



Siloam Methodist Church, in a photo from 1884, was founded in the wake of a nineteenth century “worship war.”

Listen to the Tadpoles Sing!

Mark E. Dixon (2006)

Editor's note: Mark E. Dixon is an author and columnist who lives in Wayne, Pennsylvania. The following article originally was published in the June 2006 issue of Main Line Today, under the title, "To Sing or Not to Sing." It is here reprinted with the permission of Main Line Today and Mr. Dixon, who asked that we use the title he originally proposed.

In 1847, Delaware County Methodists were at odds. At issue: music in church. Scripture tells us to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord" and to "come before His presence with singing." It seems simple enough – until you worry about the details. Exactly when should we sing? And if we are always in His presence, when not? Who determines when we are joyful? How should we know when to "shout" (another translation of "noise") and when to whisper?

In 1847, such questions sparked a schism at Bethel Methodist Church, which served southern Delaware and neighboring New Castle Counties. Progressives and younger people brought in a new hymnal featuring, for the first time, the musical scale that showed members what their voices should do. Old-timers, thinking this smacked almost of popery, left to form a new church up the road. "I know people whose grandparents wouldn't talk to each other because their grandparents had been on opposite sides of this," said James Hanby, the unofficial historian of the splinter church, Siloam Methodist.

Sarah Foulk Clayton might have predicted trouble from the rowdy Methodists. Recounting the church squabble in his 1892 memoir, *Rambles and Reflections*, Thomas Jefferson Clayton, a Delaware County judge and member of Bethel Methodist, recalled that his grandmother had "despised" the Methodists for the noisy, shouting emotionalism of their worship. "When my grandfather became a Methodist," wrote Clayton, "she thought the family was disgraced. She shut herself up in her room over a week and wept from shame."

After eight days, Sarah relented and again “received her husband with her wonted grace.” But before she died – possibly in childbirth – in 1795, she made her husband promise to bury her in a Quaker burial ground rather than let her lie among Methodists.

Organized Methodism arrived in the Mid-Atlantic region with church pioneer Thomas Webb (1724-1796), a former British army officer who first came to America in 1758 to take part in the siege of Louisburg and later published *A Military Treatise on the Appointments of the Army*. (Comparing warfare in the New and Old worlds, Webb argued that America’s rough terrain demanded lighter weapons to maintain mobility. George Washington’s copy of Webb’s treatise is in a Boston museum.) Webb was known for laying both his sword and his Bible on the pulpit as he preached.

Personally converted by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, Webb retired from the military in 1766 to become one of the church’s first American evangelists. In 1767, he founded the first Methodist society in Philadelphia and, two years later, preached at New Castle and Wilmington. In 1780, inspired by Webb’s visits, border-area Methodists built a log meetinghouse – Cloud’s Chapel, named after Robert Cloud, who donated the land – on Foulk Road, just south of the Pennsylvania-Delaware line in New Castle County. When the log structure was replaced by a stone church in 1799, the congregation became known as Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church.

Methodists like to sing. Wesley himself wrote hymns. (His more prolific brother, Charles, wrote more than 7,000.) But the denomination also bore the marks of the English Reformation which, in the 16th and 17th centuries, had disbanded monasteries, smashed stained-glass windows and statues, painted over ancient frescoes and translated the Bible to English for the laity – all to make religion more accessible to the average person.

Musically, Martin Luther set the pace when he eliminated Catholic polyphony – music sung by multiple trained singers, including those famous castrati – and restored congregational singing. In earlier times, the Catholic Church allowed congregations to sing doxologies, hymns and amens, but in the late 6th century transferred the song of the church to professionals, under the direction of the clergy. Luther’s objection wasn’t that the professionals didn’t sing well, but that they deprived the congregation of an opportunity to sing at all – and thus of an opportunity to participate in the liturgy.



A nineteenth century Image of Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church

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English Puritans were more austere than Luther. They simply sang the psalms. Even more severe were the Baptists and the Quakers, who considered music a distracting frill and eliminated it. Baptists later introduced psalm singing, but a schism over “man-made” songs wasn’t healed until a London pastor published a book of approved hymns in 1691. East Coast Quakers still don’t sing during worship, but fudge the issue by rising to sing immediately after formal worship has ended.

Like the Baptists, Methodists used approved hymnals, but those books contained only song texts. There were no musical scales, which would have been useful only to professional musicians. Mostly, recalled Clayton, the Methodists shouted their own inspired praises or remembered songs. Many were illiterate and, thus, unable to read the hymnals anyway. “Methodism, in those days, was much more primitive than it now is,” he wrote:

The early Methodists did not condemn shouting aloud their praises to the Lord. They sung and prayed with great spiritual fervor and did not believe in (orchestrated) church music or educated preachers. They regarded religion as a Faith rather than as a Philosophy.

