Recovering Voices of Mainline Protestantism in Appalachia

by

Thomas Dale Hilton

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Abstract

Between 1955 and 1986, the Appalachian Preaching Mission brought an array of notable Christian speakers from across the country in Northeast Tennessee. Although the preaching mission did seek to convert people to Christianity, its main purpose was to have Christians deepen their faith and become more active in their churches. Early in its existence, the preaching mission drew in crowds of thousands of attendees per night and had tremendous support from the community. Many of the speakers were recognized at the national level. The Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University contains seven boxes of records from the preaching mission, including audio of 332 sermons. Although the preaching mission was a highly influential and anticipated annual event for many years, documentation of its influence is not readily available outside the collection. In an effort to increase access to the collection and provide information on the preaching mission, I have created a website that contains selected items from the collection, along with streaming audio of 21 selected sermons. This website brings to light the preaching mission’s organizational structure, community impact, and unique place in the history of mainline Protestantism in Appalachia. These records tell the story of an important local religious event; distribution of select contents from the collection via the internet aims to increase interest and deepen understanding of religious heterogeneity in Appalachia and its relation to mainline Protestantism and religion in general at a national level. Such distribution will also give the local community easy access to valuable information on their local religious history.
Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, members of various local Protestant Christian churches in Northeast Tennessee organized an annual event that brought in large crowds consisting of members of various denominations, races, and economic backgrounds. This event brought influential nationally-recognized preachers to speak before crowds consisting of thousands of people; local churches often cancelled services so their congregations could attend this event, and recorded sermons from the event were often broadcast on local radio and television.\(^1\) The event I am referring to was the Appalachian Preaching Mission, which ran from 1955 to 1986. Although the preaching mission had a significant impact on the community for a number of years, its influence is not widely acknowledged today. Articles and advertisements of the preaching mission appeared in local newspapers such as the *Johnson City Press-Chronicle*, but they are not readily available to the researcher and provide only a glimpse of the vast and complex history of the preaching mission.

An information source that provides a much more comprehensive view of the preaching mission, however, does exist. The Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, holds the Appalachian Preaching Mission Records, which contain various items pertaining to the preaching mission. This collection was donated by the First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City and contains textual documents including speaker lists, financial statements, correspondence, promotional materials, and orders of service; the documents in total measure 3.5 linear feet. This collection also contains 332 audiotapes, one 16mm film, and several photographs.\(^2\) The Appalachian Preaching Mission Records show not only the organizational structure and details of the preaching mission, but also the mission’s

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unique place in Appalachian and national religious history. Although the word “Appalachian” was part of the mission’s title, the Appalachian Preaching Mission was different from the view of Appalachia held by some scholars. Such scholars thought Appalachia as being isolated and viewed religion in Appalachia as being restricted to rural fundamentalist churches that were not associated with mainline churches. Instead, the Appalachian Preaching Mission was typical of mainline Protestantism popular in suburban and urban areas across the United States.

The Appalachian Preaching Mission Records contain a large number of documents about a major annual religious event that lasted more than three decades. This collection is rarely accessed by patrons, as there are no user copies of the audiotapes in the collection, even though the collection was processed over 30 years ago. Patrons’ lack of access is probably due to the seemingly less interesting content of the collection, as they frequently access collections that deal with “exotic” serpent handling.³ In the early twenty-first century, archival patrons commonly seek information online; archivists should take advantage of this change and be willing to make materials accessible over the internet when possible. In her article “What is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?,” Kate Theimer argues that archivists need to embrace modern technology and make archival objects available over the internet with users in mind. The Archives 2.0 model emphasizes the role of the archivist as an interpreter rather than simply a custodian and encourages users to submit their own information and opinions about a collection. This model also encourages sharing and promotion of archives, and not putting the duty on the user to just

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³ Collections in the Archives of Appalachia that deal with serpent handling include the Thomas G. Burton-Ambrose N. Manning Collection and the Thomas Burton and Jack Schrader Films; use of such collections is evidenced by the existence of user copies.
seek out archives themselves. This model will not only attract more users, but will allow for more interactions between the archivist and the community.  

While it is true archivists may not have enough resources to digitize full collections, they may be able to digitize materials that provide a well-rounded sample from a collection. I have created a website that provides such a well-rounded sampling of the Appalachian Preaching Mission Records. This site contains various documents, including a brochure from every year in the collection, financial statements, promotional materials, and speaker correspondence. Also, the site links to a YouTube channel that streams 24 of the 332 audiotapes in the collection. The website also contains general information on the preaching mission, along with information on speakers and the collection itself. I use some Archives 2.0 techniques such as allowing users to submit information through comments on YouTube videos. The intent of this website is to increase access to information on a significant religious event in Appalachia and, more importantly, should help weaken the view that religion in Appalachia is a homogenous experience that differs significantly from religious experiences in other parts of the United States. Furthermore, this site contains evidence that very influential mainline Protestant speakers spoke at the mission and drew large crowds, thereby affirming the fact that mainline Protestantism held a significant place in Appalachian religion practices and beliefs.

In this paper, I provide a literature review of religion in Appalachia (and more specifically, the Northeast Tennessee region). I then describe in detail the history and organizational structure of the Appalachian Preaching Mission, including its creation and reasons for its demise. Next, I describe the contents of the collection (including audiotapes) and how they

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5 Only providing a sampling for a collection, however, could cause a loss of original order and a misrepresentation of a collection’s content.
show the strong resemblance between mainline Protestantism in Appalachia and mainline Protestantism across the United States. Finally, I describe the creation of the website, the selection of materials placed on the website, and the potential of the website to help change the public perception of religion in Appalachia. The purpose of this paper is to explain the history of the Appalachian Preaching Mission how the website helps to reveal aspects of that history.

