

The Methodist Church Today

The Methodist Church of today is more settled and sedate than it was in pioneer times. There are few circuit riders, and these use cars instead of horses. The membership is recruited largely from church schools and young people's societies. Some are older persons who join church after private conferences and decisions rather than during camp meetings and revivals.

From the physical standpoint, the Methodist Church has prospered. Midway in the twentieth century the total valuation of Methodist property in Iowa was estimated at approximately \$34,412,085, of which \$26,762,028 represents the church buildings and sites. There were 432 ministers in active service, 237 on the retired list, 47 on trial, and 120 listed as accepted supply preachers, not for regular appointments. Of the 120 supplies, 18 were women.

The North Iowa Conference is divided into eight districts with 313 charges, while the Iowa-Des Moines Conference has six districts with 324 charges. Of these charges, 222 had two appointments, eight had three preaching places, one had four, and 22 were circuits. Of the pastors, ten were women. The total membership was 276,466,

though almost 40,000 were listed as inactive. Approximately one-tenth of Iowa's population belongs to the Methodist Church. The largest membership is at St. Paul's in Cedar Rapids with 3,336. Six other churches have more than 2,000 members, while 37 others have more than 1,000. Seventy-four churches reported less than fifty members each. There are over 12,000 Methodists in Des Moines and vicinity.

But a church is more than its buildings, ministers, and members. A church must have spiritual appeal and moral force if it is to aid in establishing the right relationship of its members with God and with the world. The Methodist Church has lost some of its emotional momentum. The camp meetings and revivals, with their tears of conviction and shouts of triumph, have largely disappeared. Visitation programs and conferences are used to bring the indifferent and undecided into the church and help them with their spiritual problems. The minister preaches less often of Hell and perhaps too seldom of the punishment for wrong-doing. Instead, he portrays the peace which comes from fellowship with Christ and obedience to the laws of God. The Devil has been almost forgotten.

With these changes in emphasis there has been a change of moral standards. Dancing and the theater are no longer taboo in Methodist circles as they were a hundred years ago. Few object to

ruffles, jewelry, and musical instruments, while religious objects such as crosses and candles are recognized as aids to worship. Social card games are tolerated, but the Methodist Church as a whole opposes gambling, the sale of liquor, and obscene and immoral literature. A small minority advocates peace, but only a few call for peace at any price. The Methodist Church in Iowa stands for racial toleration and for the abolition of barriers based on race or color.

Young people's work is promoted by the Methodist Youth Fellowship, successor of the Epworth League. A spiritual life retreat is held for members of this organization at Clear Lake in the North Iowa Conference. Summer camps are also held at Lake Okoboji. The church schools continue to be a most vital part of the church's activities, with almost 150,000 Iowa children and adults enrolled in them.

Retired ministers and ministers' widows are provided for by annuities. For retired ministers in the North Iowa Conference the amount paid is \$33 annually for each year of service; for widows, \$23.10 — the total being \$210,000 per year. The Iowa-Des Moines Conference pays less — \$24 to each retired minister for each year of service in the Conference, and approximately \$16.80 to each widow. The total paid out by both conferences amounts to approximately \$350,000 annually.

Statistics, however, are an inadequate basis for judging a church. What does Methodism mean to Iowa in human values? It means a Methodist church in most Iowa towns and all Iowa cities, with neighbors meeting at the morning service. It means the sound of hymns undergirded by a piano or perhaps a great organ. It means children learning Bible stories or young people talking over the problems of life. It means an invitation to all to accept the way of salvation offered to every man, woman, and child. It means comfort for the sick and old. It means a standard of public and personal morality. It means groups of women meeting to sew and to pray, to study and to raise money for missions. It means that the laborer and the factory owner, the farmer and the banker are equally welcome in God's house. It means that each functioning church in the smallest town reaches out to the ends of the earth.

The Methodist Church of today is not the church of the pioneers. The great evangelistic crusade now being conducted will, it is hoped, bring a new spiritual awakening for Methodism. The church cannot go back, but it can go forward, holding, as its motto, John Wesley's final comment: "The best of all is, God is with us."