

Bishops Herman W. Kaebnick (left) and J. Gordon Howard (right) clasp hands during a special service at Albright College in October 1969, celebrating the uniting of the former Eastern (EUB) and Philadelphia (Methodist) Conferences, to create the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

# Numbering the Annual Conference Sessions

by Rev. Joseph F. DiPaolo (2012)

*Note: The author is the editor of this journal, and an active clergy member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.*

Each year, when the delegates of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church assemble for their annual session, a number is attached to it which appears to record the running total of times the venerable body has met. Thus, when it convenes in May 2012, the gathering will be designated the 226th annual session, rightly evoking the long and storied heritage that resides in Eastern Pennsylvania, where famous preachers and formative events have shaped all the varied branches of our rich denominational history.

But what, exactly, does that number tally? Does it do justice to all the previous bodies which comprise today's Eastern Pennsylvania Conference? A little exercise in auditing may well uncover questionable accounting practices, and reveal a fascinating, though confusing, history of how the annual conference developed over the years.

The story of how we have come to number our sessions as we do begins in March 1862, when our predecessor body, the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, gathered for its annual meeting in Philadelphia's Union ME Church, located on Fourth Street. As the delegates listened to reports, engaged in debates and voted on resolutions, the Civil War was about to enter its second year. The conference then included within its bounds the Delmarva Peninsula, and as a "Border Conference," had been painfully torn by the conflict. Churches on the Eastern Shore had seceded, lay members were fighting in both armies, and ongoing debates were raging over slavery, abolition and the national crisis. Amid all the burning questions of the day, an odd issue became consuming: just how old is this conference, anyway?

Nobody seemed to know; and so, as Methodists are wont to do, a committee was appointed to investigate. A few days later, the group reported back that conference sessions had been held at least annually (sometimes more often) within the territorial boundaries of the Philadelphia Conference since 1788, and therefore that year should be regarded as the “safe and truthful date” of the founding of the body. The recommendation was adopted, and the number 75 assigned to the 1862 session.<sup>1</sup> So the numbers began to run. To this day, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church numbers its sessions based on the 1788 start date, established by the 1862 committee.

### MATH PROBLEMS

Now, despite the fact that many church leaders – especially preachers – are not noted for their math skills, no doubt some astute reader has already realized that the numbers don’t add up. With 1788 as a start date, 2012 should be the 225th session, not the 226th. The puzzle of the extra session is solved in 1939, the year that the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church (which all had gone their separate ways years before) merged to form, simply, the Methodist Church. In the wake of this great reunion, the Philadelphia Conference held two numbered sessions in the same year. After the 152nd session was held in March 1939, a special “Dissolving Conference of the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church” convened in Arch Street Church on the morning of October 9, followed that afternoon by the “Organizing Conference of the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Church.” The morning meeting was evidently designated the 153rd and final session of the old, pre-merger conference. Thus, the math works as follows: the 1788 session plus 224 annual sessions through 2012, plus the additional 1939 session equals 226. *Voila!*

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<sup>1</sup>*Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1862), 44-45. The committee members were Goldsmith D. Carrow, Thomas C. Murphy, Elijah Miller, Richard M. Greenbank, and John Lednum. Lednum was an important chronicler of Methodism; his book, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (1859), remains an important source for early Methodist history. Oddly, despite the decision to make the 1862 session number 75, the cover of the 1862 *Minutes* says “Fifty-Ninth Session.” This follows a numbering system that appeared abruptly in 1858, called the “Fifty-Fifth Session.” There is no indication why 1858 was declared number 55 (which would make 1804 the first); no earlier minutes assign numbers to the sessions. The cover of the 1863 *Minutes* says “Seventy-Sixth Session.”

