

# **Early understanding of the Methodist Church in Poland by the Mission of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South**

The presented material is an effect of my researches in Polish Archives on the origins of the Methodist Church in Poland. Until this point it was an important but unknown element of the formation of the Methodist Church in Poland in early twenties. It shows how much the missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South from the very beginning tried to build a church suitable to the prevailing situation in our homeland. The document is an example of an attempt of inculturyzation of the missionary activities of American Methodists in Poland.

The understanding of the Church in Poland due to the Mission of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South) was revealed at the beginning of April 1923, just three years after beginning of the Mission in the country on the Vistula river. In a document sent to the office of the Ministerium for Religious Faiths and Public Enlightenment named: "A project of organization of the Methodist Church in Poland" representatives of the Mission speak about The Methodist Church, which could function in our country independently. This is extremely important for researching into early Methodism in Poland, for it shows the way of thinking of leaders of the Mission as well as its ability for going on compromise and adaptation for local conditions of social-religious life in Poland. This document has never been published and talked over and that is why I am deeply convinced that it should be presented and exactly analyzed in this work.

The document written on 16 pages (in archival numbering pages 415 – 430) consists just of 8 Articles, in which 75 paragraphs were put in

Art. 1. An essence of the Church and its character	§§ 1-6
Art. 2. Teaching	§ 7 with 25 subparagraphs
Art. 3. Structure of the Church	§§ 8-49
Art. 4. Collectively representations	§§ 50-71
Art. 5. Property and funds of the Church	§ 72
Art. 6. Relation of the Church to the state	§ 73
Art. 7. Relation of the Church to the other denomination	§ 74
Art. 8. Liquidation of the Church	§ 75

**In Article 1** the name, character, goal, means to reach the goal, territory of activity and formal language of Church is determined. Due to the project, the Church was supposed to be named: The Methodist Church in Poland [and not The Methodist Episcopal Church, South – why not?] should represent: “Christian belief in Protestant spirit”. Its goal is ”to foster rules of faith and Christian morality, taken straight from the Bible; waking, developing and strengthening religious feelings, training believers to lead a life morally pure and stress humanitarian activities.” The area of these activities was supposed to be the whole territory of Poland and „a region of free city of Gdansk“. Leagal language should be Polish. Worship services were supposed to be held in understandable language for „majority members of the parish or congregation. It gave the possibility of leading services in Polish, German or another needet language.

**Article 2** shows a theological view of The Church. As its foundation the Methodist Church in Poland together with another churches recognizes confessions of faith such as: Nicene Creed (325), Nicene-Constantinople (381), Athanasian Creed (ca. 500 written in latin language and stressing very much the main catholic convictions concerning Trinity and Christology) and 25 Articles of Faith, which are cited in this document.

**Article 3** is the longest chapter of the whole document. It consists of 41 paragraphs, in which vision of the Church structures were shown. Here we read that there are 4 categories of Methodist believers:

- a. Clergy,
- b. Authorized lay religion workers,
- c. Lay members.
- d. Children under 14, along with the will of their parents or legal protector.

There are a couple of categories of clergy:

- General Superintendent and designated by him his deputy,
- District Superintendents, designated by a General Superintendent,
- Pastor of a parish (priest),
- Pastor helper (vicar),
- Deacon – clergy of a lower rank.

General Superintendent was supposed to represent the whole Methodist Church in Poland and that is why he ought to be a Pole, a citizen of Poland, a man without any bad moral or political issue, not younger than 30 years old with a higher education (§10). He was supposed to be elected by Annual Conference or extraordinary Conference by the majority of votes from among clergy, for four years tenure with a possibility of prolonging it. The election of a General Superintendent ought to be approved by the President of Polish State, who could ask the nominee to take a suitable oath (§ 12). Competences of The General Superintendent had to be wide and equal to competences of a bishop in The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. (§ 13). The General Superintendent alone make out and appoints his deputy (§ 16), what “is based on a resolution of The Annual Conference or Extraordinary Conference” (§ 18).

Pastor of a parish (parson) is a person with Polish citizenship, properly ordained and nominated by The General Superintendent, based on a resolution of The Annual Conference or its Consistory (§ 23). Pastor helper (vicar) is a properly ordained clergy (presbyter), who is not in charge of a parish.

Deacons are defined as a “clergy of a lower rank”, taking on duty functions of parish pastors or pastors helpers if they are suitable for this.

A group of lay religion coworkers are recognize: local preachers, exhorters and deaconesses. Deaconess could become a woman (not married or widow), who voluntarily sacrificed herself for Samaritan ministry in hospitals, almshouses or private nursing homes, with at least high school degree together with a biblical course and in the age between 25 and 50 years old. The General Superintendent could take deaconess to the ministry due to the resolution of the Conference. Deaconesses do not vow forever and they may resign from the position at any time (§ 33-35).

