

## Happenings Around the Church

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## HAPPY 225th ANNIVERSARY, AMERICAN METHODISM (Part 2)

For 225 years, or for as long as the United States has officially been the United States, Methodism has been part of the American religious scene. Organized in America at almost the same time the United States was birthed, Methodism has been a major force in helping to fashion the religious, social and political life of the new nation. Methodist revivalism, with the altar call, the emphasis on the New Birth, and the gospel hymn, defined the American meaning of the word evangelical. Methodism's individualism and creative entrepreneurship, as pointed out by Nathan Hatch in the Democratization of American Christianity, helped to fashion the American understanding of democracy.

Methodism's unique combining of the doctrines of original sin and free grace (not free will) broke down social and class and race divisions. Sin affected all persons, but free grace was available to all without distinction, to rich or poor, male or female, black or whites. Early Methodist campmeetings were among the first public gatherings in which blacks and white met on more or less equal terms. Consequently, by 1820 Methodism could claim 38,509 persons of color as members, or 20% of the total. This took place without benefit of conference resolutions, or monitoring agencies. By 1850 it could be said that America was one of the most Christianized of all the nations of the world, and one-third of all its church members were some form of Methodist.

There is much to celebrate about Methodism. The overwhelming response to the tragedy in Haiti, for example, is showing a better side of Methodism. But there is unease on the ship called Methodism. The once-mighty movement is in danger of becoming, even as Wesley warned, a dead sect. The membership decline is approaching something like 45 straight years. Someone has compared The United Methodist Church with General Motors. Mistakes in the past and a corporate culture incapable of learning from those mistakes have led to a loss of market share and a decline that probably cannot be reversed. The malaise, at least for Methodism, has been a long-time coming. The 225th anniversary is a proper time not only to celebrate the past, but to recall some past mistakes that we might learn from them.

Two areas are worth mentioning.

1. Compromising of doctrine. While revivalism was responsible for most of Methodism's early growth, the revivalists eventually compromised the Methodist cause by stressing experience at the expense of doctrine. But it was theological modernism that cut the heart out of Methodism. Borden Parker Bowne is a hero to liberal establishment Methodism. A professor at Boston from 1876-1910, Bowne became Methodism's best-known theologian (actually he was a philosopher more than a theologian) during the period when theological modernism was being introduced in Methodism. Bowne was a heretic who denied almost every essential doctrine of Methodism. It is telling that his sharpest barbs were directed not toward secularists and unbelievers but toward the church, which he considered ignorant and superstitious. After he was acquitted of heresy charges in 1904, it became impossible for any Methodist to be convicted of heresy, except for persons who believed there was such a thing as heresy. As a consequence Methodism became known as a church that believed nothing or anything. No church has ever been considered significant or relevant that has had no core of beliefs, and that is the situation among United Methodism today. The move among present corporate Methodists to emphasize "inclusiveness" (there are no standards of practice or belief that would bar any person from church membership) is a modern application that perpetuates a past mistake. A major purpose of the Confessing Movement is to advocate for the recovery of historic Wesleyan doctrine in United Methodism.

2. The professionalizing of the church and the loss of the poor. Methodism originally (both in England and in America) attracted the poor and the outcasts of society. It was truly a movement of the underclass. But the poor people, when they were converted and responsible, soon find themselves moving up in the world. Humble meeting houses soon became brick churches with steeples. Church colleges, and then seminaries, sprang up all across the countryside.

With increasing respectability came an increasing professionalizing of the church. Methodism developed its own mediating elite. It has been said that by 1850 1 out of every 10 Americans was enrolled in a Methodist Sunday school. Sunday school attendance outstripped worship attendance. But educational professionals were critical of the often simplistic faith and teaching of the lay-led Sunday school, and so they basically took over the whole educational enterprise. When E. B. Chappell became editor of the M.E. South Sunday school materials in 1911 he worked with one assistant. In the next 8 years he would add 22 professional educators to his staff. By the 1950s and 60s Methodist Sunday schools were forbidden by disciplinary law to use any kind of curriculum, song books, and even audio-visual resources except those prepared by or authorized by the corporate educational professionals (almost exclusively biased against evangelical theology). The resulting stifling of creativity and ownership by laity, as much as anything else, has led to the disastrous disintegration of United Methodist Sunday schools.

The same move toward respectability and professionalism contributed also to the loss of the poor. Methodism abandoned its roots. In England William Booth started the Salvation Army when his efforts to work with the poor were rebuffed by the Methodist establishment. In America Phineas Bresee started the Church of the Nazarene when his efforts to work with the poor were rebuffed by the Methodist establishment. The repudiation of holiness teaching and the holiness movement by the Methodist establishment (in both the north and south church) in the late 19th century led to the loss of Methodist presence in many rural areas and in the inner city. The piling on of educational standards for clergy (few seminary graduates want, or are able, to serve in impoverished areas) further led to Methodism's alienation from the poor in its midst.

What is ironic about this is that Methodism's growing social action awareness was taking place at the same time the church was cutting itself off from the very people it claimed to want to help. The Methodist Federation for Social Action advocated economic socialism and the redistribution of wealth supposedly to help out the poor. Methodism's Social Creed advocated for the poor. Even today mission outreach and agency grants are related to the needs of the poor. But modern-day corporate-driven Methodism's record among the poor is an embarrassment. The symbol of modern United Methodism is the church agency passing resolutions on behalf of the poor while meeting in expensive hotels.

United Methodism presently has several study groups discussing how the church can better structure itself for mission. Can these study groups learn from the mistakes of the past? These will be the topic for upcoming Happenings article.

In an effort to be better stewards, The Confessing Movement is now able to offer the *We Confess* newsletter electronically. While unable to provide it as an email attachment, a link to a .pdf document on [www.confessingumc.org](http://www.confessingumc.org) will be emailed to those who request the email newsletter. If you would prefer to receive the email newsletter, please contact The Confessing Movement at [confessingumc@iquest.net](mailto:confessingumc@iquest.net).

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