**Literature Review**

Although the Appalachian Preaching Mission took place well within the boundaries of Appalachia, it was actually in line with mainline Protestantism being practiced across the United States at the time. The vast majority of literature published on religion in the Appalachian region from the time of the preaching mission until today tend to focus on smaller, fundamentalist churches located in rural areas. I argue this may be attributed to the supposedly more interesting, exotic practices of such churches, especially those that practice gifts of the Holy Spirit such as drinking poison and handling serpents. Some scholars and non-academic writers may have not studied mainline Protestant events such as the Appalachian Preaching Mission as they may have seen them as “boring.” Much of the literature does not acknowledge the various Protestant, Catholic, and non-Christian places of worship that have existed in Appalachia since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Deborah Vansau McCauley’s *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (1995) focuses specifically on “mountain religion,” which McCauley defines as consisting of churches that “exist predominately or almost exclusively in the region and are very special to it.” McCauley does acknowledge that mainline Protestant churches exist in Appalachia and states that such

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churches located in urbanized areas have not been affected by the regional religious culture.7 Throughout the text, McCauley primarily focuses on the history and experiences of churches, such as the Old Regular Baptists and Holiness-Pentecostal ones, that practice “mountain religion.” Such churches tend to engage in exotic religious practices, such as faith healing and speaking in tongues. Members of these churches tend to believe in a literal interpretation of scripture and tend to not to associate with mainline Protestant churches. The few references to mainline Protestantism in the text focus on its contrast to mountain religion churches. For example, in her chapter on Methodism, McCauley discusses the differences between urbanized high Methodist churches and the mountain Methodist churches, and points to members of the urbanized, high Methodist churches often being frustrated at being grouped in with the mountain Methodists, as mountain Methodist churches only represent a small part of Methodism in Appalachia.8 The text tends to show typical mainline Protestant churches as proper and organized and shows mountain religion churches as disorganized and having a literal interpretation of scripture.

In 1999, Bill J. Leonard edited a collection of essays called Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism, which contains a number of essays that address primarily religious practices pertinent to Appalachia.9 Although Leonard’s collection of essays contains a more diverse group of writings on religious practices than does the McCauley text, it still only references mainline Protestantism in Appalachia as a contrast to unique rural religious practices. In his introductory essay, Leonard discusses Mary Lee Daugherty’s four groups of Protestants in Appalachia: mainline churches, evangelical churches, Pentecostal churches, and mountain churches. According to Daugherty, mainline churches are denominationally oriented, have

7 McCauley, Appalachian Mountain Religion, 2.
8 Ibid., 242-244.
9 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).
ministers who were trained at a seminary, and often have organized services with a liturgy. Mainline Protestant denominations include American Baptist U.S.A., Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. Evangelical churches feature worship that is less formal than mainline churches and tend to focus on individual conversion experiences. Pentecostal churches practice signs of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and healing. Mountain churches include mainly independent Holiness and smaller Baptist denominations and are closely linked to mountain culture. Most essays in this collection tend to explore mountain churches and explain that some of these mountain churches have evangelical and Pentecostal elements. One essay in this collection, “The Presbyterians in Central Appalachia” by H. Davis Yeuell and Marcia Clark Meyers mostly focuses on the difficulties of the Presbyterian Church integrating into Appalachian culture. Melvin E. Dieter’s essay called “Wesleyan/Holiness Churches” details the history of Holiness Churches in Appalachia and how they emerged from Methodism; however, no mention is made of Methodism in Appalachia after the beginning of the Holiness movement. Not all essays deal exclusively with Protestantism; “Catholic Mission and Evangelization” by Lou F. McNeil discusses some history of Catholics in Appalachia and efforts to spread the Catholic faith. In sum, Christianity in Appalachia describes the relationship of certain denominations of mainline Protestantism to religious practices distinctive to the region, but does not expand on the practices of Appalachian mainline Protestant denominations themselves.

Many works show churches in Appalachia as exotic, disorganized, and adherents to Biblical literalism, including churches that practice snake handling. In Serpent-Handling

10 Leonard, Christianity in Appalachia, xxi-xxii.
11 Ibid., 189-207.
12 Ibid., 227-242.
13 Ibid., 257-277.
Believers (1993) by Thomas Burton, the author explores a number of serpent handling churches, several located in East Tennessee. Snake handling is based on Mark 16:17-18 which states that followers of Christ are commanded to take up serpents, drink poison, and cast out demons as evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Snake handling became established in Appalachia after George Hensley’s personal religious experience in 1912 in Southeast Tennessee.\(^{14}\) Dennis Covington’s Salvation on Sand Mountain (1995) offers another glimpse of snake handling. Covington becomes a regular attendee of a church in Scottsboro, Alabama, that believes the power of the Holy Spirit allows believers to take up serpents, drink poison, and exhibit other miraculous signs.\(^{15}\) A number of other texts also explore snake handling in Appalachia.\(^{16}\) The existence of numerous popular texts on snake handling is further evidence that scholarship in Appalachia tends to concentrate on exotic practices, even if those practices are rare and not representative or religion in Appalachia at large.

Howard Dorgan has written several texts on religion in Appalachia that conforms to McCauley’s definition of mountain religion. In Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations (1987), Dorgan explores several Baptist subdenominations unique to Appalachia. Although the churches described in this text do not perform such exotic practices as snake handling, some do practice faith healing and are overall isolated from mainline Protestant groups.\(^{17}\) Another notable Dorgan work, In the Hands of a Happy God: The “No-Hellers” of Central Appalachia (1997), discusses how the concept of

\(^{14}\) (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 5-9.

\(^{15}\) Dennis Covington, Salvation on Sand Mountain (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).


\(^{17}\) (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).
“salvation for all” was absorbed in several Independent Baptist churches in Appalachia. Like the other Dorgan text, the churches studied tend to be isolated from mainline Protestant groups and unique to the Appalachian region.18

Some authors do try to dispel the stereotypes that exist about religion in Appalachia. In Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands (1999), Loyal Jones states that educated missionaries sometimes characterized rural Appalachians as ignorant and “underdeveloped people.” Furthermore, this text states that “Mainline Christians believed strongly that Appalachian people had to be saved from themselves.”19 Such statements suggest that mainline Christianity does not have a history of its own in Appalachia. While this text details the depth and variety of religious experiences in rural mountainous areas of Appalachia, it does not dispel the notion that the Christianity practiced in Appalachia is vastly different from Christianity practiced elsewhere in the United States.

