tie that bound Methodism and its mission in Europe, and he had saved it through commitment to peace and connectionalism, to continue its work on the continent.

Indeed, the Methodist Episcopal Church in America participated in an international relief effort in 1919, mainly targeting children, which Nuelson administered and this clearly helped to begin the repair of the global Methodist connection. Moreover, these relief efforts brought the Methodists to the attention of the government and helped to form more ecumenical links as well. Because of his neutral stance, the Methodist church in Germany (and the other parts of the reunified European Methodist connection) survived the war years, and was allowed by the German government to retain its church status and its loose international connections. After the war, as Germany moved into its new political stance of the Weimar Republic, Methodism discovered an improved status along with a federation of other Free churches, now that the monarchy was gone, the state-church hegemony was altered, and the Free churches were protected by legal right. Nuelson’s public criticism of the Dawes Plan, which called for crushing war reparations of up to 1.7 billion Gold-marks per year to the victorious powers, added to Methodism’s enhanced status as a church committed to Germany under the Weimar regime.

V

When Hitler came to power in 1933, subsequently dissolving the Weimar Republic, Methodism was again forced to forge a new relationship to National Socialism. The Methodist Church and Nuelson, an American citizen, increasingly came under scrutiny for the church’s Anglo-Saxon origins and international connections. The Methodist Church found itself in a tension again. Should it sever its international connection and “nationalize,” joining Hitler’s new coalition of State Church Lutherans and other recognized Free churches in the Nazi approved, so-called, “Church struggle group”? Or would Methodism join with other “confessing” churches and form an underground opposition to Nazism? Methodism under Nuelson’s hand, again steered a middle course. Methodism did not openly oppose the Nazi regime, but instead adopted a studied neutrality that did not appear to break too far away from the recognized church. Full length treatments of Methodism’s complex development during the Nazi era have been written, which recount the struggles for Methodism to survive Nazi state regulation

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38 K. H. Voigt, 96–97.
by becoming independent from Anglo-Saxon taint, while also attempting to keep its neutrality from devolving into indifference to the Nazi regime. The results of this tension within Methodism led ultimately to the election of the first independent German bishop, Otto H. Melle in 1938. Yet Melle’s story, along with the recognition and incorporation of the Methodist church under Nazi law, and the severing of Methodism’s tie to the international connection without General Conference approval, is told in great detail in other sources. For our purposes, we wish to note Bishop Nuelson’s own published views from 1936 which again sought the middle way of neutrality, commitment to the needs of the local context, all without sacrificing the international community:

First let it be once more ascertained . . . that the Reich government has not inhibited our work or put any pressure upon us in any manner whatsoever. We are not at battle with the Führer or the Third Reich. And we have no cause to be. On the contrary, we are pleased and thankful for the freedom and peace which allowed us, and our prayers rise to the throne of grace, that the Lord will grant the Führer and his coworkers unfailingly the spirit of wisdom, of perception and of the fear of God.

If the Methodists were not about to join the resistance through the Confessing Movement, neutrality was not the same as joining with the state church however:

Since the Methodist Episcopal Church is not at battle with the state, but can perform its service undisturbed, so she does not feel herself called upon to become involved in the so-called Church struggle (the struggle to create a pure German church under state control). Rather she sees the whole system of a close connection of the church with the state (whether Staatskirche or Landeskirche—State church or Federated Church) as hindering freedom of the Gospel, given the modern notions of church and state.

As shockingly naive as these quotes seem about the oppression going on in Nazi Germany, it is only fair to note that these comments were in published form, and most church meetings and documents were under close Gestapo scrutiny. Nuelson therefore had to make such carefully crafted statements as a matter of course. And if Methodism’s neutrality appeared to be the kind only designed to save itself, indifferent to the suffering of others, Nuelson’s other more penetrating view of the situation can be offered as a counterbalance, taken from his last Episcopal Address before the European Central Conference including Germany:


45Quoted in J. A. Dwyer, 41.
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Our non-interference may not tempt us into a false security. We dare not cradle ourselves in the thought that our fathers may certainly have had to endure all manner of shame and persecution yesterday, but that we, today, may bask in the sunshine of official recognition. We must shun shyness before suffering or avoidance of misery which we ought to take upon ourselves for faith’s sake. The word of the Cross is even today foolishness and irritation for the world. . . . Proclamation of repentance and conversion always encounters the contradiction of the proud, be he individualist or racist, be he semite or African or Indo-European (Inda-Germane). . . . It is the nature of things that the mission of a Free Church includes also a special calling as a Witness Church (Zeugniskirche), thus if necessary a Martyr Church (Märtyrkirche).46

This clearly indicates that neutrality in the face of Nazism was not to capitulate to its race theory, but was to keep “the Methodist Connexion” alive. Here we also see an example of the subtle, but clear renunciation of Nazi “Aryan” racial supremacy theory. Nuelson did not advocate Methodist neutrality to avoid the costs of commitment and resistance to the Nazis, which nevertheless Nuelson and many other Methodists bore throughout the war. But official church statements during Nuelson’s last years before the war stressed neutrality and strengthening the mission of the church in its search for justice and peace in the midst of war. Yet Nuelson recognized, all too well from his earlier experience, that war would be an increasingly costly business for the German Methodists.

