

The First Delegated General Conference of 1812

by Nathan Bangs

The First Delegated General Conference of 1812 was a pivotal event in the history of the Methodist Church, marking significant decisions about its future and the role of local deacons in the church.

Scripture: Proverbs 11:14, 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, Ephesians 4:16, 1 Timothy 5:17, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:2, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Church Governance", "Ecclesiastical Authority"

Description

In a detailed account of the General Conference discussions on the appointment of presiding elders in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the arguments for and against the proposed change are presented. Those in favor of the change emphasized the need for a voice in the election of presiding elders, concerns over unchecked episcopal power, and the importance of local knowledge in stationing preachers. On the other hand, opponents argued that the episcopacy needed control over appointments for efficient administration, the necessity of maintaining responsibility within the episcopacy, and the practical challenges of implementing a stationing committee. Ultimately, after a series of debates and compromises, the resolutions to change the appointment process were suspended and later rescinded, leading to a period of unity and cooperation within the Church.

Transcript

We have traced the progress of Methodism from its origin to the present period. We have seen it beginning in a small class consisting of only five members in the city of New York, and under the auspices of divine providence and grace, growing up to a considerable society, and chiefly by the instrumentality of a local preacher who had little to recommend him to public favor but the sincerity of his zeal, the fervor of his piety, and the influence he derived from his connection with such a man as John Wesley; and thence breaking out, under the labors of Boardman and Pilmoor, and the more energetic exertions of Asbury, into circuits and quarterly meeting conferences; until, in imitation of the practice which had obtained in Europe, a regular conference was convened in Philadelphia under the superintendence of Rankin. As it continued to enlarge its dimensions by means of the labors of these men, their coadjutors, and successors, this conference became divided and subdivided into several others, until it was found expedient to concentrate the councils of the church in one General Conference, composed of all the traveling elders who might be disposed to attend.

As, however, the work continued to expand in every direction until it became co-extensive with the settlements which were spread over this large country, comprehending the cities and villages, the denser population of the one and the sparser settlements of the new states and territories, to prevent a useless expenditure of time, labor, and money, as well as to secure greater harmony in counsel and dispatch of business, it was found necessary to lessen the number who should compose this General Conference, by selecting a specific number from among the elders of each annual conference. To bring all the traveling elders together, scattered as they were among the circuits and stations from Maine to Louisiana, and thence along the waters of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio, and their tributary streams; the shores of lakes Erie and Ontario and the banks of the St. Lawrence to Montreal and Quebec, would be involving an expense of time and money which neither members the preachers nor people were able to bear, or if able, they could give no reasonable account for such a waste of expenditure. On the other hand, if those in the extreme parts of the work were deterred from attending the General Conference, on account of the difficulties arising from distance or poverty, or from the hazards to the souls of the people by such a long absence from their charge, then the affairs of the Church would be left in the hands of some of the most central of the annual conferences, who might not understand the circumstances and wants of their brethren in the exterior parts of the work. Every consideration, therefore, of justice and expediency dictated the policy of the measure which, in 1808, provided for a delegated General Conference.

This conference assembled in the city of New York, on the first day of May, 1812. And as this is the first delegated General Conference, the reader will doubtless be pleased to have the names of the delegates, which are here given as they stand on the Journal of the conference. They are as follows: --

New York Conference:

William Anson, Nathan Bangs, Truman Bishop, Laban Clark, Seth Crowell, Freeborn Garrettson, Aaron Hunt, Samuel Merwin, Daniel Ostrander, William Phoebus, Eben Smith, Henry Stead.

New England Conference:

Oliver Beale, Elijah Hedding, Asa Kent, George Pickering, Solomon Sias, Joshua Soule, William Stephens, Daniel Webb, Joel Winch.

Genesee Conference:

Elijah Batchelor, James Kelsey, William B. Lacy, Timothy Lee, Anning Owen, William Snow.

Western Conference:

James Axley, Lawner Blackman, John Collins, William Houston, Benjamin Lakin, Samuel Parker, William Pattison, Isaac Quinn, James Quinn, John Sale, Frederick Stier, Thomas Stillwell, David Young,

South Carolina Conference:

Daniel Asbury, Samuel Dunwoody, James Glenn, Hilliard Judge, William M. Kennedy, Lewis Myers, Lovick Pierce, Joseph Tarpley, Joseph Travis.

Virginia Conference:

John Ballew, James M. Boyd, Philip Bruce, John Buxton, Charles Callaway, Thomas L. Douglass, John Early, Cannnillum H. Hines, William Jean, Richard Lattimore, Jesse Lee.

Baltimore Conference:

Robert Burch, Christopher Frye, Enoch George, Jacob Gruber, Hamilton Jefferson, Nelson Reed, Robert R. Roberts, William Ryland, Asa Shin, Henry Smith, James Smith, Nicholas Snethen, Joseph Toy, Joshua Wells.

Philadelphia Conference:

David Bartine, James Bateman, Thomas Boring, Thomas Burch, Michael Coate, Ezekiel Cooper, John McClaskey, Stephen G. Roszel, Thomas F. Sargent, Asa Smith, Richard Sneath, John Walker, Thomas Ware, George Woolley.

Bishops Asbury and McKendree were present, and the conference was opened by the former, by reading a portion of the Holy Scriptures and prayer; after which the names of the delegates were called by a temporary secretary, and they presented the certificates of their election by the several annual conferences. This being finished, Daniel Hitt, the book agent, not being one of the delegates, was elected secretary.

This being a delegated conference, acting under the restrictions imposed upon it by the body by which it was constituted, it was found necessary to frame a set of new rules to guide the members in their deliberations and decisions. A committee was accordingly appointed for the purpose of preparing rules, and a long time was spent in discussing and adopting them, and after they were adopted, being an abridgment of the congressional rules found in Jefferson's Manual, they were to the conference something like Saul's armor to David: they did not like them; and they have long since been laid aside as not only useless but perplexing. Men of plain common sense, acting with a simple desire to accomplish the greatest good by the use of the best means, need but a few plain and simple rules, easily understood, to guide them in their action.