As described in local historical texts, mainline Protestantism in Appalachia has a long history. History of Washington County, Tennessee (2001) contains a number of essays on churches arranged by religious denomination in Washington County, Tennessee, where some services of the Appalachian Preaching Mission took place. A vast majority of denominations and churches described in this text adheres to Daugherty’s definition of mainline Protestantism.20 For example, Episcopalian missionaries first came to Northeast Tennessee in 1859 and later they built a sizable Episcopal church in Johnson City in 1905.21 Large groups of Lutherans settled in the region in the 1790s, and established a number of congregations in the region during the

18 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).
1800s. White Methodist circuit riders first visited the region in the 1780s and a number of white Methodist churches were established in the region; black Methodist churches were later established. Some of the earliest settlers in the region were Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the 1770s; they established a number of urban and rural Presbyterian churches thereafter. The only essay in this text that describes a denomination that may fit the Appalachian stereotype of “mountain religion” is an essay on the General Council of the Assemblies of God, written by J. Samuel Rasnake. Members of this denomination believe in speaking in tongues as initial evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; however, these churches are part of the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world. Although such local histories show that mainline Protestantism is indeed a major part of religion in Appalachia, scholarship at large has rarely recognized its presence and much less its significance.

Although Protestant Christians are by far the largest religious group in Appalachia, Jews, Catholics, and Muslims reside in the region. A Separate Circle: Jewish Life in Knoxville, Tennessee (2001) by Wendy Lowe Besmann states the Jewish community was established in Knoxville as early as 1876. As told in Coalfield Jews: An Appalachian History by Deborah R. Weiner, a number of Jews from Russia settled in central Appalachia during the great Jewish migration of 1880-1924. Catholicism also has a long history in Appalachia; Catholic parishes were established in Appalachia as early as 1840. Several works tell of specific Catholic communities in Appalachia. For example, in Mountain Sisters: From Covenant to Community in Appalachia, the authors describe a group of Catholic Sisters performing social justice work in

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27 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
rural Kentucky. Finally, Muslims constitute a small percentage of the Appalachian population and there exists some scholarship on this group. For example, Saundra K. Reynolds’ 2015 thesis “Media Representation of Islam and Muslims in Southern Appalachia” discusses negative media portrayals of Muslims in the Appalachian region.

Non-Protestants also have a rich history specifically in the Northeast Tennessee region. As told in an essay on Catholicism in by Mary D. Manning, Catholic masses have been held in Washington County since 1888. Catholics founded what later became St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Johnson City in 1905, which still exists to this day and is the only Roman Catholic Church in Johnson City. The B’nai Shalom Congregation, a Jewish Synagogue-community, has been in operation in the Tri-Cities since 1905; their history is documented in the Congregation B'nai Sholom Records in the Archives of Appalachia. Clearly, there are many churches, Protestant and non-Protestant, in Appalachia that do not conform to mountain religion.

Churches that meet Daugherty’s definition of mainline Protestantism have a long and complex history. National identity, class, and race are forces within mainline Protestantism highly relevant during the years of the Appalachian Preaching Mission (1955-1986). Certain scholarship, such as Will Herberg’s Protestant, Catholic, Jew provides a general history of American Protestantism from its transfer from Europe to the New World, to the creation of various denominations. Herberg eventually argues that Protestantism became synonymous with “being American.” When Protestant, Catholic, Jew was published in 1960, Herberg even argued that “there are many parts of the nation in which it (Protestantism) is virtually identical with the American people.” This is primarily due to Protestants comprising an extremely high percentage

of the population in some states, among them North Carolina.\textsuperscript{33} Other works also describe Protestantism’s near equivalency with being a white American. Charles H. Anderson’s \textit{White Protestant America} (1970) argues that “Protestantism has been formally or informally the nation’s established religion.”\textsuperscript{34} People of different classes historically have been segregated in American mainline Protestant churches. Anderson argues that white Protestants have been overrepresented in the American upper-class. Anderson describes a vast majority of upper-class Protestants are described as being in mainline denominations, such as Episcopalian and Presbyterian.\textsuperscript{35} Classes were segregated primarily because the various Protestant church denominations formed their own social communities over time.\textsuperscript{36}

A text certainly relevant to the period in which the Preaching Mission took place is James Hudnut-Beumler’s \textit{Looking for God in the Suburbs} (1994). This text follows the rise in church attendance and religious affiliation in the 1950s and details mainline Protestantism’s becoming a dominant part of American culture.\textsuperscript{37} A major factor contributing to the spread of Protestantism (and religion in general) was the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Some people were drawn to the pacifism of some Christian churches that hoped to put an end to nuclear war; others thought the nuclear threat and the spread of communism were signs of the end times discussed in the Bible.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, the text discusses the decline of mainline churches beginning in the 1960s. This was partly due to the popularity of certain philosophical writings (such as Gabriel Vahanian’s \textit{The Death of God} and William Hamilton’s essay “Thursday’s Child: The Theologian Today and Tomorrow”) that declared there was no longer a place for a living God in

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\textsuperscript{33} Herberg, \textit{Protestant, Catholic, Jew}, 124, 134.
\textsuperscript{35} Anderson, \textit{White Protestant America}, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 150.
\textsuperscript{37} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 32-34.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 13-14.
\end{flushright}
society; instead, the life of Jesus simply served as an example for others to follow.\textsuperscript{39} Also, many large mainline churches were located in urban areas and as members of those churches moved to suburban areas, membership declined.\textsuperscript{40}

This paper adds to the literature of religion in Appalachia, American mainline Protestantism, and local religious history. It shows that mainline Protestantism in Appalachia was strong enough to attract nationally-known speakers from large churches in urban areas and to attract crowds of thousands. This paper also demonstrates that a collection such as the Appalachian Preaching Mission Records can shed light on both religious practices and beliefs in Appalachia, as well as in the nation as a whole. Distribution of a selection of the collection’s records over the internet can contribute to deeper understanding of religion in Appalachia and help dispel the notion that mountain religion is a predominant religious force in the region.

