



Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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Editorial — The Bridge Generation

I remember Bishop Marston preaching a stirring, thought-provoking sermon in Spring Arbor on Psalm 103:9. "He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger forever." Don't miss the good news there, Bishop Marston said: "God will chide!" A marvelous message on God's patience.

I remember Bishop Fairbairn's humor, Bishop Taylor's oratory, Bishop Ormston's humility.

Marston, teacher and scholar, was elected bishop in 1935, five years before I was born. Bishops M. D. Ormston, C. V. Fairbairn and J. Paul Taylor were elected in 1936, 1939 and 1947, respectively. These were the bishops of my childhood and teen years. I remember them well and fondly. I used to mow Bishop Ormston's lawn. After his death, Minnie, his widow, gave me his set of *Clarke's Commentaries*.

These four remarkable men—Marston, Ormston, Fairbairn, and Taylor—served jointly as bishops for over a decade, and the first three served together for twenty years. Not much wonder that, growing up in the Free Methodist Church, I sensed identity, continuity, integrity and spiritual depth. One could feel it — see it.

The point here is not nostalgia, however, but something more urgent: *we are the bridge generation*. Those of us born around the time of L. R. Marston's election as bishop and who are still around and more or less in

our right minds — we are the bridge generation, the mediating generation. We are the last generation that remembers not only these great bishops, but *what Free Methodism was like* before the '60s. Our children don't. And certainly neither do our grandchildren and the generations to come after them.

Granted, there is much of

pre-1960s Free Methodism that is better forgotten and not dug up. But there is also much that must be recalled, recorded, documented and appropriated for the church's spiritual vitality today. Free Methodists knew something about being a counterculture.

The purpose of the Free Methodist Historical Society is not just antiquarian or academic. It is spiritual in the best sense. This editorial comment comes as a reminder to "the bridge generation" of our key role and responsibility as living carriers of a fast-fading memory. God help us be good stewards of a unique legacy that Free Methodists in 2003 — or in 2053, for that matter — still need, and through which they can still be blessed.

—Howard A. Snyder



1948. Bishops Fairbairn, Taylor, Marston and Ormston

B. T. Roberts Writes: "A Great Want"

The great want of the times is men and women in every neighborhood who, in everyday life, year in and year out, manifest before the world, practical holiness. They need not be rich or learned. They may have simply ordinary common sense, and may occupy a humble position in life. They should be strictly conscientious in all business matters — ... never failing to pay as promised; never selling an inferior article for a good one. Such persons are needed to keep alive in the minds of

the people, the true idea of what it is to be a Christian. They are needed to comfort the afflicted and relieve the distressed. They are needed as friends to be consulted by those in trouble. They are needed to keep before the world examples of holy living. They are needed to point out the way to those who are really in earnest to go to heaven.

—B. T. Roberts, Editorial, *The Earnest Christian* (Dec. 1883), 190.

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John Wesley

Amazingly M

Wesley's Sermon, "The

As a young man, John Wesley had a missionary experience in the New World from January 1736 to December 1737. Analyzing this period in Wesley's life in the journal *Missiology*, W. Harrison Daniel notes Wesley's unusual sensitivity to the native Americans and his desire to minister the Gospel to them.

Wesley was largely frustrated in this early missionary endeavor. Governor Oglethorpe wanted to confine his energies to the colonists and their spiritual needs—that is, to his "parish." (Daniel suspects that this rueful experience may have later given birth to Wesley's defiant statement, "The world is my parish.") In spite of these imposed boundaries on his activities, however, Wesley had some key contacts with leaders of the surrounding Indian tribes.

While Wesley's notions of the native Americans were rather romantic and naive, Daniel notes, "Wesley was already articulating an intentional missionary theology and plan of action very early in his ministry—at a time well before the worldwide Protestant missionary movement had begun in earnest." Daniel argues, "This demonstrates how foundational mission thought and action were for Wesley and the Methodist movement."

The principal focus of Wesley's sermon "The General Spread of the Gospel" bears out Daniel's conclusion. This important sermon was written in Dublin in 1783 when Wesley was 80 years old, over 46 years after his return to England from America.

By this time the Methodist movement is established across the British Isles with close to 70,000 adherents in Britain and a similar number in America. The movement is growing and spreading rapidly. So Wesley, with considerable satisfaction, leans back, takes the long view, and writes this remarkable sermon. His text is: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

Wesley begins with a survey of the global conditions of the Christian movement. (Remember, this is almost 220 years ago, long before the birth of the social sciences.) Here

is his bleak analysis: "... supposing the world to be divided into thirty parts, nineteen of them are professed Heathens, altogether as ignorant of Christ as if he had never come into the world. Six of the remaining parts are professed Mahometans: so that only five in thirty are so much as nominally Christians!"

