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Celebrating 200 Years in Mission

PAPERS FROM THE METHODIST MISSION BICENTENNIAL CONFERENCE
APRIL 8–10, 2019



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Cover: The cover image is the bicentennial logo of the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church. Essays in this double issue were presented at a conference to mark the 200th anniversary of the 1819 founding of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the first denomination-wide mission society in American Methodism and the earliest forerunner of today's Global Ministries.

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METHODIST HISTORY

Alfred T. Day III, Editor
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Editor: METHODIST HISTORY, P.O. Box 127, Madison, NJ 07940. Prospective authors are
advised to write for guidelines or visit www.gcqh.org.

CONTRIBUTORS

ARUN W. JONES is the Dan and Lillian Hankey Associate Professor of World Evangelism, Candler School of Theology, Emory University. The son of Methodist missionaries in India, he himself worked as a missionary in the Philippines. As an ordained elder, he pastored United Methodist congregations in Connecticut and New Jersey. Jones is the author of two monographs, *Missionary Christianity and Local Religion: American Evangelicalism in North India, 1836–1870*, and *Christian Missions in the American Empire: Episcopalians in Northern Luzon, the Philippines, 1902–1946*. He is President of the American Society of Missiology.

DOUGLAS D. TZAN is Director of the Doctor of Ministry and Course of Study Programs and Assistant Professor of Church History and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, and senior pastor at the Sykesville Parish (St. Paul's and Gaither United Methodist Churches) in Sykesville, Maryland. He earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies (History of Christianity) from Boston University in 2013. He is the author of *William Taylor and the Mapping of the Methodist Missionary Tradition: The World His Parish*. The manuscript of that book was awarded the 2015 Jesse Lee Prize of the General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church. He teaches in the fields of church history and mission.

PHILIP WINGEIER-RAYO is Dean of Wesley Theological Seminary and Professor of Missiology and Methodist Studies. Dr. Wingeier-Rayo holds his doctorate in Theology, Ethics and Culture from Chicago Theological Seminary. He has previously taught at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Pfeiffer University, and Seminario Baez Camargo in Mexico City. His academic work is informed by fifteen years of missionary service where he served in Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico, and the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. Dr. Wingeier-Rayo is currently writing a book on a Wesleyan theology of mission and evangelism.

DANA L. ROBERT is Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission and Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at Boston University. She is a Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2017, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Missiology. Her books include *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community*; *Joy to the World!: Mission in the Age of Global Christianity*, a UMW mission study; *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (now in its twelfth printing); and *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*.

ROBERT K. LANG'AT is Bishop of the Africa Gospel Church, Kenya. Prior to his service as Bishop, he was the senior pastor of Ngata Africa Gospel Church, Nakuru, Kenya, and a professor, administrator, and leader at Kabarak University, Kenya, as well as several other colleges and universities. He holds a Ph.D. in Methodist and Wesleyan Studies from Drew University, Madison, NJ.

GUNSHIK SHIM is an ordained elder in the New York Annual Conference. Now retired, he previously served for 28 years as a pastor and District Superintendent of the Long Island West District (2001–2008). He has a Ph.D. from Drew University, Madison, NJ.

ROBERT A. HUNT is the Director of Global Theological Education at Perkins School of Theology. He teaches courses in World Religions, Mission Studies, Cultural Intelligence, and Islam in Contemporary Societies and States. Dr. Hunt received his Ph.D. from the University of Malaya, studying Christian-Muslim relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is a fellow of the Hunt Institute for Engineering and the Humanities and Editor of the American Society of Missiology Series.

MIKE FEELY has been the Director of Development at Camp Lookout in Rising Fawn, Georgia, since September, 2018. Previously, he served at Henderson Settlement from 2013–2018. He has also served as a United Methodist minister in east Tennessee, ran political campaigns, and founded an urban ministry center. He has a B.A. from the University of Georgia; an M.Div. from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC; and has done further studies at the Sewanee School of Theology. He has taught history and world religions at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; Tennessee Temple University; and Chattanooga State Community College.

GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

The papers included in this special double issue of *Methodist History* were all presented at “Answering the Call: Hearing God’s Voice in Methodist Mission Past, Present and Future,” the Methodist Mission Bicentennial Conference, co-sponsored by Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church and Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and held April 8–10, 2019. These papers are just some of the rich material presented at that conference. I wish I could have included more papers, and I thank all who presented there.

That conference celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding, in 1819, of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the first denomination-wide mission society in American Methodism and the earliest forerunner of today’s Global Ministries. Yet while this event marked a significant milestone in the life of Global Ministries, the conference organizers wanted to ensure that the conference did not just focus narrowly on the history of mission as undertaken by one particular institution (or set of institutions, as several societies merged together to form what is now Global Ministries).

