

*What does it mean  
to be the "Colorado  
Seminary"?*

The University of Denver's  
Historical Connections  
to the Methodist Church

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Sesquicentennial Speaker Series on "Colorado's  
Diverse Religious Legacy: 1864-2014"*

*To celebrate the University of Denver's sesquicentennial in 2014, the University of Denver's Department of Religious Studies and Office of Religious and Spiritual Life organized a six-part speaker series around the theme of "Colorado's Diverse Religious Legacy: 1864-2014". Supported by a grant from the University Provost's Office, this series began with a panel discussion in January 2014 on "The University of Denver's Historical Connections to the Methodist Church". The panel discussion featured Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies William Gravely, President and CEO of the Iliff School of Theology Thomas Wolfe, and Senior Pastor of the University Park Methodist Church Paul Kottke. What follows are the edited remarks of Dr. Gravely.*

**METHODISM** is now a nearly three-century old global phenomenon, as emphasized in David Hempton's book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Yale University Press, 2006). As a movement today it has many regional and national names associated with it, but it began at Oxford University as a student organization called the Holy Club in the 1730s. Indeed Methodist was originally a nickname because these students, two brothers John and Charles Wesley and others, lived on a disciplined schedule for their study, devotional life and outreach to prisons and the like. At first it was a movement within the Church of England emphasizing experiential Christianity and expressed in a sung theology (Charles Wesley was a great hymn writer – author of classic hymns like "Hark the Herald Angels" and "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"). Methodism appealed to working class people, held outdoor preaching and trained lay persons for ministry. By the end of the

century it had separated from the Church of England to create the British Wesleyan Conference. Its missionaries followed the global expansion of the British empire to the American colonies and much of the rest of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Wesley even came to the Georgia colony for a brief although not very successful venture.

By the time of the founding of what became the University of Denver, Methodists in the United States had become the largest Protestant denomination with the widest world missionary enterprise. The northern-based branch of the movement, the Methodist Episcopal Church was responsible through its clergy and laity in early Denver for forming Colorado Seminary in 1864. The word seminary at the time was not associated with what we think of today— a seminary as a professional school for the training of clergy.

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The name was widely used to mean something more like an academy, ranging from upper high school to community college or junior college level curriculum. Functionally the Colorado Seminary existed for only three years, but founder John Evans (a medical doctor, then Governor of the Colorado Territory, then railroad magnate) kept its charter so that after state-hood in 1876 it could continue to hold property in

trust and be associated with the University of Denver from the 1880s on. (Evans lost the governorship due to the horrendous Sand Creek Massacre.) Colorado Seminary's original building at 14<sup>th</sup> and Arapahoe was where the parking garage for the Denver Center for the Performing Arts is today.

In the early period, and until 1928, the University of Denver's chief executive officers were Methodist clergymen, but there was never any religious requirement expected of a faculty member, administrator – in part because John Evans' Quaker background influenced his respect for freedom of conscience. Formal ties with the Colorado Conference -- later and currently the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church -- still exist through approval of the Board of Trustees-- again with no requirement that they be Methodists. Up to the 1960s, University chancellors reported on the state of the university at these annual conference sessions, which were often held on the University of Denver's campus. At the same time several chancellors have come directly out of the faculty, as did now retiring Chancellor Coombe. That was true for his colleague in the 1980s who also came from the Chemistry Department, Dwight Smith (a Methodist layman) and before that of Chester Alter, also a chemist and Methodist layman, from 1953 to 1967. It is an oddity that three of the University's 17 Chancellors were previously Chemistry Department faculty.

Besides formal relationships related to the trusteeship of property, hosting the annual conference, and reporting to the denomination, the places where Methodist influence has been felt for much of the University's history were in the practice of

religion on campus and in the curriculum related to the study of religion. In the beginning, students were required to attend chapel daily, then down to four, three, two, then one time each week, and then finally no chapel requirements. Chapel met originally in University Hall, then in Buchtel Hall before it burned with only the tower left next to us here.

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Since then the only building for religious services on campus has been the Evans Chapel, which first belonged to a Methodist congregation in downtown Denver. It was to be demolished before a decision was made to take it apart brick by brick, move it and restore it. In 1939 American Methodism had merged its three main bodies (ME Church, MECS, MPC) into the Methodist Church in 1939. Now a national church, it sought to institutionalize campus ministry in Wesley Foundation buildings and staff on public campuses and in Methodist Student Movement ministries at denominational schools. For a time in the late 1950s down to the mid-60s, the position of University Chaplain was held by three Methodists in succession. There has come to be a chaplaincy again but without Methodist affiliation. The campus ministry structurally has had varying patterns over time. An early vice-chancellor in charge of religious life, for example, was John Rice, Presbyterian minister and father of Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State, a DU undergrad

with a doctorate from the School of international Studies.

