

Growth of the Central Pennsylvania Conference During the Fifty Years of Its History

by Milton K. Foster, 1918

[*editors' note:* Milton Kirk Foster (1828-1938), a distinguished senior member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference was asked to prepare this presentation for the "Golden Jubilee." He entered the East Baltimore Conference on trial in 1858, the year of its creation, and was a charter member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference at its formation in 1868. He served a total of 54 years, including 15 years in three different appointments as district superintendent, before retiring in 1912.]

The Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church began its career under favorable circumstances. Its territory, as yet, in some parts of its bounds was largely undeveloped. Rich in natural resources, it waited only the skillful manipulation of wisely directed labor to produce abundant rewards. The Civil War, but recently happily concluded, gave impetus to industries of almost every description. That portion of the State of Pennsylvania embraced within our Conference boundaries greatly encouraged the putting forth of effort to win material success in life.

Methodism having early obtained a footing among us, in harmony with the nature of her faith, was disposed to be aggressive and progressive – taking advantage of the opportunities, purposing that the Church should at least keep pace with the growth of the county. Doubtless as we review the half century of our life as a Conference, we will have occasion for sadness as we contemplate the possibilities unrealized. But at any rate, if we have not accomplished all we might have done, some success has gladdened our hearts as we have labored together with God in the cultivation of Immanuel's land.

In 1869, when in the town of Danville our Conference held its first session, with Bishop Scott presiding, we numbered 182 – 157 members and 25 probationers. Of those, 28 were not in the effective relation. Of those answering to their names on Monday morning, March 10, 1868, the following members are yet living: John W. Buckley, Milton K. Foster, Richard H. Colburn, John B. Mann, John S. Polsgrove, William A. Houck, George Leidy, Hiles C. Pardoe, Walter R. Whitney, Silas C. Swallow, William B. Norcross, and Richard Mallalieu. And of the probationers: Alfred S. Bowman, William R. Reese, Levi G. Heck, William A. Robbins, Louis A. Rudisill and Ezra H. Yocum. Meanwhile, of the preachers in the Conference fifty years ago and of those who have united with us since, 228 have died.

Notwithstanding this depletion of our ranks, persistently going on, we number today 269 full members and 23 probationers, making a total of 292. But

of these it must be said that 81 are not in the effective relation. In 1869 we reported 28,414 members and 4,828 probationers. We now have, as reported in the 1918 Minutes, 88,039 members and 3,289 probationers, making a total of 91,308. And in the interval, more than 32,000 of those who worshiped with us have responded to the call to “come up higher.” We count it no small achievement that we have so many preachers and such a host of communicants who have gone up and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Fifty years ago we had 124 circuits and stations; now we have 259 charges. We began with 324 church buildings valued at \$880,900 and 65 parsonages valued at \$131,800; now we have 638 places of worship valued at \$4,968,777 and 239 parsonages valued at \$797,275.

For pastoral support in 1869, our preachers were allowed \$107,953 – and of this, \$3,900 was not paid. John A. Gere, for example, was allowed \$100 a year for his services as a junior pastor but received only \$80. He wrote in his account to the Conference opposite the \$20 deficiency: “to be paid at the judgment, if faithful.” Last year’s Minutes report total salary claims of \$321,901 – of which \$320,093 was paid. It is but fair, however, to say that the claims of \$321,901 included \$48,019 toward the rental of parsonages – an item not included in the Minutes of 1869. In 1869, the four presiding elders were allowed \$5,800, and of this they received \$5,370. Fifty years later the five district superintendents were allowed \$17,742, and of this \$17,673 was paid. The claim of the Episcopal Fund in 1869 was nothing, and now it is \$5,204.

Or Missionary collection fifty years ago amounted to \$14,943. Our last Minutes show that we paid \$43,754 to the Foreign Board, \$35,703 to Home Missions and \$21,796 through our two women’s missionary societies. In 1868 our Church Extension Society collections amounted to \$1,051. Since then we have raised for this Society, up to the time it was merged with Home Missions, \$108,488 – perhaps not nearly as much as we ought to have done to help needy churches to establish themselves in localities where in the years to come they in turn can help needy places.

