The World Is Our Parish: Remembering the 1919 Protestant Missionary Fair

Christopher J. Anderson

John Wesley once stated, “The world is my parish,” a phrase that served as a springboard for a dramatic increase in missionary activity by Methodist mission agencies in Great Britain and the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the summer of 1919 American Methodists took this phrase as the slogan for an enormous missionary exposition held in Columbus, Ohio. From June 20 to July 13, members of Methodist denominations—including the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (since 1954, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church)—participated in an international exhibition showcasing American Methodist missions and the worldwide expansion of Christianity.

Prior to the exposition Methodist officials sent word to mission agencies of the need to gather people and items of material culture for display at Columbus. As a result, over 500 “natives” were enlisted, and a number of their homes and hundreds of objects were collected, all being transported from around the world by ship and train to the fairgrounds. Visitors at the Centenary Celebration thus could view the successful expansion of Christianity into foreign fields and could witness the powerful changes experienced by native peoples through the means of Methodist missionaries and missionary agencies.

The pavilions re-created scenes of distant lands that most visitors had only imagined or seen while watching a church missionary lantern slide show. In the Africa building, for example, visitors could feed elephants and ride camels through a miniature desert. The Malaysian Island building contained artifacts and peoples from the Philippine Islands. One of the most popular displays inside this pavilion was a mechanical electric village. It displayed a “typical” Philippine village by using electric power to motorize a series of large belts. The exhibit depicted automated scenes in miniature, including a regiment of U.S. troops marching across the island landscape, a working waterfall, and a small “native” climbing up and down a coconut tree.

As people entered the India building, they could dip their fingers into a miniature version of the Ganges River flowing throughout the pavilion, or they could view Hindu fakirs reclining on a bed of spikes. Visitors were also able to spend time inside a replica Hindu temple, complete with statues of local gods, with guides who described how Methodist missionaries were working toward evangelizing the people of India. In the lecture room one could also view amateur ethnographic silent films made by...

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Methodist missionaries that featured the conversion of Indian spiritual leaders.

The Europe building contained a five-hundred-seat replica of a destroyed French Protestant cathedral. Visitors could sit on benches and peer out broken windows to view large painted murals depicting the destruction of the European landscape as a result of the Great War. Inside, people could reflect on the horrors of the war and contemplate the roles they might play in European reconstruction through volunteer service or financial contribution.

Throughout the day these buildings and exhibits were occupied by interested visitors and potential donors who wanted to see images from popular magazines such as National Geographic come to life. Local newspapers and Methodist periodicals beckoned readers to see for themselves what was going on at the fairgrounds. If visitors tired of touring the pavilions, they might enjoy a glass of Coca-Cola or ride the Ferris wheel, take in a lantern slide show or missionary film on the ten-story picture screen, attend a musical pageant and ethnological demonstration put on by foreign Christian converts and American Methodist volunteers, or even watch a recent Hollywood film. Visitors also watched parades held daily throughout the grounds or looked to the skies as World War I airplanes fought in mock air battles and anti-aircraft guns loaded with blank shot barked out a deafening response from the grounds below. There was always plenty to do and see at the missionary exhibition, just as Methodist organizers had meticulously planned.

Fred B. Smith, a Methodist layman writing for the YMCA periodical Association Men, noted the multilayered entertainment the Columbus exposition offered. Smith praised the various modes of the fair, which “gave an opportunity for enjoying what was the best in a circus, a county fair, a picnic, grand opera, the drama and the Church—all at one time.” Even visitors from Hollywood were impressed by the scope of the Methodist fair, which offered Americans the chance to view real “natives” from distant lands. Motion picture director D. W. Griffith, following a tour of the pavilions, remarked, “What particularly impressed me was the wonderful opportunity the Methodist Centenary Celebration gives the people to visit the entire world. Extraordinarily impressive are the foreign villages represented where not ‘supers’ but real natives brought from foreign lands demonstrate the daily existence in those countries.” For Smith and Griffith the exposition served as an arena simultaneously for Methodist entertainment, Christian missionary education, and ethnographic exhibition.

