

# An Account of the General Conference of 1800

## 1800

by Nathan Bangs

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*The sermon details the proceedings and significant decisions made during the General Conference of 1800, focusing on leadership challenges and structural changes within the Methodist Episcopal Church.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Philippians 2:3, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 5:2

**Topics:** "Church History", "Leadership Development"

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### Description

Nathan Bangs preaches about the significant events of the General Conference held in 1800, including Bishop Asbury's contemplation of resigning due to health issues, the request for Dr. Coke to return to Europe, and the election of Richard Whatcoat as a joint superintendent with Bishop Asbury. The conference also raised the allowance for preachers and their families, made provisions for the support of bishops, and amended rules regarding the trial of accused members and the boundaries of annual conferences.

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### Transcript

As the oldest manuscript journal of a General Conference I have been able to find is the one for this year, I have been guided thus far from printed documents only, and from such facts as I have been able to collect from living witnesses. Hereafter recourse will be also had to the records of the General Conference for such information as relates to the general affairs of the Church, and to the alterations or additions which may have been made from time to time in the rules and regulations of the Discipline.

There were eight annual conferences held this year, the first beginning in Charleston, S. C., January 1, and the last in Lynn, Mass., on the 18th of July. But before we notice the extension of the work in the bounds of the several conferences, and in the new settlements of the western country, we will detail the doings of the General Conference, which was held from the 6th to the 20th day of May, in the city of Baltimore.

By a reference to the journal of Bishop Asbury for the year 1799, it will be perceived that such was his physical debility, originating from excessive labors, the multiplicity of his cares, and his exposures to all sorts of weather, that, though he continued his annual tour of the continent, he was able to preach but seldom, and that it was with much difficulty he discharged his official duties at several annual conferences. In consequence of this general debility he entertained serious thoughts of resigning the superintendency

at the ensuing General Conference, and accordingly wrote to several of his most judicious friends in reference to it, giving them information of his intention. So confirmed was he in the intention of resigning his office, and of taking a seat on a level with his brethren in the conference, that he had prepared a letter to that effect, with a design to present it to the conference, fully believing that his bodily health was not adequate to the discharge of the multitudinous and important duties of a superintendent. When the conference convened, and the subject of the bishop's resignation was introduced, he informed them that in consequence of bodily infirmities, he had not been able to travel, as heretofore, on horseback, nor to preach as often as usual, and therefore had been obliged to take with him a traveling companion, that the appointments might be regularly filled -- and moreover that his labors were frequently interrupted for want of strength to perform them regularly; on which account he did not know that the conference were fully satisfied with the manner in which he had discharged his official trust. After some conversation on these topics, the following questions and answering were unanimously agreed to: --

"Question. Whereas, Mr. Asbury has signified his intention of resigning his official station in our Church on account of his weakness of body, what is the sense of the conference on this occasion?

"Answer 1. The General' Conference consider themselves under many and great obligations to Mr. Asbury for the many and great services which he has rendered to this connection.

"2. This conference do earnestly entreat Mr. Asbury for a continuation of his services as one of the general superintendents of the Methodist Episcopal Church as far as his strength will permit."

This unequivocal expression of confidence and affection so satisfied the bishop of their unabated attachment to him, and of their approbation of his conduct, that he told them in answer, notwithstanding his feelings led him still to decline the arduous duties of his office, yet, as his general health was better than it had been, he was willing to continue his services in any way the conference might think best. This matter being set at rest,