Instead, we sought to reflect on the “past, present, and future” of Methodist mission broadly. Mission does not belong to any church institution. It is first and foremost the mission of God (*missio Dei*). Moreover, as the church joins in the mission of God, it always does so in partnership; thus, readers will notice that several of the papers (Jones, Robert, and Lang’at) are about people or networks who were not primarily affiliated with or oriented toward the Missionary Society and its peers and successors. This is not an attempt to claim this history for Global Ministries; it is rather an attempt to recognize that the Missionary Society, Global Ministries, and other related institutions are but one thread in Methodist mission history, even if they are an important thread.

Looking through these papers, and others presented at the conference but not included here, what themes emerge in surveying the last two centuries of Methodist mission? While no eight papers could hope to cover the entirety of two centuries of Methodist mission, these papers do suggest some important and recurring themes that run throughout the entirety of that history.

First, one sees the importance of theology, either implicitly or explicitly held, in shaping mission. The virtues Jones discusses in his reflection on John Stewart may also be thought of as theological convictions that have motivated Methodist missionaries over the years. The pieces by Robert, Tzan, and Lang’at also show the central importance of theological convictions in shaping the mission work Methodists have undertaken.

Some of the pieces focus primarily on individuals, especially those by

Jones, Tzan, Wingeier-Rayo, Hunt, and Shim. Others focus primarily on networks of people, especially those by Robert, Lang'at, and Feely. In this combination, we see another important truth about Methodist mission: individual actors are important, but we cannot separate individuals from the larger networks that have supported mission work. In this regard, Methodist mission reflects a very Methodist combination of individual agency and connectional relationships.

Another pair of impulses in Methodist mission history visible in these papers is the combination between innovation and structure. The pieces by Robert, Tzan, Wingeier-Rayo, and Lang'at all describe mission innovators, people who went beyond the system current in their time. The result of these innovations was not anarchy, but rather new structures for supporting and shaping mission. Both innovation and structure are recurring impulses.

While this collection of papers highlights the importance of structure, there is certainly more to say about how these structures have been shaped by economic constraints and considerations and more to say about how these structures have embedded particular power relationships within the church, power relationships that often reflect inequalities within secular society—gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, etc. Hunt's paper shows how the combination of ethnic assumptions and economic necessities marginalized the Malay within the Malaysia Mission, and Feely's paper shows how class prejudices shaped how Americans thought about mission in Appalachia. Moreover, several of the papers—those by Wingeier-Rayo, Robert, and Shim centrally, but also those by Hunt and Lang'at—show the central role that women have played in Methodist mission, despite the limitations put on them in both secular society and the church.

Many of the papers included herein demonstrate the importance of education in Methodist mission history, including those by Tzan, Wingeier-Rayo, Robert, Shim, Hunt, and Feely. This is appropriate, as education has been a central focus for Methodist mission. But at the same time, the papers also demonstrate the breadth of Methodist mission, which has included not only education, but also evangelism, health and healing, charitable work, social reform, printing, and translation, as shown in these papers. Other papers from the conference that did not make it into this volume described agriculture, peace-making, migration work, ecumenism, and other forms of Methodist mission.

Finally, this collection of papers shows that there are multiple ways of assessing the significance and impact of Methodist mission as we look back over the past two hundred years. While none of the papers deals directly with numerical growth of the church, many people, both historically and in contemporary times, have judged mission by the extent to which it has produced new Christians in new lands. Wingeier-Rayo's piece, dealing in part with India, and Shim's piece, dealing with Korea, both give examples of areas in which mission did indeed have such an impact. Yet numerical means of assessing the significance of mission are far from the only ones possible.

Another set of means of assessing the impact of mission is to look at its

impact on the church. One such way of determining that significance is the ability of mission to produce individuals who stand as spiritual exemplars for all Christians, not just those involved in mission. Jones' profile of John Stewart shows the power of mission work to produce just such individuals. Alternatively, one might look at how mission has influenced the development of the church as an institution, as the pieces by Tzan, Wingeier-Rayo, Robert, and Lang'at do.

Or, taking another tack, one could look at the impact of mission on the broader society beyond the church. The medical services described by Shim and the social services described by Feely were in both cases offered to all in their societies, not just Christians. In the case of women's medical work in Korea, the impact of these services on the lives of all Korean women, not just Christians, was revolutionary. Hunt's piece nicely shows how the impacts of mission language work were primarily beyond the church.

There are certainly other themes that are important in Methodist mission history and could have received more treatment in this journal issue. The complex relationships between mission, nationalism, and globalization stand out as one such theme. Yet no collection of eight papers can cover everything. As it is, I think you will find these particular eight papers to be rich in themselves and richly suggestive of how we should think about the history of Methodist mission broadly.

DR. DAVID W. SCOTT
Director, Mission Theology
General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church
Atlanta, Georgia