

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN WEST VIRGINIA: A CASE STUDY IN CONNECTIONALISM

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In “The Large Minutes,” John Wesley identified “Christian conference” as one of five instituted means of grace. He was not referring to the ecclesiastical organization, but rather to the relationships between believers, to the conversations they have with each other. Towards the end of his life, as he reflected on the formative years of Methodism, he wrote “. . . all that time the term *Conference* meant not so much the conversation we had together, as the persons that conferred”¹ The development of Methodism in the Allegheny Highlands of West Virginia during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era demonstrates this connectional understanding of conference. Missionary activity and denominational expansion during the period highlight the importance of annual conference and the connectional principles it embodied. An examination of the Methodist Episcopal Church in West Virginia demonstrates the effectiveness of the connectional system and reveals how Methodism was well-suited to handle the tumult of industrialization.

Wesley’s descriptions help conceptualize conference as both the structure built by connectionalism and the spirit produced by connectionalism. Elaborating primarily on the structural relationship between conference and connectionalism, Russell Richey states that the term *connectionalism*

designates Methodism’s origins; relationships that existed among preachers and peoples and between them and Mr. Wesley; ordained ministerial status and conference membership; conference structures that governed; whatever the actions or measures or processes that held the movement together, i.e. that connected; the evolving movement as institution or polity; a theology or specifically an ecclesiology, often more implicit than explicit; an organizational classification the consequent presumption that Methodism and Methodists would adhere or connect; and therefore a denominational self-understanding.²

Concerning the spiritual relationship between these two terms, Richey asserts that “Methodism might be seen as a sequence of such Christian conversations—in class, society, quarterly conference, annual conference, and general conference.”³

¹ John Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 322, 333; “Thoughts Upon Some Late Occurrences,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 13, 248.

² Russell E. Richey, “Connection and Connectionalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, eds. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 211, 212.

³ “Connection and Connectionalism,” 226.

This framework of conference and connection in American Methodism is essential when exploring the links between Methodism and the larger American culture. Recognizing the centrality of conference and connection to Methodism is required, in order to comprehend how that denomination viewed and responded to crucial periods of change in the United States. The most obvious example of this is the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church prior to the Civil War in 1844. As C. C. Goen observed when discussing that schism, “The close connectionalism of the Methodist Episcopal Church meant that matters affecting polity and procedure received intense scrutiny, and any significant dispute had to be dealt with—usually in some annual conference, and if not settled satisfactorily there, in General Conference.”⁴

Methodists continued to see conference as the vehicle through which to apply a set of religious principles, to preserve and propagate Methodism. Thus, when confronted with the extreme changes brought about by industrialization and modernization, Methodists in West Virginia continued to rely on the annual conference as a mediator between local congregations/quarterly conferences and general conference and as a mode of ministry to the people in and around the conference boundaries.

This essential feature of Methodist polity is often overlooked by scholars examining the relationship between religion and the social and economic turmoil of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. In her treatment of Methodism in Appalachia, Deborah Vansau McCauley argues that congregations in the mountains leaned toward holiness theology or became independent holiness churches, while churches in valley towns and larger cities maintained stronger links to mainstream Methodism. In his work on Christianity in the eastern Kentucky coalfields, Richard Callahan follows this line of thought, echoing the claim that Methodism was not “indigenous” to the region at all by the time of industrialization. Going further than McCauley, he argues that Methodist churches across eastern Kentucky represented modern religion and society to such an extent that they could not contribute to the emergence of an independent holiness movement.⁵

⁴ C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schism and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1985), 78.

