

**Welcome Back to OXFORDnotes**

With this issue of **OXFORDnotes** Ted A. Campbell assumes the position of Editor. Richard P. Heitzenrater will continue to serve in the capacity of Associate Editor. We express gratitude to Dr. Heitzenrater for the superb work he has done as Editor since the inception of **OXFORDnotes** and we look forward to the editorial leadership of Dr. Campbell.

**OXFORDnotes** serves the membership of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies and seeks to enhance the world-wide community of scholarship serving the churches of Wesleyan and Methodist traditions.

This issue contains reports and other materials from the last Oxford Institute, which met at Somerville College, Oxford, in July and August of 1992. The coming issues will be devoted to responses to the work of the 1992 Institute and preparation for the next Institute which is scheduled for Oxford during the second and third weeks of July 1997. We invite responses and contributions from our readership.

**M. Douglas Meeks**

**Co-Chairperson**

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**Report of the Pre-Institute Third World Consultation**

**Introduction**

We have gathered from many different parts of the world--Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific. Yet above and beyond our diversity there is much that we have in common. We are from the Third World, a world of poor people, who are struggling to be faithful to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. While located in differing geographical areas representing twenty one different language groups, with varying historical contexts, we share a common oppressive colonial past; we struggle against the attempts, both subtle and

crude, to re-colonize us; and we have a deep common hope of freedom. It is this that constitutes our point of departure.

While keenly aware that we ourselves are not poor, we are here at this Institute to echo the voice of the poor, to share with you our thoughts on the theme of this encounter, "Good News for the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition". We want to help our brothers and sisters of the Wesleyan family from other countries and cultural contexts to understand what "good news" means for the poor from the perspective of persons who work among, live with, suffer and die in and among them. But first a word about our context.

In these days we are repeatedly being made aware of the collapse of the USSR and its satellites, as well as the emergence of a supposed "new world order". From our point of view, this has tended to reinforce the arrogance of triumphalistic capitalism, with the possible consequence of introducing an alienating hegemony of the North.

Even as the world breathes a sigh of relief as East-West tensions which threatened a global nuclear holocaust appear to ease, militarism continues to grow and increasing numbers of nations are being embroiled in low-intensity warfare. We see this to be the case in present conflicts in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Peru, Haiti, and Mozambique.

We toil under the need to service crushing international debt which continues to impoverish nations as they respond to the demands of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other financial consortia and institutions. We wrestle with the prevailing models of development which continue to lead

in the direction of ecological disintegration, cultural violation, and increasing misery.

We in Third World countries are unable to resist the temptation to permit the dumping of nuclear and other hazardous waste in the very areas where the poor live. The result of this is a serious threat to human life and to the natural environment. The disturbing phenomenon of migrants and refugees from the South seeking safe havens in the North remains a challenge to those who thirst for justice. It is too often true that a plight not dissimilar to the oppression and marginalization which caused their flight also awaits them wherever they go.

We have not succeeded in warding off attempts to homogenize the cultural diversity of our nations chiefly through the use of the electronic media. These latter have inculcated harmful value systems that jeopardize the economies and the very life of Third World families.

In all of these contexts we are painfully aware of the intolerable burden of suffering that is being imposed on the women and children of our communities.

In much of the Third World there is a pervasive atmosphere of desperation among poor people who often express their alienation through withdrawal, through domestic violence, through social unrest, or through self-destruction by the abuse of dangerous substances. The massive illegal trade in cocaine and other drugs does not only supply this last demand, but it also represents a technology which transforms an element of the culture of the poor into a vehicle of dehumanization and death.

In the face of these and other challenges the responses of the Christian community, in-

cluding those of the Wesleyan tradition, have been many and varied. There is no doubt that all of the churches concur in their search for an end to these ills that blight our human landscape. Some have found themselves incapable of coping. At times the oppressive structures of the institutional church have tended to thwart well-intentioned efforts rather than facilitate them. In other cases popular movements within and outside of church structures have proven to be more imaginative, courageous and resilient. In yet other cases, minority churches have made a powerful silent witness when political and other considerations have so demanded. In all of these cases, we have sought and found signs of hope in the gospel. Often we are gratified that churches in the North have been willing and effective partners in this search.

### **The Poor**

As we return to the terms of the theme of this institute, we need to explore and to understand, "Who are the poor?"

The poor are those who have been impoverished by oppressive and unjust political and economic systems, an experience that has left our people with the feeling that they have no power to control or to change their situation, or to make decisions about their own destiny. In spite of being thus vulnerable the poor still have power to survive and change their historical conditions. Although poverty could be interpreted from different perspectives, we should not avoid the reality that, in all countries, the poor are deprived of the means to sustain a dignified life.

In this light we are called to recognize the sacramental significance of the poor. We are

bidden to acknowledge and continuously rediscover how God goes ahead of us in evangelistic mission. When we arrive at communities of the poor, immediately we encounter signs of God's presence and activity among them. We need eyes to see such signs emerging from the poor toward us, in the affirmation that they are signs of the Kingdom of God.

In other words, the poor can lead us and teach us about the meaning of the good news. We have to discover the gospel coming from the poor even before we attempt to communicate "good news" to them.

The gospel has no final form, but through listening to the poor, we can enlarge our understanding of the good news. It seems that a transformation of evangelization models must occur in order to preach the good news. We assert that the poor are not objects of evangelization, but rather the subjects of a new form of evangelical proclamation directed toward those who have always enjoyed power and privilege.

