

A Brief History of the Michigan Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church

By Charles Bragg [former Michigan Conference president], 1961

Retyped and edited by
Rebecca J. McNitt, Archivist of the Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church
and
William H. McNitt, member of the Michigan Conference Commission on Archives and History
2020¹

In 1830, Dr. George Brown of the Pittsburgh Conference, one of the staunch leaders of the Methodist Protestant Church and a preacher of oratorical ability and evangelistic zeal, swam rivers through the state of Ohio and southern Michigan with his faithful horse and other horses loaned to him by members of the church who were consecrated to the cause. Somewhere in the vicinity of the small village of Adrian, he began his evangelistic work. As we read the biography of Dr. Brown, we are startled at the endurance and zeal that he, with others such as Dennis Dorsey, Jonathan Flood, Thomas Stockton, and William Evans, who came by way of the Monongahela River and the Ohio, had for the cause of the Methodist Protestant Church. In many instances they waded through swamps and heavy forests, blazing trails for future generations.²

As the result of their labors, the Michigan Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church was organized at the General Conference held at Baltimore in July 1842. The Michigan Conference originally consisted of three circuits (Adrian, Franklin, and Jackson) and five itinerant ministers (Jeremiah T. Pratt, Elisha Hall, Laban Smith, George B. Wooster, and Beniah Bayn), all of whom were recognized previously in the Ohio Conference. The number of members reported at this General Conference was two hundred and fifty. The five ministers were later joined by twelve more ministers and preachers, with James Gay as their first

¹ Editors' note: Rev. Bragg initially compiled this history in 1958 at the request of the Detroit Conference Historical Society. He read that version at a Society meeting at the Chelsea Home on May 6 of that year. He continued to revise the history in subsequent years. The Bragg history currently exists in the form of several rough drafts with extensive edits in the folder titled "A Short History of the Michigan Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church" in Box 1 of the Charles Bragg Papers at the United Methodist Church's Michigan Conference Archives. We have edited for style, capitalization, spelling, and proper flow of the narrative (even changing the order of paragraphs), but the gist of the story follows Rev. Bragg's 1961 draft. In three cases we added to the history text written by Bragg in other documents that provided additional information about the conference events in which he was involved, with proper citation.

² Brown, George. *Recollections of Itinerant Life: including early reminiscences*. (Springfield: Methodist Protestant Publishing House, 1868)

President. They set out in full faith for a prosperous year; the following year they reported four hundred members.³

Methodist Protestant historian Ancel Bassett reports that two hundred pioneers migrated from Ohio to Southern Michigan. One can imagine that they were attracted by the reports of the pioneer preachers of opportunities for labor in the forests and lumber industry in the Adrian and Jackson vicinity or the Detroit port or for farming. It should be noted that Asa Shinn was President of this General Conference and John Reed the Secretary. These men were staunch advocates of the organization of the Methodist Protestant Church, and members of the first Conference in 1828.

The first meeting of the Michigan Conference was held at Franciscoville (Jackson County) in July 1842. Subsequent conferences were held yearly, first at Franciscoville, Concord, and Prairie Ronde.⁴ At the conference of 1844, a memorial was voted upon and passed to present to the General Conference to establish a literary institute at Leoni, Jackson County, with Rev. Robert Bamford as agent, but it did not materialize as to buildings, though its initial work was promising and there were forty students in attendance.⁵ This was the beginning of Adrian College. The General Conference which voted on this proposal was held at the Sixth Street Methodist Protestant Church in Cincinnati, Ohio on May 4, 1846 with James Gay as ministerial delegate from Michigan and H. Brownson as lay delegate.⁶

The Michigan Conference refused to send delegates to the General Conference in 1850 due to the denomination's failure to take a strong stand against slavery.⁷ The question of slavery was detrimental to the growth of the Church, according to Ancel Bassett. Michigan lost heavily during the Civil War. There was a station in Detroit and in Jackson, and in both places churches and pastors were lost, as well as other places being weakened. No fact was more easily demonstrated than that the Northern States were the heaviest losers throughout the existence of slave holders in our ecclesiastical connection.⁸