After the adoption of the rules, and the transaction of some other preliminary business, a letter (a copy of which I have not been able to find) from Dr. Coke was read to the conference, expressive of his determination to visit the East Indies on a grand missionary enterprise, and of his unabated attachment to his American brethren¹ After this, Bishop McKendree presented the conference with the following address, which was the first time that either of the presidents submitted his views to the conference in writing: --

"To the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, now assembled in the city of New York.

"Dear Brethren: -- My relation to you, and the connection in general, seems, in my opinion, to make it necessary that I should address you in some way, by which you may get possession of some information, perhaps not otherwise to be obtained by many of you.

"It is now four years since, by your appointment, it became my duty jointly to superintend our extensive and very important charge. With anxious solicitude, and good wishes, I have looked forward to this General Conference. The appointed time is come, and the Lord has graciously permitted us to meet according to appointment, for which I hope we are prepared jointly to praise and adore his goodness.

"Upon examination, you will find the work of the Lord is prospering in our hands. Our important charge has greatly increased since the last General Conference: we have had an increase of nearly forty thousand members. At present, we have about one hundred and ninety thousand members, upward of two

thousand local, and about even hundred traveling preachers, in our connection, and these widely scattered over seventeen states, besides the Canadas and several of the territorial settlements.

Thus situated, it must be expected, in the present state of things, that the counsel and direction of your united wisdom will be necessary to preserve the harmony and peace of the body, as well as co-operation of the traveling and local ministry, in carrying on the blessed work of reformation which the Lord has been pleased to effect, through our instrumentality. To deserve the confidence of the local ministry and membership, as well as to retain confidence in ourselves, and in each other, is undoubtedly our duty; and if we consider that those who are to confide in us are a collection from all classes and descriptions from all countries of which the nation is composed, promiscuously scattered over this vast continent, men who were originally of different educations, manners, habits, and opinions, we shall see the difficulty as well as the importance of this part of our charge.

"In order to enjoy the comforts of peace and union among us, we must 'love one another;' but this cannot abide where confidence does not exist and purity of intention, manifested by proper actions, is the very foundation and support of confidence; thus, 'united, we stand;' each member is a support to the body, and the body supports each member; but if confidence fails, love will grow cold, peace will be broken, and 'divided, we fall.' It therefore becomes this body, which, by its example, is to move the passions and direct the course of thousands of ministers, and tens of thousands of members, to pay strict attention to the simplicity of gospel manners, and to do every thing as in the immediate presence of God. If we consider the nature of our business, and the influence of civil governments, and political measures, it will hardly be expected that every individual in so large a body as you form will continually be sufficiently and strictly evangelical in all cases; it is therefore hoped in cases of failure, that the wisdom and firmness of your united prudence as a body will counteract evil effects by a well-ordered and prudent disapprobation and better example. Church and state should never be assimilated.

"Connected as I am with you, and the connection in general, I feel it a part of my duty to submit to your consideration the appointment of the Genesee Conference; and perhaps it may be for the general good, if, in your wisdom you should think proper to take into consideration a division of the work in the western country, and a proper arrangement of the work in general and the magnitude and extent of the work which the Lord has graciously pleased to prosper in our hands, may make it proper for you to inquire if the work is sufficiently within the oversight of the superintendency, and to make such arrangements and provision as your wisdom may approve. I would also suggest the necessity of keeping in view, not only the traveling, but the relation and situation of our local brethren; and to pursue that plan which may render the whole the most useful; and it may also be proper to bring into view any unfinished business (if any) which we had under consideration at our last General Conference. Hitherto, as a body, we have been preserved, by our well-digested system of rules, which are as sinews to the body, and form the bonds of our union. But it is evident, both from Scripture and experience, that men, even good men, may depart from first principles and the best of rules; it may therefore be proper for you to pay some attention to the administration, to know the state both of the traveling and local ministry, as it relates to doctrine, discipline, and practice.

Before I conclude, permit me, my dear brethren, to express a few thoughts concerning the view I have of the relation in which I stand connected with this body. It is only by virtue of a delegated power from the General Conference; that I hold the reins of government. I consider myself bound by virtue of the same authority to exercise discipline in perfect conformity to the rules of the Church, to the best of my ability and judgment. I consider my self justly accountable, not for the system of government, but for my administration, and ought therefore to be ready to answer in General Conference for past conduct, and be

willing to receive information and advice, to perfect future operations and I wish my brethren to feel themselves perfectly easy and at liberty.

"I shall take the liberty here to present my grateful acknowledgments for the high degree of confidence which my beloved brethren have placed in me, and especially for the able counsel and seasonable support afforded by many, which has, I believe, with the divine aid, preserved and supported me. Dear brethren, such are the effects of our high responsibility, connected with a consciousness of the insufficiency of my talents for so great a work, that I move with trembling. Your eyes and the eyes of the Lord are upon me for good. We shall rejoice together to see the armies of Israel wisely conducted in all their ranks, carrying the triumphs of the Redeemer's kingdom to the ends of the earth and the Lord will rejoice to make his ministers a flame of fire. In you I have confidence, and on you I depend for aid, and above all, I trust in divine aid. Influenced by these considerations, and with my situation in full view, I cannot entertain a thought of bearing such awful accountability longer than I am persuaded my services are useful to the Church of God, and feel a confidence of being aided by your counsel and support, which is with you to give in any way or form you judge proper. And while I join with you, my dear brethren, in pure gospel simplicity, to commit and recommend ourselves and our several charges to the special care of the great head of the Church, I remain, with sentiments of love and confidence, your servant in the gospel of Christ,

"William. McKendree.

"New York, May 5th, 1812."

This address was referred to appropriate committees, after which Bishop Asbury, addressing himself extemporaneously to Bishop McKendree, and through him to the conference, gave a historical sketch of the rise and progress of Methodism in this country, its present state and prospects, and concluded by urging upon the General Conference the expediency of increasing the number of annual conferences for the convenience of the preachers, and as a measure of economy to the whole Church; and the committees were instructed to take these matters into consideration, in connection with the several portions of Bishop McKendree's address.

