



Bishop Fred Pierce Corson and his wife Frances,  
in a publicity photo from the 1950s.

# Bishop Fred Pierce Corson: A Personal Recollection

Dr. Frederick E. Maser (1985)

*Editor's note: this essay originally appeared as a series of four articles in the United Methodist Reporter for Eastern Pennsylvania in May and June of 1985, shortly after the death of Bishop Corson on February 16, 1985. Corson had served as presiding Bishop of the Philadelphia area of the Methodist Church from 1944 to 1968. Frederick Maser (1908-2002) was a well-known historian of American Methodism, and a clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference for 69 years.*

A small group of preachers was having lunch with Bishop Corson at the Union League. Two of them were earnestly arguing about the age at which a child should be admitted to Holy Communion. Not being able to agree, they turned to the bishop for a judgment. He said slowly, "I don't want to give an offhand opinion on a matter that serious; but I shall always be grateful to the pastor who admitted me to Holy Communion when I was about eight years of age. For me, it was a vivid and wonderful experience!"

The story gives an insight into the religious atmosphere of his early life. He was born in Millville, New Jersey, on April 11, 1896, the son of Jeremiah and Mary E. (Payne) Corson. He was educated in the Millville public schools, and he graduated with honors from Dickinson College and Drew University. Later, he continued his studies at Yale Divinity School. He told me that at Dickinson his nickname was "The Bishop." He smiled as he said it as if to indicate this was not because of any particular piety. It probably meant he was articulate, had a logical mind and had given evidence of that political acumen which every person needs who rises to the episcopacy.

He never told me how he came to decide for the ministry. However, he entered the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1920, and served churches in New York and Connecticut. His greatest achievement was during his assignment to Jackson Heights, New York where he organized a community church which included 26 denominations. He was appointed a district superintendent when he was only 34 years old.

## The Superintendent

One of the large and influential churches on his district was also a very independent church. Its leadership boasted that the church had a special kind of charter, making it independent of Methodism. If they, as leaders, were dissatis-

fied with the administration, the church could become a separate community organization. Bishop Corson, as a youthful superintendent, was well aware of the situation but refused to be intimidated by it. He quietly did what no one else had thought to do. He looked up the church's charter. He discovered that the document was a standard Methodist charter centering ownership of the property in the denomination and not in the trustees. At an appropriate moment in his first meeting with the officials, he read the pertinent sections of the charter to the amazed leaders of the church and then said in a firm, friendly manner, "Brethren, this is a Methodist Church. That is now definitely settled." He had no further trouble from that church.

In 1934, after serving only four years on the District, he was elected the 20th president of Dickinson College of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, one of the most historic colleges in Methodism. He was one of the youngest men ever elected to that office. Physically, he was a handsome, rugged person with a square jaw, thick black hair, heavy eyebrows and a body as disciplined as a well-trained athlete. In 1922, he had married Frances Blount Beaman of Charlotte, North Carolina by whom he had one son, Hampton Payne, who later became a physician of note.

### College President

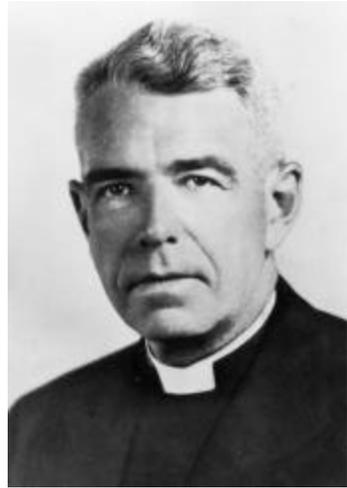
He served as president of Dickinson College for ten years, transferring from the New York East Conference to the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The depression had struck the country, and Dickinson needed friends – wealthy friends. President Corson traveled everywhere making such friends, and moving with ease and purpose among the educators and leaders of his day. Travel became a way of life, making it frequently necessary to be away from the campus. There is an amusing story told among the inner circle of his friends, that some students placed an ironic notice in a student publication stating, "Anyone wishing to see President Corson may do so on July 4th, 1939, at four PM, when he will be in his office for one half hour." I never researched the incident, but I could easily believe it.

These were critical times. Students were beginning to demonstrate against the war system, and by 1934, the World Peace Committee of the Central Pennsylvania Conference was urging support for those students who had refused for conscientious reasons to take compulsory military training in the ROTC in California, Maryland and Ohio State Universities.