At the 1854 General Conference, Michigan's ministerial delegate was J.L. Turner and Thomas Hinman of Adrian was the lay delegate.⁹ The Conference reported one station, nineteen circuits, and seven missions, with forty seven ministers and preachers, and one thousand four hundred sixty-nine members, with a property value of \$4,800.¹⁰

At the General Conference of 1858, held at Springfield Ohio, the West Michigan Conference was organized. The two Michigan Conferences both met that year at Rice Creek

³ Bassett, Ancel H. *A Concise History of the Methodist Protestant Church from Its Origin*. (Pittsburgh: William McCracken, 1887), p. 161. Editors' note: The unpublished minutes of the 1842 Michigan Methodist Protestant Conference in the archives show the appointment of these additional ministers: Oliver Earl, Benjamin Paris, W. N. Beardsley, O. Gregory, Lorenzo A. Warren, Robert C. Lanning, David G. Oaks, Colburn B. Blake, and J. Mulligan.

⁴ Editors' note: Bragg incorrectly listed the first three annual conferences as being held at Adrian, Franklin, and Jackson and that the first conference took place in August, but that has been corrected by the editors based on the handwritten Conference records in the archives.

⁵ Drinkhouse, Edward J. *History of Methodist Reform*. (Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), p. 355.

⁶ Drinkhouse, p. 344

⁷ Drinkhouse, pp. 362 and 365.

⁸ Bassett, p. 187.

⁹ Drinkhouse, p. 388.

¹⁰ Drinkhouse, p. 392.

(Calhoun County) in October. Harvey H. Johnson was President and William D. Tomkinson was Secretary of the Michigan Conference. Silas F. Hale was the first President of the West Michigan Conference and William Curtis was the Secretary. Hereafter, the name of William D. Tomkinson appears in minutes of both conferences in the state and he, with Ancil C. Fuller, Austin B. Hathaway, Chandler W. Stephenson, D.D., William H. Cole, Mical R. Saigeon, Willis C. Harger, Frank E. Kunsman, and many others that space will not permit, were staunch workers for the cause of lay representation. The West Michigan produced men of like caliber, whose names should be William D. Tomkinson, Clarence L. Ellis, John A. Moray, Charles E. Perry, and Lorenzo D. Abbott.

The two Conferences met each year for camp meetings at a central point near Lansing and at one of these camp meeting a sum of money was raised. This was the year 1872 and said money was used for establishing a mission at Lansing where the Main Street Methodist Church now stands. Ransom E. Olds of Lansing, in his will, donated the corner lot next to this site, at the corner of Washington and Main Street. After Methodist Union, this church was called the Main Street Methodist Church.¹¹

From 1867 to 1875, the churches suffered heavy losses through secessions, and during that period the name Methodist Church was adopted, in anticipation of taking in Wesley Methodists, Free Methodists, and all non-Episcopal Methodists. This union was not consummated because of secret societies and many other reasons. A conference was called at Flint in the spring of 1875, with members of both the Michigan and West Michigan Conferences present, at which time it was resolved that inasmuch as all non-Episcopal Methodists were not falling in line with the union, delegates were instructed to meet at the General Conference in Springfield, Ohio to resume the name Methodist Protestant. During this time, it became evident that there were politicians who were after the spoils instead of the true Spirit of the Lord. At the General Conference held at Cincinnati, Ohio, May 9-16, 1876, a resolution was drawn and presented to this body and the name of Methodist Protestant was again taken, and of course the other churches resumed their names.

In the year 1890, the brethren discovered a beautiful spot on the east side of Gull Lake. Clarence L. Ellis, John A. Moray, Lorenzo D. Abbott, and others of the Conference, both ministers and laymen, through sacrifice and hard labor, established what was named the Gull Lake Camp Meeting Association, and afterwards called the Gull Lake Assembly of the Methodist Protestant Church. These grounds became a place of beauty and attraction in years ahead. It was controlled by a Board of Trustees and a manager of the grounds elected from the Board. E.L.L. Hursley, a prominent layman, held this position for many years. It should be noted that the organization sold ten-dollar shares to erect the Tabernacle, thus designating this as a stockholding company. Each lot were entitled to shares or stock, as per its value, and some lot owners were entitled to more votes than others.

