

# Commemorating Mission: History as a Means to Revival of the Missionary Spirit

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The Centenary celebration of American Methodist mission was a major undertaking. Three years of planning and preparation led to several significant elements of the observance in 1919: a prayer campaign, a campaign to mobilize Christian workers for mission, a colossal fundraising campaign, and a world's fair of Methodist mission, held for three weeks that summer in Columbus, OH. Moreover, collections of fundraising pledges and new mission projects started with Centenary money were central to both domestic and international mission for the next half decade or more.

Those associated with the event therefore had a grand understanding of the significance of their work. In 1919, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, mission leader Elmer T. Clark proclaimed, “The greatest enterprise of its kind ever undertaken by any Christian denomination in human history was an attempt on the part of a united church to fitly celebrate the centennial of American Methodist missions”<sup>1</sup> A few years later, he added, “Between 1920 and 1924 we wrote the most glorious chapter of Methodist history. Our achievements in extending the Kingdom of God are unparalleled. We have made advances of which no former generation of Methodists would have dared to dream.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elmer T. Clark, “Conception and Development of the Centenary,” in “The Call of the People: ‘How can they hear without a preacher?’ Souvenir, Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions, Columbus, Ohio, June twenty to July thirteen Nineteen Nineteen,” 9.

<sup>2</sup> Elmer T. Clark, *The Task Ahead: The Missionary Crisis of the Church*. (Nashville, TN: Board of Missions, Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 36.

We must grant that these comments and others like them reflect some enthusiastic exaggeration by promoters of and participants in the event. Yet the number of voices in late 1919 and early 1920 extolling the importance of the Centenary for Methodism and Christianity in general make the following fact surprising. Ninety years later, *The Methodist Experience in America*, published in 2010 as the new standard text on the history of American Methodism, includes no reference to the Centenary.<sup>3</sup> In less than 100 years, the Centenary went from being the most important event in Methodist, if not Christian, history to not worth even a footnote.

This change presents a mystery: How could the Centenary go from being “the most glorious chapter of Methodist history” to being completely omitted from a significant account of Methodist history? And what does that transformation tell us about the connections between mission, revival, history, and organization? This paper intends to answer these questions. In it, I will examine the scope, the successes, the failures, the legacy, the eclipse, and the lessons of the Centenary. Along the way, I will suggest that the Centenary has had much more long-lasting consequences than it is given credit for. Yet the problems of the Centenary have prevented it from becoming usable history for the denomination. A reappraisal, however, yields two spiritual lessons for those seeking revival through commemorating mission history: the importance of repentance and leaving room for the work of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Scope of the Centenary**

The Centenary movement commemorated the founding in 1819 of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. That organization was created in response to stories

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<sup>3</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*, Vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). There is no reference to the Centenary in the Index, and I have not been able to identify any reference in the text of the book. I do not mean to be critical of senior colleagues here, but rather to note the way in which the Centenary has fallen from the historical record.

of the successful mission work of John Stewart, a self-appointed lay evangelist and free-born African American, among the Wyandotte Native Americans of Ohio. The idea to commemorate this anniversary seems to have first been suggested in the spring of 1916 by William W. Pinson, the General Secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South's Board of Missions.

Subsequent to Pinson's mooted idea, it was embraced by the General Conferences of both the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), as well as the MEC Board of Foreign Missions, MEC Board of Home Missions and Church Extension, and MECS Board of Missions. Invitations to participate in the celebration were also extended to the Canadian Methodist Church, Methodist Protestant Church, and "several of the colored Methodist bodies in the United States," but the celebration remained mostly a joint MEC and MECS undertaking.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Centenary was seen at the time as an important step toward MEC-MECS reunification.

The Centenary movement included spiritual, discipleship, financial, and celebratory aspects. Organizers spoke of four components: "Intercession, Stewardship, Life Enlistment, and a Missionary Advance."<sup>5</sup> These were elsewhere described as "(a) A call to daily intercession for the coming of the Kingdom of God. (b) A call to the Stewardship of Life and Substance. (c) A call, in view of the present World Crisis, to evangelize the Nations, to the end that the Kingdom may be ushered in and thus make Democracy safe for the World. (d) A call to greatly increased gifts for missionary purposes at home and abroad."<sup>6</sup> The Centenary also involved the production of four volumes of surveys and statistics about the mission work of American Methodists. A

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<sup>4</sup> "Canadian Methodists Invited to Join Centenary," *The Centenary Bulletin* (Feb. 14, 1918), 1; "The Progress to Date of the Centenary World Program," *The Centenary Bulletin* (March 21, 1918), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, "Conception and Development of the Centenary," 9.

<sup>6</sup> *World Program Handbook: Suggestions for Centenary Speakers and Other Workers*. (New York: Joint Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, [n.d. - 1918?]), 62.

volume on foreign mission and a volume on home mission each for the MEC and MECS give a comprehensive picture of the church's engagement with its surroundings, both domestically and abroad, in 1918.<sup>7</sup> The Centenary has, however, been most noted since its day for its fundraising campaign and the three-week-long celebration of American Methodist mission held in Columbus, OH, June 20 – July 13, 1819.

