

## **A Tale of The Northfield Conference**

*Written for the Centennial of the Northfield Conference*

1993

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To be one hundred years old — born in 1883 and still going in 1993, what a span of years that covers. From the world of Queen Victoria, Franz Joseph, Tsar Alexander III, and President Grover Cleveland to the world of Boris Yeltsin, Ronald Reagan, of Bill and Hillary Clinton — seems like moving from one universe to another. In 1893, women wore leg-of-mutton sleeves so broad that they could only move from one room to another in many houses by slipping sideways through the doorway. Although permitted to appear in skirts above the ankle when playing tennis or indulging in the popular new sport of bicycling, the rest of the time they dressed in skirts that, while freed of the bustle, still uniformly swept the floor 5½ to 6 yards round at the hem, whether of the then fashionable “bell”, “empire”, “granny”, “yoke”, or “sun-ray” style, with, as the ladies’ magazines of the day wryly warned, “a labyrinth of black elastic inside” to keep the pleats in place that gave “fullness at the back”. No lady (or gentleman either, for that matter) would have dreamed of venturing out of doors without wearing a hat. The contrast with the world of 1993 could hardly be more dramatic — 1993, in which a recent Sunday edition of the New York Times trumpeted in one column that “punk” was back in fashion, remarked in another on the continuing popularity of “grunge” (the accuracy of which observation was affirmed by the appearance of a Northfield conferee that very day wearing a pair of jeans with multiple rents from which the inner white threads issued to flutter in the wind and which, across the knees, were so large that the trouser legs below hung by little more than a single thread). The latest in Italian-designed daywear for women in which the individual outfits were so variegated in material and design from one part to another that it looked as if the group of models had been blown apart by a bomb and then had arms, heads, torsos, and legs hastily fitted together again by a blind man, grabbing whatever part lay most handily within reach so as not to keep the photographer waiting. There wasn’t a hat anywhere in sight.

Something of the same anomaly is on occasion apparent in the now venerably centenarian Northfield. I remember a vespers service in Sage Chapel in my first years at the Conference in which, for the first time, the minister in charge that night gave the girls themselves carte blanche to plan and carry out the service in whatever form suited them. We duly filed in, prepared for the customary service — everyone sedately seated in pews, candles lit on the spotlit high altar, organist quietly modulating, ready to launch into the opening hymn, the bible open on the lectern, only to find things quite different. The sanctuary was dark, the organ was silent, and the organist nowhere to be seen. Pew cushions had been dragged out to lie on the floor, where girls could sprawl out comfortably, and at least five of those seated in the chancel put in front of the pews for the choir were tuning up guitars. The other girls, coming in, quickly followed the example of those already there, and in a moment even more pew cushions were on the floor: the only people left sitting in the pews were the members of the staff and the members of the Northern Area Committee.

The service that followed contained readings from Khalil Gibran and, if I remember correctly, Lao Tse. One of the parables was narrated — not only in colloquial modern language, but so far as setting and characters went, in modern dress. Most extempore — sounding. The music consisted of renditions of “Mrs. Robinson”, “The Sounds of Silence”, and “Blowin’ in the Wind”, with guitar accompaniment. Some of the girls joined softly in “Blowin’ in the Wind”, but from the beginning to end of the service the pews containing the older people were wrapped in total silence. It was as if a dark gulf had opened up between that part of the church and the brightly-lit chancel beyond. Nor was that the only gulf. At one point in the service, looking towards the back of the church across the great ranks of empty pews barely visible in the darkness (no lights had been turned on), I was startled to see what appeared to be the figure of a man standing in the corridor beyond and looking out at us through the gothic arched opening above the very last pew row, partly silhouetted, partly lit from above by the exit lights. Head poised virtually neck-less on a massive chest, face deeply bronzed where you could see the skin clear of the luxuriant mustaches and full beard that covered the face’s lower half, a button Santa Claus nose and heavy eyebrows beneath which fierce little eyes glared balefully at us. It could have been Moses, just descended from the heights of Sinai, the clay tablets containing the Ten Commandments in his grip, catching his first astonished glimpse of the children of Israel romping around the Golden Calf. The figure remained absolutely still, yet thunderclouds seemed to gather round its head as if at any moment it might come raging down the aisle like the Commendatore in “Don Giovanni” to hurl the sinning multitude into the fires of Hell.

