

Keeping the Doors Open:
The Story of a City Church

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United Methodist History

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Introduction

Like huge, wooden arms stretched out to the world, they open invitingly during the week promptly at 8:00 each morning. Soon after, the slow trickle of people begins, usually amounting to no more than one or two dozen on a typical day. There may be among the visitors a nanny who has dropped off her charges for the morning at the day school situated in the same building four floors above. Or perhaps it is a lawyer or investment banker who stops simply wanting a moment of reflection before hurrying off to a dizzying pace of activity in a Wall Street or Midtown office. Or the person who enters may just have peeked through the glass buffer doors to find one more precious gem tucked away into the high-rise corridors and cavities of the city.

Each one passes underneath the crowned figure with book in hand (the "King of Teachers") chiselled into the front exterior, who serves as guardian of the Romanesque structure. They might sit quietly in the simple interior, heads bowed, eyes closed, or perhaps look up at the golden budded cross that dominates the chancel, or at the crouching, winged figure supporting the lectern and staring blankly back at them.

The mighty oaken arms swing closed at three o'clock in the afternoon. But in the evening their less majestic companions on the side become the focus of activity as one by one people are buzzed into the inner caverns for various purposes: committee meetings, study groups, twelve-step programs, community meetings.

But it is on Sunday, after a day of relative calm, that the front wooden portals stand their proudest, their most glorious, as

their invitation to come is accepted, not by dozens, but by hundreds. A small, but dedicated group arrives early for prayer and study while others raise their voices to the heavens in preparation for the celebration to come. Later, still others enter, two hundred of them most Sundays, and three or four hundred on the occasions which honor the birth or resurrection of the "King of Teachers."

It is, of course, a church, an active church, a growing church, a church in mission to the city that engulfs it. It might well be any church in any city. But the city is New York, the place where many who have spent time in the midst of both the good and evil fruit that it bears still regard as the "greatest city in the world." And the church is a United Methodist Church.

The doors that stand so proudly now and swing so invitingly open might well not have stood at all, or might have swung for the congregation of a different denomination. "Few people realize what it takes to keep the doors of a church open and in mission in New York City," the minister who is serving there now comments. And the story of the church as it has been written over the preceding 156 years, and as it is still being written, confirms this.

In 1946 (when Protestant denominations and local congregations were largely experiencing something of a post-war boom), Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam appointed a minister to the church with the episcopal directive to close its doors within six months and to channel the few remaining parishioners to other existing congregations. However, neither the minister (including the two part-time student ministers who followed him) nor a small and determined congregation

would allow that to happen. They saw the future potential for a church located on New York's Upper East Side, and kept the doors of the church, the Park Avenue United Methodist Church, open during those most difficult years of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

156 Years of History

It certainly would have been an ignominious ending to a place of worship which had a history rich, in both a spiritual and material sense, with the earliest traditions of Methodism. The church began as a mission outpost of one of the oldest Methodist churches in America, the John Street Methodist Church, built in 1768.¹ In the early 1830s, a small, residential village known as "Yorkville" was attracting people from the more congested downtown areas of New York City to which it was connected, first by stage coach, and later by railroad. In 1837, Methodist services were begun in a vacant room in Yorkville on Third Avenue and 85th Street, opposite a tavern and over a rum-selling grocery.² In March of that

¹While Methodists in the New York region like to claim the John Street Church as the oldest Methodist meetinghouse in America, this distinction apparently belongs to the meetinghouse built by Robert Strawbridge in Frederick County, Maryland in 1760. John G. McEllhenney, ed., with Frederick E. Maser, Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., Kenneth E. Rowe, *United Methodism in America: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 29-30.