Interestingly, someone (perhaps presiding Bishop Ernest G. Richardson) decided that a newly reunited conference with a new name should mean a fresh start for numbering the sessions. Thus the title page of the 1940 conference journal reads, “First Annual Session... [and] Successor to the 153rd Session of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” This new numbering system lasted only through 1944 (the “Fifth Annual Session”), which was also Bishop Richardson’s last year. In 1945, the title page abruptly reverts to the earlier accounting, with the subtitle, “One Hundred Fifty-Ninth Annual Session.” One cannot but suspect that this was the work of newly appointed Bishop Fred Pierce Corson, who may have wanted to emphasize the antiquity of his new domain. Of course it really wasn’t the 159th *annual* session – the adjective “annual” had never been used in previous years, since folks (well, some anyway) knew that the number didn’t exactly correspond to single annual sessions; however, after its first appearance in 1940, the term “annual” has stuck around ever since. But at least we have a clear accounting of the 226 sessions.

Or do we? Before we break for coffee, there are still a few loose ends to tie up. For one thing, it is questionable whether 1788 really can be seen as the first session of the old Philadelphia Conference. Strictly speaking, distinct annual conferences had not quite developed by that point. From the 1770s, conferences were held periodically throughout the year in different geographic areas; then all the information was published in combined form as though from one session. Gradually, the annual conference system developed, governed by a General Conference which first met in 1792.<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1796 that the General Conference first clearly defined six distinct annual conferences, including Philadelphia – which then encompassed all of New York State west of the Hudson River, all of New Jersey, all of Pennsylvania east of the Susquehanna River, and the entire Peninsula of Delaware and the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>See Frederick A. Norwood, “The Church Takes Shape,” in Emory S. Bucke, gen. ed., *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), I:419-458.

<sup>3</sup>Even 1796 may not be right. According to historian Lawrence Sherwood, in Bucke, op. cit., I:368, “it is difficult to use these annual conferences as the basic units at this early date [1796]; the membership returns in the Minutes continued to be by states even after the conferences were formed; it was not until 1802 that appointments to the circuits were made by both districts and by annual conferences.” The earliest existing records of Philadelphia Conference proceedings date to the year 1800, in the form of bound volumes of handwritten minutes, held today in the archive at St. George’s.

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A map showing the original six annual conferences, as they were delineated by the 1796 *Discipline* (from Elmer T. Clark, *Album of Methodist History* (1952), 187.

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If we are to commence our count from a date before the formation of distinct annual conferences, why not go all the way back to July 1773, when John Wesley's emissary, Thomas Rankin, led the first Methodist conference in America, at St. George's?<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the members of the 1862 committee thought the 1788 date did not do justice to the conference's rich legacy, making a point in their report to declare Philadelphia "a Conference seat older than any other city or place in America, nor does it seem to us an assumption to regard and call the Philadelphia Conference *the Mother of Conferences*"<sup>5</sup> (italics original).

The problem, at least according to the logic used by the 1862 committee, was that there were holes between 1773 and 1788. Since it was only from the latter year that some sort of conference session was held *at least annually* within the bounds of the Philadelphia Conference, 1788 was the year they chose.

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<sup>4</sup>The first American Conference met July 14-16, 1773, with nine preachers: Thomas Rankin, Francis Asbury, Richard Boardman, John King, Joseph Pilmore, George Shadford, Thomas Webb, Abraham Whitworth, Richard Wright and Joseph Yearby. Though the official minutes say it was held in June, this is clearly an error, as the Journals of Asbury, Rankin and Pilmore clearly show. See Bucke, I:120-129; and Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958) I:85.

<sup>5</sup>*Philadelphia Conference Minutes* (1862), 44.

## SHIFTING BORDERS

It apparently did not take long for the reasoning behind the numbering to be forgotten. In 1886, as delegates met during their 99th session, someone suggested planning a centennial celebration for the following year; whereupon another committee was convened to confirm that they had the date right. The committee reported back that a centennial celebration would not quite be appropriate, since the evidence was somewhat confused as to when the conference could properly be said to have begun, and not every session was necessarily an annual session. Nevertheless, the committee reaffirmed the year 1788 as the beginning of conferences meeting at least annually within its bounds, and the numbers continued to run.<sup>6</sup>

But even that, strictly speaking, was not quite true. For the conference boundaries had changed since 1862 – and dramatically. By action of the 1868 General Conference, the Delmarva Peninsula had been detached to form a new body, the Wilmington Conference, predecessor to today's Peninsula-Delaware Conference. That meant that 15 years' worth of numbered conference sessions technically no longer met the criteria – for they had been held in towns like Easton, Maryland or Wilmington, Delaware, which ceased to be part of the Philadelphia Conference territory after 1868.<sup>7</sup>

That drops the number from 226 sessions to 211.

