

## Chapter 10

## CONFERENCE MERGERS - HAWAII DISTRICT

I doubt anyone in the Conference at the present time is aware of the fact that the present Annual Conference is the outgrowth of ten different Annual Conferences that have been merged from time to time. Probably no other Conference in Methodism has had so many predecessor Conferences in its background. These are the Conferences:

1. Southern California Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church.
2. California German Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church
3. Pacific Swedish Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church
4. Western Norwegian Danish Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church
5. Pacific Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South
6. Arizona Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South
7. Latin American Provisional Annual Conference of The Methodist Church
8. Pacific Japanese Provisional Annual Conference of The Methodist Church
9. California Oriental Provisional Annual Conference of The Methodist Church
10. California Annual Conference of The Evangelical United Brethren Church

Add to this list Hawaii Mission of The Methodist Church and there are eleven units instead of ten although Hawaii was not a Conference. I was not in the office when the first three mergers actually took place. I did spend a great deal of time after I came with the Conference on problems which were the result of the mergers.

For instance, after I came we still had seven or eight former German Churches to dispose of. The German merger agreement of 1928 pledged all former German Churches to the Conference Endowment Fund in view of the fact that our Conference was accepting the pension responsibility for all former German pastors. As these churches were phased out we had to get the titles into the name of the Conference Corporation, find a buyer and transfer title to the purchaser. The list of assets pledged to the Endowment Fund included what is now Kingsley Manor of Pacific Homes and First German Church in Los Angeles which has never been phased out. Because of the 1928 agreement, Pacific Homes still pays annually to the Endowment Fund the sum of \$2000. In the late 1930's an agreement was reached with First German Church whereby the Conference Corporation has a 2/7th equity in the real property and receives annually 2/7th of the net income from a parking lot that is leased commercially. This agreement brings about

\$6000 annually to the Endowment Fund. The agreement is recorded as a lien against the property.

We had an interesting experience with the Stockton German Church property when it was transferred to us. We did not get a Policy of Title Insurance when title was transferred to the Conference. We sold the property to a Four Square congregation on a purchase contract that provided clear title would be given when 25% of the purchase price had been paid. The day came when they qualified for the deed and title. The Preliminary Report from the Title Company was a shock to us. The Title Company said the German Church did not have clear title to the property. It developed that a member and his wife had agreed to give the property to the church. Before they did it, he died. She kept faith with the promise and gave the church a deed to the property. The Title Company said she didn't have title because his estate was never probated to give her clear title. In order to clear up the problem we had to find a man who would cooperate with us. He applied for appointment as executor of the deceased man's estate although the man had been dead many years. As soon as the executor was appointed we brought suit against him for the title. It was all a friendly procedure that cost us \$1000 before we got through.

Another sad development was to find that in almost all the cases the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension in Philadelphia held Trust Agreements against the properties for donations made years before. These liens were not revealed in the listing of assets in the 1928 agreement. The liens of course had to be released before title could be transferred to buyers. The payment of the liens greatly reduced what had been contemplated to be generous additions to the Endowment Fund.

Although we did not experience any unsurmountable problems in the process of mergers, we did have to spend a great deal of time on them. In most cases the Conferences to be merged covered more than just one Annual Conference into which the churches were to be merged. In the case of the Pacific Japanese Provisional Annual Conference at least six Annual Conferences in the West were affected. One difficult question was the assignment of pension responsibility of retired members and widows to the successor Conferences. The Board of Pensions in Chicago helped greatly on this matter. In each case three members from each Annual Conference were appointed to a "Distributing Committee." This total committee had power to assign the portion of the pension responsibility each successor conference was to assume. Sometimes this was done mathematically on a percentage basis. In other instances it was done by assigning men and widows together with their service years.

In almost every case of a merger the Conference coming in has had a lower pension rate than ours. This has created an inequity which has had to be corrected by our Conference. In every case now the men who have served churches within the bounds of our present Conference receive the same pension rate for those years as former members of our Conference received. There is no disparity whatsoever in the pension rate paid to

members of the former merged Conferences. While it has cost many dollars to do this, it has seemed the only fair way to handle the matter.