**What Exactly is a Preaching Mission?**

Before I discuss the Appalachian Preaching Mission itself, the term “preaching mission” needs to be defined. Although I was unable to find an exact definition of the term, in previous literature the use of the term has a consistent meaning in line with the Appalachian Preaching Mission. Many uses of the term are associated with Anglican and Episcopal church practices. An early use of the term “preaching mission” can be found in the 1915 publication *A Manual: A Nation-wide Preaching Mission*. The Episcopal Church planned a nationwide preaching mission to take place among all of its churches in the United States, and this text gives churches instructions on how to conduct the preaching mission. This publication defines a mission as a “special effort to convert souls to God. It is a concentration of spiritual effort upon one place for

\textsuperscript{39} Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs*, 186.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 196.
a short time.”\textsuperscript{41} The nationwide preaching mission sought to place this spiritual effort among “the great majority of parishes and missions of the whole Church.”\textsuperscript{42} During this preaching mission, ministers of individual Episcopal churches exchanged congregations for a short period of time to deliver sermons that would touch each person’s soul so that God would become the center of their lives.\textsuperscript{43} As will be seen, the Appalachian Preaching Mission resembled the earlier Episcopalian mission. For example, although the Episcopalian mission took place strictly in Episcopal churches, people individuals from other denominations were invited to participate, particularly if smaller churches conducted a mission.\textsuperscript{44} Also, attendees were invited to fill out “pledge cards” if they wished to rededicate themselves to their church or engage in daily Bible reading and prayer.\textsuperscript{45}

The book \textit{The Contemporary Christ: A Preaching Mission in Action} published in 1917 gives examples of sermons a pastor preached at a smaller preaching mission in Massachusetts and New Jersey.\textsuperscript{46} Sermons included a variety of topics, along with special addresses for men, women, and children.\textsuperscript{47} An article in the 1921 Anglican periodical \textit{The Churchman} claims that the church was unable to conduct a nationwide preaching mission because many in the church saw it as too similar to revivals conducted among evangelical Christians. The author, however, argues that the preaching mission is not merely “an effort to stir the emotions, which causes no

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 15, 18.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., xi-xii.
permanent result.” He then argued that a preaching mission should really be a “teaching mission” in which a preacher should speak on the same subject to a certain congregation eight days in a row; this would allow the congregation to absorb the information in a way that would not be possible during a normal church schedule.

Preaching missions were typically logical and organized while revivals were typically emotional and disorganized. Historically, revival meetings tended to feature emotional preaching and to include activities such as faith healing. In *Great Awakenings: Popular Religion and Popular Culture*, Marshall Fishwick argues that the urban revivals at the turn of the twentieth century were disorganized to the point that they changed their traditional worship practices and abandoned their liturgy. These revivals also involved intense emotions that caused individuals to change their ways of living. As noted earlier, preaching missions are intended to have a noticeable effect on the congregation, but it is to be achieved through repeated instruction and not emotionalism. The writer of the aforementioned *Churchman* article was probably trying to distance preaching missions from the highly emotional and seemingly lower-class urban revivals happening around the same time.

As evidenced through the audiotapes and the descriptions of speakers in the brochures in the collection, the services of the Appalachian Preaching Mission were not very emotional and mostly consisted of sermons preached by well-educated individuals. Although preachers in the Appalachian Preaching Mission usually did not center its sermons on a certain theme, the

49 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
mission’s organized nature, overall lack of extreme emotionalism, and well-educated speakers bring it much closer to the definition of a preaching mission than to a revival.\(^{53}\)

**Beginnings of the Appalachian Preaching Mission**

The Appalachian Preaching Mission held its first services in 1955; it was preceded by another preaching mission that began services six years earlier. In 1949, the Bristol Preaching Mission conducted its first meetings in Bristol, Tennessee. According to a history of the mission by Mac L. Lee, the Bristol Preaching Mission was first conceived at a Bible conference held in Massanetta Springs, Virginia. Attending this conference was pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bristol, Tennessee Julian Lake who became the first chairman of the Bristol Preaching Mission Committee.\(^{54}\) The original purpose of the mission, Lee stated, was to “allow the people of the area to hear great preachers that they would not normally have the opportunity to hear. The emphasis was to reach the church people and revive their spirit and energy.”\(^{55}\) The mission was to last eight consecutive nights with two preachers speaking per night.\(^{56}\) The first Bristol Preaching Mission ran from Sunday, February 6 to Sunday, February 13, 1949 and held afternoon and evening services on every day of the mission except for Saturday. The evening services were held in the Virginia High School Gymnasium and the afternoon services were held in the State Street Methodist Church.\(^{57}\) On its opening night, the mission attracted an audience of more than 5,000 people and included speakers such as Minnesota Congressman Walter Judd,

\(^{53}\) Such categorizations, however, occasionally can be wrong: some revivals may be more organized and less emotional, while some preaching missions may be more emotional and less organized.


\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) Advertisement, *Bristol Herald-Courier*, February 6, 1949.
who spoke against the dangers of communism and the importance of unity among Christians. The topics later became central in the early years of the Appalachian Preaching Mission. On its final night, the school gymnasium was at capacity and potential attendees were being turned away at the door. The crowd enthusiastically called for another mission the following year. The Bristol Preaching Mission successfully continued as an individual mission for six more years; by 1954, the mission attracted very well-known speakers such as African-American civil rights leader Dr. Howard Thurman and Quaker theologian Dr. Elton Trueblood.

Eventually, people from other cities in the region longed for a mission similar to the Bristol Preaching Mission. In 1954, Dr. Ferguson Wood, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City and Johnson City Press-Chronicle editor George Kelly conceived the idea of what would become the Appalachian Preaching Mission. Wood and Kelly held that instead of each city having its own mission, all three of the Tri-Cities should be part of a larger preaching mission where speakers rotate between the three cities. Having speakers preach to three audiences instead of one also would encourage the participation of more well-known speakers. Thus, the Tri-Cities Preaching Mission was born. Johnson City and Kingsport formed their own preaching mission committees along with the existing Bristol committee. In April 1954, members from all three committees met to establish guidelines for the mission, including having a noon speaker on weekdays, reducing publicity expenses, and notifying local schools and civic organizations about preaching mission time and dates so that schedules might not conflict.

