



John Harper stands behind the pulpit, on the left, at a 1938 convention of Christian Endeavor, an interdenominational youth ministry organization that was popular in the early 20th century. Harper has just introduced Harriet Clark, widow of Dr. Francis E. Clark, who founded CE in 1881.

Remembering John Harper

Leading Layman of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference

Dr. Joe Hale

Editor's Note: For 25 years, Dr. Joe Hale served as General Secretary of the World Methodist Council. Since his retirement in 2001, he has lived in Waynesville, North Carolina. We are grateful for his willingness to contribute this article.

John R. Harper was well known, not only in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, but across the United Methodist Church. He was active at every level of his church and denomination. A delegate to Jurisdictional and General Conferences, he also served on the General Council on Finance and Administration. He was a leader in Simpson United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, where for many years he was the church school superintendent. After moving to Langhorne, he, along with Dr. Charles Yrigoyen, Sr., organized evening worship services for the Attleboro retirement community. John was a worker and supporter of Christian Endeavor from his youth, and on one occasion was responsible for Richard Nixon addressing a large Christian Endeavor conference. In 1961, he was a member of the organizing committee for the first Billy Graham Crusade in Philadelphia. John also served as an officer of both the Sunday School Union and the YMCA.

He was the first lay leader of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, having been elected to that role in its predecessor Philadelphia Conference in 1962, and serving until 1971. He also served on the Episcopal Committee during the tenure of his friend, Bishop Fred Pierce Corson. The Harpers and Corsons were close friends to the time of their deaths. Honors presented to him include the St. George's Medal from historic St. George's United Methodist Church in Philadelphia, and reception into the "Honorable Order of Jerusalem" for his service to world Methodism.

Two or three years before his death, John was recognized at a session of his annual conference by Bishop Peter Weaver, who before the conference cited the contributions he had made over the years. Bishop Weaver later telephoned John and asked if he might meet with him in Langhorne to visit with him about the Church they both loved. That visit meant much to John!

MY ASSIGNMENT

Rev. Joseph DiPaolo, the Editor of *Annals*, has asked me to give some picture of John Harper beyond Pennsylvania, and Methodism in America. For it was in the international area we met, and it was in the world arena I knew him best. I first met John Harper in the 1960s when I was on the staff of the General Board of Evangelism. I had been invited to work on a proposal for a World Methodist Evangelism Committee to be organized. This was presented to the 1971 World Methodist Conference in Denver and adopted. I was later asked to attend some of the early meetings of the Evangelism Committee – in Bristol, England, London, Jamaica and following these, a larger consultation in Frankfurt, Germany. John was present at all these meetings. At this time plans were emerging for a World Conference on Evangelism to be held in Jerusalem. I worked for two years on that event serving as the registrar. While John did not attend the Jerusalem conference, he was centrally involved in its planning. 2,500 persons from across the world were there, and the program of World Evangelism was launched.

Later in New York City, I was invited to another meeting attended by John, and chaired by Dr. Charles C. Parlin. It was a search committee named by the World Methodist Council to seek a successor to Dr. Lee F. Tuttle, who had decided to retire. Lee had served for 15 years as general secretary. Several persons were present to be interviewed. I was surprised to be invited, and came with no expectations. I do recall John raising some thoughtful questions, and felt his support. A few days later I received a letter from Dr. Parlin, inviting me to meet with the council's full nominating committee in London.

John Harper was there in London too! Following this meeting in the old Penta Hotel, we all took a memorable cab ride across London to City Road to survey the restoration work then underway at Wesley's Chapel. We also visited Wesley's house and grave. I learned that day how deeply involved the World Methodist Council was in the effort to "Save Wesley's Chapel." The building had been condemned and closed. The restoration – which took five years – happened in large part because of the World Methodist Council's campaign to "Save Wesley's Chapel." Over the years more than a million dollars from America and other parts of the world were channeled through John Harper to the work in London.

The next time I was with John was in Accra, Ghana for the meeting of the Council's Executive Committee. There my nomination was affirmed and sent to the full meeting of the Council for approval the following year in Dublin, Ireland. This was the beginning of my 25-year association with John Harper.



John Harper stands behind his friend, Bishop Fred P. Corson (seated), and among members of the delegation from the Philadelphia Conference to the 1968 General Conference. That general conference, held in Dallas, Texas, united the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church to create The United Methodist Church.

