

# United Methodist History

## John Wesley: the Founder and Guiding Force of Methodism

### Childhood

John Wesley was born in 1703 in Epworth, England, to Samuel Wesley, an Anglican priest, and Susanna Wesley, a devout Christian. She had a strong influence on John's life.

### Education

At age 11, Wesley was sent to school in London, and at 17, he began study at Oxford. In 1726, he was elected a fellow at Lincoln College. Two years later, at the age of 25, he was ordained a priest of the Church of England.

### Origin of the "Methodists"

While at Oxford, Wesley and his brother Charles and other students formed a religious society. Dedicated to methodical religious life, they studied the Bible daily, fasted regularly and took Communion weekly. Other students teased them, calling them "Bible Moths" and "Methodists" -- a name that stuck!

### American Mission

In 1735, John and Charles sailed to the American colony of Georgia as missionaries to the pioneers and Indians. The project was a failure and Wesley returned to England 2 years later, depressed and doubting his faith.

### Conversion

Back in London, Wesley befriended members of a German Christian society, the Moravians. (On the voyage to America, he had been impressed by the faith of a group of Moravians.)

On May 24, 1738 while attending a religious society meeting, Wesley had a deep religious experience. "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."

### A New Mission

With renewed faith, John (with Charles and a friend George Whitefield) spread the Word of God's love and salvation throughout Britain. The neglected poor and lower classes were given their first hope of salvation and their first incentive to lead better lives

through Christ. Services were held anywhere -- in fields, barns, abandoned buildings, even mining pits. The great number of converts were organized into religious "societies" (small local groups guided by Wesley's teachings).

In the words of John Wesley (1703-1791) "A Methodist is ... one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength."

#### Beginnings of a New Church in England

Methodism began as a renewal movement with the Church of England, not as a separate sect.

#### 1740: Conflicts

The Anglican Church refused to let the Wesley brothers preach in church and denied Methodist converts communion. Many Methodist preachers and followers were persecuted for their beliefs.

#### 1741: Circuit System

Wesley organized a network of traveling preachers who made the rounds to distant communities, telling the good news and bringing men and women to faith.

#### 1742: Further Organization

Religious societies were divided into classes under lay leaders. The following year, Wesley wrote the "General Rules of the United Societies."

#### 1744: Conference

The first conference between the Wesleys and their preachers was held to settle questions about doctrine and discipline. Conferences became annual events.

#### Following years: Ordinations

In 1784, Wesley began to ordain ministers for America -- an act which deepened the split between Methodists and the Anglican Church.

#### Foundations of Methodists in America

The Methodist movement spread rapidly in the colonies.

#### 1760s: First Lay Societies Organized

Methodism in America began as a lay movement. In New York in 1766, a small society was started by Phillip Embury and Barbara Heck. In 1768 they built the John Street Church. Societies were also organized elsewhere:

- In Maryland, by Robert Strawbridge, a revivalist
- In Philadelphia, by Thomas Webb (who had often preached to the New York Group)
- In Virginia, by Deveraux Jarrat (an evangelical clergyman)

#### 1769: Missionaries Sent to America

In 1769, Wesley sent his first preachers to America to take charge. Later, Francis Asbury, Richard Wright, George Shadford and Thomas Rankin were also assigned to the colonies. (Rankin was appointed superintendent over American Methodist activities.)

#### The Revolutionary War

Wesley supported England in the war, so in many colonies it was dangerous to be Methodist. The British preachers returned to England -- all but Asbury, who worked tirelessly and at great risk to keep the societies together. He rode thousands of miles to preach and organize throughout the colonies; by the war's end, membership had tripled to 15,000 due to Asbury's extraordinary efforts!

#### Establishment of 3 New American Churches

These 3 churches were formed in the U.S., all sharing a common purpose, spirit and love.

#### Methodist Episcopal Church

On Christmas Eve of 1784, 60 American preachers met in Baltimore, Maryland to form the Methodist Episcopal Church.

- Wesley's Articles of Religion and Sunday Service were adopted
- Allegiance to the U.S. government was vowed.

#### Church Leaders:

- Thomas Coke, a minister appointed as superintendent for America by Wesley, was then elected superintendent by the American conference in 1784
- Francis Asbury was first ordained deacon, then elder, then superintendent (bishop) during the 1784 conference. Phillip Otterbein, a
- German preacher, assisted Thomas Coke in these ordinations.

## United Brethren in Christ

Two great men founded this denomination:

- Philip Otterbein was a minister of the German Reformed Church who served German settlers in Pennsylvania and later in Baltimore.
- Martin Boehm was a powerful Mennonite preacher who had studied Wesley's writings.

The 2 men met in 1767 at a revival meeting in Lancaster, PA. After Boehm's sermon, Otterbein embraced Boehm, and said "We are brethren." In 1800, they formed the United Brethren, a German-speaking church that followed Methodist discipline.

## Evangelical Association

Jacob Albright, founder, was originally a Lutheran farmer from Pennsylvania. When 3 of children died, leaving him spiritually shaken, he found strength and renewed faith in attending Methodist meetings. He became a Methodist preacher, whose fervor won him many followers among German settlers in Pennsylvania, Maryland and the Shenandoah Valley. In 1803, his followers founded the Newly Formed Methodist Conference.