Another difficult problem of these mergers has been to assimilate the new men coming into the Conference into the life and leadership of the Conference. I don't have the exact percentages in each case of the number of churches and Conference members coming to us in a merger, but I am sure that none would exceed 15% of the successor Conference compared with 85% from our Conference. Obviously, the men coming in, particularly from ethnic groups, feel that they are such a minority they should be seen but not heard. Many times they have not even been seen. In spite of efforts to encourage them and even urge them to participate, they are reluctant to do so. Not only has this been true on the Conference level, but it is even more noticeable in District youth and women's activities. Generally speaking, these language group mergers have benefited the ministers as far as the minimum salary and pension plans are concerned, but it is doubtful that the lay members have been benefited very much.

The one merger in which I had a major part was when Hawaii Mission became a District of our Conference. When I retired the Hawaii District presented me with a Calabash on which there is an inscription reading: "Mahalo Nui Loa - Dr. J. Wesley Hole - Friend of Hawaii - Architect of District Status." I will have to plead guilty to those statements.

My love affair with Hawaii began in 1950. Dr. Leonard Oechsli had been appointed Superintendent of Hawaii Mission in 1948. Jim McGiffin was sent over in 1949 to head up the Christian Education work in the Mission. One thing that was sorely needed was a bookkeeping system for the office. Dr. Oechsli arranged with the Philadelphia office of the Board of Missions to have me sent over to set up a bookkeeping system. At about the same time the Board arranged for ministers and laymen from other Jurisdictions to make a visit to evaluate the work in the Islands. The Annual Meeting of the Mission was scheduled for February 1950. About a dozen people from the mainland went over and not only attended the Annual Meeting but toured all of the islands and visited the churches. In between jumps I set up the books in the Headquarters offices which were located at First Church, Honolulu. It was a thrilling experience for both Velma and me. We met many wonderful people who are still our friends.

One thing that bothered me about our work in Hawaii was the almost feudal system used in the administration of the work. The Board in Philadelphia held title to all the properties. No work could be commenced unless the Board had approved it. Most of the money for salaries and maintenance of the properties came from the Board. It was certainly a patronizing process that depended very little on local decisions or leadership. On the other hand, there were many men and women in the churches whose leadership ability could not be surpassed. Ministers were enlisted from Conferences on the mainland and were sent over on a five-year basis. Many times it turned out that a minister had reasons

other than a missionary zeal to go into such service. A minister who went over maintained his Conference relationship during his five years and then returned to his Conference. This resulted in a great deal of turn-over and instability.

In 1954 Velma and I had another opportunity to represent the Board of Missions at the Annual Meeting. Bishop Kennedy had come to Los Angeles and we went over on the Lurline with them. After the Annual Meeting on our way home I had a long conversation with the Bishop about the administration of our work in Hawaii. Actually, by this time there were two channels of authority involved. In addition to the financial domination of the Board, there was a new voice in relation to Episcopal appointments. There were also signs of a sleeping giant awakening as far as grass roots participation in local policy decisions were concerned. The next step up in organization in our Methodist system would be for a Mission to become a Provisional Annual Conference. In such a Conference ministers would have their membership transferred as they were appointed but the financial responsibility would still be vested in the Philadelphia Board. With financial responsibility would inevitably be perpetuation of the patronizing system of appropriations. This in reality would offer little improvement over Mission status.

Hawaii Mission was in the Western Jurisdiction. The Episcopal supervision was assigned to the Los Angeles Area. It seemed to me to be a logical move to make Hawaii a District of our Conference. So I proposed it. It was a radical departure from anything that had ever been done before with a Mission - except in Utah which was a Mission and became a District of the Rocky Mountain Conference. Bishop Kennedy reacted favorably and encouraged me to explore the idea.

The major questions were financial. Obviously, the Philadelphia Board would have considerably less responsibility to a District of an Annual Conference than it had to a Mission. There would be the cost of ministers and laymen attending our Annual Conferences. It would be necessary to provide funds for Hawaii District to have participation along with other Districts on Conference Boards and Committees. The Minimum Salary Plan and the Moving Expense Plan would have to apply in Hawaii as they did in other Districts. At first the mathematical calculations were discouraging. I discussed the idea with several Conference leaders and got some support. Others thought I was out of my mind to propose such a thing.

