METHODOISM IN NORTH CAROLINA

Methodism in North Carolina did not begin at any one point and spread out from there. Rather, there were three distinct beginnings. One of these was in the northern Roanoke River area and the northeastern counties where the movement spread from Virginia. Another beginning was a lay movement along the seacoast where the bays and inlets made the entry accessible by water. Another beginning was through Wilmington into Bladen County and further inland in the Sandhills country where the movement spread from South Carolina.

Prior to this, George Whitefield traveled the main North-South route for several years beginning in 1739 and preached in towns and hamlets, but did not organize a society. There was not a Methodist preacher in the state until 1772 when Joseph Pilmore preached at Currituck courthouse. Robert Williams, a Methodist preacher stationed in Petersburg, planned a circuit into North Carolina in 1774 and John King preached in our state the following year. It was during this period that the first societies were organized in North Carolina. Some coastal societies were probably organized at the same time, but this cannot be documented.

It was not until 1776 that the first circuit entirely within North Carolina was organized and three preachers carried out the work, followed by the New Hope, Tar River and Roanoke Circuits in 1778. Yadkin was added in 1780, the year of Francis Asbury’s first visit to the state. A strong period of growth occurred between 1780 and 1784, the year the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was organized in Baltimore, and in that latter year Methodists in North Carolina numbered about 3,000. The first conference of the newly organized church took place at the home of Major Green Hill near Louisburg in 1785. Only five years later there were over 10,000 Methodists in the State.

For over a decade a growing number of loosely defined circuits spread into the state beginning from Virginia and South Carolina. Camp meetings which began around 1800 contributed to the tremendous growth. Gradually the western part of the state became known as the Holston division. In spite of this activity, Methodism did not have any state identity until 1837 when the North Carolina Conference was formed with 15,062 white and 3,666 colored members.

The South Carolina Conference gave up part of its territory in 1850, followed in 1870 by the remainder of its circuits which were within the state of North Carolina. The last territory in North Carolina to be separated from the Virginia Conference occurred in 1895. In 1889 a division occurred which separated the Western North Carolina Conference from that in the east.

Powerful revival meetings generated new churches, but the church was not without its divisions. The first
of these occurred in 1828 when the first conference of the Methodist Protestant Church was held at Whitakers Chapel in Halifax County. The General Conference in 1844 divided Methodism into two main bodies with the North Carolina churches adhering to the M.E. Church, South.

Following the war between the states, the strong black membership in the southern church was drawn away from that body by at least three different groups; the A.M.E. Zion movement which organized its conference in 1864, the M.E. Church which established a missionary conference in 1867 and the A.M.E. Church which organized in Wilmington in 1868.

The M.E. Church, South attempted to eliminate its black membership in 1870 by providing for the creation of a separate body known as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, but it was 1873 before a Conference of this denomination was organized in North Carolina.

In 1869, the M.E. Church divided its membership along racial lines, one branch becoming the Blue Ridge-Atlantic Conference which was composed of several native American congregations and a scattering of coastal churches. This body merged in 1939 along with that portion of the 222 Methodist Protestant Churches in Eastern North Carolina and the 732 congregations of the M.E. Church, South to form the North Carolina Conference of The Methodist Church. The black branch of the M.E. Church became part of the Central Jurisdiction and merged into North Carolina Methodism in 1968, approximately one hundred years after it had been formed. This growing body became The United Methodist Church in 1968.

Today, the North Carolina Conference is composed of 211,180 members among twelve districts with the burden to make the Gospel relevant to three ethnic groups which are united in principle, and dedicated to make Christ’s mission alive in a world which is divided in fact.

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