

# Back to the Method of Methodism: A New Wesleyan (Practical? Missional?) Quadrilateral

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## Contextual Thoughts

I will admit that in my role as General Secretary I have veered out of traditional academic writing. But, in this role, I've also been exposed to the vast lack of knowledge of United Methodists when it comes to our heritage – our *true* Wesleyan heritage. On my speaking tours across the UM connection, I get a lot of questions about how we “go back” to Wesley and recreate what he did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And, as much as I would love a time-machine to explore history first hand, going back and doing what Wesley did isn't the answer. Instead, we should study what he did and rethink how it fits with our twenty-first century lives.

Thus, if you will entertain this thought process on paper (in lieu of a formal academic paper), I'm proposing a new Wesleyan quadrilateral (or other four-sided shape if we need to get beyond the quad) that is *not* theological in its nature but is practical. After all, Wesleyan was not a systematic theologian, but was a systematic missiologist who knew how to bring together types of folks, hook them with a riveting message, sustain them with community and small groups, engage them in mission, and train them for leadership. This thought-process paper will begin with a state of the field (field not necessarily in the academic field sense but in the Wesleyan understanding of “field” as the place where people are who longing for the word of God). I'll then walk through the various sides of this new Wesleyan quad and ways that it can be reworked for today's ministries. This paper is meant to be a basis for a co-authored book with Rev. Chris Heckert which will hopefully be released in 2025.

The average UM layperson, ordained clergy, and locally licensed preachers rarely read contemporary Methodist or Wesleyan scholarship. Most of their knowledge of the Wesleys and Methodist origins comes from their seminary days, the occasional online course, and the occasional newsletter. So many of these spaces name the “method” of Methodism as either class meetings (or some other form of discipleship, oftentimes with harmful language around accountability), the three General Rules, or the daily connecting with God through a number of personal/pious means.<sup>1</sup> Some sources name our connectional organization, conferencing, or itinerancy as our “method.”<sup>2</sup> But I want to posit that none of these alone is the method of Methodism. In order to be Methodist there was more required of you, an active full system put in place in which you were expected to fully participate in and not be able to pick and choose which spaces/places you wanted to participate. Thus, the key to this method is that ALL of these things must be done to be a people called Methodist.

The method begins with popular preaching (in today's vernacular we might call this *content creation*); then, it moves to societies, classes, and bands (we'll call this *micro-communities*); then getting those persons into mission (we'll call this *social justice*); and finally training others to lead or bringing others to the group (we'll call this *intentional replication*). In order to be Methodist, you could not (and cannot) just do one of the above four things, but you had to do them all. That was the way to truly ensure the balance between personal and social holiness was maintained, that persons remained active in their love of God, and that the movement expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Disciples Making Disciples: A Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups and Class Leaders* (2016). Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. Seedbed (2013). Kevin Watson, *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* (2009). Kevin Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness; The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Lacey Warner, *The Method of our Mission: United Methodist Polity and Organization*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014. Russell E. Richey, *Marks of Methodism: Theology and Ecclesial Practice*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.

Where we've failed as United Methodists is we've been selective, believing that we can create small groups in new and invigorating ways but we don't then ask anything of them or train them for mission or leadership. We also rely heavily on certain "celebrity preachers" to inspire people with words, stories, and exegesis, but we don't then ensure that those persons have a means to sustain their renewed faith or spiritual excitement. We focus on mission without grounding that mission in community where it can be wrestled with and discerned. Or we focus on creating new leaders or disciples, but we do so without connecting them to community and training them deeply in mission or in heritage – and we often do this leader-training and disciple-making not in a consistent, universal, or particularly Methodist way. In other words, we've been treating the method of Methodism like a menu, picking and choosing which one fits us at the moment instead of challenging ourselves to truly follow the method laid out by the Wesleys.

What follows is a very basic history showing how the Wesleys created the above spaces and connected them in an intentional way to be *the method*. The book that this will hopefully lead to will then take this history and find new ways of doing this work today.

### **Field Preaching (aka Content Creation)**

John Wesley was not the only well-known preacher of his day. Arguably, George Whitefield, of Calvinist Methodist fame, attracted larger crowds than John, and Whitefield deserves the credit for John beginning to preach outdoors. But their theologies could not have been more different. Wesley called *all* persons towards God's love, expounding upon a message of universal atonement, conditional grace, and human agency in salvation. He called persons towards actions of love of neighbor, instead of solely focusing on one's personal relationship with God. One of the spaces where Whitefield and Wesley overlapped was in the focus on preaching to the poor and outcast, a trait they both developed as early Holy Clubbers.

The content of Wesley's (and Whitefield's) message was one that appealed to the heart (not the head). It was an emotive preaching, meant to lead to a conversion experience. This was often held in contrast to the "indoor" preaching of the day which was often more intellectual than the average person. When Whitefield would preach, he would leave crowds often overwhelmed with the Holy Spirit and convicted of their sin. When Wesley preached, he ensured that those gathered had a means to sustain their newly found faith. He did this through intentional communities, learned from the German Pietists and Moravians. These are the next piece of this practical quadrilateral.