After a full interchange of thoughts in reference to adding one more to the number of bishops, as recommended by Bishop McKendree, as it was understood he intended by the question "whether the work is sufficiently within the oversight of the superintendency," the committee reported that they "did not see their way clear to recommend any alteration or additions" which was concurred in by the conference.

Bishop Asbury had, previous to the session of this conference, expressed a desire once more to visit his native land from which he had now been absent about forty-one years; and in his communication to the conference he requested them to give him their advice on the propriety of doing it soon after the adjournment of conference. The committee on the episcopacy, having reported against increasing the number of bishops, say in reference to this subject: "It is our sincere desire and request, that Bishop Asbury would relinquish his thoughts of visiting England, and confine his labors to the American connection so long as God may preserve his life." In this the conference fully concurred, and the bishop cheerfully relinquished his design.

In regard to creating the Genesee conference, respecting which some had demurred on account of the illegality of the measure, as they alleged, the conference voted in its favor, and this justified the bishops in what they had done in the premises.

In respect to the division of the work in the western country, which was earnestly recommended by both the bishops, the conference consented to divide the Western conference into two, to be called the Ohio and Tennessee conferences; the former to comprehend the Salt river, Kentucky, Miami, and Muskingum districts; the latter, the Holston, Nashville, Cumberland, Wabash, and Illinois districts; and then gave authority to the bishops, in the interval of the General Conference, if they should find it necessary, to establish another conference down the Mississippi, provided that no circuit or district shall be incorporated in such conference, without its consent -- a precaution that marks the jealousy with which the General Conference guarded the rights of annual conferences, against what they considered the encroachments of episcopal prerogative -- and also a disposition, frequently exemplified before, to comprehend as large a territory as possible within the bounds of each annual conference, however inconvenient it might be to preachers and people -- mistaken policy, it is believed, which has been since gradually rectified.

The most important act of this General Conference was the making local deacons eligible to the office of elders. This measure elicited a very strong debate, in which the talent of the most able members was brought into requisition, both for and against it. Those who were in favor of the measure, contended that the services of such were needed in the various parts of the work, where the number of traveling elders was few, to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to perform the ceremony of marriage and burial of the dead; -- that being recognized by our church as ministers of the gospel, they were also entitled, equally with their traveling brethren, to full powers as elders in the Church of God; -- and as conferring them would add dignity and importance to their character, it would also increase their usefulness, and consequently attach them more strongly to their traveling brethren.

To this it was answered that the ordination service implied a covenant transaction, in which the person receiving orders took upon himself the charge of the flock of Christ, which a local elder in our Church could not do, and therefore could not fulfill his covenant obligations, inasmuch as he did not, nor could he as a mere local minister, devote himself exclusively to the work of the ministry; -- that as to the right he had to full orders, we must distinguish between original, unalienable, and acquired rights, between civil, political, and ecclesiastical rights. As to original or natural right, no one pretended that a local preacher had it; -- as to acquired, according to the economy of our Church he could not acquire it, because no such provision had been made as the reward of services, however meritorious, this being reserved for traveling preachers alone, who sacrificed their all of temporal emolument and devoted themselves entirely to the service of the Church; as to civil or political right, he could claim none, as the civil polity of our country did not interfere in religious matters at all; -- and therefore it only remained to inquire whether our local deacons had an ecclesiastical right to the order of elders; and this was the very question at issue, and therefore they could have none until it be given to them by the Church to which they belong. The question then must be decided, it was contended, on the principles of expediency and the probable utility of the measure; and the majority finally decided that the privilege ought to be granted them on this ground -- they might be needed, and might therefore be useful.

Having thus decided in favor of granting them elders' orders, the following regulations were adopted as the conditions on which the bishops were permitted to confer them, which show plainly that this privilege was granted solely on the presumption that in every case where ordinations of this character were allowed, there was an imperious call for the services of such elders, and not because they could claim them as a right originating from their relation to the Church. The regulations were as follows: --

A local deacon shall be eligible to the office of an elder, and on the following regulations and restrictions, viz., he shall have preached four years from the time he was ordained a deacon; and shall obtain a

recommendation of two-thirds from the quarterly conference of which he is a member, signed by the president and countersigned by the secretary, certifying his qualifications in doctrine, discipline, talents, and usefulness; and the necessity of the official services of such local elder in the circuit where he resides. He shall, if he cannot be present, send to the annual conference a note certifying his belief in the doctrine and discipline of our Church: the whole being examined and approved by the annual conference, he shall be ordained -- provided that no slaveholder shall be eligible to the office of local elder, in any state or territory where the civil laws will admit emancipation, and suffer the liberated slave to enjoy his freedom."

The following item was added to the section inspecting the settlement of disputes which might arise among brethren in the Church: --

"Whenever a complaint is made against any member of our church for the nonpayment of debt: when the accounts are adjusted, and the amount properly ascertained, the preacher having the charge shall call the debtor before a committee of at least three, to say why he does not make payment; and if further time is requested, the committee shall determine whether it ought to be granted, and what security, or if any, should be given, to secure the payment and in case the debtor should refuse to comply, he shall be expelled: but in such case shall have the privilege of appealing to the quarterly meeting conference, who shall decide on the case, and their decision shall be final. And in case the creditor shall complain that justice is not done him, he shall have the privilege of laying his grievance before the quarterly-meeting conference, who shall decide on the case, and the decision shall be final; and in case the creditor refuse to comply, he shall be expelled."

The necessity of publishing a periodical work was strongly urged upon this conference by some of its leading members, and strenuously opposed by others. The subject was referred to the consideration of the committee on the Book Concern, and they finally recommended, and the conference concurred, "That the book agents be directed to resume the publication of the Methodist Magazine, two volumes having been published" (namely, in 1789 and 1790) "to commence publishing the third volume at farthest by January next." And with a view to secure this object, an additional agent was appointed, and Daniel Hitt being, re-elected the principal, and Thomas Ware the assistant agent. The mandate of the conference, however, was never obeyed, and unhappily for the literature and character of the Methodist Episcopal Church, we had no Magazine, nor scarcely any publication of American growth, until 1818, when the Methodist Magazine was recommenced.