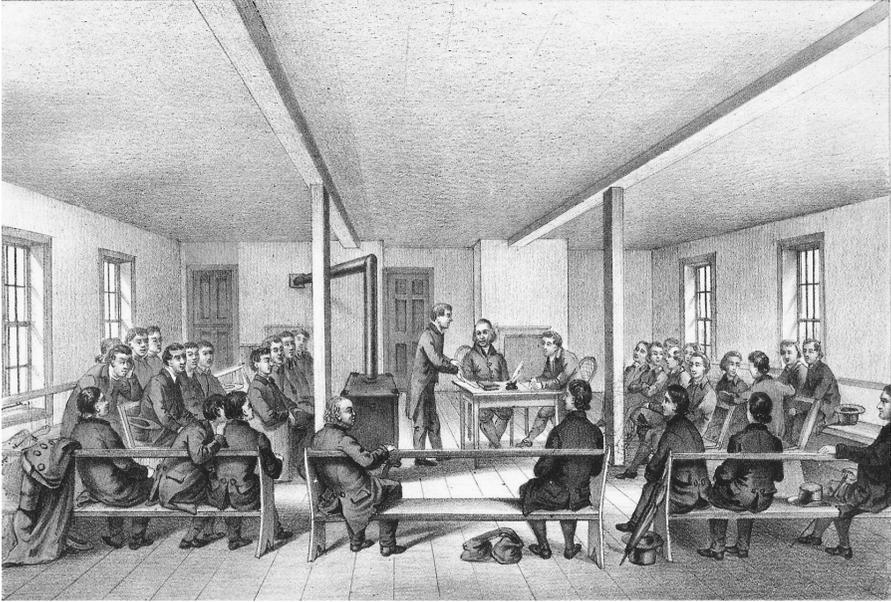
In 1872, yet another General Conference action – passed over the vehement opposition of Philadelphia Conference delegates – detached the city of Harrisburg and made it part of the Central Pennsylvania Conference (predecessor to today's Susquehanna Conference). Two conference sessions had been held in Pennsylvania's capitol, those of 1853 and 1867, dropping our total down to 209.<sup>8</sup> And it appears that the

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<sup>6</sup>*Minutes of the Philadelphia Conference* (1886), 73-74.

<sup>7</sup>Five annual sessions were held in Wilmington (1832, 1838, 1842, 1847 and 1864); two in Easton, Maryland (1810 and 1848); two at Duck Creek, in Delaware (1800 and 1803); three in Smyrna, Delaware (1820, 1827 and 1851); two in Milford, Delaware (1821 and 1845) and one in Chestertown, Maryland (1803).

<sup>8</sup>On the efforts of Philadelphia Conference delegates during the 1872 General Conference to retain Harrisburg, see Frederick E. Maser, *Methodism in Central Pennsylvania, 1771-1969* (Lebanon: Sowers Printing, 1971), 3-6. That it was a sore point for years is clear from an editorial in the conference paper about proposed border adjustments: "The Philadelphia Conference will oppose all change in present boundary lines unless it be to restore Harrisburg to its former relations." *Philadelphia Methodist*, June 6, 1896.



A mid-19th century image of an early Methodist conference, with Bishop Francis Asbury in the chair. Early conferences were often quite small, with a presiding bishop and a few dozen preachers.

venerable team of historians in 1862 actually had fudged a bit, even by their own criteria. For the 1833 session had been held in Newark, New Jersey – and New Jersey had become a separate conference after the 1836 General Conference.

Now we are down to 208.