### **The Good News**

We understand that the concept of good news implies not only a special message but also a conflict. Good news for some will almost necessarily mean bad news for others. People in the Third World are now appropriating the good news and making it their own, interpreting it in the light of their own experience.

Throughout Scriptures, God sides with the poor, and in Jesus Christ God becomes poor. In the resurrection God's option for the poor is confirmed. Thus, in Christ, God is the hope of the poor and oppressed in a world of despair,

and through the gift of God's Spirit, the poor are empowered to be free.

In the midst of poverty and struggle we are called to recognize signs of the unfolding Kingdom of God. These are manifested as persons in the ranks of the poor and are empowered by the gospel to shrug off the chains of oppression and put on the mantle of self-determination and participation. As examples of this we would cite how indigenous peoples are throwing off centuries of deprivation and insist on sharing in the good things of life. Women similarly empowered have found the gospel to be their good news. So have countless other poor.

The gospel also impels us to deplore the situation in many parts of the Third World where children languish in poverty. One other sign of good news coming out of poverty is the voluntary poverty which for some wealthy persons has become a spiritual resource and witness to the gospel. This is happening not only among some Christians but also among some people of other faiths.

### **Our Response, Your Challenge**

Arising out of our dialogue at this pre-Institute consultation, we have committed ourselves to raising the following issues in the discussion groups of the full Institute.

#### *Biblical Studies*

We call for the re-reading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor.

#### *Wesley Studies*

(1) We propose that instead of treating Methodism merely as an institution, participants make an effort to reformulate its various

dimensions as a movement.) This means that room must be made for those Wesleyan expressions which have become indigenous to many countries, accommodating itself to cultures, languages, and religious traditions, for example, the Aymara people in Bolivia and the growing Methodist pentecostal movement.

(2) We wish to note, to affirm, and to encourage Third World churches which are sharing their limited resources in a South-South exchange as well as their readiness to be a part of the process of evangelizing the North. Mutuality in mission across all frontiers is an imperative task.

#### *Post-Wesley Methodist History*

We call upon this Institute to assist Methodism in shifting its center away from the charismatic personality of John Wesley to the people who are the active agents in the movement which he founded, and beyond.

#### *Social Ethics and Practical Theology*

Methodist commitment to the poor is not accidental. It is central and has been expressed as a permanent concern through the social creeds of the whole Methodist family. Social ethics, then, has to deal with poverty as a scandal to the Christian conscience. In this regard, we call urgent attention to the plight of the burgeoning millions of people, especially of children, who are the innocent victims of abject poverty.

#### *Evangelism*

(1) We are convinced that evangelization has to be approached from the perspective of the poor. It must interact with, and take root in the social, political, and ethnic context of the

people. Its prophetic mission involves exposing the structures of sin that perpetuate poverty.

(2) We call particular attention to the disturbing development of neo-fundamentalism in the USA, which is being exported to different parts of the world.

In similar other forms of Western theology may not be prescriptively helpful for the complex and sensitive situations of religious pluralism found in many parts of Asia and other multi-cultural settings.

### *Systematic Theology*

(1) In the light of all that has been said in this presentation, we identify sin in all its dimensions as being at the root of the ills that afflict the poor. We therefore call upon this Institute to undertake a new exploration of the doctrine of sin and creation, as a way of facilitating the church in confronting these evils.

(2) We are convinced that John Wesley moved towards the poor because he recognized the image of Christ incarnate in impoverished persons. We urge consideration of the ways in which the messianic power and presence of God is found in the poor.

## **Working Groups**

### **Plenary Report of the Biblical Studies Working Group**

The Biblical Studies Working Group was blessed with a rich diversity of perspectives and a fruitful atmosphere of collegiality. We

offer the following comments and observations as a general summary of our work.

1. The wide range of papers offered and discussed served to confirm the central importance of God's preferential option for the poor in the biblical text (as well as the corrupting potential of wealth and materialism).

2. At the same time texts cannot be made to simply say what we wish and biblical work in the church must honestly face problematic texts and difficult readings.

3. Our work suggests that there is not homogeneity within the biblical text in defining who the poor are. Taking this diversity into account biblically may help with the diversity of definitions we have encountered for the poor of our world.

4. Of special importance is consideration of these biblical definitions of the poor in terms of gender since women are often absent from categories we uncritically take as generic but which in reality omit the experience of women altogether. The effects of poverty and marginalization are often different for women than for men and are often unacknowledged in ancient text and modern context.

5. It is clear in our biblical work that social and spiritual dimensions of the "good news for the poor" are inextricably related. To read from the perspective of the poor is to read in the presence of God because it is with the poor that God has located the divine self. The Bible does not allow us to be concerned for the poor only as a social problem but to find in the poor the necessary medium for relationship to God, and the critique of our attempts to manipulate God in our own interests. This relationship between socio-political and spiritual

dimensions of the good news needs further exploration.

6. Our work has demonstrated the rich variety of methods available to the church for the reading and appropriation of texts. We urge the churches represented here to explore this richness. In our work these methods have included socio-critical readings, canon criticism, reader response theory, feminist hermeneutics, materialist readings, liberation hermeneutics, tracing of history of exegetical trajectories, base Christian community approaches to the text.