²A key resource for the early history of the Park Avenue United Methodist Church (that is, the history prior to 1956) comes from a thin volume prepared for the 150th anniversary of the church in 1987. In it is contained the facts and folklore of the church's story as it is presently understood, including excerpts from letters and other church documents which have now largely been lost or misplaced, but have nevertheless been memorialized in prior editions of the church's history, and so were available for use in this volume. See Lynn Bruhn, ed., *Park Avenue United Methodist Church, 150th Anniversary* (1987). What appears to be the earliest such church history booklet that still exists is the 40th anniversary

same year, the church was formally organized by electing a board of trustees. Land was purchased, and a wooden structure was completed by August using some of the timbers of the original John Street Church, which had been hewn by Philip Embury, one of the giants of early Methodism, and saved when the church was rebuilt in 1817.³ The doors of the new Methodist church in Yorkville opened with a membership of 20 and a debt of \$3,400. The congregation grew slowly to a membership of 100 by 1853, and then, because of the space limitations within the small church, began to decline.

When the wooden structure was replaced with a brick one in 1859, new members were attracted to the church, and a succession of excellent ministers nurtured the congregation. By 1884, the membership had grown to over 700 persons, and more room was again needed. Consequently, in that same year a new church of brown stone

history written in 1877. The Park Avenue Church no longer retains a copy of this volume, but a copy has been kept in excellent condition at the New York Historical Society. The pastor who undertook the project at that time recorded his reasons for doing so:

[T]wo or three men were living who could recall from memory the history of the forty years of Church-life which godly men and women have enjoyed upon this very spot. The history of the Church would be lost unless it were rescued from oblivion before these few men should pass away.

A.J. Palmer (pastor), *Forty Years of Methodism in 86th Street, City of New York* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1877) 6.

³This information is contained in a letter written in January, 1877, by Daniel DeVinne, the minister who organized and helped build the original church, as he reminisced on the early years of the church. The original letter has been lost, but its contents have been memorialized in the 40th anniversary edition of the church's history. Palmer, 26.

was completed at the corner of 86th Street and Park Avenue, the location that gave the church its name. Known as the "great church," the property included a sanctuary, meeting rooms, a chapel, and a parsonage. The church and its new structure were featured in *Harper's Weekly* the week after the building was dedicated.⁴

Prosperity continued over the next 40 years for the church. The Yorkville area was no longer a small village, but had become an integral part of the expanding city of New York. The site on which the church sat had become prime real estate, since, with the covering over of the railroad tracks which had long been a feature of Park Avenue, the Avenue had now become a fashionable residential area. Wanting to seize the opportunity offered by the location of its property, and with the church structure having somehow fallen into disrepair (no precise details are available concerning how the structure was allowed to deteriorate), it was determined in the mid-1920s to tear down the existing structure and on its site build a slightly smaller, more easily maintained church on 86th Street, and a 15-story apartment building on the corner of Park and 86th. It was anticipated by the trustees that the apartment building would pay itself off and in due course support the finances of the church. The architect for the church structure (Henry Pelton) was the same man who later designed the Riverside Church, and the timbers hewn by Philip Embury were embedded snugly within the foundation of the pulpit. As the congregation of over a thousand prepared in January,

⁴"The Park Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church," *Harper's Weekly* (March 29, 1884) 208.

1927, to move into its new quarters, *The Evening Sun*, on December 31, 1926, reported that with "the apartment house . . . alongside its new edifice, . . . [the church] has made its financial future and property safe and secure."⁵

Such a prediction was premature, and the timing for such a real estate venture could not have been much worse. Within three years of the consecration of the church and apartment building the stock market had collapsed and the economic depression that would engulf the city and the nation had begun. Membership declined severely in the 1930s and during World War II, and the church barely stayed ahead of the interest payments due the mortgage holder of the property. Finally converting the apartment house into cooperative apartments, the church was able to relieve itself of its debt burden in 1956.⁶

It was also in 1956, ten years after the instructions from Bishop Oxnam to close the doors of the church, that another Bishop, Frederick B. Newell, appointed a recent graduate of the Boston University School of Theology to pastor the church. Too naive to realize that no one else in the New York Conference would accept appointment to the church,⁷ Rev. Philip A.C. Clarke moved his family

⁵Bruhn, no page.

