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WESLEYAN EVANGELISM TODAY

Toward the close of his life John Wesley preached a remarkable sermon on "The General Spread of the Gospel". In it he revealed his vision of the world-wide expansion of Methodist evangelism. He claims: "God can undoubtedly convert whole nations or the whole world. It is as easy to Him to convert a world as one individual soul."

From small beginnings at the University of Oxford, John Wesley describes in detail what he believes will happen. He sees the gospel spreading to Europe and America, to New Foundland, Turkey, Abyssinia and to the uttermost parts of the earth in the East Indies, Africa, Asia and the South Seas. He describes "Mahometans" and the people of Israel receiving the Gospel. His vision ends with the re-establishment of universal holiness and happiness and all the inhabitants of the earth singing together "Hallelujah the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

With Wesleyan Methodist churches established in ninety countries, John Wesley's world vision has in part been realised. Now World Methodism is moving forward again. With the launching of World Evangelism at the 12th World Methodist Conference at Denver, Colorado in 1971, Methodism again reaches for the world. Through the "Mission to the 90's" the Gospel is being proclaimed with power around the world.

After ten years of global witness new discoveries in modern evangelism are emerging. While drawing constantly on the resources of Wesleyan theology and traditions, new insights are being received in World Evangelism. Let me reflect on what God is doing through the "Mission to the 90's" and try and outline the contribution it is making to reconceiving evangelism today.

1. Conversion-Christianity

Conversion-Christianity must be central to Wesleyan evangelism today. To release into people's lives the transforming power of Jesus Christ is the need of the church and the hope of the world.

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In John Wesley's diary there is recorded a crucial conversation between him and Peter Bohler. John Wesley did not understand or believe in conversion but Peter Bohler forced him to examine the evidence of the change Jesus Christ brings about through faith. This is his confession: "I could not comprehend what he spoke of an instantaneous work. I could not understand how a man could at once be turned from darkness to light. I searched the Scriptures and found scarce any other than instantaneous conversions, scarce any so slow as St. Paul who was three days in the pangs of the new birth."

The Wesleyan 13th Century Evangelical Revival was built on the power of conversion. Under the preaching of John Wesley and his followers lives were profoundly transformed: drunkards became sober, crude and cruel men and women were refined and redeemed, godless people were turned toward holiness. The Wesleyan movement proved the reality of the Pauline statement: "Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold all things have become new."

Conversion-Christianity must be the basis of evangelism today. The wheel has turned full circle. Millions now know nothing of Christian grace and power. The world is being threatened by raw human nature. It is unredeemed people who are the major causes of the problems of society. People and societies separated from God in the end destroy themselves. Behind the persistence of poverty are selfish callous people who take rather than give, waste rather than share, exploit rather than serve. Racism begins in the pride and prejudice of individual lives. The real threat is not the nuclear bomb but the nuclear human heart packed with suspicion, fear and hatred.

The Church, especially in Western lands, must learn again how to "make disciples". For fifty years it has been a maintenance church, caring for the people linked with it, trusting to biological growth, turned in upon itself. Now it must bring people to conversion.

A recent survey in Australia shows that twenty years ago the ratio of children in Sunday Schools to adults at worship was 105 per cent. Last year, 1991, it was 47 per cent. Now with the number of children related to the church more than halved the church must decline if it puts its faith in biological growth.

What does it mean to become conversion-conscious? All must begin with a heightened faith in the power of conversion. A clear understanding is needed of how the Holy Spirit works, how He leads people through the process of salvation from prevenient grace to sanctification. It means re-discovering the power of preaching. Whether in John Wesley's day or today the most powerful instrument for communicating the converting grace found in Jesus Christ is preaching.

World Evangelism is finding how necessary it is to operate beyond church buildings. The early church offered Christ where the people were, for the first three centuries it owned no properties. John Wesley took to the fields. To reach people beyond the church today some kind of "neutral" place must be found.