This is the more to be regretted, because it occasions the dearth of materials for such a history of this period as is most desirable, and which is now most painfully felt. For though some members of the Magazine abound in rich material for history, especially those sketches furnished by Theophilus Arminius and some others, to which I have been much indebted for many facts and graphic descriptions of Methodism in the west, yet these and others of a similar character generally terminate about the year 1812, and we in vain look for anything satisfactory out of the ordinary records of the Church, from that time to about the year 1820. This period, therefore, quite contrary to my expectations when I commenced writing, seems to be the most barren of interesting incidents and those historical details which are essential to render history engaging and edifying, of any period of our Church.

During a number of years, it appears that education of all sorts, as well as writing for the public eye, was laid aside as useless, and we seem to have come to the strange conclusion that we had naught else to do but simply to preach the gospel, and attend to those other duties connected with the pastoral office, in order to assure the blessing of God on our labors; hence the Magazine had been discontinued for more

than twenty years, and scarcely anything issued from our press except what was imported from Europe, and much of this, even, was brought before the public through other mediums.² Here and there a small pamphlet made its appearance, but only to disappear generally before it had time to breathe the breath of life; for it seemed to be taken for granted that American Methodists were doomed to that state of nonage which unfitted them to instruct one another through the medium of the press.

It is true that a few sighed over this state of things in secret, and sometimes vented their feelings to each other, in accents of sorrow and regret, but they almost despaired of obtaining redress. It was this feeling which prompted them to bring this subject before the General Conference in 1812; but though they succeeded in getting a bare majority so far to second their views as to order the resumption of the Methodist Magazine, yet such was the general apathy on this subject, that the agents either refused to obey the order of the conference, or could not obtain sufficient encouragement to justify them in the enterprise; and either alternative proves a lamentable state of things in regard to literature and science among us at that time.

One consequence resulting from this inertness is reference to periodical literature and other branches of mental improvement, was, that when assailed by our adversaries -- and this was not infrequently the case -- we had no adequate means of defense; and hence the reading public were left to draw their inferences respecting Methodist doctrine and economy from the distorted representations of those who felt it a duty to caricature or present us in a false position. These things were irksome, yet they were unavoidable under the circumstances.

From these humiliating facts it became proverbial that the "Methodists were enemies to learning," and it must be confessed that there was too much reason for the taunting remark; and it was not without much labor that the reproach has been, in some measure at least, rolled away from us.

The fact is, that the destruction of Cokesbury College, and the failure in attempting to establish district schools and academies, seemed to throw a damper upon the spirits of those who had abetted learning, and to furnish those who were either inimical or indifferent to its interests with arguments against it while the bungling attempts of some, who prematurely sent their ill-digested effusions into the world, disgusted all men of correct taste and wise discernment with their puerile productions. These causes operated conjointly to frustrate all attempts to revive the spirits of those who felt the necessity of furnishing our brethren and friends with that character of literature which the state of the Church and of society generally imperiously demanded.

Add to this, as an apology for the neglect, that many of our preachers were most assiduously engaged in the frontier settlements, preaching the gospel of the kingdom to the poor in log huts, and had therefore neither the time nor the means to devote to literary pursuits; and it seemed to others, that the pecuniary means at command were needed to supply the immediate wants of those who were thus engaged in winning souls to Jesus Christ from among the outcasts of men. In this most praiseworthy work they were eminently blessed.

But whatever may have been the cause, or how reasonable soever may have been the excuse, for suffering ourselves to be for so long a time destitute of medium of instruction and information, and of mutual edification, such are the facts in the case, and such are their consequences upon this portion of the Church's history. That a brighter day has dawned upon us in this respect is matter of congratulation among all the friends of the Church, of religion, science, and morals.

In 1810 Mr. Lee's History of the Methodists made its appearance; but it by no means satisfied the friends of the cause, and the General Conference of 1808, to which the manuscript was submitted, had reported adverse to its merits. To secure, therefore, a more perfect history of the Church was the anxious desire of Bishop Asbury and many others. To effect this object the subject had been submitted to the annual conferences, and they had appointed some members of their own body to collect facts and historical incidents for a future history, and to bring or forward them to this General Conference. Some few were presented, and they were referred to a committee to examine and report thereon. On examination it was found that though some of the facts collected were valuable, yet, on the whole, they were considered meager and unsatisfactory. This appears evident from the following remark of the committee: --

"We are of opinion that the letters submitted to us for examination contain some valuable information; and good materials for a history of Methodism, as far as they go; but we think they are not sufficiently full on different points."

After this the committee go on to state their views of the sort of materials which they considered essential to form a complete history, such as accounts of the state of the country and the time when Methodism was introduced; its difficulties and success biographical sketches of eminent preachers and others, &c., &c.; and then they recommend that each annual conference should appoint a committee of three to collect the needful information, directing that the presiding elders and preachers be instructed to aid in this work; and then the New York conference was authorized to engage a historian to digest and arrange the materials thus furnished, and prepare them for the press. In this report the conference fully concurred.

All this was very well. But like many other good schemes which are never executed, merely because left to many hands, without any individual who should be responsible for its execution, this proved an abortion. Nothing effectual was ever done in the premises. Yet the adoption of this report by the General Conference had its use. It no doubt served to direct the attention of individuals to this subject, and to call forth the talents of those brethren who have at different times since written those sketches of Methodism to which the present history is much indebted.

The following clause was added to the section on the legal settlement of church property: --

"But each annual conference is authorized to make such modification in the deeds as they may find the different usages and customs of law require in the different states or territories, so as to secure the premises firmly, by deed, and permanently, to the Methodist Episcopal Church, according to the true intent and meaning of the following form of a deed of settlement, any thing in the said form to the contrary notwithstanding."

The conference ordered that every "local elder, deacon, and preacher shall have his name recorded on the journal of the quarterly meeting conference of which he is a member."

