

An Account of the General Conference of 1796

by Nathan Bangs

The General Conference of 1796 reviewed the economy of the Methodist Episcopal Church and made necessary alterations and additions to the Discipline, including the creation of a fund for the relief of necessitous preachers and the establishment of a deed of settlement to secure church property permanently to the church.

Scripture: 1 Timothy 5:17

Topics: "Church History", "Methodist Heritage"

Description

Nathan Bangs preaches about the historical General Conference in Baltimore in 1796, where significant decisions were made to strengthen the Methodist Episcopal Church. The conference established a fund for the relief of needy preachers and their families, created a deed of settlement to secure church property, and made provisions for local preachers. The conference also addressed the issue of spirituous liquors, emphasizing abstinence and prohibition. Dr. Coke was appointed as an assistant bishop to assist Bishop Asbury in his episcopal duties, demonstrating a spirit of unity and cooperation.

Transcript

The conference assembled in the city of Baltimore, October 20th, 1796, and was composed of one hundred and twenty members. As there were no restrictions upon the powers of the conference at that time, they felt themselves at liberty to review our entire economy, and to make such alterations and additions to the Discipline as they might consider would best promote the interests of the Church. Up to this time the bishops had a discretionary power to appoint as many annual conferences as they might judge would be most for the convenience of the preachers and people; but this conference fixed their bounds, and determined that their number should be but six, with a proviso that, if the bishop saw proper, they might form an additional one in the province of Maine.

We have already seen that the strength of the itinerating ministry was very much weakened, from year to year, by reason of the numerous locations which took place at the several annual conferences. This originated, in part at least, from the inadequate support which was provided for the preachers and their families, especially in the new settlements. The hardships to which they were exposed in traversing the wilderness, their scanty fare, and the excessive labors they were obliged to perform, brought on many of them premature old age, and in many instances they contracted those diseases which terminated in death. By these means, while some were doomed to linger on in feebleness and poverty, others were called to leave their widows and orphan children, to suffer from the privations brought upon them by the

sacrifices of their devoted husbands and parents. With such prospects before them, many, as before stated, were induced to forsake the itinerant field, in the hope of providing more adequately for themselves and families, while it may be presumed that some were actuated more from mercenary motives than merely from a fear of temporal want.

To remedy an evil of such magnitude, and take away, as far as possible, all temptations to forsake the work of spreading the gospel by an itinerant ministry, many of the most devoted friends of the cause had looked with anxious hearts for some suitable means. The subject came up for consideration before this General Conference, and they finally resolved to create a fund for the relief of necessitous preachers, their wives, widows, and orphans. This was soon after incorporated by the legislature of Pennsylvania, under the following

"ARTICLES OF ASSOCIATION

Of the Trustees of the Fund for the Relief and Support of the itinerant, superannuated, and worn-out Ministers and Preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America their Wives and Children, Widows and Orphans.

ARTICLE 1. -- It is provided and declared, that the name, style, and title of this corporation shall be, 'The Trustees of the Fund for the Relief and Support of the itinerant superannuated, and worn-out Ministers and Preachers of the Episcopal Church, (in the United States of America,) their Wives and Children, Widows and Orphans;' and that the said trustees shall consist of John Dickins, Thomas Haskins; Jacob Baker, Henry Manly, Burton Wallace, Josiah Lusby, Hugh Smith, Caleb North, and Cornelius Comegys, and their successors, qualified and appointed as is hereinafter mentioned. And they are hereby vested with full powers for carrying into effect the benevolent and charitable purposes in this instrument mentioned and declared.

ARTICLE 2. -- It is provided and declared, that the said trustees, and their successors, by the name, style, and title aforesaid, shall be able and capable in law to make, receive, have, hold, possess, and enjoy, all, and all manner of lands, tenements, rents, annuities, franchises, and hereditaments, and any sum or sums of money, and any manner and portion of goods and chattels, given, granted, or devised unto them or their successors, by any person or persons, bodies politic or corporate, agreeable to the intention of the donors respectively, and according to the objects, articles, and conditions, in this instrument mentioned and declared; and by the name, style, and title aforesaid, shall be able and capable in law, to sue and be sued, plead and be impleaded, in any court or courts, before any judge or judges, justice or justices, in all manner of suits, complaints, pleas, causes, matters, and demands whatsoever, and all and every matter therein to do, in as full and effectual a manner as any other person or persons, bodies politic and corporate, within this commonwealth may or can do.

