

## **The Place of the Historical Society in the United Methodist Church and its Predecessors**

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at Market Street UM Church, Williamsport PA

Paragraph 738 of the 1988 Discipline of the United Methodist Church, on page 406, section 1 reads: "In each Annual Conference there shall be a conference Commission on Archives and History." And section 2 reads: "The Commission may organize a conference Historical Society and encourage individuals to become members of it for the purpose of promoting interest in the study and preservation of the history of the conference and its antecedents." The same provision is given to the General Commission on Archives and History to form a denominational Historical Society (Paragraph 1810, page 634).

The implication of this is that the commission shall be the responsible unit within the annual or general conference for the collecting, organizing, preserving, and researching of the records of the conference. The budget for the same will be maintained by the annual conference.

Permission is given for forming an Historical Society which might encourage the promotion of the history of the conference through a dues-paying membership. Publications, tours, special events, meetings of the membership, etc. are possible if the society has the strength, initiative, and finances to do the same. Care is taken that these two units, the Commission and the Society, are not in conflict with each other. Thus the historical society may become an important adjunct to the commission in helping it promote its responsibilities of collecting, organizing, preserving, and researching. You and I are fully aware of the current development within the Central Pennsylvania Conference between the Commission and its stepchild, the Historical Society. In most of the conferences of our denomination these two historical units have developed similarly. The differences are chiefly in the enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm within each of these units.

In the Baltimore and Eastern Pennsylvania (formerly Philadelphia) Conferences, the situation has been reversed. In each of those instances, the Historical Society had become a strong group prior to the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968. Those conferences, therefore, were very desirous that the Discipline would permit the commissions to operate without undermining their historical societies. This was provided, but to many outside their conferences it appears that the Historical Society is the stronger unit.

Within our Central Pennsylvania Conference there are positive results that can be realized if the Commission and the Society have cooperating leadership. The Historical Society can do some things that are not possible for the Commission. It can raise funds independent of the annual conference leadership. It does not have to spend all of its funds in any given year. It can engage in programs and activities that are independent of the conference Council on Finance and Administration. These may be: publications, tours, sale of artifacts and published material, meetings, etc. The Commission must be fully responsible to the annual conference and its Council on Finance and Administration for its budget, collecting, organizing, and preservation duties.

Thus, as a working combination, the Commission and the Society can do a very positive job of raising the historical consciousness of the annual conference. This is what those persons who planned the historical section of the Discipline had in mind when they prepared it prior to 1968. Now let us take a look at the place of the Historical Society prior to 1968 in the several denominations.

### **The Methodist Church**

The official historical agency of the Methodist Church had its beginning in May 1923, when a few interested persons met in Baltimore MD to discuss the future of historical matters within Methodism. Since there was no denominational authorization, and recognizing that they were representatives from several Methodist denominations, they planned the formation of an Association of Methodist Historical Societies. Initially, city and annual conference historical societies of the several branches of American Methodism were invited to become members.

In December 1925, the first annual meeting of this organization was convened in Philadelphia. The purpose of the organization was to cooperate in the preservation and dissemination of information and in the display and presentation of Methodist historical material. Affiliated societies joined by paying dues of \$10.00. The 1936 General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Protestant Churches gave official recognition of the Association, and the 1938 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church South later added its official approval. There were no funds voted for the Association at any of these sessions.

In 1940, the first General Conference of the Methodist Church officially recognized the Association and authorized the formation of historical societies within the annual conferences and the jurisdictions. When Elmer T. Clark was elected Executive Secretary of the Association in 1944, he brought vigorous leadership. Among the many qualities of Dr. Clark was his exceptional ability to raise funds. By 1948 he indicated to the General Conference that there were 3 jurisdictional and 75 annual conference societies – although some of these existed not much more than in name only – and the General Conference approved an

annual appropriation of \$6000 for the Association. Succeeding General Conferences regularly increased the annual appropriations.