Early International Missionary Expositions

The Centenary Celebration of American Methodist Missions combined the exhibition of peoples, artifacts, and technologies seen at international world’s fairs with displays showcasing the effects of world missions evidenced at earlier European and American Protestant missionary expositions. The popularity of international expositions in Chicago (1893), St. Louis (1904), and San Francisco (1915), as well as missionary expositions in London (1867) and Boston (1911), encouraged Methodists to plan a further celebration of Protestant missions for American audiences.

The roots of the U.S. missionary exposition movement can be traced to a YMCA conference center in Silver Bay, New York, where the Young People’s Missionary Movement (YPMM) was formed in 1902 to promote education about Protestant missions through Sunday schools and mission study classes. The YPMM in turn led to the founding of the Young People’s Missionary Union (YPMU), formed in Boston in 1908 by a small group of missions-minded Protestants.

While the YPMU, through Christian education and weekend retreats, was successfully emphasizing the need for more missionaries, another venue geared toward showcasing foreign and home missions had been prominent in Great Britain for half a century, namely, Protestant missionary expositions. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such expositions provided British audiences with a chance to see the success and global reach of missions by placing converted peoples, their homes, and material artifacts on display in an interactive museum format. Expositions such as the 1908 “Orient in London,” sponsored by the London Missionary Society, sparked the interest of U.S. Protestant missionary agencies for holding such an exhibition in the United States. Those within the New England–based YPMU also believed that a missionary exposition similar to the London fair would draw large crowds of missionary supporters and ultimately increase funding for U.S. mission agencies. As a result, the first U.S. Protestant missionary exhibition—“The World in Boston: The First Great Exposition in America of Home and Foreign Missions”—was held in April and May of 1911 at the Mechanics Building in downtown Boston.

Planning for the Boston exposition began in 1908. By March of 1909 the YPMU had acquired the support of over fifty Christian organizations to help with planning and implementing the exposition, including both the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The 1911 fair fostered support for the later 1919 Centenary Celebration as both Methodist Episcopal Church missionary boards organized display booths and key Methodist leaders, including S. Earl Taylor and Ralph E. Diffendorfer, served in leadership roles at “The World in Boston.”

In 1910 A. M. Gardner of London was chosen by the YPMU to serve as general secretary of “The World in Boston” because of his experience with earlier British missionary expositions. Gardner immediately went to work designing floor plans and an assortment of displays including glass curios, wall exhibits, and for-
eign homes. Experts from various denominations gathered in Boston to plan exhibits that showcased the people and domestic activities of countries impacted by Protestant missionary agencies. The live exhibits and demonstrations re-created the living conditions of people from Africa, India, and China. Exposition visitors watched as foreign families prepared meals and ate dinner, organized and cleaned their homes, and practiced indigenous religious traditions. Exhibits dedicated to the endeavors of home missionaries in the United States appeared throughout the building, giving visitors the chance to view ways in which Protestant missionaries assisted the Southern Negro and the American Indian. The exposition also featured a “Hall of Religions,” which included exhibits comparing American Protestantism with the practices of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam.11

By late 1914 much of Europe had become engulfed in conflict, including nations with many Protestants. As the war became more global in scope, the effectiveness of Christian foreign and home missions needed to be reassessed. How might mission agencies effectively demonstrate that the work of Christian missionaries in foreign lands could still bring global peace and cultural stability when thousands of Protestant soldiers were slaughtering each other in trench warfare and Christian citizens were being killed in European cities? In newspapers and periodicals Americans read of the destruction and chaos caused by the Great War, and Christians throughout the United States wondered how effective as a positive global presence foreign missions actually had been. Some American Methodist leaders believed that renewed mission effort was the key and began to discuss the idea of initiating a national fund drive to raise money for world missions. This campaign would culminate in 1919 with the Centenary Celebration, a distinctly Methodist missionary affair that leaders wanted to ensure was larger in size and broader in scope than any previous Christian missions exposition.