ARTICLE 3. -- It is provided and declared, that in case of the death, resignation, or expulsion from membership (according to the rules and discipline from time to time adopted by the itinerant ministers and preachers of the said Church, in their General Conference assembled) of any one or more of the members of the said corporation, or their successors, then, and in such case, it shall be the duty of the remaining trustees to nominate double the number of those whose seats may have been vacated as aforesaid, and to make a representation thereof, in writing, to the itinerant ministers and preachers of the said Church in their next General Conference assembled; whose duty it shall be then and there to proceed to choose, and, by a majority of votes, appoint one or more persons (as the case may be) out of the whole number of

those nominated by the trustees, as aforesaid, to fill such vacancy or vacancies, in order to keep up the number of nine trustees for ever: and upon such choice and appointment a certificate shall issue from the said General Conference signed by their president and countersigned by their secretary, and directed to the trustees of the said corporation, containing the name or names of the person or persons so chosen and appointed, which said certificate shall be registered in the books of the said corporation; and the person or persons thus chosen and appointed shall be vested with all the powers and immunities of a member of the said corporation -- provided, nevertheless, that no person or persons shall be eligible as a trustee or trustees of the said corporation who has not been a member of the said Church (according to the rules and discipline thereof, as aforesaid) at least five years next preceding his or their election and appointment as aforesaid, and who shall not be at least twenty-five years of age.

ARTICLE 4. -- It is provided and declared, that the said corporation shall meet at least once in every year (for the dispatch of their necessary business) at such time and place as a majority of them may judge most convenient and proper: and when so met they shall have power to make such by-laws, rules, and regulations for their government, in the management of their affairs, as a majority of them may judge necessary; and also at every such annual meeting they shall proceed to choose, and by a majority of votes appoint two of their own number to act, the one as president, and the other as secretary, to the said corporation, who may continue them in office from year to year, as a majority of the said corporation may think proper.

ARTICLE 5. -- It is provided and declared, that if, at any time hereafter, a majority of the trustees should deem it expedient, by deed or otherwise, to grant, bargain, sell, convey, or otherwise dispose of any part or parcel of the estate, real or personal, of, and belonging to, the said corporation, or charge or incumber the same, then, and in such case, it shall be their duty to make a representation thereof in writing to the itinerant ministers and preachers of the said Church, in their next General Conference assembled, who shall then and there judge of the necessity or expediency of such proposed sale; and if two-thirds of the ministers and preachers, assembled as aforesaid, shall consent and agree thereto, a certificate shall issue from the said General Conference, signed by their president and countersigned by their secretary, declaring such approbation and consent, and specifying the kind and amount of the property to be sold or otherwise disposed of; which certificate shall be transmitted to the said trustees, who shall cause the same to be recorded in the books of the said corporation -- provided, always, that the moneys arising from such licensed sale shall be vested by the said trustees (as soon as conveniently may be) in such other securities and property as, in the judgment of a majority of them, will be most productive and safe; and provided farther, that the annual interest and income, arising from the money so vested, shall be exclusively applied in the manner and for the uses and purposes in this instrument mentioned and declared.

ARTICLE 6. -- It is provided and declared, that the annual rents, interest, and income of the estate, real and personal, which now does, or at any time hereafter may belong to the said corporation and their successors, shall by them be held subject to the exclusive order and control of the itinerant ministers and preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, in their General Conference (from time to time) assembled: and the said ministers and preachers, thus assembled, are hereby vested with full powers to appropriate and point out the mode of applying the same to the objects, under the limitations, and for the uses and purposes herein mentioned and expressly declared.

ARTICLE 7. -- It is provided and declared, that the object and design of the fund hereby intended to be established is expressly for the purposes of relieving the distresses, and supplying the deficiencies of the

itinerant and superannuated or worn-out ministers and preachers of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America who remain in connection with, and continue subject to, the order and control of, the General Conference; as also for the relief of the wives and children, widows and orphans, of such ministers and preachers, and for no other use, intent, or purpose whatever.

ARTICLE 8. -- It is provided and declared, that no sum exceeding sixty-four dollars shall in any one year be appropriated and applied to the use of an itinerant, superannuated, or worn-out single minister or preacher; also that no sum exceeding one hundred and twenty-eight dollars, in any one year, shall be applied to the use of an itinerant, superannuated, or worn-out married minister or preacher and that no sum exceeding sixty-four dollars, in any one year, shall be applied to the use of each widow of such ministers and preachers as are herein before mentioned and described and also that no sum exceeding sixteen dollars shall be applied, in any one year, to the use of each child or orphan, of such ministers and preachers as are herein before particularly mentioned and described.

ARTICLE 9. -- It is provided and declared, that no sum or sums of money, and or any pretense whatever, shall be drawn from the fund hereby intended to be established, other than for the uses and purposes, and under the limitations and restrictions, herein before expressly mentioned and declared -- provided, nevertheless, that the trustees of the said corporation and their successors shall have power to draw and apply, from time to time, so much money belonging to the said fund as in the judgment of a majority of them may be wanting to defray all the necessary expense of conducting the business of the said corporation.

