

THE STORY
of
THE WESLEYAN
CHURCH

Robert Black
Keith Drury

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In the economic distress of the 1920s, J. R. “Uncle Jimmy” Teague of Asheville, North Carolina, mortgaged his house to save his Wesleyan Methodist church from defaulting on its loan. When his friends warned him that he could lose his home, he replied, “If I don’t have a church, I don’t need a home.” The church he saved was my home church, pastored at the time by my grandfather and later by my father.

—Bob Black

Immigrant coal miner Walter and his wife Emmaline were Methodists in Pennsylvania when their neighbor invited them to a holiness camp meeting. Testifying that God had filled them with love, they became part of the “holiness movement” despite pressure by their pastor to tone down their holiness witness. When a Pilgrim Holiness church was planted in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, this Methodist leader and his wife joined the new holiness denomination. They walked two miles to the Pilgrim Holiness church three days a week—twice on Sundays and once on Wednesdays, plus every Saturday to serve as the church janitors—for the next twenty-five years. Walter and Emmaline were my grandparents.

—Keith Drury

To the memories of these heroes of holiness and to thousands like them—the people of our heritage—we dedicate this book.

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FOREWORD

This work represents the seventh official history of The Wesleyan Church and the denominations that came together in 1968 to create it. Updated editions of some of those histories increase that number significantly. Stacked on a shelf, those works would stretch from Luther Lee's *Wesleyan Manual* (1863) and its several Wesleyan Methodist successors to Paul Westphal Thomas and Paul William Thomas's *The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (1976) and most recently to *Reformers and Revivalists: The History of The Wesleyan Church* (1992), a comprehensive history written by sixteen contributing authors and edited by Wayne E. Caldwell. Historians of the caliber of Lee Haines and Melvin Dieter have chronicled our past and chronicled it well.

So why a new denominational history?

For one thing, a lot has happened in the last twenty years—from major changes in world missions to the meteoric rise in the number and influence of large churches to the election of the denomination's first female general superintendent.

For another, this particular history takes a somewhat different approach. It's a narrative history, and the *story* stands center stage. It was written more for the reader than for the researcher.

As its narrators, we represent the two principal streams which flowed together in Anderson, Indiana, in 1968: Pilgrim Holiness (Keith) and Wesleyan Methodist (Bob). That balance was important to us as we

wrote, but so was a measure of balance between the local church part of the story and the general church part. Not every general conference is recorded here—there were sixty-eight of them if the two precedent denominations are included and many more than that if we should count the smaller uniting churches over the years—and not every notable leader is mentioned. But forgoing that level of detail allowed us to recount what local church revivals were like in the 1930s, for example, and how Christian Youth Crusaders (CYC) affected midweek attendance patterns in the 1960s.

It's all part of the *story*.

And it's a story well worth the telling.

PART 1

TRUE WESLEYANS

NEW CHURCH, OLD ROOTS

At a signal, the two lines of church leaders made their way down parallel sidewalks on the campus of Anderson College in Anderson, Indiana. They were representatives of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America and the Pilgrim Holiness Church, and on a summer day in 1968, they were meeting to unite the two denominations.

The short procession across the campus green was the last leg of a long journey, an odyssey that started with decades of collaboration and progressed to negotiation and reorganization over the previous five years. Now, as the delegates approached each other, preparation for the merger was over. Implementation of the merger was the task at hand.

Even that quick walk gave time for reflection. Both sides were about to experience significant changes in the way they “did church.” Both were moving away from the customary and comfortable toward the new and different: a new denominational name, new district alignments, a new general church financial plan, new leadership, a new *Discipline*.

Wesleyan Methodists were facing the likelihood of significant shifts in congregational life, principally the introduction of a centralized local church board. Pilgrims wondered about the future of several of their colleges.

But hope overcame hesitation. One day earlier, the bodies they represented had met to adjourn for the last time, retiring with honor their long-held denominational names in readiness for the merger. The books were officially closed on 125 years of Wesleyan Methodism and seventy-one years of

Pilgrim Holiness history, and a new book was about to be opened. This day—June 26, 1968—they would write its first page.

When the two streams converged at the entrance to Warner Auditorium, they joined ranks and marched into the service together. The merger had begun. This joint procession was *koinonia* choreography, the flow of New Testament fellowship, and it served as a powerful parable of unity on day one of the new church they were creating. Before a word was spoken in the service, 122,000 Pilgrims and Wesleyan Methodists were, at least in symbol, already merging around the world.



Wesleyan Archives and Historical Library

Merger March. In the summer of 1968, delegates from the Pilgrim Holiness Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church marched toward the merger that would create The Wesleyan Church. While not on the scale of major unions among Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed bodies, it was still one of the larger denominational mergers of the twentieth century.