### **Classes, Bands, and Societies (aka Micro-Communities)**

One of the main differences between early Methodists such as Whitefield and Wesley was what they did after the preached. Whitefield was not an organizational genius, but he was an exceptional preacher. Whitefield was good at riling up a crowd, convicting them of sin, and pivoting them towards Christ. But then Whitefield would leave and go on to another town and repeat this act. Wesley quickly became grounded in community. Yes, he, too, was an exceptional preacher, but he truly excelled at sustaining faith through intentional community building. As we all know, he borrowed the idea of bands from German pietism and the idea of societies had long been established in England. But Wesley takes these long-standing ideas and makes them part of the method. Once you've caught someone attention through content/preaching, Wesley immediately had a method for sustaining their newly invigorated faith – the societies, classes, and bands. And his emphasis on community is evident from the need of these three levels of micro-community, allowing for various types of accountability and vulnerability.

Bands first form after Wesley's first time preaching in the fields of Bristol. Before he leaves at the end of 1739, he not only laid the foundation of the New Room, the first Methodist building in the world, but laid the foundation of the micro-communities which would become the hallmark of the Methodist movement.

He then connected these bands to classes and societies, providing multiple layers of community, accountability, and vulnerability. Each of these micro-communities had its own distinctive role and purpose and its own demographics but all were organized by the General Rules: 1) do no harm 2) do good 3) attend to the ordinances of God. Persons had to evidence these rules in order to maintain their class/society ticket. These classes became one of the more readily replicable models of the Methodists. Arguably, Methodism spread throughout London, into Ireland, and onto the American colonies through class meetings. While Whitefield was known as a preacher throughout the American colonies, Methodism would not have taken root without classes. The two origin stories of American Methodism both involve the formation of a Methodist class – Robert Strawbridge in Virginia and Phillip Embury/Barbara Heck in New York City. These then either created more classes or created the first “churches” of American Methodism, decades before the MEC was formed in 1784.

### **Mission (aka social engagement via justice-centered work)**

One of the hallmarks of these classes was their engagement with their community. The bands in Bristol ensured that the New Room functioned as a medical dispensary, library, and community center (alongside being a preaching house). Through the bands, classes, and societies persons formed orphanages, schools, hospitals. They began to lay the foundation of what we now know as the Methodist connection, providing various layers of missional work, connecting community to church, secular to sacred, and town to town. In the American Methodist context this work began to take the form of social protest – protest against slavery, protest for women’s rights to ordination, and protests for equal educational opportunities. These micro-communities used the three General Rules to do mission and seek justice in the world. They realized that all three rules are action-oriented, calling persons to *do* church and not to simply believe in God or have faith. This led to missional societies and organizations, both domestic and international. And created the basis both the general agency structure which currently occupies The United Methodist Church and the worldwide representation of Methodism as a beacon of justice work. In order to ‘do good,’ Methodists must seek justice. A micro-community is not doing what it is called to do without being out in the community, amongst the people, spreading the love of God.

### **Disciple making (aka leadership activation)**

The final leg of this proposed new quad is what has historically been called disciple making, but what might more specifically be termed leadership activation. In order for bands, classes, and societies to multiply, they had to have the intent of dissolution and replication. Thus, one or two persons of a given community would break away and reform a new type, a replication, of that community, continuing to attend preaching, attend to the general rules, and do mission. These persons would begin the cycle of the practical quadrilateral once again. But without their empowerment, their activation, the quad would be a dead-end, not a cycle. And this is one of the key spaces of Wesley’s genius. Creating a micro-community that is not meant to be a permanent ‘clique’ but is meant towards either dissolution or malleability. And this is so often where we, in 2024, go wrong. We create small groups that become so close that the idea of them changing or going away might lead to the failure of the whole system or cause members to leave. Instead, how do we train persons in this system to trust the system, to trust the various layers of community, and feel empowered to continue to bring others to Christ through this practical method?

### **Final Thoughts**

One of the more interesting phenomena going on in modern day Christianity right now is the drastic, unintentional, outpouring of the above Wesleyan quad-like method outside of Methodism. Conservative Protestant and non-denominational churches, such as Liquid Church, Hoboken Grace, and City Light, are actively doing this method and GROWING! They start with active content creation that is hyper-technologically advanced. They then gather persons in micro-communities and center these communities in local mission. And they then challenge these groups with intentional replication, active disciple-making. All of this is done, seemingly without knowledge of (or at least without acknowledging) John Wesley and those early Methodists. They have proven that the method of Methodism still works. So how do we as United Methodists, as Wesleyans, as Methodists of any and all ilk, reclaim this method, ground it in its roots, and utilize it to reignite the faith of our current members and those persons in our communities?

The book that Rev. Chris Heckert and I are writing outlines the above in much further detail. It will ground each of the sides of this practical quadrilateral in written histories of the Wesleys and early Methodists. It will show how the method was replicated across England and onto the British colonies and early United States. It will also include practical ways to do this work now, including resources which can be pulled directly from the book and implemented. The absolute key, however, is that all four aspects must be done. It is not a menu; it's a method.

I apologize to the OIMTS for not having a more cohesive, formally academic paper. But I do hope that this thought process on paper will be able to spark some conversation about how we continue to re-engage Wesley, ground ourselves in our roots, and develop Methodism into a modern-day movement.