The last West Michigan Annual Conference was held at Barryville (Barry County) on September 6, 1904, with John A. Moray as President. The following year, the two Conferences met together for the purpose of reuniting at the First Methodist Protestant Church of Flint, on

¹¹ Editors' note: Lansing: Main Street church merged in 1961 with Lansing: Maple Grove to form Lansing: Christ Methodist Church. That church was discontinued on December 27, 2015.

North Saginaw Street. At the time, John A. Moray was President of the West Michigan Conference and John W. Gray, D.D., was President of the Michigan Conference.

The 1906 Annual Conference began August 28 at Caro and closed Sunday evening, September 2. The church was large enough for the business of the Conference, while evening services were held under a large tent belonging to the West Michigan Conference. The Speaker was William R. Newell of Chicago, who lectured on the Bible. He was chosen as the evening speaker for several years thereafter.

The 1907 Annual Conference was held in the Tabernacle at Midland Park on Gull Lake, beginning August 27 and closing September 1. The 1908 Annual Conference was at Lansing Main Street Church from August 25 to September 1. At this conference, it was voted to hold all succeeding conferences at Midland Park, to be preceded for one week by outstanding lecturers chosen by a Program Committee elected by the Conference. The men chosen were William R. Newell, R.A. Torey, Harry Rimmer, and others of like reputation, but not many of our own church, who were also men of high standards.

To be sure, there were men of our General Conference who gave addresses regarding the status of our own denomination, such as Dr. Hamilton Lewis, Lyman E. Davis, Dr. George Miller, James Straughn, John C. Broomfield, and men of our own Conference such as William H. Cole, Mical R. Saigeon, Chandler W. Stephenson, his son Dr. Franklin W. Stephenson, and many others that space will not permit us to name. Willis C. Harger should be mentioned, as a man of great insight, and understanding.

Getting back to 1909, from that time to 1918, the ministers of the Conference were a band of Christian brethren. It could be said of them, "see how these brethren love each other", but a separation of doctrine, and opinions was apparent in our midst, and we began to hear such terms as Fundamentalists and Modernists, and accusations were made designating ministers of the Conference by these terms.

We could see why this was so, instead of taking charge of the grounds at Midland Park, they were rented to outside religious groups, for a time an organization from Chicago, then after the war, a group from Grand Rapids rented these grounds. Among them were men of considerable means, who bought the best lakefront cottages, which carried with them the largest number of shares and voting power. This situation was noted around the years 1923 to 1931. This group organized the Gull Lake Bible Association, holding their business meeting before the Gull Lake Assembly business meeting of the Methodist Protestant Church, and coming into our meeting with a controlling vote.

The teaching of this group was radical fundamentalism and the Methodist Episcopal Church (and later the combined Methodist Church) was designated as being modernistic in its teaching, and many of its ministers were named as advocates of doctrine adverse to the Cross of Christ and the cleansing blood. Several of our brethren became firm believers in this kind of teaching, and as a result from 1937 to the uniting conference at Adrian, our Conference suffered numerically and financially, and benevolences were neglected.

I was elected as President of the Michigan Conference in 1927. This office gave me the honor of being a delegate to the General Conference held at Baltimore, Maryland, in May 1928. It was at this conference that plans were made for the uniting of Methodism and I was chosen as one of the Commissioners on Interdenominational Relations.

