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# Methodist Church Is Oldest in Birmingham

## Society Formed 113 Years Ago, Records Declare

*(Editor's Note—Following is the second of a series of church history, written by the pastor of the Redeemer Lutheran Church, using information he gleaned from files of The Eccentric while recently working on a college degree.)*

By THEO. WUGGAZER, JR.  
The local Methodist Church planted its roots in Birmingham soil long before the village newspaper made its first appearance. Indeed, the history of this Church is peculiarly interwoven with the history of our city. It is the oldest of Birmingham churches, having been organized in the year 1827. Seeley's History records the fact that the first services were conducted in Willis's log tavern and also at the home of Dr. Ezra Parks. This arrangement apparently continued until the first church was built at the corner of Bates

and Merrill in 1839. That building served the congregation for 34 years, when, in 1873, the present building was constructed at the corner of West Maple and Henietta at a cost of \$20,000.

**Supported Reform Movement**  
The history, as recorded by The Eccentric beginning in 1878, reveals a close connection between this Church and the local reform movement. The reform and temperance questions were always of vital concern to most of the local churches, but the Methodist Church in these early years was the center of these activities. They appeared to have had the support of the village as a whole. For instance, one meeting of the Reform Club in 1879 drew a crowd of 219. One month later the same club celebrated its second anniversary in a service at the Methodist Church, at which 45 pledged total abstinence after a three-hour address by a certain Jerome Murray.

From the standpoint of organizing its forces, (both young people and adults) for mission, cultural, and social activities, the congregation was very active. In 1879 the young people were organized for the "promotion of social, intellectual, and spiritual elements, and advancement of the general interests of the Church." The group organized with a membership of 60. It developed a few years later into a Missionary Society, and in 1889 became a member of the Epworth League. Among other things, the young people bought an organ for the church in 1892.

**"Social" in 1878**  
Meanwhile, the women were also active. Reference is made to a "society" by the Women's Group in 1879. "This," they said, "would be better than that given by the young men lately." By 1881 the Church was free of debt due in a large measure to the work of the

ladies. A Women's Working Society was organized in 1887. While the initiation fee was 25 cents, yet the announcement stated that gentlemen can join for 50 cents and that "such members will be treated with the utmost deference by the ladies." But the gentlemen were never more interested for only a short time later it is reported that they were always conspicuous by their absence, and sadly arrears in their dues. In fact, the Secretary even had to notify them of their carelessness.

Yet, much was accomplished by these groups. They promoted cultural activities, kept many vital questions before the public eye, and also provided much wholesome entertainment. Lectures were sponsored from time to time, open forum discussions on questions of local interest were conducted, and so on.

An outstanding organization in these days was the Women's Foreign Mission Society, which began in March, 1898 with 10 members and grew to 46 by July 1917. In that period \$2,600 was raised, which was used to help further the foreign missions of the Methodist Church. In 1888, the Home Missionary Society was organized.

**Report in 1907**  
In 1907 a short statement appeared in The Eccentric revealing the internal condition of the Church. "This year the Methodist Church made the largest gain in 20 years. All expenses are paid; benevolences reached the \$400 mark; a strong bond of unity exists, and the Church looks forward to great things in the future."

Improvements in the Church property were made as the need arose. In 1897 the Church received a new steel roof and steel-corroded ceiling at a cost of \$800. More than half of this amount was raised on the day of the re-opening. In 1906 fire destroyed part of the building, and the congregation was forced to worship in Johnston-Shaw Hall for more than a year. In 1910 interior improvements were made: A new furnace, new carpet, linoleum in Sunday School room, and one classroom enlarged. Steam heat was installed in 1914, while at the same time a gift of \$1,000 was received from Mrs. Martha Worth to help pay for an organ, and other extensive repairs were undertaken. The total cost of these repairs was \$7,500. On March 7, 1915 the Church was re-dedicated in three special services. It is to be noted repeatedly that there seems to have been a very wise measure to liquidate all church debts as hastily as possible. In this case, for example, the announcement was made in the morning service that \$2,400 of the debt was still outstanding. One half of that amount was immediately raised by subscription, and