TREASURER OF THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL

John was a central figure in the World Methodist Council long before I was involved. The previous treasurer, Edwin L. Jones, of Charlotte, North Carolina, preparing to board a flight for Chicago to attend a council finance meeting, suffered a heart attack. While waiting for the ambulance, he handed his treasurer's financial records and report to a flight attendant asking they be hand delivered to the person meeting him in Chicago. The books were received at O'Hare Field, Mr. Jones did not survive, and at a later meeting John Harper was elected treasurer of the World Methodist Council – a position he held for 21 years. In this capacity, John and Anne visited many areas of World Methodism across the world. John had many stories of rich experiences and unforgettable meetings.

IN TONGA AND AT THE VATICAN

In the Kingdom of Tonga, the Council Officers were received with great ceremony, meeting with the King of Tonga and the Queen in the Royal Palace – just as the page of the calendar turned to a New Year. The place was significant because Tonga is “where time begins,” the dawn and first hour of each new day! John had many stories to tell about the protocol of the visit, the sheer presence and size of King Tupou IV, who weighed over 400 pounds, tables laden with food, and visits with the noted Tongan Methodist leader, Dr. John Havea. Later in Europe, John and Anne in another part of the world were received in a private audience with Pope Paul VI in his library in the Vatican.

PROPOSAL FOR WORLD CONFERENCE VENUE

Shortly after I became general secretary, John brought an important proposal to the World Methodist Council. The venue for the World Methodist Conference is determined at least four years in advance of the meeting in order to enable adequate preparation. These Conferences began in 1881 in London. For almost 100 years, the venues had alternated between Britain and the United States, with two exceptions: Canada in 1911 and Norway in 1961. John proposed that the 1981 Centennial Conference be held in Honolulu, Hawaii. It was a US state, but the islands are far out in the Pacific and featured a wide cultural diversity representative of the vast Pacific rim. John had come to know Hawaii, while stationed in Honolulu in World War II. Of all the World Methodist Conferences, this conference in Honolulu, still holds the record of being the largest held in over 120 years! A pacific cultural event in Hawaii one evening featured many of the Island cultures and an enormous sit-down dinner for 4,000 persons – the largest such event attempted in the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel ballroom, which was extended to capacity. It was amazingly orchestrated, and the food both hot and delicious!

BARCELONA, SPAIN

My inexperience was evident in the first Officers’ meeting for which I had responsibility. I had booked a faded old hotel in the heart of Barcelona, Spain, which we discovered later, had an expensive dining room. John saved us by example, guiding us to places we could eat more reasonably in nearby places with “ham sandwiches” and other affordable meals.

John’s great story from Barcelona, however, comes from a dinner the Spanish Evangelical Church hosted for the world officers at the hotel. The



The Harpers being greeted by Pope Paul VI at the Vatican

Church had a relaxed view on alcohol, so drinks were served. When the wine came around the Methodists all declined, either cupping a hand over the glass to indicate “no,” or turning the glass upside down on the table. Later, however, when the dessert arrived, everyone was lapping it up. It was thoroughly enjoyed by all! According to John, one of our Spanish hosts standing with a friend, pointed to one of the upturned glasses, and waved: “No, no!” but pointing to the liquor-laced dessert, he gestured, “Yes, yes!”

BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

In this great South American city, on one officers’ visitation, John again helped us with our money, this time to understand the currency. The astronomical numbers in the local money, at the time, had many zeros! It took several hundred thousand pesos to buy one ham sandwich! One ten-thousand peso bill I still have from that visit was only worth a few cents. John prepared small notes to help us understand the peso/dollar equivalents!

THE MAN TO SEE AT WORLD CONFERENCES

In Hawaii, Nairobi, Singapore, and many other international meetings, John was the man to see! He was the World Treasurer and people lined up to receive food allowances, to be reimbursed for air tickets, and other sundry calls on the Treasurer. He was very popular! He also received annual member church assessments for the Council's work. The Koreans usually did not pay in advance, but brought the money with them – in cash! So John often received from their hands rolls of \$100 dollar bills and thousands of dollars in cash payments!

THE RESTORATION OF WESLEY'S CHAPEL

John was a key figure in making the urgent need for the Wesley's Chapel restoration known, collecting funds for it, and making the financial transfers to the work in London. World Methodists over five years contributed more than 1 million dollars to the effort to "Save Wesley's Chapel" through the World Methodist Council. John was in frequent touch with the Chapel minister, Dr. Allen Birtwhistle, the architect, and the contractor, and closely followed the progress. He also encouraged a proposal to save the old pipe organ in the Chapel, which was on the verge of being destroyed, as an electronic instrument was proposed to be purchased for the reopening. It was with John's encouragement that an organ builder from America, Clay Hale, was invited to travel to London to assess the feasibility of saving the old pipe organ, which had been silent in a building without heat for five years, and assumed to be beyond repair. The grand re-opening, when Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were to be present, was less than a year away, so the decision had to be made.

