

David W. Scott

Leading the World Parish: American Methodist Nationalism in an International Framing

Paper for “Nationalism and internationalism in the young ecumenical movement, 1895–1920s”

David W. Scott

“American Methodism Joins Hands in Plans for Missionary Conquest and World Betterment,” read the headline. It was a suitably patriotic sentiment for the July 4, 1818 edition of *The Centenary Bulletin*, a newspaper produced by the Methodist Episcopal Church to promote its mission Centenary celebration. Anyone on the underside of an empire might look askance at this linkage between “conquest” and “world betterment”—better for who, and in what way? But for those planning the Centenary of American Methodist mission work, there was no conflict between these two terms. American Methodists firmly believed that the “missionary conquest” of the world—in large part by American Methodists—would indeed make the world better, not just for American Methodists, but for all people.¹

In this way, these American Methodists joined a strong sense of national purpose and moral superiority with an internationalist vision of world service. Moreover, while America would lead the way in missionary conquest, that conquest would not be political. American Methodists expected the nations of the world to retain their autonomy. In this vision, the United States would stand pre-eminent among nations but would not dominate over other nations. (The obvious exceptions to that vision were the Philippines and the United States’ other overseas territories.) America’s pre-eminence would be achieved through moral and spiritual leadership,

¹ Although the adjective “American” applies to all people living in North and South America, this paper will follow the usage of the historical subjects described herein by using it to describe citizens and inhabitants of the United States of America.

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not through force of arms, even as American arms were proving decisive in the Great War being fought in Europe. “World betterment” was to be accomplished through attractional rather than coercive means.

This vision was played out again and again over the course of the three years’ worth of preparation and celebration for the Centenary. From 1916 to 1919, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), jointly undertook to celebrate the centennial of the founding of the first denomination-wide mission society in American Methodism. Three years of planning and preparation, supported by a newspaper and a variety of other publications,² led to several significant elements of the observance in 1919: a prayer campaign, a campaign to mobilize Christian workers for mission, a colossal fundraising campaign that collected nearly \$150 million in pledges,³ and a world’s fair of Methodist mission, held for three weeks that summer in Columbus, Ohio, and which over a million people attended.⁴

² The newspaper is *The Centenary Bulletin*. The Centenary also involved the production of four volumes of surveys and statistics about the mission work of American Methodists, along with diverse other publications. A volume on foreign mission and a volume on home mission each for the MEC and MECS gave a comprehensive picture of the church’s engagement with its surroundings, both domestically and abroad, in 1918: *The Centenary Survey of The Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Joint Centenary Committee, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918); *The Centenary Survey of The Board of Foreign Missions, The Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Joint Centenary Committee, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1918); Goddard, O. E. and Mrs. R. W. MacDonell, *Making America Safe: A Study of the Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville, TN: Centenary Commission M. E. Church, South, 1918); *Missionary Centenary, 1819–1919 World Survey, A Program of Spiritual Strategy and Preparedness* (Nashville, TN: Missionary Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1918).

³ \$113,741,455 in pledges for the MEC and \$35,787,338 in pledges for the MECS. See John Lankford, “Methodism ‘Over the Top’: The Joint Centenary Movement, 1917–1925” *Methodist History* 2 no. 1 (October 1963), 31.

⁴ For analyses of the fair, see Christopher J. Anderson, *The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions: The 1919 World’s Fair of Evangelical Americanism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 2012); Nancy Van Brunt, “Pagentry at the Methodist Centenary,” *Methodist History* 35 no. 2 (January 1997), 106–118. For a collection of speeches from that fair, see Christopher J. Anderson, *Voices from the Fair: Race, Gender, and the American Nation at a Methodist Missionary Exposition* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2012).