Hitherto the stewards of the circuits had been appointed by the preacher in charge; but this conference resolved that the nomination of the preacher should be submitted to the quarterly-meeting conference, for its concurrence or rejection, and likewise made the stewards amenable to said conference for their official conduct.

A memorial having been presented from the quarterly meeting conference in the city of New York, praying the General Conference to adopt some means to raise a fund for the relief of the members of conference, it was resolved, after considerable discussion,

"That each annual conference shall be authorized to raise, if they think proper, a fund, as in their wisdom they shall see fit, to be considered a fund for the relief of the wives, widows, and children of traveling preachers, and also for the relief of supernumerary and superannuated preachers, and affording supplies for missionary purposes."

This is the first action which I have found on the records of the conference especially regarding missions; and the reason is, not because the conference was at any time indifferent to the situation of those portions of the country which were destitute of the gospel, but because the whole system of Methodism had been very justly considered missionary in its character from its beginning; but now so many inconveniences, not to say suffering embarrassments, had been realized from the poverty of the preachers, and also of the people in the new settlements, that the attention of some had become awakened to the importance of affording pecuniary relief, more effectually than it could be in the ordinary way, to those who were thus destitute, and to those who were willing and desirous to supply them with the ordinances of religion. And though this was but an incipient step, it led finally to more important results, which will be noticed at the proper time.

In respect to the fund which the annual conferences were authorized to raise for the relief of worn-out preachers, widows, and children, several of the conferences have availed themselves of it at different times, under such regulations as they deemed expedient, some under the control of conference, and others by forming a society exclusively of such members as chose to become subscribers to the institution. But with all these helps, nothing like an adequate supply has ever been furnished those most needy and deserving members of the Methodist community. Most assuredly the widows and orphans, and those preachers who have worn themselves out in the service of the Church, ought not to be "neglected in the daily ministrations."

The conference closed its labors on the 22d day of May, 1812, and sent out the following address as expressive of their feelings and views at this important period of our history: --

"The Address of the General Conference to the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

"Dearly Beloved Brethren: -- When we retrospect the divine goodness toward us as a people, our hearts are animated with sentiments of praise and thanksgiving. We have been favored with repeated manifestations of the power and grace of God. The Redeemer has planted his standard in the midst of us, and given astonishing success to our labors, and annually made accessions of thousands to our number. From the cold provinces of Canada to the sultry regions of Georgia -- from the shores of the Atlantic to the waters of the Mississippi -- in populous cities, improved countries, and dreary deserts, God has extended the triumphs of his grace. Infidelity trembles in the presence of the cross, superstition yields to the mild influence of the gospel, and ignorance vanishes before the auspicious beams of truth. In the revolution of a few years our number has almost amounted to two hundred thousand, exclusive of expulsions, withdrawals, and the many happy souls who have departed in the faith and gone to their reward in heaven. We have mutually participated in our prosperity.

"The blessings you have received from God should humble you to the dust. A recollection of his mercies should inspire you with gratitude and love. All the divine benedictions conferred upon you have been unmerited and free. Undeserved blessings have been strewed in your paths, and distinguished compassion manifested in all your ways. Whilst myriads of your fellow-creatures grope in pagan darkness

and Mohammedan delusion, you enjoy the light and truth of the gospel of Christ. In the midst of civil and ecclesiastical convulsions, you have enjoyed repose and tranquillity. You are therefore under peculiar obligations to grace. 'By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.' To Him, therefore, ascribe the glory of your past and present prosperity.

"Frequently in our solemn assemblies we have witnessed the effusions of grace, and joyfully experienced the overwhelming showers of redeeming love. We are bound to you by ties, which death itself cannot dissolve. With you again we renew our covenant, to live and die your servants in Jesus Christ. You will, therefore, we hope, receive from us the word of exhortation.

"The pursuit of internal religion in all its branches, we most ardently insist on. The religion of the Bible does not consist in rites and ceremonies; in subscribing creeds and becoming violent partisans; in the reveries or a heated imagination, nor the paroxysms of agitated passions but in the mind which was in Jesus Christ; in a victory over sin, and a conformity to the will of God; 'in love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance;' in all the amiable virtues which center in the moral character of God. Without this holiness, we shall never enter into the kingdom of glory. 'Be ye holy, for I am holy,' said the almighty God. And no unclean thing shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, said Jesus Christ. Therefore pursue this holiness with all the ardor of faith and hope. Never give sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids, until you awake with the lovely likeness of Christ.

"Whilst we insist on internal, we do not forget external religion. You are commanded to 'let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven;' to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, and to be careful to maintain good works. The duties which God has enjoined on us should be discharged with inviolate fidelity. The eyes of God are upon us; the enemies of religion behold us, and our conscience will accuse or excuse us. O let us be holy in all our outgoings and incomings.

" 'Search the Scriptures,' said Jesus Christ, 'for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me.' God has not left us to learn his nature and will merely from his works and providence; he has revealed himself in the pages of inspiration, with all the perspicuity necessary to make us wise unto salvation. This holy revelation should be studied with industry, attention, and candor. We beseech you, read it in your families and in your closets. A proper knowledge of it will render you happy in all the calamities of life, support you in the pangs of death, and prepare you for an endless enjoyment of heaven.

"A strict attention to the Christian ordinances we deem indispensably necessary. Christ himself instituted the holy ordinances of baptism and the sacrament of his supper. We trust his professed followers will never neglect them. They should be precious in our memory, and dear to our heart. 'Go ye,' said Jesus Christ, 'and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' And in reference to his supper he said, 'This do in remembrance of me.'

The Sabbath of the Lord deserves your serious consideration and attention. It should be wholly consecrated to his service. All labor, vain conversation, worldly-mindedness, and visiting, should be carefully avoided. Prayer, praise, searching the Scriptures, meditation, and waiting on God, should be our only employment. 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,' is the language of God.

"It is with regret that we have seen the use of ardent spirits, dram-drinking, &c., so common among the Methodists. We have endeavored to suppress the practice by our example, that it is necessary that we add precept to example; and we really think it not consistent with the character of a Christian, to be

immersed in the practice of distilling or retailing an article so destructive to the morals of society, and we do most earnestly recommend the annual conferences and our people to join with us in making a firm and constant stand against an evil which has ruined thousands, both in time and eternity.

