

Joseph Sproule

While “passing the torch” from one pastor to another is generally a rather smooth non-event in United Methodism, such was not the case in the spring of 1929 when Joseph Sproule refused to vacate the pulpit of the Malvern church in the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

This particular incident is relevant to the Susquehanna Conference because Joseph Sproule later supplied the Lanesboro appointment in the former Wyoming Conference from 1956 to 1961, and his obituary appears in the 1969 journal of the Wyoming Conference. What is unusual about the Joseph Sproule case is the lack of any identification in the journal at the time of his service as a supply pastor (e.g., “a retired Baptist minister” or “a student at Drew University”) and the rather glowing but strangely unspecific nature of his conference obituary – which is as follows.

JOSEPH SPROULE was born May 28, 1896, in County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland, son of William and Matilda Sproule. He started in the ministry in 1924 at Collingdale, Pa., his preparation including graduation from Eastern University and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Among other churches that he served were Malvern Methodist Church, Dallas Methodist Church, and Lanesboro Methodist Church, where he retired in 1958. Since his retirement he served as supply pastor in various churches, and during his ministry he served as pastor of several other churches which were not under the jurisdiction of The Methodist Church.

For forty years he was president of the Christian Ministerial Association and for thirty years, secretary-treasurer of the Christian Tract Society. He was instrumental in getting several young men to study for the ministry, one of whom was his nephew, the Rev. Thomas Sproule.

For the past seven years he resided with his sister, Miss Sarah Sproule at Martins Creek, Pa., until his death January 21, 1969, at Easton Hospital, Easton Pa. Funeral services were held at the Strunk Funeral Home Easton, Pa., with interment at Arlington Cemetery, Drexel Hill, Pa. The Rev. Ervin Weitzel officiated, assisted by the Rev. Thomas Sproule. — Joseph Stewart

Some of the questions raised by the obituary are as follows.

1. Was Joseph Sproule ever ordained? If so, in what denomination?
2. What is this Christian Ministerial Association that he led for most of his adult life?
3. Why is there no record, neither at Eastern University nor at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, of Sproule graduating from either institution?
4. Why is there no record, either in the conference journal or in the local congregational history, of Sproule serving the Dallas Methodist Church?
5. Who is the writer of the obituary, and where did he get his information?

These questions, the tumultuous nature of the 1929 transition at Malvern, and the other transitions in the life of Joseph Sproule hinted at in the obituary, suggest that the story of the Rev. Mr. Sproule would be an appropriate one for this issue of *The Chronicle*.

Early Life

It appears that Joseph was the youngest of five children born in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, to William and Matilda Sproule. Those children and their birth years were Isabelle (1887), Thomas (c1889), Sarah (1893), William (1894) and Joseph (1896). Isabelle came to America first, passing through Ellis Island as a 21 year old single lady on October 12, 1908. Mother Matilda and the other Sproule children arrived on the ship California on May 3, 1909. In 1910 they are all living together in Philadelphia's 20th ward.

Joseph Sproule registered for the World War I draft 1917-18 and is reported to have served in the military. While his obituary stated that "he started in the ministry in 1924 at Collingdale, Pa., his preparation including graduation from Eastern University and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary," Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary was not organized until 1925 – and the college division was not formed until 1932. Correspondence with Eastern University on file at the conference archives confirms that Joseph Sproule did not graduate from that institution and that the school has no record of his ever attending any of its academic divisions.

The Philadelphia Conference (1924-29)

In the 1920's, the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Conference held its annual sessions in late March. In May of 1924 the conference began a new work to serve the adjacent Delaware County boroughs of Collingdale and Aldan, a few miles southwest of Philadelphia. The first mention of Joseph Sproule occurs in the 1925 journal, page 97, and reads as follows.

COLLINGDALE AND ALDAN, a new church organized at the suggestion of Charles F. Eggleston, Esq., and in response to a petition sent by residents there, has been a success from the beginning. Joseph Sproule, the pastor, is preaching to congregations approximating 100 in number. The Sunday School has more than 50 enrolled and in attendance. On the lot secured on the corner of Clifton and Ash Avenues we are building a new church building, now nearing completion. It is beautiful in design and commodious, accommodating about 200. There is every promise of a very successful work here.¹

¹ Koch's 1968 *The Leaven of the Kingdom*, a history of the churches of the Philadelphia Conference states that the "Central M.E. Church of Collingdale and Alden" was formed in May 1924. In the 1940's a building fund was begun which received \$10,000 from the sale of the Mariner's Bethel church in Philadelphia with the stipulation that the name of the church

Joseph Sproule was listed as a supply pastor, and he served Collingdale from June 1924 until he was moved to Malvern at the 1927 annual conference. There was never a statement about his credentials, or any indication that he intended to seek ordination or entrance into the itinerancy, but he appeared to have a successful ministry at Collingdale. The superintendent's report for that year, 1927, page 372, stated that the congregation there was "a young but lively church" – with 50 conversions, an increase in membership, the doubling of Sunday School attendance, a successful Epworth League, and a considerable pay-down on the debt.