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While the fundraising campaign and the Columbus celebration have garnered the most attention, the sources indicate that organizers believed the spiritual outcomes of the Centenary to have been equally important. The training manual for Centenary speakers asserted, “That the purpose of the Centenary is not the raising of millions of money but the lifting up of the Church to a new plane of spiritual power whence it shall accomplish the Christian conquest of the world; and that the consummation of this purpose will be through a new emphasis upon world vision, intercession and stewardship.”⁵ Organizers spoke of four components of the Centenary: “(a) A call to daily intercession for the coming of the Kingdom of God. (b) A call to the Stewardship of Life and Substance. (c) A call, in view of the present World Crisis, to evangelize the Nations, to the end that the Kingdom may be ushered in and thus make Democracy safe for the World. (d) A call to greatly increased gifts for missionary purposes at home and abroad.”⁶

The combination of “conquest” and “word vision” in these descriptions of the Centenary is again notable, but perhaps the most telling phrase above is “make Democracy safe for the World.” The language immediately, and intentionally, calls to mind Woodrow Wilson’s call to make the world “safe for democracy.” Despite the inversion of the two terms, the language is an intentional homage to Wilson, and there would be many other affirmations in the Centenary of Wilson’s vision of a new international political order, established and led by the United States through its moral force. The Centenary happened at a moment of convergence between a long-running tradition of American moral internationalism in the missionary community and the articulation of a similar vision within secular politics by the US President. This convergence

⁵ *World Program Handbook: Suggestions for Centenary Speakers and Other Workers* (New York: Joint Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, [n.d. - 1918?]), 66.

⁶ *World Program Handbook*, 62.

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offered American Methodist mission boosters an opportunity to try to promote this view more widely among American Christians. Ultimately, both American Methodist mission leaders and Wilson would be disappointed in the American people's response to their international visions. Yet even as Americans turned their backs on the fullest expressions of these visions, these understandings of America's role in the world would have long-lasting impacts, strengthening and solidifying aspects of American self-understanding that would endure for a century to come.

American Internationalism Leading Up to the Centenary

While the Centenary was a particularly notable expression of the notion that American Christians has a special role to play in world affairs, the idea was by no means a new one. It is often traced back to the Puritan origins of New England as expressed in John Winthrop's sermon about the Massachusetts Bay colony as a "city on a hill." Although the country was founded on principles of separation between church and state, the notion of America as a Christian nation, endowed by God with a special mission in the world, has a long pedigree.⁷ This view held at the popular and scholarly levels. Philip Schaff, the founder of American church history, wrote of the United States that "providence has evidently prepared this country and nation for the greatest work."⁸ This vision of America as a Christian nation was often an explicitly white and even white supremacist understanding of American nationalism, as Robert P. Jones has shown.⁹

⁷ See, for instance, "Part One: The United States Is a Christian Nation: The History of an Idea," in John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

⁸ Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character* (1855; reprinted Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), xxiii. Quoted in Christopher H. Evans, *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 19.

⁹ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

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This sense of national purpose informed the origins of American Christian foreign missions. As Emily Conroy-Krutz wrote about the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, “In the first decades of the foreign mission movement, American evangelicals had a dual identity: they were both evangelical Christians who saw themselves as transnational figures taking part in a global struggle for God’s kingdom and Americans whose national pride called them to partner with Great Britain in the conversion of the world.”¹⁰ Conroy-Krutz here identifies the particular mix of international vision and nationalist instincts that would continue to characterize most expressions of mission as America’s “errand to the world,” as William R. Hutchison called it.¹¹ This way of thinking would flourish at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, when American missionaries and other American Christian moral reform movements such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union would create a “moral empire,” in Ian Tyrell’s words.¹²

Although American Methodists formed their first denomination-wide missionary society in 1819 and sent their first foreign missionary in 1833, American Methodist foreign missions really took off in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Several authors have commented on the global vision that characterized Methodism’s expansionist impulses in the nineteenth

¹⁰ Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹¹ William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹² Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

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century,¹³ a vision in which moral reform played an important role.¹⁴ Due to the Methodist theological emphasis on universal atonement, the strong pragmatic streak in Methodism, and Methodists' initial distance from the levers of national power, American Methodist missionaries were perhaps somewhat more open to contextual expressions of Christianity and somewhat less committed to the imposition of a particular model of Western civilization and the advancement of the American nation than other American missionaries. Methodist missionaries and mission leaders wrote frequently of their world vision in the nineteenth century, but less frequently about the role of the United States as a particular agent in bringing about this vision. In this regard, there is some distance between Methodists and the Congregationalists on whom Conroy-Krutz and Hutchison primarily focused in their writings. There were still nationalist assumptions on the part of American Methodists, but these were usually implicitly held rather than explicitly stated.

