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Methodist bishop's odyssey an epic ride

By Judy Harrison, BDN Staff

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MIDNIGHT RIDER FOR THE MORNING STAR: From the Life and Times of Francis Asbury, by Mark Alan Leslie, 2008, Francis Asbury Press, Wilmore, Ky., 257 pages, \$14.95, paperback, available online at www.amazon.com.

It was the painting of Francis Asbury, clutching an open Bible, astride a gray steed fording a stream, that inspired a Monmouth writer to pen his novel about the English missionary who planted Methodist churches up and down the Eastern Seaboard as the Revolutionary War raged.

Harry Cochrane's painting of Asbury in the United Church of Monmouth grabbed author Mark Alan Leslie's attention years ago, but he was busy on other projects. Earlier this year, Francis Asbury Press, a small publishing house owned by the Francis Asbury Society in Wilmore, Ky., published "Midnight Rider for the Morning Star."

Asbury was born in Hampstead Bridge, Staffordshire, England, in 1745. He was licensed as a local preacher and at the age of 21 admitted to the Wesleyan Conference, the church founded by John Wesley, the father of Methodism.

In 1771, Asbury volunteered to evangelize in North America and became a resident of Delaware a few years later. He was the first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, now the United Methodist Church, consecrated in the U.S.

When he arrived in the colonies, there were just three Methodist meetinghouses established and about 300 members, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica. By the time of his death at age 70 in 1816 in Spotsylvania, Va., there were 412 Methodist societies with a membership of more than 214,000. He crossed the Allegheny Mountains 60 times and traveled an average of 5,000 miles a year on horseback.

Leslie, himself ordained to

preach by the World Bible Way Fellowship based in DeSoto, Texas, took the title of the book from two New Testament verses — II Peter 1:19 and Revelation 22:16. He spent about two years researching the book and about 18 months writing it. That process did have an impact on Leslie's faith.

"During this exploration and writing," Leslie said in an e-mail response to questions about the book, "the Holy Spirit took me on an amazing ride — from the heights of exhilaration over this man's amazing life and accomplishments to the depths of many uneasy moments when considering the extent of my own 'spirituality.' Most of all, for me, Asbury's life is both convicting and challenging as well as inspiring."

Leslie was born in Eastport but raised in Brewer. He graduated from Brewer High School in 1966 and the University of Maine in 1971 with a journalism degree. He worked for newspapers in Waterville, Lewiston and Portland in the 1970s and '80s.

Before starting his media-relations firm in 2000, Leslie worked 11 years as managing editor and then editor of Golf Course News, a trade publication for the golf industry in the U.S., and Golf Course News International, which covers the industry worldwide.

Also known for his public speaking, Leslie has lectured at regional events and national conferences on golf and the media. He also has taught journalism in an adult education program. The writer described himself as "born again and Holy Spirit-filled in 1983."

In researching the book with his wife, Loy Leslie, he used previous published biographies of Asbury including "A Methodist Saint: The Life of Bishop Asbury," written in 1927 by Herbert Asbury, and "The Pioneer Bishop: The Life and Times of Francis Asbury," written in 1858 by W.P. Strickland.

Asbury's personal journals that he kept throughout his life also proved to be excellent source material, according to the author.

Leslie chose to tell the story of Asbury's adventures in flashbacks as if the minister were reminiscing about his life with a family. That allowed him to do two things, the writer said: Look back and witness the consequences of the preacher's actions and to pull the highlights out of the more than 30 years Asbury spent in America.

"Asbury's life was so huge with such a vast scope," the author said, "that it would be impossible to put it all in one historical novel and still be able to hold it in one hand. Flashbacks also allowed me to address Asbury's accomplishments without getting bogged down by the mile-by-mile travel."

One of the most important decisions the bishop made, according to Leslie, was to refuse to return to England with all of the other preachers when they were ordered home at the start of the American Revolution.

"His remaining here highlighted the character of the man. People were able to trust and respect him and thus were willing to listen to the Gospel he shared," the writer said. "It also put the Methodist Church in good standing with the new government, which was crucial. At a ceremony dedicating a statue of Asbury in Washington, D.C., President Calvin Coolidge said Asbury 'ranks as one of the builders of our nation' and added, 'It was because of what Bishop Asbury ... preached that our country has developed so much freedom and contributed so much to the civilization of the world.'"

Leslie said that after reading the book, pastors in Maine and Massachusetts have invited him to speak and give readings. A professor at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Ind., is using the book as a text in one of his courses at the seminary.

"The story of Asbury's faith really transcends all denominations," the author said.

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