

Celebrating Our Connection  
Main Street UMC, Columbia  
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I want to thank you for inviting me to come be with you today as we celebrate Main Street's history, and by extension, the history of our connection. I'm sure many of you are wondering what I can tell you about this church that you don't already know. And I'm not really going to try to do that, because it would be a little presumptuous. Besides that, you don't really know me and I don't really know you. But we have much in common, you and I. We are connected to each other in this conference and in this great United Methodist Church. Mr. Wesley wanted us to be a connectional people and a connectional church. We sing the same hymns, share in the same sacraments, and even speak the same language. I could come in and talk about the DS, the UMYF, Charge Conference, and you would all know what I'm talking about. We can even poke fun at ourselves and our habits. With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, there are even lists of "You might be a United Methodist if..." one-liners. . . .

For example, you might be a United Methodist if you understand that an "appointment" has nothing to do with a visit to the doctor,

or if you know that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is not some kind of trick football play.

I want to talk about the history of Main Street Church and how it fits into the connection, about our Methodist Church, and about why I think we must all work to preserve our history and heritage.

This congregation has a long history, and like most churches that have been around for a long time, the congregation is older than the building. Like some other congregations, this one actually started in a different location and with a different name. We modern folks, with our mobility, our ease of transportation, look at all of these Methodist churches in downtown Columbia and wonder why there are so many of them so close together. It's important to remember that Columbia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a much more compact city and that

lots of people lived all around these streets. They may not have wanted to walk eight or nine blocks to church.

The first notion that this area of Columbia needed a Methodist church came from members of Washington Street Church. In 1847, Mr. Louis Pou (Pew) started a Sunday school in this neighborhood. Within a year, after purchasing a lot at the corner of Marion and Calhoun streets, the Marion Street Church was organized. The minister of Washington Street, The Rev. William Martin, was committed to building this church and helped raise funds for its construction. Rev. Martin was a leading clergyman in the conference, later serving 15 years on Wofford's board of trustees. Naysayers doubted the church would ever be able to be self-sustaining even if the funds could be raised, but your ancestors clearly proved them wrong. The church was dedicated on the last day of 1848. The first minister here, the Rev. John T. Wightman, was a cousin of Wofford's first president. Connections abound in this conference.

Membership here grew steadily, and the church became self-sustaining immediately. It was a station appointment – not part of a city circuit or mission, within 2 years. By the 1870s, after the late unpleasantness, Marion Street Church had about 160 members. The church soon began producing a series of candidates for the ministry. One of those who got his license to preach from this church was Edward S. Jones. He got his license to preach before he even graduated from Wofford. He served throughout the conference and was a presiding elder of 4 different districts, including Columbia. He was serving as the DS here in Columbia in 1926 when he was killed in an auto accident in Spartanburg. The reason I mention him is that he married a member of my church, Bethel in Spartanburg. Their daughter, Sarah, married Herbert Hucks, who was my predecessor as college and conference archivist. We really are a connected people.

Your ancestors were not satisfied with just being a church and Sunday School. They founded the first Women's Missionary Society in South Carolina, three years before the Conference-wide organization was created. This is the predecessor of the United Methodist Women. They also created an Epworth League – the precursor of UMYF – in the 1890s. The church sent out ministers to serve churches in South Carolina and missionaries to different parts of the world.

The church seemed to be marching forward when disaster struck. In 1898, the church's fiftieth year, fire destroyed the church, the Sunday School building, and the parsonage. The Presbyterians loaned their old high school building to the church for a temporary home, and the church leadership set to work deciding what to do next. The willingness of the Presbyterians to help the church out in a time of need suggests that we Methodists were pretty easy to get along with. We're pretty ecumenical, and I think those views still hold true today

Out of the ashes, this church's leaders found inspiration to move the church to a new site, this time on Main Street. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, for at just over 300 members, the church was outgrowing its buildings. Out of a fire, they found a new vision, to be a larger church. I'm reminded of the words from the Prophet Joel, where God promises that he will pour out his spirit on all flesh, that your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. And, when God provides a dream and a vision, God provides the resources to make that dream possible. With insurance money and funds that the church raised, they purchased this piece of land. Within two years after the fire, this church had been built and was dedicated, and the name changed to "Main Street."