Several things began to change by the turn of the twentieth century, however, to inject more overtly nationalist notes into Methodist mission. The Spanish American War and the seizure of the Philippines, led by a Methodist US President (William McKinley) who told a story about his agonized prayer over that decision, combined with the opportunity for Methodist mission offered by American occupation of the Philippines, provided Methodists with much to debate in terms of America's role in the world. Many were quick to baptize American imperial

13 David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); David W. Scott, *Mission as Globalization: Methodists in Southeast Asia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), Chapter 2: "Methodist Mission as a Global Vision"; Douglas D. Tzan, *William Taylor and the Mapping of the Methodist Missionary Tradition: The World His Parish* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

14 Hempton, *Methodism*; Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Society History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), Chapter Four: "'Woman's Work for Woman' and the Methodist Episcopal Church"; David W. Scott, "Alcohol, Opium, and the Methodists in Singapore: The Inculturation of a Moral Crusade." *Mission Studies* 29 (2012) 147–62.

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ambitions.¹⁵ Tyrell's work, in which Methodist characters play significant roles, further shows just how much Methodist missionaries and mission leaders bought into an international but American-centered vision of world moral reform by the early twentieth century. At home, the progress of the temperance and women's suffrage movements, culminating in the passage of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the US Constitution, respectively, made plausible the possibility of moral reform led by Methodists, who were strong supporters of both causes, and accomplished through the US federal government.¹⁶

Added to this new taste for power was white American Methodists' inability to recognize their own cultural and national biases. Thus, while Methodist missionaries were willing to tolerate and even celebrate some degree of diversity in the language and other incidentals by which Christianity was expressed, they were unable to see the ways in which their vision of world evangelization was emphatically American-centric. The Methodist theological emphasis on active response to God's saving grace meant that Methodists tended to narrate themselves as the central characters in whatever story they were telling about Christianity. This held true when that story was the spread of the gospel to all nations: white American Methodists saw themselves as central characters in God's redemption of the world. When this self-understanding was combined with the sorts of financial, theological, and cultural privileges held by native-born white American men, the result was a widely-promoted expectation that the world would be saved, with white, native-born American men as the primary actors in this story and a host of

¹⁵ Kenneth M. MacKenzie, *The Robe and the Sword: The Methodist Church and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1961).

¹⁶ The Eighteenth Amendment was approved by Congress and ratified by the states during the Centenary period, and the Nineteenth Amendment was approved by Congress and began to be ratified by the states during the Centenary, though it would not be finally ratified by enough states until 1920.

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women, immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans, and people from other countries playing supporting roles. Moreover, the presence of these other characters as supporting actors emphasized the importance of the work done by white American men as the central characters in this story by demonstrating the attractiveness of the Christian ideals and ends advanced by those white American men.

It is this understanding of God's plans for the salvation of the world that the white American men planning the Centenary brought to that endeavor.¹⁷ Because the means through which American Methodists intended to achieve the spiritual, religious, and moral goals of the Centenary were attractional rather than coercive, it was imperative to the logic of the narrative that Methodists in other countries and members of other denominations also play an active role in this movement. Their participation proved that these goals were universally attractive, not just appealing to white American Methodist men.

Thus, Centenary publications hailed the ways in which Canadians, Asians, Latin Americans, Africans, and Europeans were joining in the tasks of Methodist mission fundraising, evangelism, and social reform. Methodist churches from Argentina to the Philippines to Norway participated in Centenary fundraising. Indeed, the Buenos Aires congregation of the MEC was the first in the denomination to achieve its fundraising goal.¹⁸ Moreover, both African American and immigrant groups found a place in the Centenary in the US. The first US congregation to

¹⁷ Belle Harris Bennett was the only woman to serve on the Joint Centenary Committee. There were no women among the executive staff of the Centenary celebration, and there were no people of color from the United States or any people from outside the United States on the Joint Centenary Committee or the executive staff. See "The Call of the People: 'How can they hear without a preacher?' Souvenir, Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions, Columbus, Ohio, June twenty to July thirteen Nineteen nineteen," 7–8.

¹⁸ "Buenos Aires Leads World Methodism: Argentine Congregation First to Finish Financial Drive for Centenary," *The Centenary Bulletin* (October 17, 1918), 1.

