

## DISAPPEARING CHURCHES: RURAL METHODISM IN THE WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA HIGHLANDS, 1918-1968

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In 1922 more than 500 churches in the three predecessor denominations of The Methodist Church dotted the western North Carolina mountains and foothills. In 1967 The Methodist Church reported 386 churches in the area, including a few new congregations in larger towns and cities.<sup>1</sup> Yet, census records and Methodist statistics show about a ten percent increase in both population and the total number of Methodists. In addition, the Western North Carolina Annual Conference possessed an organization, a source of funds, and talented leadership dedicated to the welfare of rural churches. Ironically, this very organization, funding, and leadership often contributed to the loss of churches.

For this article, the highlands of western North Carolina include the Appalachian Mountains and the lower Brushy Mountains to the east, including border counties containing both the eastern slope of the mountains and the industrialized Piedmont.<sup>2</sup> Large, inaccessible mountainous areas with a comparatively small amount of arable land characterize this region of great natural beauty. With a mostly Scotch-Irish, Protestant population, the area had few African Americans or recent immigrants.<sup>3</sup> By reputation, the people of the western North Carolina highlands were independent, proud, loyal to family and friends, and suspicious of outsiders. Residents of the industrial Piedmont area often patronized mountain people which the proud mountaineers resented.

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<sup>1</sup>1922 was the year in which statistics from the three denominations showed the highest number of churches. Closing of churches was not, of course, confined to western North Carolina, but occurred throughout Methodism in all sections of the country. The western North Carolina mountains, however, provided an unusual combination of circumstances that might shed light on the reasons for church closings.

<sup>2</sup>A North Carolina industrial almanac for the mid-years of the period, *North Carolina Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1952-1953* (Raleigh, NC: Almanac Publishing Company) includes these border counties in its mountains sections of the state. It lists the northern mountain counties as Allegheny, Ashe, Avery, Caldwell, Surry, Watauga, Wilkes, and Yadkin, and the southern mountain counties as Buncombe, Burke, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, and Yancy.

<sup>3</sup>According to the 1940 Census Polk County, a partially mountainous border county that grew a large amount of cotton, had 16 % African American population. Buncombe County, the only county in the area with over 10,000 African Americans, was 17 % African American. All other counties in the area had less than 10,000 African Americans with some counties having only a few hundred.

Mostly Protestant, many mountaineers found identity, comfort, community, social life, power, and excitement in their religion. Their independence led many to prefer congregational government. Thus, Baptists were in the majority in most western North Carolina counties.<sup>4</sup> Although Methodists were the second largest denomination and remained so throughout the period, those who preferred local autonomy or a more exciting religious experience often rejected the Methodist message. Also economically-marginal mountain residents perceived, perhaps rightly, that prosperous Methodists looked down on them.

A complex set of factors contributed to the closing of Methodist churches in the mountains. Closings occurred in the context of economic stagnation, government activism, and technological advances. Lack of economic opportunity contributed to a population flow to the larger towns within the area, or out of the area completely, a factor in the decline of mountain Methodist churches. Because of the high birthrate, children who could not inherit arable land or find nearby jobs frequently migrated to the towns. In the large families of those who remained, the process was repeated. Eventually the small, rural church consisted of an aging membership. Furthermore, lack of interest in evangelism resulted in few new members. Therefore, as members died, some churches closed.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, National Forests, and TVA dams also contributed to both the stagnant economy and the closing of churches. A turn-of-the-century timber boom faded after World War I leaving behind unemployment and bare hillsides. Government policies of forest preservation and provision of hydroelectric power temporarily preserved the area's beauty, but inhibited future economic development on large tracts of land. Some churches were displaced by lakes or found themselves within park or National Forest boundaries. At the same time, technological advances such as automobiles, paved roads, telephones, movies, radio, and later television, made it easier to travel longer distances to church, receive a worship service in the home, or find Sunday recreational opportunities that rivaled church attendance.

Yet many contributing factors to the closing of churches came from within Methodism itself. During the Civil War many western North Carolinians supported the Union. After the war some former union supporters joined the northern-based Methodist Episcopal Church. By 1939 approximately 25 Methodist Episcopal preachers served 116 congregations in the North Carolina highlands. In addition there were some ten Methodist Protestant

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<sup>4</sup>Jesse Marvin Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1931) presents statistics on rural churches of all denominations. The most recent study of the Appalachian region, Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), concentrates on the south central Appalachians of extreme western Virginia, West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and the Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee, and does not include a chapter on Methodists. It also confirms the domination of Baptist groups.

congregations in the area. In the new Methodist Church of 1939, some rural areas had two or three Methodist churches. As time passed, smaller churches closed or merged into larger churches. Most often the smaller, previously Methodist Episcopal or Methodist Protestant churches closed or merged into the larger, more dominant churches from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South tradition.