The call to commitment must be heard if conversions are to be seen. There is far too much "Mae West religion": "Come up and see me sometime". An urgent, passionate, "now" must be heard: "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation".

Commitment is not conversion. Commitment is the opening of the mind and heart to Jesus Christ who then comes in and brings about the miracle of conversion. Preaching, witnessing for a verdict is the essence of evangelism. World Evangelism, through the lives it is seeing transformed, is discovering again the power and the practice of Conversion-Christianity.

2. Personal and Social Evangelism.

Modern Wesleyan evangelism is exploring and giving witness to a Gospel which is at once personal and social. It seeks at one and the same time to be obedient to the command of Jesus to love God and neighbour.

John Wesley revealed a constant social concern. He was not a Christian prophet in the meaning we give these terms today for the slant of his mind was conservative, but he constantly related the Gospel to the issues of his day. Many pamphlets came from his pen: "The Present Scarcity of Provisions", "Thoughts on Slavery", "A Word to a Smuggler". One of his famous sermons was entitled: "The Use of Money". From his death bed he wrote a letter to William Wilberforce the great slave emancipator: "Go in the name of God and in the power of His might until even American slavery the vilest that ever saw the sun shall vanish away."

There is much evangelism today which is purely personal. It is selfish, escapist and irrelevant. It shouts "Hallelujah", "Praise the Lord", but is silent before the towering social and world tragedies of poverty, racism and war. It at times becomes almost a parody of the total Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Something of a struggle is going on in the mind and soul of modern Methodism over the message to be proclaimed. Unhappily there has been a polarisation between so called evangelicals and people committed to social witness and action. It is a sad and unnecessary dichotomy. It would not have occurred if a more authentic Methodism had stayed closer to the mind and message of John Wesley.

World Evangelism seeks to be faithful to the wholeness of the Gospel as found in the New Testament and in Wesleyan traditions. Faithfully it has sought to link people to God through His reconciling grace and to fashion a world fit for all people to live in. There are few social and world issues to which World Evangelism has not addressed itself.

Three clear examples can be given of World Methodism's social concern. In South Africa the "Obedience Movement" is grappling bravely with apartheid, the nation's evil legal and institutionalised racism. In Australia a "National Goals and Directions Movement" was initiated by World Evangelism in a serious effort to overcome the divisions and to give direction to the nation. On the world level the giving each year of the "World Methodist Peace Award" by the World Methodist Council demonstrates the church's commitment to peace-making.

World Evangelism is demonstrating the power of a message which ties together the personal and social aspects of the Gospel. It rejects the "Sequence Theory" - get a man or a woman's heart right and the world will come right. It knows that a relevant evangelism must not call for a commitment in a vacuum. It must be a commitment to God and to creating a social and world order according to His will. Hence christian conversion must include a conversion to concern for the poor, conversion to justice, conversion to peace as well as conversion to God.

3. Evangelism Within the Body of Christ

World Evangelism has confirmed the Wesleyan insight that evangelism must be firmly grounded within the church as the Body of Christ. The most effective form of evangelism arises out of the church and conserves its gains within the church.

There is a significant eighteenth century contrast which has meaning for today. In America, George Whitfield won an astonishing response to his preaching. It is claimed as many as 90 per cent of the population of the Eastern seaboard of America heard him preach. Yet when he died little remained save the memory of an impressive orator. In England, John Wesley preached with great power, but Wesley set out to draw people into the fellowship of other Christians, into his class meetings. The Methodist Movement continues today because John Wesley both proclaimed the Gospel and was determined to "make disciples".

Over the last twenty to thirty years there has been much detached evangelism, detached from the church. Para-church evangelism has proliferated, with many evangelists setting up their own organisations outside the life and discipline of the church. On radio and television media religion has mushroomed with skilful communicators proclaiming the Gospel. The evidence is mounting that there is a limited flow through of people into the life of the church. A recent survey of new church members in the United States revealed only .6 per cent said they were led into the church by media

religion, the so-called "electronic church".