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reach their fundraising goal was a Swedish immigrant congregation, German immigrant annual conferences were among the highest per capita givers, and African American congregations subscribed heavily to the Centenary fundraising drive as well.¹⁹ These groups had their own motivations for buying into the Centenary movement, but the white, native-born Americans running the Centenary were less interested in these motivations and more interested in this participation as proof of their own suppositions. All of these efforts were eagerly reported by *The Centenary Bulletin*, even as the perspective of the paper's reporting implied that these groups were in some way other from the newspaper's writers and readers. As this story was told, native-born white Americans were the center of Methodist mission, but the righteousness of their efforts was demonstrated by the number of others who bought in.

Moreover, Methodists noted how other Protestant groups were engaged in other fundraising efforts for the sake of forwarding the goal of world betterment through mission. Although Canadian Methodists declined to accept the offer by Americans to join in the Centenary, *The Centenary Bulletin* felt vindicated when Canadian Methodists joined with other Canadian Protestants in a fundraising campaign "Similar to Our Own Centenary."²⁰ The paper also reported on fundraising efforts by Northern Baptists and both Southern and Northern Presbyterians.²¹ The crowning ecumenical effort in the eyes of Centenary promoters, though, was

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

20 "Canadian Protestants Unite in Great Forward Movement Similar to Our Own Centenary," *The Centenary Bulletin* (March 21, 1918), 1.

21 For Northern Baptists, see "\$6,000,000 Goal Set by Baptists," *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 23, 1919), 2. For Presbyterians, see "Other Church Plans Expansion of Missions: Southern Presbyterians Push Campaign for \$3,000,000—Confident of Success," *The Centenary Bulletin* (Mar. 14, 1918), 1; "\$12,000,000 Is Goal of Southern Presbyterians: General Assembly Orders Three-year Mission Program to Meet Present Crisis," *The Centenary Bulletin* (June 6, 1918), 1; "75,000,000 Is Proposed Goal of Presbyterians: Church Has Reconstruction Program Almost Equaling Our Own," *The Centenary Bulletin* (June 13, 1918), 1; "Another Drive for Millions: Presbyterians

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the organization of the Interchurch World Movement (IWM). The MEC Board of Foreign Missions was the first denominational body to throw its support behind the IWM, in January of 1919.²² An article announcing the creation of the new group boldly stated, “United American Protestantism will go inward in the greatest movement of the Christian Church to solve the problems of world evangelism.”²³ This quote implies that the world could be evangelized, and that American Protestants (and perhaps American Methodists in particular) would be the most important actors in doing so. The glory of the nation and the service of the world would coincide.

Woodrow Wilson and American Internationalism

At the same time that American Methodist mission leaders were promoting a international vision of moral reform with the United States as the central actor, Woodrow Wilson was articulating a similar vision in secular politics. Much has been written about Wilsonian internationalism, but Thomas Bender makes clear the combination of international vision and American centrism that so paralleled the missionary narrative:

Wilson was committed to a vision of America and the world that amounted to an endorsement of the American way of life as empire. Like many leaders before him, he thought the United States was at once unique and a universal model. The world should look like the United States writ large, he thought ... That society would be not only in the American interest but in the interest of all humankind, of ‘civilization itself.’²⁴

Launch New Era Movement in Work of Whole Church,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (Oct. 3, 1918), 1.

²² “Methodism Votes First to Give Endorsement to Interchurch World Plan,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (January 23, 1919), 1.

²³ “Protestant Forces Plan Joint Drive for Missions,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (December 26, 1918), 1.

²⁴ Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

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Or, as E. J. Eisenach put it, the “primary source of Progressive internationalism ... was nationalism itself.”²⁵ Wilson believed that America was morally superior to other nations and had a duty to exercise this moral superiority to reform other nations.²⁶ The exercise of this duty would lead to Wilsonian proposals such as the Fourteen Points for peace after the Great War and the League of Nations. It would be expressed in such catchphrases as “making the world safe for democracy” and “the war to end all wars.”

The notion of the United States as a unique and morally superior nation was not new to Wilson. What was new with Wilson and the state of world affairs in the late teens was the desire and the ability for the United States to attempt to implement within the realm of international politics this vision of itself as the reformer of the world. While the great powers of Europe lay in ruins, physically and economically, the United States experienced unprecedented influence on the world stage. As Adam Tooze wrote, “Indeed, so overwhelming was its pre-eminence that it seemed to raise once more the question that had been expelled from the history of Europe in the seventeenth century. Was the United States the universal, world-encompassing empire similar to that which the Catholic Habsburgs had once threatened to establish?”²⁷ Tooze strongly emphasized the discontinuities between the international order before and after the war. Yet even if Tooze’s portrait is overdrawn, the point remains: Wilson’s notion of the United States’ role in the world, combined with the position of the United States as it came out of the Great War, represented a new set of opportunities for Americans.