After the service ended, I went back to investigate more closely and discovered that what I had taken for the “observer” was, in fact, a bronze bust of Dwight Moody placed, whether by accident or design, against the back wall in such a way that only the head and the upper portion of the torso were visible through the archway, looking when the light was right quite disconcertingly alive.

That night in 1969, the spontaneous symbolism of that curious scene struck me as shockingly apt. It suddenly made disturbingly clear something about the conference that until then I had picked up once or twice only as a faint discordant note sounded sometimes for a moment in dining hall, classroom, or post-lecture question periods, but had little time to puzzle over. More disturbingly still, it cast a revealing light on the larger world of Town and Church and Parish out of which I had come and to which I would shortly be returning. In both Northfield and the outside world the Present seemed caught between the authoritative figures of the Past and the clustering forces that already carried, through as yet only half drawn about their shoulders, the authority of the Future. Many have been the times since that I have wondered whether in either place we should be able to summon up enough wisdom, imagination and compassion to bridge the gulfs between those opposing forces before the troubled waters rolling in the depths rose in the end to wash us all away.

Though the passage of a century can seem to cover virtually unbridgeable distances} however, it can also seem in other moments like a mere winking of the eye. Not long ago, my wife Maeve and I attended the celebration of the one hundredth birthday of a Massachusetts General Hospital volunteer Maeve had got to know well over their years of joint service to the hospital. The first sixty or so years of her life had been

spent working steadily in the town in which she had grown up, and where the slopes of the hill on the top of which stood the nursing home in which she now lived had in her youth, as she said with a wry chuckle, been bare of anything but cows pasturing there. After her husband's death when she was in her middle sixties, however, she paused to take stock of her life and coolly decided to travel and do all the other things she had not ventured to do before. Buying a one-way ticket to Europe, she traveled about the Continent until she had only enough money left to buy a ticket home, and then returned. In the years that followed, she went off to India. In her nineties, when, for the first time since the Communist Revolution, opportunities to visit China opened up, she went with the first tour — and later traveled a second time as well. Not all that long before, though never having been on a horse in her life, she went pony-trekking though the West. When it seemed likely that she had contracted cancer just before her second trip to China, and the suggestion was made that if the tests proved positive, her trip should be deferred so that surgery could proceed, she went on the trip anyway, telling the hospital to tell her about the outcome of the tests after she got back; and when major surgery did indeed seem to the doctors to be essential, after a night spent thinking about it in the hospital, she declined it. "I spent the night thinking about all the ways I might die," she said, "and I found I didn't like any of them. I decided that cancer was about as good a way to go as any, so I'll just stick with that." And so she did through the following eight years, sometimes ill, sometimes discouraged, eventually giving up her apartment when she could no longer physically avoid it, moving into two successive senior citizen centers and coming at last to the nursing home in her old hometown. There, back where her life began, she could look out on still familiar places. New houses had crowded out the old cow pastures it was true, but there were still homes and vistas that she remembered and there were other patients in residence who could swap their memories of the neighborhood with hers.

So there we found her, in a wheelchair to be sure, but immaculately turned out in a neatly cut navy blue dress and jacket that she had bought on her last trip to China, diamond earrings sparkling, her hair becomingly cut and waved, her hospital award pin on her shoulder, wry wit freshly burnished and every memory at instant command as she greeted her guests with cordiality in which regal directness and a kind of astringent freshness of outlook shone with undiminished sparkle. All that century of years and experience was in her, contained and comprehended within that indomitable spirit. The moments of sadness and of joy, the moments of acceptance and rebellion — all available to enrich with innumerable overtones of meaning the present moment.

And thinking about that party, as I did repeatedly in the days that followed (because hundredth birthdays are not occasions those of us who do not work in nursing homes get the opportunity to celebrate very often) there came a moment when I suddenly realized that our dauntless centenarian was actually only a month or so younger than the Northfield Conference itself. As was true for her, the Conference might also reveal contained and comprehend within its communal self all the experiences of its one hundred years of life. All of it in some sense "grist to the mill" in its richness of variety. Could it be that for all the changes in form and manner that had come over the years there was a characteristic pattern of response, that the core of the Conference remained true to its early self despite seemingly profound and deeply felt generational

