**How Do We Date Our Church’s Beginning?**

By the Commission on Archives and History,

Greater New Jersey Conference,

The United Methodist Church

In the United Methodist tradition we celebrate significant events on all levels of the connection as part of our ministry of memory. As we live and worship in the present day world, we anchor our faith in God through the triumphs and struggles of the local church members, who built what is now the contemporary congregation. Local church members are part of this endless line of splendor, which continues to add to our Wesleyan-Christian identity. Yet, identifying the founding date for a particular local church can be difficult. The older the church is the harder it can be to discern when a congregation was born. Herein, the Greater New Jersey Commission on Archives History wishes to provide useful guidelines for establishing the founding date of a congregation, by clarifying that the official organizing event recognized by the annual conference remains the most reliable date for the founding of a congregation, unless there is a clear evidential trail which documents the connection between earlier events and the formation of the church.

Ministry of memory is a vital part of what it means to be a United Methodist in today’s fast changing world. The celebration of a local church’s significant anniversary is one of the most important parts of our ministry of memory. By reconnecting with our Wesleyan-Methodist heritage grounds us in the present by providing insight into our past identity. This recaptured historical identity highlights our uniqueness and vitality as a community of faith. Remembering and celebrating church anniversaries continues to be transformative with each successive generation adding their own meaningful traditions. This, then, creates a transformational clergy and laity that result in vital ministries within the life of the congregation.

However, information about when a particular church was founded can range from the nebulous to the exact hour. This discontinuity of data often leads to debates by historians, church boards, congregations and even whole communities. So by which measurement does a local church date its beginning?

In reality, there are no commonly agreed standard measurements and the variety of current practices are inconsistent and confusing. For example, The *Book of Discipline* gives no clear definitive answer, nor do the various United Methodist archives and history commissions. Some churches date their beginning to when the first circuit rider or missionary preached nearby. Other churches might cite the first revival meeting on their property. Still others look to the date of the first class meeting. Ironically, few churches take the date when the class meeting or society was officially recognized as a church by the annual conference, even though this date has the most reliable data when compared to the above mentioned scenarios.

Further, the founding date should not be considered a birthdate. Rather, it was a day when by trial and hard work that the now organized church came to ecclesiastical fruition and reached a point of viability being built upon the prayers and actions of collaborative faithful members over time to reach their specified goal. Another way think about this dating problem is to compare it to achieving a diploma or higher education degree. You do not get the recognition of completing an educational course of study until all the requirements are met. As a freshman, you begin the process toward becoming a lettered individual, which is only validated by your successful completion of the curriculum requirements set by the school. Dating a church is similar in the sense that the weekly Methodist class meetings or a larger society had to survive many obstacles and live in God’s continuing grace before it could be recognized as a bona fide church by its peers and validated by the annual conference.

In churches which date back to or beyond the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church during the Christmas Conference in 1784, the question of founding is tricky at best. If a church believes that its founding occurred when a Methodist, United Brethren or Evangelical Church circuit rider preached a sermon nearby, but then he moved on to another location and never returned without organizing a regular class meeting, there is little proof of continued religious activity to connect the earlier preaching event with the beginning of an organized congregation. If another preacher came back to the same area and established a circuit charge which becomes a regular preaching stop, then that date has more validity provided that the church survived its infancy and grew into a self-supporting congregation. Thus, the later date with the second circuit rider is more reliable than that of the arrival of the first circuit rider or missionary preaching in an open air meeting or tent.

The first class meeting has a special place in the hearts of many United Methodists as representing the founding date of a local church. The founding date becomes valid if evidence demonstrates that the first class meetings continued, without significant interruption, until the incorporation of the church. Class tickets or local recognition of those meetings outside of the church, such as news clippings or references in county histories, can serve as proof that the first class meeting equated to the founding of the congregation. Likewise, the initial meeting of a nascent Sunday School which directly leads to a fledging congregation produces a similar confirmation date as the official beginning of a church.

Thus the recognition by the annual conference or incorporation of a congregation is always the strongest date since there is plenty of historical data to back it up. The primary example would be when the church appears in the annual conference journal either as a new work or as part of a circuit with an appointed clergyperson. Another proof would be evidence of the first elected officers who help administer the life of the congregation with the pastor. Therefore, the official organizing event recognized by the annual conference remains the most reliable date for the founding of a congregation unless there is a clear evidential trail that documents the connection between earlier events and the legal formation of the church.