⁵ Deborah V. McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Chicago: U Illinois P, 1995), 241-243; Melvin E. Dieter, “Wesleyan/Holiness Churches,” in *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill Leonard (Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 1999), 228-237; Richard J. Callahan, Jr., *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2009), 60, 61, 134-141. The literature on industrialization in Appalachia is extensive, and much of it deals with religion in some way. Some of the most recent works that focus on this particular mountain region include Don Teter, *Goin’ Up Gandy: A History of the Dry Fork Region of Randolph and Tucker Counties West Virginia* (Parsons, WV: McClain Printing, 2011); Steve Bodkins, *Bemis and Gladys West Virginia: A History of Two Mountain Towns* (Parson, WV: McClain Printing, 2006); Alan R. Clarke, *The West Virginia Central and Pittsburgh Railway: A Western Maryland Predecessor* (Lynchburg, VA: TLC Publishing, 2003); and *West Virginia’s Coal and Coke Railway: A B&O Predecessor* (Lynchburg, VA: TLC Publishing, 2002).

Callahan's findings and conclusions fit well in McCauley's larger argument about modernization and religious purity and primitivist movements. More importantly, underlying these conclusions is an assertion that the Methodist ecclesiastical structure somehow broke down, that the annual conference ceased to serve as an effective ecclesiastical and missional agency, thus allowing other factors and actors to influence theology and polity.

These studies explore just one sub-region of Appalachia, the Cumberlands. This present investigation focuses exclusively on the Alleghenies, and it presents a markedly different picture. During this period, Methodists in these remote highlands, whether in mountain communities, mill towns, or county seats, exhibited little substantial displeasure with mainstream Methodism in general or the episcopacy/connectional system in particular. Reactionary shifting into the independent holiness or Pentecostal camps was by no means a given in industrializing Appalachia. Methodism in four West Virginia mountain counties shows how the connectional system embodied in the annual conference responded to the changes produced by the advent of the railroad between 1880 and 1900.

Studying the Allegheny region of West Virginia is particularly helpful, because the churches in these counties fell under the jurisdiction of different annual conferences during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Methodist Episcopal churches were split between two conferences. The Baltimore Conference encompassed Mineral and Grant Counties. Churches in Tucker and Randolph counties were members of the West Virginia Conference. This division provides a window into the importance of that ecclesiastical unit and the role it played during the period. The episcopal system of the MEC actually enabled the church to weather the storms of industrialization, rather than to be swept away by them.

In 1865, in response to a group of Methodists in Tennessee who desired to unite with that denomination, the MEC formed the Holston Conference. This was just one example of a missionary conference in traditional MECS territory that would serve both whites and blacks.⁶ Because this new conference was located in the Blue Ridge Mountains, it also constituted the beginning of MEC mountain work. However, once the Holston Conference was organized, General Conference left it to function as any other annual conference. Through Reconstruction, the MEC work in the South focused primarily on race relations in the various missionary conferences. With African Americans being comparatively scarce in the up country, these regions remained neglected. That changed in the 1880s, as Northern Protestants in general began to see the need for specific work among mountain whites.

In the case of the MEC, this would in some way replicate the work al-

⁶ William Crawford Barclay, *The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1845-1939, Vol. 3: Widening Horizons, 1845-1895* (New York: The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1957), 303-305. This new Holston Conference mirrored an existing Southern Methodist conference occupying the same territory in eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and southwestern Virginia.

ready being done among former slaves. The church hierarchy came to see Appalachians as a distinct people in need of spiritual and social uplift. Thus, in addition to sending missionaries, the denomination also built schools throughout the mountains. Much of the work was done in coordination with annual conferences and local church and non-sectarian voluntary societies. Women played an important role, especially in the settlement house movement, which began to spread to rural Appalachia in the late nineteenth century.⁷

This early attention on the southern mountains did not include West Virginia, despite the fact that industrialization meant rapid population growth. Annual conferences stepped in to fill the gap, following the General Conference lead in centralizing mission work.⁸ State and local mission movements thrived, often with at best indirect support from the General Conference. Local congregations were expected to contribute to and support missions in their parts of the state, but state bodies ensured that the various districts had ample financial resources.⁹

The Missionary Society of the West Virginia Conference was independent, cooperating with that annual conference but not subject to its authority. Not until later did the annual conference, through the General Mission Committee, take control of the society by appointing its Board of Managers. Missionary gatherings convened in each district beginning in the 1896.¹⁰

Annual conference went a step further, taking its responsibilities seriously and seeing great potential in the rapidly growing mountain counties. The eastern panhandle fell under the jurisdiction of the Baltimore Conference. A proposed rail line connecting some of those counties with the interior counties promised to make communication and fellowship easier, creating a vital link between districts, circuits, and congregations. The mountains would no longer pose the same geographical challenge to connection.