²⁵ E. J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 225. Quoted in Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (New York: Viking, 2014), 27.

²⁶ Patricia O’Toole, *The Moralists: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

²⁷ Tooze, 6.

The Centenary and Wilsonian Internationalism

If Wilsonian internationalism represented a set of new opportunities for Americans, these were opportunities that Methodist mission leaders intended to take to advance their own ends. These ends were both spiritual and financial. On the financial side, American Methodists were recognizing by the beginning of the twentieth century that the model of mission in which they had invested was rather expensive. Methodists' penchant for holistic ministry including schools and hospitals, their presumption that Western missionaries should continue to live at Western standards supported by Western salaries, and their world vision, which created an ever-expanding list of places for Methodist mission to occur, meant that finances were a significant constraint upon (and in the eyes of mission leaders a significant hindrance to the success of) Methodist mission.²⁸ Despite the denominational example of William Taylor's self-supporting mission, American Methodist mission leaders saw the only way of solving this financial problem as increased giving by American Methodists, which depended upon drawing more American Methodists into the vision of "missionary conquest and world betterment."

The organizers of the Centenary acknowledged this challenge in an article in the very first issue of *The Centenary Bulletin*:

We concede that a few people believe, really believe, in missions. Perhaps five or ten per cent of the church.

As for the other ninety or more per cent, missions is a new idea. The Centenary is therefore faced with a salesman's proposition. Sell the idea first; then it will be easy enough to put up the claims of that specific work with which you are charged.²⁹

²⁸ For more on the financial challenges of American Protestant foreign missions at this point, see David W. Scott, "The Value of Money: Funding Sources and Philanthropic Priorities in Twentieth-Century American Mission." *Religions* 9:4 (2018) <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/4/122/html>.

²⁹ "Meet People Where They Live," *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 17, 1918), 2.

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Organizers recognized from the beginning that the Centenary was an ideological sales job, one that was necessary to line up the spiritual, organization, financial, and other support necessary to continue to carry out their international vision.

It is significant that this acknowledgement came in a piece entitled, “Meet People Where They Live.” A modern rewording of this sales tactic would encourage salespersons to “meet people where they are.” And in 1918, where Americans were, and where their thinking was, was deeply connected to the world war and questions about America’s place in the world that had been raised by that war. Thus, the war represented an opportunity for Centenary organizers to tie their own vision of missionary internationalism to the much broader movement in the country toward Wilsonian internationalism and, hopefully, to thereby win more support for the former.

The connections to the Wilsonian vision were explicit, as repeated references to Wilsonian language and even the president himself pervaded the Centenary. Nowhere was this clearer than in the repeated use of language about world democracy. From the beginning, promoters wrote of the Centenary, “Methodist Church Has a Great Constructive Program to Make World Ready for Democracy.”³⁰ An article in that same issue of *The Centenary Bulletin*, tellingly titled, “Americanism and Mission,” noted “the place of home and foreign missions in making the world safe for democracy.”³¹ The MEC published a foreign mission study textbook entitled *The Christian Crusade for World Democracy*, by S. Earl Taylor and Halford E. Luccock,³² and a home mission study textbook entitled *Christian Democracy for America*, by D.

30 “Methodist Church Has a Great Constructive Program to Make World Ready for Democracy,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 24, 1918), 1.

31 “Americanism and Mission,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 24, 1918), 1.

32 S. Earl Taylor and Halford E. Luccock, *The Christian Crusade for World Democracy* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918).

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D. Forsyth and Ralph Welles Keeler.³³ Bishop James Atkins of the MECS delivered an address to one of the committees preparing for the Centenary entitled, “The Centenary of American Methodist Missions; or, Making Democracy Safe for the World.”³⁴ Bishop Francis J. McConnell of the MEC published a book in 1919 entitled *Democratic Christianity: Some Problems of the Church in the Days Just Ahead*.³⁵ The message was resounding: Christianity was a necessary component of the Wilsonian goal of promoting world-wide democracy, and mission was the means by which American Methodism could advance that goal.