I was making frequent trips to Hawaii by that time representing the Board at Annual Meetings and in the development of Pohai Nani - the home for senior citizens. I discussed the idea with Dr. Harry Komuro who was then Superintendent of the Mission and with other leaders in Hawaii. Most of them were in favor of the idea. We finally decided the first step would be to get an Enabling Act through the General Conference. I knew it would be difficult if not impossible to get support from Philadelphia. Such a move would remove the best appeal the Board had for Advance designations from churches across the nation. What the Board had been

doing was to use regular budget funds to finance a project in Hawaii. Then it would use the appeal for support of the project in approaching possible donors-churches or individuals-for Advance designations. When such designations were received, the money instead of going to the project would be used to relieve the financial commitment from the regular budget of the Board. I was certain the Board would not want to lose its "Exhibit A" for appeal for Advance funds.

We finally worked out a Memorial to the 1960 General Conference which authorized Hawaii to become a District of our Conference upon request of the Mission and upon approval of the National Division of the Board of Missions and approval of our Conference. The National Division did not want to oppose the Memorial at General Conference and it was adopted.

However, Dr. Allen Rice, Executive Secretary of the National Division, let it be known in Hawaii in no uncertain terms that he would block the approval by the National Division if Hawaii should request it. Consequently, the matter was laid on the table for about five years. The Memorial of 1960 was reviewed by the General Conference for another quadrennium in 1964.

When Dr. Ed. Caruthers became Executive Secretary of the National Division he soon found that there were not enough funds to finance projects that he wanted to develop in the country. He began to examine the budget of the Division to see where some cuts could be made. Quite a large sum was going to support projects in Hawaii. When he read about the Enabling Act of the General Conference the wheels began to turn in his head. He had a daughter living in Southern California and he came out to spend Christmas with her in 1964. While he was here he made an appointment for me to have lunch with him. He wanted to determine whether or not we would still be interested in Hawaii becoming a District of our Conference. I know he was afraid we would say we were no longer interested, but we assured him that if Hawaii wanted to do it and if the Division would approve it we would do our best to get the Conference to approve.

Dr. Frank Butterworth was by then the Superintendent of the Mission. Dr. Komuro had gone to Philadelphia as a staff member of the Division. Both of these men were favorable to the proposal. By the fall of 1965 we had made careful estimates of the cost and were ready to present to the churches in Hawaii a fairly definite plan. A meeting was called of the ministers and lay personnel in Hawaii and the proposal was presented. There were many sincere questions some of which I could not answer except on the basis of what we were confident the Conference would do. There was some strong opposition on the part of certain ministers who were members of Conferences other than Southern California. There would be the option given to such cases of either transferring to our Conference or returning to their own Conferences. The vote in this meeting was quite heavy in favor of the plan. The procedure would be for the Mission to vote on the plan at its 1966 Annual Meeting. If the vote

turned out to be a formal request to our Conference we would consider it at the 1966 session. If it were approved a committee composed of five from the Conference and five from the Mission would perfect a plan of transition to be presented in 1967 to both groups.

The Annual Meeting of the Hawaii Mission approved the proposal in February of 1966. When it was presented at our Conference I frankly told the Conference the plan would cost us \$100,000 per year for a few years and said that unless the Conference was willing to invest that much money in the idea it should be voted down. It was approved with only a few dissenting votes. The Committee to work out the details of transition was appointed and got to work immediately. There were no serious points of difference.

The 1967 Annual Conference was the greatest display of pageantry we ever saw. Each church in Hawaii had a lay member elected. They and the ministers came in Hawaiian garb with all their beautiful flowers and leis. It was some celebration!

My estimates of cost proved to be too high. The highest annual cost did not exceed \$60,000. The churches in Hawaii readily accepted their apportionments which were a great deal higher than they had been as a Mission. For several consecutive years the Hawaii District was the only District in the Conference which overpaid its Benevolence apportionment. Almost every church in Hawaii soon became self-supporting. The District proved beyond any doubt that it was far more of an asset to the Conference than a liability.

I have alternately been praised and criticized for proposing District status for Hawaii. Regardless of which side of the discussion a person may be, no one can deny that the move developed some of the most capable leadership in our Conference. To me the investment of whatever the cost may have been has been more than justified in the self development of the churches, and in the contributions of lay leadership that was made possible when local participation in policies and programs replaced the patronizing style of administration that existed.



Representatives in Integration, left to right: Nicolas Davila (Latin American), Young Yong Choi (Korean), Harry Komuro (Hawaiian Japanese), Wun Bew Wong (Chinese) and J. Wesley Hole.