

The General Conference ~~xxxxxxMethodist Church~~ is the highest deliberative and authoritative body of the Methodist Church. Every four years it meets to set the policies and program, to pass the laws of our church. Other denominations have their highest bodies meet annually, or triennially, but the Methodists make their laws and policies and then have to live with them for four years.

In my first experience as a delegate or even as an observer I found the General Conference tense with excitement and thoroughly exhausting. Gathering its delegates from around the world, the Methodist Church is tremendously impressive in size and scope. Especially in this crucial year of 1960 when Methodism faced the most perplexing and drastic issues one had the feeling of intense drama and expectation. Great intensity derived from the knowledge that this was the summit of Methodism: the issues had to be faced and finally resolved here, or not at all. There was no court of higher appeal. This was a great church taking decisions which would affect nine million people. I would like to share with you this morning four major impressions of this memorable summit experience.

-I-

The first impression was that this was Methodism at its democratic best. It was in fact an awesome example of the democratic method and spirit.

Methodism is not always thought of as a democratic instrument. ~~xxxxx~~ We have a kind of hierarchal system in which tremendous power and authority are invested in bishops. This power is most keenly felt in the right of the bishops to appoint ministers to the churches. Both the churches and the ministers are finally impotent before this authority. But at the General Conference where its laws are made the Methodist Church decrees that the bishops must sit off to one side and not be permitted ~~xxx~~ either to enter into the debate or vote. At each session a bishop is selected to preside but he is reduced absolutely to the status of guiding the floor proceedings according to parliamentary procedure. He is elected to his position for life ~~xxx~~ and given immense power over the lives of individuals and churches but at the General Conference he may not even express an opinion without being called upon to testify.

At this General Conference these some seventy bishops had to sit quietly and powerlessly to one side as the delegates on the floor vigorously debated the issue of the bishops'.



term of residency within one area. Up until a week ago the Methodist bishop could reign over one area indefinitely. But this time the delegates, debating openly before their bishops, passed a law which will be effective in 1972 limiting a bishop to a total of twelve years within one area. When it came time to vote on this matter a secret ballot was taken, thus assuring every candidate a measure of protection against episcopal reprisal.

In addition to this aspect of democracy the General Conference is a delegated body with every annual conference being represented and entitled to elect its own delegates, both lay and ministerial. In the annual conference the ministers elect their delegates by ballot and the laymen elect ~~xx~~ theirs by ballot. At Denver there were 788 delegates, half of whom were ministers, half of whom were laymen.

Winston Churchill once said that "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." (Kennedy's PROFILES OF COURAGE, p.244) Another ~~xxxx~~ definition I like was given by Senator Humphrey: "Democracy is like a mirror - you look in it and see a dirty face. It's your's!" (Pastors Convention, 1960) Both of these I believe apply to the Methodist Church and I saw them both in operation at Denver. Methodist democracy is laborious, often maddening with any one of the 788 delegates given ~~xxxx~~ the right to jam up the proceedings with parliamentary ~~xx~~ maneuverings and blockings. At times the majority can compel the minority; at other times a skillful minority can employ its guile to obstruct the majority. Still it is democracy and I was pleased to see this demonstration of democratic principle at Denver.

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A second impression brought home from the Methodist summit is that of a church which is in reality a large cross-section of our national life. Almost every factor of our national life was reflected in this deliberative body.

The air of the auditorium was electric with excitement as debate was opened on the single most commanding issue facing our church - racial segregation. For over a week the Methodist church writhed and recoiled, agonized and sought for an answer to this over-arching problem along exactly the same lines in which it is found in our national life. For the most part this was a sectional struggle between the south and the north, with the very real exception that the Negroes - who are segregated - were hopelessly divided among themselves as regarding strategy and position. Probably there was not much difference in the nature of the arguments raised on both sides of this issue than ~~xxxx~~ in those arguments



which are heard on the floors of the U.S. Congress. In other words, Methodism does not transcend our national life in any significant way. The Methodist Church did in fact emerge from this General Conference still as a segregated church.

In addition it was apparent that those who represented Methodism at this conference were also representatives of the affluent secular society in which they live. Perhaps the new \$15 million Hilton Hotel which housed all of the bishops and provided most of the special dinners at \$5.00 a plate was symbolic of this fact. The very quintessence of luxury and comfort, this hotel was undoubtedly important to many Methodists even though they had to pay \$23 a day for their rooms. Perhaps one who stayed in a lesser hotel with an old fashioned bathtub that took forever to drain could be forgiven a backward look to the days of the raw and wild frontiers when the saddlebag and the crude inn were the marks of Methodist advance. Indeed the Methodist Church is both in the world and of the world. Methodists at Denver were very well dressed, groomed, ~~xxx~~ domiciled and fed. Its representatives gave evidence that the Methodist Church is moving above the middle class. At Denver Methodism expressed and embraced both the temper and the tastes of the times.

-III-

My third impression is that of a world church.