⁶*The Park Avenews, Special Mortgage Burning Issue* (Spring, 1956).

⁷Rev. Clarke still recalls one sentence from a letter he found in the church files during the first year of his ministry. The letter has now been lost, but it had been written by one of the church's pastors in the 1930s to the Bishop of the New York Conference, and Rev. Clarke remembers the climactic sentence stated

to the city and began his ministry at the church on December 1. He recalls that the most encouragement that the Bishop could offer was to say, "Give it a year or two and if nothing happens, I'll move you out."

Phil Clarke today is charismatic, energetic, enthusiastic. In fact one would suspect that he is no less so than when he first arrived at the church 36 1/2 years ago. Any weathering that has occurred in being in one location for all those years seems to have only refined and matured him, not worn him down.

It is not easy to remain energetic and enthusiastic in any city church. But this church was particularly difficult. Rev. Clarke arrived to a congregation of about 25 people, mostly elderly women and only two young adults. There was no Sunday School. No membership records had been kept for some time. Crowded amongst the surrounding apartment buildings, "it was like a fortress," he remembers. "The church doors were closed up tighter than a drum except between 10:15 and 12:15 on Sunday mornings." The church secretary gave him a list of names and addresses of people who she remembered to have been members of the church at one time. He was only able to track down about a half dozen of them. The rest had evidently moved on. And it was clear that, of those who were still in the city but had not been to the church in a while, none still considered themselves members, nor had they any interest in establishing a tie with a novice minister at a dilapidated church.

something such as the following: "If I knew then what I know now about this church, I would never have accepted an appointment here."

Continuity of Present With Past

Rev. Clarke, who knows intimately the story of the church, who has, in fact, himself created so much of its story, has on several occasions reminisced that in this 156-year-old church one can feel the past and the future meet. The work currently being done there is but one stage in a whole movement of the footsteps of Methodist worshippers who are no longer here. There is within the doors of the church the presence of those who have come and gone, and even of those who have yet to arrive. The barrier of time has been broken and it is as if the concerns of this present church are not really so very different from those of an earlier time. There is a continuity with the past, one that goes well beyond the simple connection to previous historical moments symbolized by the presence of the wooden beams of Philip Embury in the foundation of the current pulpit.

(1) Membership

This continuity with the past is no more evident than in the area of membership. Rev. Clarke can often be heard to say that at this church, "we minister to a parade of people." By this he means that there is a constant turnover in the members and worshippers in the church. On average, the church might take in 40 new members a year, but at the same time lose 30 members. While there has been continual, gradual growth in the membership of the church, it can feel like a daunting task to know that the church must attract 30 to 35 new members each year just to stay even. And there is always the overhanging shadow that a key, "irreplaceable" lay leader will

be the next one to leave the church (to be replaced soon after, it usually turns out, by a new member graced with abilities willing to be offered to the mission of the church).

Much of this turnover is simply the nature of New York City. People often move to the outlying communities once they consider having children or desire a more suburban lifestyle. Sometimes they relocate back to the region of the United States where they were raised after a few years in the "big city" gaining valuable work experience. Some leave after making their lucky "break" into the artistic world (art, acting, writing, singing), and some because whatever luck they could see in their field never quite seemed to come their way. Others are transferred out of the city by their employers (including diplomats or their staffs who work at the United Nations or their countries' consulates), and still others simply grow tired of the pace and activity that can be such an invigorating and depressing part of life in a city like New York. The Park Avenue United Methodist Church seems to have had more than its share of these transitional people. Most of its members are young (that is, in the 25 to 45 age range) and either single or couples, with or without children, who have no permanent ties to New York.

The transition or "parade" of people through the church can be dramatic. Once in looking over the list of new members from two years previous, Rev. Clarke found that eight of twelve had already moved away. It's not uncommon for one or two people to make a commitment to become a member in the church and be transferred or

move even before the day of official reception into membership. Rev. Clarke estimates that during his nearly 37 years at the church, he has ministered to eight or nine different congregations.