Joseph Sproule is listed as serving as a supply pastor at Malvern 1927-29, and then he no longer appears in the conference journal. There is no indication in the 1929 journal of any problems or special circumstances, nor is there any reference in the journal, when a different person was appointed to Malvern, to his having ceased to be a supply pastor. In fact, the superintendent's report for 1929, page 98, gives the following favorable report.

MALVERN (J. Sproule) – The pastor reports 35 conversions and membership increased. \$200 paid on debt. \$176 paid for improvements. Sunday School increased.

But despite the failure of the journals to report anything amiss, all was not well at Malvern and Joseph Sproule did not actually complete his second year at Malvern. As reconstructed from various sources, there are the facts as to what really happened at Malvern in March 1929.

1. The 1929 sessions of the Philadelphia Conference met at the Arch Street Church in Philadelphia from Tuesday March 12 to Monday March 18. All of the conference reports, and presumably the bulk of the appointment assignments, had been submitted weeks beforehand.
2. For a reason that has not been determined, District Superintendent W.E.P. Hass contacted Joseph Sproule in early March and informed him that retired itinerant elder C.S. Mervine would finish out the conference year at Malvern, beginning Sunday March 10, and that Sproule's services would no longer be needed.
3. On Sunday March 10 Sproule refused to relinquish the pulpit. He showed up as usual and preached for four hours straight, with his supporters bringing him a lunch to eat while he preached, and denied Mervine access to the pulpit.

would be changed. Construction for the new addition ended in 1948 and the name Mariner's Bethel Memorial was then officially adopted. The congregation existed until 2010 when Mariners United Methodist Church was closed and the property sold to Golden Gate Christian Assembly, which had been organized in 1972 as Golden Gate Baptist Church and worshiped in several different locations before settling in Collingdale.

4. The conflict and accusations continued for several days – eventually proving more than the local police could handle and necessitating an appeal to the Governor and the use of Pennsylvania State Police
- The following newspaper accounts document the drama that unfolded.

Harrisburg Evening News

Wednesday, March 13, 1929, front page

PHILADELPHIA, March 13. The Rev. Joseph Sproule, termed the "filibustering parson of Malvern," because of his refusal to give up his post in the little Main Line town of Chester County a few miles west of the city limits, today had earned the sobriquet of the "fighting parson." With a pistol in one hand and shotgun within reach of the other, the fiery Methodist Episcopal minister guarded the entrance to his home last night after a mob had chased him indoors demanding his life. One man was seriously injured in the melee that followed and State troopers were forced to charge the crowd when local police failed to disperse the agitators.

Two weeks ago the Rev. Mr. Sproule was ousted from his church by Dr. E. P. Haas, district superintendent, who appointed the Rev. C M. Mervine. The Rev. Mr. Sproule refused to give up the post, declaring Doctor Haas had no power to remove him. Last Sunday, when the Rev. Mr. Mervine appeared at the church he found the Rev. Mr. Sproule in the pulpit, and he refused to step aside, preaching a four-hour sermon. Lunch was brought to him in the pulpit and then Sproule continued his filibustering sermon, holding the post throughout the day. But during a disturbance the Rev. Mr. Sproule had Joseph Belt arrested on an assault charge. Last night at Belt's hearing the trouble broke out afresh and a crowd of 700 pursued Sproule to his home. Today the weary pastor's home was protected by a lone trooper, while the minister remains secluded with friends here. Meanwhile, Belt is under \$500 bond and friends of the ousted pastor plan to seek a restraining injunction in West Chester against Doctor Haas.

Jefferson City Post-Tribune

Friday, March 15, 1929, page 2

Minister Says He'll March Back To Pulpit

MALVERN, Pa., Mar. 15 - (UP) - The Rev. Joseph Sproule, ousted pastor of the Methodist Church, hopes to march into the pulpit Sunday under the banner of "truth and the state militia." The minister, who preached for six [sic] hours last Sunday and ate his luncheon in the pulpit so his successor could not occupy it, wired to Gov. John Fisher asking for protection of state troopers in the battle that looms Sunday. A faction opposed to Sproule is determined that the Rev. C. S. Mervine, appointed by the district superintendent to succeed Sproule, is going to deliver the sermon Sunday.