### UNACCOUNTED CONFERENCE SESSIONS

Never fear, however, for there were additional conference sessions held within the current-day bounds of Eastern Pennsylvania that are not accounted for in the original 226. Multiple sessions were held in the late 1960s in the wake of yet another denominational merger. When the 237 congregations of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church (as well as 21 from other EUB conferences) united with the 376 local churches of the Philadelphia Conference of the former Methodist Church, a new body technically was born – the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist

Church. However, the logistics of merging the administrative structures of the two bodies took some time, so for two years *two separate conference sessions* met – in 1968 and 1969 – each listed as covering the territory of Eastern Pennsylvania for the United Methodist Church.

The two extra sessions bring us back up to 210.

Actually, that brings the total quite a bit higher. For the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) Church, of course, had held its own annual conference sessions in eastern Pennsylvania prior to the 1968 merger – and these are not accounted for at all in the current total. Oddly, this was both acknowledged and ignored in the 1970 Journal. After Bishop J. Gordon Howard presided over the first fully unified session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference at Albright College in June of 1970, the title page of the 1970 *Official Journal and Year Book* read:

Successor to the former  
Eastern Conference (EUB)  
(170th and Final Session in 1969)

and

Philadelphia Annual Conference  
(Methodist)  
(183rd and Final Session in 1969)

Despite the fact that the two predecessor bodies thus yielded a combined total of 353 distinct conferences, that same title page simply ignored the EUB tally, and declared the 1970 gathering the “One Hundred Eighty-Fourth Session.” However, we need not be too hard on whoever decided not to include any of those 170 former EUB meetings. For the history of conference sessions on the EUB side of the equation is even more tangled than that of the Methodist side.

The EUB Church itself had been created as a result of the 1946 merger of the Evangelical Church and the United Brethren Church. Merging the administrative structures of the former Evangelical and

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<sup>9</sup>The former EUB body (the Eastern Conference) met June 10-13, 1968 at Lebanon Valley College, and again June 3-5, 1969 at Albright College. The former Methodist body (the Philadelphia Conference) met May 15-19, 1968 and May 21-25, 1969, both times at Arch Street United Methodist Church. On Saturday, October 25, 1969, Bishops J. Gordon Howard and Herman W. Kaebnick led a special celebration of worship in the field house of Reading’s Albright College, to celebrate the union of the Eastern and Philadelphia Conferences.



Clergy of the Philadelphia Conference posing during their 1883 session.

United Brethren conferences that covered southeastern Pennsylvania took many years to effect. The former UB body, designated the “East Pennsylvania Conference (UB) of the EUB Church,” continued to function separately from 1947 through 1963 (17 sessions). The former Evangelical Church body, called the “East Pennsylvania Conference (EV) of the EUB Church,” covering roughly the same geographical area, met from 1947 through 1957 (11 sessions), after which it merged with the Atlantic and New England Conferences to create the Northeastern Conference (EV) of the EUB Church (adding 6 sessions). Finally in 1964, the Northeastern (EV) and East PA (UB) fully merged to create the Eastern Conference of the EUB Church. This body met until 1967, after which the United Methodist merger took place (4 sessions).

If I’ve counted correctly, that adds 38 additional sessions – just beginning with 1946 – boosting our count to 238.

But that is not all. There were yet other annual conference sessions held within our bounds by bodies which have since been folded into today’s Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. Perhaps most noteworthy was the Delaware Conference, created by the larger church to segregate black Methodists, and allow full ordination and conference membership

for African-American preachers for the first time. The first session was held in 1864 in Philadelphia's John Wesley ME Church, and its territory stretched from New York through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and into the Delmarva Peninsula. The Delaware Conference held its 103rd and last session in 1965, in Philadelphia's Tindley Temple.<sup>10</sup> At that point the previously segregated congregations (and preachers) were integrated into the geographical conferences where they were situated. Some 54 sessions of the Delaware Conference were held in Philadelphia or Chester, the majority at Zoar or Tindley Temple, thus raising our tally of conference sessions within eastern Pennsylvania way up to 292.