In addition, theological, philosophical, and organizational trends within Methodism provided a rationale for closing churches. Theologically, three perspectives provided the context for the decline of mountain congregations. After the Civil War most mountain Methodists continued the frontier Methodist emphasis on conversion, salvation from sin as a result of Jesus' death on the cross, and holy living. Although camp meetings declined before the Civil War, mountain Methodists still depended on periodic revival meetings for spiritual nourishment. However, two new theological perspectives emerged before World War I, both of which placed more emphasis on Christian life than on conversion experiences. Holiness theology emphasized the necessity of a "second blessing" experience, conferred by the Holy Spirit, giving believers the ability to live free of the desire to sin.<sup>5</sup> The other new perspective, Personalism, emphasized spiritual growth, relationships, personality, and the worth of all persons. Although each perspective affected Methodism in the western North Carolina highlands, Personalism had more impact on the closing of churches.

In the 20th century many Methodist leaders, both North and South, adopted a liberal, progressive, Personalist theology and philosophy. Adherents of this viewpoint accepted higher criticism as a valid way of interpreting the Bible. They believed in a this-worldly kingdom of God, which would result from the extension of Christianity all over the world. These leaders adopted Personalist philosophy to undergird their liberal theological views. Personalism, as advocated by the German, Herman Lotze, and Borden Parker Bowne of Boston University, considered personality as the basic unit of reality. Religiously, the human finite personality was the image of the infinite personality of God. Personality is characterized by the dignity of each individual person, the ability to grow into a wholeness of personality that integrates the body, mind, and soul, and the ability to relate

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<sup>5</sup>The impact of Holiness theology on mountain church closings after World War I was limited. The Holiness Controversy within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South had largely subsided before 1900. Many Holiness leaders remained within the denomination. Most activity within Methodism was concentrated in the industrial Piedmont rather than in the mountains. Some Holiness preachers became Conference Evangelists. Donald K. Funderburk, *John R. Church, Evangelist: A Biography Including Dr. Church's Personal Testimony and His Memorial Service* (Donald K. Funderburk, 1895), describes such a preacher. However, some Methodists may have joined independent Holiness congregations in the mountainous areas.

to others.<sup>6</sup> Methodists, therefore, emphasized spiritual growth toward wholeness, fulfillment, reconciliation, relationships, and community. Like Boston University and other Methodist theological schools, divinity schools at Duke and Emory, whose preachers served in western North Carolina, taught this theological view.

The extent of the movement of Personalist theology into highland areas is difficult to quantify. As the 20th century progressed, more preachers graduated from college and attended divinity school at Duke or Emory. The mountain areas generally had many appointments listed as "to be supplied" by local preachers or student pastors. In addition, many divinity school graduates received their first appointment in the rural mountain areas. Therefore, although a majority of mountain Methodists probably remained conservative, over the years student and newly ordained Methodist preachers brought into the highlands a religious perspective that concentrated on spiritual growth, community, and nurture of congregational members.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to their Personalist theology, many seminary-educated preachers preferred an organizational policy that emphasized centralization, efficiency, consolidation, and professionalism. This philosophy was also prevalent in the secular world of the time. Schools consolidated. Businesses and governments grew larger and integrated many functions. In Methodism, centralized boards, agencies, commissions, and committees appeared at all levels of the denomination to establish and coordinate programs for nurturing members. The Publishing House and the Sunday School Board provided literature to Sunday schools that emphasized spiritual growth. Conferences provided programs for training Sunday school teachers. Professional program directors appeared in larger churches to direct children and youth programs. Women's, men's and youth organizations were organized at the denominational, conference, district, and sub-district levels. Conference-wide boards established hospitals and retirement homes.

As part of the trend toward centralized agencies, Departments and Commissions on Rural Work (later Town and Country Commissions) appeared in both the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. These commissions originated under the auspices of Home Missions, but later became free-standing commissions with their

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<sup>6</sup>Doug Andersen, "Finite Persons: The Legacy of Bowne's Empiricism," in the Personalist Forum, *Studies of Personalist Philosophy*. Proceedings of the Conference on Persons, Mansfield College, Oxford England, September 11-14, 1991, 1-8.