In 1878, anticipating these changes, the West Virginia Conference petitioned the General Conference to re-configure the boundaries of the annual conference to include the entire state of West Virginia, as well as the eastern part of Garrett County, Maryland. In 1880, the Keyser church, located in Mineral County, notified the General Conference of its desire to remain in the Baltimore Conference and requested that national body not to alter the

⁷ "Bishop's Address," *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1884, 7. See also David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1983), 19-34. One of the most well-known examples of a rural settlement house in West Virginia was the Scott's Run Settlement House, established in 1922 by women from Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church in Morgantown, West Virginia.

⁸ Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 145, 146.

⁹ "Committee on Missions," *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1884, 17.

¹⁰ Carl E. Burrows, Robert B. Florian, and David F. Mahoney, *Melting Times: A History of West Virginia United Methodism* (Charleston, WV: Commission on Archives and History, West Virginia Conference, The United Methodist Church, 1984), 135, 136.

boundaries. That annual conference in turn instructed its delegates to the General Conference to oppose any and all efforts at changing boundaries. They asserted “that the interests of the Church in those charges are better secured in connection with the Baltimore Conference, and that removal to the West Virginia Conference would be injurious to the charges and the conference.”¹¹

Baltimore’s response reflects the same commitment to connectionalism, in and through the annual conference, that West Virginia demonstrated in pursuing those particular churches in the first place. Not only did the two annual conferences themselves assert their own importance and power; districts and circuits also understood the crucial role played by intermediary groups. Regardless of the outcome, both annual conferences responded to the changing situation in those specific parts of Maryland and West Virginia, seeing it as their responsibility to act for the improvement of the denomination. This incident reflected a trend of boundary adjustment that had been sweeping the MEC since the end of Civil War. At issue was the effort to balance existing conference boundaries, which had helped to create community and fellowship, with the need to continue the very mission that conference was designed to fulfill. Annual conferences, Russell Richey asserts, “knew themselves as bounded entities, as a brotherhood.” They achieved the kind of relationship Wesley had with his lieutenants, and in so doing spread Methodism throughout their territories.¹² In times of flux, the understanding of “conference” might need to be flexible, in order to ensure the continuation of Methodism and its connectional faith.

The actions of the West Virginia Conference proved prescient. The railroad, named the West Virginia Central and Pittsburg [*sic*] Railway (WVC&P), did exactly what it was expected to do. The resultant growth further aggravated the situation between the two annual conferences. The new tracks began in Mineral County and proceeded southwest through Grant County, both of which fell under the jurisdiction of the Baltimore Conference. The WVC&P then entered the West Virginia Conference, running through Tucker and Randolph counties. Mission work in Tucker County led naturally to efforts in Grant and Mineral counties to the North. The western, mountainous portion Grant County had no real Methodist presence. Methodism had some hold in western Mineral County along the railroad, but most of its strength was in the northern and central parts of the county.¹³

¹¹ “Home Mission Report,” *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1878, 58; “History of First Methodist Church” (Keyser, WV: s.n., n. date), 2. “Protest Against Removal of any Portion of Baltimore Conference Territory,” *Minutes of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: Methodist Episcopal Book Rooms, 1880), 22.

¹² *The Methodist Conference in America*, 138.

¹³ Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: U North Carolina P), 67. See also Alan R. Clarke, *The West Virginia Central and Pittsburgh Railway: A Western Maryland Predecessor* (Lynchburg, VA: TLC Publishing, 2003).