Prior to the development of the Association, a number of strong depositories had been established – mostly on campuses of colleges, universities and seminaries. Among the seminaries, this occurred at Perkins (Dallas), Candler (Atlanta), Boston, Duke and Drew. Such colleges and universities included Ohio Wesleyan, Adrian, Western Maryland and DePauw. Other locations were established by the Baltimore Conference, the Philadelphia Conference, and the Methodist Publishing House. Because these collections had become quite voluminous and unique in their scope, the Association made no effort to compete by creating its own extensive depository. It did, however, gather a goodly number of materials – largely in the personal collection of Dr. Clark. The significant contribution of the Association to the denomination was to correlate what had been done by these respective depositories.

In 1948 the Association initiated the *World Parish*, a publication to disseminate information among Methodist scholars and the respective depositories. Since much of that which Elmer Clark did also arose from his leadership as Executive Secretary of the World Methodist Council, there was some division of these efforts at the time of his retirement. The World Methodist Council took over the continued publication of *World Parish*, while the Association managed the library of books. In 1962 the Association initiated the publication of *Methodist History*, an historical quarterly that has continued to the present.

The Association also has produced some fine publications to coordinate the body of available historical material. Most of these were in cooperation with other agencies, each helping to finance the project – such as the three-volume set of *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*. *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (2 volumes) was produced jointly with The Methodist Publishing House and completed by the Commission of Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. The Wesley Works Editorial Project, originally conceived by scholars from the four seminaries on university campuses and supported by the Association, has recently been joined by The United Methodist Publishing House and is moving forward magnificently. A Union Card Catalog was conceived in cooperation with the Methodist Librarians' Fellowship and was put into print after 1968. Currently we are engaged in a Union Card File of ministers of the denomination, which was initiated by the Association and the Methodist Publishing House Library.

During the years a commendable library, which included the John Wesley busts and other outstanding memorabilia, was developed in conjunction with the World Methodist Council – but this library never attained the size and scope of most of the above depositories. Through printed and non-published catalogs, the Association assisted scholars by guiding them to the proper location.

Another major responsibility assigned to the Association and financed largely by General Conference was the Bicentennial of American Methodism in

Baltimore in 1966. The Association was truly the voice of history within the Methodist Church.

### **The Evangelical United Brethren Church**

Within the Evangelical United Brethren Church there were some parallel developments, and yet there were significant differences.

The earliest effort within the United Brethren Church occurred in 1885, when an Historical Society was formed at Dayton OH. Paid memberships were solicited, and the Printing Establishment of the denomination provided space for a depository. Later the society moved its modest collection and offices to the seminary in the same city. There were limited efforts, largely on the part of individuals, to gather a depository. While there was no denominational funding, the society did manage to produce several authorized histories over the next fifty years.

Among the Evangelicals, the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church took the leadership in organizing historical efforts. In 1909, a membership society was formed. With the re-union in 1922, this conference society became the parent Historical Society of the Evangelical Church. Its depository was located at the Evangelical School of Theology in Reading PA. The General Conference of 1934 recommended that the Albright Chapel of Klintfeltersville and its adjacent cemetery become the property of the denominational society. Its ownership had originally been invested in the East Pennsylvania Conference, but a transfer was effected in 1939.

When the Evangelical United Brethren Church was formed in 1946, the Historical Society was authorized by the General Conference and became the legal successor of the two former societies. It continued to supervise depositories at two locations until 1954, when the collections were merged and located in the library of United Theological Seminary in Dayton. By this time the merged depository had become the most complete collection of printed records in the denomination. A concerted effort was made to encourage depositing in this central location.

In 1965, the Board of Publication offered space in its new Center in Dayton, an area of which was especially designed for historical preservation and display. At the same time, the Board authorized the Historical Society to become the custodian of the two publishing house libraries – which were eventually moved into the Center, with ownership of the material placed in the Historical Society.

About this time, and in anticipation of the union with the Methodists, the Historical Society had a strong archival policy written into the EUB Discipline. This was to insure that during the union of respective boards and agencies, the staffs would not arbitrarily destroy records rather than transfer them. Thus when the union took place in 1968, the new Commission on Archives and History had primary access to these records through both the EUB Discipline and the

Discipline of the new United Methodist Church. There was no effort to take away an agency's authority, but it was meant to protect records from the indiscriminant destruction by staff. Some loss did take place, but most of the agencies were cooperative.

