

Northern Illinois Annual Conference
Episcopal Address – June 9, 2022
Bishop John L. Hopkins

“CONNECTED TO CHRIST: COME TO THE WATER”

The Church was born on Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Here is how it happened. The disciple, now Apostle, Peter preached a sermon and the first converts “Came to the Water” and were baptized. Here is the crowd’s response to Peter’s sermon in Act 2:37-39:

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. And about 3,000 were baptized.

From that Pentecost, here is how the Methodist Church started: In 1784, at age 81 (7 years before he died), John Wesley dispatched Thomas Coke from England to oversee the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Coke met Francis Asbury at Barratt’s Chapel in November. Plans were quickly made to gather all Methodist preachers together for the Christmas Conference at Lovely Lane in Baltimore. Historian John Strawbridge¹ writes about what happened over those ten days:

“Every Methodist preacher in America left their home and their parish on Christmas Eve. . . . So, they gathered all the preachers in America, about 86 preachers that they knew of at the time and planned to meet at the Lovely Lane Chapel on Christmas Eve 1784.

They met in conference for ten days, established a Discipline, a Book of Worship, they ordained preachers, and they set aside Francis Asbury as the first superintendent. It was 10 days of debates and struggles and accusations and reconciliations, and the kinds of things that we do as Methodists.” Our church was born by lay preachers baptizing people and reforming the nation.

Since 1784, for 238 years, Methodists have been conferencing. It is the way we stay “Connected in Christ”—moving closer to God and others at the same time. Collectively we work together. Today, all around the world, United Methodists are connecting like we are in Northern Illinois. Just in the month of June, there are over 53 annual conferences connecting like we are. From California to New England, to Estonia, to Germany and Norway and Switzerland.

As we gather for this conference, I must admit we have an uncertain future ahead of us. At the same time, I think we have the DNA to be at the forefront of a new spiritual awakening that this country—and many people around the world—are deeply yearning for. Why do I say that?

¹ John Strawbridge, historian at Lovely Lane United Methodist Church in Maryland. Lovely Lane Chapel was the site of the Christmas Conference of 1784.

Well, we are living in a divergent culture, where individualism, and group identity, and tribalism is dominate. The parts are greater than the whole. I do not have time in this address to explore the reasons or the results of such a divergent culture. I simply note that many people are simply not connected enough to others and certainly not to God.

We are coming unraveled rather than woven together. There are now almost 8 billion people on this earth and loneliness is greater than ever before. And, when we do come together it is often for personal or political power for our side to win. (*Was not Jesus tempted with personal or political power by the devil in the wilderness?*).

At the same time, there is such a desperate need for people to be connected to the “Living Water” that will take away our sins, anger, fear, and divisions. I believe we are yearning for a new Spiritual Awakening. Culture shifts are hard to see, but I think we are on the verge of a return to a more convergent culture.

This shift to a more convergent culture may be a wide threshold to cross. But we will not be going back from where we have come. The divergent culture may have been necessary and has taught us a lot; but is not sufficient or sustainable. We are on this planet together. And we need a new Pentecost of God’s Holy Spirit to bring us together. The question I ask today is, “Do we have the spiritual DNA to be part of a Spiritual Awakening that is bigger than our cultural divisions?”

When we lived in Minnesota, Elaine and I started canoeing the Boundary Waters every summer for 10 years. In the early years all we had was a compass. It worked well until rain and fog prevented us from finding a point on shore. One time we were totally lost. The only way out was to retrace where we had been. Finally, we found our way again. Sometimes we must go back to go forward. Let me tell you the story of how our Methodist Movement was the strongest when we were “Connected to Christ” and to one another in service to God.

Nathan O. (“Ted”) Hatch is a Presbyterian who retired in 2021 after 16 years as President of Wake Forest, a Baptist School. He also was Provost at Notre Dame, a Roman Catholic School. And he is a Methodist Scholar! Dr. Hatch is regularly cited as one of the most influential scholars in the history of religion in America. In “The Puzzle of American Methodism”² he writes, and I quote extensively:

“The American followers of John Wesley, who could boast no more than 4 ministers and 300 lay people in 1771, were threatened with extinction during the Revolution. All their leaders, save Francis Asbury, returned to England, leaving the Methodist faithful to struggle with the stigma of disloyalty throughout the war.

² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Puzzle of American Methodism*, Church History Vol. 63, No.2 (June 1994), pp. 175-189, Published by Cambridge University Press.

Under the tireless direction of Asbury, the Methodists advanced from Canada to Georgia emphasizing three themes that Americans found captivating: God’s free grace, the liberty of people to accept or reject that grace, and the power and validity of popular religious expression—even among servants, women, and African Americans.

Led by unlearned preachers committed to sacrifice and to travel, the Methodists organized local classes or cells and preaching circuits at a rate that alarmed more respectable denominations. When Francis Asbury died in 1816, he could claim over 2,000 ministers and 200,000 Methodist members.