The next question which arose was, whether Dr. Coke, who was present as one of the presidents of the conference, might have liberty to return to Europe in conformity to an earnest request of the British Conference to that effect. This request was founded on the acknowledged right which the American Conference had to the exclusive services of Dr. Coke, in consequence of the solemn pledge he had given them in the year 1796, \*[See Book IV., Chap. 3] and which had been gratefully accepted by the American Conference. And so sacred was this obligation considered by Dr. Coke, and recognized by the British Conference, that he would not consent to a withdrawal of his services from his American brethren without their approbation and consent. When, however, his engagement was first made known to the brethren in Great Britain, they expressed their deep regrets that the doctor had thus deprived them of his valuable services, particularly in the missionary department of their work. Accordingly, when he visited the continent in 1797, he brought with him an earnest and affectionate address from the British Conference to their American brethren, in which they urged the doctor's return to Europe with all practicable speed, as his presence and influence among them seemed necessary to secure their peace and harmony, and more especially for the efficient prosecution of their missionary enterprise, which was then in its infancy. But as the engagement of Dr. Coke was made with the General Conference, which would not again assemble until 1800, no official action could be had in reference to this subject at that time. The address, however, was submitted to the Virginia conference, at which Dr. Coke was present, and the following letter from Bishop Asbury will show the light in which the matter was viewed by them, as well as the high estimation in which Dr. Coke was held by his brethren on both sides of the Atlantic

Respected Fathers and Brethren: -- You, in your brotherly kindness, were pleased to address a letter to us, your brethren and friends in America, expressing your difficulties and desires concerning our beloved brother Dr. Coke, that he might return to Europe to heal the breach which designing men have been making among you, or prevent its threatened overflow. We have but one grand responsive body, which is our General Conference, and it was in and to this body the doctor entered his obligations to serve his brethren in America. No yearly conference, no official character dare assume to answer for that grand federal body.

By the advice of the yearly conference now sitting in Virginia, and the respect I bear to you, I write to inform you that in our own persons and order we consent to his return, and partial continuance with you, and earnestly pray that you may have much peace, union, and happiness together. May you find that your divisions end in a greater union, order, and harmony of the body, so that the threatened cloud may blow over, and your divisive party may be of as little consequence to you, as ours is to us.

With respect to the doctor's returning to us, I leave your enlarged understandings and good sense to judge. You will see the number of souls upon our annual minutes, and as men of reading, you may judge over what a vast continent these societies are scattered. I refer you to a large letter I wrote our beloved brother Bradburn on the subject.

By a probable guess, we have, perhaps, from 1,000 to 1,200 traveling and local preachers. local preachers are daily rising up and coming forward with proper recommendations from their respective societies, to receive ordination, besides the regulation and ordinations of the yearly conferences. From Charleston, South Carolina, where the conference was held, to the province of Maine, where another conference is to be held, there is a space of about 1,300 miles; and we have only one worn-out superintendent, who was this day advised by the yearly conference to desist from preaching till next spring, on account of his debilitated state of body. But the situation of our affairs requires that he should travel about five thousand miles a year, through many parts unsettled, and other thinly peopled countries. I have now with me an assistant who does every thing for me he constitutionally can: but the ordaining and stationing the preachers can only be performed by myself in the doctor's absence.

We have to lament that our superintendency is so weak, and that it cannot constitutionally be strengthened till the ensuing General Conference. How I have felt and must feel, under such critical and important circumstances, I leave you to judge.

"To write much on the subject would be imposing on my own weakness and your good understanding. I speak as unto wise men; judge what I say.

"Wishing you great peace and spiritual prosperity, I remain your brother, your friend, your servant for Christ's sake,

Francis Asbury"

In conformity with the permission given in this letter for his absence from America for a short season only, after remaining for a while and assisting Bishop Asbury, Dr. Coke returned to Europe, and was usefully employed in visiting the societies in various parts of the United Kingdom, particularly in Ireland during a rebellion which broke out in 1798, in which he was successful in his attempts to shield the Methodist preachers from all blame, -- until the session of this General Conference, when he appeared to fulfill his engagements with his American brethren, or be honorably released. After deliberating for some time upon

the request of the British Conference for Dr. Coke's return, the following resolution was concurred in: --

"That in compliance with the address of the British Conference, to let Dr. Coke return to Europe, this General Conference consent to his return, upon condition that he come back to America as soon as his business will allow, but certainly by the next General Conference."

