Mutuality in Early Methodist Evangelistic Leadership

By Paul W. Chilcote | Methodism began as a movement of renewal within the Church of England in the eighteenth century under the direction of John and Charles Wesley. The Wesleys rediscovered the biblical vision of the church as mission, and their revival elevated the status and role of women by embracing multiple forms of mutuality in ministry. Both men and women provided evangelistic leadership for this missionary movement. Working together, men and women, both laity and clergy, breathed new life into the church of their day. These early Methodist pioneers have something to teach evangelical Christians of all denominations about mutuality and leadership today.

Small Group Ministries

Early Methodism was primarily a small group movement. The Methodist Societies, as they were called, were divided into smaller cells known as classes and bands. The classes were generally about twelve in number and mixed in terms of gender and marital status. They also included children and youth. These classes were the heartbeat of the movement. Smaller still were the bands, usually composed of between four and seven members. Smaller still were the bands, usually composed of between four and seven members. Smaller still were the bands, usually composed of between four and seven members.

For women, who generally stood on the fringe of social structures and institutions in that day—if they had any place at all—class and band leadership provided opportunities to discover, practice, and develop leadership skills.

These positions of trust, authority, and evangelistic leadership often led women into more visible and critical roles within the movement.

Reaching Out to the Lost

Another role shared by men and women alike was related to visitation of the sick and imprisoned. This particularly important ministry traced its roots back to the time the Wesley brothers were students at Oxford. Instead of waiting for people in need to come to them, they went to the forgotten, the suffering, and the lonely with a message of hope.

The prison ministries of Sarah Peters and Silas Told are excellent examples of mutuality in evangelistic leadership. Wesley saw that Sarah was especially gifted in caring for the lost and supporting the weak. While Silas pioneered the work at the notorious Newgate Prison in London, Sarah soon joined on an equal footing in the religious services organized for the inmates there. They both visited the cells of all the prisoners to pray for them and to provide for the needs of these outcasts.

Public Prayer and Evangelism

Three particular roles, those involving public prayer, testimony, and exhortation, were especially important evangelistic activities in which women flourished as well as men. Each of these practices is grounded in the evangelistic urge to “save souls,” but in Wesleyan theology and experience, these were closely linked to social action and service.

While falling short of preaching in a technical sense, activity in these areas of leadership proved to be a training ground for a fuller exposition of the gospel. Moreover, all of these activities presuppose the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit, and the Methodist pioneers firmly believed that this presence was open to all Christian believers. For many women, such as Isabella Wilson, prayer was their first experience of public leadership. With regard to her evangelistic impulse to pray openly with others, Isabella simply confessed that she was more than willing to be accounted a fool if she might be a means of glorifying God and helping others.

The early Methodists very quickly discovered that women had testimonies and exhortations that were just as moving as...
the men’s were. The Love-Feast, patterned after the agape meal of the early church, provided a unique opportunity for women to share the struggles and triumphs of their Christian experience in mixed company. On a visit to a Methodist Society on the eve of its first Love-Feast, Wesley made it clear to all that every man and woman was welcome to join in free and familiar conversation to the glory of God. Again, Wesley and other leaders were often astounded by the ability of the Holy Spirit to equip the faithful as the instruments of divine love.

From Prayer to Preaching

Perhaps the most important examples of mutuality in evangelistic leadership were in the areas of preaching and social service. Despite the fact that both Wesley brothers—like the vast majority of church leaders in their times—initially opposed women preachers, they experienced an amazing metamorphosis that changed their perspectives entirely. In fact, John Wesley became the strongest advocate of women’s ministry in the eighteenth century. Sarah Crosby was the first woman he authorized to preach the gospel. Others soon joined the ranks, including Mary Bosanquet, Ann Gilbert, Elizabeth Hurrell, Margaret Davidson, Alice Cambridge, Sarah Mallet, and Mary Taft, one of the greatest evangelists of the early nineteenth century.

During Wesley’s lifetime nearly fifty women were welcomed into the ranks of the Methodist preachers and shaped the egalitarian impulse of the Methodist movement. They were a tangible expression of the biblical prophet Joel’s vision of mutuality in ministry. Their tremendous gifts and the fruit of their ministry forced contemporaries to reconsider biblical texts once thought to be prohibitive. The Pauline vision of unity and mutuality in Christ became the key to their understanding of the Christian community and its life.

Leadership in Mission

Since the original vision of the Methodists was missional, it is not surprising that we find women and men working together in ministries of social justice and change. They understood social action to be as critical an evangelistic ministry as the proclamation of the gospel. It was, in fact, the incarnation of the gospel vision in their very lives. They offered Christ to others through the activity of their lives as well as the words of their mouths.

The work of Mary Bosanquet, in this regard, was remarkable. Born into wealth and affluence, she abandoned her comforts and luxuries to establish an orphanage and

Methodist Women Who Spread the Word

Laura Smith Haviland (1808–1898)

Born in Canada and raised Quaker, Laura Smith Haviland and her husband, Charles, converted to Methodism and moved to Michigan, where they lived and worshipped for many years. In 1837, they co-founded the Raisin Institute, one of the first schools in the country to admit black boys and girls. Laura Haviland also worked as a nurse during the Civil War and organized one of the first stations on the Michigan underground railroad. As Superintendent and Stationmaster, she aided between forty and one hundred thousand slaves, earning a $3,000 reward from anti-abolitionists for her capture. Throughout her acts of resistance, she was outspoken about her Christian faith and proclaimed freedom for the captives in the name of Christ.