The organ builder spent a week inside the organ chambers. The leathers, pipes, and other critical parts of the instrument were found to be basically sound. The project was feasible. Given the "go ahead" by the British Committee, Hale secured \$100,000 from the Akin family in America to cover the restoration costs. Dr. Nita Akin was an internationally renowned organist who had also performed on the Wesley's Chapel organ! As the Royal Family entered Wesley's Chapel on November 2, 1978, the day of the re-opening, the organ was glorious as all present heartily sang "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing!"

Following the re-opening service, John and Anne were among 15 persons who met Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in a small tea and reception in the Royal Artillery Headquarters across City Road from the Chapel. As the Royal couple left the small tea, they passed through a great

hall, greeting around two hundred other dignitaries from many parts of the world before leaving for Buckingham Palace.

DINNER HOSTED BY MR. SPEAKER, GEORGE THOMAS

John and Anne maintained a long friendship with the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Honorable George Thomas. The week the Chapel was reopened, Mr. Speaker gave a dinner in the Speaker's private apartments in the British Parliament building for 20 guests who had been close to the Chapel restoration. Mr. Speaker was dressed in the tradition of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The dinner was memorable. One guest commented on the huge silver candlesticks on his long dining table. He confided with us that his were larger than the Queen's in Buckingham Palace!

Following the dessert, one of the Speaker's servers softly asked if he should "pass the cigars." Our host told him, yes, but whispered "They are all Methodists, they won't take any." After he had taken the silver platter of cigars, as he passed George Thomas, I heard him whisper, "Sir, they took seven!"

Later, when George Thomas was made a member of the House of Lords, and assumed the title Lord Tonypany, he traveled to America in 1994 to speak at the Annual Dinner of the Friends of the World Methodist Museum at the Council headquarters in North Carolina. Just two weeks before he came for this address, my wife, Mary, suffered a stroke. John Harper brought Lord Tonypany to see her in an Asheville, North Carolina hospital, 30 miles from Lake Junaluska. Mary had been very ill. For days, it had been "touch and go." I will never forget the moment they walked into Mary's hospital room. Lord Tonypany held out a small bouquet and presented it to her in a most courtly and unforgettable way! And for both of us, just John's presence meant everything!

EXPANSION OF THE WORLD METHODIST MUSEUM

When the United Methodist General Commission on Archives and History moved from the World Methodist Building to its new facility on the campus of Drew University, John was among the first to see new possibilities for expanding the World Methodist Museum. Securing the help of a Philadelphia artist and close friend, Hilda Lynn, this vision was accomplished and, in the judgment of many, the finest museum of early Methodism was created. At John's request, Hilda designed the monumental "Wesley" and "Christ" stained glass windows at the sides of the main entrance. She also designed a number of the major displays and gave the

Museum a large mural of John Wesley, the height he was in life, preaching at the Market Cross in Epworth. Three magnificent lighted museum cases were later given by John in memory of his wife, Anne. John's portrait painted at the time he was the World Treasurer also hangs in the Museum's portrait gallery.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

John Harper gave visionary leadership many years ago in sensing the need to secure property adjacent to the Council headquarters building when it came on the market, and before any need arose. Because the property was purchased at that time, the new Royce and Jane Reynolds/Epworth building, a 1.5 million dollar scale-replica of the 300-year old Epworth Old Rectory where the Wesley family lived in England, today faces Lake Junaluska, alongside the Susanna Wesley Garden and the World Methodist Museum.

VISITS WITH THE HARPERS IN PHILADELPHIA

My wife, Mary, our son Jeff and I recall great times with John and Anne at their 7508 Brookfield Road home in Philadelphia. John would tell us about the fun he had with his brothers at Christmas, when they exchanged the same mechanical toys over and over! He and Anne would serve beautiful meals and homemade chipped beef on toast (my favorite, and John's) for breakfast.

John and Anne were very proud when they spoke of members of the Harper and Tait families, and often told us the things the nephews and nieces were doing. We met many of them at John and Anne's 50th wedding anniversary, where we heard speeches they made and music they performed. On one trip to Philadelphia, I wanted to see some of the places frequented by the famous contemporary of John Wesley, George Whitefield. We were preparing an exhibit for the Council Museum to mark the 250th anniversary of Whitefield's ordination in Gloucester, England. John took us to many of these places George Whitefield visited in the area: Neshaminy, downtown Philadelphia, and other points where he had preached.