Then there was the Methodist Protestant Church, which functioned as an independent denomination from 1829 until 1939, when it reunited with the northern and southern branches of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Though it never had much presence in eastern Pennsylvania, the MP Church did have some churches in the area as part of its Maryland Conference. Three MP annual conference sessions were held in Philadelphia, in 1841, 1844 and 1858.<sup>11</sup>

That brings our total to 295.

## THE UNITED BRETHREN

We have not yet accounted for the previous history of the United Brethren Church before its 1946 merger with the Evangelicals.

The UB Church traced its origin to a 1767 evangelistic meeting at Long's Barn in Lancaster County, when Phillip William clasped the hand of Martin Boehm and exclaimed *Wir Sind Bruder* ("We are brethren"). Cooperative efforts over the years led to the organization of the UB Church in September 1800, at a conference in Frederick, Maryland, where Otterbein and Boehm were made its founding bishops. In the early years, there was just one conference that met annually, later called the "old" or "original" conference, with most of its sessions held in Maryland or Pennsylvania. In 1815, the General Conference first defined

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<sup>10</sup>Again the math doesn't seem to add up, but works out the same way as for the old Philadelphia Conference. The first session in 1864 plus 101 sessions through 1965 plus a special, additionally numbered session in 1939 in the wake of the merger that year, equals 103 sessions. Interestingly the Tindley Temple congregation and its predecessors (known successively as John Wesley, Bainbridge Street, Calvary, East Calvary and Tindley Temple) hosted the Delaware Conference for 34 of its 103 sessions.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Hamilton Lewis, compiler, *Historical Record of the Maryland Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1829-1939* (1939), 100.

the governmental structure of the denomination, to consist of quarterly, annual and general conferences. New conferences began to be formed, and “the territorial expansion of the church moved from the area of the ‘old’ or Eastern Annual Conference through southwestern Pennsylvania into new states and territories west of the Appalachians.”<sup>12</sup>

At the General Conference of 1829, the “Old” Conference was divided into the Virginia and Harrisburg (or Pennsylvania) Conferences. The latter first met in 1831 with 31 ministers in attendance, and by 1833 encompassed the entire Commonwealth, plus portions of Maryland; this was divided again in 1839, when the Allegheny Conference was carved out. Finally, at the General Conference of 1845, provision was made to set off the part of Pennsylvania that lies east of the Susquehanna River, as the East Pennsylvania Conference, which met for its first session in 1847 at Brightbill’s Church in Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

There was yet another UB conference, called the East German (or Eastern) Conference, created in 1869 as a German-language body spanning three existing geographical conferences, though most of its churches were in southeast Pennsylvania. The East German Conference functioned as an independent entity from its first session in 1870 until it merged with East Pennsylvania in 1900 – though the boundaries between the two bodies had been fairly porous for years; ministers often transferred back and forth between them, and the two conferences actually met in joint session from 1877 through 1881.<sup>14</sup>

## THE EVANGELICALS

Then there is the tortured history of the Evangelical Association. Jacob Albright founded the EA in the early 1800s, and most of his earliest preaching sites were within today’s Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The first conference was held in 1807 near Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania. At the General Conference of 1826, the church was divided into Western and Eastern Conferences, with the latter’s first meeting held the next year in Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania. At the 1839 General Conference, a third conference was created, and the East Pennsylvania Conference

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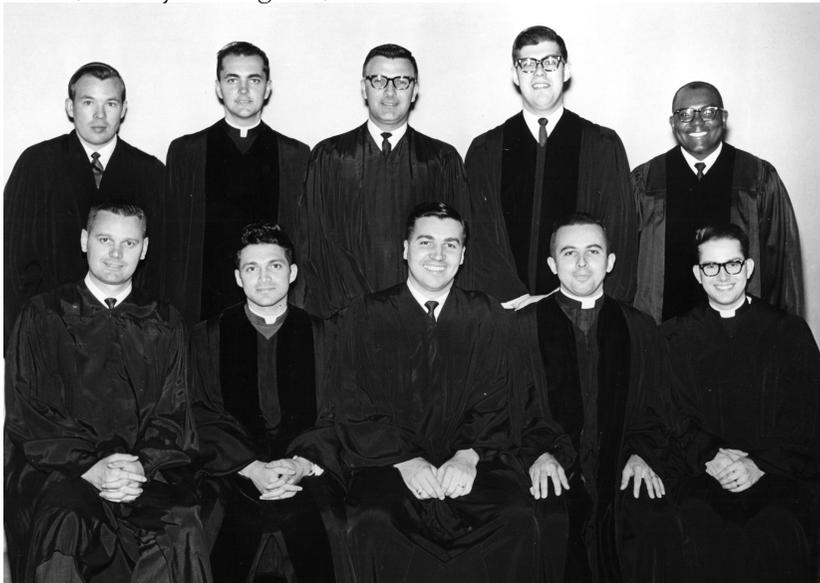
<sup>12</sup>J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 117.