differences (at the very least over the meanings attached to associated words) over values and matters of faith? For all the many and obvious differences between the world of leg-of-mutton sleeves and the world of “grunge” (taken merely as symbols, with no intention to ridicule either but simply to take each, quite uncritically, as visual manifestations of their era). is there a consistent “group personality” for the Northfield Conference throughout its history that connects the conservative, fundamentalist, evangelistic, self-consciously Protestant Christian body brought into being by Dwight Moody with the liberal deliberately non-fundamentalist, non-evangelistic, interfaith body, respectfully hospitable to believer, agnostic, and unbeliever alike, that exists in tripartite form today? Not long ago I’d have had my doubts about it. But in the last few days I have changed my mind, and what changed it, surprisingly enough, was Dwight Moody. Even superficial research into that life, which was all I could manage, showed conclusively how right May Whittle Moody was when she said (as she repeatedly did) that although the idea for starting a Northfield Conference for girls first came from her, it was her father-in-law, Dwight Moody himself, who really gave it life and an enduring basic character. Northfielders who read the following brief sketch of Moody’s life and ministry should keep their eyes open for characteristic attitudes or responses, however antique or even antipathetic the surrounding circumstances, that they might find reminiscent of their own Conference at various times. They are there.

Dwight Moody was born in the little white house now called “The Birthplace” in February, 1837, to the town’s bricklayer and his wife, whose livelihood had been severely strained by the financial panic of 1836. The father died of sudden heart failure in 1841, leaving his widow to bring up the family in almost crushing poverty, sometimes with nothing but cornmeal and water in the house to eat. Dwight went to Northfield schools, where the education was of such poor quality that he left school barely able to read and write. He grew up to be a stocky 5’6”, weighing 180 pounds which, as the years passed, expanded to 230 pounds, abounding in both physical and intellectual energy, and with an infectious sense of humor that often took the form of practical jokes. He went regularly to church with his mother, and found it boring.

At 17, Moody went to Boston to work in his maternal uncle’s shoe store, where his energetic selling tactics — practically dragging passersby into the shop when business was slow -amazed his fellow clerks and appalled his uncle; and he found there a new and unexpected center of inspiration in the local branch of the YMCA, only recently established, where there was a well-stocked library to further his education and an active Christian bible study group more lively than anything staid Northfield had to offer. The Brahmins of the Mount Vernon Church at the foot of Beacon Hill rejected his first application for membership because of his pronounced rural Yankee accent (which he retained all his life) and his as yet stumbling reading ability and unscholarly way of interpreting biblical passages, although his improvement in reading — if not in interpretive powers by Brahmin standards — eventually won him acceptance when he applied a second time.

Experience of Bostonian inhospitable ways, combined with his uncle’s stony determination to run the shoe store in his own way and not in the way the eager Moody wanted to run it gradually soured him on Boston, and in 1856 Moody moved to Chicago, once again trying his hand (with more agreeable results

this time) at the shoe business, but also finding more and more that what really absorbed him was the work of a lay Christian evangelist: playing a vigorous part in the work of the YMCA; wandering the streets to urge passing children (or adults if he could get them) into Sunday schools which he organized and taught himself; speaking on street corners or passing out handbills to attract people into meetings at the Y and raising the money to fund these enterprises from wealthy Chicagoans, who found his mixture of pragmatic common sense, resourceful salesmanship, untiring energy, intense faith and spontaneous high spirits at first amusing, then endearing, converting them in spite of themselves. Included among them was John Farwell, a dry goods merchant who had made a fortune with the partner who gave his name to their store, Marshall Field and became not only a generous contributor, but also with his wife, an active leader in helping with Moody's work. Another was Major Daniel Webster Whittle, a western Massachusetts man who, like Moody, had come to Chicago to make a fortune and became one of Moody's chief assistants, taking charge when Moody was off in later years on his great evangelizing missions in the British Isles. In 1860, Moody gave up business entirely to devote himself full-time to his mission ministry, continuing for almost forty years, with only an occasional holiday, until 1899 when, like his father before him, a failing heart brought him down.

Further details of Moody's remarkable ministry need not detain us here, full of interest though they are, but certain aspects of his manner of ministry are germane to the tale of the Northfield Conferences.