Among the 788 delegates there were representatives from all over the world, in every kind of costume, speaking all kinds of tongues. In this respect our church differs from almost every other major Protestant denomination in the United States.

As we first met for holy communion it was deeply moving to hear the familiar words spoken in the languages of the world.

At one of the formal business sessions there was a factor of the utmost significance when for the first time a bishop presided who was a native of a country outside of continental United States. This was Bishop Shri K. Mondol of India.

Indeed one had all during the conference the realization that he was a part of a world-wide church and that he was standing almost literally at ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> crossroad through which all of the peoples of the world were marching.

One of the unforgettable highlights of the conference occurred when John B. Nicholas from the deep south arose in the midst of the tense debate over segregation to make one of the most prophetic utterances I have ever heard. Said he;



I heard the story of a man who had a particular love for a picture frame that had no picture in it and he went out to buy a picture one day to put in this dearly-loved frame. He did not take the frame with him, and, as he walked through an art store a particular picture struck his fancy. He carried the picture home with him and when he reached home he found that the picture was too big for the frame so he took the scissors and clipped the picture so that it would fit the frame and put the picture up in his house.

Now, I am not suggesting that we go back and clip the picture of the Christian gospel and Christian ethics to fit the particular frame or section that we hold dear in our particular geographical jurisdictions, but I am hopeful that everybody will go back and seek to enlarge the sectional frame in which he would like to place the picture that the gospel and the ethics of Jesus represent. As far as I am concerned, there is only one single frame that will fit it and that is a world frame. (Applause.) (p.280,281, Daily Christian Advocate.)

-IV-

The fourth impression I brought away from the General Conference was that of the massive power and might of the Methodist Church. I cannot refrain from reflecting upon the potential good which could conceivably be realized for all mankind if this power and might were to be employed solely for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

Perhaps the use of this power could be seen most clearly in the reiteration of the historical requirement that Methodist ministers are not to use tobacco. In this case it was a minority report that prevailed. The majority report had recommended that this specific reference to tobacco be deleted. A vigorous debate followed. Since returning to Columbus I have been receiving some good-natured ribbing from my non-Methodist clerical brethren because I guess I was quoted in the press against ministerial smoking. Now here is my position: ten years ago I would have voted to remove this requirement as a petty and ~~know~~ pious example of moralizing. But with the revelations from science of the cancerous effects of tobacco on large numbers of people I believe it has become a moral issue and every Methodist minister ought to be willing to abstain from such a habit because of what this might mean to millions of children and youth. I am not now concerned about laymen. I have plenty of ash trays for those who must smoke when they come to my house. I ~~cannot~~ feel not at all self-righteous or superior simply because I do not smoke. But I am so sick and tired of the gigantic lies dinned in our ears from morning until night about the desirability of smoking from our mass advertisers that I am quite ready to stand up and shout that I know they are lies. Hence I was glad to see in this somewhat ~~fragmentary~~ fragmentary way, at least, the Methodist Church use its voice to protest against the blandishments and cruel deceptions of the commercial

world. It is only a sample of the immense power available to righteousness if only the Methodist Church could mobilize its resources on the most crucial issues.

Other examples of the use of this power were seen in the General Conference's support of the World and National Councils of Churches in a time when they have been maliciously attacked by hate-mongers and minds twisted by untruth. Furthermore it was heartening to see the Methodist Church exposing the recent sweeping and scurrilous attack on the vast majority of Protestant ministers and exposing these falsehoods for what they truly are.

On the way home last Sunday Dr. and Mrs. George Lackland and my wife and I stopped in Grand Island, Nebraska to worship at the Methodist Church. There we heard a minister tell a somewhat corny story that might have a measure of truth. He said that someone had wondered what would happen if an atomic bomb were dropped on Denver while the Methodist General Conference was in session. Against this question someone else had raised another: "Could you think of a better way to spread the gospel?" Actually, I fear that ~~the bomb~~ no real bomb was detonated at the Methodist summit. The Methodist Church neither changed nor saved the world.

There was a parable for me in a personal difficulty I had all during the conference. My doctor told me about a year ago that I would soon have to go to bifocals. At Denver I learned that that time had come. Sitting at a desk at the rear of a huge auditorium, I had no difficulty at all in seeing the speakers and happenings on the faraway stage. My long distance vision is very good. The trouble I had was in seeing the volumes of fine print which I had to follow before me on the table. I could not read the type close up. My vision was blurred,, distored, often uncertain. And so it was, I believe, with the General Conference. Our collective eye focussed clearly and steadily on the world as a whole. On the world frame we could see and understand the major problems. But it was every/ so difficult to focus on those matters so close up: the local church, our own ministry, our sectional differences, segregation in our own town and churches. This is our difficulty as Christians. But I am certain too that when we see through the eyes of Christ we get not only a clear world view, but a view of ourselves, our churches, our communities close up. Only then can we do his will both abroad and at home.