When in Philadelphia, John, on occasion, took me to the Pardee Company headquarters to meet those with whom he worked so many years. I was introduced to staff members who assisted John with the correspondence and financial records of the World Methodist Council – all done *gratis* – with the generous support of the company. John began with the Pardee Company as an office boy when he was a teenager. He rose from office boy, to trusted manager, and to President of Pardee Land Company and Black-

wood Land Company, in 1978. Walter L. Foulke of Pardee reminded the annual board meeting John last attended, that he had “continuously served the company for 70 years, a record few in business anywhere can match.”

JOHN'S GENEROSITY

On one occasion, we were together in Jerusalem. It was a free day, and some of the persons traveling with us took optional tours to the Sea of Galilee, Masada, and Jericho. John chose to join a small group that was to visit places of need and service in and around Jerusalem. One of these was the “Four Homes of Mercy.” Here, near the Biblical town of Bethany, physicians and therapists worked with handicapped children and youth – some of them severely deformed, and others that required constant attention and specialized care. As we were leaving, John handed the director a check for \$1,000. “Generous” is the word that describes the man John *always* was!

JOHN'S FRIENDSHIP WITH BISHOP CANNON

One of John's favorite people was Bishop William R. Cannon, who served in many capacities in the World Methodist Council, including its President. During a meeting of a council committee in Philadelphia, John took us to his favorite downtown restaurant. When the menus were passed around, everything was seafood. Bishop Cannon loudly announced “I don't eat anything out of the sea!”

John remembered another occasion when we were in Seoul, Korea for an officers meeting. We were lavishly entertained one evening for dinner in a penthouse atop one of the downtown hotels by the president of the World Federation of Methodist Women and her husband, whose business was exporting sports equipment all over the world. Bishop Cannon was greatly enjoying the soup: “It is *de-licious!*” he said. Someone asked what kind of soup it was. Our host replied “turtle soup.” The bishop's color faded, and he did not take another bite!

The other story John remembered, and often laughed about, was one Bishop Cannon told one night the Council officers were gathered in our home. Cannon, who never married, lived on the 12th floor of an apartment building on Peachtree Street in Atlanta. A woman always seemed to be lurking in the lobby or near the lobby elevator of the building waiting for him when he came down! She always seemed to be there, waiting, or to follow him. It was difficult for Bishop Cannon to leave the building without her a few steps behind. One day he had enough! He stepped out of the elevator, quickly making his way to the door. He reached the walk, thinking



Mary Hale (wife of the author) with John and Anne

the “coast was clear,” but she was there just a few steps behind him! Bishop Cannon exasperated, turned, and motioning with both hands and loudly cried: “Shoo, Shoo”! No one enjoyed telling this story more than John!

ANNE'S DEATH

I learned the depth of John's faith, following the tragic accident when he and Anne, coming from a board meeting of one of the United Methodist agencies, were struck by a car that crossed several lanes, the median and collided with them head-on – taking the life of his beloved Anne, and seriously injuring John. Mary and I were present for Anne's funeral at Simpson United Methodist Church. John asked that we have breakfast with him that morning in his apartment. Before we ate, he read *The Upper Room*, as he always did, including the longer Scripture passages, and led in prayer. Following the funeral, he had invited about 40 family members to join him for lunch at Attleboro. After the meal, John gave a powerful witness out of his unswerving faith, challenging us all to remember, and bear witness to God's great love. It was unforgettable.

The relationship Mary and I have had with John, and with Anne, was extraordinary. He was very ill toward the end of his life, and for days without the ability to speak on the telephone. The night before he died, when I called, he was completely lucid, just like “his old self,” just as clear as before when we talked on the phone. The next evening, friends were visiting in our home from California. We were singing, those hymns we loved, and that John loved – those great gospel hymns Rev. DiPaolo wrote about in the first issue of *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania*. That night, we were singing one of them, “Out of the Ivory Palaces.” Our friends left for the evening, and I went out to pick something up at a drug store. While I was away, the call came from Susan Kenkelen, John’s niece, who had lovingly cared for him in his closing days, telling us that John had died. And we knew, our Savior had come “Out of the Ivory Palaces” to open wide the door for one who indeed “walked with God.” And John had entered “his heavenly home, to dwell forevermore”!

John’s name appears in our guest books more frequently than any other. Mary said that on his last visit, he had counted them, and found more than 50 entries, covering a quarter century.