Bishop Nuelson was soon forced again in 1936 to relinquish Germany and later Austrian-Hungarian Methodism, when Germany occupied Austria in the “Anschluss” of 1938. These events were seen as a great loss to Nuelson and his connectional Methodist vision. However, it was a move, much like his handing over of the allied controlled Methodist areas to London in 1917, made out of practical necessity as a concession to the long term survival of the Methodist movement in Nazi controlled lands. It would have simply been impossible for an American citizen to continue as Bishop of the Methodist Church in Nazi Germany. In order for the church to survive, he had to relinquish Germany and later the still fledgling mission work in Austro-Hungary, in order to continue his episcopal oversight binding together Methodists in Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. After the German Methodist Church broke away from the rest of European Methodism, Nuelson took over leadership of the “Geneva Area” of Methodism, the now orphaned group of Methodist churches within the neutral states of Europe, and those countries not yet within the grasp of Nazism. That most of these areas would later also fall under Hitler’s reign, with devastating results to the Methodist mission there and such dire implications for the long term connections of Methodism on the continent, Nuelson could not have known. Yet it is clear from Nuelson’s late episcopal actions, as the last Methodist bishop to oversee all of conti-

46J. A. Dwyer, 43.
nental European Methodism, that the world-wide connection of Methodism was ever the goal in his episcopal actions. The time had come when Bishop John L. Nuelson could do no more to strengthen the ties that bound Methodists in Europe together, as the Second World War tore those bonds apart. He wrote with clarity in September 1939, as Germany attacked Poland and months before his missionary career ended and the flames of war would engulf his beloved Europe:

On the altars of self-made gods today, hundreds of thousands of people will be slaughtered, torn and dismantled. This mass-murdering passion is today’s form of disgraceful suffering, due to the unnatural use of Men’s bodies, and of the drift towards shame, spoken about by Paul in Romans 1:22–24. Massive powers of destruction and annihilation are at work everywhere in Europe: Materialism, Nihilism, the lust for money, the search for pleasure, racial discrimination, scientific presumption. The day may come, where everyone who is still Christian must together under a common banner proclaim: The day of Judgment and decision in God’s court has come. I pray that it will also be a day of repentance and of conversion to God.47

Having been able barely to hold together the Methodist connection and mission in Europe during and after World War I, Nuelson would not be able to do this again a second time. Nevertheless, through two wars, Nuelson maintained the hope that mission would offer a chance for humanity to find repentance and peace with itself and God. In 1940, at the age of 73, Bishop Nuelson retired to the U.S.A. as his missionary father before him had done.48

The Second World War deeply wounded the German-speaking Methodist Church in Europe (excluding Switzerland). Approximately 2,000 Methodist members did not return from the war; a quarter of the pastors were lost as soldiers or to air-attacks; 60% of all church buildings were destroyed in the fighting.49 The Methodist contribution to the renewal of a post-war Europe again was considerable, particularly among relief efforts and in work with refugees. But in addition to the human loss and lasting physical scars, the Second World War damaged the unity of continental European Methodism for over fifty years. But the war did not mean an end to the mission influence of Nuelson on the continent. On the contrary, Nuelson’s creative, synthesis of the best in the traditions of German and American speaking Methodism, survived two wars and continues to influence the Methodist movement within Europe. Today, the EMK (or “Evangelische-Methodistischen Kirche,” as the UMC is known in the German speaking world) conducts mission as a world-wide, connected, ecumenical, and supra-national renewal movement. This “Free church” mission continues to preach the Kingdom of God as prior to its own structure. Such principles remain the legacy of the mission leadership of Bishop John L. Nuelson.

47Quoted in W. Nausner, “Methodismus und Weltmission,” 35; my translation.
48J. A. Dwyer, 11.
VI

In conclusion, Nuelson's attempt to maintain Methodist mission on the firm foundations of ecumenical unity and connectionalism, is extremely significant for three other reasons. First, Nuelson's work shows an early form of global partnership between the Methodist church in America and many European countries in mission in a period when nationalism and paternalism rather than globalism dominated the missionary movement. Nuelson's mission theology stands against the general trend of that period. Secondly, in Nuelson's struggles through two wars to make the Methodist Church locally sensitive, while remaining globally connected, we can discover both the promise and the limits of Methodist connectionalism as a means to do mission. And finally, due to the conflict between NATO countries in Europe and Yugoslavia, the unity of European Methodism appears at the end of the 20th century to be faced with its greatest challenge since World War II. The Methodist connection in Europe, only recently reunited, is again in jeopardy as anti-Western sentiment threatens to split parts of Balkan Methodism from the world Methodist family. Nuelson's attempts to maintain Methodist unity through war, could offer important sources for reflection, as Methodists struggle again to strengthen the ties that bind us together, particularly with our partners in Yugoslavia. An understanding of Nuelson's contribution to European Methodism during the first half of the 20th century, may therefore provide important clues to help the church rebuild unity in Europe for the next century.