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The first Tri-Cities Preaching Mission was held in February 1955 with tremendous support from civic leaders and local churches. The mission took place simultaneously in all three cities, with speakers rotating between the cities. Almost all local churches in the surrounding region cancelled services and local school groups participated.\(^6^4\) The mission was promoted as being completely all-inclusive. Newspaper articles stated the mission was “inter-denominational and inter-racial” and that “Everybody is welcome. Everybody is wanted. Everybody is needed.”\(^6^5\) Nightly, the mission had a choir of 600 individuals. Sermons included topics that were stirring and controversial such as God potentially punishing the United States with destruction from hydrogen bombs for its sins.\(^6^6\) The mission was a spectacular success and Dr. Wood, chairman of the Johnson City Mission, promised an even greater mission the following year.\(^6^7\) Following the success of the 1955 mission, Elizabethton sought to join the mission.\(^6^8\) With the addition of Elizabethton, the name was changed to the Appalachian Preaching Mission beginning in 1956.\(^6^9\)

The large crowds and enormous influence in the early days of the Appalachian Preaching Mission were consistent with the increasing influence and church membership of Protestant churches in the 1950s throughout the United States. During this period, church attendance rose rapidly, rising from just 36 percent in 1900 to 60 percent in 1955.\(^7^0\) Around this period, about two-thirds of the entire United States population identified as Protestant.\(^7^1\) Even among non-Protestants during this period, religion was a way of life; in a 1952 research survey conducted by

\(^{6^7}\) Ibid.
\(^{6^8}\) Lee, “The Appalachia Preaching Mission in Johnson City.”
\(^{7^0}\) Fishwick, Great Awakenings, 105-106.
\(^{7^1}\) Hudnut-Beumler, Looking for God in the Suburbs, 34.
Ben Gaffin & Associates, around 99 percent of the population professed a belief in God. Not only was religion a way of life for many people, it became central to the American identity. President Dwight Eisenhower supported many reforms that linked religion to nation, such as changing the national motto to “In God We Trust” and adding the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.

Some scholars, such as Benjamin E. Zeller, even claim that Christianity during this era had become “institutionalized.” A major reason for this institutionalization of religion was to unite all Americans together to battle the threat of communism during the Cold War. The large crowds in the early years of the Appalachian Preaching Mission certainly seemed to be in line with the popularity of religion in mainline Protestant America. Furthermore, with local schools, civic institutions, and local government leaders supporting the mission, it seems as though supporting the mission had become synonymous with being a citizen of the Tri-Cities region. Finally, while the ecumenism that existed in the preaching mission was significant, it was not completely surprising for its time. In 1950 the National Council of Christ (NCC) in the United States of America was founded to unify Christianity. This council included twenty-five Protestant denominations along with four Eastern Orthodox Patriarchies. According to scholar Thomas C. Berg, the NCC sought to promote unity across all denominations of Christianity, including what the NCC considered fringe groups such as Pentecostals; the NCC urged mainline denominations to look to such smaller sects, some of which were included in the Appalachian Preaching Mission.

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72 Hudnut-Beumler, Looking for God in the Suburbs, 41.
73 Ibid., Suburbs, 50-51.
75 Ibid., 341.
76 Ibid., 333.
Preaching Mission, for “examples of vigor and missionary spirit.” Clearly, the Appalachian Preaching Mission’s popularity and interdenominational nature was in line with general American Protestantism during this time period.

**Preachers and the Sermons They Preached**

Although the title for the mission was the “Appalachian Preaching Mission,” most of the preachers who spoke at the mission were not actually from the Appalachian region, as the main purpose of the mission was to bring to the Tri-Cities region speakers whom residents had never heard. As evident in the yearly official programs, a majority of preachers at the mission were pastors of mainline Protestant churches in urban areas. Among mainline Protestant preachers, Presbyterians and Methodists were most numerous, though a number of pastors of Baptist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Lutheran, and Episcopal churches were represented. Pastors from evangelical denominations also spoke at the mission, including ones from Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Church of the Nazarene, Churches of Christ, and a few Pentecostal churches. It should be noted, however, that pastors from the evangelical and non-mainstream denominations tended to be very well-known and close to mainstream Christianity. For example, Pentecostal preacher Earl Paulk, Jr., who spoke at the mission in 1959 was president of the Atlanta Pentecostal Fellowship but also supported social causes associated with mainline Protestantism such as promoting unsegregated congregations, as Paulk himself eventually led a

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78 Lee, “The Appalachia Preaching Mission in Johnson City.”
large interracial congregation. James A. Forbes, another Pentecostal minister who spoke at the mission, later became pastor of the liberal Riverside Church in New York City. Efforts were made to secure additional conservative speakers: evangelist Billy Graham was commonly requested though never secured due to his extremely high demand elsewhere.

The preachers at the mission exhibited more than just denominational diversity. Since its earliest years, the preaching mission included several African-American speakers such as civil rights leader Leon H. Sullivan and Baptist pastor Kelly M. Smith. As far as gender, however, the preaching mission was not very inclusive. Minutes from an early meeting of the mission show that the committee unanimously voted that women would not be allowed to speak at the mission. In 1969, a single woman did speak at the mission: philanthropist Gertrude Behanna. 1978, 1979, and 1980 each had a single female speaker and in 1982 a husband and wife team spoke as part of a marriage enrichment seminar. All women who spoke at the mission were not pastors of church congregations, but were Christian authors, actors, or lecturers. This was not totally surprising, as female clergy in Protestant denominations during this time period usually held fewer pastoral positions than did their male counterparts. Nevertheless, despite the racial

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81 Various suggested speakers lists, APM Records.
83 Committee meeting minutes, 1958, box 2, folder 11, APM Records.
and denominational diversity, the speakers and leadership of the mission was almost entirely male-dominated during its run.