" 'Be not conformed to this world,' said the Apostle St. Paul, 'but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.' We should unanimously arise, and oppose the fashions and maxims of this ungodly world; particularly in the article of dress. We are creatures of a moment, hastening to the grave, and soon shall stand before God in judgment; therefore let us not copy the fashions of the gay and thoughtless, especially by putting on gold, and costly apparel; but dress with simplicity, gravity, and neatness.

"The important duty of fasting has almost become obsolete. This we are afraid will be productive of melancholy effects. We yet have abundant cause for deep humiliation before God and one another. Our country is threatened, calamities stare us in the face, iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxes cold. O let us again resort to fasting and humiliation.

"The propriety of religiously educating your children, we wish seriously to impress upon your minds. To instruct them in the arts and sciences may be useful, but to teach the knowledge of God and their own hearts is absolutely necessary. It is only religion which can render them useful in society, happy in life, and triumphant in death. The effects of indifference to the education of children, must be seen and lamented by every friend to religion. Children who grow up in iniquity become obdurate in sin, and prepared for almost every species of vileness. They transgress the laws of God, violate the principles of humanity, and frequently terminate their unhappy career covered with iniquity and disgrace. Instruct your children, therefore, in the principle and excellence of religion. Whilst young, take them by the hand and lead them into the salutary paths of wisdom and virtue. And rest assured, your labor shall not be in vain. For, said Solomon, 'train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.'

"Now, unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the Church by Jesus Christ throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

The Presiding Elder Question -- Council for stationing the Preachers

As this question was largely discussed at the above conference, as well as before and since, and has, at times, occasioned considerable uneasiness in some minds, this seems as suitable a place as any to redeem my pledge to present the question fully and fairly before the reader.

That it may be rightly understood, it is necessary to advert to the circumstances under which the practice of fixing the stations of the preachers originated. When Mr. Wesley commenced his evangelical labors, and helpers were raised up to him from among his sons in the gospel, he was naturally led to appoint them to their particular fields of labor, and to change them as often as he judged it expedient; and thus, from usage introduced in this way, it became an established law, so long as Mr. Wesley lived, to appoint each preacher to his circuit, to change him as often as he might think the state of the work required; and I believe he never allowed any preacher to remain longer than two, or at most three years in one place. But after Mr. Wesley's death, this power devolved upon the conference, who appoint a stationing committee every year, whose duty it is to fix the stations of the preachers, subject to an appeal to the conference, if any one thinks himself aggrieved.

As this power was lodged in the hands of Mr. Wesley, and as his assistant in America acted as his representative, doing that which he would have done if present; this assistant was in the habit of stationing the preachers, of removing or changing them as often and to whatever place it was judged the state of the work and the talents of the preachers might render it expedient. According to this usage, which had grown up with the growth of the societies in America, at the General Conference in 1784, when the societies were organized into a church, it was made the duty of the bishop "to fix the appointments of the preachers for the several circuits and in the intervals of the conference to change, receive, or suspend preachers, as necessity may require."

In the account given of the secession of O'Kelly and its causes, we have seen that he moved for an appeal to the conference from the appointment of the bishop, with the privilege, if any preacher thought himself injured by his appointment, to state his objections, and if they were considered by the conference valid, the bishop should appoint him to another circuit. This motion was, as heretofore related, after a full discussion of its merit, decided in the negative by a very large majority.

This decision put the question so completely at rest, that we find nothing more in relation to it until the General Conference of 1800, when Dr. Coke, after it had been determined to elect an additional bishop, presented the following resolution for the consideration of the conference: --

"That the new bishop, whenever he presides in an annual conference, in the absence of Bishop Asbury, shall bring the stations of the preachers into the conference, and read" (them) "that he may hear what the conference has to say upon each station."

This motion was withdrawn by the mover; and another, that the "new bishop, in stationing the preachers, be aided by a committee of not less than three, nor more than four preachers, to be chosen by the conference," was, after an exchange of opinions in reference to it, rejected by the conference; as well as several other attempts which were made by different members to restrict the power of the new bishop.

From these movements it would appear that even those who were in favor of abridging the prerogative of the episcopacy in the work of stationing the preachers, were so fully convinced of the wisdom and strict integrity of Bishop Asbury, that they had no desire to curtail his conceded rights in this respect -- a conviction highly creditable to him as the superintendent of the Church -- and the majority determined that the new bishop should go into office clothed with the same powers which had been ceded to the senior bishop.

I find nothing more on the records of the General Conference in reference to this question until 1808, when a motion was made to make the office of presiding elder elective by the votes of the annual conferences. This motion was largely, and by many of the speakers very ably and eloquently discussed, but was finally decided in the negative by a majority of twenty-one, fifty-two voting in favor and seventy-three against it.

As this motion was, at the special request of the mover, disposed of before the resolutions providing for a delegated general conference were passed, it has been strongly urged by some that it should be considered unconstitutional either to elect the presiding elders or to associate a committee with the bishops in stationing the preachers; while others contend that as there is nothing in the restrictive regulations bearing specifically on these points, it is still left optional with the conference to modify or change the manner of appointing those officers as may be judged expedient, and also to elect a committee to assist the bishop in stationing the preachers.

Whether this be so or not, the subject was agitated from one General Conference to another, until the year 1823, since which time it has been allowed to sleep in peace. At the conference of 1812 the same question was introduced by a motion from a member of the New York conference, and fully discussed, but was lost by a majority of three, forty-two voting in favor and forty-five against it. It may be proper to observe here that the delegates in the Philadelphia, New York, and Genesee conferences were all in favor of this measure, the majority in each being for it, and accordingly sent delegates who coincided with them in opinion; but they were seconded by a few only from the southern and western delegates.