Harrisburg Evening News
Monday, March 18, 1929, page 8

MALVERN, March 18. After a second Sunday of a divided church, Malvern's "spiritual filibuster" still was going merrily on. With the supporters of Rev. Joseph Sproule, former lay minister of the Methodist Church, holding the key to the cellar and furnace room Dr. C. M. Mervine spoke, to a congregation of twenty-four in the cold church. He read a letter from Bishop Ernest G. Richardson which explained that the church conference supported Dr. W. E. P. Haas, district superintendent, in his attempt to oust the lay minister. He made no other mention of the Rev. Sproule in his services. In a house across the street with a big stove burning to keep the throng warm, the Rev. Mr. Sproule spoke in heated terms of his rival, the district superintendent and the devil. He said he wanted "religious freedom" and threatened to carry his case to Governor John S. Fisher and the State police. During yesterday's services, several State policemen were on duty in front of the church and kept the groups from clashing after the camera men had taken their "shots" of the rival groups.

Harrisburg Evening News
Tuesday March 20, 1929, page 11

[article included a photo which would not reproduce well]

Philadelphia. The Malvern Methodist Church, recently the scene of a "spiritual filibuster", now is a house divided against itself. For, as these photos show, the Rev. Joseph Sproule, left, has been ousted from the pulpit by the Rev. C. S. Mervine, right. But each of the ministers still holds the sympathies of part of the congregation, and the Rev. Mr. Sproule and his followers are shown lower right after a service held outdoors. When Sproule refused to obey the order of the district superintendent to resign, he held the pulpit there, so Mervine could not get in. The following Sunday, while State troopers patrolled the district, the Sproule faction held a service across the street, leaving the church unheated and the furnace room locked.

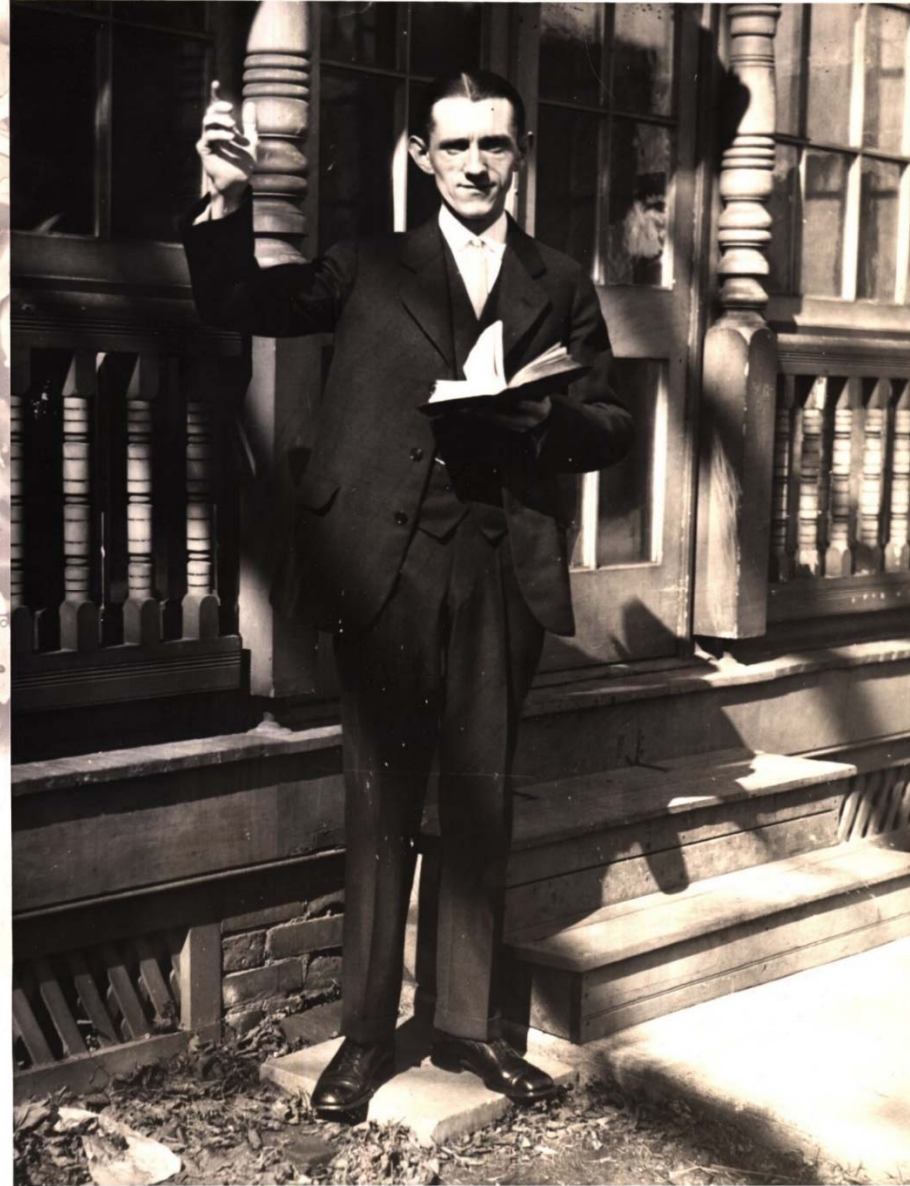
Not only did the news services pick up on the excitement and spread the story nation-wide, but even *Time* magazine in its March 25, 1929, page 48, Miscellany section carried the following article.