<sup>7</sup>Personalist theology may have entered the western North Carolina Mountains from other denominations as well. The Episcopalian, William Porcher DuBose advocated a Personalist theology as did Edgar Y. Mullins, a southern Baptist leader at Louisville Seminary. Leo Sandon, Jr., "Boston University Personalism and Southern Baptist Theology." *Foundation* 20: 101-108, notes the influence of Boston Personalism on Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as on Mullins.

own executives.<sup>8</sup> This early Home Missions interest combined improving rural life with spreading the Christian message. Both denominations organized for rural work in the 1930s and this organization continued after the merger of 1939.<sup>9</sup> In 1932, the Methodist Episcopal Church, in addition to establishing a Department of Rural Work under their Board of Home Missions, provided a mechanism for Annual Conferences to establish independent rural societies. The organizational structure for rural work continued until the merger with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968, when new styles of organization emerged.

At the Annual Conference level in western North Carolina, the Blue Ridge Atlantic Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church had no rural commission, although the denomination had authorized such commissions. The North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, however, formed a Rural Church Committee in 1926. This committee reported yearly until 1936 when it presented a final list of recommendations that included improving the appearance and comfort of church buildings and developing a more adequate worship program.<sup>10</sup>

In the Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, denominational concern with rural churches began around 1920 and came from a source other than the Board of Missions. Tobacco and electric power millionaire James B. Duke for several years had contributed money to the welfare of rural churches. In 1920 he requested that Trinity College (later Duke University) administer a fund for country church work. A Duke Fund Commission, comprised of members from each of the two Methodist Episcopal Church, South conferences in North Carolina, was established to cooperate with Trinity and conference boards to "promote the utmost well being of the Country Church in the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences." The commission gave special attention to adequate church buildings and training leaders. It concluded that the primary problems facing country churches were extremely large circuits with

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<sup>8</sup>In the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Department of Home Missions began to express concern over rural conditions as early as 1913. G. B. Winton, ed. *The Junaluska Conference: A Report of the Second General Missionary Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Board of Missions of the M. E. Church, South, 1913) contains a chapter on Rural Missions. Between 1892 and 1910, the Women's Home Mission society supported mountain schools, including one in Brevard, North Carolina. The southern Women's Missionary Society began to support programs for rural women and children in the 1930s. John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1882), 49-51.

<sup>9</sup>The Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference of 1932 and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South General Conference of 1934 authorized their Boards of Missions to oversee work in rural churches. By the 1936 and 1938 General Conferences respectively, permanent groups had been set up to administer programs for rural churches.

<sup>10</sup>North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, *Journal*, 1936, 35-36.

little opportunity for preaching and lack of space for Sunday schools. The committee noted that "in the absence of preaching, little or no provision has been made for feeding the flock of Christ."<sup>11</sup>

In 1924, James B. Duke's will established the Duke Endowment. A small portion of the total endowment provided for building and maintenance of churches "in the sparsely settled rural districts in the state of North Carolina . . . ."<sup>12</sup> In 1926, the 150th anniversary of Methodist circuits in North Carolina and the first year that funds from the Duke Endowment were available for country church buildings, the Western North Carolina Conference designated its journal as the Rural Church Number. For the first time the Conference included statistical data on each church in the Conference.

With a yearly source of income assured, the Duke Fund Commission began to establish criteria for efficient use of Duke Endowment money. The Rural Life Department of Duke University, under the direction of J. M. Ormond, began to map and survey each charge. Sites for new church buildings had to be analyzed and approved before appropriation of money.<sup>13</sup> New churches should be of brick or stone, have at least three additional rooms, be on a large amount of land, and in a strategic location in communities that had growth potential. When churches successfully built new buildings using money from the rural fund, the preachers of those churches should receive special training for rural work and have their salaries supplemented. Weak or struggling churches should not receive appropriations. In fact, weak churches in areas with no growth potential should be consolidated with other churches or closed.<sup>14</sup>

For the next decade this Commission continued to administer the Duke Endowment funds and keep the issue of rural churches before the Conference. However, the Commission's goals of statistical study, adequate church buildings, leadership training, and efficient use of Duke money did not address attracting members or evangelism. In the 1930s when Methodists at the denominational levels began to express concern for rural churches, they too gave nurture of members a higher priority than evangelism. Even though these organizations existed within the Board of Missions, the earlier goal of spreading the gospel to rural areas had almost disappeared.