The committee had also recommend a series of specific steps for peace. In 1940, President Corson became the chairperson of a newly formed committee ordered by the General Conference on "The State of the Church and World Affairs." Under his leadership, reports of the committee about social service and world peace became less specific. The committee defined its work in "the broad terms of analysis and interpretation." President Corson approached his duties as

a scholar, rather than an agitator or prophet. Nevertheless, his name became known throughout the Jurisdiction.

I first met him when I was pastor of the Methodist Church at Birdsboro where he addressed the local high school. His charisma, more than what he said, captured the student body. The girls saw in him the embodiment of their dreams, and the boys envied his strong masculinity. I encountered him again on one of the occasions when he came to the former Philadelphia Conference to speak on behalf of Dickinson College. He treated me very kindly, and we spent some time together. One could not help but be impressed by his broad outlook, his grasp of community and national problems, his reasonable approach to their solution, and his friendly personality.



*Bishop Fred P. Corson*

He was elected to the episcopacy on an early ballot at a session of the Jurisdictional Conference at Ocean City, New Jersey, in 1944. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was President of the United States; the country was in the throes of World War II; the horrors of atomic warfare were unknown; blacks were beginning to fight for their way up to first class citizenship; student riots were still few in number; and ecumenicity, particularly between Roman Catholics and Protestants, was a dream of the far distant future.

Bishop Corson served as Resident Bishop of the former Philadelphia Area of the former Methodist Church for six quadrenniums. More changes occurred in the world during this time than in the previous two hundred or more years. Methodism and Philadelphia were indeed fortunate in having a person of Bishop Corson's stature as their leader.

### The Voice of Protestantism

During the 24 years that Fred Pierce Corson was the resident bishop of the former Philadelphia Area of the former Methodist Church, he became the voice of Protestantism in the East. He was frequently quoted in the press, he appeared on numerous television programs, and his advice and counsel were sought by the leaders of the community and by churchmen around the world.

This happened gradually. When I first became a superintendent, I frankly told him that he had a great deal to say, but no one was hearing him.

"Well," he answered, "I can't trumpet myself!"

"Let me do it," I said. I added that if he would give me at least an outline of his addresses and some significant quotes, I would release them to the press. He agreed, and he cooperated fully. I had instantaneous access to him for

publicity purposes. I worked closely with the press, and the results are now history. One day Robert Curry, now [1985] pastor of St. George's Church, came to me and said, "You're doing a great job of getting the bishop in the news, but you're not hitting television and radio. I think I could help there."

I thought a moment and said, "The bishop is flying in this evening from a world tour. I have alerted the press that he will be holding a news conference. Do you think television and radio would be interested?"

"They will be when I tell them what it's all about," Dr. Curry answered. From that time forward Dr. Curry and I worked together and Bishop Corson's name became better and better known. My most far-reaching success was when I hit the international press and the *New York Times* relative to the bishop's election as President of the World Methodist Council. After that, the bishop was saying and doing so many important things that the media were glad to give him space.

Bishop Corson loved Philadelphia. He knew the strategic value of having Methodist headquarters located in central Philadelphia at 1701 Arch Street, and he recognized the importance of preaching centers like Arch Street Church and Tindley Temple.

### The Parliamentarian

Bishop Corson was one of the best parliamentarians I have ever sat under. He knew rules of order and procedure. There never was a parliamentary tangle at a conference over which he presided. Everyone was informed what motions had been made, what we were voting on and why. He was brilliant.

He also had a dry wit that often broke the tensions of an emotional issue. I recall one instance in which the conference became very tense over some issue I have long since forgotten. One man made an impassioned speech and then offered a motion which, of course, is contrary to parliamentary procedure. Another brother arose and shouted, "Point of order. He can't make a motion following his own speech!" There was a tense pause during which time the bishop smiled, leaned forward and then, as though speaking to everyone in confidence, he said, "I've been listening to our good brother, and I don't think he's really said anything. I think I can safely rule he never made a speech and let the motion stand." The conference howled with laughter and the tension was broken. Needless to say the good brother's motion was lost.