ONE—THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE

The symbolic procession set the stage for a service of merger filled with similar moments. Two general superintendents, one from each of the merging denominations, clasped hands over a table bearing a Bible,

the hymnal of each church, the *Pilgrim Holiness Manual*, the Wesleyan Methodist *Discipline*, and the documents of the merger. The ritual was repeated by two children, two teens, two adult laypersons, two evangelists, two pastors, two teachers, and two international leaders. The climactic word was left to the assembled delegates, who stood, joined hands, and said in unison, “Lord of the church, we are united in Thee, in Thy church, and now in The Wesleyan Church.” After sharing words of commitment from John Wesley’s Covenant Service, the first gathering of



Wesleyan Archives and Historical Library

○ **A New Church.** The conference theme came from Christ’s prayer for his church in John 17: “One—That the World May Believe.” Unity was apparent in the merging ceremony, in the Communion service, in the election results, and even in the selection of the site. Anderson, Indiana, is located midway between the headquarters of the two merging denominations.

○

May Believe.” Not only was there an unmistakable sense of history in the service, but also a sense of the holy. Denominational merger was being offered as at least a partial answer to Christ’s prayer for unity among his disciples in John 17.

The Wesleyan Church ended, appropriately enough, in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. More than four thousand church officials, delegates, members, and friends found union in Communion.

Even the site of the conference illustrated the theme of unity. Anderson, Indiana lies about thirty miles north of Indianapolis and approximately the same distance south of Marion, the two cities that were, at the time, the sites of the headquarters of the merging denominations. The delegations were literally meeting halfway when they came together for merger at this college sponsored by a fellow holiness denomination, the Church of God (Anderson).

From location to line of march to liturgy, everything echoed the conference theme from John 17:20–21 that was displayed on a banner overhead: “One—That the World

“One—That the World May Believe” would become the initial theme for the new church.

Any delegate or observer who had time to glance at a newspaper that week was reminded of how desperately the world needed to believe. America in particular was in turmoil as the conference convened. Robert Kennedy had been gunned down just three weeks before, and the breaking news on the morning of the service of merger was that key figures in the upcoming trial of his assassin would be shielded behind bulletproof glass. There were developments that week in the recent murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. as well. His killer, on the run since the April 4 assassination, had been apprehended earlier in June, and details of his impending trial were front-page news. Meanwhile, the war in Vietnam was tearing the country apart, and President Lyndon Johnson had recently responded to plunging popularity polls by announcing that he would not seek reelection. The news seemed universally grim, and from a marketing perspective, it may not have been the best time to launch a new church. From a ministry perspective, however, the timing was providential. After all, in eighteenth-century England, John Wesley had faced times as turbulent as those his spiritual descendants were facing in 1968.

A BRAND PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING

John Wesley was born in Epworth, England, in 1703 to Samuel and Susanna Wesley and raised, along with his nine brothers and sisters, in a Church of England parsonage. In 1709 their home was destroyed by fire, and five-year-old John was the last of the family to reach safety, rescued from a second-story window only moments before the roof collapsed. To Susanna it was an obvious act of providence. She was determined “to be especially careful of the soul of this child.” He was “a brand plucked out of the fire” (Zech. 3:2 KJV), she said, and she was convinced that God had spared him for a reason.



John Wesley. God used John Wesley in the 1700s to spark a spiritual awakening known as the “Wesleyan revival” in the British Isles. That revival gave birth to Methodism and eventually to the Methodist family of churches worldwide. Wesleyans look to John Wesley—reformer, evangelist, and lifelong Anglican priest—as their spiritual forefather.

Years later as a student at Oxford, Wesley began to take his faith seriously. He read great authors—Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, William Law—and he determined to do great things for God. He entered the ministry, pastored with his father, and became an Oxford professor. It was there that he and his brother Charles led a campus group known to history as the Holy Club, a name sarcastically offered by their critics and one that the members of the group never used of themselves. They devoted themselves to the service of God in a structured and methodical way, earning themselves another slur—Methodists. This one they would wear as a badge of honor.

In the spirit of the Holy Club, John and Charles Wesley accompanied a family acquaintance, James Oglethorpe, to the new colony of Georgia, that Oglethorpe was planting in America. Their goal was to evangelize the Native Americans and minister to the colonists, but the venture was disastrous for them. Both returned to England discouraged and confused. John wondered if God had spared him from the fire only to leave him a failure.