### **The United Methodist Church**

When the committee of Methodist and EUB persons representing both the Association and the Historical Society sat together, they determined to preserve the values of each former historical body. From the EUB perspective archival strength was written into the new Discipline, and from the Methodist practice promotional aspects were preserved. The church and historical research have benefited.

Soon after the union in 1968, the Commission on Archives and History began to study where it might be best to locate a central depository. A representative committee was formed to draw up guidelines to be followed, and a number of interested schools and communities extended invitations. Most of these were soon eliminated, and after a long process the offer of Drew University was measured against the guidelines and approved. Both the General Council on Finance and Administration and the General Conference agreed, so that in 1982 the offices and depository of the Commission were moved to Madison NJ – many of you have probably visited the place. The Commission is now in a functionally well-equipped building, fire and climate safe, erected at a cost of \$3,000,000 to house the records of the denomination.

Drew University was quite pleased with the safety features and authorized the transfer of their vast holdings of Methodist materials to the Commission depository. Drew University retains ownership of their materials, and they also provide adequate staff to help in servicing these library holdings. The combined libraries number more than 100,000 volumes of printed records, and there are several million archival pieces in the collections.

Since being on the Drew campus, the Commission has entertained the Council of Bishops and the Council of General Secretaries. In this way they were able to demonstrate that through adequate facilities and good archival techniques they can protect and service the records of the bishops and the agencies in an acceptable manner. The results have been excellent – more and more retiring bishops have placed their papers at Madison, and more and more agency records are being received. Today the Commission building houses the largest historical collection of Methodist-related materials in the world, and scholars come from around the globe.

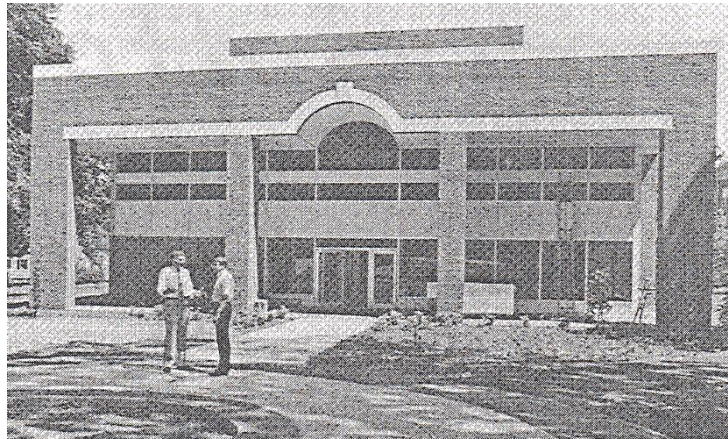
Early in the life of the EUB Historical Society, the Discipline of that denomination permitted holding a quadrennial gathering of historians and other designated persons from each annual conference. The first Historical Convocation was convened at Reading PA in the mid-1950's. Each quadrennium thereafter, historical representatives were sent to the quadrennial Historical

Convocation. Today this quadrennial gathering has disciplinary approval and is under the responsibility of the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church. The Commission has become the sponsoring agency for this society, which even in its infancy has prospects of becoming an excellent adjunct to the General Commission.

In summary, a few remarks should be made. Although the EUB denomination had its general Historical Society and each annual conference had a similar one, these were not dues-paying societies. Membership came by election at the annual or general conference levels. Today we would truly call them "commissions." Within the Methodist Church, many of their historical societies were also non-dues units – but there were some true societies, such as those in the Baltimore and Philadelphia Conferences. The concern registered by those who prepared the section in the 1968 Discipline for historical matters was to prevent a membership-based society from being the depository for housing annual conference records, thus depriving the conference access or full ownership of those records. This did not happen, but the possibilities were there.

While a commission of a designated number of members elected by conference has a limited participation in historical matters, the historical society provision allows for much wider participation and can encourage greater interest. Today the United Methodist Church has seen fit to profit by having both commissions and societies as its historical units.

Time has not permitted us to go into greater detail in this paper. Later studies are needed to provide a more definitive exploration into the past, and to study the roots that have brought us to where we are today.



John Ness and his successor, Charles Yrigoyen, discussing the upcoming October 1982 opening of the new Archives Center.