

# A brief history of Methodism

'**Methodists**' was originally a nickname applied to a revival movement in 18th century Britain, based within the Church of England and led by, among others, the brothers John and Charles Wesley.

## Childhood home

Born into the large family of Samuel Wesley, Rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, **John [1703-1791] and Charles [1707-1788]** owed a great deal to their remarkable mother Susanna, as well as to the Puritan background of both parents.

## Oxford and America

Both brothers studied at the University of Oxford (at Christ Church) and John went on to become a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. In the early 1730's, a small group of students met regularly for Bible study and prayer, received Communion frequently and undertook works of charity; such devout behaviour was unusual in those times and they were soon ridiculed. Among others in the 'Holy Club' (another nickname) was George Whitefield who would become the greatest preacher of the time. The Wesleys, Whitefield and other leaders were mostly ordained clergy of the Church of England. The 'Methodists' in Oxford were a short-lived group, but they set a pattern for the 'Evangelical Revival'.

In 1735 the Wesleys responded to an invitation to serve as chaplains to American colonies; this was unsuccessful, and both had returned to Britain by 1738. Although neither returned to America, some 50 years later their followers (such as Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke) did, and so Methodism spread in the 'New World'.

## Aldersgate

Influenced by the Moravians the Wesleys joined in a 'Religious Society' in London, and in May 1738 both underwent a profound spiritual experience. John famously described this in his Journal for 24 May 1738

*"In the evening I went unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther and 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 me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

Three days earlier, following his own 'conversion', Charles had written a hymn:

*Where shall my wondering soul begin  
How shall I all to heaven aspire?*

For the following half-century such hymns flowed from Charles' pen (it is estimated he wrote over 6,000), while John was the organising genius who turned a spontaneous movement into structured body which became the origin of today's world-wide Methodist Church.

## **Preaching**

In 1739 Whitefield invited John Wesley to preach to crowds of working classes in Bristol in the open air. Since such people were often excluded from the churches, 'field preaching' became a key feature of the Revival, and Wesley recorded addressing gatherings of many thousands. His published Sermons became and remain the doctrinal standard of the Methodist Church.

## **Societies and classes**

Wesley formed converts into local societies, originally modelled upon the 'Religious Societies' and his Oxford group; they were also subdivided into 'classes' which met weekly. Every year, by horse or carriage, John Wesley travelled the country to visit, encourage and admonish the societies, as well as preaching. He insisted that Methodists regularly attend their local parish church as well as Methodist meetings.

Through the societies, members supported one another spiritually and pastorally, and working people and women often found a status otherwise denied to them.

## **'Social righteousness'**

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 concerned to remedy social injustice, and John Wesley's last known letter urged the abolition of 'that execrable villainy'; black slavery. The Wesleys were an influence in prison reform and, inspired by Susanna Wesley, they earned a reputation as pioneers in education. John Wesley wrote, edited or abridged some 400 publications.

## **Hymns**

Among Charles' hymns, still sung today, are numbered some of the finest ever written; and through them the Methodists received and expressed their Christian experience and learned their beliefs. His poetic genius drew upon his classical and literary education and an awareness of popular culture, as well as his musical talents. After his marriage in 1749, Charles remained mostly in London and Bristol.

## **Doctrine**

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'. The Calvinists (such as Whitefield) by contrast stressed the absolute sovereignty of God and believed in predestination.

## Separation

Although Wesley declared, "I live and die a member of the Church of England", the strength and impact of the movement, especially after John Wesley's clandestine ordinations in 1784, made a separate Methodist body virtually inevitable.

In the 19th century Methodism in Britain flowed in several channels, including Primitive Methodism which began with 'camp meetings' in 1807 and was organised into a separate body in 1811. The Methodists grew to be a large, respectable and influential section of society; characterised by the 'nonconformist conscience' and also the 'temperance movement' and many members with poor origins became prosperous. The missionary movement also spread the Methodist message around the world.

In 1932 the three main Methodist groups in Britain came together to form the present Methodist Church.

## The Methodist Conference and Connexion

As the Methodist societies grew at a fast rate, some way of keeping in touch and organising them was needed. John Wesley had held what became an annual conference of Methodist preachers. In 1784 he made provision for the continuance as a corporate body after his death of the 'Yearly Conference of the People called Methodists'. He nominated 100 people and declared them to be its members and laid down the method by which their successors were to be appointed.

After his death the leadership passed to the Methodist Conference, and instead of one person exercising leadership for a length of time, the President of the Conference became for the year of office the representative of the Conference and leading minister of the church. During the nineteenth century there were many factions in the church. Gradually most of these were re-united, the last union being in 1932.

The Methodist Church has a Connexional structure rather than a congregational one. This is where the whole church acts and decides together. It is where the local church is never independent of the rest of the Connexion. Everyone who becomes a member through confirmation is a member of the Methodist Church as a whole, not just their local church.

The Methodist Church is part of the whole Church of Christ. It claims no superiority or inferiority to any other part of the Church. All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligations to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as full members of the Methodist Church.

**For further Methodist history information see Methodist Heritage**  
<http://www.forsaith-oxen.demon.co.uk/methodist-heritage/>

**Website for John Wesley's 300th anniversary** <http://wesley2003.org.uk>

(These hyperlinks may not be valid any longer.)