During the war Methodist executives who had worked at the 1911 Boston exposition continued to discuss the effectiveness of missionary exhibitions. Methodist leaders firmly believed that the U.S. government and the American military were “making the world safe for democracy” by working for worldwide peace, human rights, and economic prosperity. Yet as Methodist military leaders and soldiers fought in the fields of Europe, S. Earl Taylor, secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, argued there were “things which governments cannot do” for which the Methodist Episcopal Church had an answer. In an article for The Centenary Survey of the Board of Foreign Missions, Taylor declared that the Methodist Church and its missionary agencies were needed to reinforce “the spiritual and moral forces” within the United States and to remove “ignorance and superstition” from foreign lands. Taylor summoned American Methodists to the task, and Methodist Bishop James W. Bashford seconded Taylor’s claim, stating in the same article, “Nothing can meet the problem of making them [foreigners] ready [for democracy] but Christian missions, and in that solution our Church with its World Program is taking the lead.”12 This “World Program” evolved into the Centenary Fund Drive.

In 1916 at the Saratoga Springs General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, discussions were held on how the denomination might effectively raise additional funding for missions, as well as recognize both the centennial of black Methodist missionary John Stewart and the 1819 founding of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Minutes from the General Conference state, “Whereas, the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was born in 1819, and, during one hundred years of splendid service, has helped to spread Christ’s kingdom not only at home but in many foreign fields, Therefore, be it resolved, that the General Conference authorizes the setting aside of the years 1918 and 1919 as Centennial Thanksgiving years . . . and to make all necessary arrangements to enable the Church to signalize the Centennial year by special intercession and the outpouring of gifts.”13

During the General Conference the Board of Foreign Missions was directed to organize a Centenary Commission to make “Centenary Surveys” of all missionaries, foreign fields, and needed funding. The results of the survey were presented in 1917 at Niagara Falls, New York, to the World Program Committee, a select group of Methodists whose task it was to organize the exposition. The recommendation highlighted the origin of the exposition and the ultimate motives of the Centenary Commission: “The Centenary Program should culminate in a great

Planning for the Columbus Fair

Following the successful run of the Boston exposition, several Protestant world’s fairs were held in the United States before World War I, including expositions in Cincinnati and Baltimore in 1912, and in Chicago in 1913. Each of these fairs showcased the progress of world missions by exhibiting their success in making Christian converts and by bringing Western civilization to “uncivilized” (i.e., non-Christian) parts of the world.
The amount of money pledged to the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1917 to 1919 far exceeded the $40 million originally proposed by the Centenary Commission. Fund drive pledge cards filled out before the start of the June 1919 exposition committed Methodists to give almost $160 million toward global missions—an enormous sum of money to be promised by any group or organization in the early twentieth century.

Methodist leaders investigated a number of Midwestern cities, including Indianapolis, Indiana; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Louisville, Kentucky, before settling on Columbus. Honoring the “discoverer” of America, the city’s name sounded an appropriate note. Many Americans associated the term “Columbus” with “progress” and “conquest”—two important words used by proponents of Methodist missions at the Columbus exposition—and the name carried expansionist overtones linked to the westward progress of the United States in the nineteenth century.

Both denominational demographics and accessibility entered into selection of the city. A survey had indicated that one in twelve Ohio residents attended a Methodist Episcopal Church and that approximately one million Methodists lived within a six-hour drive of the city. Columbus served as a central hub for the U.S. railroad system, and a number of highways intersected with the city, connecting it with surrounding states. To assist Methodists toward finding their way to the Centenary Celebration organizers distributed 100,000 free road maps with directions to the fairgrounds to churches and individuals across the United States.

Significance and Outcome

The Centenary Celebration, along with other missionary expositions, was more than simply a venue for missionary promotion. As a fair, even if a missionary one, it stood in a lengthy line of self-congratulatory international expositions. Technological achievements, such as its gargantuan movie screen, earn it a minor note in the history of the growth of the U.S. entertainment industry. As a set of exhibits arranged for public viewing, the Centenary Celebration has a place within the wider field of museology, the discipline having to do with artifact selection, preservation, organization, and exhibition.

Recent theoretical scholarship in museology addresses the motivations that lie behind the exhibition—and viewing—of people and the placement of products on display. Tony Bennett writes of the “exhibitionary complex” that moves people and objects from previously enclosed or private locations to more open and interactive settings. Viewers are provided with opportunities to compare and contrast themselves with the persons and objects on display. Bennett raises questions about the impact the curator’s control of the exhibit’s arrangement has on the way people and objects are understood and interpreted.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett highlights the issue of placing of peoples and material objects in curator-defined contexts for purposes of display. On the one hand, ethnographic villages, “natives,” and selected objects on display become representative of an entire country or particular group of people. On the other hand, the paraphernalia of exhibits, including descriptive diagrams, charts, or identification tags, distance viewers from the objects under observation. While onlookers are able to make comparisons, the supplied frames of reference privilege the viewer over against the objects or “natives” on display.