While the fundraising campaign and the Columbus Celebration have garnered the most attention, the prayer and spiritual components of the Centenary movement should not be overlooked. It is clear from the sources that organizers believed the spiritual outcomes of the Centenary to be the most important. The training manual for Centenary speakers asserted, "That the purpose of the Centenary is not the raising of millions of money but the lifting up of the Church to a new plane of spiritual power whence it shall accomplish the Christian conquest of the world; and that the consummation of this purpose will be through a new emphasis upon world vision, intercession and stewardship."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the sources are replete with references that indicate that organizers saw the spiritual goal of the Centenary movement as one of revival. The speakers' training manual stated bluntly, "The Centenary is a revival movement."<sup>9</sup> Elmer Clark agreed, stating, "The supreme objective of the Centenary of Methodist missions was and is a revived and revitalized church, filled with thoroughly consecrated Christians, going about the business of saving a world in the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Centenary Survey of The Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* (New York: Joint Centenary Committee, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918); *The Centenary Survey of The Board of Foreign Missions, The Methodist Episcopal Church.* (New York: Joint Centenary Committee, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918); Goddard, O. E. and Mrs. R. W. MacDonell. *Making America Safe: A Study of the Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.* (Nashville, TN: Centenary Commission M. E. Church, South, 1918); *Missionary Centenary, 1819-1919 World Survey, A Program of Spiritual Strategy and Preparedness.* (Nashville, TN: Missionary Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1918).

<sup>8</sup> *World Program Handbook*, 66.

<sup>9</sup> *World Program Handbook*, 62.

spirit of Christ.”<sup>10</sup> *The Centenary Bulletin* likewise emphasized revival as a more important outcome than fundraising, “It is interesting to note that the goal of \$80,000,000 which seemed for a time to be the outstanding feature of the Centenary movement, is now being considered as somewhat incidental. It is now clearly seen that the great objectives of the Centenary are spiritual and not financial; that the great outcome of the Centenary will be a revived church, a Church placed on higher levels for the next one hundred years.”<sup>11</sup> Most people would hardly call \$80 million incidental, but the hyperbole emphasizes the importance of the spiritual aims.

If the stated goals for the Centenary were spiritual, the approach taken toward these goals was nationalistic and triumphalist. The language and rhetoric of the Centenary reflects an overwhelming conflation of the Christian mission of the MEC and MECS and the post-World War I democratic mission of the United States of America. J. Tremayne Coplestone noted a shift over the course of Centenary planning between early language extolling a “world-wide Church” and a later “politico-military patriotism it shared with the secular community” that arose out of American involvement in World War I.<sup>12</sup> A thorough treatment of this theme goes far beyond the scope of this paper but is reflected in Christopher Anderson and Nancye Van Brunt’s scholarship on the Centenary.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, “Conception and Development of the Centenary,” 10.

<sup>11</sup> “The Spirit of the Centenary,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (November 21, 1918), 3.

<sup>12</sup> J. Tremayne Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions, Vol. IV: Twentieth-Century Perspectives (The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1896-1939)* (New York: The Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1973), 499.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Anderson, *The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions: The 1919 World's Fair of Evangelical Americanism*. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012); Christopher J. Anderson, *Voices from the Fair: Race, Gender, and the American Nation at a Methodist Missionary Exposition*. (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012); Christopher Anderson, “The World Is Our Parish: Remembering the 1919 Protestant Missionary Fair,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30 no. 4 (October 2006): 196-200; and Nancye Van Brunt, “Pagentry at the Methodist Centenary,” *Methodist History* 35 no. 2 (January, 1997): 106-118.

Despite the nationalistic tone of the Centenary, the Centenary as a revival and fundraising campaign extended around the world. Methodist churches from Argentina to the Philippines to Norway participated. Indeed, the Buenos Aires congregation of the MEC was the first in the denomination to achieve its fundraising goal.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, both African-American and immigrant groups found a place in the Centenary in the US. The first US congregation to reach their fundraising goal was a Swedish immigrant congregation, German immigrant annual conferences were among the highest per capita givers, and African-American congregations subscribed heavily to the Centenary fundraising drive as well.<sup>15</sup> The uptake on the Centenary was broader than its nationalistic tone might suggest.

Overseeing the Centenary movement was a large mix of organizations, committees, and individuals. Early in the process, the General Conferences of both MEC and MECS were involved, as were large planning committees of up to one hundred pastors in each denomination. Once plans had been outlined, the MEC Board of Foreign Missions, MECS Board of Missions, and MEC Board of Home Missions were the lead sponsors, but these organizations together created seven committees and commissions, including a MEC National Campaign Committee with 21 departments. Bishops and District Superintendents were involved, and there were committees and designated leaders at the annual conference, district, and local church level. Ten paid staff were involved in coordinating the Columbus Celebration.