Because of the failure of the established churches to be involved in evangelism it is perhaps true that the spirit of God who never leaves Himself without witness has brought para-church evangelism into being, and it has offered Christ to millions of people. Now the Christian Church itself is beginning to give priority to evangelism. For example, the Church of South India has recently decreed evangelism is to be its first priority in the coming years. So in many places the church is turning from maintenance to mission.

As the church prepares to be part of a new evangelical age the church is making two major discoveries. First, it is realising how little it understands evangelism, how few ministers and lay people there are who can witness effectively to "not yet Christians". Theological education has often failed to equip ministers for an evangelical task. Recently a young Australian pastor said to me: "I learned many truths in my theological course, but two things I was not taught: how to pray and how to lead anyone to Jesus Christ". Local pastors and local congregations are content with a maintenance ministry, having little desire or skills to turn outward and reach for the world.

A second discovery is that churches do not know how to receive and nurture new christians. Hence when people come from beyond the existent fellowship of the church they are neither welcomed with warmth or joy nor easily integrated into the Body of Christ.

In an effort to grapple with these deficiencies World Methodism has established an Institute for World Evangelism. It has been designed as a result of requests from pastors and people round the world, because of the discovered needs of a church which is turning again to evangelism. Through a multi-national Faculty which will bring people from around the world and by going to selected countries to learn about and to teach evangelism, it is setting out to "multiply the witnesses" to an evangelical interpretation and presentation of the Gospel.

A World Methodist Church on mission has an immense potential. The Methodist Church is established in ninety countries with 35,000 ministers and 250,000 local congregations. If again it found the passion and the urgency which throbbed in the heart of John Wesley in the early Methodist movement what a story of evangelical advance it would write. It is this vision which lies behind the commitment of the World Methodist Council to the "Mission to the 30's".

4. The Indigenous Church

World Evangelism is discovering the power and the nature of the indigenous church. It has come to appreciate the variety of Christian expression in many cultures.

Up until fairly recent times the mission of the church has been carried on largely through a one-way traffic of missionary activity. Some countries have "sent" missionaries and some have "received" them. The sending countries were most Western in culture, the receiving areas largely developing countries.

Three consequences have flowed from the earlier missionary age. The Church has become universal through the faithfulness and the dedication of countless missionaries. Secondly, replicas of Western churches have become established all over the world. The Western sending churches have been impoverished by being deprived of the insights and enthusiasm which could have come from the newer, younger churches of the world.

Now all is changing. Many countries are not open to external missionaries. Everywhere local national leaders are taking over and guiding the church. The result is startling. Far from weakening the witness of the church the newer indigenous churches are showing a vitality and a growth beyond that which occurred when they were missionary led.

The key to the future is the indigenisation of the church everywhere. In many places this transformation has far to go. Too many churches in worship and in the pattern of congregational life reflect Western rather than local cultural realities. For example, I remember worshipping in the Central Methodist Church in Monrovia, Liberia. From its gowned processing choir to the order of worship, the organ and the hymns it was almost a complete copy of a First Methodist Church in most American cities. And the worship was formal and dull. The next day we were taken into the hills. A thousand people were gathered for worship in the open. There were African instruments and music and dancing. And the worship was vital, alive, exciting. It was the indigenous church worshipping its God.

The Western churches must respect to the utmost the integrity and the independence of the indigenous church. How difficult it is for Western churches to step back in this way is shown in Communist China. The Christian Church is determined to be Chinese. For the first time it has the chance of appearing not to be a foreign importation, not to be an expression of the West. So when in China I asked Christian leaders: "What can we do to help the church in China". The answer was always similar. "Pray for us, extend the hand of fellowship but please no Western missionaries, no Western moneys and stop people like Brother Andrew from smuggling Bibles into China".

The need for indigenisation goes beyond developing countries. Churches far away from England or America as in Australia or South Africa are also the product of effective missionary witness in the past. As a result in the Southern Hemisphere, in a very different geographical and cultural climate, churches reflect Northern Hemisphere church thought and practices.