No collections for education are reported in our first minutes, but in 1873 \$53 was paid to this cause. Since then, collections have been taken regularly. The inauguration of Children’s Day, first regularly reported in the Minutes of 1893, gave a great impulse to the cause of Christian education. The Children’s Fund has been of great help to the church in giving aid to needy young folks to obtain a liberal education. Without this help it would have been impossible, in many instances, for them to have obtained it – but having been obtained, it has been to these and to the Church and to the world a great blessing.

And the wonderful movement throughout the church generally in raising money to enlarge the capability of our educational institutions to do more than ever before in providing higher education for those of limited means has been shared by our Conference. It is a matter of great gratification that the plan to raise a fund of \$450,000 as an invested fund, that to many of the faint hearted among us seemed a task impossible of accomplishment, was so enthusiastically prosecuted that at its conclusion the subscription was safely secured.

In 1869 the amount contributed toward the support of the superannuated¹ preachers and the widows and orphans of our deceased brethren was \$3,224. Of this: \$326 was paid to effective preachers who had been deficient in their allowance, \$744 was paid to supernumerary preachers, \$1149 to superannuated men, and \$1005 to widows and orphans. That year the Preacher's Aid Society appropriated \$1300 to the necessitous cases. Altogether, \$4524 was available to make comfortable those no longer in circumstances enabling them to command a comfortable living.

In the meantime, the church generally wakened to the claim these disable workers have for consideration, and in recent years especially has put forth effort to remedy a condition that has called long and hard for betterment. In two directions relief is promised. The annual collections for immediate distribution have been largely increased by the churches. Last year the churches of our Conference gave in round numbers \$16,000, the Book Concern \$3821, other sources \$480, and the Preacher's Aid Society appropriated \$2800 – making altogether \$23,000 at the disposal of the stewards. Besides this, the income from the Conference Annuity Fund for its current year added another \$8000 – making altogether over \$30,000 to be divided among the claimants, and making a much larger contribution to each individual than was possible in 1869.

The church is now putting forth efforts to provide invested productive funds, the annual income from which will add largely to its ability to provide generously for the pensioners upon its funds. Our Conference from the small beginnings of fifty years ago has made creditable progress toward accumulating a fund, the income from which will in time guarantee a modest support to all those having a legitimate claim upon its funds. Last year 33 percent of the claims were paid, and it is hoped that each succeeding year the distributions will be larger until par is reached. Doubtless it will take considerable time before the organization fully meets the hopes of its friends, but its future is full of promise – and the preachers now entering our ministry may look forward to the close of their active work confident that their declining years will be comfortably provided for.

¹ In the early records, superannuated meant retired, supernumerary meant on leave for reasons of health or disability, and effective meant active in the itinerancy.

During the last fifty years, organizations in the church and Sunday School have greatly multiplied. And, generally speaking, these innovations have been in the direction of improvement – but only time will tell what things will bear the test of use, and what will serve their brief day and give place to more serviceable and enduring methods. It is well for the Christian religion to prove all things and to hold on to only the things that are good.

The Gospel of fifty years ago is still, however, the Gospel of today. As to quality, there can be no improvement upon the glad tidings the fathers preached. The ministers of the future will be better educated, and they ought to be. The opportunity for heroic work and sacrifice will not be wanting. There will be, as in the past, imperative demand for the best expenditure of physical and mental and spiritual forces. And they who gladly consent to spend and be spent will be abundantly rewarded – if not here and now, then certainly in the great hereafter.

There will always be abundant opportunity both for preacher and for people to exercise themselves unto godliness, and no service faithfully rendered will miss its reward. But will you younger brethren allow us to urge you to do your best – not to win the applause of men, but to secure the smile of God. As already said, there can be no improvement in the quality of the religion we profess and preach over that which the fathers preached – but if we will, we can have more abundant supplies of divine grace. And “if any lack wisdom, let him ask of Him that giveth liberally and upbraideth not.”

Oh that we might – all of us, preachers and people – be so imbued with the power of the Holy Ghost, that the world would be compelled to take knowledge of us that we “have been with Jesus and learned of Him” that, beginning with this Conference and stretching out through the next fifty years, there might be a continuous revival throughout our bounds – that when the Centennial is celebrated in 1968 it might be a jubilee as would make glad the hearts of those celebrating it on earth and fill heaven with a joy unspeakable and full of glory.