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EDITOR’S NOTE

I came across this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.: “We are not makers of history; we are made by history.”

Thinking about the readers of Methodist History, those of us who are historians, archivists or just plain history buffs, King’s words capture my attention. They both surprise and intrigue me.

Taken out of context, read only from the perspective of a Quote of the Day website, Dr. King’s words might be misleading. It sounds like he is merely saying that people do not engage the past, instead the past defines the person. We are who we are and become who we become because of the history we have lived. We do not get to change that. In one way that makes sense, especially in regards to the struggle for civil rights, for which King gave his life.

In context, however, Dr. King is expressing quite an opposite idea. The quote comes from a sermon that is published in his book Strength to Love (1963). His message: that people are so panicked about trying to fit-in and uphold the status quo that they forgo opportunities to make history—they acquiesce. King is challenging people not to benignly accept or conform to the way things are (i.e. segregation). Do not let history make you, he proclaims. Engage the world around and its struggles. Get involved. A different history may be the result.

Reading history in proper context, examining it as foundational and formative to one’s place in the world, contemplating history as means of engaging and shaping the present, even inspiring and instigating the future—all these strands are intertwined in the fabric of the discipline. Like my fascination with the Dr. King quote above, this issue of Methodist History demonstrates them all.

Rob Sledge’s “The Saddest Day: Gene Leggett and the Origins of the Incompatible Clause” delves into the background history of the language of the 1972 United Methodist General Conference on the subject of homosexuality. The statement that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” came from a first-time lay delegate from the Southwest Texas Conference. Don Hand had just witnessed the chaotic meeting of the 1971 his annual conference in which the Rev. Gene Leggett was “involuntarily located” for “unacceptability,” a term that meant but did not explicitly say he was a self-avowed, practicing homosexual. This historic clause has endured for half-century and is still a bone of contention. This essay is unique as both scholarly examination and memoir since Dr. Sledge was a witness to the events as they unfolded in his home conference. The work is extremely timely given the continuing tumult over LGBTQ issues in
the United Methodist Church and the current work of the General Conference (2016)-appointed Way Forward Commission.

Paul Chilcote and Ulrike Schuler’s “Methodist Women in Bulgaria and Italy” continues the story of Methodist women pioneers in Bulgaria and Italy. Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society second-wave pioneers—highly educated and deeply pious women—quickly moved into positions of leadership, consolidating the efforts of a first wave of indigenous Bible women. This essay, a second installment, builds on Chilcote and Schuler’s essay that appeared in October 2016/January 2017 special double-issue of Methodist History. It examines the role and influence of these missionaries, describes their relationship with incumbent missionary wives and indigenous counterparts, and draws conclusions about the missiological shifts in this evolving story about mission and women.

Heather Moore’s “Migration, Theology and Long’s Barn: A Heritage to the Church of the United Brethren in Christ” digs deeply into the historical and theological heritage of Martin Boehm and Phillip William Otterbein’s denomination-defining exclamation: “We are Brothers!” This essay, first presented to the Methodist section of The American Academy of Religion 2016, highlights the historiography and hagiography of words many United Methodists simply and simplistically have accepted at face value. Examining the migration of German Reformed and Swiss Mennonite traditions in Pennsylvania and Mid-Atlantic regions, readers will find much more to Long’s Barn and the Boehm-Otterbein embrace than previously considered.

I wish informative, illuminating and inspiring reading to all.

Alfred T. Day III