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<sup>11</sup>Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Journal*, 1920, 18-20, 89.

<sup>12</sup>Duke Endowment Trustees, *The Duke Endowment Established by James B. Duke, with Provisions of the Will and a Trust of Mr. Duke Supplementing the Same, also an Address by William R. Perkins, Personal Council of Mr. Duke on the Origin, Nature, and Purpose of the Duke Endowment* (1932), 20. The rural portion of the Duke Endowment continues to help with new church buildings and provides money and training for preachers.

<sup>13</sup>Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Journal*, 1926, 109.

<sup>14</sup>Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Journal*, 1927, 73-74.

The Duke Fund Commission had been active for almost 20 years before the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (The Methodist Church after 1939) organized for rural work. The 1938 Discipline (§§605 and 606) provided for a General Rural Work Commission, and Annual Conference commissions, to "study rural problems" and "prepare policies and plans for the development of Methodism in rural areas." They were to conduct research, develop cooperative procedures for church agencies serving rural people and outline a policy for rural work, which should produce better-trained and better-paid rural ministers and trained lay workers. In addition the commissions should work for more wholesome rural communities in which Methodists cooperated with all other community agencies. Illustrating the cooperative nature of rural work, the Rural Work Commissions involved Boards of Christian Education, Missions, Church Extension, Lay Activities, Presiding Elders, and the Women's Missionary Society.

When the Methodist denominations combined in 1939, the new Methodist Church continued to organize for the nurture of rural members. Paragraphs 960 and 977-982 under the Section on Home Missions in the 1940 Discipline provided for several departments including a Department of Town and Country Work. It also described relationships between the General Department of Town and Country Work and other boards and commissions, as well as relationships between the Department and Annual and Jurisdictional Conferences. At the Jurisdictional level, the General Department of Town and Country Work was to work with various Jurisdictional Boards "in their regional movements and methods for establishing the Church and preaching the gospel of Christ to all people in their territory." This was one of the few mentions of evangelism in the entire discussion of rural work.

In addition, paragraph 982 of the 1940 Discipline provided that "Any Annual Conferences which elects to do so may set up a Commission on Town and Country Work." These commissions could conduct surveys, cooperate with churches and social and governmental agencies, promote Town and Country Work in Divinity Schools, and encourage training rural of ministers, equitable salaries, and community life. In 1944 the optional provision for Conference Commissions on Town and Country Work was made obligatory with insertion of the words "shall" instead of "may."

To involve laity, the General Department of Town and Country Work could promote Town and Country Societies that could name themselves, determine their organization, and plan their work. Thus, the Methodist Rural Fellowship grew out of a meeting of rural laymen and ministers in April, 1940 at the first General Conference of The Methodist Church. Its purpose was "to promote the Christianizing of Rural America through literature, conferences, and fellowship."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>United Methodist Rural Fellowship, *Bulletin*, LX:2 (Summer 2000), 5.

The Western North Carolina Conference established a Commission on Town and Country Work in 1941. The Duke Endowment Committee continued to function and report each year, confining its reports to funds for new churches and provision of student preachers to rural areas in the summer. In 1954, the Conference strengthened its organization for rural work by employing a full-time Executive Secretary for the Commission of Town and Country Work. In 1957 the Western North Carolina Conference was involved in the establishment of the Hinton Rural Life Center in Haynesville, NC, later a project of the Southeastern Jurisdiction.

In all of this organization, spreading the gospel and attracting new members were seldom mentioned as goals for rural work. Other agencies dealt with evangelism, but their programs seldom applied specifically to rural conditions. The desire to "Christianize Rural America," the objective of the Methodist Rural Fellowship, referred more to the church's influence in stabilizing rural communities than to spreading the gospel to individuals. The Fellowship wanted to make rural culture a Christian culture, with a least 50% of its inhabitants belonging to some Christian church.<sup>16</sup>

As The Methodist Church organized to promote rural work, several leaders of the rural movement had ties to North Carolina or the Western North Carolina Conference. The Southeastern Jurisdiction's two divinity schools, Emory and Duke, strongly supported the effort. Earl Brewer at Emory and J. M. Ormond at Duke both spoke at the first meeting of the Methodist Rural Fellowship at the 1940 General Conference. Brewer, a member of the Western North Carolina Conference, served on the Conference's Town and Country Commission. Wilson Nesbitt, the first full-time Executive Secretary of the Western North Carolina Town and Country Commission later administered the rural portion of the Duke Endowment.