ARTICLE 10. -- It is provided and declared, that it shall be the duty of the trustees to cause regular and fair accounts to be kept (in books to be provided for that purpose) of the funds of the said corporation, as well as it respects the kind and amount of the capital stock, and of the annual interest and income thereof, as of all and every sum or sums of money which shall from time to time be drawn therefrom, for the objects, under the limitations, and for the uses and purposes herein before particularly mentioned and declared. And farther, it shall be the duty of the said trustees and their successors, at every General Conference of the preachers as aforesaid, to prepare and lay before them a statement of the affairs of the said fund, for their inspection and examination; which said statement shall be signed by the president and countersigned by the secretary of the said corporation, certifying that the same is fair and correct."

It was provided, by a resolution of the General Conference, that the objects of this fund should be presented in an address to our brethren and friends, and that they should be invited to fill it up by voluntary contributions, donations, and bequests. This was accordingly done, and some subscribed liberally, while others stood aloof from it, thinking it most advisable to let the funds remain in the hands of the people, to be drawn out as they might be needed. Though the creation of the chartered fund originated from the purest motives, and has been kept up and superintended by some of the most benevolent spirits in the Church, yet it has never been able to pay more than from ninety to one hundred dollars a year to each annual conference; and as this small amount would not, when divided among the several claimants, give to each but about two dollars a year, it may be questioned whether, by inducing a false dependence in the public mind, this fund has not defeated the objects of its institution, and disappointed the expectations of its benevolent founders and patrons. It has continued, however, in existence, has gradually increased in its resources, and its avails are scrupulously applied according to the provisions of its charter; and hence for the good it has done we have reason to be thankful, and especially to those generous men who have, from time to time, gratuitously superintended its affairs, and impartially distributed its avails.

At this conference, with a view to secure church property permanently to the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church, according to the true intent and meaning of the donors and contributors, with as little expense as possible, the form of a deed of settlement was drawn up and inserted in the Discipline. The provisions of the Discipline, however, in respect to this deed, have been modified from time to time, so as to conform to the usages of law in the several states and territories, merely requiring deeds of trust to be so drawn as to "secure the premises firmly and permanently to the Methodist Episcopal Church," to be held in trust by a board of trustees -- elected by the people where the laws of the states respectively so require, or where no such laws exist, they are to be appointed by the preacher in charge, or by the presiding elder of the district -- for the use of the members of said church in the place where the property is located. See Dis., part ii, sec. 2.

As many have affirmed that all church property is owned by the annual conferences, it may be proper to remark, that they have no legal claim to the property, nor have they sought, nor do they seek, any other control over it than to be permitted "to preach and expound God's word" in the churches, and to administer the discipline and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As to the property itself, it is vested in a board of trustees, elected according to the provisions of law, where such law exists, who are held responsible as Methodists to the quarterly meeting conference of their circuit for the manner in which they discharge their trusts; while the conferences claim the right of using the houses of worship, in conformity to the object for which they were erected, for religious and spiritual purposes only, according to the requisitions of the doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It is true, the trustees are not permitted to alienate the property for other purposes than those for which it was procured, nor are they permitted to exclude from the pulpits those ministers who are regularly sent to them according to the regulations of the Church to which they belong. And is not this as it should be? Should not church property be held sacredly for the sole purposes to which it has been devoted, and which were specified in the deed of settlement when it was enfeoffed to the church? ["enfeoffed to the church:" made a holding of, placed under the control of, the church-- DVM]

These remarks have been called for by the oft-repeated and oft-refuted slander, that the Methodist bishops and conferences are the legal owners of the houses of worship which are occupied within our bounds. The property belongs to the members of the church worshipping in that place, and they have committed it to trustees, generally of their own choosing, for safe keeping, that it may be used for the exclusive purpose for which it was procured, namely, to be devoted in perpetuity to the interests of true religion, as now taught, explained, and enforced by the Methodist Episcopal Church.

We have already seen that our economy recognizes a class of laborers denominated local preachers, who attend to secular concerns for a livelihood, and preach occasionally without fee or reward, as their dispositions and circumstances will allow. The number of these had become considerably increased in consequence of the numerous locations before noticed, as well by licensing those who were thought to possess gifts and grace for usefulness in the Church. This useful class of men were often called upon to assist the traveling preachers in their work, to fill vacancies occasioned by sickness or death, in addition to their regular appointments on the Sabbath. In consequence of these things, the present General Conference made the following provisions respecting a local preacher: --

He must receive a license, after being examined and approved, from the quarterly meeting conference, provided he be recommended by the class to which he belongs.

After improving his gifts acceptably for four years, by being suitably recommended to an annual conference, he was to be eligible to the office of a deacon.