<sup>13</sup>See Phares B. Gibble, *History of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton: The Otterbein Press, 1951), 1-4, 285, 570.

<sup>14</sup>Phares Gibble’s 1951 history treats the East Conference and the East German Conference as one body throughout.



Above: clergy of the Delaware Conference who were transferred into the Philadelphia Conference in 1965 (the photo does not contain their names). Below: the class of Elders ordained at that same 1965 session. Standing: William J. Stuart, III, Edwin R. Green, Jr., Walter A. Swank, William H. Blose, Herbert E. Palmer, Sitting: Leo F. Farley, Joseph Leggieri, Harry F. Wooters, Rodney H. Longmire, Reid S. Thomas.



was formed, which initially included all of Pennsylvania east of the Susquehanna River, New York as far as Buffalo, and north into Canada; its first session was held in Schuylkill Haven in 1840.<sup>15</sup>

Simmering disputes in the late 1880s led to a split in the Evangelical Association, beginning with two rival General Conference sessions being held in 1891. The dissenting wing, which had strong support in the East Pennsylvania Conference, held one of them in Philadelphia. Soon, local churches and annual conferences were splitting, and claiming jurisdiction over the same areas. From 1891 through 1894, there were two rival bodies claiming the name East Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Association – one has to check the title page of the annual minutes those years to distinguish them by where the meeting was held!<sup>16</sup> In 1894, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court decreed that the dissenting, minority wing could no longer use the name Evangelical Association, and it became the United Evangelical Church. Having held its annual session that year in February while still laying claim to the original name, the conference in Eastern Pennsylvania held a second annual session in October in Reading, which it designated as the “First Session of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, beginning in 1894, two different East Pennsylvania Conferences functioned in the same territory, each claiming to be the rightful heir of Albright’s organization.

With the passing of time, the old wounds healed and efforts to reunite the splintered communion succeeded in 1922, when a reunion was approved by both bodies as they met in General Conference session, first separately, then jointly, in October of that year. The newly reconstituted body took a new name, the Evangelical Church. However, 15 delegates to the UE General Conference from East Pennsylvania refused to support the merger, and afterward that conference, along with congregations from other areas, announced their intention to continue

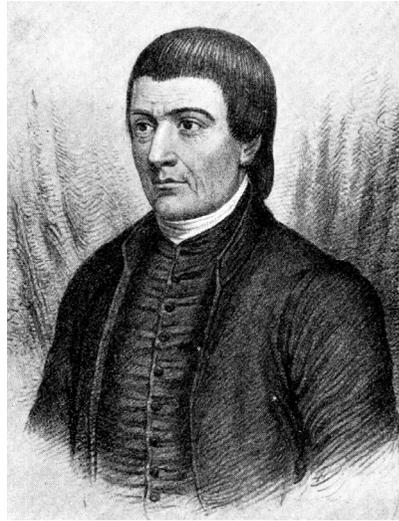
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<sup>15</sup>See Behney and Eller, 133-134; summaries of the Eastern Conference sessions, (and all prior conferences), are in Ammon Stapleton’s *Annals of the Evangelical Association of North America* (Harrisburg: Publishing House of the United Evangelical Church, 1900).