7. We have been concerned for and urge further attention to the norms by which we judge the multivalent readings possible from biblical texts. Questions of authority, reading in community, relationship of reading to tradition, and contextuality as a factor in judging readings were touched upon but not systematically explored.

8. Finally, appropriate pedagogies for communicating and making available the results of biblical work in congregations and classrooms were discussed but remains an area needing further development.

Our report appropriately included words of gratitude to those who labored to provide groups, settings, and schedules that would prove most conducive to our work together. At the same time, we would honor our obligation to offer suggestions that may make future Oxford Institutes even more productive:

1) We believe that early preparation and distribution of papers is essential to the success of the Working Groups. When a number of lengthy papers don't reach group members' hands until the Institute is underway, duplicating costs soar and members are forced to

surrender precious free hours. We recommend that deadlines for papers be set well ahead of time and strictly enforced. Copies of papers should be made prior to arrival at Oxford;

2) Moreover, planning well in advance would afford us the freedom to vary the strictly academic and "bring what you can" format of our sessions. Every Working Group session does not have to follow the same format;

3) Our theme, "Good news for the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition," elicited a tremendous variety of paper topics. Though this variety was, in some ways, a blessing, many members of our Group thought that several sessions devoted to solicited papers on particular topics would provide a welcomed measure of structure.

Again, all Working Group sessions do not have to follow the same format;

4) Most members of the Biblical Studies Working Group expressed appreciation for their experiences in the Interdisciplinary Groups. They suggested that two Working Groups (e.g., Biblical Studies and Theology) might profitably meet together several times during the Institute.

5) Group members also suggested that plenary addresses be followed not only by a same-discipline response, but also by one or two other-discipline responses.

We are grateful for the collegial, but also appropriately critical, participation of Group members. In particular, we appreciate the opportunity to gather and work together, not only as Old and New Testament scholars, but also as members of world-wide Methodism.

**Katheryn Pfisterer Darr,  
Bruce C. Birch,  
Co-Chairs**

## Plenary Report of the Wesley Studies Working Group

The Wesley Studies Working Group, meeting together for the third time since its inception in 1982, heard papers given by John Tyson, Charles Brockwell, Kenneth Carder, Thomas William Madron, Gregory Clapper, Robert C. Monk, Kenneth J. Collins, and David Butler. In addition, the Group devoted specific time to the discussion of plenary papers by Ted Jennings and Richard Heitzenrater. These various group and plenary papers offered a variety of perspectives on the responses of John Wesley and eighteenth-century Methodism, more broadly, to the crises brought about by the Industrial Revolution, especially the crisis of urban poverty.

Although members of the group generally agreed with Jennings's and Heitzenrater's assertions about the centrality of and motivations for ministry to the poor for John Wesley, a central and sharply-debated question that emerged in the group was whether Wesley gave priority to spiritual concerns over concerns about bodily welfare. Gregory Clapper and Kenneth Collins, in particular, argued strongly for such "spiritual priority."

The group not only asked about the details of eighteenth-century history, but also sought to prioritize some of the implications of its research for contemporary Wesleyan and Methodist churches. These implications are given under four headings, namely, implications for World Methodist institutions, implications for Wesleyan and Methodist academic enterprises, implications for

Wesleyan and Methodist congregations, and implications for ourselves.

a. With respect to World Methodist institutions, the group offers the following suggestions: 1) We should work together with World Methodist institutions to make available an economical book on Charles Wesley's hymns; 2) We should perhaps print a new version of Wesley's "Thoughts on the Scarcity of Provisions" with comments regarding its application for our times; 3) We should consider ways in which we can educate ourselves (at the Oxford Institute) on the ways in which people communicate in different cultural contexts; 4) The Oxford Institute might consider having a Spirituality working group; 5) We should consider ways in which we can produce economical and simple booklets on the Wesleys for use in congregations, including translations where necessary; 6) We should consider organized fasting at the Oxford Institute, conjoined with the practice of prayer and almsgiving as well; 7) We might consider organizing visits to needy people at the next Oxford Institute.

b. With respect to Wesleyan or Methodist academic circles, the group offers the following suggestions: 1) We should pursue the methodological issue of how we can utilize John or Charles Wesley in the contemporary Church; 2) We might address more particularly the question of who were the (literal) poor ministered by the Wesleys (to what extent did this include women or children; and what might the relevance of this be today); 3) We should devote more study to the divergent views on poverty gathered at the Oxford Institute and present them; 4) We should pursue the "prosopographical" question of who

the first Methodists really were (i.e., to ask about their names, occupations, etc.); 5) We should pursue the question of what (practically) John and Charles Wesley had to offer the people of their day.

c. With respect to the life of contemporary Methodist and Wesleyan congregations, the group offers these suggestions: 1) We should examine the Charles Wesley hymns more frequently and in more detail; 2) We should emphasise the centrality of fasting, prayer and the giving of alms for Methodists; 3) We should better educate people on the reality of the context of the poor we have among us, and of present ministries to the poor (video presentations or case studies might be helpful in this respect).

d. With respect to ourselves and our own lives as Christian disciples, a number of suggestions were offered, some of them too personal to be given here. Some resolutions adopted or insights gained by particular group members were the following: 1) We should adoption of simpler lifestyles in response to the issues raised by this Oxford Institute; 2) We should renew our commitments to serve Christ and Christ's Church as a ministers (whether ordained or not); 3) We should each work for the reception of God's gift of judgement and hope at this Institute which will translate into action in one's vocation or calling; 4) Some should consider serving outside of the so-called "First World"; 5) We should each work to make Charles Wesley's hymns more accessible or available to Methodist and Wesleyan people in our own contexts; and finally 6. Some of us should be engaged making books and resources on Methodism

more available to persons in "Two-Thirds-World" contexts.