A vital struggle is under way in Australia to develop a truly Australian Church. Australian churches are almost identical with churches in Scotland, Ireland and England. There is little Australian theology or hymnology or even church architecture. Unless Australian churches can more adequately become Australianised they will continue to stand somewhat outside the mainstream of Australian life, now so different from any other culture on earth.

If the agent for the mission of Jesus in the world is the indigenous church then the churches in each country must see their own land as their mission field. Now the best missionary to India is an Indian Christian, an Indonesian to Indonesia, an Australian to Australia. This concept is being grasped. The Methodist Church is sending its own nationals to areas where Christian witness is weak as from Sumatra to Borneo in Indonesia, from the south to the north in India and Brazil. It means every church must examine its own land and plan its own mission to its own people.

There are perils in the indigenous church. They can become ingrown and the integrity of the Gospel can be diluted by cultural factors. Thus influences from the universal church must flow freely around the globe. Now a two-way traffic of Christian witness and influence must develop. There must be a common sharing of the resources of the global church if the whole church is to be enriched and strengthened. The indigenous and the global church must be in constant relationship and advance together for Christ's sake.

5. The Universality of the Gospel

Modern Wesleyan evangelism is proving afresh the universality of the Gospel. This Gospel is creating an ever spreading universal church.

In World Evangelism I have witnessed the impact of Jesus Christ as universal Saviour and Lord. None was more vivid than that which was experienced through a visit one after the other, to England and Arnhem Land in Northern Australia. A closing meeting in England was in Westminster Central Hall, at the heart of sophisticated London. Within a short period of time I was offering Christ at Yirrakala in Arnhem Land. Some four hundred Aborigines, representing one of the most primitive cultures on earth, were seated in the open around small fires in front of a wattle-decked pulpit, with the lapping of the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria as a background of sound. In essence I preached the same Gospel, and saw the same human response in London and Arnhem Land to the claims of Jesus Christ.

There are, of course, changes of emphases and interpretations of the Gospel. Out of the total spectrum of the total, universal Gospel differing truths appear more relevant and powerful in different places. For example, in Malaysia and Indonesia, people live with a deep fear of evil spirits. Fear dominates the mind of masses of the people. I quickly found that to present Christ as more powerful than any demon, to show Him as the conqueror of fear rather than the deliverer from sin won a clear response from the people. The Gospel proclaimed with relevance to each culture from one side of the world to the other is a universal Faith.

The universal Gospel has created a universal church. However, everywhere it can be said: the church is there. The universal presence of the church is a new factor in human affairs. It must increasingly influence the course of history.

There is now an opportunity and a need to share from one part of the world to another the insights and the resources of the followers of Christ. It will result in a larger understanding of God in Christ. The West needs to experience the joy and excitement of people from the developing countries who are akin to first century Christians, discovering the liberation Christ brings for the first time. Developing countries need the contribution of a deeper theological maturity from Western churches. All must benefit from the discoveries made under opposition and persecution of Christians in communist lands.

World Methodist evangelism is developing global relationships and a world strategy. It is a pioneering venture which is already producing valuable results. It is finding there is an inspiration which flows from a realisation of the universal scope of the church, from learning what God is doing around the world, and from doing some things in concert together. This is illustrated by the response which has come from such programs of World Evangelism as "Making Disciples" and "Prayer for the World" and from the coming together of young people for conferences together from many nations.

World Methodism stands poised for another period of global growth. If inhibitions over making new Christian disciples can be overcome, if there is a recovery of confidence in the Gospel and the Church, if the indigenous church across the world accepts the call of the Spirit to mission, millions could be brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

A world civilization is emerging for the first time in history. Only a church which becomes aware of its universal presence and strength and consciously plans on a global scale for mission will influence for Christ's sake that emerging civilization. World Evangelism represents World Methodism seeking to implant the influence of Christ on the far-flung life of this rapidly changing world.
