

It is possible to see the foundation of overseas missions by British Methodism as part of the emergence of the European missionary endeavour at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, though, British Methodism has an almost unique status as a sending Church. Most missionary societies: the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, responsible for the sending out of the Wesleys; the Baptist Missionary Society; and the Church Missionary Society were founded as societies of interested people within a denomination, but having no formal relationship with that denomination. The London Missionary Society, though it began in 1794 as a non-denominational society, soon alienated both Methodists (who disapproved of its Calvinist theology) and Anglicans (who disapproved of its lack of episcopal order) and became the society of those members of traditional dissent who were committed to foreign missions.

Methodist missionary activity, on the other hand, had a different basis. It is true that Dr Thomas Coke had unsuccessfully in 1784 tried to set up within Methodism a 'Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathen' on the same lines as the above societies, and that for many years after conducted missionary activity almost as a private adventurer. He was, though, given responsibility for missions by Conference from 1804 onwards and encouraged the setting up of District Missionary Societies before his departure for Sri Lanka and death in 1813. In fact, the pressure for a more formal basis to the missionary activity, already firmly established in the West Indies, was generated by local churches. The agitation began in the Leeds area where speakers at huge missionary meetings expressed the view that what the poor of Britain had learned from Methodist preaching must be shared with the rest of the world. In 1818 the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society was founded at a connexional level. It was from the beginning an arm of the Methodist Church as a whole, and not a society within it. There were reasons for this, both theological and social. Methodism had itself begun as a society of religious zealots operating within an established Church. Its *raison d'etre* had been the missionary urge - the sense of vocation which led its members to work among the dechristianised masses of England and America.

Foreign missions were seen as an extension of this vocation - an extension summarised by the official History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society:

Conveyed from the centre of each local ecclesia it (missionary service) animates the entire frame to its extramities. On the Methodist theory, Foreign Missions form a main and indispensable function of the Church, alike in its largest and in its most limited capacity; every fibre and every faculty of the Body of Christ lies under contribution for their furtherance. (p.59)

Besides this theological reason, the tightly-knit nature of Methodism, even after it became a separate denomination, militated against the formation of an independent organisation. The missionaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society were sent by the Church itself, through the direction of Conference. They were sent to establish new Methodist societies which would, like the missionaries themselves, be responsible to the conference at home through its agent, the Missionary Committee. Perhaps there is some irony in the fact that whilst British Methodism had not, at its birth, hesitated to modify the practices and usages of the established church in accordance with the needs of the situation as they saw it, in its missionary enterprises it rarely saw the need to depart in any significant detail from the organisation and forms of worship developed thousands of miles away from where they were being enacted.

The means of this sending out from the home base was, as its critics have never tired of pointing out, tied by and large to the network of Empire and trade established by Imperial Britain. This was inevitable - the sending out of the apostles would have been more of a problem without the benefit of the Pax Romanum. And missionaries cannot simply be identified with the imperial power: in India colonial administrators often put up obstacles to prevent Christian evangelism, whilst in the South Pacific, the first missionaries arrived considerably in advance of the agents of the Empire. Even so, there was a national pride in most mission projects and part of British Methodism's sense of vocation arose from its sense of Britain's special place in the world:

Protection and honour so peculiar, shown to one chosen land, called for a new dedication upon its part. What fitter end could the Father of mankind have in view than that through the people He had shielded with His might and in whose hand He had placed the keys of the world's traffic, the Gospel of His glory should be published to the ends of the earth? Such were the reflections that inspired many a missionary sermon and speech in the years which followed Trafalgar and Waterloo.  
(History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society) p.85.

This provided the theme for the Nineteenth century, as preachers, educationalists and eventually medical personnel joined the mission stations throughout Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. As churches became more established, more autonomy was given to the local districts and more responsibility given to local ministers, but the British conference retained overall control. As late as 1914 a policy document produced by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society cited as the first duty of the missionary the oversight of the native church. It went on to stress the dependence of the native Church on 'the help of those who have profited by the age-long conflicts of belief and growth of Christian experience among the Churches in the West.' Training and leadership in evangelism were the other tasks assigned to the missionary, though other parts of the document show a gradual dawning of what had become clear at the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, that missionary domination cannot be sustained, theologically or practically, for an indefinite period.

The Twentieth century has seen a decline in the numbers of personnel sent by the mainstream churches of the West, as well as a change in their function. Just as nationalist leaders emerged to challenge the colonial powers in the Third World, so indigenous leaders of stature emerged to challenge the dominance of the sending Church. An extreme example was in China where under government pressure the main Protestant communities united under the banner of the 'Three Self Movement' (self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating) after the communist victory. This effectively brought to an end the work of British Methodism, which had a long tradition of sending pastoral, educational and medical personnel to the country.

In India the founding of the Church of South India and, more recently, the Church of North India, has meant a more complex change. British Methodism retains through a Related Missions Committee a link with the new Churches. It remains a sending Church in the sense that it continues to help with the support of Church projects through financial aid and by sending personnel to those institutions which were founded by the various missions and often remain a burden to the local Christian community.

The Caribbean, the site of the first Methodist foreign mission and now an autonomous conference, receives a block grant from British Methodism and is free to use this to support missionaries whose

stipend, conditions of service and stationings are under its own control.

During the sixties and seventies, the Churches of Africa were at the centre of the so-called 'moratorium debate'. Whilst the idea of a moratorium on the sending of missionaries from Europe was never the policy of entire churches, the debate brought to the fore the difficulty of regarding one Church as a sending and another as a receiving agent. These difficulties are not resolved when what is sent is not so much an imposed leadership as personnel with particular skills and money in the form of aid projects. Methodism has found it difficult to replace its centrally controlled world network with a conciliar system. How to express the interdependence of local churches throughout the world, without allowing the dominance of the powerful and rich is still an open question. Perhaps the lack of a system of episcopal government is in part responsible for a lack of balance between local autonomy and centralised tyranny.

The Methodist Church in Britain has tried to adapt to these changes in several ways. The change of the name 'Methodist Missionary Society' to Methodist Church Overseas Division' expresses the fact that the Church no longer sees itself exclusively in a sending role. The idea that the partnership of Churches involves receiving as well as sending has been emphasised by the 'World Church in Britain' programme.

Through these changes can be discerned changes in theological emphasis and in the social context within which theology has been translated into practice. Englishmen no longer feel so confident that they are called to be 'a light to the nations' and the secularising process within Western Europe has pointed to the need for ground breaking mission at home as much as abroad. The modern emphasis on the importance of the local ecclesia and the awareness of the need for the 'contextualisation' of Christianity has made it less easy to impose one centralised system of administration and practise on diverse churches.