The complexity of the Centenary movement – organizationally and in terms of purpose – has presented a challenge to subsequent historians. How is it possible to do justice to the

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<sup>14</sup> “Buenos Aires Leads World Methodism: Argentine Congregation First to Finish Financial Drive for Centenary,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (October 17, 1918), 1.

<sup>15</sup> “New Claimant for First Place Appears,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (December 19, 1918), 1; “German Methodists Among Leading Givers,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (June 19, 1919), 4; “Colored Conferences Will Not Go Behind,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (May 22, 1919), 2.

Centenary as a whole? This question is made even more difficult when one considers the wide range of interpretive issues that arise even in one component of the Centenary, as Anderson and Van Brunt's work on the Columbus Celebration shows.

### **The Success of the Centenary**

Assessing the success of the Centenary movement is complicated given the variety of its aims and the difficulty of establishing metrics for some of them. Yet when the Centenary celebration of American Methodist mission concluded in 1919, the reviews were hyperbolically good. The multi-faceted movement had mobilized over 100,000 clergy and lay volunteers at the local church level, had taken in over \$140 million in pledges for mission, the equivalent of \$2 billion today,<sup>16</sup> and had hosted over one million visitors at a world's fair of Methodist missions in Columbus, OH. There was a lot for leaders to feel good about.

And feel good they did. *The Centenary Bulletin*, the official newspaper of the Centenary, proclaimed that the Centenary had been the "Greatest Movement in Methodism" and the "Greatest Missionary Event in the History of the Christian Church."<sup>17</sup> The Episcopal Address at the Methodist Episcopal Church's 1920 General Conference reflected in amazement, "We cannot adequately characterize the Centenary Movement. Nothing else equal to it was ever planned or achieved by any denomination."<sup>18</sup>

Early assessments also felt that the Centenary's revivalist goals had been met. *The Christian Advocate* asserted that the Centenary had been "the greatest revival the Church has

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<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "CPI Inflation Calculator," U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm), accessed July 2, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> *The Centenary Bulletin*, (May 29, 1919), 1; and (June 26, 1919), 1

<sup>18</sup> Committee on Conservation and Advance, "What Centenary Money Is Doing" (Chicago, IL: Committee on Conservation and Advance, Methodist Episcopal Church, [N.d.]), Front Matter.

ever known.”<sup>19</sup> Writing in the souvenir program for the Columbus Celebration, Elmer Clark asserted optimistically, “The Centenary campaign revived churches everywhere. . . . Everywhere revival fires are about to break out, and the church trembles on the verge of a mighty revival.”<sup>20</sup> Six years later, he still felt confident that “It kindled a revival in our country. In 1919 we were losing members at the rate of 1,000 per day. Since then we have had a net increase of nearly a third of a million.”<sup>21</sup> The Northern church reported membership gains as well. “The year after the Centenary Campaign witnessed the largest number of accessions to the Methodist Episcopal Church in its history, over 180,000 new members.”<sup>22</sup>

In other tangible terms, the Centenary initially seemed like a success as well. Over 100,000 Methodists were mobilized to conduct a ten-day door-to-door subscription campaign in May 1919. The initial fundraising goal for the Northern church was \$80,000,000, and they surpassed it handily, bringing in \$113,740,455 in pledges.<sup>23</sup> The Southern Methodists surpassed their \$25,000,000 fundraising goal with \$36,911,166 in pledges.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, the amount of money raised was impressive. Dr. Charles E. Jefferson proclaimed the Centenary fundraising drive to be “the most stupendous achievement of any branch of the Christian Church in modern history.”<sup>25</sup> Charles Sumner Ward agreed, “First of all, the raising of \$140,000,000 for the

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in John Lankford, “Methodism ‘Over the Top’: The Joint Centenary Movement, 1917-1925.” *Methodist History* 11 no. 4 (October 1963), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, “Conception and Development of the Centenary,” 10.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, *The Task Ahead*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> “What Centenary Money Is Doing,” 31.

<sup>23</sup> “Financial Total Still Rising as Areas Report New Pledges Following the Big Celebration,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (July 24, 1919), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *The Task Ahead*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> “What Centenary Money Is Doing,” 31.



advancement of the kingdom of God is the greatest enterprise ever undertaken by any Church in Christian history.”<sup>26</sup>

The Columbus Celebration was a numeric success, too. As Anderson reports, “The fair attracted over ten thousand Methodist ministers and over one million curious visitors each paying fifty cents to enter the front gates of the exposition.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, “over five hundred fairgoers signed cards pledging to commit their lives to some form of Christian missionary service.”<sup>28</sup> With so many pledges and extra money to send missionaries, both the MECS and MEC sent out a wave of fresh missionaries starting in fall 1919. The MECS doubled their number of foreign missionaries as a result of the Centenary.<sup>29</sup> The MEC sent out 275 new foreign missionaries between November 1919 and October 1920, nearly triple their previous one-year total of 96.<sup>30</sup>