<sup>16</sup>The majority group held the “Fifty-Second Annual Session” of the East Pennsylvania Conference in Allentown’s Emanuel Church, February 28 - March 4, led by Bishop Bowman; while the minority group, led by Rev. H. A. Neitz, held a rival “Fifty-Second Session” in the same town beginning February 26.

<sup>17</sup>This was followed by a conference held February 28-March 6, 1895 in Schuylkill Haven, which it strangely deemed its “First Annual Session,” followed by a “Second Annual Session” in 1896.

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 An image of Jacob Albright  
 (1759-1808), founder of  
 the Evangelical Church.  
 His spiritual heirs divided,  
 united, and branched off  
 into a confusing array  
 of conferences in south-  
 eastern Pennsylvania.  
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separately as the United Evangelical Church. Legal disputes over ownership of local churches, and especially of Albright College, resulted in the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court upholding the validity of the denominational reunion. The dissenters were required to take a new name, which they did as the Evangelical Congregational Church.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, logistical issues in effecting the merger meant that the two conferences of the reunited church covering the territory east of the Susquehanna River continued to meet separately for six years. Thus, from 1922 to 1928 *three different annual conferences* functioned and met for annual sessions in eastern Pennsylvania: The East Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Church (the EA majority body before reunion); the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Church (the UE minority body before reunion); and the East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church (the dissenting body that in 1928 became the EC Church). In addition, there was a fourth, German-speaking body that held jurisdiction in the area, the Atlantic Conference, which had been formed in 1876, and had remained within the Evangelical Association. The Atlantic Conference also met annually, though its territory included areas beyond eastern Pennsylvania.<sup>19</sup>

From 1929 to 1946, the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Church met annually, as did the Atlantic Conference, until both became part of the merged Evangelical United Brethren Church.

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<sup>18</sup>On the story of the EC Church, see Terry M. Heisey, "Albright's Other People: The Evangelical Congregational Church," in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 4 (2007), 19-36.

<sup>19</sup>See Edward F. Ohms, *A Grain of Mustard Seed: A History of the Atlantic Conference of the Evangelical Association/Church* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1985).

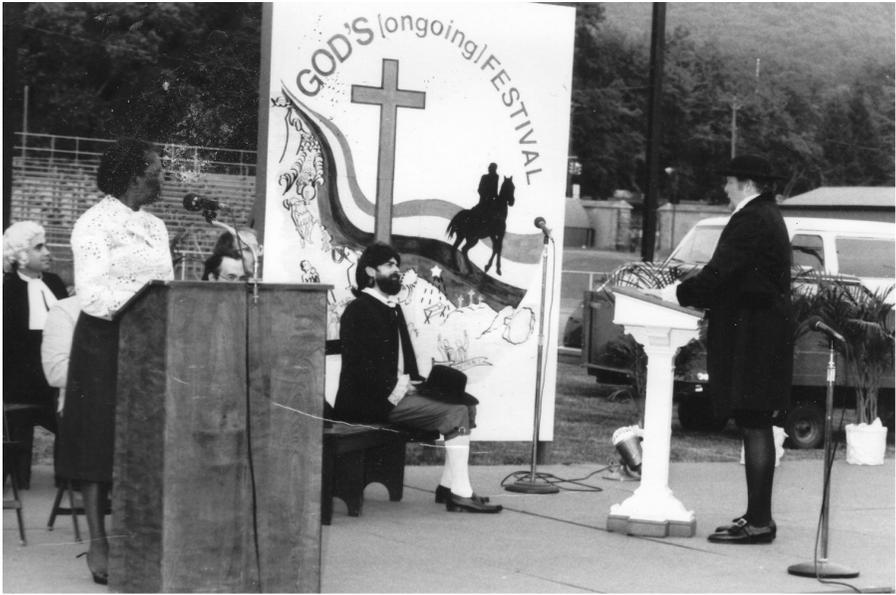
## HOW MANY ANNUAL SESSIONS TO CELEBRATE?

Where does this leave our total of annual sessions that can be credited to the account of today's Eastern Pennsylvania Conference?

At this point, only the good Lord knows.