On July 1, 1930, Commissioners from the Methodist Episcopal Church North and the Methodist Protestant Church met at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh to explore the possibilities of union of the two churches. I shall never forget the address of Bishop William McDowell, as he pleaded for the union of the three outstanding bodies of Methodism, and the address of Dr. Albert N. Ward, President of Western Maryland College, representing the Methodist Protestant Church, who said that we could not unite till the Methodist Episcopal Church South was ready to come with us, for as yet they had not attended any of the meetings. When we met in our headquarters at the hotel, Dr. Ward said that this was a Great Day for Methodism and urged us all to be faithful and work together for the final consummation of this union. For said he "A Great Day awaits us to work in a Great Church!" He never lived to see the consummation of this Union for God took him, as well as Bishop McDowell, and Bishop Edwin Mouzon, of the Southern Church -- three great men, they were God's noble men, and if one ever heard these men speak on Methodist Union they could never get away from the impression they made.¹²

It should be noted here that at the beginning of the 1920s, both Methodist churches had adopted lay representation in both the General and Annual Conferences. The reason for the organization of the Methodist Protestant Church by our forefathers in 1828 was not the episcopacy, but lay representation. The Methodist Church has a better lay representation than the Methodist Protestants had, because when a matter of great importance came to the floor of the Methodist Protestant conference the writer knows, and so do other Methodist Protestants know, that the ministers manhandle the laymen in such cases by sitting beside them, and seeing to it that they voted as the ministers wanted them to. This cannot be done by a minister of the Methodist Church, for the laymen hold their meetings in such matters by themselves, only in such cases of Ministerial Ordination do they vote together. They preside over their own conference at a separate building for the election of laymen to the General Conference. And after this measure was passed by both Methodist Episcopal churches (North and South), really there was no point of our separate existence. Hence the agitation for Methodist Union.

In the last six years before Methodist Union, midyear conferences were held. The last midyear conference was held at Caro in the month of February [1936]. James Straughn, President of the General Conference, was to be present to explain Methodist Union, but it became impossible for him to attend, and Dr. Richard Shipley, editor of *The Methodist Protestant-Recorder* was sent in his place. A motion was made and passed that Shipley not be allowed to speak on Methodist Union, so one can understand why the vote taken at the subsequent Annual Conference at Gull Lake resulted in an overwhelming vote against Methodist Union.¹³ They were willing to take the word of the uninformed rather than the informed.

¹² Editors' note: The highlighted text was not originally part of Bragg's history, but is from a separate document titled "Dramatic Incidents in the Ministry of Rev. Charles Bragg" found in the folder Methodist Union, 1939 – General in Box 1 of the Charles Bragg Papers. The editors felt that it added to his conference history and incorporated it here. For more information on the work towards Methodist Union, see Bishop John Moore's book *The Long Road to Methodist Union* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943).

¹³ Editors' note: In August 1936, the Michigan Annual Conference voted 79 to 27 to reject the proposal to merge with the two Methodist Episcopal denominations. Four other Methodist Protestant annual conferences rejected the proposal, but the proposal received the support of enough annual conferences to ensure its eventual ratification.

Wednesday afternoon on August 17, 1938, the business meeting of the Gull Lake Assembly of the Methodist Protestant Church was held [and the conference voted on a proposal to continue the existence of the Michigan Conference outside the Methodist Union]. I quote from my diary, "The fundamental Baptists of Gull Lake Bible Conference present in full force. They are out to steal the grounds from us." This they did, as you will see further on. They had poisoned the minds of many of our brethren, to the extent that when the final vote was taken on Wednesday, the result was 51 against Methodist Union, to 52 for it! This was too close for comfort.

They were nasty and irreligious in their conduct. They resorted to means of indecency and bad conduct. A colleague of mine retired this conference from active service. Several of the men and I approached him and agreed to have him come and conduct evangelistic meetings, but at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of which he was a member, he said that no Methodist Bishop would ever stand in the pulpit at Midland Park Tabernacle. After hearing this statement, I met him and told him that because of his attitude, I did not or could not have him come to my church and the meeting was cancelled. Whereupon he came to me, pushed me off his steps and struck me so hard that I lost one front tooth. I should have known better, for I had seen him in hot temper before. You could work with this man only if you worked for him and did not cross him. He was the boss!¹⁴

There were around fifteen of the brethren who held clandestine conferences and certain tracts were written against the proposed Methodist Union. The tracts were sent to the various churches and members of the Conference. In one instance these tracts were placed in mailboxes without stamps, thus violating the Federal Postal law. Had it not been for a kind mailman, the individual who did this would have had a trip to the Federal penitentiary.¹⁵

