

Tales from the Archives

Because of its historic connection with Methodism, Dickinson College has periodically served as a depository for items associated with the Conference and the denomination. Several years ago an effort was made to identify all such materials and transfer them to the conference archives at Lycoming College. But every so often Dickinson College discovers additional items that rightfully belong to the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

Such was the case last summer when an inventory of the vaults in the Dickinson College archives turned up two boxes of original transcripts of Methodist Episcopal church trials. One box covers the entire existence of the East Baltimore Conference (direct predecessor of the Central Pennsylvania Conference) from 1858 to 1868. The second box covers the first three quadrennia of the Central Pennsylvania Conference from 1868 to 1880. Exactly when and under what circumstances the material was deposited at Dickinson College remains a mystery, but its discovery has shed new light on those years of Central Pennsylvania Methodism.

One particular benefit the discovery brings to the archives is the ability to document exactly why certain pastors withdrew from or were dismissed from the ministry during those years. Most of the "scandals" involve doctrinal (e.g., preaching that there is not a literal hell) or practical (e.g., purchasing a load of hay on the Sabbath) or administrative (e.g., removing a church member from the rolls) issues.

While about half of the trials resulted in pastors being excluded from the ministry, it is clear that very few of the charges would be entertained, let alone sustained, in the Church of today. The material has not yet been fully evaluated, but it appears on the surface that it may be suitable for the basis of a graduate thesis and/or several articles in future issues of *THE CHRONICLE*.

In the meantime, *THE CHRONICLE* is pleased to present articles based on two of those trials. The articles include actual transcripts and exhibits from the church trials – material which at the time was considered confidential information not intended for public release. It has been judged, however, that the passing of 150 years and the nature of these particular trials allow for the inclusion of this material in this volume.

"The Call of God?" deals with the struggles of Rev. Levin R.B. Rhodes (1840-1928) to fulfill what he believed to be calling into the ordained ministry. "The Promise of Man?" deals with the struggles of Rev. John T. Cole (dates unknown) to balance his personal emotional needs with the rigors of circuit-riding and separation from his family and friends. Both are stories of persons who, for one reason or another, were not outwardly successful as ordained ministers in Central Pennsylvania.