Wesley then transitions to the promises of God: "And what can give ease to a thoughtful mind under so melancholy a prospect? What but the consideration, that things will not always be so; that another scene will soon be opened. God will be jealous of his honour: He will arise and maintain his own cause. ... The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth; shall fill every soul of man."

Wesley then reviews the impressive march of the Methodist movement, from a few young men at Oxford with a few grand convictions about justification by faith alone, holiness without which no one will see the Lord, and the empowering grace for all of this which comes from God in Christ. He says of these men: "These great truths they declared on all occasions, in private and in public; having no design but to promote the glory of God, and no desire but to save souls from death." Wesley describes these men as "born again of the Spirit, and filled with righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." As a result, the movement "afterwards spread to every part of the land, and a little one became a thousand. It then spread into north Britain and Ireland; and a few years after into New York, Pennsylvania, and many other provinces in America, even as high as Newfoundland and Nova-Scotia. So that, although at first this 'grain of mustard seed' was 'the least of all seeds,' yet, in a few years it grew into a 'large tree, and put forth great branches.'"

Wesley explains that the movement did not take place in a corner but in centers such as London, Bristol, and Newcastle—all places where mighty movements of the Spirit were witnessed. Then, he says, after the ex-

citement gradually subsided, from there on the work of God was carried on by "gentle degrees; while that Spirit in watering the seed that had been sown, in confirming and strengthening them that believed,

*deign'd his influence to infuse,
Secret, refreshing as the silent dews."*

Wesley asks, "Is it not then highly probable, that God will carry on his work in the same manner as he has begun?" He expects that the movement will escape the short life of an emotional revival but will "silently increase, wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another." He adds, "May we not suppose that the same leaven of pure and undefiled religion, of experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness, will afterwards spread to the Roman Catholics in Great Britain, Ireland, Holland; in Germany, France, Switzerland; and in all other countries where Romanists and Protestants live intermixed and familiarly converse with each other? ... And may it not be gradually diffused from thence to all that name the name of Christ, in the various provinces of Turkey, in Abyssinia, yet, and in the remotest parts, not only of Europe, but of Asia, Africa and America?"

Wesley continues,

"And then the Saviour of sinners will say, 'The hour is come: I will glorify my Father: I will seek and save the sheep that were wandering on the dark mountains.' ... All the prophets of lies shall vanish away, and all the nations that followed them shall acknowledge the great Prophet of the Lord, 'mighty in word and deed'; and 'shall honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.'

And then, the great stumbling block being removed from the heathen nations also, the same Spirit will be poured out upon them; even those that remain in the uttermost parts of the sea."

Wesley sees the witness carried by colonies of Christians wherever they are in the world. In other places, "The God of love will

Wesley's Modern Missional Vision - General Spread of the Gospel"

by Gerald E. Bates



then prepare his messengers, and make a way into the polar regions; into the deepest recesses of America, and into the interior parts of Africa; yea, into the heart of China and Japan, with the countries adjoining them."

The practical Wesley asks about the means to cover so many distant nations with messengers. And then he answers his question: "Yea, but is not God able to send them? Cannot he raise them up, as it were, out of the stones? And can he ever want means of sending them?" In varieties of ways, God will send his messengers.

Finishing his triumphal symphony Wesley proclaims:

"All unprejudiced persons may see with their eyes, that He is renewing the face of the earth: And we have strong reason to hope that the work he hath begun, he will carry on unto the day of the Lord Jesus; that he will never intermit this blessed work of his Spirit, until he has fulfilled all his promises; until he hath put a period to sin and misery, and infirmity, and death; and re-established universal holiness and happiness and caused all the inhabitants of the earth to sing together, 'Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!' 'Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever!'" (Rev. 7:12).

Some reflections: Why is this sermon so meaningful for us in the Methodist tradition?

1. It is a wondrous artifact of our Methodist roots; a model of gospel optimism and triumph.

2. In view of its period and the age of the author at the time, it represents an amazing outburst of energy and global vision.

3. It anticipates by nearly 200 years the social researchers and their application of this kind of research and analysis to the worldwide enterprise of the gospel.