Another seeming success upon the conclusion of the Centenary Celebration in Columbus was the launch of the Interchurch World Movement (IWM) as a sort of ecumenical successor to the Methodist Centenary movement. The MEC Board of Foreign Missions was the first denominational body to throw its support behind the IWM, in January of 1919.<sup>31</sup> S. Earl Taylor, who as head of the MEC Board of Foreign Missions, had been responsible for leading Centenary efforts for the MEC, was chosen as the head of the newly formed organization. Ralph Cushman, who had also been a key MEC player in the Centenary would work for the IWM as well. Finally,

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Sumner Ward, “Missionary Centenary Review,” in “Souvenir,” 69.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher J. Anderson, *Voices from the Fair: Race, Gender, and the American Nation at a Methodist Missionary Exposition*. (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *The Centenary Celebration*, 217.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, *The Task Ahead*, 13, 21.

<sup>30</sup> “What Centenary Money Is Doing,” 16.

<sup>31</sup> “Methodism Votes First to Give Endorsement to Interchurch World Plan,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (January 23, 1919), 1.

some of the equipment and physical property used for the Centenary Celebration was donated to the IWM, and the IWM would sponsor additional performances in Madison Square Garden of the play “The Wayfarer,” which debuted at the Centenary Celebration. In fall 1919, the success of the Centenary and its continued legacy both within and beyond Methodism seemed assured.

### **The Failure of the Centenary**

Problems with the Centenary fundraising campaign emerged quickly, however. The campaign had pushed for pledges, which were expected to be collected over the course of the following five years, from mid-1919 to mid-1924. Yet, when it was time to collect from church members who had pledged so enthusiastically in the spring, mission leaders found those same church members less willing to part with their dollars come fall. Giving for home missions fell in fall 1919. By February 1920, payments to the MEC were 32% behind pledges. The situation in the MECS was even worse.<sup>32</sup>

Several external factors hampered collections. The wave of post-war euphoria was over. A sharp post-war recession had set in, and prices of many commodities had increased, leaving churchgoers with less disposable income. Yet mission leaders saw an element of spiritual failure in the less-than-hoped-for collections. Writing in 1924, Elmer Clark declared, “There is no question of ability. It is only one of willingness, determination, loyalty, and effort.”<sup>33</sup>

The amount of “willingness, determination, loyalty, and effort” going into a variety of American religious causes was on the wane during the 1920s. Robert Handy referred to this period as a “religious depression.”<sup>34</sup> The Interchurch World Movement, heir of the Centenary,

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<sup>32</sup> Lankford, 33-34.

<sup>33</sup> Clark, *The Task Ahead*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Referenced in Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 377.

failed dramatically by 1921, not even raising enough money to cover its operating expenses. Eldon Ernst has argued that the IWM's failure "contributed to the general decline of Protestant creativity, influence, and prestige in America during the 1920's."<sup>35</sup> Clifford Putney has argued, "The declining importance of foreign as opposed to domestic mission was especially pronounced following World War I."<sup>36</sup> Missionary recruitment through the Student Volunteer Movement declined steadily through the 1920s, from 1,731 recruits at its 1920 convention to 550 at its 1928 convention.<sup>37</sup> R. Pierce Beaver and Dana Robert have both argued that the end of independent women's mission agencies in many denominations in the 1920s (though not the MEC) also cut into Americans' enthusiasm for mission.<sup>38</sup>

While Methodists were thus not unique in suffering a decline in enthusiasm during the 1920s, the structure of the Centenary had placed them in a uniquely vulnerable position when collections failed to live up to expectations. Both the MEC and MECS had collected pledges, not dollars, but then had laid plans for new projects and new areas of mission work based on the assumption that these pledges would be paid in full. When that was not the case, projects had to be halted, missionaries had to be recalled, and new areas of work had to be abandoned, all for lack of sufficient funds. Construction projects for new churches and schools in established fields were sometimes abandoned mid-build because of lack of funds. These became a visible sign to Methodists outside the US of their abandonment by their American brothers and sisters. The

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<sup>35</sup> Eldon G. Ernst, "The Interchurch World Movement of North America," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1968, i.

<sup>36</sup> Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> Johanna M. Sellers, *The World Student Christian Federation, 1895-1925: Motives, Methods, and Influential Women*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), p. 103.