This apparently is the way it has been at the church since it came into existence. The following excerpt from a recollection of the pastor of the church during the 1850s could have been written in 1993:

In the spring of each year there would be numbers admitted by transfer, but at the same time as many would remove by certificate. Yorkville seemed to be a way-station for migrating Methodists.⁸

However, with the exception of the 1930 to 1956 period, the membership rolls of the church have continued to gradually expand (current membership stands at just over 600). Rev. Clarke saw within his first year at the church just how difficult it can sometimes be to make a call on a prospective parishioner in New York City, especially compared to a stereotypically smalltown setting where a minister might simply drop in on a family during the early evening. In New York, "it can be impossible to get past the doorman [in an apartment building], or to explain through an intercom system precisely who you are and why you are there, even if you thought that you had been expected. People work late into the evening in New York, or work odd hours. There's never a good time to call." A "Fisherman's Club," started in the late 1950s at the suggestion of a couple of laymen, produced few fish on their expeditions through the neighborhood to visit with those who had recently

⁸Palmer, 21.

attended the church.

Instead, Rev. Clarke learned quickly that "in the city, people go at their own speeds," meaning that what the church must concentrate on is a meaningful worship service and warm fellowship afterward for those who have somehow found their way to the church. In an article from the Easter edition of the *Ladies Home Journal*, published in Rev. Clarke's early days at the church, he described then what might well still be his prescription for increasing membership in the church (to the extent this can really be called a prescription or strategy for church growth):

People have been drawn to our church. We feel they come here because it is like the one back home -- they find small-town warmth and friendship and spiritual nourishment in what can be the most lonely city in the world.⁹

Getting lay people involved in inviting friends and greeting newcomers has always been a key strategy for Rev. Clarke. The pressure from the pastor must be low-key, a phone call or two and a couple of letters. The advice from a pastoral letter of November, 1904 sounds like something that Rev. Clarke himself might have written a time or two over his 36 years:

Come to the services regularly, and make it a point always to greet strangers with a good, warm handshake. Keep your eye open for changes in residences in your vicinity, and be quick to invite newcomers to your church if they shall have no church relation.¹⁰

Members and visitors to the church today might also take some

⁹"Faith and Fellowship Saved Our Dying Church," *Ladies Home Journal* (April, 1962) 136.

¹⁰Bruhn, no page.

advice, not only from Rev. Clarke's frequent exhortations during the announcements on Sunday morning to "Remember, strangers are only friends you haven't yet met," but also from the pastor of the church in 1877 who wrote:

Many people complain that they do not feel at home in a strange church. Two bits of advice, if followed, would help matters greatly:

(1) To Church members. -- Always notice strangers in the Church -- shake hands and speak. If you cannot say anything else, say "Welcome."

(2) To strangers -- The way to make friends is to be friendly.¹¹

(2) Social Issues

There are other ways in which the history of the church has in many respects simply been a later chapter in the same story. For most of its history, the church has endeavored to apply the message of Christ to important social issues. For example, the pastor of the church in the early 1890s, Ferdinand Inglehart, preached a sermon in support of the crusade of Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt's effort to get the "law-defying and crime breeding saloons to close on a Sunday." In later reflections on this sermon and a subsequent meeting with Roosevelt, Inglehart wrote the following in a book he authored, titled *Theodore Roosevelt: the Man as I Knew Him*:

[I said to Theodore Roosevelt,] "our church will stand by you. In my sermon yesterday morning I asked all good people to sustain you in this great crusade."

The Commissioner said, "I saw what you said in your pulpit in the report of this morning's papers and thank you very much."

¹¹Palmer, 32.