Whenever a local preacher filled the place of a traveling preacher, if the latter were unable from sickness or other unavoidable means to fill his own appointments, he was to be allowed a sum in proportion to the allowance of the traveling preacher, to be raised by the circuit; or if the traveling preacher were absent from other causes, his substitute was to be paid out of his allowance.

But if the local preacher were distressed in his circumstances, in consequence of his services in the Church, by applying to the quarterly conference, he might receive such relief as they might see proper to afford him, after the allowance of the traveling preachers and their families were paid.

A rule was made for the trial of a local preacher before his peers, differing but little from the one now in existence, which, as the regulations respecting them have been modified from time to time, I shall notice more particularly in another place. Before this rule was passed, local preachers had been tried before the society to which they belonged, the same as if they were but private members. Since this period, however, they have been amenable either to those of their own grade in the ministry or to the quarterly meeting conference.

The following rule respecting the use and sale of spirituous liquors was made, and still continues, unhappily, [Bangs apparently thought that the regulation was faulty, in that it seemed to give tacit legitimacy to some use of spirituous liquors. -- DVM] the standing regulation on this subject: --

"If any member of our society retail or give spirituous liquors, and any thing disorderly be transacted under his roof on this account, the preacher who has the oversight of the circuit shall proceed against him as in the case of other immoralities; and the person accused shall be cleared, suspended; or excluded, according to his conduct, as on other charges of immorality."

By turning to the form of Discipline published in 1789, which is said to be fifth edition, we find the following item in the General Rules: --

"Drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them."

This was an alteration from the rule of Mr. Wesley, as that allowed the use of them in cases of "extreme necessity," -- whereas this prohibits all use of them, as a drink, and even forbids the "buying or selling" them under any circumstances. At what time or by whose influence the rule was so altered as to read as it now stands in the Discipline, I have not been able to ascertain, but presume it must have been some time prior to the year 1796, as it seems the pernicious custom of retailing them had become so offensive at this time as to require a special enactment of the General Conference to check the unhallowed practice; for when people begin to make laws with a view to regulate any particular practice, it is an evidence that the practice itself is, in some sense, sanctioned. It is to be hoped that the time is not far distant when the entire use of spirituous liquors shall be banished from the world, but more especially from the church of God: and that to traffic in them, by either manufacturing, buying or selling them, shall be considered as dishonorable, as it is now to become inebriated by their excessive use.

In consequence of the extension of the work, the frequent interruptions in the health of Bishop Asbury, and the long absence of Dr. Coke from the continent every year, it was considered expedient by many members to elect and consecrate some person as an assistant bishop. After consulting each other in

reference to the manner in which the person should be elected, Dr. Coke put an end to the discussion by offering himself unreservedly to the American Methodists. This offer was accepted by the conference, and Dr. Coke gave them the following certificate in writing: --

"I offer myself to my American brethren entirely to their service, all I am and have, with my talents and labors in every respect, without any mental reservation whatever, to labor among them and to assist Bishop Asbury; not to station the preachers at any time when he is present; but to exercise all the episcopal duties, when I hold a conference in his absence, and by his consent, and to visit the West Indies and France, when there is an opening and I can be spared.

Signed, Thomas Coke." Conference Room, Baltimore, Oct. 27, 1796."

This instrument was given and accepted in good faith, and the obligation was sacredly fulfilled on the part of Dr. Coke, until he was honorably released from it by his American brethren. In pursuance of this engagement, Dr. Coke continued on the American continent as the "friend and colleague" of Bishop Asbury, laboring with great acceptance and usefulness among the people in different parts of the country, until the 6th of February, when he took his departure from Charleston, South Carolina, for Europe. Having a very tempestuous passage, the ship suffered severely, and though they arrived in the Irish channel in twenty-five days, they were there becalmed nearly sixteen days, during which time the following curious incident occurred, which shows the superstition to which seamen, otherwise intelligent, are often subjected.

During the calm Dr. Coke used his time in reading a large folio volume. "At length," says his biographer, "being impelled more violently by a tide of superstition, than his vessel was by natural breezes, the captain exclaimed in unequivocal terms, 'We shall never have a wind until that book is finished.' 'Sir, I will put it aside,' replied Dr. Coke. 'No,' rejoined the captain, that will not do; it must be finished, or we shall have no wind.' Dr. Coke continued reading, and 'I doubt not,' he observes, 'that the captain was somewhat confirmed in his opinion; for just as I had finished the book, the wind sprung up, and in six and thirty hours brought us into the harbor.' "

Having finished the labors of this conference, Bishop Asbury expressing his gladness that the session was over, went to his accustomed work, and the preachers to their respective fields of labor, being "determined to know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/nathan-bangs/an-account-of-the-general-conference-of-1796/>

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