Local preachers are a lay religion workers, who are ready to work unselfishly in their free time, directed by their pastor, on the position of the proclaimer of The Gospel. They should have at least high school degree, and pass exam before qualifying commission that is called by a District Conference. The exam has to be approved by Annual Conference and authorizes to appointment for this position by The General Superintendent.

An exhorter could be a person, who got from the Quarterly Conference right to preach and teach in moral issues under supervision of a pastor (§ 41).

Any person over 14 can become a member of the Church. If a person had not been baptized before, should be baptized, but if someone were baptized in another Church, the baptism should

not be repeated. Children under 14 could be registered in the Church on behalf of their parents or guardian (§ 49).

Organization, structures, due to **Article 4** were as follows:

- Annual Conference or Extraordinary Conference (§§ 50-58)
- Consistory (§ 59) (not a Church Council – E.P.)
- District Conference (§§ 67-69)
- Quarterly Conference (§ 70)
- Monthly Conference (§ 71)

Annual Conference or Extraordinary Conference was to be the highest instance in all matters of a The Church. It was General Superintendent (not a Bishop! – E. P.) that summons and leads the conference and in case of some problems his deputy.

District Conference was to debate once in a year in the area of a certain church district. It was summoned and led by The District Superintendent. In case of his absence the conference was opened by the oldest pastor, who would lead the conference til election of the leader from among present people.

Quarterly Conference was to be summoned and led by District Superintendent four times in a year in order to discuss important matter for life of local people.

Monthly Conference was summoned and led by the local pastor.

**Article 5** was dedicated to property matters. Church was supposed to be self financed and could not derive assets from public funds. It was the Annual Conference and in its name Consistory should be in charge of finances and property of the Church.

In **Article 6** we read about attitude of the Church to the state, which was defined as “ an unconditional loyalty and obedience of the Church to the State in all matters except issues of faith and a conscience. Much stronger sounds words against any political or social agitation and about doing everything possible to calm down any political or social emotions.

**Article 7** expresses ecumenical beliefs of Polish Methodists.

**Article 8** (which is the last one) assumes the possibility of liquidation of the Church, which could be decided only by the Annual Conference or Extraordinary Conference by majority of votes. The same Conference would have to decide about destiny of goods from liquidation of the Church.

So far this important document.

State authorities have never introduced their attitude to this document, not mentioning about accepting it. Maybe it is even better, because if it had happened, it would have been very hard for the Mission of the MEC, South to find at that time a Polish clergy with a higher education, who could be on a position of The General Superintendent. But maybe leaders of the Mission thought that in this case an American Methodist clergy would get Polish citizenship.

This document seems to be a compromise between Methodist terminology and at that time and local circumstances. Surprisingly enough, there is no word “bishop”, even though the Mission represented the Church which claimed to have Episcopal roots. This Church was active in the culture where bishops function were well understood and accepted. Prerogatives of a bishop were given to The General Superintendent. This term is foreign and not understandable in Polish context.

Descriptions such as “parish” and “congregation” were used commonly and interchangeably without any exact determination. A pastor of a parish was defined as a “parson - rector” and his coworker as a vicar. This document introduces also a definition “Consistory”, well known within Protestant Churches, but not used by Methodists in any other countries in America or Europe. The important thing was also describing Methodists as “Christian faith in the Protestant spirit.”

This shows clearly salutations toward adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon ethos of Methodism to Polish religion terminology. Today we would call it inculturation. The whole document expresses autonomy and independence of the Methodist Church in Poland from any influence from outside of Poland. The highest body of the Church: Annual and Extraordinary Conference should be Polish and independent. Loyalty to the state and ecumenical openness and self-determination should be basic independence pillar of a new created Church in Poland.

But the things run another way. The state did not accept it or rather not officially expressed its attitude to this document. Annual conferences were still led by foreign General Superintendents (Bishops) also pastors came from abroad. Instead of the Consistory there was Executive Committee. Another basic elements had not been changed and realized. The driving motor of Methodism was a will and need of helping those in need and the structures and ways of realizing

those targets had the secondary meaning for the Church life. It is a pity at that time they had not established Church due to intention introduced in this document.

It is important to mention that in the same time another document was prepared for in Polish Methodists in Polish language. I am thinking about second part of the Book of Discipline of the MEC, South from year 1922 which was published in September 1924. Thanks God this document had never gained legal meaning in our country because it was too American in its understanding of the Church. Translation of this document was not good enough and shows unclearness and contradictions in its self. As an instruction, direction, suggestion, advice would be OK, but not as rule, guiding principle or legal document. Again, thanks God that the MEC, S missionaries and the first Methodists in Poland were more practical minded than legalistic oriented. Thank do this we have a United Methodist Church in Poland.

I hope that farther research projects will show more such a discoveries and will enlighten Methodist roots in Poland.