In accordance with the spirit of this resolution, the conference addressed their British brethren in the words following: --

"We have considered, with the greatest attention, the request you have made for the doctor's return to Europe; and after revolving the subject deeply in our minds, and spending part of two days in debating thereon, we still feel an ardent desire for his continuance in America. This arises from the critical state of Bishop Asbury's health, the extension of our work, our affection for, and approbation of the doctor, and his probable usefulness, provided he continue with us. We want to detain him, as we greatly need his services. But the statement you have laid before us in your address, of the success of the West India missions under his superintendence, the arduous attempt to carry the gospel among the native Irish requiring his influence and support, and the earnest request you have added to this representation; 'believing it to be for the glory of God,' hath turned the scale at present in your favor. We have, therefore, in compliance with your request, lent the doctor to you for a season to return to us as soon as he conveniently can, but at farthest by the meeting of our next General Conference.

"Signed by order and in the behalf of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America,

"Francis Asbury, "Richard Whatcoat. Baltimore, May 9, 1800."

Having thus consented to a partial release of Dr. Coke from his engagements, the next important desideratum was how to supply his lack of service. The debilitated state of Bishop Asbury, and the great extension of the work in almost every direction, rendered it next to impossible for him to supply the wants of the Church in its superintendency, or to sustain the interests of the itinerancy in its various departments of labor. After a full consideration of this subject, it was finally agreed that another bishop should be elected and consecrated at this conference.

Before, however, the conference went into the election, considerable conversation was had respecting the powers of the new bishop, some contending that he should be considered only as an assistant, and, in the absence of his principal, should have power to station the preachers, only with the advice and concurrence of a committee appointed by the annual conference. The views, however, of those prevailed who thought he should be every way equal in power with his senior in office, both as respected presiding in the conferences, ordaining and stationing the preachers, and the general superintendency of the work.

This point being settled, they proceeded to ballot for a bishop. On the first count there appeared a tie between Richard Whatcoat and Jesse Lee. On the second balloting there were fifty-nine votes for Richard Whatcoat, and fifty-five for Jesse Lee, on which Mr. Whatcoat was declared to be duly elected. Accordingly on the 18th of May he was consecrated as a joint superintendent with Bishop Asbury, by prayer and the imposition of the hands of Bishops Coke and Asbury, assisted by some of the elders.

Mr. Whatcoat was one of the preachers who was ordained a deacon and elder by Mr. Wesley, and accompanied Dr. Coke to America in 1784. He was born in England in the year 1736, and brought up

under the influence of a religious education, by which he was saved from those vicious practices to which many youth are addicted. At the age of twenty-two he was made a partaker of the witness, and immediately brought forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit. In 1769 he entered as a probationer into the itinerant connection of Wesleyan Methodist preachers, then under the superintendence of Mr.

Wesley. In this work he continued a faithful laborer, much beloved and respected by the people and confided in by his coadjutors in this work, until he embarked for America, then in the 48th year of his age. He was, of course, one of those who assisted in the organization of our Church at the Christmas conference, and was highly distinguished for the meekness and quietness of his spirit, as much as the prudence of his conduct, and the exemplariness of his deportment. From the time of this conference until his election to the office of a bishop, he had, with the exception of three years, discharged the duties of presiding elder, which, in those days especially, required labors and privations of no ordinary character, as both the districts and circuits were large, the people in general poor, and the calls for preaching numerous, and often far part.

In the fulfillment of his duties in this station, he gave, it is believed, general satisfaction, and acquired the confidence and affection of both preachers and people. Those, indeed, who withheld their votes from him were actuated more from a conviction, it is said, of his lack of those peculiar talents which seemed essential for the office of a bishop, than from any want of confidence in either the depth of his piety, or measure of his prudence; and also from that kindred feeling for his competitor, who had been raised among themselves as an American preacher, and would therefore, as they thought, more familiarly enter into their feelings and views.

