

“He who governed the world before I was born shall take care of it likewise when I am dead. My part is to improve the present moment.”

John Wesley

The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church sprang directly from the work of John Wesley (1703 - 1791) and his brother Charles (1707 - 1788) and was part of the evangelical revival of the 18th century. John and Charles were dedicated to Christian living and met with others at Oxford University to form, what was dubbed, the 'Holy Club' in 1725, also nicknamed "Methodists" because of their rigorous 'methodology' or approach to the Christian life. Among others in this 'Club' was George Whitefield who would become the greatest preacher of the time.

After being ordained deacons and priests of the Church of England, they left Oxford to go to Georgia in the American Colonies as missionaries in 1735. On the voyages, and whilst there, they were greatly impressed by the faith of Moravians, their piety, simple lifestyle and organisation. They returned to London, England, where on May 24, 1738, John famously described a spiritual experience in his Journal:

"In the evening I went unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."

After this new beginning, reluctantly following the example of George Whitefield, they began open-air preaching, despite the opposition of bishops and hostile mobs. For the following half-century, beautiful and inspiring hymns flowed from Charles' pen (it is estimated he wrote over 6,000) which would affect many churches worldwide, while John became the organising genius who turned a spontaneous movement into structured body which became the origin of today's world-wide Methodist Church.

Societies were formed, both itinerant and local, first in Bristol and London, and then all over the United Kingdom. Preachers were employed; a system of circuits were formed, and from 1744 onwards there was an annual Conference of preachers, and a centralised system geared for mission. John travelled 250,000 miles and preached 40,000 times, and by 1791, there were over 70,000 members and more than 400 chapels!

For the Wesleys, 'works' as well as faith were essential to the whole of Christian living, and caring for the poor, for prisoners, for widows and orphans mattered a great deal. Methodists were not only interested in welfare, they were also concerned with remedying social injustice, and John Wesley's last known letter urged the abolition of 'that execrable villainy', black slavery.

John Wesley never intended his movement to separate from the Church of England but in 1784 he gave legal status to his Conference and ordained ministers for America. Disputes about the status of the travelling preachers and the administration of the sacraments were resolved by the Plan of Pacification (1795) which was a decisive break with the Church of England. Divisions arising from constitutional disputes and fresh revivals led to the creation of the Methodist New Connexion (1797), the Primitive Methodists (1812), the Bible Christians (1816) and smaller groups. All except the Wesleyan Reform Union and the Independent Methodists united with the main body, the Wesleys, to form the Methodist Church in 1932.

This Church, which covers England, Scotland and Wales, is the largest of the Free Churches in England. It belongs to the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and other ecumenical bodies and takes part in over 550 local ecumenical partnerships. It has 33 districts, each with a Synod, presided over by a ministerial Chair. It emphasises education and training for various forms of ministries, both lay and ordained.

The assurance of the free grace of God was the experience of the early Methodists, which the Wesleys set in the Christian tradition of 'arminianism', emphasising within human freewill the need for holy living as an outcome of faith leading towards 'Christian perfection'. Calvinists (such as Whitefield) by contrast stressed the absolute sovereignty of God and believed in predestination.

Its worship is a mixture of formal and free; the hymns of the Wesleys are still important to a people "born in song." Its commitment to Bible study in house fellowship/discussion groups, to youth work, to pastoral care and social outreach, are the main characteristics of a church

proud to celebrate 250 years of Methodist witness in 1988 and 200 years of overseas missions in 1986 within the World Church.

The rediscovery of Wesley's message for today is a vital part of its ongoing commitment to evangelical revival and the quest for holiness, personal and corporate, which offers Christ to all through worship, preaching and service.

Further Information: www.methodist.org.uk