As one of the greatest revivalist preachers of the 19th century, what sets Moody apart from his fellows in that art was his central theme. Jonathan Edwards, the first to urge his contemporaries to a "Great Awakening", made his congregations quake with his vivid prophecies of the horrors of Divine Judgment awaiting them as "sinners in the hands of an angry God." This was a staple as well of the evangelists who followed him. Moody stood squarely in this tradition when he began his own teaching, but he changed. A young English ex-prize fighter named Harry Morehouse, who met Moody in 1866 when Moody had taken his wife to visit her family in England in the hope of recovering her health after a siege of asthma and heart trouble, followed the Moodys back to Chicago and began evangelistic work with Moody by preaching a series of strong sermons unusually full of apposite biblical quotations, on the theme not of judgment, but of redemption. Weaving the separate verses together in this fashion made them for Moody "like links in a golden chain, holding a broken and ruined world together, and binding it fast to God's mercy seat". "Mr. Moody," Morehouse said to him after listening to Moody's far-more traditional fire and brimstone sermon, "You are sailing on the wrong tack. If you will change your course, and learn to preach God's words instead of your own, He will make you a great power for good."

Moody was never one to jibe at being taught by his juniors. With Morehouse to encourage him, he embarked on an exhaustive, comparative study of the Bible that convinced him of the validity of Morehouse's approach. A mystical experience of the very Presence of God, which he spoke of only with great reluctance, brought the biblical insights still further home. It revolutionized his preaching. He would say,

*"I used to preach that God hates the sinner, and seeks to destroy him... that God was behind the sinner*

*with a double-edged sword ready to hew him down... I never knew that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out; I could not hold back the tears. I just drank it in... I took up that word "Love", and do not know how many weeks I spent in studying the passages in which it occurs, 'til at last I could not help loving people. I had been feeding on love so long that I was anxious to do everybody good... I got full of it. It ran out of my fingers... The churches would soon be filled if outsiders could find that people in them loved them when they came. This draws sinners. We must win them first, then we can win them to Christ. We must get the people to love us, and then turn them over to Christ... I don't want to scare men into the kingdom of God. I don't believe in preaching that way. If I did get some in that way, they would soon get out... Terror never brought a man in yet."*

Foxhole religion in whatever form thereafter had no appeal for Moody. "What we want", he said "is cool, calm calculation that you will just turn from sin and turn to God," H.L. Mencken, by no means an easy admirer of preachers, said that "by putting the soft pedal on Hell" Moody "beat all his competitors".

The insight that revolutionized Moody's preaching also strongly influenced the development of other aspects of his work. Putting the Bible at the center of his preaching meant that it became less theologically theoretical, less concerned with doctrine, more concrete, more anecdotal, like the Bible itself "springing from life," as a later biblical critic once put it, "and returning directly to the life from which it came to give form and clarity to experiences." There was no rhetoric in Moody's sermons. They were simple, straightforward, colloquial, and, where it seemed to Moody to be potentially helpful to his listeners, salted with illustrations drawn from his own spiritual journeying as well as daily life in the Moody family.

The interweaving of biblical instruction and interpretation with personal experience became something Moody was constantly eager to encourage in his program. It led to the establishment of the Bible Institute in Chicago to train teachers in Bible study methods and in carrying biblical teachings into social work. It led to the establishment of the Northfield School for Girls in 1879 and of the Mt. Hermon School for Boys in 1881 to provide boys and girls with a liberal, practical education grounded in biblical studies. It also led Moody to adopt an attitude hospitable to scholarly approaches different from his own, to sit loose on the interdenominational rivalries common at the time and to welcome friendships with those whose ecclesiastical loyalties might have little in common, at least on the surface, with the ones in which he himself had been nurtured.

In his ministry Moody reached out to all Christians. He counted Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists Presbyterians and members of other denominations among his followers. Roman Catholics in North Chicago called Moody "Father Moody", only half-joking, because of his friendly attempts to visit them in sickness and provide some alleviation of their grinding poverty. When Roman Catholics in Northfield issued an appeal for contributions to help them build a church, Moody's was one of the most generous, and the organ was given entirely by him. Nor did his sympathetic tolerance stop there. He had no trace of the anti-Semitism then widespread in church circles. At one missionary conference Moody was leading, the audience was startled when, to illustrate the magnitude of the task before them, he unfurled a vast chart

on which the numbers of “Heathen” were listed; but excluded from that number and listed separately, were not only Protestants and Catholics, but Jews and Muslims as well. On a visit to the Holy Land outside the walls of Jerusalem on a Sunday Moody jumped up on a handy stone to preach at the request of a gathering crowd, only to be publicly reprovved afterwards for having, unaware, used a Muslim tombstone as his pulpit. Moody promptly apologized, equally publicly, the following Sunday. “I shouldn’t think much”, he said, “of a man who climbed up on my father’s tombstone to preach.”