### Evangelism

Bishop Corson was an evangelist in the best sense of the word. He sought to win persons for Christ and the Kingdom, particularly youth. He arranged that youth conferences be held at the site of the annual conference sessions, and on Saturday morning he invited the young people to sit with their own pastors within the bar of the conference. The climax came on Sunday afternoon when the appointments were read.

Before reading the appointments, the bishop preached. On these occasions, he rose far above his best efforts. Although I personally disagreed with the man on many issues, I cannot fault him at this point. He presented Christ with all the passion of a dedicated scholar, preacher and saint to the youth of Methodism. Then followed an invitation for life commitment and for life service. Some of the preachers in our conference today first decided for Christ and His ministry at these meetings. He called these young people Youth Crusaders, and it is estimated that 30,000 youths gave their lives to Christ and some to His ministry during Bishop Corson's twenty-four years of service.

In 1949, under his leadership, the first United Preaching Visitation Evangelistic Campaign conducted by the General Board of Evangelism was inaugurated in Philadelphia. Thirty-four thousand persons gathered in Convention Hall for the closing session. Four years later, a World Convocation on Evangelism was held in Philadelphia, celebrating the 250th anniversary of the birth of John Wesley. One thousand persons were united to the church by Bishop Corson at an outdoor service in Franklin Field.

### Mrs. Corson

My memories of Bishop Corson are closely tied with my memories of the beautiful woman, Frances Corson. At first, I saw her only from a distance. However, I agreed with my new assistant at St. James Church who was sitting next to me when he first saw her. He half arose from his seat and then, sinking back, said, "Who is that beautiful woman?"

"That," I said, "is the bishop's wife."

"It can't be," he said softly. "No Methodist bishop would be allowed to have a wife that beautiful."

But beauty is not Mrs. Corson's only virtue. She is an intelligent, compassionate woman, a community leader in her own right and a very witty person. Once when the New Jersey Conference was honoring Bishop Corson, a youth leader arose to give his presentation. He said that though Bishop Corson often preached too long, the young people loved him, and they were glad he had been re-assigned to the area. Mrs. Corson followed on the program almost immediately. She said, "I agree with the young man who thinks the bishop preaches too long, and I want to announce to the bishop now that I hope we all get out of here by 9:30 o'clock."

The Methodists, who loved her frank wit and charm, applauded loudly; but, as you might expect, the meeting did not end until about 10:30. No one was ever able to cut down the length of Bishop Corson's speeches. He explained his position to me. "Fred," he said, "there are things that need to be said, and I'm going to say them no matter how long it takes." It usually took quite long.

Certainly by her charm, sagacity, and community leadership, Mrs. Corson had as much to do with making the wheels go 'round as did the bishop.

## Honors and Awards

Bishop Corson soon became a recognized figure throughout the world. We will discuss his relationship with the Vatican later; suffice to say, for the moment, that had not Corson been a world figure, he would hardly have merited the attention showered on him by the Roman Catholic Church and at least two popes.

He received nearly fifty honorary degrees from institutions of learning and numerous other awards. He was the first Protestant clergyman to receive an honorary degree from St. Joseph's College. In 1964, he was decorated by the King of Norway with the Medal of the Order of St. Olav. In 1966, he was awarded a medal for outstanding contribution to Sino-American relations in commemoration of the one hundredth birthday of Sun Yet-Sen. Earlier, I had had the privilege of presiding when the trustees of Old St. George's presented him the St. George's gold medal award for distinguished service to the Methodist Church. These are only a few of the many awards he received.

## Lecturer and Writer

He filled university lectureships acceptably. He was a brilliant conversationalist; but as a speaker, he was uneven, rising at times to great heights of oratory so that on numerous occasions he received standing ovations from his listeners. At other times, people said he was dull, speaking in a monotone and at great length.

As a writer, he never captured that journalistic style that is so necessary for popularity. Nor did he write in the clear, direct style that characterized his informal pronouncements and made him an outstanding television personality. However, one critic has said that his published address, "How Good is Communism," is one of the best analyses of the weaknesses of the form of government.

He seldom laughed at himself. He took himself too seriously. He always remembered he was the bishop, and no one laughs at a bishop. However, when he learned that I collected first editions, partly because of the rarity, he said wistfully, "I'm afraid in my case, it's the second editions that are a rarity." Then he laughed. The only other time I knew him to laugh at himself was after his retirement. We met in the Union League, and I asked him whether he was getting any speaking engagements. "I'm not doing so well," he responded. "It's getting so I think I'll have to give out green stamps to anyone who invites me." He was still receiving a tremendous number of invitations, but probably not as many as when he was an effective rather than a retired bishop.