"I am only one," I continued . . . "and an humble one at that, but you may count on me to stand with you on the firing line, and whenever you shoot your big gun down in Mulberry Street, just listen and you will hear its echo in the crack of a little finebored pistol on the Corner of Park Avenue and 86th Street, and that pistol will be in my hand and I will be shooting at the thing at which you aim."

Roosevelt said enthusiastically, "You're the stuff. I am looking for you as much as you are looking for me." And taking my hand warmly, he added, "I will stand with you in the fight till the end." Then he continued, "Do you know that you are the first man whose opinion I count of any value who has commented on my stand. You and your people are a credit to our great city of New York."¹²

The issues of the 1960s and 1970s were the war in Viet Nam and the struggle for civil rights. Rev. Clarke spoke out strongly against the war, even before it became somewhat acceptable to do so, and several key members left the church as a result. But it is in the area of racial justice and integration that the church currently makes an invaluable statement each Sunday. It has not always been so.

Rev. Clarke remembers that when he was appointed to a New York City church, he had the vision of a church that was "interracial, international, and interdenominational," a Riverside Church¹³ on the east side of Central Park, not only through the identity offered by

¹²This quote has been memorialized in succeeding generations of private pastoral papers, including those of Rev. Clarke. However, no copy of this book has been located in any of the church files, nor is it in the libraries of Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University, the New York Historical Society, or the New York Public Library.

¹³Riverside Church, located at 120th Street and Riverside Drive on the west side of Manhattan, has, since its inception, used the slogan "interracial, international, interdenominational" to describe its membership.

the same architect, but through the type of people who would be drawn to its doors. The closest Rev. Clarke came to this in his first year was the black porter working in the neighborhood who would sit in the back pew of the church early on a Sunday morning to listen to the choir practice, being careful to leave before the worship service began, despite encouragement from Rev. Clarke to stay. Later that first year a young Korean couple joined the church (the man's father was a Methodist minister in California), and the church has consistently since that time had a strong presence of Asians.¹⁴

The black/white barrier was broken in 1960 when Theresa Hoover, an African-American woman living in the neighborhood at what was then the Methodist Deaconess Home, joined the church. Among various high level positions in the United Methodist Church and in ecumenical organizations, she has been the Deputy General Secretary of the Women's Program Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, and was selected for membership on the Joint Commission on Church Union, which resulted in the merger of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches into the United Methodist Church in 1968.¹⁵ She became a trustee of the church and its vice president of the local chapter of the United Methodist Women. One unfortunate incident occurred when a prominent white member of the

¹⁴For example, several Vietnamese families were brought into relationship with the church when members sponsored refugees from that country in the late 1970s. Currently, there are several Filipino-born families who have become active members of the church.

¹⁵Grant S. Shockley, ed., *Heritage and Hope: The African American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) 182 (picture), 229, 262. 14

church refused to allow her picture to be used in a national magazine which was doing a story on integrated churches, because she had been photographed with Theresa Hoover and the Korean couple, and feared the reaction of her traditional southern family.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Rev. Clarke's vision for the church provided the impetus for its integration. In a sermon in 1960 he attacked the system in the Methodist Church which divided the denomination into five primarily white geographical jurisdictions and a "Central" Jurisdiction which was composed of predominantly African-American churches.¹⁷ *The New York Times* wrote a short article on his sermon, quoting him as saying:

No matter how you try to look at it, no matter how familiar you are with the administrative difficulties involved [in abolishing the Central Jurisdiction], you are still faced with the fact that in the light of the divine mind of Christ, a segregated church is wrong.¹⁸

This outspokenness from the pulpit on issues of racial justice is not a first for a pastor of the Methodist church at Park Avenue and 86th Street. One of the early pastors of the church was convicted in the late 1830s by the New York Conference for being an "abolitionist," and his relationship to the Conference was suspended

¹⁶Due to the sensitive nature of this issue, neither the article nor all the parties involved will be cited.

¹⁷The Central Jurisdiction was done away with at the time of the merger of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches into the United Methodist Church in 1968, and churches that had primarily African-Americans as members were assimilated into the existing jurisdictions and annual conferences based on geographical location. McEllhenney, 120-121; Shockley, 200-207.