With a new sanctuary and Sunday school, the church entered a period of rapid growth. In the first ten years on this site, membership more than doubled, to over 800 members. In the second decade, membership nearly tripled, to 2300. Maybe we need to go back and study what they were doing! Even another fire, this one 1921, only prompted the church to expand. I just have to ask, what is it with you folks in Columbia and fire? With a larger sanctuary, the church continued to serve its membership here in downtown Columbia. A series of educational buildings provided room for Sunday School classes from the cradle roll to adult classes – before that space became available, all types of Sunday school groups met in what had to be a loud and crowded sanctuary.

You've reached beyond the church, and I especially appreciate how your church helped found one other nearby church. Not many churches can claim to have the namesake of another church among their members, but Virginia Wingard Methodist was named in memory of one of your departed saints. I don't know of too many

Methodist churches that are named for women, despite how much women have done to sustain the church.

Despite the wholesale departure of residents from downtown Columbia, this church has continued to serve God and the community from Main Street. I think it's a great sign of respect that you continue to worship here, just as your predecessors have done for 160 years.

We share a proud and long tradition as Methodists. We are connected beyond our own church. Methodism emerged from the Anglican Church, the Church of England. John Wesley was an Anglican priest, the son and grandson of Anglican priests, and he never left that church. To oversimplify a bit, he and his colleagues believed that their church was cold and formal, and was neglecting the working classes. I often tell my Episcopalian friends that all the Wesleys and their associates were trying to do was put some spirit back in the Church of England and to make it a church for people on all levels of society. Had they been successful, we might not be here today. After the American Revolution, when it became apparent that the Methodist movement in the United States could not continue under the leadership of a British Anglican, Wesley developed a liturgy and articles of religion based on the Church of England for the new Methodist Episcopal Church. So we have a structure to our worship that connects us to other Christians today and in our past. Those Articles of Religion are a basic explanation of our beliefs, but they are not a creed that we must agree with. They are guidelines that we use as we continue to explore our faith.

We share a concern for people at all levels of society and believe in service to God and our neighbors. For Wesley, faith always included a social dimension. As we grow in faith through our participation in the church, we are also fitted for mission and service to the world. From Wesley's time to the present, Methodism has sought to be both a nurturing community and a servant community. Members of Methodist Societies saw themselves as existing 'to reform the nation...and to spread their message across the land. And we as American Methodists have been doing this as a church for 225 years this Christmas Eve.

With so many other tasks before us, why do we spend our time and resources preserving and sharing our history? To be honest, people sometimes have a funny reaction when I tell them I'm a historian. Sometimes they're interested, but other times the response is more negative. They tell me they don't like history, which I think is an odd response. They tell me that they think history is boring, that they didn't enjoy history when they were in high school or college, that it's just a bunch of names and dates that are hard to remember. And honestly, if history was nothing more than memorizing names and dates, I'm not sure I'd find it that interesting or useful either. It would be as if religion was nothing more than memorizing Bible verses. It's important that we know names and dates and chapters and verses, but it is so much more important that we know what they mean, how they relate to us. History is not a list, it's a story; it's the chronicle of how we have grown into what we are today. **We don't keep our history and traditions out of some sense of vanity.** We keep a record of our history because it helps us know who we are, and it is a tribute of respect to remember all those who sacrificed to build our community.

We often speak of the "great cloud of witnesses" that the author of the letter to the Hebrews says surrounds us. That great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews is made up of the saints of the Old Testament, of Noah, of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, of David and Samuel. We can add others who are closer to us to it. That great cloud of witnesses speaks to us today through our recorded history. We can't go back and meet the men and women that founded this church. But as long as we in the church keep a record of our past, and of our present, we are able to maintain that connection. We may not be able to go back to see the church during the Civil War or the Depression, but as long as we record the memories of those who were there, we are able to experience those times. Of course, the cloud of witnesses has left us this responsibility; for all that they have done for us, they can't do it for us any more.

Finally, history keeps those saints who have gone on before us **alive to us and among us.** The men and women who founded this church, the ones who supported this church all their lives with their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service, the ministers who served it, they are all among us today, and they are urging you forward to tell their story to the next generation. This church has a story to tell. It's a

story of overcoming challenges, of missions and outreach. It's a proud story, and the next chapter is waiting for you to write it.

I can't wait to read it.