*Bishop Corson (right) clasping hands with Pope Paul VI,  
as Philadelphia's Archbishop John Krol looks on.*

## Social Concerns

Bishop Corson spoke out on current social and political issues. He was opposed to communism, strongly backed the Chinese government of Taiwan and was a close friend of General and Mrs. Chiang Kai-Shek. He believed in prayer in the public schools and opposed the decision of the Supreme Court. He failed to understand that the Supreme Court was against coercion and the use of prayers written for students by the state but not against prayer itself.

He had a heart for minorities as he did for the underpaid and the poor, but he was no activist. He was not to be found in the center of demonstrations. Like Wesley, he believed the important thing was to get to the key people making the important decisions and, in this way, change the thinking of a nation. He opposed divorce and was a staunch believer in the importance of family. However, he was not an enthusiastic supporter of the ordination of women. Nevertheless, once the church had spoken on the question, he cooperated as fully as possible.

He believed in the right of blacks to their place as first class citizens, but he was cautious in his action toward this end and not impulsive. He followed the contemporary thinking of Barry Goldwater. However, when he received the go-ahead from the church, he paved the way for the Delaware

Conference churches to become members of the Philadelphia Annual Conference, and, at the time of union, he appointed a black man – the Rev. Walter Hazard – as a district superintendent.

His frequent travels took him to all parts of the world. Between 1944 and 1960, Bishop Corson was sent around the world three times on important assignments for the church, but he never lessened his grip on Philadelphia Methodism. When I was on the district, the superintendents never made an important decision without first consulting him by wire or phone wherever he might be. He wanted to know what was going on.

Some people thought that this caused him at times to place weak men in important positions. When I asked him why he supported a certain layman for a particularly important post in Methodism, he said, “He’s not the strongest person for the position, but I don’t need to worry when I’m in India what he’s doing here at home. He won’t do much unless I give him a directive.” He told me his philosophy was “Accept a person for what he is – use his strengths and strengthen his weaknesses.”

## The Conference

He was always careful in the choice of his district superintendents. He tried to keep together the various factions of the conference, and he tried to have the two dominant groups of the conference represented on his cabinet, but only by men whom he believed he could control. To that extent he tended to polarize the conference.

Some men seemed to feel that under Bishop Corson they would get nowhere, and some transferred to other conferences or other denominations. Those who transferred to other denominations usually did so because they felt more comfortable in a denomination with different doctrines and polity than Methodism. In short, just as in every church there are some persons against the preacher, so there were some ministers and laypersons against the bishop.

Bishop Corson loved liturgy and liturgical dress and appointments. He influenced the entire conference and much of Methodism, particularly the bishops, in this direction. He offered to buy clerics for the new members of the conference if they agreed to wear them. Every district superintendent was expected to dress in a particular kind of clerical garb. On official occasions, he dressed more elaborately than the pope or his good friend John Cardinal Krol. He expected everyone to stand when he entered a room, and, as he grew older, he tended to dominate the conversation of any gathering of which he was a part.

There is no doubt, however, that he was highly respected, and many persons went along with his ideas because they loved him. He usually got his own way in the conference, generally by the force and authority of his personality. He told me that his philosophy of the episcopacy was like that of Asbury, McKendree and Soule, which meant that he was an authoritarian – an

autocrat. By this kind of leadership, he kept the wheels going 'round in the Philadelphia Area.

### Ecclesiastical Statesman and World Figure

Bishop Corson literally took the world as his parish. He was usually in the right place at the right time; he said the right things at the right moment, and he had the happy faculty of generally choosing the winning side, which, in most cases, was the right side.

Obviously, he had the marks of a statesman and a world figure. Churchmen respected him, the media were always happy to know what he had to say about an issue, and heads of other denominations looked upon him as one of the few leaders of Methodism with whom they could converse on equal terms. He possessed charisma; people liked him, and some stood in awe of him. His appearance was certainly a help. He looked like a bishop, he talked and acted like a bishop, and he was what people thought a bishop ought to be.