The Wesley Studies Working Group also offers as a part of its concluding report the attached account of a miraculous documentary discovery, as reported in the concluding sessions of the Institute.

**Ted A. Campbell,  
Lorna Khoo, Co-Convenors**

### **An Hitherto Unpublished Letter of John Wesley to Charles Wesley**

(As presented to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Aug. 6, 1992 by S T Kimbrough, Jr.)

My dear brother,

It is evening, but before reading the appointed Psalm for the day, prayers, and retiring, I hasten to send you these words to Oxford. I have learned from one of lay preachers here at Leeds (a place you no doubt recall, as you once rode here from Newcastle to inform me of your hand in Grace Murray's marriage to John Bennett)--Now, Charles, do not put down this letter! I assure you I will not mention that subject again. I only wish I had thought at the time to remind you of father's words to you when you sent away to school as a boy: *carolum vehis et caroli fortunas*--Charles carries fortune? I hardly thought so on that day.

Now to the matter at hand: I understand there is a gathering at Oxford of our ministers, laity, and professors from England, America, Africa, and other countries far and wide. I am told you are meeting at Somerville College. I find that strange, as I have never heard of the place, and I do know Oxford! After all, there are Lincoln



College and Christ Church. Or, if you wish to place on the hearts of our folk the burden of the poor and dispossessed, why not hold at least one meeting in the Bocardo--within the walls of a prison, especially, if you are being denied the use of our churches?

From the report received evening last, you are discussing the foundations of our minisry to the poor. My dear brother, I bid you share these thoughts with our faithful friends.

1) I adjure you, sisters and brothers in the faith, that you make no distinction among the poor or in their care. They are God's creatures as are we. In creation we are one as in Christ. God is no respecter of persons, rather receives all alike as human beings.

2) I encourage you, the faithful, to read Acts 2:42-45 each morning and evening of your gathering, and always, that you may be moved with the reality of life lived with and for the poor.

3) Do not think this matter is simple. My brother and I have been to America. We have seen the ravages of slavery and known the inustices imposed on the natives of the American continent. We could never for one second imagine a kingdom of God which allows the impoverishment of others. Enslavement is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature.

4) If we would serve Christ, we must, like him, become poor. Let none think on the occasion of your Oxford meeting that spiritual poverty applies only to life in the spirit. The gospel demands commitment of all we are and have, and sharing the gift of salvation in and with Christ means sharing all we are and have with the poor. When we live and work with the poor, we will experience and practice God's

grace. There is always a message of grace, indeed grace, from the poor.

By the way, Charles, I have just received your hymn sent for my perusal and correction in which you speak of aspiring to perfection as "perfect poverty." Why I have not thought of it in such a fashion I do not know. Would that our rich acquaintances so thought! In pursuit of such perfection in Christ perhaps we shall be more evangelized by the poor than they by us.

Your corrections and additions for my Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament arrived a week ago, but I caution you to check your Latin sources, rather than to quote the Church Fathers and Latin poets so regularly from memory, as I discovered quite a few misspellings. Remember ars est longa, vita est brevis. Excuse my diversion, Charles.

(5) My friends, as a number of my brother's hymns explain, "the poor must be our best friends." We must embrace them, make of them friends, as does Christ. We must stand firm with them and, yet, we must be for them. This is holy love lived.

Charles, how often have we heard the question in some societies (for not all our folk are the dispossessed), Who are the poor? We say we are poorest of all! We must be! But are we? We have food, shelter and raiment! We are rich! We see about us daily the hungering, destitute, poverty stricken masses. They are the poor. (In the hovels of colliers at Newcastle recently the stench was so unbearable that I found the smell of horse manure pleasant, when I returned to fetch my animal from the stable.) Must these poor folk be condemned, sentenced on earth to such a destiny? They are the poor, yes, but not they only! We have seen

in every level of our society those who, though fashionable, though of good taste, though educated and of high culture, though rich, are fully bereft, totally impoverished in soul and mind, and at times even in body. What shall we say then? The poor have a right to the gospel! Yes! But not the gospel only--to the fullness of life! Yea, this is the gospel. Christ would have it so-- that they have life and have it abundantly!

Reports tell me you are not agreed in all things. Where among Methodists is this so, except that in Christ we are all set free! This is why, my sister and brothers, you must continue in the work of serious study of scripture, faith, and all of your thoughts of God. Nevertheless, I caution you regarding the following:

1) Firstly, saying you are of Wesley, Charles or John, as many said in St. Paul's writings, "I am of Apollos or Cephas." You are Christ's! Pray for faith and understanding, study the scriptures, be faithful to the prayers and sacraments, seek the inner witness of the Spirit, preach the Word, praise God in song, serve one another and the poor in love as did Christ. Give constant attention to growth in body, mind, and spirit. If someone says these things are of the Wesleys, so be it! Do not be faithless in them. But we seek no followers who say, "We belong to the Wesleys." Nay, rather, "We belong to Christ and Christ is God's."