In one year alone, 1924, no less than six different annual sessions met within the current-day bounds of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference – all of which were later folded into it. The Philadelphia Conference (ME) held the “One Hundred and Thirty-seventh Session,” March 26 to April 1, 1924 at Lancaster's First ME Church, led by Bishop Joseph Berry. The East Pennsylvania Conference (UB) met for its “125th Annual Session” in Avon, Pennsylvania at Zion UB Church, September 24-28, 1924, Bishop William M. Bell in the chair. Bishop M. W. Clair led the Delaware Conference (ME) in its “61st session” that year at East Calvary ME Church, Philadelphia. Three different bodies within the Evangelical Church held sessions in 1924: the “30th Annual Session” of the East Pennsylvania Conference (the former UE conference after merger), at St. Paul's, Lebanon, February 28-March 3, under Bishop J. F. Dunlap; the “85th Session” of the East Pennsylvania Conference (the former Evangelical Church conference), led by Bishop L. H. Seager; and the “Forty-Ninth Session” of the Atlantic Conference, in Germantown, Philadelphia, May 1-4, under the direction of Bishop S. C. Breyfogel. A seventh conference was held by the dissident United Evangelicals that year, April 24-28, in St. Paul's UE Church, Reading, under Bishop W. F. Heil; this became the Evangelical Congregational Church.

None of this, however, seemed to trouble the assembled delegates of the 1986 session of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, held in Reading, Pennsylvania, June 10-12, at Albright College. Blissfully unaware of the tangled mathematics of their predecessors, the delegates had been making plans for two years to mark their “200th Annual Session” in 1986 with a grand celebration. Under the theme, “God's [Ongoing] Festival,” (with a special logo designed by conference member Priscilla Williams), the festivities began with an appeal to all the local churches of the conference to hold a special service of remembrance on Sunday, June 1, ten days before the session began. A packet with more than 40 pages of study materials was prepared by Methodist historians Chuck Yrigoyen and Ken Rowe, and a hymn was commissioned for the occasion, composed by Heath Allen, a member of Philadelphia's Calvary Church. Entitled “Together We Find Life,” its refrain ran,



Two images from the June 1986 celebration of Eastern Pennsylvania Conference's "200th" Annual Session.



People gather many places in my name,  
Bringing forth both joy and strife.  
This is what I offer, you must take it all,  
For only all together we find life.

On the evening of June 11, the second day of the conference, 2,000 people gathered in the college stadium for the celebration, led by presiding Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, guest preacher (and former EPA conference member) Bishop George Bashore, and more than one hundred children, youth and adults, many in period costume. Produced by Rev. William Garrett, with a script written by Mrs. Jean Flood, the presentation included music by children and youth choirs, as well as a full orchestra, and a visit (on horseback) by Bishop Asbury. "It was a time of remembering the faith and struggles that have brought us to where we are today," the conference paper noted, "and a chance to look ahead to the future as God's presence is announced anew in our midst."<sup>20</sup> A memorable occasion – even if it didn't quite get the numbers right.

## CONCLUSION

Where does all this leave us? History being an inexact discipline, we could well make a case to change the numbers; but then any suggested change is apt to be even more confusing. Perhaps it would be better to eliminate numbered sessions altogether, just pick a founding date and leave it at that – say, 1796, the year the first annual conferences were delineated by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A purist might press the case and suggest that, technically, it really is only since 1970 that the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference as we now know it has met annually.

On the other hand, traditions are stubborn things, and our traditional numbering certainly does not err in reminding us of the wonderfully long heritage that is ours in Eastern Pennsylvania. There can be no question that many great luminaries of the past – however often they gathered in conference sessions – preached, gathered congregations, founded institutions of education and care, and carved out a legacy which has profoundly shaped the contours of United Methodism in our region – and well beyond.

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<sup>20</sup>*The United Methodist Reporter for Eastern Pennsylvania*, June 27, 1986. Other sources include: *The United Methodist Reporter*, May 16, 1986; *The Daily Reporter*, June 10-12, 1986; and *Journal of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference* (1986).