To both the candidates, the Church had awarded the merit of sharing her confidence and affection, as having been many years distinguished for their pious zeal and indefatigable labors, as well as for their wisdom and consistency of conduct in council. But the manner in which Richard Whatcoat fulfilled the high trust confided to him, fully justified the wisdom of the conference in selecting him as one of their superintendents; for no man ever furnished more satisfactory evidence of his entire devotion to God, and of his unwavering attachment to the interests of religion, than Bishop Whatcoat did from the time of his consecration to his office till the day of his death.

His meekness and modesty, his gravity and dignity of deportment, pointed him out as a fair sample for a primitive bishop, in whose integrity all could confide as a father and a friend, and his subsequent life justified the wisdom of the selection.

Hitherto the allowance of a traveling preacher had been sixty-four dollars a year and his traveling expenses. At this conference it was raised to eighty, and the same for his wife or widow, sixteen dollars a year for each child under seven years of age, and twenty-four dollars for those over seven and under fourteen years. The same provision was made for supernumerary and superannuated preachers, their wives, widows, and orphans; and so it remained until the General Conference of 1816, when the salary of the preachers, their wives and widows, was raised to one hundred dollars a year -- the allowance for children remaining the same as heretofore.

In order to meet the increased demands for the support of the ministry, in addition to the class and quarterly collections, and the avails of the Book Concern, the money received for celebrating the rite of matrimony was to be brought to the conference, together with the income of the Chartered Fund, and what might be raised in public collections on the circuits and at the sessions of the conferences.

Among the rules adopted at the conference of 1784, was one requiring every preacher, when admitted into the traveling ministry, to pay two dollars sixty-seven cents, and by a subsequent rule every member of the conference was to pay two dollars annually. This was to constitute a fund for the support of worn-out preachers, widows, and orphans. At the present conference it was ordered that this money should be appropriated to make up the deficiencies, together with any surplus which might remain in the hands of the stewards, after paying off the allowance of the preachers on the circuits.

On the recommendation of Dr. Coke, who always manifested a lively interest in the welfare of the preachers and their families, those rules were adopted by this conference which recommend to the people to provide for each circuit a parsonage, "furnished at least with heavy furniture," or otherwise to "rent a house for the married preacher and his family, and that the annual conferences assist to make up the rent of such houses, as far as they can, when the circuit cannot do it."

The rule for the trial of accused members was amended at this conference, so that the members before whom the delinquent was brought for trial were to judge of his innocence or guilt, according to the weight of evidence adduced; and also, that if the preacher who sat as judge in the case should dissent from the decision of the committee, he had the privilege of an appeal to the quarterly meeting conference.

The rule requiring preachers to give an account of private donations from their friends was at this conference rescinded.

In fixing the boundaries of the annual conferences, the number of which were to be seven, the New England and New York received their respective bounds as separate and distinct conferences.

Hitherto no special provision had been made for the support of the bishops, they having had their temporal wants supplied by private benefactions, and from particular societies; but at this conference, and it has been a standing regulation ever since, it was ordered that each annual conference should pay its proportion toward their support. And that the annual conferences might feel a measure of responsibility to the General Conference for their acts and doings, they were required by a resolution of this conference to keep and send records of their proceedings to the General Conference that they might be inspected.

It was also resolved that no preacher should hereafter have a seat in the General Conference, unless he had traveled four years, and was in full connection at the time:

The bishops were authorized to ordain those African preachers, in the places where there were houses of worship for their use, who might be chosen by a majority of the male members of the society to which they belonged, and could procure a recommendation from the preacher in charge and his colleagues on the circuit, to the office of local deacons. The rule giving this authority was not incorporated among the printed regulations of the Discipline, but by a vote of the conference was only to stand on its records. Richard Allen, of Philadelphia, was the first colored man who received orders under this rule. Since that time, however, many in different places have been elected and consecrated, and since the General Conference of 1812, when the bishops were authorized to ordain local deacons to the office of elders, after four years' probation as deacons, several have been ordained elders.

After passing these resolutions, and making sundry verbal alterations in the Discipline, not necessary to be particularly noticed, the conference adjourned on the 20th day of May to meet again in the city of Baltimore, on the 6th day of May, 1804.

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