2) Secondly, I have heard in some societies recently of conflicts over whether one should be more concerned about spiritual or material poverty. We may be sure God does not despise the humble, contrite and repentant heart--true spiritual poverty--yea, desires it; but our Lord's

story of the Last Judgment must ever convict us that the committed Christlike heart responds to pain, hunger, injury, and nakedness.

Finally, as it is always our task to nurture the human mind and heart for growth in faith, grace, and service, I urge you to develop a small, inexpensive Christian Faith Library pamphlet series which can be offered especially to the poor and dispossessed throughout the world that they may in their own tongues learn of the full breadth and depth of our understanding of faith in Christ and its practice as members of Christ's holy church. Be faithful to provoke your hearts and minds to grow in Christ.

These things I humbly submit to your care, my dear brother, that you may hold them up to those gathered with you.

Your loving brother, John

P.S. In the event some among you have not maintained their Latin, I remind them, Charles, as I have reminded you above, ars est longa, vita est brevis (art is long, life is short)!

Tell all with you that it is my prayer, as you gather and depart, that Christ may dwell in you richly and accompany you with restless hearts until the imprisoned are freed, the injured healed, the naked clothed, the homeless given shelter, and the lost saved,--yea, until all have made their peace in Christ.

[Note: The above letter was composed by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. at the request of the Wesley Studies Working Group of the Ninth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, after this group had sharply focussed in its own discussion some primary aspects of the Wesleys' "Good News to the Poor," which it wished to bring before the Institute. The latter was then submitted as a major part of the

group's report to the plenary session of the Institute on August 6, 1992.]

### **Plenary Report of the Working Group on Post-Wesley Historical Studies**

The seventeen papers and the wide-ranging discussions of the Post-Wesley History group do not admit of easy summary. The following points capture some highlights.

#### **1. The Broken Tradition**

Our papers described a succession of discrete movements, each of which extended and/or revisited the Wesleyan commitment to the poor, some like the Free Methodists obliged to "come out" to sustain their reform, others like the social gospel able to effect modest change within a system. Those renewals testify to the continuing vigor of the Wesleyan vision. They also show that the vision eventually blurs, thus requiring the renewal. The tradition is therefore a broken one; yet, even so a tradition. The Institute's theme brought the tradition into view and occasioned a start on re-reading Methodist history, a recognition that efforts with and on behalf of the poor constitute a distinctive narrative, reveal new heroes and heroines, require a fresh story line, revise interpretive rubrics and demand a different periodization.

a) Periodization and our sense of historical time, we thought, might well be significantly altered if this theme were taken to be the substance of Methodist history. The Wesleyan good news to the poor has been momentary, discrete and episodic. Perhaps a history of such

efforts would be less linear and more cyclical, less continuous and more pulsating, than traditional Methodist narratives. Certainly, it would demand different starting and ending points. One such different periodization emerged in our Latin American papers which foreshortened time so as to focus on the recent past, recent economic and debt realities, and the way that crisis simply cut off the distant past.

b) Despite the momentary and episodic character of church-wide efforts with the poor, Methodism has evidenced counter-patterns of persistence. We discovered such at local levels where laity and clergy hung in, despite the lack of support and resources from above.

c) Leaders and leadership proved key in persistence and/or renewal. Each prophetic moment had its hero or heroine. Visionary, thinker, institution-builder, prophet--they differed in their mode of leadership. Typically, they lived out their commitment in demonstrative identification with the poor and they found some way of giving coherence or plan to that good news.

#### **2) When Prophecy Fails**

The group found persuasive and quite helpful Donald Dayton's plenary address and his argument that the instability of the Wesleyan ministry with the poor had something to do with ambiguities and tensions in Wesley's own formulations. Dayton noted, for instance, that the lack of systematic theological treatment may well have frustrated effective transmission of Wesley's vision. Implicitly, our papers provided some ironic corollaries of Dayton's observations.

a) The instability of Wesleyan ministry with the poor had something to do with its incarnational character. Rendered in popular and colloquial rhetoric and taking the form of dramatic enactment and engagement, Methodist prophecy staged itself effectively but faded as the play itself closed. It possessed both the power and the impermanence of the voice.

b) So also Methodism's genius with the strategic, programmatic and contextual made good news to the poor period-specific and subject to distortions over time. Abolition, missions, temperance, labor reform—Methodism excelled in putting its commitment into a program. Radical for their day, such programs had difficulty in maintaining their 'edge'.

c) The good news often captivated its audience with a riveting systemic metaphor, a living embodiment of the oppression from which relief must be found. Today and especially in the Third World, transnational capitalism functions as metaphor, gathering into one image the various dynamics, elites, policies and conditions that impoverish and exploit. In Wesley's day, gentility provided a metaphor and the genteel life epitomized slavery to the world; for the mid-nineteenth century and especially the holiness movement bourgeois Victoriana served that role; missions, championed as a reform for the poor, imaged exploitation as heathen; the social gospel saw industrial monopoly as the enemy; the women's movement views patriarchy as the operative metaphor. Like rhetoric and program, metaphors proved to be period specific, not compelling, sometimes not even understandable, in a later day. Here, too, then

the very power of Methodist good news for one day rendered it vulnerable in the next.

d) The more incarnational, then, the Methodist commitment the less stable it was. So efforts that ministered to the poor proved more enduring than ministry with and of the poor. One reason for this, clearly, was the so-called escalator effect noted by Wesley and subsequent interpreters.