<sup>38</sup> R. Pierce Beaver, *All Loves Excelling* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968); Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

MECS ended Centenary-originated Russian-language work in Manchuria in 1927 and Korean-language work in Siberia in the early 30s.<sup>39</sup> New MEC work in Spain suffered as well.<sup>40</sup> As Robert Sledge described the MECS Board of Missions, “The program was addicted to Centenary funding and was now suffering withdrawal pains.”<sup>41</sup>

Both the MECS and MEC tried a variety of tactics over the five-year collection period to encourage churches and individuals to make good on their Centenary pledges. In the end, the MEC collected about 70% of its pledges, and the MECS collected a little over half. This put collections for the MEC at around \$80 million and the MECS at around \$20 million. In both cases, these figures were or were nearly the initial goals for the campaign before an excess of zeal had pushed pledges higher. Looked at that way, the results were not bad, and not everyone then or since has been dissatisfied with the final donation numbers. Looking back, John Lankford has concluded that, given the national financial and religious context, the fundraising totals were probably “a good showing.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet those leading Methodist mission efforts had built their hopes and their plans based on the full pledged numbers. Thus, the final totals did not seem to them to be “a good showing.” They seemed to be a disaster. *The Centenary Bulletin* had forewarned in 1918, “It will be disastrous to the very future of our denominational life if, having been summoned to a great task, we should in a burst of temporary enthusiasm pour money into the treasuries of the boards, thus allowing for a great expansion of the work of these boards, and then settle back to the old

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<sup>39</sup> Robert W. Sledge, *Five Dollars and Myself: The History of Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1845-1939*. (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2005), 373.

<sup>40</sup> Copplestone, 1028.

<sup>41</sup> Sledge, 349.

<sup>42</sup> Lankford, 36.

ways.”<sup>43</sup> When it became clear that was exactly what had happened, Elmer Clark described the psychological consequences of such a failure as follows: “Once on the retreat, our morale is broken. Once admit defeat, and we may never—certainly not in this generation—regain the ground we give up. We suffer shamefully in our prestige, influence, and self-esteem. Few worse calamities could befall us.”<sup>44</sup> It may have been a calamity of their own making because of imprudent planning, but by the late 1920s, Methodist mission leaders saw the Centenary not as a stimulating success but as a dispiriting disaster.

### **The Legacy of the Centenary**

It was these psychological effects of the failure of the Centenary fundraising campaign and the collapse of new mission work undertaken with Centenary money that were to have the most significant, negative, and longest-lasting consequences. Indeed, through these forces, the Centenary’s legacy lived up to its planners hopes of setting the tone for the next hundred years of Methodist mission, but in the exact opposite direction they had intended.

One of the hopes of Centenary planners was that the Centenary would not only yield five years’ worth of extra income but increase baseline annual giving in a lasting fashion. That did not happen. Instead, shortly after both MEC and MECS gave up on collecting any more Centenary pledges, the Great Depression hit, with devastating financial effects for Methodist mission. By 1933, mission giving in the MECS was half what it had been in 1927.<sup>45</sup> In the MEC,

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<sup>43</sup> “The Spirit of the Centenary,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (November 21, 1918), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Clark, *The Task Ahead*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Sledge, 393-5.

mission giving dropped off by almost half from the Centenary years to 1928 and then dropped by half again by 1939. The MEC took in less money for mission in 1939 than it had in 1918.<sup>46</sup>

1939 also saw the merger of the MEC, MECS, and Methodist Protestant Church and the concomitant combination of their various mission agencies. The financial disaster of the Great Depression and the upheaval of merger were then followed by extreme disruptions to mission occasioned by World War II. In both Europe and East Asia, the war played havoc on churches, indigenous leaders, and missionaries. By the time American Methodists began to consider what the role of the church could be after the war, mission, especially foreign mission, had suffered through two straight decades of hard times.

Yet by 1944, American Methodists were confident of the progress of the war toward eventual American victory and certain that their church had a role to play in rebuilding the world afterward. Leading foreign mission efforts at this time were two capable and experienced leaders – Ralph E. Diffendorfer as General Secretary of the World Division of the Board of Missions and Bishop Arthur J. Moore as the chair of the Board. The experience of both men, however, was significantly connected to the Centenary in ways that shaped the plans they laid.

As a young man, Diffendorfer had accompanied MEC mission leader S. Earl Taylor to the 1911 “The World in Boston” mission exposition, the first major American mission fair and a significant model for the Columbus Centenary Celebration.<sup>47</sup> While Diffendorfer did not have a major planning role in the Centenary Celebration, he must have been intrigued in its progress given his participation in the Boston exposition. Diffendorfer would be given his first major leadership role with the MEC Board of Foreign Missions in 1924, just as the Centenary fundraising drive was concluding and thus after the consequences of a shortfall in contributions

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<sup>46</sup> Coplestone, 894.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Voices from the Fair*, 4.

were made clear. As Linda Gesling relays, “W. W. Reid evaluated [Diffendorfer’s] tenure as covering some of the most difficult times for ‘foreign’ missions. The excitement was over, the money was scarce, and support was diminishing.”<sup>48</sup> While Diffendorfer was not directly involved in leading the Centenary, his career was in many ways shaped by it.