Mary Artemesia Lathbury (1841–1913)

Mary Lathbury grew up in a Methodist minister’s home, learning early on the value of music in expressing faith. She studied and taught art in Massachusetts, Vermont, and New York before getting involved with the temperance and Chautauqua educational movements as an author and poet. Below is a hymn she penned specifically for a Chautauqua conference closing worship.

Break Thou the Bread of Life

Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As thou didst break the leaves beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page I seek thee, Lord;
My spirit pants for thee, O living Word.

Thou art the bread of life, O Lord, to me,
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;
Give me to eat and live with thee above;
Teach me to love thy truth, for thou art love.

Oh, send thy Spirit, Lord now unto me,
That he may touch my eyes, and make me see;
Teach me the truth concealed within thy word,
And in thy book revealed I see the Lord.

Bless thou the truth, dear Lord, to me,
As thou didst bless the bread by Galilee;
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall,
And I shall find my peace, my all in all.

Jarena Lee (1783–1849)

After her conversion to Christianity, Jarena Lee felt a strong call to preach. However, Bishop Allen, to whom she addressed her desire to receive authority to preach, denied her for eight years before experiencing one of her sermons and authorizing her. She was a woman and second, because she was black. As an itinerate preacher for the African Methodist Episcopal Church, she traveled from camp meeting to camp meeting, passing out pamphlets like her personal narrative, Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee.
school for the most desperate and abandoned of the London poor. Wesley kept this model Christian community, which combined vibrant personal piety and active social service, under his personal surveillance. Over the course of five years, before moving the community into the north of England, they sheltered and cared for thirty-five children and thirty-four adults. The orphanage was a beacon of hope, a magnetic force for the gospel, as these Christian women sought to live out their lives in solidarity with the poor.

In all of these ways, the early Methodist people lived out a vision of mutuality in service to Christ and those whom Christ loves. Men and women together offered the good news of the gospel through word and deed. Through these evangelistic/missional activities they reached out, drew in, nurtured, and sent out disciples of Jesus Christ. How does this model of mutuality connect with us today?

**Mutuality in Small Group Ministries**

Before his death, Henri Nouwen once said that the most desperate cry of people in our world today is our need for intimacy. People yearn for meaningful relationships. They want to be close with other people, but often do not even know where to begin searching for loving, caring fellowship. At the same time, Christians are rediscovering the importance of intimacy in small group ministries.

Early Methodism developed a network of “little churches within the church,” in which disciples of Christ were encouraged to share their lives and their stories with one another. Small groups are a natural place to explore and experience true mutuality as brothers and sisters in Christ. Intimate circles of Christian fellowship provide a place to nurture gifts, to affirm the value and worth of every human being, and to develop cells of renewal and vision for the larger Christian community.

**The Ministry of the Baptized**

The early Methodist people believed that all Christians are called into ministry by virtue of their baptism. Baptism is our ordination into the service of Christ in which we all seek to use our gifts for the glory of God. The early church leader, Irenaeus, once said that “the greatest glory of God is the human creature fully alive.” As Christians we are called to affirm the responsibility of all God’s family to pray, to share our stories of faith, to encourage the down-hearted and down-trodden, and to be ambassadors of hope, grace, and love. This is precisely what the early Methodists did.

There is a great need within the life of the church today for all Christian people to reclaim this privilege and this task. Every Christian is called to be an evangelist, to offer Christ in word and in deed to all of God’s children. This rediscovery will become a reality, I believe, by our affirmation and encouragement of all God’s people. Each of us has the amazing privilege of helping God to restore others, to bring them back to life so that they will live abundantly. We need to help one another discover our giftedness, to celebrate the presence of the Spirit of Christ in each believer, and to proclaim the good news of God’s unconditional love through every imaginable way.

**Called to Mission**

“Go to the people” is a divine imperative directed to men, women, and children alike. The early Methodists had to learn how to reach out to the least, the last, and the lost. It was not something that came naturally to them. They had to rely on the Spirit of God every step of the way.

A very affluent young woman was converted under the ministry of John Wesley, but found it extremely humiliating to minister among the poor. But the Methodist founder believed in the transforming power of God. In a letter to her he challenged her to visit the poor and sick in their own hovels. He invited her to take up her cross and to remember the faith, for Jesus went before her and would go with her. “Put off the gentility,” he told her, “you bear a higher character.”

Today, as I write, war is destroying lives and stealing away hope, natural disasters have caused untold suffering and loss, the AIDS pandemic wreaks havoc on much of the world, and brothers and sisters in our human family lack the basic necessities of shelter, food, clean water, and education. God invites all—without any concern for gender whatsoever—to respond to the needs we see around us every day. God calls us to be a missional community that lives, not for itself, but for the sake of Christ and God’s world.