Music was always a primary concern to Moody in his evangelistic ministry. He had no musical talent himself, could not sing a note, but he made sure that there were always with him those who could. His association with Ira Sankey (the famous American Gospel singer and composer of such hymns as Trusting Jesus, Faith is the Victory and Under His Wings) with Dwight Moody for so many years (their billing together on posters led passers-by sometimes to think they must be a music hall team) was no accident. Moody and Sankey determined that the music, like the teaching and preaching, should be straightforward, simple, unpretentious and easy to master, carrying what was being taught or prayed about forward through another medium. Sankey seated in front of a packed hall at his little melodeon (which in those days was scorned by professional church musicians and clergy as much as guitars sometimes are today), could improvise a musical line to accompany a touching hymn and bring the audience to tears through the magic of his voice, using words that spoke of direct human experience and that were distinguished more for sincerity of feeling than for poetic merit. At one meeting in a local church, the minister pointed out that there was a fine organ at the back of the church and that Sankey should sing from there rather than clutter up the chancel with the melodeon or distract the audience with his weaving about above it as he played. Moody dismissed the suggestion at once: “If God had meant us to listen to music coming from behind us, he’d have put our ears on back to front instead of the other way ‘round.”

One of May Whittle’s earliest memories was of Dwight Moody bending down to smile warmly at her when she made her way through a forest of legs after a big Chicago mission meeting. When she found him, she threw her arms around his knees to keep herself from falling. This was the man, white-haired and looking more like Edward Gwen as Kris Kringle in *The Miracle on 34th Street*, rather than his Sage Chapel bust, to whom she appealed in the summer of 1892, petition in hand, to start a special conference for girls. Here is how she herself described the conference’s beginnings in an address to the Directors of the Northfield League when she handed over the Presidency of the League to Frances Phaner in 1929:

*As far as one knows, in 1893 there had never been a conference for girls anywhere in the world, except a small group of secretaries who met at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in 1891. The first conference of any kind held in Northfield was called by Mr. D. L. Moody in 1882. This was called a “General Conference” for ministers and Christian workers. In the summer of 1886, the men’s conference had begun. About 200 gathered at Mt. Hermon School and it was there that the Student Volunteer Movement sprang into being when one hundred college men volunteered for the foreign field. It was my great privilege to be there with my father who was one of the speakers. The experience never left me. One felt the power of God’s spirit calling them into service.*

*This conference grew very rapidly as the delegates scattered to their colleges and shared their experience. Among the many well known men of that generation were Dr. Watt and Dr. Speer. In 1895, there were about six hundred men, and this did not include southern or western colleges, as other conferences had started for them. The report of this conference closes with this paragraph: "The leaders of the Northfield Conferences have sought from the beginning to instill and foster a deeper love and clearer knowledge of the Scriptures in the hearts and minds of men and women; and to this the growing power of these conferences is due.*

*Two years later the men told Mr. Moody that ten days was too short a time to get the Bible study they needed, and asked if could have them for a month, which he did in July, 1899. They studied under the leadership of the strongest conservative men of our country and abroad. The program annually included Bible Classes and addresses on the work of the Holy Spirit and personal work.*

*These were the days when groups of college men would go into the hills about Northfield and pray to be filled with God's spirit and power for service. It is the rule and not the exception to have an outstanding minister or layman of that generation say, "I attended the Northfield Men's Conference when I was an undergraduate".*

*All this history of the men's conference is necessary in order to get the setting and atmosphere out of which our own conference came into being. From the first a changing group of fifteen or twenty girls attended the men's conference. They were not invited to any sessions except the platform meetings and some Classes. They met together for discussion and prayer. In 1892 such a group attended the men's conference and lived at the Merriam Cottage on Main Street. Mrs. Bailey, who was Mrs. Speer's mother, chaperoned us. At one of the sessions in Stone Hall, one of the girls [Editor's Note: Actually May Whittle herself] sat beside C. K. Ober and said impulsively to him, "Why can't we have a girls' conference and fill this place with girls instead of men?" "You can," he responded sympathetically. "Go ahead and start it." That was enough, and that day a petition to Mr. D. L. Moody was written and many sheets pasted together for signatures o/both men and women. Confidentially, the leaders of the men's conference were delighted at the prospect of eliminating a distracting element.*