Moore’s career was less directly shaped by the Centenary but was shaped just as much by the sort of financial difficulties for mission that began with the Centenary. In 1936, Moore was chosen by the MECS bishops to lead “the Bishops’ Crusade” fundraising drive to eliminate a half million-dollar debt incurred by the MECS Board of Missions to get itself through the financial hardships of the Depression. Moore was successful in raising enough money to retire the debt by the middle of 1937, at which point the campaign morphed into a spiritual push for renewal, led by Bishop A. Frank Smith.<sup>49</sup> The combination of fundraising and spiritual goals is reminiscent of the initial aims of the Centenary.

Thus, when Diffendorfer, Moore, and others collaborated on plans for what became the “Crusade for Christ,” launched in 1944 in anticipation of the end of the war, it was with professional histories as mission leaders deeply shaped by the financial scarcity that followed the Centenary. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that while their plans for the Crusade in some ways echoed the Centenary, they were also much more financially conservative than leaders of the Centenary had been. The Crusade, like the Centenary, had a similar and similarly broad range of objectives: “relief and reconstruction, evangelism, the church school, stewardship, and world order. Some of the ministries involved aid to Christians of other denominations who were still

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<sup>48</sup> Linda Gesling, *Mirror and Beacon: The History of Mission of The Methodist Church, 1939-1968*. (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2005), 74.

<sup>49</sup> Sledge, 399-401.

suffering on account of the war.”<sup>50</sup> Notably absent from the list was the opening of church-planting mission work in new areas, as the Centenary had tried and then mostly failed to enable. The financial goal for the Crusade was set at \$25 million, about a quarter of what the Centenary had actually taken in.<sup>51</sup> Mission leaders had learned from the Centenary not to be too optimistic in their projections.

Nevertheless, as Murry Leiffer wrote, “The financial goal was surpassed, and the church as a whole experienced a sense of dynamic achievement. So effective was the crusade, which had been designed as a campaign of fourteen months' duration, that toward the end of the quadrennium a new program called “The Advance for Christ and His Church” was devised and presented to the 1948 General Conference. This too was enthusiastically adopted.”<sup>52</sup> The success of the Crusade seemed to indicate that American Methodist mission had finally recovered from the curse of the Centenary. Indeed, there was a general resurgence in mission interest following WWII that lasted through the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the Centenary continued in this regard: Renewed interest in mission did not result in church-planting mission work in any new countries. By the time existing work had been stabilized following World War II, it had been a quarter century since American Methodists had started churches in a new country. Following the Centenary, they had lost that pioneering, evangelistic drive. It would not be until the early 1990s that what was by then called the General Board of Global Ministries started churches in a new country. This restart

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<sup>50</sup> Gesling, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Murray H. Leiffer, “United Methodism, 1940-60,” in Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes: Volume III* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 518.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



to international evangelistic work happened in Russia and ironically drew on some of the roots of the MECS Russia work started by the Centenary and then abandoned.

It may seem natural (and perhaps even commendable) from the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that American Methodists should have left off planting churches in new countries by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That assumption reflects by-now deeply internalized post-colonial views on mission. Yet as several comparisons show, American Methodists were not destined to take a seventy-year break from evangelistic mission in new countries. First, when one looks at the trajectory leading up to 1920, one sees a steady expansion in foreign mission work, especially by the MEC. Granted, much of this expansion was tied to and facilitated by European colonialism in a way that is worth critiquing. The point remains, however, that based on the record of the previous 70 years, it would have been unthinkable in 1920 that American Methodists would start work in no new countries for the next 70 years.

Second, a comparison between the MEC, MECS, The Methodist Church, and The United Methodist Church (UMC) with related Wesleyan holiness and African-American Methodist churches is enlightening. While the UMC and its predecessors were taking a 70-year break from opening work in new countries, their American relatives were not. Denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene, The Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church all started work in multiple new countries during this time period.

Third, a comparison with the UMC's track record since the 1990s is illustrative. The UMC currently has Mission Initiatives, that is, new church-planting mission work in nine countries. In addition, it has started churches in an additional half-dozen countries that are now no longer Mission Initiatives but part of the regular structure of annual conferences. This rate of

expansion of more than one new country every other year over the past 25 years suggests that the UMC and its predecessors could have been starting new work in the prior seven decades as well.

Thus, it seems a reasonable conclusion that this seventy-year hiatus from starting work in new countries was not inevitable but in fact a result of the financial failure of the Centenary, the consequent damage to new mission work begun with Centenary funds, and the long-term lessons drawn by mission leaders who watched this process play out. Certainly, other factors played a part as well, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and post-colonialism, but nonetheless, it is fair to see this gap as a legacy of the Centenary.

Moreover, this hiatus from starting work in new countries served to set up the most contentious conflict over mission in the past sixty years, one that still reverberates in the denomination today. In the 1950s and increasingly in the 1960s, the Board of Missions paid attention to the calls for increased autonomy and indigenous control in churches outside the US. It began making changes in missionary deployment accordingly. The number of missionaries serving pastoral and evangelistic roles decreased. The number of missionaries assigned to established fields in Asia and Latin America decreased as well.