4. It advances a strong theological statement on the efficacy of the Holy Spirit's therapeutic work in individuals, society, and creation, leading up to the culmination of the return of Christ, and this in the face of the

pessimistic eschatology of his day (and ours).

5. Speaking for myself, I nearly burst with pride at this happy proclamation of enormous faith by our ancestral founder of the Methodist movement. After reading this sermon I feel I know Wesley better.

6. The question for us: Can we measure up?

Bishop Emeritus Gerald E. Bates served with his wife Marlene and family as Free Methodist missionaries in Central Africa. A member of the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives and director of the Center for the Study of Wesley and Society, Bishop Bates is also active in developing Hope Africa University as a Free Methodist ministry centered in Nairobi, Kenya.

Sources:

- W. Harrison Daniel, "The Young John Wesley as Cross-Cultural Witness: Investigations into Wesley's American Mission Experience and Implications for Today's Mission," *Missiology*, Vol. 28:4 (October 2000), 443-457.
- Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, 1994.
- *The Works of John Wesley*, Sermon 63.

Yea, but is not God able to send them? Cannot he raise them up, as it were, out of the stones? And can he ever want means of sending them?

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- EXTRA COPIES of the Newsletter are available free of charge upon request (up to ten copies to one address). If you wish to hand out the current or back issues to friends or family, you can make your request by email at History@fmca.org.
- THE HISTORICAL CENTER has recently received archival material to add to the Kentucky-Tennessee, Central Illinois, and Wabash Conference collections. Also, several FM authors

are contributing copies of their own recent publications to our collection.

- CONFERENCE HISTORIANS: Are you going to General Conference in Seattle? If so, please contact the Historical Center so we can plan to meet with you.
- IN COMING ISSUES: "50 Years of *The Earnest Christian*" and "The Vision of John Wesley Redfield."

Book Review

Free Methodist and Other Missions in Zimbabwe, by Tillman A. Houser (Harare: Priority Projects Publishing, 2000, 136 pages). ISBN: 0-7974-2067-3.

This volume is a detailed history of the development of the Free Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. The FM mission work in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) began in 1939, eleven years after an invitation was issued by Paramount Chief Sengwe of the Hlengwe people. Immigrant workers had told him of the Free Methodist work in Mozambique. He wanted schools, medical clinics and churches in his area. It is clear that part of the motivation was economic; another reason may have been a concern to stave off white European encroachment on his lands. Indeed, the lands were taken from the Hlengwe and they were relegated to unproductive areas to serve as cheap labor for the ranchers who received their tribal lands as grants from the British colonial government.

Free Methodist missionaries Ralph and Ethel Jacobs led the way. Others followed: Eldon and Florence Sayre, Ruth Smith, Virginia Strait, Ruth Morris, Paul and Esther Embree, and Phillip and Carmena Capp. Tillman Houser and his wife were part of this hardy corps, going to Southern Rhodesia in 1948. Byron S. Lamson wrote in *Venture! The Frontiers of Free Methodism*, "Rev. and Mrs. Tillman Houser visited their widely separated outstations in wild Southern Rhodesia, sleeping at night in the box of their pickup truck" (p. 188).

The Free Methodists established schools and clinics on land assigned by the government. Statistics for 1959, given on page 123 of Houser's book, show the Free Methodists holding their own in comparison with other Western missions. The FM mission reported 39 churches with 1,374 attending Sunday schools and another 10,000 having been served in the medical clinics.

The high point of Free Methodist "full membership" (about 1,800) was reached from 1967-1968 at the beginning of the fight for freedom. With minimal trained African leadership (and violence all

about), the Free Methodist Church declined to around 1,000 members by about 1970 (see graph, p. xv). Since then membership has fluctuated wildly. Demographer David B. Barrett and colleagues in the *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions In the Modern World* (2nd ed.; Oxford University Press, 2001) attempted to estimate the growth in "affiliation" (including children, teenagers and adult non-member attendees) to the Free Methodist Church. Barrett suggested the change between 1975 and 1995 to be from about 6,000 to about 8,250, a growth

rate considerably less than many churches in Zimbabwe experienced during the same period.

Tillman Houser's fine volume is an important contribution to Free Methodist mission history and the history of Zimbabwe. It is a gift to the Zimbabwean Free Methodist Church as it seeks to find its way in the post-colonial period. The book will long be a standard work in the field of African Christian studies.

— David Bundy, Fuller Theological Seminary,
Pasadena, California



Gwen and Tillman Houser (circa 1966) in front of the camper they used for four-day treks into the rural areas of Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia).

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