The same fate attended a similar motion in 1816, although one of the bishops elected at that conference was known to be favorable to the proposed change in the mode of selecting the presiding elders. The resolution of this conference was, as finally acted on, in the following words: --

"The bishop, at an early period of the annual conference, shall nominate an elder for each district, and the conference shall, without debate, either confirm or reject such nomination. If the person or persons so nominated be not elected by the conference, the bishop shall nominate two others for each vacant district, one of whom shall be chosen. And the presiding elder so elected and appointed shall remain in office four years, unless dismissed by the mutual consent of the bishop and conference but no presiding elder shall be removed from office during the term of four years, unless the reasons for such removal be stated to him in presence of the conference, which shall decide without debate on his case."

It was then provided, in another paragraph, that the presiding elders thus selected, should form a council to assist the bishop in stationing the preachers.

Perhaps a greater amount of talent was never brought to bear on any question ever brought before the General Conference, than was elicited from both sides of the house in the discussion of this resolution. Some of the speeches were deep, pungent, and highly argumentative, the speakers throwing their whole souls into the subject, and winding themselves up to the highest pitch of impassioned eloquence, often concluding with a tremendous appeal to the understandings and consciences of their antagonists, both sides invoking the future prosperity of the Church as an auxiliary to their arguments. The vote ultimately declared the voice of the conference to be against the measure, thirty-eight voting in favor and sixty-three against it.

The same question was brought forward in the General Conference of 1820, and after debate had thereon was again decided in the negative. As however, considerable uneasiness was manifested, particularly by the advocates of the measure, it was moved by Nathan Bangs, and seconded by William Capers, the former friendly and the latter adverse to the measure,

"That three of the members who desire an election of the presiding elders, and an equal number of those who are opposed to any change of our present plan, be a committee to confer with the bishops upon that subject, and that they report to us whether any, and if any, what alterations might be made to conciliate the wishes of the brethren upon this subject, and that they report tomorrow."

This resolution having passed the conference, the following were appointed members of the committee: Ezekiel Cooper, Stephen G. Roszel, Nathan Bangs, Joshua Wells, John Emory, William Capers.

After a conference with the bishops, agreeably to their instructions, the committee unanimously concurred in the following report: --

"The committee appointed to confer with the bishops on a plan to conciliate the wishes of the brethren on the subject of choosing presiding elders, recommend to the conference the adoption of the following resolutions, to be inserted in their proper place in the Discipline, namely: --

"1. That whenever in any annual conference there shall be a vacancy or vacancies in the office of presiding elder, in consequence of his period of service of four years having expired, or the Bishop wishing to remove any presiding elder, or by death, resignation or otherwise, the bishop or president of the conference having ascertained the number wanted from any of these causes, shall nominate three times the number wanted; -- provided, when there is more than one wanted, not more than three at a time shall be nominated, nor more than one at a time elected; -- Provided also, that in case of any vacancy or vacancies in the office of presiding elder in the interval of any annual conference, the bishop shall have authority to fill the said vacancy or vacancies, until the ensuing annual conference.

"2. That the presiding elders be and hereby are made the advisory council of the bishop or president of the conference in stationing the preachers."

This report was signed by all the members of the committee above named, and submitted to the conference in the afternoon session of May 20th, and, after some little conversation in respect to its merits, was passed by a majority of thirty-six votes, sixty-one in favor and twenty-five against it. As this was presented and adopted in the spirit of compromise, it was hoped by many on both sides of the house, that this long agitated question would be allowed to rest in quiet.

In this expectation they were, however, disappointed; for the Rev. Joshua Soule, who had been elected on the 13th to the episcopal office, after a prayerful and mature consideration of the subject, signified to the conference that if consecrated a bishop, inasmuch as these resolutions were adopted after his election, and were, in his judgment, unconstitutional, he could not consistently with his views of duty, be controlled by them and Bishop McKendree, whose health would not permit him to participate much in the doings of the conference, on the 23d, three days after their passage, came into the conference, and, after assigning sundry reasons, entered his objections against them as unconstitutional, and, as he apprehended, subversive of the grand system of an efficient and general superintendency and itinerancy.

The judgment of these two men, both justly respected, -- the one on account of his office, long and laborious services, his age and experience, the other for having the confidence of a majority of his brethren for one of the superintendents of the Church, -- had great influence upon the minds of many, and led to a serious suspense in respect to the expediency of the measure.

These movements, indeed, created quite a sensation in the minds of those who were the most deeply interested in the stability and prosperity of our institutions on both sides of the question, and the more so, as the bishop elect had tendered his resignation, which was finally accepted by the conference. Hence, after an ineffectual attempt to get the above resolutions reconsidered, a motion was at length made and carried, that they be suspended for four years, and that in the mean time the government should be administered as heretofore.

In 1824, their suspension was continued, and at the General Conference in Pittsburgh, in 1828, they were called up, and with but a feeble opposition were rescinded, and the subject has not been since agitated.

I have thus endeavored to furnish the reader with a true and impartial narration of the facts in relation to a question which has caused more agitation in our Church, and sometimes seemed to threaten more

disastrous consequences, than any other which, up to that time, had been canvassed on the floor of the General Conference. It only remains now, that the prominence and importance given to it may be duly appreciated, to state the outlines of the arguments which were used for and against the proposed alteration, by those who entered most deeply into the discussion:

Those in favor of the change, alleged,

That it is more in conformity to the genius of the American people to have a voice in the election of those who are to rule over them; and as the presiding elders were, by the usages of the Church, entrusted with a controlling influence over the preachers, they ought to have a choice in their selection.

It was contended that so long as they were appointed by the bishop, it necessarily augmented the power of the episcopacy, as, by virtue of this appointment, the presiding elders were amenable to the bishop alone for their official conduct, and not to their brethren in the conference.

Hence, the preacher, let him be oppressed ever so much in his appointment, has no medium of redress within his reach, as his case is represented to the appointing power through an ecclesiastical officer over whom he has no control, and who is completely in the bishop's confidence and at his disposal.

These things, it was contended, were incompatible with the natural and civil rights of freemen, and especially with that equality among brethren of the same ministerial order, as are the presiding elders and all the other elders in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

As to a council to advise with the bishops in stationing the preachers, it was pleaded that however wise and good the bishop might be, it was impossible for him to have that knowledge of the local state of the people and peculiar circumstances of the preachers, which is essential to enable him to make the most judicious appointments; and hence he assumed a responsibility for which he could not rationally account.