The largest decline in missionaries came in the number of missionaries sent out by the Women's Division, which declined steadily following 1950. The number of missionaries sent out by the Foreign (and then World) Division actually increased through 1965, driven by an increasing number of missionaries sent to Africa.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, after the 1968 creation of The United Methodist Church, the total number of missionaries began dropping noticeably.<sup>54</sup> This shift in numbers was driven by a number of factors – changes in the capacities of younger

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<sup>53</sup> Gesling, 324-335.

<sup>54</sup> Robert J. Harman, *From Missions to Mission: The History of Mission of The United Methodist Church, 1968-2000*. (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2005), 94.

churches, changing mission philosophies, declining interest in the US – but among those factors was a lack of new mission fields. As existing mission churches matured, missionary roles from previous generations were no longer needed or available.

This shift, however, was unacceptable to many evangelical United Methodists, who faulted the Board of Missions for abandoning evangelistic outreach and shifting its commitments from mission to social justice. This paper is not the place to rehash the details of this debate. Nevertheless, it is critical to point out that the hiatus in starting mission work in new countries set the stage for this conflict in significant ways. Evangelicals wanted missionaries who focused on evangelism. The Board wanted to turn evangelistic responsibilities in existing mission work over to indigenous leaders. Without new areas of mission work, it was impossible to satisfy both groups. It is telling that when evangelicals started the Missionary Society for United Methodists in 1984, they focused on starting mission work in new countries.<sup>55</sup> The conflict over missionary roles between the Board of Global Ministries on one side and the Evangelical Missions Council and later Mission Society for United Methodists on the other was a defining feature of Methodist mission throughout the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. And it was set up by the hiatus in work in new countries that was the lasting legacy of the Centenary.

### **The Eclipse of the Centenary**

The greatest irony of this story is that as this conflict between the Board and evangelicals, which was the legacy of the Centenary, began heating up, the Centenary itself was fading from American Methodists' collective memory. Again, this eclipse is surprising. Not only was the Centenary initially seen as a resounding success, it had touched all aspects of church life in the United States. In addition to its significant impact on foreign mission, the Centenary also touched

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<sup>55</sup> Harman, 95.

upon immigration, urban work, rural work, African-American churches, education, evangelism, and home mission. The origins of the General Council of Finance and Administration and the evolution of apportionments are bound up with the story of the Centenary.<sup>56</sup> There were many possible points at which the Centenary could have deserved a mention in the annals of American Methodism.

Yet by the 1960s, the Centenary no longer looked like the “greatest movement in Methodism,” one that uplifted all the work of the church. It looked like a failure and/or an embarrassment. The failure of the Centenary has already been discussed. The Centenary, however, had become an embarrassment as well. Mission itself was beginning to fall into disregard in the 1960s, the victim of postcolonial critiques, the undercutting of women’s mission, a focus on domestic events, changing theologies, and trends toward secularization. Mission had once again become a marginal interest in the church. Moreover, in the minds of scholars in the 1960s and beyond, the excessively nationalistic, triumphalist, and frequently racist tone of the Centenary represented everything that was wrong with mission, everything that the church needed to move beyond. The Centenary became an embarrassing and unnecessary bit of family history for Methodists, best glossed over or omitted if possible.

Despite this aura of failure and embarrassment, the Centenary did survive into some of the historiography of the 1960s and 70s. Robert Moats Miller’s chapter in Emory Stevens Bucke’s three-volume history of American Methodism, published in 1964, contains this quite positive comment on the Centenary:

It would indeed be sad if Methodists did not look back with 'gratitude and gratification.' So many criticisms have been made of the Centenary and other denominational and interdenominational missionary movements of the early twentieth century, so many damaging observations have been drawn between the high hopes and the limited

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<sup>56</sup> Stephen Perry, “The Revival of Stewardship and the Creation of the World Service Commission in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1912-1924.” *Methodist History* 23:1 (July 1985), 223-239.

attainments of these movements, that it is easy to overlook a final fact: Millions of Christians in modest—and often very modest—financial circumstances made very real sacrifices so that millions of forgotten and burdened human beings throughout the world might receive a measure of material and spiritual succor.<sup>57</sup>

Copplestone's history of MEC missions from 1896-1939, which was published in 1973, makes occasional references to the Centenary and its impact on various aspects of MEC foreign mission work, though interestingly it does not contain an extended discussion of the movement itself.

Frederick Norwood devotes several pages to the Centenary in his standard history textbook of 1974, *The Story of American Methodism*.<sup>58</sup> An article per decade in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in *Methodist History* touched on some aspect of the Centenary as well.<sup>59</sup>

Yet the Centenary was missing from some significant treatments of American Methodist history, too. W. Richey Hogg's essay on mission in Bucke's edited volume contains no mention of the Centenary.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the Centenary is notably lacking from a series in which 1919 serves as a major (though unexplained) point of periodization.<sup>61</sup> Charles W. Ferguson's 1971 *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* includes no reference to the Centenary, either.<sup>62</sup>

The Centenary has received some recent renewed interest, mostly from Christopher Anderson's work on the Centenary Celebration and from Robert Sledge's extensive treatment of

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Moats Miller, "Methodism and American Society, 1900-1939," in Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes: Volume III* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 400.