### **The Devil Made Me Do It**

The episodic and momentary character of ministry with the poor invites blame and scape-goating. Methodism failed. How to explain the failure? Jeremiadic and primitivistic readings come easily (and frequently). Methodism fell from its primitive purity; for culprit or cause the historian picks his/her pet peeve. Such historiographical temptations are not readily resisted. Notions of embourgeoisment, formalization, institutionalization, routinization, clericalization clearly help but can also be rendered so as to focus "blame" narrowly. We have noted several intrinsic dynamics that made persistence with the poor difficult. Also operative were various cross-pressures that affected the preaching of good news to the poor.

a) Other ideals, including the servant ideals of mission and enabling ideals of education, seem to have drawn attention away from the poor.

b) Denominational competition, with Anglicans in Britain and Baptists in the US, affected how Methodism understood its mandate and whom it thought needed the gospel.

c) The state and civil law have played and continue to play, especially in the Third

World, an important hand. The state has frustrated ministries to the poor; it has also stepped in with its own efforts in such a way as to up-stage denominations. Law can set the terms for denominational activity.

d) Racism, anti-catholicism, caste prejudice and various tribalisms have complicated and qualified Methodist efforts, typically not for the good.

#### **4) The World Turned Upside Down**

This point is a reminder that in our search for moments of Wesleyan faithfulness to the vision of Good News to the poor, we must not overlook or discount the revolutionary power of the ordinary; that is, the liberating power in ordinary church life: where the Word is preached and the sacraments are celebrated; where Christian people gather in worship and fellowship with one another. We mention three particular aspects of this:

a) The appeal of the Methodist message for ordinary people. The response of women and African Americans to early Methodist preaching is convincing evidence that the Gospel continues to be heard in authentic ways, often despite the intentions of the preacher.

b) The poor's own preferential option. One paper in our Working Group used this evocative phrase to point to the power of the poor to shape out of what they have heard and experienced and received that which is valid and meaningful in their own context. Here we were reminded again of Methodism as a popular religion, as we looked at Methodist movements among Indians in Bolivia, among Pentecostals in Chile, among the Orang Asli in Malaysia, and among African women in Zimbabwe.

c) The validity and importance of faithful witness. Such witness in solidarity with the poor and against injustice is to be remembered and cherished in any age whether or not it was ultimately successful in transforming oppressive social conditions.

#### **5) Goodbye, Columbus**

(Or, from another perspective, the end of Vasco de Gama. People from other parts of the world, fill in the blank appropriately.)

The point, of course, at this quincentenary of the European invasion of 1492, is the end of Western colonial dominance; or, to put it more positively, toward a liberationist historiography. Again, we would focus on three brief points:

a) What the poor want is to be subjects of history: to have the opportunity to name and define themselves, and to tell their own story as they saw it.

b) We affirm the recommendation of the Third World Pre-Institute Consultation that in our studies of the Wesleyan tradition "room must be made for those Wesleyan expressions which have become indigenous to many countries, accommodating themselves to other cultures, languages, and religious traditions."

c) With regard to the agenda of our History Working Group, this means that: we must recognize there are different stages of historiography present in the First and Third Worlds, we are committed to shaping the group's future agenda in non-exclusive ways, and we want to attend to and celebrate both the search for commonality and the history-writing that is needed at home.

#### **6) Good News from the Poor**

In light of all the above, our History Working Group recommends that the next Oxford Institute take the obvious next step from this year's theme, "Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition," to the theme "Good News from the Poor." We would challenge the various Working Groups, including our own, to explore what it means to discover the Gospel coming from the poor, to recognize evangelization from the margins; if you will, to move from the field to the tradition. This means discerning the in-breaking of the Spirit in surprising places. To use a few fairly obvious illustrations: What happened to John Wesley's theology and practice when he began to encounter the poor of the eighteenth century in his field preaching? What difference did it make to Methodism in North America that there was from the beginning (and indeed throughout) such a significant African American presence? What happens to the Wesleyan tradition when an Indian in Bolivia becomes Bishop? We suggest that there would be room in this theme for many of the concerns expressed at this Institute: exploration of structures of power and the use of language, attention to women and children as the poorest of the poor, all toward the goal of a new way of being human. We would also urge those charged with shaping the next Oxford Institute to find ways to make the form and process of the Institute more coherent with the theme, in terms of location, the use of languages other than English, the various formats for sessions, and the integration of the Institute's worship life with all of its work. We want to attempt to accept the challenge put to members of this

Institute by Rev. Grace Imathiu: to make this issue of the poor our business!

**Jean Miller Schmidt,**

**Russell E. Richey, Co-Chairs**

## **Plenary Report of the Working Group on Social Ethics and Practical Theology**

### **Introduction**

The late Paul Ramsey used to refer to Christian Ethics as only "the little finger on the Body of Christ." The members of Group 4 on "Social Ethics and Practical Theology" are not that modest about our task, although we recognize that in all aspects of our work we are dependent upon all of the other disciplines of theology and practice and upon the direct experience of people in real situations. The perennial task of Christian ethics is to help the church understand how to organize human existence in accordance with the Gospel.