Certain speakers in the collection are particularly notable. For example, George Docherty whom spoke at the 1958 preaching mission was monumental in adding the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. Harold Ockenga, whom also spoke at the 1958 preaching mission, was a noted minister, Christian scholar, and a founder of the neo-evangelicalism movement, which sought to combine Christian fundamentalism with social responsibility. Norman Vincent Peale, who spoke at the 1974 mission, was writer of the highly influential book *The Power of Positive Thinking* which became a Christian’s guide on how to transform one’s life though changed thinking patterns and increased Bible reading. Dr. Charles Allen, minister of the largest Methodist church in the world (First United Methodist Church, Houston Texas), quickly became a favorite at the mission and was invited back to preach numerous times.

Although the sermons preached at the mission varied on their exact subjects, common themes were apparent. A number of sermons, particularly those preached early in the mission’s run, focused on current events and the proper Christian response to those events. For example, in a 1958 sermon, Presbyterian minister Louis Evans spoke on increasing divorce rates and argued that married couples should live under God instead of living for themselves or each other. Evangelist Harold Ockenga preached on several alleged social problems of the day, such as widespread youth violence, increases in illicit sexual activity, and increases of socialist policies

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91 Louis Evans, sermon, recorded February 9, 1958, open-reel audiotape, tape 9, APM Records.
in government; he then argued that adherence to God’s law can bring stability back to society. Later sermons seemed to be preached straight from Scripture without much of a social context, such as Presbyterian minister Sherrard Rice’s 1971 sermon instructing Christians to be more active in their local churches similar to the church in Antioch described in Scripture, or Methodist minister Charles Allen’s 1973 sermon that provides an exegesis of Psalm 23. The styles of preaching at the mission also varied greatly, from the cool and collected preaching of Church of Christ pastor Harold Hockley to the intense and passionate African-American style of preaching by Leon H. Sullivan.

Many of the sermons preached at the mission were typical of the era. Earlier sermons that focused on the evils of communism and the equivalency of being Christian with being American was common in mainline Christianity following World War II. Later sermons, however, deviated somewhat from typical mainline Protestant sermons. Starting in the mid-1960s, some mainline Protestant churches took up social causes and became more liberal theologically speaking, with some even claiming that “God does not exist.” The sermons of the preaching mission may have differed from the national norm due to the more conservative nature of Protestant churches in the southern United States. Instead, such churches tended to deal with conversion and salvation. Many later sermons of the preaching mission dealt with such topics (though perhaps more on rededication than conversion). Thus, although the later sermons of the

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92 Harold Ockenga, sermon, recorded February 10, 1958, open-reel audiotape, tape 15, APM Records.
95 Hudnut-Beumler, Looking for God in the Suburbs, 76, 86.
mission were more in line with mainline Protestantism specifically in the southern United States, they still were a far cry from “mountain religion.”

Although there was great diversity among preachers and the sermons they preached, one constant theme throughout the Appalachian Preaching Mission was Christian unity. Earlier sermons focused on the need for Christians of different denominations to join together to defeat the forces of communism and anti-Americanism; some later sermons focused on how members of each Christian denomination can exercise unique spiritual gifts. Furthermore, denominational doctrines were generally not the subject of sermons. Occasionally, a preacher made a comment about a practice or distinguishing characteristic within his denomination; such differences, however, were often included as a joke or were mentioned to highlight the diversity that existed among denominations. Since its earliest days, the Appalachian Preaching Mission was promoted as being inclusive to Christians regardless of their denominational affiliation, and the sermons preached at the mission throughout its lifespan largely lived up to that statement.

Structure of the Mission

The structure of the individual services tended to follow a strict time schedule. A typical service from 1963 had a 15-minute song service, 20 minutes for prayer, announcements, and special music, two 25 minute sermons, and finally 10 minutes for decisions followed by the benediction. Congregational singing filled up any additional time. During decision time, ushers typically passed out decision cards that attendees could fill out to note they have made a decision to follow Christ, rededicate themselves to God, join a church, pray for services, or read the Bible. The decisions noted on these cards indicated that most attendees were already Christians; for

97 Johnson City Preaching Mission Wednesday night order of service, February 13, 1963, box 3, folder 7, APM Records.
example, decision statistics from a 1959 service showed that out of 600 decision cards submitted, only 18 noted that a profession of faith was made.98

Offerings given by attendees paid for mission expenses. A good portion of the expenses included honoraria for the speakers and their travel.99 Speakers typically stayed at the John Sevier Hotel in downtown Johnson City, and the mission provided travel to and from speaking engagements.100 There was also a significant amount of publicity about the mission, especially in its early years. Numerous ads and articles can be seen throughout the Johnson City Press-Chronicle before, during, and after the preaching mission; during the mission’s early years, there was a space on the front page counting down the number of days until the preaching mission began. To further increase attendance, the Johnson City Transit Company provided residents of the Keystone and Carver public housing developments free transportation to the event.101

Music at the mission was mostly traditional in nature; typical hymns sung included “Onward Christian Soldiers,” “Trust and Obey,” and “Just as I Am.” Music was led by well-trained song leaders who were in high demand. For example, Reverend Dean Jacoby, who led music at the mission for over a decade, was a professor of music at multiple colleges and was frequently requested as a music leader at revivals and conventions.102 Later missions featured contemporary Christian music; for example, African-American R&B gospel band Andrae Crouch and the Disciples performed during the 1976 and 1977 missions.103

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100 Letter to transportation committee, January 8, 1967, box 6, folder 2, APM Records.
102 1976 Johnson City Appalachian Preaching Mission Official Program, February 1-6, 1976, box 1, folder 3, APM Records.
The Final Years of the Preaching Mission