Between 1776 and 1850 (74 years), the Methodists in America achieved a virtual miracle of growth, rising from less than 3 percent of all church members in 1776 to more than 34 percent by 1850, making them far and away the largest religious body in the nation and the most extensive national institution other than the Federal government.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Methodists boasted 4,000 itinerants, almost 8,000 local preachers, and over a million members. ...By 1850, almost one in 15 Americans belonged to a Methodist church.

Methodism in America transcended class barriers and empowered common people to make religion their own. Unlike Calvinism, which emphasized human corruption, divine initiative, the authority of the educated clergymen and inherited ecclesiastical structures, the Methodists proclaimed the breathtaking message of individual freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and achievement. More African Americans became Christians in ten years of Methodist preaching than in a century of Anglican influence.”

“Methodism fostered social mobility... and had a great appeal for upstarts who hungered for respect and opportunity.”

A divergent culture wants to force “either/or” choices. A convergent culture sees the value of “both/and” choices. Methodism at its best has been convergent. Look at these early characteristics. Methodism:

- Was applied *and* flexible
- Liturgical *and* vernacular
- Appealed to the educated *and* popular (common)
- Joined piety *and* learning.
- Was not captive to culture, but did not reject it
- Authority *and* popular participation
- Episcopal *and* democratic
- Morally strong *and* accepted everyone
- Had its Quadrilateral: scripture, reason, tradition, & experience

We are a holiness movement that became a Church. We resisted attempts to be an “either/or” church and chose to be a “both/and” church. Except for a few aberrations, we became more and more inclusive to share God’s grace to more and more people. Our DNA and our theology of grace has always been convergent. We do not unravel; we weave people together for a stronger witness.

So, what does our future look like? When will a new Awakening happen? Is it possible for us to change the culture of our time?

Again, we must go back even before American Methodism to go forward. (*I received this report from The Rev. Timothy Bias³ several years ago. If you have heard it before, you will enjoy hearing it again.*)

In 1991, an interesting article was written in a journal called The Public Interest. Roger Starr, a professor at City College in New York, is a liberal, Jewish Democrat. (*Remember that; it is important to this story.*)

Starr concluded that there was only one other period in world history that matches the day in which we live. It was 18th century England. There was a problem of addiction—they had just discovered gin. Families were decomposing. There were problems of pollution and crime and violence and rioting—problems very much like our own.

When he discovered this, Roger Starr wanted to know what saved England, or brought them out of this mess. And would you believe? This liberal, Jewish, Democrat argues that the only thing that saved England was someone that he had not really heard much about—someone by the name of John Wesley who started a movement called Methodism.

“Now, I don’t even know any Methodists,” says Starr. “I don’t know anything about them. But this Wesley started a movement that literally saved England. It was a movement that had profound social, economic, and political consequences and transformed and indeed saved that nation.” And maybe what we need to do, he says, “is to study those Methodists to find out how they did it, and to duplicate what they did back in the 18th century.”

About a month later, George Will wrote an editorial for The Washington Post. George Will is a conservative, Roman Catholic Republican. (*Remember that; it is important to the story.*)

Will wrote, “I never thought I’d agree with anything Roger Starr has ever written. But you know, this liberal has actually got a point. It is that in the 18th century you have the German and French revolutions, and other revolutions around the world; but you don’t have an English Revolution. But they *did*, you see. It was called the *Methodist revolution* because

³ The Reverend Timothy Bias, shared this report at the 2004 Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference.

these Methodists turned their world upside down. Maybe what we need to do is to take Roger Starr seriously and look at what was the secret of those Methodists.”

Then he added, “I know this is going to sound strange for me, saying that we need some more Methodists to save the world; and I hate to end *the column this way, but does anybody out there have a better idea?*”

About one month later, Fred Barnes, editor of *The New Republic* writes an article. Fred Barnes is an evangelical Episcopalian moderate. (*Remember that; it's important to the story.*)

He writes, “Can you believe this? We have George Will and Roger Starr agreeing on something. I can't believe it! But the more you think about it, they are exactly right. But they forgot one thing. What they forgot was that basically the Methodist Movement was at heart, a spiritual awaking.

Yes, it had tremendous economic, social, and political consequences, but it began as a spiritual revival—a spiritual awakening. And unless we get in this nation a spiritual awakening and a spiritual revival that will create these kinds of economic and political implications... in our day, it won't work. It's got to have a new generation of Methodists who will do for this day what they did in the 18th century.”

Members of the Northern Illinois Conference, God is up to something! We are on the verge of a new spiritual awakening... and the world needs a new generation of United Methodists to lead the way? Can we do this? Can we let the Holy Spirit of Pentecost weave us together and join with others to spread scriptural holiness across the nation? Are you ready to go? Let's do it!