In addition to those associated with the two divinity schools, Garland R. Stafford of the Western North Carolina Conference supported rural churches throughout his career. By choice, he never served a station church. In 1938, after ten years in rural churches, he discussed his goals with Bishop Clare Purcell. "My deepest interest is in the rural church . . . I want to be a good pastor of rural churches in places of 1,500 population or less – and to make a definite contribution to the rural church field."<sup>17</sup> Although he never had a station church, he served as a District Superintendent in a mountainous district from 1955 to 1961 and as the Executive Secretary of the Conference Commission on Town and Country Work from 1961 until 1968. An active member of the Methodist Rural Fellowship he edited its *Bulletin* and was its President from 1959 to 1963.

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<sup>16</sup>United Methodist Rural Fellowship, *Bulletin*, LX:2 (Summer 2000). 7.

<sup>17</sup>Garland Reid Stafford, *Up the Years From Buffalo: an Autobiography, Seventy Years a Town and Country Preacher* (Statesville, NC: Bucolic Enterprises, 1994) and Garland R. Stafford to Bishop Clare Purcell, October 13, 1938.

Born in West Virginia, Stafford attended Emory and Henry College and graduated from Duke Divinity School in 1932. At Duke he studied under Dr. J. M. Ormond and wrote his thesis on rural churches.<sup>18</sup> Like many divinity school graduates of the period Stafford was theologically liberal and politically progressive.<sup>19</sup> Wherever he was, Stafford supported projects of value to the area, a hospital in Alexander County or adequate telephone service for a rural area outside Winston Salem. Also, from his first charge, he encouraged cooperation among the churches by publishing charge newsletters. Realizing that a large part of the rural identity was in the history of the community, Stafford wrote a history of "Methodism in Ashe County" and was active in Methodist Historical Societies. As District Superintendent, he worked to establish a district camp.

As the years passed, organizations in the Western North Carolina Conference that worked with rural churches faithfully carried out their goals and objectives. The Duke Endowment and the Commission on Town and Country Work cooperated with other conference boards, women's groups, and laity groups on a number of fronts. These activities fell into several categories, including more modern church buildings, research, surveys and statistics, improvement of rural communities, defining the most efficient circuit or charge organization, increasing the salary and training of rural preachers, providing staffing and programs similar to larger urban churches, and cooperative activities between local churches and numerous conference agencies.

Among Methodists in western North Carolina, the earliest concern relating to rural churches was the condition of church buildings, discussed previously. In an effort that continues today, Duke Endowment funds helped replace many small, wooden, one-room church buildings without electricity or plumbing. In their place were brick buildings with electricity, plumbing, and space for Sunday school classes.

Lack of basic information on rural churches also concerned rural church leadership. Before 1926, information on specific rural churches in western North Carolina was spotty.<sup>20</sup> One of the first tasks of the Duke Fund

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<sup>18</sup>Letter of Stafford to Purcell.

<sup>19</sup>His sermons contained many references to Biblical criticism. He wrote letters to Congress before World War II opposing the draft. He actively supported W. Kerr Scott, former Agricultural Commissioner of North Carolina, for governor in 1948. Scott's platform included a program to pave rural roads to make it easier for farmers to get their produce to market. Stafford, *Up From Buffalo*, 267.

<sup>20</sup>In the 19th century, conference journals only reported on the status of preachers and appointments. Information about congregations appeared in Quarterly Conference Circuit records, many of which have been lost. District Conference records, also spotty, sometimes contained information about local congregations. In 1904 the North Carolina conferences published a map of Methodist Episcopal Church, South circuits in the state, showing the approximate location of all the churches. In 1917 the Methodist Episcopal Church, South began to list Sunday School Superintendents for each church that had a Sunday School. In addition, changes in circuit or charge boundaries, which listed the specific churches that changed circuits, appeared in the 1920s.

Commission was to locate rural churches, gather statistical information, and make the information public. After creation of the Duke Endowment, the Rural Life Department of Duke University under Dr. J. M. Ormond began to map churches by county and collect statistics. These efforts culminated in the publication in 1931 of *The Country Church in North Carolina*, which showed the location, not only of Methodist churches, but of most white churches in the state. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South conferences in North Carolina began to gather and publish yearly statistics on rural churches.