¹⁸*The New York Times* (February 15, 1960) B4.

for one year.¹⁹

The vision of an integrated church is a reality today. The church membership is comprised of approximately 30 percent ethnic minorities (about 40 percent in the children's Sunday School). The largest minority ethnic group is African-American, many of whom have served capably on church committees and in various leadership positions. While the immediate community surrounding the church (from 76th to 96th Streets and from Fifth to East End Avenues) remains largely white, the church draws in people from various areas outside its immediate walking distance who share the pastor's vision that the true community of the church is the larger city of New York and, indeed, the world. Adding to this its many foreign-born members and visitors, along with the significant number who became members by transferring their church letters from other denominations, the Park Avenue United Methodist Church is a church that is "interracial, international, interdenominational."

(3) Financial Concerns

The continuity between past and present has been evident as well in the interesting history of the church's finances and economic ventures. The small Yorkville congregation did not become self-supporting until 20 years after it was first begun. Like many mission outposts in those early years of Methodism (and even today, when churches are planted in promising locations), the Park Avenue Church received aid from the New York Conference in those years.²⁰

¹⁹Palmer, 32.

²⁰Palmer, 20.

Not long thereafter, however, with the building of the third structure in the 1880s, the "great church" became one of the strong Methodist churches in New York City and the Conference. The money invested in the church in those early years was paying significant dividends.

The disaster for the church, that has already been described above, struck in the 1930s when the new church structure and apartment building, that were meant to bring the church lasting financial security, burdened it, during the Depression years, with the largest debt in the New York Conference, and, tradition has even claimed, in all of Methodism. Thus, the "great church" on Park Avenue and 86th Street became, during the 1940s and early 1950s, a church that, as it had been 100 years before, was once again not self-sufficient, but required aid from the Conference. This time assistance came from the Methodist City Society of New York, an organization which had been created by the New York Conference during its prosperous years before the Depression to provide aid to struggling churches like the Park Avenue Church.

Rev. Clarke remembers that in June, 1956, a short seven months after he had arrived at the church, the chairman of the Finance Committee, Paul Russell, held up a slip of paper in his hand and said, "This is the last check we'll be receiving from the City Society. From now on we're on our own." Rev. Clarke recalls not comprehending immediately precisely what his layman meant or what the consequences were. But he understood soon enough that, with the City Society allocating its limited resources to needs pressing in

other churches and projects in the city, the church had to become self-sufficient, and that he was the primary person that would have to make it happen. It was still possible that the church, which had been designated to close eleven years earlier, might not avoid that fate. "There's nothing like the thought of being hanged within the hour, to set one's priorities straight," he remembers thinking.

Rev. Clarke worked hard to strengthen and integrate the church, as described above. But no miracle occurred overnight, and the finances of the church remained tight. Often bills were not paid, and an important role of the Finance Committee came to be developing the optimum system of procrastinating on paying the bills of the church while not angering its creditors, who might need to be called on again for work in the church. Rev. Clarke remembers one layman, who had just attended his first Finance Committee meeting in the early 1960s, saying that this was the only Methodist Church of which he had ever been a member where committee meetings consisted of laying out the bills of the church, getting something of a laugh out of the attempt to determine which ones were most pressing and would be paid, and then adjourning the meeting.

A turning point came in 1964, when a frequent visitor to the church, Miss Ottilie Hertlein, left the church about \$2,000 worth of stock in her will. A new chairman of the Finance Committee, Jonathan Bush,²¹ convinced the pastor and church leaders to sell the

²¹Jonathan Bush, another important member of the church between the late 1950s and early 1970s, is the brother of the 41st President of the United States, George Bush. He remained as a loyal and active member of the church despite his support of the war in Viet Nam and the opposition to it of his pastor.

stock, and use \$1,000 of it to pay down some of the church's bills, while placing the remainder in the bank as a cushion, "so we never get behind again."