FILIBUSTER

In Malvern, Pa., the Rev. Joseph Sproule preached and preached; he preached all morning and far into the afternoon; he ate his lunch in the pulpit. Thus did he prevent his appointed successor, the Rev. C.S. Mervine, who sat waiting in the congregation, from taking his post in the Malvern Methodist Church. That night, however, Pastor Mervine seized the pulpit, and the church doors were locked against Pastor Sproule. Repulsed by guards with whom he tussled, Pastor Sproule held service in a nearby house. "I will fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," he cried. Late reports indicated that he was still fighting, and that his "spiritual filibuster" had turned into a "war."

State troopers were called upon to patrol Malvern's streets when the embattled Methodist partisans became violent. A fervent Sproulite prayed for the devil to "give these heretics, those non-believers, their just dues."

ORIGINAL ACME NEWS SERVICE PHOTOGRAPH AND CAPTION



**OUSTED PREACHER OF MALVERN METHODIST CHURCH
FIGHTS FOR PASTORATE**

Malvern, Pa. – The Rev. Joseph Sproule, ousted as pastor of the Methodist Church, preached his sermon to his congregation at the home of one of his parishioners directly across the street from the church. He preached to about one hundred members while the Rev. C.S. Mervine who was appointed to succeed the Rev. Sproule preached in the church to about twenty-eight.

In the end, of course, the superintendent and the conference prevailed. Retired pastor C.S. Mervine finished out the last few weeks of the conference year and the newly assigned preacher took over on schedule for the 1929-30 conference year. No mention of the incident, the removal of Sproule a few weeks short of his term, or the cause of the trouble ever appeared in the conference journals. The only hint of anything amiss is the wording of the superintendent's 1930 report, page 355.

MALVERN (J.J. McCabe) – "Peace, perfect peace." All is well. Conversions 9, received into full membership, 13. The church has enjoyed a year of growth. Membership has steadily increased... Under the leadership of the popular pastor the people have sacrificed. A spirit of unity and devotion to the spirit of Methodism prevails.

Living in Philadelphia

According to the 1940 census, Joseph and his sister Sarah are living in Philadelphia with their sister Isabelle Sproule Stewart (whose husband William had died in 1938) and her two sons William and Joseph.² Joseph continues to be known as Rev. Joseph Sproule and is in demand as a speaker over a wide area.³

It was during these years that Sproule claimed the title of president of the Christian Ministerial Association. The following October 2, 1943, article from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle is typical of many such references.

GOSPEL ASSEMBLY'S ANNIVERSARY PLANS

The Victory Gospel Assembly, 5613 4th Ave., of which the Rev. Christian Nelson is pastor, will celebrate its fourth anniversary with a series of four special meetings. On Thursday evening at 8 o'clock the Rev. Hart R. Armstrong, returned missionary from Sumatra, will speak. The second meeting on Friday, will be addressed by the Rev. Joseph Sproule of Philadelphia, president of the Christian Ministerial Association of America. The Rev. Clarence B. Slott of Malvern, Pa., will also participate in the services. The Rev. Clarence F. Roddy of the Baptist Temple will be the guest preacher on Saturday evening and the Rev. E.E. Farntirri of Manhattan on Sunday evening

The only other relevant consistent reference to this group is in connection with a Rev. William H. Haffling (1910-1985) – a non-denominational holiness minister from Northampton County who had various contacts with Sproule over the years and was supposedly one of the founders of the Christian Ministerial Association.