The answer, of course, was a divine no that would soon lead to a divine yes in the life of John Wesley. On the way to Georgia, Wesley had been deeply moved and personally convicted by the calm faith of a group of Moravian Christians during a turbulent storm at sea. They had a peace he did not possess. After his return to England, he met another Moravian, Peter Bohler, who showed him that he had been trying to work for God’s favor rather than receiving it by faith.

The turning point came on May 24, 1738. At a small group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, John Wesley’s life was transformed.

“I felt my heart strangely warmed,” he wrote in his journal. “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.” Wesley had found his faith and with it the message he would preach for the next half century.

The World His Parish

The following year he found his method. Reluctantly accepting an invitation from George Whitefield to adopt his practice of preaching in the open air, Wesley was amazed at the result. He began preaching four or five times a day in public squares, in the fields, from the porches of private homes, and once even from his father’s tombstone. Over a fifty-year period, he traveled a quarter of a million miles on horseback (or, in old age, in a carriage) to spread the gospel.

What John accomplished through preaching and organization, his brother Charles multiplied through music. He wrote over six thousand hymns during his lifetime, several of them widely acknowledged to be among the greatest ever written. The ministries of the Wesleys complemented each other perfectly, and under the blessing of God, the Wesleyan revival was the result.

As the number of the converted grew, John Wesley organized them into societies, classes, and bands. It was a remarkably effective network of Methodist believers. To provide leadership, he mobilized lay preachers and, true to form, organized them as well; they met with him annually in what he called a conference. Wesley never left the Church of England, and he did not intend for his new



The Methodist Library Collection
at Drew University

○ **Charles Wesley.** What John Wesley accomplished through preaching and organization, his brother Charles multiplied through music. Charles Wesley wrote over six thousand hymns during his lifetime. Many of them are widely acknowledged to be among the greatest ever written, including *And Can It Be* and *O, for a Thousand Tongues*. ○

Methodist movement to compete with it. Methodism was intended to be a renewal movement within the church.

Still, opposition mounted. When an Anglican bishop ordered him to stop preaching in other priests' parishes, Wesley reminded him that the Oxford credentials he still held allowed him to preach wherever he chose. "The world is my parish," he once wrote. Those were prophetic words.

Wesley faced opposition outside the church too. In the early years of Methodism, he and his lay preachers were pelted with rocks and rotten eggs, harassed by mobs, ridiculed in the press, and, in the case of some of his preachers, even forced into military service on the spot. Despite it all, Methodism continued to grow in size and influence.

"God Is with Us"

As a result, England experienced a revival that changed not only the church, but society as well. Wesley the evangelist was also Wesley the reformer, all in the name of Christ. His passion for reform found expression in many ways:

- He was an early opponent of slavery, calling for its abolition in a day when few seemed concerned.
- He took up the cause of the poor, creating interest-free loans, free medical services, and a jobs program that was far ahead of its time.
- John Howard, the reformer who awakened England's conscience to the abuses in its brutal prison system, credited Wesley as his inspiration.
- In a nation addicted to gin—London had more than 7,000 gin sellers in the 1730s for a population numbering only about 600,000—Wesley led the fight against the distilleries.
- He elevated the role of women. God seemed to be using women in ministry, Wesley once pointed out to a questioner, and who was he to withstand God?

And then there was Wesley the theologian. His contributions to Christian thought are significant. There's his strong defense of free will; his recovery of the message of Christian holiness or perfect love, which he believed to be the truth God had raised up the Methodists to proclaim; and his welcome emphasis on the assurance of our salvation. At the time, most believed that you could only hope that you were saved; Wesley taught that you could know. On his death bed at age eighty-seven, that assurance was his. "The best of all, God is with us," he said. Because of the life and legacy of John Wesley, many others can say the same.

John Wesley was buried behind his City Road Chapel in London on March 9, 1791, in a 5:00 a.m. service. It was an unusual time for a funeral, but it was chosen for the expressed purpose of avoiding the massive crowd that might otherwise be expected, a crowd so large as to be unmanageable. His obituary declared that, apart from the king, he had become the most widely known man in England. Even at that predawn hour, a substantial number stood quietly by his graveside. One of Wesley's lay preachers conducted the service, and when he reached the traditional reference to "the soul of our dear brother," he paused and softly substituted, "our dear father." To his Methodists, he was nothing less.

METHODISM IN AMERICA

For years Methodist emigrants from England had brought their faith with them to the American colonies, and in 1769 Wesley sent two volunteers, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, to organize and expand Methodist ministries in America. When Francis Asbury followed two years later, American Methodism found its version of John Wesley.