Especially as the war drew toward a close and the Centenary entered its final stages, the rhetoric around the Centenary took on the same tone as the idealistic rhetoric about the new world that American international politics would create in the aftermath of the Great War. *The Centenary Bulletin*, the official newspaper of the Centenary, proclaimed that the Centenary had been the “Greatest Movement in Methodism” and the “Greatest Missionary Event in the History of the Christian Church.”³⁶ The Episcopal Address at the MEC’s 1920 General Conference reflected in amazement, “We cannot adequately characterize the Centenary Movement. Nothing else equal to it was ever planned or achieved by any denomination.”³⁷ MECS mission leader Elmer T. Clark concurred, “The greatest enterprise of its kind ever undertaken by any Christian denomination in human history was an attempt on the part of a united church to fitly celebrate

33 D. D. Forsyth and Ralph Welles Keeler, *Christian Democracy for America* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918).

34 *Missionary Centenary, 1819–1919 World Survey*, 94–98.

35 Francis J. McConnell, *Democratic Christianity: Some Problems of the Church in the Days Just Ahead* (New York: Macmillan, 1919).

36 *The Centenary Bulletin*, (May 29, 1919), 1; and (June 26, 1919), 1.

37 Committee on Conservation and Advance, “What Centenary Money Is Doing” (Chicago, IL: Committee on Conservation and Advance, Methodist Episcopal Church, [N.d.]), Front Matter.

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the centennial of American Methodist missions.”³⁸ Dr. Charles E. Jefferson proclaimed the Centenary fundraising drive to be “the most stupendous achievement of any branch of the Christian Church in modern history.”³⁹ Charles Sumner Ward agreed, “First of all, the raising of \$140,000,000 for the advancement of the kingdom of God is the greatest enterprise ever undertaken by any Church in Christian history.”⁴⁰ *The Christian Advocate* asserted that the Centenary had been “the greatest revival the Church has ever known.”⁴¹ While some of this language may be written off as mere denominational boosterism, it also reflected the end-of-history political rhetoric used by Wilsonians about the post-war new world order that the United States would create, in which war would be no more and democracy would be universal. A speech by Wilson surrogate William G. McAdoo at the Centenary fair in defense of the League of Nations as a means to achieve the Christian goal of world peace gives further testimony to this linkage between unprecedented mission effort and the planned Wilsonian new world order.⁴²

Beyond the use of Wilsonian language about democracy and a shared sense of monumental achievement, organizers of the Centenary sought to link the organization to Wilson personally. Quotations by him were prominently displayed in *The Centenary Bulletin*.⁴³ A report on the convention in June 1918 that finalized plans for the Centenary included the text of a telegram sent by the convention to Wilson, along with the president’s reply.⁴⁴ As the world’s fair

38 Elmer T. Clark, “Conception and Development of the Centenary,” in “Souvenir, Centenary Celebration,” 9.

39 “What Centenary Money Is Doing,” 31.

40 Charles Sumner Ward, “Missionary Centenary Review,” in “Souvenir, Centenary Celebration,” 69.

41 Quoted in Lankford, “Methodism ‘Over the Top,’” 32.

42 Anderson, *Voices from the Fair*, 239–257.

43 See, for instance, *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 31, 1918), 1.

44 “Telegram to Wilson Pledging Support of Whole Church to War,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (June 27, 1918),

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approached, the paper noted, “President Wilson Wires Wishes for Centenary Success.”⁴⁵ Writing in *The Centenary Survey of the Board of Foreign Missions*, S. Earl Taylor made the link between the Centenary, Wilson, and American moral internationalism the clearest when he wrote, “Under the providence of God, through the leadership of President Wilson, America is today in the position of the unchallenged moral and spiritual leadership of the world. The world listens to what we say, is ready to follow where we move.”⁴⁶

This quotation certainly shows the parallels between mission leaders’ thinking about American Methodist mission and their thinking about American politics. Yet it reveals something more. At some point, belief in the Wilsonian ideal of the United States’ moral mission to remake the world went from being a convenient point of convergence by which mission could be promoted to an end in itself. Commenting on the drama *The Wayfarer* performed at the Centenary fair, Nancye Van Brunt wrote, “It is implied by the presence [in *The Wayfarer*] of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, representatives of the branches of the military, Union and Confederate soldiers and the figure of Columbia that this [religious] message is both addressed to and fulfilled by the United States. The framing of the religious message between scenes of military destruction and representatives of the armed forces carrying national flags fuses the two beliefs.”⁴⁷ J. Tremayne Copplestone described this fusion in the following way:

[I]n 1917, under the influence of American involvement in the war, the Board changed the orientation from that of a world-wide church to that of a national church so exercising its higher patriotism as to bring the world under the command of America's war aim of democracy raised to its supreme Christian expression—‘a federation of the World under the Spiritual Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ It was clear from its formal statements

45 “President Wilson Wires Wishes for Centenary Success,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (May 15, 1919), 1.