It worked. According to Clayton, Bethel Church in 1847 was among “the most flourishing” in Delaware. The stone meetinghouse was crowded most Sundays, and winter revivals overflowed. Night services were needed to manage the crowds.

The congregation possessed several good singers, but no regular church choir. What Bethel Methodist did have was a singing society of mostly young people who practiced at each other’s homes. That the singers were young may in itself have made their elders suspicious. Were they wholly focused on worship or on each other?

Some evidence suggests, at least, a mixture of motives. In 1855, for instance, Horatio C. King, a freshman at Dickinson College in Carlisle, wrote his hymnal adventures in a diary later published as, *Journal Of My College Life: Comprising love, foolishness and the like*. “Ordered two pieces of music,” wrote King,

“[and] also received the *Lute of Zion*, the [hymnal] which we intend to learn from. Went down to Mrs. Porter’s again tonight. Had a splendid time....Miss Sallie is still very kind and sisterlike to me. I love her dearly. Mattie and Fannie looked beautiful as usual. I love them both...We cut up considerable in (Hymn) No. 33, singing &c...Retired to dream of all the Porter family at 11 o’cl.”

The New Lute of Zion, blamed in some accounts for what happened at Bethel Methodist, featured cross-denominational (read: non-Methodist) songs and the musical scale. It also featured polyphonic music – with parts for men and women – that may have seemed both reminiscent of Catholic practice and highly erotic. To innocent country boys, the harmony of the girls’ sweet falsettos – and their own oppositional bass voices – may have seemed as arousing as a pole dance.

The *Lute*, however, was not published until 1856, so the Bethel youth were apparently using another hymnal in 1847. Whatever its name, the book’s musical scale was an issue when the words started to fly. “About this time,” wrote Clayton, “the singers petitioned the trustees... to set apart two benches prepared by a four-inch-wide board nailed upon the back of each bench, for their especial use.” The board was to hold the singing society members’ hymnals as they sang. The trustees agreed, but many members of the congregation did not. Older, more primitive Methodists looked at this as a step toward ritualism and high-church practice. Where was the equality of all believers, if a few were catered to in this way? Where was the authentic worship that

sprang from the soul rather than a book printed in Boston?

“The friends and enemies of the choir...soon became divided into separate parties,” wrote Clayton. “Friends of a lifetime became enemies; families were divided; law suits were engendered; church trials were instituted; in a word, the Devil, under the guise of a note book, entered and ruined the church.”

Left unstated, according to Hanby, may have been another issue: slavery. “It’s nothing I can prove,” he said, but many twenty-somethings of that era were aggressive about social change. Hanby thinks they may have pushed choir singing as a proxy for abolitionism, another radical issue that made their elders cautious.

But anti-hymnal beliefs were strongly felt. Clayton, then 21 and pro-hymnal, later wrote of stopping at the blacksmith shop of anti-hymnal Samuel Grubb. Grubb, “very much excited” over the issue, expressed an intention to take his hammer to church to knock the book rests off the benches. Clayton tried to reason with him. “I cited David and his harp, the music of the spheres, and even quoted Shakespeare’s opinion of “the man that had no music in his soul,” he wrote.

Grubb was not impressed. “Anybody with common sense,” retorted the blacksmith, “ought to know that it will not help the voice to look, when you sing, upon those things you call keys, and bars, with black and white tadpoles, some with their tails up, some with their tails down, decorated with black flags, and trying to crawl through the fence. It’s all the work of the devil.”

Hymnal anxiety has not disappeared. In 2003, US Methodists were roiled over the new hymnal, *The Faith We Sing*, which conservatives dislike because some of its thousand songs refer to the Deity’s feminine characteristics.

At Bethel Methodist, the singers won. The book rests, the hymnals and the “tadpoles” stayed, even as many members left. In 1852, Samuel Hance and Samuel Hanby – remembered locally as First and Second Samuel – donated 1.5 acres at Booth’s Corner for a new stone church. The defectors named it Siloam after a pool near Jerusalem whose waters were said to cure blindness.

None of this history prevented Siloam – in 1880, only 28 years later – from organizing its first choir and installing its first organ. Today, the two congregations gather together again twice annually for worship and singing from their tadpole-filled hymnals.

People have to sing, you know.