Asbury was a young man of twenty-six when he arrived in the colonies, and his total dedication to the cause combined with his natural gifts to make him the acknowledged leader of the small but dedicated cadre of Methodists, numbering at the time about six hundred. After the

Revolutionary War ended in 1783 and with the blessing of Wesley, Asbury led American Methodism to become the first religious body in the newly independent United States to work out an independent national organization of their own. The Methodist Episcopal Church (*Episcopal* simply meaning it would be governed by bishops) was formed in late December 1784 at a gathering in Baltimore, Maryland, known to history as the “Christmas Conference.” It was no longer an extension of British Methodism—an important consideration, given the depth of anti-British feeling associated with the war—but the spiritual ties with Wesley and his Methodists in England remained strong. Asbury believed that the end of the war meant the beginning of Methodist growth in America. He was right. He was also largely responsible for that growth.



The Methodist Library Collection
at Drew University

○ **Francis Asbury.** Arriving in the colonies as a young man of twenty-six, Asbury spread Methodism on horseback, riding an average of six thousand miles a year and preaching as he went. During his ministry, Methodists in America grew from 600 to 214,000 members. Francis Asbury is the father of American Methodism as John Wesley is its grandfather. ○

Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke became American Methodism’s first bishops, a title Wesley argued against because of his negative experiences with bishops in the Church of England. Asbury and Coke had his full support personally, however, and he resigned himself to their choice of labels.

Coke’s passion was missions, and his work in America was interrupted by numerous trips abroad to plant Methodist missions in foreign lands. Asbury’s travels were just as extensive but all within the boundaries of America. He traveled the Eastern Seaboard again and again, planting churches, shaping new converts and young congregations, and taking Christ into settings as diverse as the streets of Manhattan and the backcountry of the Carolinas. His *Journal* records sixty-three crossings of the Appalachian or Allegheny Mountains.

Asbury's leadership positioned the Methodists to capitalize on the moving of God's Spirit in the national revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Taking a page from the journals of Asbury and Wesley, Methodist circuit riders on horseback crisscrossed the American frontier as ambassadors of Christ in places where civilization was only a rumor—first in the untamed expanses of western Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, and eventually across the Mississippi and into the Great Plains. A popular saying was a testament to their dedication: “The weather's so bad that nothing's stirring except mad dogs and Methodist preachers.” Year in and year out, in good conditions and bad, “in season and out of season,” Methodist circuit riders moved westward with the people and helped to build the country while they built the kingdom.

Another factor in the growth of Methodism was its leading role in the Holiness Revival. In 1835 Phoebe Palmer, wife of a New York City physician and a lay theologian in her own right, joined with her sister Sarah Lankford to make the case for Christian holiness in a series of small group gatherings for women held in the Palmer home. These “Tuesday meetings” proved extremely popular, and by 1839 attendance was opened to men also. The Tuesday meetings led to a periodical, *Guide to Holiness*, which at its peak counted an impressive thirty thousand subscribers.

Phoebe Palmer championed John Wesley's doctrine of holiness—the idea that believers can be sanctified or made holy in this life through a second work of God's grace in their hearts—but many believe that she modified it in one important regard. She linked Paul's words in Romans 12 about offering ourselves as living sacrifices with Jesus' reference in Matthew 23:19 to the altar that sanctifies the gift (KJV). As a result, she proposed a well-defined and easy-to-grasp, three-step path to entire sanctification or Christian perfection: consecration, faith, and testimony. This view, which came to be called “the Shorter Way” in contrast to Wesley's more conservative counsel to wait for the inner witness of the Holy Spirit before claiming sanctification, proved popular in Methodist circles and beyond. With this simple formula, holiness seemed more accessible to the



○ **Phoebe Palmer.** The American holiness movement's forefather is John Wesley, but its mother is Phoebe Palmer. Like Wesley, she combined personal piety with compassionate ministries, but her lasting legacy is theological. She urged seekers after entire sanctification not only to receive the second work of grace by faith but to claim it the same way, making her emphasis more immediate than Wesley's.

man or woman in the street than ever before. Traditional Methodist theologians had reservations, but the message of holiness gained popularity among the common people. So did Methodism.

By 1820 the Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest denomination in the nation. From 15,000 members at the close of the Revolutionary War, the church had grown to almost 250,000 in less than forty years. By 1860 every third church member in America was a Methodist. After the federal government and the political parties, the Methodist Episcopal Church was the largest single national institution.

But with size and status came the desire to protect those gains. The great national debate was on slavery, and the bishops feared its potential to divide the church. If keeping silent on the question of slavery was necessary to prevent regional divisions from slowing

Methodist momentum, the bishops were determined to maintain that silence.

They would find some Methodists equally determined to break it.