### **I. Analysis of the Setting of Poverty**

Poverty is a global reality present in many forms in all the countries represented here. By poverty we do not mean voluntarily chosen poverty, nor do we wish to romanticize the life or character of the poor. In our discussions we became aware of two morally significant dimensions of poverty: First, the sheer lack of physical necessities required for health and well-being. Second, the lack of enough material resources to be able to participate in the life of society.

The first, physical poverty, affects the poor themselves through suffering, weakness, and death. In Group 4 we surveyed this reality in all of the continents. The second, relative poverty, affects all of us. For when the poor

lack the resources to participate in community, everybody else is deprived of meaningful relationship with them. Relative poverty is present throughout the world. We have noted, in particular, its effects on those in the middle classes who are at risk of becoming poor and the moral and spiritual poverty of an economic culture based on greed.

## II. Theological Response

We have noted, with appreciation, the general recognition in this conference of the centrality of the issue of poverty in our Wesleyan tradition. Without elaboration, we find there such great theological themes as the doctrines of creation and grace and sin. The doctrine of creation compels us to take physical being seriously and to regard human suffering as a tragic frustration of God's purposes. The doctrine of grace prompts reflection on the love of God as the deepest ground of human community and, by that token, the recognition that when deprivation and gross inequality leads to alienation with the community they obstruct the working of grace. The doctrine of sin points both to personal and collective forms of rebellion against God's intended good. Poverty is generally a systemic reality, manifesting collective forms of sin. The reality of sin makes urgent the concrete protection of the social and of valuable people.

We have noted, however, the importance of spiritual resources at every level in the struggle to confront poverty: to awaken within the poor themselves a profound sense of their worth to God, to excite within all of us an active drive to overcome poverty, and to provide enduring freshness and patience for the long run. In our

recovery of diakonia we find spiritual vision and energy to serve, to witness, to confront, to reconcile.

## III. Long Range Goals

In the long run, we seek a society without poverty. We do not concede that this is unattainable. Group 4 spent considerable time assessing the global implications of the crisis of Soviet and Eastern European socialism and to the great prestige currently enjoyed by free market capitalism. The full implications of the events remain to be digested. Nevertheless, it already seems clear that

(1) The market mechanism, left to its own devices, will increase poverty, not diminish it. The US and UK during the Reagan and Thatcher years have given a fair test of that.

(2) That it is too soon to write off socialism, though the flaws of Soviet communism were real enough. The socialist egalitarian vision, its commitment to deal directly with poverty, and its willingness to experiment with new social programs and public enterprise still contribute to Christian thinking.

In any event, the resources needed to deal with poverty must be drawn from the whole society, not just from the morally sensitive part of society. The power of government, the instrument of the whole society, to tax and redistribute, will be an indispensable element in the achievement of economic justice.

In the long run, we must work for adequate global institutions, for poverty is inter-connected globally. This is worthy of much more study.

## IV. Short-Term Action

We are impressed by the diversity of situations and by the uniqueness of our various opportunities. There is much need for direct actions by individual Christians and their churches through acts of charity and model institution building. Many Christians, especially those in more affluent and powerful societies, have a special vocation to work for change in power structure and systemic economic practices. All Christians are called to proclaim the good news and to be signs of hope for those who have lost hope.

We cannot claim to have concrete technical answers to the complex economic realities of poverty. But to proclaim the good news and be a sign of hope is at the same time to seek answers. And it is to implement them, as long as they are found, resolutely.

**J. Philip Wogaman**  
Co-Convener

## **Plenary Report of The Working Group on Evangelism**

Twenty-seven scholars and church leaders from twelve countries constituted the Evangelism Working Group for the 1992 Oxford Institute. The group processed seventeen research papers including historical studies, theological essays, and a half dozen case studies of Methodist outreach in as many populations. Lord Donald Soper spent a day with the working group, sharing from his vast experience around the 1992 Institute's theme: "Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition." The Evangelism Working Group

commends to the Oxford Institute constituency the following conclusions from its deliberations:

1. We affirm that serving and evangelizing the poor, and championing justice in their behalf, is not peripheral to Methodism's calling from God. Indeed, early Methodism served, reached, and advanced the cause of the poor, and this generation of Methodists must recover the movement's earlier vision.

2. We acknowledge that too often our parishes have become our world. We are called to overcome our provincialism and recover the vision of a world parish.

3. We acknowledge great cultural and linguistic variety among the earth's poor peoples, so that no one analysis fits all of the poor and no one program will serve and reach all poor people effectively.

4. As the Methodist movement reaches more poor people in the future, we acknowledge our primary dependence upon the full gospel of Jesus Christ in all his offices.

5. We acknowledge that the cultural forms that Christianity takes among poor peoples should not be alien cultural forms, but should be indigenous to the culture and community of each people. In this regard we also acknowledge that the 500th anniversary of Europe's "discovery" of the Western hemisphere is not an occasion for unqualified "celebration."

6. We affirm the supreme importance of mission across cultures, evangelism within cultures, and making new disciples, as well as serving people and working for justice.

7. We recognize that outreach will often be to persons and peoples already influenced by other religious or world views. While several



of our members advocated a revised agenda for mission--as dialogue and interreligious cooperation, most of us affirmed a more classical objective for mission: to make the Christian faith a live option for such people, renouncing both coercion on the one hand and mere presence on the other.

8. We recognize that ministry working for the freedom of poor peoples involves engaging the whole range of principalities and powers--from unjust political and economic systems to supernatural evil powers.