<sup>58</sup> Norwood, 376-379.

<sup>59</sup> Lankford; Perry; Van Brunt.

<sup>60</sup> W. Richey Hogg, "The Missions of American Methodism," in Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes: Volume III* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), pp. 59-128.

<sup>61</sup> Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism in Three Volumes*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964).

<sup>62</sup> Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America*. (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

the Centenary in his history of MECS mission. Yet its omission from Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt's textbook is indicative of its current historiographical status. The Centenary has largely become unusable history that does not fit the stories we want to tell about American Methodism.

### **The Lessons of the Centenary**

Is there a way in which to make the Centenary into usable history and not just an embarrassing monument to American Methodist's past nationalism or financial foolishness? In many ways, we should not need to ask this question. To the extent that it absorbed the attention and efforts of tens of thousands of Methodists in the United States and elsewhere for several years, and to the extent that its fact-finding and financial efforts touched a wide variety of Methodist efforts in its time, the Centenary is deserving of mention in the annals of Methodist history. Yet if one needs moral or historical lessons drawn from the Centenary to warrant its mention, there are such lessons to be drawn. I will identify a few related to this paper's main focus on mission, revival, and history.

First, I think it is important to include even our misdeeds and embarrassing failures in our histories. We must be willing to learn from our pasts. Indeed, the road to revival often begins with repentance. Yet American Methodists cannot repent of the nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and other unsavory aspects of our ethos and our efforts in the world unless we are willing to acknowledge them. Moreover, that acknowledgement needs to be thorough-going and not just confined to the more egregious and safely past-tense examples of such American white nationalism, like the segregated Central Jurisdiction. We may learn, too, from confessing our financial foibles to better find a way to balance optimism in God's grace and the work of God's Spirit with prudent stewardship of the resources that God has bestowed us.

Second, I think the Centenary reminds us that revival cannot be manufactured. We may identify the antecedents of revival, such as prayer and repentance, but the fact remains that revival is not the natural consequence of adopting a particular program for church mobilization. It is the supernatural consequence of the movement of God's Spirit and therefore not able to be controlled by human means. If revival were merely the result of effective mobilization efforts, the Centenary would have produced an amazing revival. It didn't, and that is a reminder of the unpredictable nature of revival.

Third, the Centenary reminds us that looking back into the past is easy; letting the past effectively propel you into the future is hard. It is not the Centenary's historiography of John Stewart or the century of Methodist mission that preceded it that we critique. While there were good and bad elements in how the Centenary envisioned the past, it was primarily its vision of its present and future that we today find lacking. The Centenary had long-term consequences that were difficult to predict in 1919 and indeed went counter to organizer's hopes and aspirations for the movement. As historians, we know that all work of history-telling will be subject to critique by future generations. Nevertheless, it is attempts to use the past to mobilize the present for the sake of the future that are the most fraught with danger.

I have the responsibility to risk just such an attempt myself. I am organizing efforts to commemorate the Bicentennial of American Methodist missions over the next year. This effort is a successor to the Centenary movement. Yet it is a successor very different in tenor and scope from the original. There will be no \$2 billion-dollar fundraising campaign, no spectacle of a Methodist world's fair, no celebration of American nationalism, triumphalism, or white supremacy. There are not seven committees, twenty-one departments, or over a dozen paid staff working on the Bicentennial. It will be an altogether more modest and humbler affair.

The Mission Bicentennial includes several elements: a website of Methodist mission profiles ([www.methodistmission200.org](http://www.methodistmission200.org)), a conference of scholars and practitioners in April 2019, and engagement with Wyandotte leaders in Upper Sandusky, OH, the site of John Stewart's work, in September 2019. Throughout, the bicentennial will try, though imperfectly, to reflect the increasingly global nature of the church and mission. The conference in April 2019, to be held at Emory University and co-sponsored by Global Ministries and Candler School of Theology, will not be a celebration of triumphalist mission but instead an opportunity for those interested in mission from around the globe to meet, form relationships, and discern how God might work through their partnerships.

My hope and the hope of others involved in the planning is that the Bicentennial will lead to an increased interest in mission among United Methodists. Yet I know better than to predict a revival stemming from these efforts. They will undoubtedly have effects that I cannot predict and will be impossible to fully discern for many years. If any movement toward revival is part of this legacy of the Bicentennial, it will not be because of diligent work or the brilliance of the plans laid. It will be because the Holy Spirit decides, for its own purposes, to work through humble human offerings. I have learned (I hope) from the Centenary, and I hope others may too.