In fact, actions had already been taken to evangelize these counties. In 1882, the Randolph Mission was established to serve parts Randolph and Tucker counties, where railroad construction was headed. A few years later, the Hambleton Mission was created, which consisted of parts of northern Tucker County, southwestern Grant County, and southeastern Garrett County, Maryland—all territory along the WVC&P.¹⁴ Grant County and that portion of Garrett County still lay within the Baltimore Conference bounds. But, as important as conference integrity was, the structure existed as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The true end was evangelization, to expand the work of the existing circuits in both counties, taking advantage of the increases in population that were certain to occur with the coming of the railroad. As Richey recognizes, “Fraternity could and must be sacrificed for Methodism’s mission and advancement.”¹⁵ There was no national body involved in this endeavor. The state organization saw a need created by a changing situation and responded accordingly.

These actions reaped great rewards. By the 1890s, two churches—Bayard and Gormanian—had been established directly along the mainline in Grant County, with a third founded about ten miles east in Mt. Storm. A fourth congregation had been formed in Blaine, just over the Mineral County line.¹⁶ Throughout the second half of the decade, the Bayard congregation held a revival every year. Each lasted at least a month, and included two services every day. The protracted meeting in 1896 yielded ninety-six converts. Two years later, in an event the *Grant County Press* described as “the greatest revival ever held in Bayard, and doubtless in in this county,” 116 people converted, eighty-five of whom joined the church. These meetings appeared to continue well into the twentieth century.¹⁷

The West Virginia Conference included all of those congregations in the Blaine Charge, which also included churches in western Garrett County, Maryland rightfully under its authority. In 1903, the annual conference, again technically acting outside its jurisdiction, put the three Grant County churches on a charge of their own; it also requested that General Conference transfer Mineral and Grant counties into West Virginia Conference jurisdiction. The Baltimore Conference, which counted the churches on its own records, objected, and no further action was taken.¹⁸

But this matter certainly was not dead. Two years later, the West Virginia Conference took up the issue again. It appointed a committee to meet with

¹⁴ “Home Mission Report,” *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1882, 29; Mott, 13-15. The town referred to in the name of the circuit was actually Henry, WV, in Grant County. The current town of Hambleton, in Tucker County, was at the time called Hulings.

¹⁵ *The Methodist Conference in America*, 138.

¹⁶ “Historical Record: Mt. Storm United Methodist Church,” Mt. Storm United Methodist Church, n.d., n.p.; “Gormanian Charge,” Mt. Storm United Methodist Church, n.d., n.p.

¹⁷ “Bayard Letter,” *Grant County Press* (Petersburg, WV), Dec. 4, 1896; “Bayard Letter,” Dec. 17, 1897; “Big Revival,” Dec. 11, 1898; “Bayard,” March 2, 1917.

¹⁸ “Report of Committee on West Virginia Conference,” *Minutes of the Baltimore Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1905, 39.

representatives from the Baltimore Conference. The latter refused a meeting, instructed the Presiding Elder of the Frederick District to take steps to care for the churches under his supervision, and requested that the West Virginia Conference stop appointing pastors to the charges under dispute, something that body had been doing for a decade.¹⁹

A meeting between the two conferences finally occurred in 1906. The West Virginia Conference conceded that it had no ecclesiastical authority over Grant County. However, the Baltimore Conference admitted it had neglected the area. Had it not been for the work of Methodists in West Virginia, there would be no churches over which to quarrel. These congregations preferred to be in connection with the West Virginia Conference. Forcing those churches to remain under the control of the Baltimore Conference would not help ministry work in that area. Thus, the Baltimore Conference agreed formally to transfer three churches in Grant County and two churches in eastern Garrett County to the West Virginia Conference. However, the rest of the eastern panhandle, including the churches in Mineral County that occasioned the original dispute, remained in the Baltimore Conference.²⁰

The West Virginia Conference kept the newly acquired Grant County churches on the Bayard charge by themselves, while the Garrett County congregations remained on the Blaine charge. Additional expansion prompted further division. The annual conference soon formed the Gorman charge, consisting of five Grant County congregations averaging approximately sixty members each during the period.²¹