When I first came to the University of Denver in 1968, most mainline Protestant churches had specific campus ministers assigned to DU and there were even YMCA and YWCA offices, but within a half dozen years that was no longer the case. At one time as part of recruitment of students every Methodist congregation in the city – maybe even in the conference – had a scholarship to award to someone to attend DU. Up until the sixties the university was more regionally and locally focused than it became after the centennial in 1964. That marked both a self-conscious move to reach out nationally and a pattern that was reflected by the religiously plural nature of the student body. For most of my thirty plus years on the faculty there was about an equal number of students with backgrounds that were Protestant, Catholic or Jewish.

Within those years DU has had a less explicit connection to Methodism and the Rocky Mountain Conference. That occurred as higher education curriculum expanded beyond sectarian interests and 19th century classical studies to scientific, social-scientific and professional programs and research -- features we associate with what a modern university represents. That can be seen in the varying ways the subject of religion as a topic of study has occurred at DU over time. In the earlier period of interdependence with the Methodist conference the teaching of religion was more parochial, but still not sectarian, not a focus on Methodism or even a generalized Protestant Christianity. It existed alongside and interacted with the Department of Philosophy and with the curriculum and faculty resources at Iliff, which did retain a

more comprehensive link to the denomination.

What has occurred at DU since the 1964 centennial is the expansion of the size and range of the Department, first called Religion and since the mid-1970s Religious Studies. It was in a period of development when I came to teach religion in America and I had an explicit ordained Methodist connection though I moved to lay status in 1975. In 1968-69 Jim Kirk, who died in November, was in India and China for a fellowship year to bring the study of Asian religions into the curriculum. He had a doctorate from the Iliff School of Theology and his vision of what the department should be reflected that background, and behind that the influence of the University of Chicago on Iliff. It consisted of having disciplinary areas like philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, comparative religion alongside biblical studies (taught by Cecil Franklin who chaired the department during this expansion period) and religious history. Gregory Robbins now has Franklin's post. The philosophy of religion appointment Carl Raschke would occupy in 1972. Wallace Clift came in to cover psychology of religion -- the position that Sandra Dixon now holds. Luis Leon covers religions in America. Offerings in Asian religions have expanded after Kirk's retirement, as with the appointment of Ginette Ishimatsu, now serving as Associate Dean, and Nicole Willock as a post-doctoral lecture. Attention to Islam has been honored over the past decade, with the appointment first of Liyaqat Takim and then Andrea L Stanton.

This development at the University of Denver had its parallels in state schools, like CU-Boulder where Religious Studies emerged from being a program in

Philosophy to becoming a separate department. That kind of thing happened on a large scale across the country, in part responding to the Supreme Court decision urging state and public institutions, including high schools, to extend the academic study of religion into curricula and to leave religious practice to private institutions and private life. Simultaneously on the national stage a new professional association was formed called the American Academy of Religion, to hold annual conventions as well as regional meetings of scholars in religious studies. The AAR joined pre-existing professional organizations like the Society for Biblical Literature, the American Society of Church History and later the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The department added a Master's degree in the mid-1970s and formed with Iliff a Joint PhD program in 1982. The latter move gave doctoral studies the kind of interaction with other disciplines that the Chicago design had done within DU's department. For example, doing a PhD in pastoral counseling this program allows students to access resources in the Department of Psychology and the Schools of Professional Psychology, Social Work and Education.

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## **distinctively Methodist about the linkage.**

Almost a century ago the University of Denver had already taken steps to move beyond focusing solely on Christianity in religious studies. Beginning in 1920 a local rabbi at BMH synagogue, Charles E. Hillel Kauvar began teaching courses part-time in Rabbinic Literature and that continued for 45 years. After Kauvar retired Rabbi Manual Laderman taught for a couple of years, then a Kauvar Chair was endowed. The father of the current Israeli Prime Minister, Benzion Netanyahu occupied the post for 3 years before moving East to Cornell. He was succeeded by BMH Rabbi Stanley Wagner, who taught Judaic Studies and then institutionalized it as a formal program in 1975. Faculty appointments came in various departments (History, Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literature). The Center for Judaic Studies developed an outreach program to Iliff, the Conservative Baptist Seminary – now known as the Denver Seminary – and the now-defunct St. Thomas Catholic Seminary. The Center for Judaic Studies celebrates 40 years in 2015 and has been a tremendous contribution to the intellectual life of the campus and to interaction with the Denver metropolitan community.

In sum, DU has shared the path of other well known universities with Methodist origins like Duke, Emory, SMU, Syracuse, Drew, Northwestern (also founded by John Evans in Evanston, Illinois). Most of them have a Methodist theological school within or adjoining them, but like all modern universities beyond that feature there is little distinctively Methodist about the

linkage. That is less true of many smaller Methodist related colleges and universities, as a look at the United Methodist website for higher education shows. A few schools with denominational origins severed their ties to become completely independent, a good example being Wesleyan in Connecticut.

The University of Denver's seal remains *religio et scientia*, "for religion and knowledge". It shares the values that the international Methodist movement have always inculcated, illustrated in a famous quote associated with John Wesley though there is no evidence of the quote in his writings: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." Does this sound too altruistic? Too much like Democrats? Perhaps, if you are a business major; and for Republicans he did write: "Having First gained all you can, and Secondly saved all you can, Then give all you can."