He once told me a mildly amusing story of an incident that occurred when he was in Rome at about the time a new pope was to be elected. He was on speaking terms with all the cardinals and on intimate terms with some. As the cardinals were gathering in Rome a group of them invited Bishop Corson to a small dinner. During the course of the meal one of the cardinals said to a waitress, "Which one of us do you think will be elected pope?" The girl looked around the table.

"Take your time," said the Cardinal, "which will it be?"

After a time she pointed her finger at Bishop Corson and said in Italian, "Him!"

I never knew whether the story was true or an "off the record" joke. It's the kind of story that could be true, and I am inclined to believe it.

Bishop Corson was one of the observers at the Second Vatican Council, leading the delegation from the World Methodist Council. He became a close friend of at least two popes, and he was given many honors by the Roman Catholic Church, who respected him greatly.

### Ecumenicity

Ecumenicity meant more to Bishop Corson than friendliness among denominations. For example, he brought into close relationship the three conferences and Puerto Rico which comprised his area. At the annual conference sessions he presented the district superintendents and their wives from each of the conferences and Puerto Rico, and he took a representative body to Puerto Rico to see Methodism there at first hand. By this means he raised a great deal of money to build new churches in Puerto Rico, a youth center and a school, among other enterprises. For his work, he was awarded honorary citizenship of San Juan by the Mayoress of that important city.

He was constantly raising funds for worthy causes: missions, education, new churches and a thousand other agencies. It is estimated that during his tenure as bishop he raised fifty million dollars for church purposes.

When he became President of the World Methodist Council, Bishop Corson wanted to give the office the power and authority of the papacy. This was to be accomplished at his induction. This was one place where I seriously disagreed with him and probably was instrumental in destroying his dream. Since I was handling the publicity, it was necessary for me to secure a copy of the Service of Induction. I was given one copy and told that other copies would be distributed just before the service.

Later, when I read the service, and I saw what was happening, I immediately consulted Bishop Corson, stating firmly that this was not the purpose of the World Council, which was a fraternal council with no legislative power or authority that was binding on the member units. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Don't say anything. Anyway, Holt wrote it."

I went to Bishop Holt who conceded that my position was right, but he stated that the induction was an attempt to give the position of President all the power and authority possible. "Be careful, Maser," he said. "Your own bishop wants it this way."

I next approached Benson Perkins, a leading delegate from England. He was a stalwart person of whom one of his colleagues said, "Perkins was never born, like the rock of Gibraltar, he has always been." When he expressed himself as opposed to the Induction Service, I asked him why he didn't do something about it and walked away.

I then went to retiring President Harold Roberts, an ascetic looking, refined Englishman who said, "It's most embarrassing, Maser, most embarrassing. I have no idea what will happen when the people back home hear of it." "It's not too late to do something," I pointed out. Just before we parted he asked to borrow my copy of the Induction Service.

The next morning, to my amazement, I learned that all copies of the service were to be destroyed, none were to be distributed. The service would be conducted without a printed order. The night before, the British delegation had met and threatened to walk out of the service unless the Order of Induction was changed. At an emergency meeting of the Executive Committee, the offensive passages were rewritten, and it was agreed that the service would be conducted without a printed order. The offensive passages were these:

*The Roman Catholic Church holds in honor and reverence the Pope at Rome, the Anglicans give recognition to the Archbishop of Canterbury as the Ecclesiastical leader of Anglicanism, and the Methodist Church...is according to the President of the World Methodist Council the same recognition and honor.*

Later the inductor was to say to the new President:

*You are the leader of the hosts of World Methodism, above all Bishops, Presidents of Conferences, Directors of Organizations of all separate churches of the Methodist World.*

Then he was to add:

*You are entitled to every recognition we can show and all the honor we can bestow.*

Since not a single one of his denominations had agreed to this sweeping declaration and since none had been apprised of what was to be said, it was indeed a bold assumption. Dr. Roberts returned the corrected copy to me and today I have the only copy in existence – with the corrections. It was Bishop Corson who had gracefully backed away and suggested the suitable changes. Today the World Council no longer elects a President but a Presidium of not more than eight presidents.

Bishop Corson and I met on numerous occasions after his retirement. In December of last year [1984], he wrote me a note thanking me for my letters and my friendship. When we met, we enjoyed talking over old times and current issues. He was a brilliant conversationalist, a sincere friend to those who would be his friend and a concerned, well-informed leader. I doubt if we will ever see his like again.