## 1800s -- Divisions in the Methodist Episcopal Church

During the 19th century, a number of churches withdrew from the main body of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Conflicts resulted from disagreements about such issues as Church authority and slavery, rather than differences in religious doctrine.

## 1828 - 1830: Methodist Protestant Church

This denomination was formed by Methodists who wanted lay people to share power with clergy in governing the church.

## 1843: Wesleyan Methodist Church

Growing hostilities between southerners and radical abolitionist members of the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery interfered with conference work. When moderate members prohibited discussion of slavery, the radicals withdrew and formed the Wesleyan Methodist Connection.

## 1845: Methodist Episcopal Church, South

Once again, the slavery issue led to a division in the church.

- The Conference of 1784 had forbidden Methodists to own slaves. But in many southern states, it was illegal to free slaves. This inevitably led to conflict.

- In 1844, the Church voted to suspend a bishop from Georgia who could not legally free his slaves. Southerners, contending that the conference had no authority to suspend bishops, decided to separate.
- In May, 1845, Southerners organized the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Doctrine, policy and discipline remained the same as that of the northern Church.
- The first attempt at reconciliation occurred in 1876 in Cape May, N. J. Both churches acknowledged each other to be true branches of the original church. This laid the groundwork for reunion.

Black Methodist Churches formed as a result of discrimination

These were formed as a result of discrimination that prevented early Black Methodists from serving the gospel as they wished. These churches include:

1816: African Methodist Episcopal Church

This church was founded in Philadelphia by Richard Allen and Daniel Coker.

1822: African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

This church was created in New York largely by black members of the John Street Church.

1870: Colored Methodist Episcopal Church

Members of this church came primarily from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In 1954, the church name was changed to Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

1900s -- Unification

After many years of discussion and planning, the United Methodist Church was formed.

### The Methodist Church

Was formed by the merger of 3 churches

- 1904: northern and southern denominations agreed on a joint hymnal; other differences were resolved at subsequent meetings
- 1910: Methodist Protestant Church and MED discussed future union
- 1939: all 3 denominations passed a Declaration of Union and drew up a new constitution creating The Methodist Church

## Evangelical United Brethren

Was formed by the union of 2 churches

- The United Brethren and the Evangelical Church shared similar Disciplines, doctrine and practices. In 1946, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, they joined together as the Evangelical United Brethren.

## The United Methodist Church

The 2 churches had always shared theology, doctrine and a similar Book of Discipline. The major difference between them had been language. By the mid-20th century, this was no longer a barrier.

So on April 23, 1968, in Dallas, Texas, the 2 churches joined to form The United Methodist Church.

### Involvement in Social Consciousness

Social Consciousness has always played an important part in Methodist history.

### Education

Beginning in the 18th century, Methodists founded many colleges, including McKendree, Wesleyan, Syracuse, Duke, Boston University, Northwestern, Southern Methodist University and many more.

### Women's Rights

In the 1800s, there were many famous women preachers in Methodist churches. For example: Maggie VanCott, Amanda Smith (former slave) and Lydia Sexton. The United Brethren Church began ordaining women in 1889.

Methodist women were given full rights as laity (1900); limited rights as clergy (1924) the right to be conference members (1956).

### Publishing

Through the 19th and 20th centuries, Methodists have been active in publishing hymnals and magazines such as "Christian Advocate" and "Methodist Magazine." The "Ladies' Repository and Gatherings of the West" was one of the first women's magazines.

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## The Structure of the United Methodist Church

Distinguishing Methodism from other denominations is the structure of the United Methodist Church. It is organized for ministry at several levels; levels maintain "connectional" links with one another. Both clergy and laity are elected to serve on the governing bodies of the church. It's similar to American democratic government with an executive, legislative and judicial branch.

### The Local Church

United Methodists think of the local church as the visible extension of Christ in the world today. Ordained and lay ministers lead the local congregation, although every United Methodist is called to minister to others. The local church's Council on Ministries recommends church programs to the Administrative Board and sets up committees to direct them. Areas of work include: Christian Unity, Education, Evangelism, Church and Society, Stewardship, Worship, Higher Education, Missions, Religion and Race.

Episcopacy (similar to the U.S. Executive branch)

Methodist Bishops are elected for life from the ranks of the ministry. They function as both spiritual and administrative leaders for their area, and participate in governing the whole church organization.

Conferences (similar to the U.S. Legislative branch)

Conferences are made up of both clergy and laity. The General Conference is the primary law-making body. There are five Jurisdictional Conferences which elect bishops and direct church programs. The Annual Conference is technically the basic unit of the church. The District Conference is organized in the Annual Conference. The Charge Conference is the governing body of a local pastoral unit.

Judicial Council (similar to the U.S. Judicial branch)

The nine-member lay and clerical Judicial Council is the court of ultimate appeal in the church. The authority and basis of all decisions is The Book of Discipline.

### Boards and Agencies

These governing bodies are set up by the General Conference, and are coordinated by a General Council on Ministries. They include:

- **GENERAL BOARDS:** Guide the church in missions, discipleship, social concerns, higher education and ministry.
- **COMMISSIONS:** Work in Christian unity, religion and race, and the status and role of women.