² Mother Matilda Sproule had died in 1929 and was buried in Arlington Cemetery, Drexel Hill PA. That Delaware County plot became the final resting place for William Stewart (1938), Isabelle Sproule Stewart (1947), Joseph Sproule (1969), Sarah Sproule (1981) and William Lyons Stewart (1991). Joseph Stewart, the writer of his uncle Joseph Sproule's obituary, is the only one not buried there – and his death date and burial location are not known.

³ The May 28, 1940, Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, page 27, for example lists "Rev. Joseph Sproule of Philadelphia" as the guest speaker at Brooklyn's Victory Gospel Assembly on Fourth Avenue.

In 1946, Joseph was still living in Philadelphia and performed a wedding ceremony for a Rev. Kenneth L. Feist⁴ – perhaps one of the young men that his obituary says he led into the ministry.

Living in Dallas

By 1952 Joseph Sproule was living in Dallas, Luzerne County PA. In March of that year he is listed⁵ as Dallas' Prohibition Party candidate for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. And he was still performing ministerial duties, for in July 1953 he officiated at the funeral of a Dallas resident who had been a member of the nearby Lehman Methodist Church. A July 1954 Presbyterian notice⁶ about the ordination of his nephew Thomas Sproule reads in part as follows.

Rev. Kenneth C. Stewart, pastor of Mr. Sproule's home church, the Marple Presbyterian Church, Broomall, Pa., and under whom Mr. Sproule served in the summer of 1952, and Dr. Joseph Sproule, uncle of Mr. Sproule, and pastor of the Methodist Church, Dallas, Pa., will assist in the ordination service.

While Rev. Joseph Sproule is now referred to as Dr. Joseph Sproule and as pastor of the Methodist Church in Dallas, research has been unable to substantiate either claim. Joseph Sproule is not listed in the Wyoming Conference journals or the histories of the Dallas Methodist Church as being appointed to Dallas, serving as a supply pastor in Dallas, or even being a local preacher responsible to and/or licensed by the Dallas charge. The pastors assigned to the Dallas station appointment during these years were full elders Frederick W. Reinfurt 1945-52 and William H. Heapps 1952-56.

The Wyoming Conference

Joseph Sproule's name first appears in the Wyoming Conference journals in 1956, page 86, when he is appointed to the three-point Lanesboro charge. There is no explanation as to his status or credentials. He continued to serve Lanesboro until 1961, when he "retired." Beginning in 1957, pages 322 and 378, he was included among the list of "approved supplies" – but without explanation as to his credentials.

⁴ The January 10, 1946 Mifflinburg *Telegraph*, page 8, states that "Rev. Joseph Sproule of Philadelphia" performed the wedding ceremony for Rev. Kenneth Feist and Miss Gladys Boop. Rev. Feist supposedly graduated from American Bible College and Temple Hall Seminary in Philadelphia – neither of which institution has been able to be positively identified, nor has the exact nature of his ministry. Rev. Kenneth L. Feist (1911-1968) is buried in the Hartleton Cemetery, Union County.

⁵ The 3/21/1952 *Kane Republican*, page 8.

⁶ July 1954 *Our Mountain Work*, page 2. This was a monthly publication of the Presbytery of Asheville, Synod of Appalachia.

The End of the Journey

After retiring from Lanesboro, Joseph Sproule moved to Martins Creek, north of Easton, to live with his sister Sarah. He died January 21, 1969, and the funeral service was conducted by a Rev. Ervin H. Weitzel (1906-1992). The status/credentials of Ervin Weitzel appear as vague as those of Joseph Sproule.

Following is the service record for Joseph Sproule as it appears in the Wyoming Conference pastoral data base⁷ on the archives section of the conference website.

SPROULE, JOSEPH

Born: 5-28-1896 County Tyrone, Northern Ireland married: [never married]
Died: 1-21-1969 Easton PA obit:

1924 license, Philadelphia Conference

Interment: Arlington Cemetery, Drexel Hill PA

Obit: Wyoming Conference 1969, 251

1924-27 Collingdale
1927-29 Malvern
 “transfer” to Wyoming Conference

1956-61 Lanesboro

1961 retired

Note: Joseph Sproule is an uncle to Rev. Thomas Sproule (1920-2010) of the Presbyterian Church and served as a local preacher in both the Philadelphia and Wyoming Conferences. He never married, and the Sproule females buried with him are his mother and his sister. He apparently was affiliated with the Methodist Church in Dallas PA in the early 1950's, although there is no record of him as a pastor, supply, or local preacher there.

⁷ The data base includes, in theory, every person who ever served in, was licensed/ordained by, or was a member of the Wyoming Conference during its entire existence from 1852 to 2010.