FOREVER BEGINNING
by Stephen W. Barninger, 1966

[editor’s note: This paper was prepared for the Bicentennial Oratorical Contest for senior high youth sponsored by the Conference Historical Society in connection with the celebration of the Bicentennial of American Methodism held at the 1966 annual conference. The 1966 date uses the 1766 preaching of Philip Embury in New York as the start of Methodism in America, but it has since been established that Robert Strawbridge began the work a few years earlier in Maryland.]

We can trace our American Methodist heritage back to the fall of 1735, when General James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia, made known his need for a clergyman in his American settlement. John Wesley was the answer to this need. Thus, he sailed from Gravesend, England, in October of that same year.

When John arrived in America in February of 1736, accompanied by his brother Charles, he made a very auspicious beginning. The people looked forward to the blessings of an ordained ministry, and Wesley had great anticipation of converting many Indians in the immediate area of the infant colony. But time proved this enthusiasm to be transitory, and within the period of one year John Wesley returned to England a discouraged and disheartened man, realizing that he didn’t possess the very gift that he had hoped to give.

Yet when his successor George Whitefield came onto the American scene, he was led to make this statement: “The good John Wesley has done in America is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people, and he has laid a foundation that I hope neither man nor devils will ever be able to shake.” And so one disheartened, weary and undone John Wesley struck the spark which strangely warmed the hearts of people now some ten million strong.

After the latter 1730’s and Mr. Whitefield’s arrival, it was not until the 1760’s that other noteworthy Methodist individuals came into the American picture. These were Robert Strawbridge and Philip Embury. Mr. Strawbridge settled in Maryland and founded his first society in 1763. Under the influence of Barbara Heck and assisted by Captain Thomas Webb, Mr. Embury founded his first society in New York in 1766. A man on the move, Captain Webb also worked in Long Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

By this time, Methodist societies were becoming more widespread than anyone could have anticipated, making it nearly impossible for the then handful of itinerant preachers to minister to the people on an effective basis. Because of this, Captain Webb wrote to John Wesley for help. In answer to this plea, at the Leeds Conference in England in 1769, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore volunteered for work in America. Because of the continued lack of men in the
field, and because of the need for someone to oversee the organization of the work in America, Francis Asbury and Richard White arrived in Philadelphia from England in 1771. Mr. Asbury would become the man who made the most significant impact for Methodism on America and its people.

Although all of these men were profound and dedicated, they weren’t the total answer to the spiritual needs of Methodism because they were all unordained and therefore unable to administer the sacraments to their parishioners. As time went on, and especially as the Revolutionary War complicated American Methodism’s relationship with and dependence upon the Church of England, this issue became more pressing and divisive and there was a definite need for unity and ordination. It wasn’t until September 1784 that John Wesley, assisted by James Creighton, ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as elders. And then Wesley, assisted by Creighton and Whatcoat and Vasey, ordained Thomas Coke to be the first bishop of the Methodist Church.

Whatcoat, Vasey and Coke then went to America with the authority to organize and unify the work, and to ordain men for the carrying out of the church’s mission. All this took place in Baltimore at the Christmas Conference of 1784, where the Methodist Episcopal Church had her formal beginning. Here one would have witnessed a growing church that had 85 traveling ministers and 15,000 members – and just 32 years later, at the time of Asbury’s death, that number had grown to 617 ordained clergy and a membership of 185,000.

Yes, it was a great church with great future. But in 1830 the mighty blow of secession struck her due to disagreements over the episcopacy, and the Methodist Protestant Church was born – separating itself entirely from the episcopal organization of Methodists. In 1845 another group of her number broke away over the issue of slavery, creating the Methodist Episcopal Church South – leaving the originally unified body in a state of three-fold division for a period of 94 years.

Then, at the Uniting Conference of 1939, held in Kansas City, Missouri, in the presence of 60 bishops and 10,000 visitors, a delegation of 900 unanimously adopted the Declaration of Union which exists to this day. Because of that union in 1939, the Methodists Church stands united in the presence of God and the whole world. It is a church which is proud of its heritage – a church which has founded 9 universities, 59 colleges, and 25 junior colleges. It has established missions in over 50 countries of the world, and is truly an “Endless Line of Splendor.”

The future of this line is in OUR hands. So let us be concerned for and involved in her future. “And let us not be weary in well doing” – but rather, with the help of Almighty God, let us take this church forward “FOREVER BEGINNING.”