Although the Appalachian Preaching Mission operated until 1986, signs of its eventual demise were apparent at least sixteen years earlier. In 1970, the Preaching Mission requested feedback from local pastors whose congregation attended the mission. Some of the feedback criticized seemingly insignificant aspects of the mission, such as the decreased publicity and restraint placed on preacher’s sermons by the mission having nightly themes for services. Other feedback was highly critical of the mission as a whole, with one pastor, for example, commenting on the “dead” congregation and the lack of community impact; this pastor also argued for the dissolution of the mission and that the amount of money spent on the mission could better be spent on a television series that would reach a larger audience and that the mission should not be kept alive simply to continue a tradition.104

As the popularity of the preaching mission waned, its service locations switched from mostly secular spaces to strictly religious spaces. For most of its run, nightly services in Johnson City were held at the Memorial Gymnasium on the campus of East Tennessee State College (later East Tennessee State University), while noonday services were held at the Tennessee Theater and later the Capri Theater downtown. Starting in 1975, noonday services took place at the First Presbyterian Church and evening services at the Freedom Hall Civic Center.105 By 1982, all services took place in religious buildings.106 Starting in 1983, there was only one speaker, and all services were held at First Presbyterian Church. According to the Johnson City Press-Chronicle, by this point the preaching missions in Bristol, Kingsport, and Elizabethton had been “dropped due to declining interest,” and the name of the mission was changed to the

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104 Johnson City Preaching Mission opinionaires, 1970, box 6, folder 9, APM Records.
“Johnson City Preaching Mission.”

Due to continually decreasing interest, the Johnson City Preaching Mission was discontinued after the 1986 mission.

Reasons for the shrinking and dissolution of the Appalachian preaching mission are not exactly clear-cut. Perhaps some attendees agreed with the writers of the aforementioned feedback in that the enthusiasm surrounding the mission was waning and it was no longer accomplishing anything worthwhile. Indeed, one wonders if the mission was kept alive in its final years simply for the sake of tradition, considering it had shrunk so considerably that all services were held in one church building with one speaker. Perhaps the end of the mission was related to the decreasing attendance of mainline Protestant churches as a whole. The 1950s were seen as a “golden age” for Protestant Christianity; beginning in the mid-1960s, this golden age was quickly coming to an end as Protestant congregations began seeing a noticeable decrease in membership numbers. Furthermore, in the early to mid-1980s, the conservative “born again” Protestant denominations were experiencing increases in attendance, while the liberal mainline Protestant denominations were experiencing decreases in attendance. This shift was connected to the moral majority arguing for a return to the “old ways” that “made this nation great” such as holding fast to biblical inerrancy that some mainline Protestants had resisted. Regardless of the reason for its demise, the Appalachian Preaching Mission had finally ended its largely successful 31-year run.

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108 Cox, “City’s preaching Mission Conceived in Snack Bar.”
The Appalachian Preaching Mission Records and their Significance

The First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City donated the Appalachian Preaching Mission Records to the Archives of Appalachia in 1984.\textsuperscript{111} This collection contains a plethora of various materials related to the mission, including financial statements, speaker correspondence, photographs, committee minutes, and brochures from every year of the mission between 1955 and 1981. Most of the materials are related to the Johnson City mission, although a few materials originate from the missions in Bristol, Kingsport, and Elizabethton. Also included in the collection are photographs from an evening mission service at the East Tennessee State University Memorial Gymnasium taken circa 1972. Most significantly, the collection contains 332 audiotapes recorded between 1958 and 1977. Audiotapes recorded between 1958 and 1973 are reel-to-reel while audiotapes recorded between 1974 and 1977 are cassettes. Although most audiotapes contain only sermons, some contain music, announcements, and other audio from services. All audiotapes appear to have been recorded at the Johnson City Mission. The audio sermons are particularly significant, as they are in their original, intended format and display the emotions of the speakers, their preaching styles, and sermon topics.

The Appalachian Preaching Mission Records provide a detailed account of the organizational structure and history of the mission. The collection provides the researcher with a detailed account of the mission’s financial history, dates and locations of services, arrangements, committee meeting discussions, attendance figures, and promotional materials used in the mission. Furthermore, this collection recounts the mission’s relationship with local churches, schools, businesses, and civic organizations. Such information can inform the user of the mission’s place in local history and its influence in the community.

Although the collection provides a significant amount of valuable data on the mission, some aspects of the mission still need to be explored. For example, although documents in the collection indicate that businesses and government agencies strongly supported the mission, the level of support from most employees of such businesses and government agencies is unclear. Also, despite almost every advertisement for the preaching mission promoting its interracial nature and black speakers listed as preaching at almost every year of the mission in the brochures, one must wonder how many blacks actually attended the services, as Jim Crow laws were still in effect during the mission’s earliest years and blacks cannot be seen in the 1972 photographs from the collection; the free transportation from public housing developments may have been an effort to increase black attendance. Further research into the collection and the mission itself may answer such questions.

The most important facet of this collection, however, is that it proves that the Appalachian Preaching Mission consisted of extremely noteworthy speakers representative of mainline American Protestantism. This collection also shows that the speakers drew very large crowds and were appreciated by the community, as some were invited back year after year. Biographical sketches and photographs of almost every speaker at the mission are included in the yearly brochures. Attendance reports in the collection show the size of the crowds that such speakers attracted, correspondence between speakers and preaching committee members show the appreciation the speakers had from the community, and the statistics from the decision cards that show large numbers of rededications indicate the positive influence that the speakers had over the attendees. Finally, the very existence of audiotapes in the collection suggests that many
in the Northeast Tennessee area were open to hearing mainline Protestant preaching, as sermons were broadcast on local radio stations.¹¹²

This collection serves as evidence that mainline Protestantism has been a significant force in Appalachia. As discussed previously, however, the lack of scholarly and popular work on this subject has led to the stereotype that mountain religious practices and beliefs predominate throughout Appalachia. Thus, easy and convenient access to this collection will help to spread the view that religion in Appalachia is more diverse than mountain religion, and a significant part of this diversity is mainline Protestantism.