Then when the Plan of Union was approved by the three churches, it was my great pleasure to be present at the election and ordination of our two Bishops, at the First Methodist Protestant Church in Kansas City -- Bishops James H. Straughn, and John Broomfield. The 1939 Uniting Conference at Kansas City was one of the highlights in my life for it was at that time that my prayers and labors were fully realized, for at last I was in a Great Church -- Methodism was one, no Methodist Episcopal North or South or Methodist Protestant, but one body called Methodists.¹⁶

It should be noted that the last meeting of the Michigan Conference was held at Plymouth Church, Adrian, June 21, 1939. This conference adjourned to meet with our Detroit Conference brethren in the First Methodist Church at Adrian, and a happy brotherhood was enjoyed by all who entered the union. Bishop Blake was the presiding Bishop, and Bishop

¹⁴ Editors' note: The highlighted text was not originally part of the history and consists of selected sentences from page 75 of a separate typed document "Grass Roots, Mountain Top & Back: Autobiography of The Rev. Charles Bragg – Farmer, Minister, Farmer" in Box 1 of the Charles Bragg Papers. The editors felt that it provided more details about the conflict within the conference and incorporated it here.

¹⁵ Editors' note: The Michigan Conference archives has examples of these tracts in the folder "Methodist Union, 1939 – Tracts Opposing" in box 1 of the Charles Bragg Papers.

¹⁶ Editors' note: The highlighted text was not originally part of the history and is from a separate document titled "Dramatic Incidents in the Ministry of Rev. Charles Bragg" found in the folder Methodist Union, 1939 – General in Box 1 of the Charles Bragg Papers. As it seemed relevant to the story, the editors included it here.

James H. Straughn presided at the Plymouth Church, giving advice as to our entrance into this fellowship.

At the Adrian Conference of 1939, the number of men as stated before refused to attend and also refused to yield the fields or parsonages and churches they were placed in the year before, and in several circuits were moved into the vacated parsonages, and the doors nailed shut. This was so at Rea and Cone parsonage, Marlette, Harger Memorial Church in Detroit, Three Rivers, Goodells, and Mt. Pleasant.

Because of this a test case had to be made. The first case was against the pastor at Three Rivers, who refused to allow the young man, Horace Thurston, to occupy the pulpit after the 1939 conference at Adrian where he was duly appointed. This case was held at Centreville, Michigan, in the St. Joseph County Court. Judge Theo T. Jacobs was on the bench, with Edward Smith as attorney for the Methodist Church and Howard Cline, a young attorney from Flint, Michigan, representing the opponents of the merger. Judge Jacobs was thorough in hearing this case. He stated that there was a difference between ecclesiastical law, which he stated in his brief had precedence over the law of the state.

This case ran from Thursday noon through Friday. The following Thursday at noon Judge Jacobs announced he would read his decision at the afternoon session. Those who were at this trial were anxious, as one can imagine, and they were in their places promptly. At the first paragraphs it seemed that the Judge was deciding the case against the Methodist Church, but finally he began saying whereas the Methodist Uniting Conference, at Kansas City, and the Methodist Conference at Adrian were legally one, etc., therefore the ministers occupying parsonages were to vacate inside of ten days.¹⁷

I would like to relate an incident from this trial that seems amusing. The leader of this group, and the main witness, was determined to bring in statements regarding the Methodist Protestant Church men who had passed to their reward some years ago, and the Judge would not allow the evidence, of course, but the individual argued with the judge that the measure only passed by one vote at the Michigan Conference at Midland Park. The judge became irked and said, "Are you telling me how to run my court? Sit down and listen to me. If I am a Democrat and you are a Republican, and I am required to submit to a Republican Governor, does that mean that I am going to rebel, and start another state. I am an Episcopalian. This is Monday morning and yesterday, I heard a good sermon from my Rector and the Lord knows that I do not want to listen to another one from you. Sit down, I say. Sit down." The witness did as the Judge told him. If it had not been for the cloth, he said he would have held the individual for contempt of court.