*In the fall of that year, this girl took the petition to Dublin, Ireland, where Mr. D. L. Moody was conducting a mission. She met again with an enthusiastic response and the condition that ifshe could persuade the Y.W.C.A. to work up the conference in the colleges, he would invite them to Northfield. Accordingly, the petition was taken to Chicago, where the President of the Y.W.C.A., Mrs. John V. Fawell, lived. She showed sincere interest and promised to bring it to her executive committee. This she did, with the result that they agreed to visit the colleges and invite delegations "to attend Mr. Moody's conference at Northfield". [Incidentally, that petition, which was addressed to Mr. D. L. Moody, was not returned, and I have never been able to trace it.]*

*The first girls' conference met at Northfield, June 22-30, 1893. About two hundred girls attended, among them seven from Great Britain. The program for this first conference was as follows: two Bible classes each day for the entire conference. From 9 to 10 the "workers" Bible Training Class with Mr. James McConaughy. The theme was the Christian's life among men, and dwelt on the method of the Saviour with men and women, making adaptation to those present. It gave practical help to all and created in many a desire for soul winning*



*in college and home life. The second class from 10 to 11 was led by Robert Speer in The Gospel of Work. Besides these two Bible classes, there were three conferences each morning: one for college girls, one for city girls, and a third for the general conference on "work for young women by young women". The entire afternoon was given to recreation. There was a twilight meeting on Round Top and an eight o'clock meeting in Stone Hall with one of the following speakers: Mr. D. L. Moody, Mrs. Bainbridge, Mrs. Beech of China, Major Whittle, Miss Grace Dodge, Mrs. Gibbons-Aberdeen, Mr. Robert E. Speer, Mr. A. J. Gordon, and Mrs. G. C. Needham.*

*This college conference continued until the summer of 1902, when the leaders decided to take it to Silber Bay [on Lake Michigan]. Mr. D. L. Moody had died in December, 1899, and without his strong leadership, the conference changed its emphasis from inspiration to organization. There was no girls' conference in 1902 as there was no desire to confuse the girls as to which place to attend. From Northfield Echoes for 1902 I have copied this report:*

*"Last year, during the Young Women's Conference at Northfield, the Henry Moore Cottage was opened for the first time for girls from private boarding schools. Although the college girls had been coming for many years to the Northfield gatherings, and boys from preparatory schools attended the Student Conferences, no effort had previously been made to bring this privilege within the reach of the private schools for girls. Their hearty appreciation of the days at Northfield last summer was shown by the large increase in numbers this year. The Henry Moore Cottage proved to be too small to accommodate all who came, even though the regular young women's conference was omitted this year." "The conferences at Northfield have been to college men and to college girls a source of real inspiration and strength. Many young men and women have testified and proved that their lives have been made richer and more useful because of the time spent at Northfield the consideration of those things which are most worthwhile. We all need to take time, in the busy lives we lead, to quietly listen to the voice of God, that the soul life, as well as the mind and body, may grow in beauty and power."*

*In 1903, the first Boarding School conference started, which became the nucleus of our present conference, with one hundred boarding school girls and two hundred others, making three hundred in all, meeting July 7 to 10.*

*In 1905, the Northfield League was suggested by Mrs. Speer for, as she put it, "We need a piece of string to hold us together between conferences...!"*

*The conferences grew from three hundred to nine hundred and about 1919, we held two conferences, each attended by about six hundred girls. Who can estimate the countless contacts made with God through this channel of His word?*

*What May Whittle had not needed to say in her report, since it was already well known to her audience, was how closely she had shepherded the Conference along through all these years. Northfield had become her home ground. A year after the 1893 conference, she married the Moody's elder son, William, and in 1899, on Moody's death, the two of them assumed the responsibility of the Northfield School. And as she sat down after giving this historical account in 1929, she can hardly have imagined how long the associa-*

tion with the Conference was to continue. William Moody had retired from the headmastership in 1925, and was to die in 1933; but she continued on, living in the homestead on the school grounds and serving as honorary President of the League. She continued to host receptions for members of the Conference every year unless poor health prevented it, and did not die until 1963, the year of the Conference's 70th anniversary, at the venerable age of ninety-three.

The tale of the early years of the Conference contained in Mrs. Moody's final report was supplemented in 1963 by a superb anniversary publication, *Foundations in Faith, 1893-1963*, complete not only with a judicious and sensitively drawn narrative of the years between but also with the lists of office-holders, conference speakers, topics, names of board members, and other statistics invaluable to an historian. Only one thing is missing, the reminiscent characterization of the people who were important to Northfield in those years and who now, sadly, are no more than names to the majority of us Northfielders. So quickly can the lights darken and the curtain drop. Of course this publication was also written by and for the very people who had done so much to benefit the Conference and they modestly hid their own by no means inconsiderable lights discreetly under a bushel. All of that needs to be remedied, before it is really too late to call back to life even faint echoes of the unusually rich mix of vibrant personalities that, as witnesses have testified repeatedly (while at the same time omitting what Pooh-Bah called "corroborative detail") made conference after conference such an unforgettable and often glowing experience.