After World War II the emphasis on research and statistical information continued. In 1949, the Western North Carolina Conference Town and Country Commission minutes reported that Garland Stafford had prepared district maps, but there was still no accurate information on the location of all churches within the conference. In the 1950s, the Commission also began to collect statistics, or "Records of Performance" for rural charges. In 1955 these statistics were published for the years 1952 through 1954 and yearly thereafter through 1968. Locating and mapping churches continued in the 1950s. By 1955 most churches had been located on county maps. Work then began to assign each church a county map number, a task almost completed by 1960.

Methodist leaders considered the breakdown of a rural sense of community as a primary result of modernization and migration from rural areas. They supported a rural community held together by modern institutions: school, fire department, post office, stores, and community center. In addition to these institutions, churches of the various denominations should provide community values. As previously noted, the Methodist Rural Fellowship, closely supported by western North Carolina rural leaders, had, as its objective, to "Christianize" rural America. This emphasis on community was also an important aspect of another on-going thrust of rural concern, the composition of rural circuits or charges. In discussing the most efficient way to constitute circuits, an important criterion in the 1920s was the proximity of parsonages and churches to schools, fire departments, post offices, and community centers.<sup>21</sup>

Other issues became important in the establishment of efficient circuits. In the 1920s the Duke Fund Commission expressed concern about the large size of the circuits and the detrimental effect on worship opportunities. However, over time, the larger churches often pressed to become stations, leaving, in effect, weak stations, and even weaker charges. As "stationitis" became more pronounced, the Town and Country Commission began to encourage formation of charges large enough (at least 400 members in 1960)<sup>22</sup> to support adequately the preacher and provide a full range of wor-

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<sup>21</sup>Western North Carolina Conference, *Journal*, 1927, 74.

<sup>22</sup>Western North Carolina Conference Commission on Town and Country Work, *Minutes*, September, 1952 and Western North Carolina Conference, *Journal*, 1966, 191.

ship and program experiences. In 1952 the Town and Country Commission presented a *Report on the Minimum Basis of Constituting a Charge* to the Conference. This report urged support of charges and suggested that additional staff be hired to provide the necessary programs. The philosophy had changed from a belief that circuits were too large to provide frequent preaching to a belief that circuits should be large enough to provide adequate support and programming.

As rural population declined, with some churches becoming smaller, and larger churches becoming stations, church leaders encouraged the concept of cooperative ministries or "larger parishes." All of the churches in a county or geographic area would combine for programming, but each charge within the larger parish would continue to have its own preacher. Program workers from women's groups or home missions would be available to the larger parish, and the Town and Country Commission and the Duke Foundation would make additional student staff available in the summer. By 1960 three larger parishes were in operation in the mountainous areas of western North Carolina—Avery County, Clay County, and Mt. Airy in Surry County. To help these group ministries, the Women's Society of Christian Service provided five women workers. The Clay County larger parish obtained land on which to set up a rural retreat and started the Hinton Rural Life Center in 1957. By 1964 this Center had been taken over by the Southeastern Jurisdiction. By 1967, seventeen cooperative ministry groups comprising 250 churches existed in the Conference. Of these, eleven were in the mountains.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to upgrading church buildings, conducting research, and working to determine the most efficient charges, leaders sought to increase the training and salary of rural preachers. Rural charges, particularly mountain charges, often had supply, student, or first-year preachers, many with no specific training for rural work. After World War II, the Commission on Town and Country Work encouraged training for young, rural preachers and provision of adequate salaries, with varying degrees of success.

For several years, working with other conference boards and agencies, the Town and Country Commission tried to establish training programs in conjunction with Duke, Emory, Brevard, or High Point Colleges. By 1955 the Commission's emphasis had changed to cooperating with the Board of Ministerial Training for an orientation program for young preachers whether student, supply, or first-year preachers. In 1959 the Commission suggested training for supplies and young preachers at the district level. By 1967 the Commission sponsored an orientation tour of conference institutions for beginning ministers.<sup>24</sup> In addition, it supported a number of opportunities for training outside of the conference, including summer clinics and workshops

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<sup>23</sup>Western North Carolina Conference, *Journal*, 1967, 188.