Considered in light of the work of Bennett and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, what did people attending the Centenary Celebration see? By viewing the people of the world “live,” American Methodists could compare their own privileged situation, their Western cultural advantages, and their faith in Christ with those in the exhibit. For these same viewers, the foreigners on display gave evidence of many disadvantages and needs.

From the perspective of the organizers of the Centenary Celebration, the various pavilions provided a visual and auditory representation of the impact Methodist missionaries were having on particular countries and peoples. The exhibits provided an interactive map of Methodist missionary work throughout the world. Unfortunately, as the climax of a fund-raising campaign, the missionary fair was less successful. Though the promotion and excitement of the Centenary Celebration created an initial fervor to spread Christianity, the excitement was short-lived and the amount of money collected fell far short of the amount pledged. Money received was used in a variety of ways, including funding for academic institutions, hospitals, and...
churches throughout the world. Funds actually received were insufficient to complete these building projects, leading some church leaders to charge that Methodists were robbing God.  

The missionary exposition of 1919 was never to be repeated. To the best of my knowledge neither the Methodist Church nor any other Wesleyan-affiliated tradition ever held another fair of such magnitude and scope. Mission festivals held at churches and conferences today serve as small-scale reminders of the missionary fairs staged between 1867 and 1919.

Setting aside the financial difficulties that followed it, during the Centennial Celebration American Methodists from 1916 to 1919 had imagined the conversion of the world for Christ with a sense of expectation. They had also enjoyed themselves at a religious festival that combined leisurely entertainment with promotion of Methodist missions and global Christian advance. The exposition was missionary in nature with serious intercultural implications. The peoples, homes, and material objects of mission lands beckoned the gaze, the interest, and the money of visitors. Made aware of needs around the world, the crowds departed from the exposition better informed concerning the work that needed to be done on behalf of distant peoples in need of Christian salvation and Methodist deliverance.

Notes


2. “Centenary Celebration Columbus,” Columbus Evening Dispatch, July 4, 1919, p. 15.


6. Ibid.


9. Ibid., p. 105.

10. Methodist Episcopal Church leadership and others connected with the 1919 Columbus exposition served in various roles at the 1911 Boston fair. S. Earl Taylor, Methodist Board of Foreign Missions secretary and general secretary of the Centenary Celebration, served as consulting secretary for the Boston event. Methodist minister Ralph E. Diffendorfer organized the children’s section at “The World in Boston” and later became general secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, serving as a speaker for the home missions exhibits at the Columbus fair. Professor Lamont A. Warner of Columbia University designed many of the exhibits at Boston and later served as director of fine arts for the Columbus exposition.


13. Ibid., p. 5.

14. Ibid.


17. See Thomas J. Schlereth, “Columbia, Columbus, and Columbianism,” Journal of American History 79, no. 3 (December 1992): 946. By the early twentieth century some U.S. states officially recognized Columbus Day. For the danger of descent into boosterism, see a local reporter’s comments: “It is altogether fitting that the word ‘Columbus’ is attached to this exposition, because it is in Columbus, Ohio, that things are shown which mark the great progress of the world since the days when Columbus discovered this wonderful country—the one country in all the world that is able to do and is glad to do more for all of the other countries of the world than any other single nation.” “Centenary Celebration Columbus,” Columbus Evening Dispatch, June 28, 1919, p. 7.

18. “Official Reports and Records of the Methodist Centenary Celebration. State Fair Grounds, Columbus, Ohio, June 20–July 13, 1919,” compiled by Alonzo E. Wilson, director, Division of Special Days and Events, p. 12. This volume is located at the General Commission on Archives and History for the United Methodist Church, Madison, New Jersey. See also Nancye Van Brunt, “Pagantry at the Methodist Centenary,” Methodist History 35, no. 2 (January 1997): 106.


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