After Methodist Union, the Assembly grounds at Gull Lake became involved in litigation at Kalamazoo Court House. Judge Fred S. Lamb of Cadillac was on the bench, Kim Sigler was attorney for the insurgents, and Edward Smith of Detroit Conference represented the Methodist

¹⁷ Editors' note: According to other sources, Judge Jacobs announced his decision on Wednesday, August 9. Several Methodist publications celebrated this precedent-setting ruling and quoted extensively from it in their coverage. For example, the *Michigan Christian Advocate*, the "Official Weekly of Michigan Methodism," devoted a page and a half to the decision in its August 24 edition and *The Methodist Protestant-Recorder*, "Official Organ of the Methodist Protestant Church," featured a picture of Judge Jacobs on the cover of the August 25 issue which had three and a half pages of coverage.

Church.¹⁸ Some former Methodist Protestants testified against the position of the Methodist Church. The decision was against the Methodists, the grounds were given into the hands of a receiver and sold to the highest bidder, which was a body called the Gull Lake Bible Association. This would never have happened if these grounds had been dedicated to and owned by the Conference, as were all the churches that came into the union.

The opponents of Methodist Union organized what was called the American Bible Fellowship Association, which existed for a while and disintegrated. The following year, the leader of this group, by instructions from their business meeting, served an injunction on Clarence Turbin, who was appointed pastor of the Stevens Street Church in Saginaw. Judge McCarrol was the judge in this case, Edward Smith, a prominent layman was again the lawyer for the Methodist Church. The judge was a Roman Catholic, and again their case was lost, the judge deciding in favor of the Detroit Conference. After some time being deprived of his pulpit, Rev. Turbin was allowed to take possession.

The Methodist Protestant Conference's finances were in a state of bankruptcy, having borrowed from the membership of the church to erect churches in Detroit and Port Huron. As early as 1937, the treasurer, E.R. Vincent, was perplexed and embarrassed about the lack of funds to make these loans good, even the interest on them. In some instances, they had to go into default for lack of funds. We would have been greatly embarrassed had it not been that the Uniting Conference at Kansas City provided for such circumstances by the appointment of an Ad Interim Adjustment Committee for each Conference with power to dispose of all churches in overlapping territory, and where there were places that ministers and congregations were opposed to entering into the Union (Michigan Conference had several such churches with parsonages). Bishop Blake, in accordance with this provision, appointed E. Ray Willson, Clayton F. Oliver, and me with powers to dispose of such property, and liquidate the indebtedness as stated above. Willson, was Chairman, Oliver the Secretary, and I was Treasurer. Thus, we were able to enter the Union with all indebtedness cleared.

Rev. Frank S. Hemingway and his congregation at Lapeer did not enter the Union. They purchased the church and parsonage and radio station WMPC from the Methodists. The church was renamed Liberty Street Gospel Church.¹⁹ There was only one other circuit that was lost entirely, the Goodells and Mt. Pleasant churches and parsonage. Others purchased their property and are holding forth as either independent churches or Baptist churches. We bid them God speed, and as for those men who have entered into the Union (some in the Detroit Conference and some in the Michigan Conference), we are happy in our Fellowship, and pray God's blessing on those who have gone from us, our young men who came to us are doing well, they have good churches, and are proclaiming the Gospel, making progress for the Kingdom.

¹⁸ Editors' note: Judge Lamb decided the case in 1940, but the Methodists appealed the decision to the Michigan Supreme Court which in July 1941 affirmed Judge Lamb's decision.

¹⁹ Years later the name of this church changed to Calvary Bible Church after the construction of a new building.

Bibliography

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Drinkhouse, Edward J. *History of Methodist Reform*. Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899.

United Methodist Church Michigan Conference Archives:

- Charles Bragg Papers: This small collection contains his autobiography, drafts of this history, and much more about the Methodist Union of 1939 and the history of the Michigan Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church.
- *Minutes of the Michigan Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1842-1939* and *Minutes of the West Michigan Conference of Methodist Protestant Church, 1858-1905* (early ones handwritten, later ones printed)