46 *The Centenary Survey of the Board of Foreign Missions*, 8.

47 Van Brunt, “Pagentry at the Methodist Centenary,” 116.

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at the Annual Meeting that it was promoting a spiritual patriotism that was an extension of the politico-military patriotism it shared with the secular community, which was so engrossed in winning the war. It fully accepted the latter both implicitly and explicitly.⁴⁸

Copplestone was clear that this transformation came at a price: “When at last its record of massive support of the American war cause was complete, the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States stood naked of any shred of neutrality or of irenic restraint to cover the fact that it had proved itself not a genuinely world-wide church, but a national, even a nationalistic, church.”⁴⁹ Ironically, by buying too deeply into the vision of America’s moral role in the world, the promoters of the Centenary forfeited the moral high ground.

Defeat and Persistence of International Visions

The nationalist internationalism of the mission Centenary and of Wilsonian politics may have been predicated on a hypocrisy, but by late 1919, this vision began to suffer from other problems too. In the world of secular politics, Wilson proved unable to fully implement his vision. The Treaty of Versailles failed to live up to Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Patricia O’Toole commented on that failure, “Wilson had tried, but moral suasion was not enough; it rarely is when stakes are high.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the creation of the League of Nations seemed to be a great success for Wilson. Yet Wilson failed not just once but on three separate occasions to win Congressional approval of American participation in the League. Perhaps Wilson’s greatest defeat, though, came in the election of Warren G. Harding as his successor. The election was

48 J. Tremayne Copplestone, *History of Methodist Missions, Vol. IV: Twentieth-Century Perspectives (The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1896–1939)* (New York: The Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1973), 499–500.

49 Copplestone, 500.

50 O’Toole, *The Moralist*, xviii.

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widely seen as a repudiation of Wilson and Wilsonian ideals. Harding's call for a "return to normalcy" was intended and interpreted as a return to a style of American politics that was minimally engaged with the great powers of Europe.

Within the realm of Methodist mission and Protestant mission more generally, failures followed the Centenary. The Interchurch World Movement, ecumenical heir of the Centenary, failed dramatically by 1921, not even raising enough money to cover its operating expenses. Eldon G. Ernst drew an explicit parallel between the failures of the IWM and the fate of Wilson's policies. He wrote that the IWM "expressed the patriotism, militarism, and idealism of the nation at arms, identifying with the League of Nations. It then shared the fate of President Wilson and the League in the changing American ideological climate. The failure of the Interchurch World Movement dashed the highest hopes of American Protestant leaders and ended an era of religious history."⁵¹

The Centenary experienced its own financial failings after the euphoria of the summer of 1919. The fundraising campaign had pushed for pledges, which were expected to be collected over the course of the following five years, from mid-1919 to mid-1924. Yet, when it was time to collect from church members who had pledged so enthusiastically in the spring, mission leaders found those same church members less willing to part with their dollars come fall. Giving for home missions fell in the second half of 1919. By February 1920, payments to the MEC were 32% behind pledges. The situation in the MECS was even worse.⁵² Finances continued to be a problem for the mission boards in both the MEC and MECS until the 1940s. Elmer Clark, an

⁵¹ Eldon G. Ernst, "The Interchurch World Movement of North America," PhD diss., Yale University, 1968, i.
⁵² Lankford, 33–34.

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MECS mission leader, described the psychological consequences of such a failure as follows: “Once on the retreat, our morale is broken. Once admit defeat, and we may never—certainly not in this generation—regain the ground we give up. We suffer shamefully in our prestige, influence, and self-esteem. Few worse calamities could befall us.”⁵³ By the 1920s, it seemed that the internationalist vision cast by the Centenary organizers was in full retreat.

