

DETROIT METHODISM'S FIRST CO-OPERATIVE EFFORT
By Detroit Conference Archivist Ronald A. Brunger (April 1966)
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Detroit in 1880 had grown to be a city of over 100,000 people; the census that year reported 116,340, making it the 17th city in size in our land. There were then six Methodist Churches in Detroit. Central was much the largest with nearly 800 members, and then in relative size came Simpson, Jefferson Avenue, Tabernacle, Fort Street (later Preston), and Sixteenth Street (later Haven).

All six Churches had built anew in the postwar decade. The present Central Methodist Church was built in 1866-67, an outstanding edifice for its day, making Methodism prominent in the city. Jefferson Avenue had dedicated its Church in 1866; Simpson in 1870; Fort Street in 1871; Sixteenth Street in 1872, and Tabernacle in 1874. In ten years from 1864 to 1874, our church property in the city advanced from about \$30,000 to nearly \$300,000. The 1870's were a time of postwar depression and deflation. The Churches found the going difficult with the long continued depression. This tremendous building expansion in one decade had strained the resources of the members. Rev. John Arnold wrote, "At each successive dedication a few men of means pressed to the front and breasted the wave, while others contributed smaller sums according to their means." The end of the decade saw all the Church with a debt that for some was becoming burdensome.

One Sunday evening in 1878 a pastor and a faithful laymen were discussing Methodism in Detroit. It was felt that while each Church was absorbed in its special field and own activities and problems, large districts of the city were being neglected. And that in the past, Sunday Schools and Churches had been placed in locations that did not best

serve the cause. They thought of the possibility of a city missionary organization. On consultation with the presiding elder, Rev. J. W. Fuller, it was decided to call a meeting to consider such an organization to “embrace and operate all our missionary interests in the city.” The presiding elder sent out a call and a meeting was held in Central Church, embracing most of the official members of the city’s Churches, who had never before met together. An enthusiasm was engendered by the meeting, and a feeling that an organization was needed.

The result was that the “Detroit M.E. Church and Sunday-school Alliance” was organized July 15, 1878. The object of the Alliance was to “secure a closer affinity.” The exception of Central, were so burdened with debt that no advance seemed possible.

At a meeting held in the Tabernacle in Feb. 1879, it was proposed that the Alliance should undertake to lift the church debt of the city by pooling it, and asking the Central Church to lend its strength. Reuben Robinson of the Tabernacle Church thought that its members could maintain their current expenses and pay \$10 or more per member toward the debt per year. If on average all the Methodist in Detroit could do this for two years, the entire debt of the Church would be wiped out. So his thinking ran. The proposal was made in the executive committee of the Alliance, and adopted dependent upon the action of Central Church. The official board of the latter generously and unanimously agreed to assume about two-fifths of the whole debt although their own debt was less than one-quarter. The German Churches for some reason withdrew from the alliances, and did not go into this campaign.

The first year \$12,000 was raised, David Preston, an outstanding Methodist layman and philanthropist for many years in Detroit, was the treasurer and sparkplug of

the campaign. In the spring of 1879 a daily prayer-meeting was held at noon in the parlor of Central Church, with one or more representatives from each Church. "In these meetings," stated Preston, "we asked for strength, for health, for wisdom, for patience and prosperity, for perseverance, for faith in God, that this work should be accomplished in His own good time, and in His own way."

At the end of the first year, enthusiasm seemed to be lagging. The Alliance resolved to raise the whole balance of \$24, 000 in six months by Thanksgiving Day, 1880. The Churches worked very hard to realize this goal that spring and fall. On Nov. 15 they were about \$2700 short of their goal. On the evening of Nov. 16, 125 faithful Methodist from all the Churches gathered by invitation at Central Church. All these people felt they had given all they could to the cause. They sang together hymns beloved to this day, "Oh for a thousand tongues to sing," "What a friend we have in Jesus", "All hail the power of Jesus' name." They kneeled and prayed together; they had a short experience meeting. "They talked together and wept together over this work which seemed so near and yet possibly so far from completion. Then the books were opened for further subscription, and in short time \$1600 of the balance had been pledged in sums ranging from \$5 to \$100." The evening concluded with a sumptuous repast and a goodly fellowship and feeling.

Preston kept on working toward the goal. A few days later six leaders met in the office of John Owen, longtime Detroit Methodist leader, and \$650 more was subscribed. Preston expressed confidence that the rest of the money would come within the specified time. On Nov.24th at 4 p.m. the last \$130 was given by two businessmen, and Preston wrote in his book in red ink, "It is finished." He felt a great burden roll off his shoulders.

On Thanksgiving Day, Nov.25, 1880, a Methodist Jubilee was held at 10:30 a.m. in Central Methodist Church. The church columns and railings were festooned with evergreens; along the front of the choir gallery was wrought in letters of evergreen, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow." The platform, pulpit and gallery were decorated with plants and flowers. In front of the pulpit was a beautiful floral banner with the legend, "Union-Success." Methodist from all over the city filled the Church and were given beautiful souvenir programs. Following the anthem and opening worship, came the dramatic moment when the boards of trustees of the several Churches were called up front for a formal presentation of the cancelled mortgages and notes, which had constituted the debt of the Churches. Oldest of the trustees was John Owen, who had been a member in Detroit for 58 years. An historical address was given by John Arnold, and remarks by several other leaders. One minister stated that for the first time he was pastor of a Church which had a steeple and no debt.

The triumphant character of this service was indicated by the offering which was taken for the benefit of the city charities, which included "The Protestant Orphan Asylum", "Home of the Friendless", "Foundlings' Home", "Industrial School", and "Working Women's Home." The offering amounted to \$130!

An ecumenical note appeared in this service, when news was brought that the Second Congregational Church had just completed a successful campaign to pay their mortgage. The Alliance sent a congratulatory message to the Congregationalists. Before the end of the service, a message had been received from them. The entire service lasted nearly two and a half hours.

Thus as Detroit began to become a large city, and the Churches found themselves faced with great problems individual and collective, the late 19th century Methodist found that in Union there is strength, and the capacity to meet wisely the individual and collective problems of the Church. The success of this union effort in 1879-80 brought a great inspiration and lift to the church leaders and members of that time. The Jubilee was never to be forgotten by those who experienced it. This early cooperative effort of the Methodist Alliance was prophetic of the great work that the modern Methodist of Detroit have been doing through the Methodist Union in recent years!