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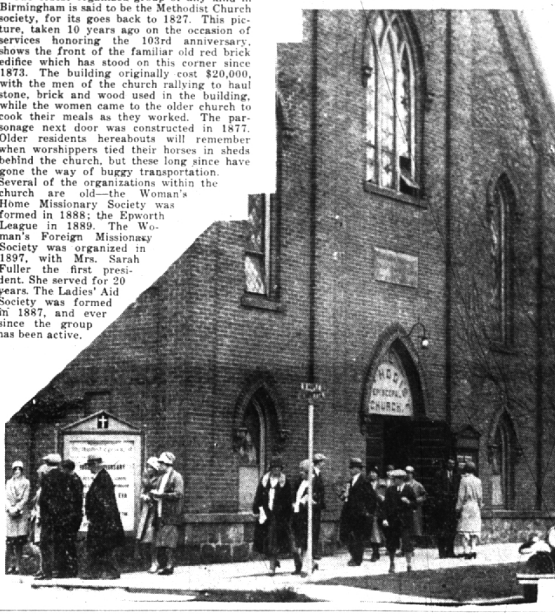
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The oldest organized group of any kind in Birmingham is said to be the Methodist Church society, for it goes back to 1827. This picture, taken 10 years ago on the occasion of services honoring the 103rd anniversary, shows the front of the familiar old red brick edifice which has stood on this corner since 1873. The building originally cost \$20,000, with the men of the church rallying to haul stone, brick and wood used in the building, while the women came to the older church to cook their meals as they worked. The parsonage next door was constructed in 1877. Older residents hereabouts will remember when worshippers tied their horses in sheds behind the church, but these long since have gone the way of buggy transportation. Several of the organizations within the church are old—the Women's Home Missionary Society was formed in 1888; the Epworth League in 1889. The Women's Foreign Missionary Society was organized in 1887, with Mrs. Sarah Fuller, the first president. She served 20 years. The Ladies Aid Society was formed in 1887, and since the group has been active.



In the evening service an additional \$800 was raised. (Editor's note—The following additional information secured by The Eccentric brings the story of Birmingham Methodism up to date.)  
In the past 20 years the church has been served by five pastors. The first of these, the Rev. Joseph Dutton led in the building of the annex building which is used by the junior department of the Church School, and also in the buying of an addition lot facing the Municipal Park which provides space some day for the building of a new church house. This is appreciated now when the present church recognizes that soon, a modern equipment will be the need of the parish.

The second of these pastors, the Rev. Robert M. Atkins, led in several new additions to the present plant. An extra room was added to the parsonage home which now serves as a pastor's study. Numerous repairs to the plant were carried out including an addition to the heating equipment of the main church building. It was during the latter part of this pastorate that the depression struck hard

in Birmingham and for that period and including the pastorate of the Rev. Russell D. Hopkins, the church found its task greatly complicated, finding it difficult to support to the necessity of its full budget the upkeep of the church. Still, during that period the membership stood by, keeping the work in all departments active and progressive.

The present pastor, the Rev. John Edward Martin, came to his task about four years ago. During this period the church has continued to grow, the entire indebtedness carried by the banks has been paid in full. The church fellowship comprises about 320 families and

been laid in the church auditorium, making this old and beautiful auditorium one of the most worshipful of the city churches. A movement is now on, led by the choir, to secure a fund for the electrification of the organ and the choir had unusual success in securing a complete outfit of new robes for the large membership. A newly-organized Men's Club is now leading in support of the church activities and the Women's Society is one of the most successful in the Detroit Conference, leading in its missionary support and in its cooperation in all local church activities.

**THE REV. ROBERT M. ATKINS** was pastor of the Church from 1925 until 1932, said to be the longest pastorate in the history of the local Church.

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