The West Virginia Annual Conference certainly attended to the areas traditionally within its jurisdiction. The same mission project which evangelized the frontiers of the Baltimore Conference also served the southern sections of the WVC&P. In November, 1886, shortly after the creation of the Hambleton Mission, Rev. S. P. Archer held a revival in that town in Tucker County at which thirty people converted and joined the Methodist church. In January, 1887, he held a revival in nearby Davis which yielded fourteen conversions, with many more joining the church, swelling its ranks to fifty members. Because the town of Davis was at time the southern terminus of the WVC&P, its population grew rapidly, and the church became a station that same year.²² In 1890, the Randolph Mission finally established a viable station church in the new town of Elkins in Randolph County, reflecting its growing importance to the region and the success of the railroad. Between

¹⁹ "Report of Committee on West Virginia Conference," 39; "Concerning Boundary Dispute," *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1905, 72, 73.

²⁰ "Joint Commission on Boundary of Baltimore and West Virginia Conferences," *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1906, 103, 104.

²¹ "Statistical Report," *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1906, n.p.; 1910, 114; 1920, n.p.

²² Pearle G. Mott, *History of Methodism in Davis, West Virginia: 1884-1965* (S.I.: s.n., 1965), 16. By 1895, the church already had 150 members. Membership hovered between 140 and 150 through the Progressive Era ("Oakland District Report," *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1895, n.p.; 1900, 66, 67; 1910, 114; "Elkins District Report," 1920, n.p.).

1895 and 1905, the congregation increased from ninety to 320 members. By 1920, it boasted nearly 1,100 members, making it the largest church in the county and the largest along the West Virginia Central and Pittsburgh mainline.²³

This is just a snap-shot of Methodist growth in the region. By 1920, the MEC had a total of fifteen circuits and thirty-three individual congregations along the railroad in the mountain counties of the Allegheny highlands. That was an increase of thirteen circuits and eighteen individual congregations over the span of about forty-five years.²⁴ This regional success should really come as no surprise. The Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest denomination in the entire state of West Virginia at the time, with the annual conference playing a crucial role in its growth by fulfilling a covenant of missional commitment.²⁵

The work of the West Virginia Conference during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era demonstrates the two-sided understanding of “conference” in the history of American Methodism and the effectiveness of that system. The outworking of and interplay between the structure and spirit of connectionalism through conference is evident in the Mountain State. As the railroad pushed into the mountains, the annual conference responded by establishing missionary organizations to meet the needs of the people in those regions. In turn, those missionary organizations, once established, ensured that the people were engaged in Christian conversation by founding new local churches and strengthening existing ones. Finally, Christian conversation extended back up the denominational hierarchy when these new congregations desired to unite with the West Virginia Conference and solidify the bonds initially forged in conference.

In short, Methodist connectionalism was at once institutional and relational, tangible and conceptual, rational and emotional. The actions and attitudes of the annual conference reveal this type of understanding. The system, if working properly, would form a conduit connecting people with

²³ Hallie Kyle, ed., “Methodist Episcopal Church, 1890-1904,” *Our Church History: Woodford United Methodist Church* (Elkins, WV: Self Published, 1987), n.p.; “Buckhannon District Report,” *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1870, n.p.; 1888, n.p.; 1895, n.p.; 1905, 74; “Elkins District Report,” 1920, 78.

²⁴ “Statistical Report,” *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1875, n.p.; “Statistical Report,” *Minutes of the Baltimore Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle and Son, 1875), 86, 87; “General Statistics,” *Minutes of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Baltimore: William K. Boyle & Son, 1920), 122; “Elkins District Report,” *Official Journal of the West Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1920, 78.