Yet these defeats notwithstanding, aspects of American self-understanding promoted by both Wilsonian internationalism and mission internationalism continued to persist in the political and the religious realms. Patricia O’Toole wrote that “despite the fact that Wilson’s fellow citizens rejected his idealistic internationalism, it remained at the heart of American debates on foreign policy for almost a hundred years.”⁵⁴ Even with Harding’s election, the immediate and enduring consequence of Wilson’s vision was a reinforcement of Americans’ view of themselves as the central actors in the world, a view shared even by Wilson’s erstwhile political opponents. Adam Tooze wrote, “[W]hat was remarkable in the wake of World War I was the degree to which American exceptionalism emerged strengthened and more vocal than ever.”⁵⁵ Thomas Bender added, “Woodrow Wilson, more than any other single person, shaped the way Americans thought about their place in the world.”⁵⁶ This sense of exceptionalism and America’s unique role in the world would come to shape the American century that followed the First World War.

It would also continue to shape most American Methodists’ views of the world church over the course of the next century. Taylor Walters Denyer has shown how much American

53 Elmer T. Clark, *The Task Ahead: The Missionary Crisis of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Board of Missions, Centenary Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 42.

54 O’Toole, 488.

55 Tooze, 27.

56 Bender, 241.

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Methodists continued to think of themselves as the central, and at times even sole, actors in mission. She details this self-understanding in the creation of the Advance for Christ in the 1940s and, through the example of American Methodist relations with Methodists in the Democratic Republic of Congo, traces it to the present day. Denyer asserts that American Methodists remain unable to conceive of themselves as anything other than the central players in the church, even as the Congolese have been able to shift their view of themselves away from being supporting characters towards being central actors in their own right.⁵⁷ Nor is Denyer the only one to observe an enduring pattern of American centrism in United Methodist polity and American Methodist mentalities.⁵⁸ The observation is almost a trope among close observers of the denomination, especially those from outside the United States.⁵⁹

One can debate whether this outcome of the Centenary was inevitable, an irresistible consequence of Americans' secular, political view of themselves as a people. But an episode early on in the Centenary is a reminder that there were other potential forces at work in the event. In article entitled, "First Aid to World Citizenship," Centenary organizers announced a "World Parish plan," an early forerunner of what today are called sister parish or church twinning programs. In the eyes of promoters, "the best feature of the World Parish plan is that it kicks a hole in the horizon of the Smith Street Church." The article continued:

⁵⁷ Taylor Walters Denyer, *Decolonizing Mission Partnerships: Evolving Collaboration between United Methodists in North Katanga and the United States of America*. American Society of Missiology Monographs Series 47 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020).

⁵⁸ See, for instance, the variety of writings under the tag of "US centrism" on the blog *UM & Global*, www.umglobal.org/search?q=US+centric.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Ole Birch, "What happened to the worldwide church? A response to Wonder, Love and Praise," *UM & Global* (July 6, 2017), <http://www.umglobal.org/2017/07/ole-birch-what-happened-to-worldwide.html>.

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The War is proving to be one long geography lesson for the American people. The Peace Conference, when it comes, will be another one. The day has arrived when the citizen of the United States must know geography, and world conditions.

The World Parish plan with its frequent reports direct from Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, and the personal contacts with these countries and their problems is really a course in First Aid to World Citizenship.⁶⁰

The language here is still centered on the United States and its role in the world. But it is a vision of that role that depends upon learning about and from fellow Christians in other countries. In contrast with the later declaration that “[t]he world listens to what we say, is ready to follow where we move,”⁶¹ this understanding of American Methodists’ role in the world held out the possibility of mutual listening and perhaps joint discernment on where and how to move.

The World Parish plan was never implemented church-wide, as this early article had anticipated. One can only speculate what would have been learned about “world citizenship” by American Methodists had it been. As it played out, the Centenary did more to infuse nationalism into the internationalist vision of missions than it had done to infuse internationalism into the nationalist habits of American Methodism. But this other dream of international Methodism, one based on mutual learning among equal citizens of the world, would persist on the margins of American Methodism. It persists still, a small but insistent voice that another way of being an international Christian community is possible.

⁶⁰ “First Aid to World Citizenship,” *The Centenary Bulletin* (Jan. 17, 1918), 2.

⁶¹ *The Centenary Survey of the Board of Foreign Missions*, 8.