The Digitization of Select Materials from the Collection

The digitization process of the collection began with the selection of audio. I decided to digitize 30 audio sermons (approximately 10 percent of the collection). None of the audiotapes were then in digital form. I intended to select a diverse group of sermons that provided a well-rounded sampling of the mission and a broad range of dates. The only information available on the finding aid were the names of the speakers and the sermon dates. I researched every speaker to find his denominational affiliation, race, and any other information that might have been relevant in making a diverse selection of sermons. Much of this information was obtained from websites of churches where speakers had previously served. The fame and notability of some of the speakers I found surprising; I decided that I would digitize sermons from some of the most notable speakers, even if they were recorded during the same year. I was also impressed with the range of denominations of the speakers. I ended up selecting 28 sermons from a variety of individuals plus two other tapes labeled “Youth Night” and “E.T.S. College Choir.”

¹¹² Appalachian Preaching Mission, audio, open-reel tape, recorded April 20, 1961, Appalachian Preaching Mission Records. Announcement is made that audio is rebroadcast on radio station WETB. Also, on several reel-to-reel tape boxes there are notes that indicate they were broadcast on radio.
The tapes were digitized to compact disc during December 2016 and January 2017. One tape containing a sermon by notable Methodist preacher Ralph W. Sockman seemed to be damaged and therefore could not be digitized. Due to numbering differences between the physical collection and the finding aid, a couple of tapes were “accidentally” digitized and a couple of tapes originally intended to be digitized were left out. This was not a major issue, as I was able to identify the speakers and the digitized sermons still represented a diverse sampling of the collection.

I then listened to every sermon that had been digitized and took notes on the Bible verses read, topics covered, and any other information of interest. I found out that one tape I selected was from a Leighton Ford Crusade at First Presbyterian Church in Johnson City and was not part of the preaching mission. The audio of two other sermons was largely unintelligible and were not worth posting. I also decided not to post the “Youth Night” tape as it contained only a few minutes of muffled music.

Although copyright law did not appear to be a problem for the most part, I decided to contact individuals and churches related to the speakers at the mission as a courtesy. I received responses from most churches and organizations related to the speakers; all responses unanimously approved digitization of the sermons and a few churches (such as the Riverside Church in New York City where Ernest Campbell and James Forbes pastored) expressed desire to share the site with their congregations after the site’s completion. One of the digitized sermons was preached by a gospel singer, who sang several of his songs during the sermon. I tried contacting his music company, but received no response. I decided not to post this sermon due to copyright concerns. I found that another digitized sermon preached by a comedian was virtually
identical to a sermon on a record he had released; this sermon was also not posted because of possible copyright violations.

I then looked through all documents in the Appalachian Preaching Mission Records, both to obtain more information about the mission and to select documents to digitize. I decided to digitize pamphlets from every year of the mission, along with an assortment of other documents that would give users a decent sampling of the collection.

Before uploading the audio to YouTube, I created visuals for every piece of audio. I decided to take images directly from the pamphlets in the collection to create a simple, authentic look. I used Microsoft Paint to combine images of the speakers, their names, and the front of the pamphlets which gave sermons from each year a unique look, as pamphlet styles varied from one year to the next. Several of the audio files were muffled or contained large amounts of static. I used audio programs such as Adobe Audition and Audacity to remove such nuisances. I edited out any music that was under copyright. I also edited out long periods of silence in hopes of keeping high viewer retention. I uploaded 21 sermons along with three audio clips which contain music, announcements, and prayer from the mission. I added descriptions to all videos that contain very brief information on the speaker, the topic preached, and the preaching mission itself, along with a link to the website.

I designed the website using Google Sites. Because my Google Sites homepage had a long and difficult to remember URL, I purchased the domain www.appalachianpreachingmission.org that redirects to the Appalachian Preaching Mission homepage. In keeping with the spirit of Archives 2.0, I made the user the primary focus, even if it meant deviating from established archival norms, such as original order. I wanted the site to be aesthetically pleasing but not to distract from the information on the mission and the archival
materials. All images on the site were taken directly from the collection. There are pages on the site that give information on the collection, the mission itself, and the purpose of the site. Digitized documents are assorted by document type. The original order of the physical textual documents in the collection is by date; I decided to deviate from this order, as several periods of time have very few digitized documents and I think that users might find browsing documents by type more interesting. I placed the seven images of the mission that were from circa 1972 on a single page.

I kept the sermons in their original order by date. YouTube videos are embedded into webpages that give information similar to that on the YouTube video pages, along with links to text of Bible verses referenced in the sermons. Below each embedded video are documents in the collection that users might find relevant. For example, on the page for the 1958 sermon preached by Dr. Louis Evans, relevant documents include a letter from Dr. Evans concerning the mission, the 1958 Johnson City Appalachian Preaching Mission brochure, and a copy of a decision card which attendees were asked to fill out directly after the sermon. Including such documents along with the sermons will not only give users more information on the speakers and the services, but also may give them a glimpse of what it would have been like to be present at a service. I also added notes that indicate what, if any, audio was removed due to copyright restrictions.

Users who visit the site will hear audio that resembles typical mainline Protestant preaching of the time, will see images of mostly white middle-class Protestants, and will see documents that demonstrate the strong influence of mainline Protestantism in the area. Such factors should teach users that by and large religion in Appalachia may not be significantly different from elsewhere in the United States. I intend for the site to remain in operation for many years to come. At some point in the future, I hope that more items from the collection will
be added to the site. I also hope that my project may be seen as an example of how other projects at the Archives of Appalachia may be digitized in the future.

**Conclusion**

The website for the Appalachian Preaching Mission records provides users with a wide array of information about the structure, speakers, attendees, and popularity of the preaching mission. While some users who visit the site may be satisfied with the sampling of materials, others may wish to visit the repository in person to research further. A primary purpose of the site is to spread information on a significant religious event that took place annually for over three decades. The items in the collection, particularly ones that demonstrate the significance of the speakers and the influence of the mission on the area, evidence the fact that mainline Protestant Christianity is a significant part of religion in Appalachia. The collection further evidences that religion in the Appalachian region encompasses far more than “mountain religion” often discussed in literature. I hope the website will stir interest in local religious history and mainline Protestantism, and may even inspire others to digitize archival holdings for others to see.
Works Cited


Appalachian Preaching Mission Records. Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City.