²⁵ “Statistical Report,” *Official Journal of the Western Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1920, n.p.; “Table,” *Minutes of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1920, n.p.; For comparison with other denominational statistics, see *Religious Bodies, 1926, Volume 2, Separate Denominations. Statistics, history, doctrine, organization, and work* (Washington: United States Government Printing Press, 1929); Russell E. Richey, “Introduction,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5.

the message of the gospel and the Methodist identity. During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in West Virginia, the West Virginia Conference embodied these principles, and so produced these results.

Penny Edgell Becker argues that while the connectional system fosters intensely strong bonds within and between local congregations, it also fuels an outward focus on mission work and activism. “Connectionalism implies a strong preference for public over private religion,” she concludes.²⁶ At various levels in the mountains of West Virginia, Methodists exhibited this concern for those inside and outside their own communion. The annual conference, the institutional manifestation of connectionalism, displayed an outward focus by re-enforcing that emphasis in constituent districts and by expanding out into unreached territory, thereby practicing and working out connection. They sought to include those at the margins of their ecclesial boundaries and even those without those boundaries—physically and spiritually. By expanding the physical bounds of conference, Methodists in the mountains of West Virginia expanded the spiritual bounds of conference by including more people in Christian conversation, by encouraging more people to talk about what it meant to a Methodist. This was precisely the purpose Francis Asbury himself had intended for the episcopal system in America.²⁷

This process and the relationships it created, which brought the West Virginia Conference into conflict with the Baltimore Conference, exemplify the ambivalence over denominational machinery that Richey points out is a hallmark of American Methodism.²⁸ The task of the annual conference—that is, overseeing *spiritual development* within its bounds—came into conflict with the authority of the annual conference—of *overseeing* spiritual development within its bounds. The connectional system of the episcopacy produced positive and negative results, and since the machinery itself is missional, it should come as no surprise that such a conflict should result from missionary activity. In fact, the boundary dispute between the West Virginia and Baltimore Conferences was just one in series of similar annual conference disagreements dating to the Reconstruction Era.²⁹

This tension between purpose and process is particularly ironic. At first glance, it would appear that in this situation, in order for conference—both physical and spiritual—to be realized for one group of Methodists, conference for another group of Methodists had to be broken. However, the true dual meaning of conference was never realized between the Baltimore Conference and the counties at the western edge of its jurisdiction. While

²⁶ Penny Edgell Becker, “Understanding Local Mission: Congregational Models and Public Religion in United Methodist Churches,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 268.

²⁷ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005), 101.

²⁸ Russell E. Richey, *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville, TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 172-174.

²⁹ *The Methodist Conference in America*, 135-137.

that annual conference had been given authority over that territory, it never really exercised it. That authority could only be rightfully demonstrated through the practice of Christian conversation, through the extension of Methodist principles and identity. The failure of the Baltimore Conference in general and the Frederick District in particular to care for the people under its charge and to advance the cause of Methodism meant that there was no true connection, no true conference in the ultimate sense. The West Virginia Conference, in taking on this responsibility when the territory was not officially under its jurisdiction, epitomized the Methodist conception of connectionalism—that is, the form and essence of conference in harmony. Truly, form followed function. True conference could not exist without both institutional and spiritual connection.

David Hempton has concluded that Methodism prospers the most in times of change, that it needs energy and mobility, and that it is “not a religious movement that can survive for very long on institutional consolidation alone.”³⁰ This case study shows that assertion to be true. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era witnessed national ecclesiastical organizations, such as the General Conference, take on increasing importance and exert significant effort and money reaching previously ignored or underappreciated groups. The period also saw greater activity at the local level, as people utilized the resources made available by the hierarchy to meet pressing material and spiritual needs. However, the role of the annual conference should not be overlooked. Far from breaking down or retreating, the West Virginia Conference, acting apart from national programs, assumed a leadership role for missions and evangelism in its territory and beyond. It filled voids at the local and national levels, showing that all levels of the Methodist hierarchy had vital functions to perform to ensure that the connectional system worked properly. In a time and place of increasing change, energy, and mobility, the annual conference harnessed those same forces to create a spirit of Christian conference, conversation, and communion in the Allegheny highlands.

³⁰ Hempton, 200.