9. We acknowledge that world Methodism contains both rich churches and poor churches. We call for reducing this disparity, and we encourage the Western Methodist Churches to receive the gospel from the poor as well as communicate it to them.

10. We affirm the historic importance of the Oxford Institute to the development of theory and practice in global Methodist evangelism and mission. The arena for reflection that the Institute provides is indispensable for responsible, self-critical, faithful and effective mission and evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition.

**George Hunter III,  
Co-Convener**

### **Plenary Report of the Working Group on Systematic/Contemporary Theology**

I am not going to attempt a summary of what we have heard and said in our group, but will instead focus on a selection of theological issues and insights that we are now coming to.

The 'now coming to' is important.

It takes time to establish rapport so that we are able to go beyond 'hearing, hearing but not understanding;' time to establish a community open to listening and discerning, and out of that, being theologically creative. Therefore, this Institute is better, because longer, than the familiar 'three-day get-together, push a few narrow agendas, let's hurry and write up a report' type of conference. If we are serious about contextual theology then we must take seriously the value of our context here as a community. That context begins with but goes beyond these days together here at Oxford; it ushers in ongoing work from this beginning.

What therefore have we concluded that we must now turn our attention to as theologians? Four things:

1. We are to allow our theological method to be reviewed and renewed.

We are to pursue theology with methods that are consistent with its content--the Gospel of Good News, reconciliation and peace, moving as we did in our group from thesis and counter-thesis, 'over-againstness', to building on each others' work and insights in a common enterprise of theological reflection.

As time went on we found ourselves judged and chastened by some papers and presentations not because they were combative or strident, but because engaging, compassion-ate, compelling. They evoked images, told stories, used case studies, and invited us to see ourselves in them. And is that not reflecting the power of the Gospel? For what is it about the crucified one that cuts us to the heart? Not a word of judgment; from the cross his word was forgiveness. It is the very act of total indiscriminating self-giving love that makes our sinfulness unbearable. It judges us and

spurs us to repentance, in deed as well as in word.

So, as we try to come to theological terms with 'good news to the poor',

2. Once again we have to ask ourselves, Who is this Jesus?

What has he done?: What does he do through the power of the Holy Spirit? What can be hoped for in him? These classical theological questions gain new force and intensity when we wrestle with them in the context of good news for the poor.

So, for example, what is 'the power of Jesus' name' that we sing about? And if we claim the power of that name, following that way and not one of our own devising that masquerades as his, or blasphemously invokes his name but only to sanctify our own agendas? Don't we need especially to find a way of witnessing to that power that does not dis-empower the hearer? How are we to bring a word of life that does not deal death to those who embrace it because it requires them to forsake their culture or to deny their communal memory that makes them who they are?

And is that not a matter of ecclesiology as well? How are we to be church with others, acknowledging our own poverty even as we try to address their poverty of deprivation and oppression?

3. We dare not by-pass ecological issues.

We must maintain that the full dimension of the good news includes the renewal of the whole creation.

Concentrating on this, of course, draws the charge of demanding that the third world should make up for the first world's destructiveness; or with putting sentimental attachment to nature before the need of people

for work and livelihood. These are serious and well-founded charges, but we cannot allow them to reduce us to silence, for if we do not address the issue then we condemn our neighbors, the next generations, not just to abject poverty but to death.

So we had before us some theological proposals worth pursuing -- theological proposals about inter-relatedness, about 'inter-living not inter-killing', interdependence of 'humans, the land and the garden', about extending the imago dei to encompass neighborly relation to the land and its creatures.

4. Finally approaching these theological issues in the spirit of Wesley.

This is not, we were reminded, to start with particular doctrines and see how we can manipulate them so that they produce a squeak that assures us they are alive! To do theology in Wesleyan spirit is not to say, 'These are the doctrines dear to Methodism; let's work to show their present relevance.'

It is rather to do in our time what Wesley did in his, viz. through pastoral and passionate engagement with the word of the Gospel, to see where God works in human life and to proclaim that. So we who have heard the Gospel, are committed to the faith and have been shaped by the church's tradition and liturgy are to ask 'What is happening in the world now, through the grace of God, that sustains people and gives them hope? How are we to discern and proclaim it, not so much to provide a label for God's work as to be part of the means of extending it?'

That is 'experimental religion' in our time as in Wesley's, which invokes not just the practice of religion but reflection as well,

reflection that engages with the long theological tradition of the church from biblical times. Only practice plus reflection equals the 'praxis' we hear so much about, and so we miss the force of what Wesley was about if we reduce his approach to either experience alone or practice alone.

The three questions which structured much of our discussion were, 'Who are the poor? What is good news for them? How do they enable us to hear the good news?' And again and again we were graphically reminded that the poor have many faces: Those who have no land or sea to sustain them are poor; those who have no memory to enliven them, no hope to encourage them, without identity in community to maintain their being.\*

Who among us has not felt something of the sharpness of that poverty, and longs to be enriched in a community sustained by God's grace?

**Norman Young,**  
**Co-convener**

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\*This is not to say, of course, that no poor people have memory, no poor people have hope. In many cases the opposite is true. But when people have their memory or hope taken away from them they are thereby rendered poor, whatever else they may possess.



***OXFORDnotes* is the Newsletter of  
the Oxford Institute of Methodist  
Theological Studies, published at:**

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WASHINGTON DC 20016  
U.S.A.**

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