Something else was coming to fruition at about the same time that would be a turning point for the church, but this had begun even before Rev. Clarke arrived. Paul Russell, a lawyer at a prominent Wall Street law firm,²² the same person who originated the idea of selling the adjacent apartment building as co-operative apartments to rid the church of its huge debt, had himself embroiled the church in another financial venture requiring the church to again become indebted at about the same time. However, Mr. Russell's venture proved to be more well-planned (or lucky or graced) than that of the church ancestors of the 1920s.

In 1954, before the church had even been able to rid itself of its apartment house next door and the mortgage attached to it, the church contracted to buy the largest warehouse in the United States, which had as its tenant the U.S. government (the warehouse, which covered thirty acres, was leased to the General Services Administration). The church owned the property for twelve years, until 1966, when the Federal government exercised its option to purchase it. In addition to the modest cash flow which had

²²Paul Russell was a corporate tax attorney with the law firm of Shearman & Sterling, and spent his younger years in the Wesleyan Methodist Church (a small denomination that split from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1843). Coincidentally, the author of this paper was also a corporate tax lawyer with Shearman & Sterling (before beginning a second career in the ministry), and also spent his formative years in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, as well as being a member of the Park Avenue United Methodist Church, too.

supported the church's budget since the purchase, the church realized over \$1.3 million from the sale. Instead of placing the net proceeds into an endowment for the church (which was still struggling financially, and had no endowment), it was determined to place the property into a trust fund that would serve not only the needs of the Park Avenue Church, but also those of the larger New York Methodist community. Therefore, the Park Avenue Methodist Church Trust Fund was created in April, 1966. The trustees of the Trust Fund were designated to come from the local church, the City Society and the New York Conference. The little church on 86th Street had thus created a fund that during the following 27 years would provide nearly \$3.2 million to important projects of the Conference and City Society,²³ both of which had at various times invested their resources in the church to allow it to keep its doors open.²⁴

Conclusion

It is tempting to think that the Park Avenue United Methodist Church is again living up to what was once its name as the "great church." As it did 100 years ago, the church is once again living in its "glory years." The sanctuary is full each Sunday. An endowment fund separate from the Trust Fund is being accumulated at a time when other city churches are surviving off of their

²³1992 *New York Annual Conference Journal and Yearbook*, 391.

²⁴The primary resource for the story of the purchase and sale of the warehouse and the creation of the Trust Fund has been in a small booklet commemorating the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Trust Fund. See Paul R. Russell, *A History of the Park Avenue Methodist Church Trust Fund* (1986).

endowments. Lay leadership in almost every area is at a 60-year highpoint.

But even so, the church is still a mission church. This is so because many of the "migrating" members of the church, who have moved to other locations around the nation and the world, maintain a connection to the church by continuing to financially support it. Like the John Street Methodist Church in the 1830s, these former members seem to think of the Park Avenue church as a mission outpost. And it is located in, as Rev. Clarke says frequently, not only the greatest city in the world, but also "the greatest mission field in the world." But it is perhaps most surely a mission church because over the course of its 156-year story the church seems to have discovered what Rev. Clarke says has been true all along, that its security and destiny are finally and most surely in the hands of God, who has provided it with a mission and given it time and again the pastors and members to keep the doors open to fulfil it. The words of Rev. DeWitt B. Thompson, written in a pastoral letter in November, 1904, might well have been written today:

Our beloved church has still a glorious mission in this community. Never, I believe, in all its history has it been more thoroughly organized, or have more efficient leaders been at the head of the different departments of work . . . [T]he financial condition of the church was never better than now. Our present need is that every man, woman, and child who is enrolled as a member of this church shall be a *live* member, and by his sympathy, prayers, and hearty cooperation seek to enlarge the work of the Kingdom of God in this community.²⁵

²⁵Bruhn, no page (emphasis in original).

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