Looked at from the perspective of 1993, those middle years of the Conference were seemingly halcyon ones — the Conference's heyday. The world's only conference organized for women and run entirely by women prospered. On one occasion in the early 1930s the number of conferees sank as low as one hundred, much to Mrs. Moody's distress, but by 1935, in Georgiana Sibley's golden days, rose again to five hundred. She and Sarah Gamble were even dissatisfied with that, looking for explanation to the College Board Examinations, rising costs, "June parties," summer camps and full time summer jobs — competing interests that were destined to cause anxiety steadily and would take much larger bites out of the Conference constituency in the future. In that decade Conference business was so demanding that for a number of years the Board hired an executive secretary to work full-time out of a central office in New York City.

Work by resourceful and committed volunteers made the Conference almost a year-round activity. Such files from those years that still exist show an extraordinary range of communications sent or events scheduled to keep the Conference community actively engaged in the months between the big Conferences each June. "The Message of the Northfield League," a compendium of newsletter, Bible readings, prayers that Bertha Harlan had begun compiling and sending out monthly to League members during her term as secretary was continued until 1944. A New Testament for girls, small enough to fit into a pocket, went out to thousands. Local League branches were organized to engage in social work, support missions in China and hold Bible classes during winter and summer vacations. For years, a Candlelight service on December 1st was a much-appreciated staple of the winter program in Boston. Luncheons, teas, and evening programs, with speakers (among whom the girls themselves figured prominently) were held to recruit new members, sometimes taking advantage of films of the conference made available by Marie Baldwin. There

were even, by popular demand, winter weekends, some of them at inns not far from the Northfield campus. In the Fall there was a “Northfield Day” with a program as close as possible to a typical June Conference day. This event always included a speaker carefully chosen for a lively approach to religion which, though possibly a bit strange to older ears, might be expected to appeal instantaneously to younger ones. [A report of such a day in 1957 was submitted by Edith Bradley, Regional Chairman for Brattleboro, Vermont. After a brief synopsis of the talk, which was capaciousy entitled *Commitment — Sin — Faith — Love*, she noted that: lithe speaker’s method of presenting his material was somewhat startling and very modern in idiom and phrasing. However, because his method was so direct, he succeeded in capturing the complete attention of the young people in his audience.” This perfectly captures the oft-experienced ambivalence to which Board members, with unexpected surprise and dismay, could find themselves increasingly vulnerable as they grew older.]

The only really significant change — and a dramatic one it certainly was — was the decision to break the old Conference up into three parts: the Erie Area, the Middle Atlantic Area, and the Northern Area, each of which could run their own annual conference independent of the others in mode of operation and financial support, though with the program of each one subject to the approval of the League whose Board members would continue to meet twice a year for the business of the conferences and for the continued inspiration of the members.

The possibility of such a change had been foreshadowed during World War Two, when travel conditions forced the Conference to divide up into several small ones in different parts of the country or risk the conferees being unable to assemble together at all. In 1943, there were three separate conferences one at Dana Hall School in Massachusetts, one at Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, and one at the Masters’ School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, and, as in 1902, with no conference held at Northfield at all. Five hundred girls attended in all — about the number that had hitherto customarily attended the one conference at Northfield. Changing conditions made it possible for all but the girls from the Erie Area to return to Northfield in 1944. However, In 1945 it was necessary again to assemble away from Northfield, and this time the Conference amoeba sub~divided into no less than seven sections, with much smaller local conferences held in Albany, Boston, Erie, New York, Philadelphia, Rochester and Washington. They lasted for only two to five days instead of the traditional week which proved to be too short a time in which to achieve the spiritual depth and unity of feeling that made the traditional conference so highly prized.