And then to give one man the complete control over five hundred others, many of whom may be equal to him in age and experience, and perhaps also in wisdom, learning, and goodness, and as likely to be as disinterested in their views and feelings, was an anomaly in legislation and an absurdity in practice for which no arguments could be adduced, derived from either Scripture or the fitness of things.

That however safely this prerogative might be exercised by Bishop Asbury, especially in the infancy of the Church, when the number of preachers was few, it had now become impossible, on the increase of preachers and people, for a bishop to exercise such a tremendous power intelligibly and safely to all concerned. Bishop Asbury, it was argued, was the father of the connection, and felt for the entire family in a way that no one else could, and therefore no one else ought to be entrusted with the same power which he had exercised.

The example of our British brethren was cited, who, after the death of Mr. Wesley, had given the power of stationing the preachers to a committee, and then they were allowed an appeal to the conference.

To these arguments, it was answered,

That the Church of Christ was founded, in some respects, upon very different principles from those on which civil governments rested, and therefore, though analogous in some particulars, yet in others the contrast was so obvious as to neutralize all analogical arguments. That though the people elected their legislators, president, and governors, yet most of the executive officers were appointed by the president;

and as presiding elders were executive officers, their appointment by the bishop might be justified even from analogy.

Though it was admitted that they strengthened the hands of the episcopacy, yet being appointed by him saved the Church from an evil more to be dreaded than mere episcopal power, and that was an electioneering spirit, which must keep the conferences in perpetual agitations -- engendering a strife incompatible with the spirit of harmony and brotherly love. Hence, though a preacher might, either from inadvertence or design, be injured in his appointment, yet to make the presiding elder dependent on the choice of an annual conference might make him fear to do his duty, in respect to enforcing discipline, and in exacting vigilance from those under him in the discharge of duty; moreover his redress was always with the bishop and the annual conference, to whom conjointly the presiding elder is responsible for his official conduct.

As to natural and civil rights, it was retorted, that though a Methodist preacher retained them as a citizen, yet the moment he entered the itinerancy, he became subject to ecclesiastical restraints which, though not incompatible with his rights as a freeman, were nevertheless essential to the preservation and efficient operation of the itinerancy. In respect to the necessity, arising from the limited information and want of local knowledge of a bishop, of associating others with him in stationing the preachers, this was remedied in practice by his receiving all the information he could from presiding elders and others, and then acting according to the dictates of an unbiased judgment, which was less likely to be influenced by local prejudices than those who, from their more limited sphere of information, were liable to be biased by partial interests and local feelings.

As to an unlimited control over five hundred men, more or less, while it was admitted that many of them might be equal to the bishop in general wisdom and experience, yet they could not, from their position, have that comprehensive knowledge of the whole work, and that experience arising from extensive travel and information which belonged to an itinerating episcopacy; and, moreover, this control had a check in annual conferences, who might ultimately determine whether a preacher was justified or not in refusing to go to his appointment, and also by the General Conference, under the inspection of which the bishop's conduct passed every fourth year.

Though it be admitted that Bishop Asbury sustained a fatherly relation to the Church which none of his successors could, and had a more intimate knowledge of preachers and people, both from his having grown up with them, and the comparative smallness of their number, yet it was contended, that the having an increased number of bishops, together with those restraints constantly thrown around them by the watchful vigilance of their brethren in the annual and general conferences, would prevent a wanton exercise of power, and render it still safe in their hands.

As to our British brethren, they had no other visible head than their conference. But we have, and therefore can act more efficiently through this medium, than we could do by a stationing committee. It was still further contended, and with great force of argument, that if this power were taken from the bishops, it would be extremely difficult to keep up an interchange of preachers from one annual conference to another, a difficulty not felt in England, where they were all united in one conference, in which all their business was transacted.

In the course of this discussion two opposite views were taken of the doctrine of responsibility. Some of those who contended for reserving this power in the hands of the bishop, insisted that the episcopacy was

responsible for the entire executive administration, in all its ramifications, and therefore, in order that it might exercise it safely, it must have the control of the appointments, not indeed to office, but to the several stations, so that if those acting under its appointment did not discharge their trusts with fidelity, they might be removed or changed at pleasure; and as a strong and commanding motive for a wise and faithful execution of this high trust, the episcopacy was held responsible to the General Conference, which had entrusted to the bishops the preservation of our itinerancy in all its parts; and this they could not do if the power of appointment were taken from them.

To this it was replied, that though this seemed very plausible in theory, it was not possible to exemplify it in practice -- that it was loading the episcopacy with a weight of responsibility too heavy for any mortal and fallible man to bear, and therefore must ultimately crush the episcopacy beneath its pressure. To prevent this it would be most judicious to divide the responsibility among the several annual conferences, and hold the presiding elders especially strictly responsible to them for their official as well as their moral and Christian conduct -- as it was admitted on all hands that the preachers were held accountable to their respective conferences for their ministerial and Christian conduct, it was in vain to contend that the episcopacy should be made liable to censure for their malversation. The former traced responsibility from the General Conference, who made the regulations and judged of episcopal acts, to the episcopacy, and thence down through the several grades of Church officers: the latter traced it up through the societies, to quarterly and annual conferences, to the General Conference; while others contended, with more truth than either, it is believed, that each body and officer was accountable for its and his own conduct, and the latter to the tribunal from which he received his authority, and held the right to call him to an account for his acts and deeds.

These several topics, with others of a collateral character, were enlarged upon and amplified at the several stages of this discussion, according to the peculiar views and feelings of the several speakers who distinguished themselves on each side of the question, until the subject seemed to be exhausted; when finally, other matters of weightier importance and more seriously affecting the vital principles of Methodism, called off the attention of all from this question, and led them to a union of effort to preserve our institutions from deterioration and this union served to convince both that if they had at any time indulged suspicions of each other's attachment to the essential principles of our economy, they had labored under erroneous impressions.

That such suspicions were indulged to some extent, th

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