<sup>24</sup>Western North Carolina Conference Commission on Town and Country Work, *Minutes*, Sept. 1955; June, 1959, Western North Carolina Conference, *Journal*, 187.

at Duke and Emory, the Methodist Rural Fellowship retreat, and meetings of the North Carolina Council of Churches and Council of the Southern Mountains. The Commission on Town and Country Work also worked with other agencies in a cooperative effort to establish minimum salaries. The Board of Missions provided money, including Duke Endowment money, to supplement salaries, and a conference-wide Minimum Salary Commission was established to determine the minimum salary.

As Methodism became more oriented to providing programs for the spiritual nurture of its members, the Town and Country Commission worked to insure that rural and small-town churches had access to the same programs as city churches. Working with other conference boards of Education, Missions, and Evangelism, the Town and Country Commission encouraged Sunday school teacher training, mission study, and revivals for all rural churches. A full range of programs for rural churches required additional staffing. In 1960, the Executive Secretary of the Town and Country Commission, W. W. Blanton, noted that his job required him to consult with churches about programming needs. He stated that all churches should have access to a Methodist Youth Fellowship, a worship service every Sunday, and at least one Woman's Society of Christian Service circle. Furthermore, all charges should have a Woman's Society of Christian Service and one session of leadership training per year.<sup>25</sup> The Commission also encouraged the laity to assist in regular Sunday worship in rural churches by becoming Lay Speakers.

In the mountains, greater church activity occurred during the summer tourist season. Many efforts, therefore, concentrated on the summer months. The Duke Endowment paid Duke Divinity students for summer church work. In 1954, the Student Summer Program, a program of the Commission on Town and Country Work in conjunction with the Woman's Society of Christian Service, began. From eight to fourteen college women served each summer, providing Bible schools and youth activities in rural areas. This program was still in effect in 1967.<sup>26</sup> In addition, as has been mentioned, the national Woman's Society assigned Church and Community workers to assist in group ministries in various rural areas, many in the mountains.

In all efforts to build up rural communities, build new church buildings, strengthen charges, provide equitable salaries and training for rural preachers, and provide a full range of programs for rural churches, cooperation with other Methodist and non-Methodist agencies was a leading priority.

Although the Commission on Town and Country Work and the Duke Endowment accomplished many of their goals, they encountered resistance in many rural churches. The desire of stronger churches to become stations

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<sup>25</sup>Western North Carolina Conference Commission on Town and Country Work, *Minutes, Report of the Executive Secretary*, April 5, 1960.

<sup>26</sup>Western North Carolina Conference Commission on Town and Country Work, *Minutes*, August 1954. Western North Carolina Conference, *Journal*, 1967, 186.

has been discussed. In addition many churches resisted cooperative efforts of any kind, including cooperating with churches in the same charge. In his report to the Commission on Town and Country in March, 18, 1958, Wilson Nesbitt, the Executive Secretary, complained of a lack of "circuit consciousness." He noted that, "Churches are not represented at Quarterly Conference and often refuse to take part in circuit-wide meetings of officials." He listed four reasons for this lack of cooperation: (1) neighborhood pride; (2) fear they will lose identity; (3) low expectations of the church's program and influence; and (4) resistance to outside leadership. Although the Commission continued to encourage Larger Parish or Group Ministries to provide support for programming, many churches, which did not support attempts by the charge preacher to coordinate charge activities, likewise showed no support for the larger groups.

In conclusion, between 1918 and 1968 more than 20% of the Methodist churches in the western North Carolina highlands closed or merged. These churches closed in the context of economic stagnation, population migration to more industrial areas, government action, and technological advances. Yet in many respects, the decline of rural churches was a by-product of Methodist theology, philosophy, and organizational policy. Theologically, Methodist leadership placed more emphasis on the spiritual nurture and growth of existing membership than on spreading the message of salvation to non-members. The denomination, therefore, organized for programs of membership nurture and encouraged cooperation and consolidation of efforts between local churches and centralized agencies and boards. Local churches, however, intent on maintaining their identity, often resisted these cooperative ventures, preferring, if possible, to become free-standing stations. Methodists also desired efficiency in allocation of the funds available for rural churches and often encouraged poorly-performing churches either to close or merge. During the middle of the 20th century, the Western North Carolina Conference Commission on Town and Country Work met many of its goals, and some rural churches prospered with new, modern buildings, financial support, staffing help for the clergy, and access to the wide range of programs available from the conference and the denomination. Yet the combination of a lack of aggressive evangelism, a desire to weed out poor-performing churches, and the refusal of churches to cooperate contributed to the closing of many mountain churches.