In 1946, with the war over, the conferences were resumed on the Northfield campus. Erie, troubled by the distance and the increasing cost of travel, as well as alive to the possibility of attracting more girls if the conference was held nearer home, stayed at Westminster College. The wisdom of that decision soon became apparent when the number attending, which had been around twenty-five when the group had last ventured as far as Northfield in 1942, grew to one hundred once the conference was comfortably rooted at Westminster. The increasing success of this experiment stimulated further thinking at the old home base and, after long consideration, it was agreed in 1952 that the Middle Atlantic Area also should break off and hold conferences independently. Just as at Erie their numbers soon rose to around one hundred conferees.

The three conferences have continued their separate existence every since. [Note: this article was written in 1993. The Erie Conference met for the last time in 2009 and the Middle Atlantic in 2005.]

In 1993, therefore, the Erie Area celebrates its 50th anniversary and the Middle Atlantic Area celebrates its 40th anniversary as independent entities within the overarching umbrella of the Northfield League. It is entirely appropriate that both conferences should wish to celebrate this moment in our mutual existence by writing their own accounts of their individual histories. A first draft of an Erie history sent to me by Vicky Curtze has been of great help to me in writing the final section of this article, as has the collection of successive Middle Atlantic Annual Reports to The Northfield League kindly sent me by Toni Neil. The time is not yet arrived, however, when the histories of the Erie and Middle Atlantic Conferences, combined with one of the Northern Area Conference's 40 years of independent existence, can be combined in a further installment of the Northfield Conference's ever-extending tale. A few conclusions and highly tentative observations based on what information is currently available to this author, however, may be helpful, if only in stimulating further inquiry. First of all, a reading of the annual League Reports leaves two impressions that seem on the surface puzzlingly contradictory and beg for further reflection, but are nonetheless to some degree validated by my own memories of League meetings I have attended over the years.

At the time of the sub-division of the old East Northfield Conference into three, great care was taken by the League to keep constant communication between the three and a dynamic sense of a common purpose strong, so that the sense of community that had been such a prized part of the old Conference experience would not be lost. A major reason for the League meetings was to foster that spirit. Yet the shyly formal courtesy with which members of one or other of the conferences reported to the League about their requisite visits to one of the conferences not their own, the relief when they were hospitably received, and the vulnerability displayed by the conference so visited when, as agreed custom required the visitors handed in their "constructive" critique, paints a picture, patently obvious in every letter or report in the record, of three separate entities, who, though systematically inter-connected, find themselves much more aware of the things that are dissimilar than of the things they share, while at the same time an inner voice keeps telling them that they ought to feel as one.

What makes this impression so puzzling, however, is that other documentary evidence points in the opposite direction. To read sequentially all the annual conference reports from all three conferences to the League year after year after year is to become convinced of the very Similarity of the three conferences. In what they try to do and in how they try to do it (though not necessarily at the same time) the three conferences are extraordinarily alike. Programs to deal with social issues including the problems of injustice, racial prejudice, drug addiction, alcoholism, broken families, AIDS, etc. crop up in all three at one time or another. Making the Bible come alive, learning better how to pray, learning something about other religions and discovering ways to worship that genuinely enrich the soul and deepen an awareness of the presence of the Divine are important to all three. Progressive efforts to bring all the various and inevitably diverse elements of the conference together to play an active, responsible role in determining the direction it needs to follow have been made by all three. The three conferences are as one in flexibly fine-tuning their

individual programs so as to meet as many as possible of the conference and conferees perceived needs while offending as few members as possible. And when greater need seems to require offending someone's or some group's sensitivities, doing so openly and honestly, with ample time made available for, as the modern buzzword has it, "processing" the resulting unhappiness or anger. In doing so, however reluctantly at times, all three conferences demonstrate the genuine respect for all conferees (and all people) which has, over the years, quite apart from the particular forum, been an essential component of the transforming love, often out of great pain, that has given the conferences their unique power. Evaluations of conferees of all three conferences attest to that again and again.

Which brings me back almost to my beginning and Dwight Moody. In the conclusion to the article on him in the 1958 Encyclopedia Britannica, the author wrote "*His sermons were colloquial, simple, full of conviction and to the point In his theology, he laid stress on the Gospel, not on sectarian opinions. His intense sympathy for, and insight into the individual, his infinite practical skill and tact, his genius for organization, his honesty, his singular largeness and sweetness of spirit and his passion for mending and winning souls made him, in spite of his scholastic defects, one of the greatest of modern evangelists*". Despite our own individual imperfections and corporate failures of vision, we can clearly see that, no matter how occasionally halting or at what a distance, the Northfield Conference that May Whittle dreamed of and Dwight Moody brought into being does indeed still "follow in his train"!