A Missionary Case Study

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Introduction

Joshua Marsden began his Methodist missionary career in 1800, sailing from England for Halifax, Nova Scotia. During the following eight years he ministered on the frontier of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick among English, French, and African-Canadian settlers. In 1808, his health severely damaged by harsh exposure and rigorous travel, he was appointed to start a Methodist mission in Bermuda, then called the Somers Islands.

The previous attempt in 1799 had failed completely, resulting in the trial and imprisonment of missionary John Stevenson and the entrenchment of strong anti-Methodist sentiments. At the time of his appointment Marsden's prospects were bleak. Yet, by the end of only four years' ministry, Marsden had succeeded in establishing a healthy, self-sufficient, multi-racial Methodist society, complete with a network of schools, indigenous leadership and a fully integrated Methodist chapel.

This done, Marsden left Bermuda in 1812, hoping to return home for the first time in twelve years. His plans were altered, however, by the outbreak of the War of 1812 which stopped commercial traffic between America and England. In 1814 he finally secured passage home by way of France, and in 1816 published the account of his missionary work from which the following case study has been drawn.

It sold under the lengthy, descriptive title, *The Narrative of a Mission to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Somers Islands, with a Tour to Lake Ontario, to which is added, The Mission, an Original Poem, with Copious Notes, Also, A Brief Account of Missionary Societies, and Much More Interesting Information on Missions In General.* This little-known document is one of the first missionary manuals to come out of the great missionary nineteenth century.

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This study limits its attention to the four years of remarkable ministry which Marsden and his young family spent in Bermuda. Marsden's work was a hybrid of both cross-cultural mission and church renewal in a complex racially and socially heterogeneous society. His amazingly successful ministry within such a context calls contemporary students and practitioners of mission to a detailed examination.

Marsden showed keen sensitivity to the subtleties of initiating ministry within a stubborn, defensive, and antagonistic British subculture in Bermuda. At the same time he also built a strong rapport within the black (former slave) community. More amazingly, he was able to bring the two together within an indigenous Bermudian Methodist worship context completely their own. The parallel challenges of some post-colonial mission contexts today again calls for further exploration of Marsden's approach. The following case study will look for clues to his success.

The Bermuda Methodist Mission, 1808-1812:

Historical Background

In 1609 an English ship wrecked on the rocks around Bermuda. The sailors found the resources of the islands so plentiful and the climate so congenial that following their safe return to New England in 1610 there began a gradual settlement and colonization process. Marsden reports that most of the settlers were from Presbyterian or Dissenting churches. A few were Anglicans. However, by the late 1700s Bermuda's spiritual condition was in extreme neglect:

> Darkness and sin spread their desolations throughout every part of the otherwise lovely domain. It is true there was one church in each parish, with three clergymen belonging to the establishment; and also a Presbyterian minister; who preached at a small church, in Heron bay: notwithstanding which, the parishes, in general, were only favoured with one sermon every fourth sabbath, and even to this scanty morsel of the bread of life, many of the poor black and coloured people had no access.

In 1798, Bermuda caught the attention of Thomas Coke, then overseeing Methodist mission activity, as its condition stood in stark contrast to the Methodist revival currently spreading throughout the West Indies. His particular concern was for the black population, and looking primarily toward their evangelization, he sent John Stevenson in 1799 as missionary.

At that time, nothing could have been more repugnant and threatening to the white Bermudian population than the evangelization of their now-endangered labour force. Stevenson had walked into a hornet's nest of opposition which eventually drove him from the islands. From one perspective the timing of his mission could not have been worse. Marsden records:

> It was a perilous moment for the friends of the Africans, as, at this period, many who owned slaves, were smarting under the abolition this inhuman traffic, which had recently taken place, and were not fully without their fears of the further interference of the British legislature, in behalf of this injured portion of the human family. Slavery is as jealous of its power as freedom is of its liberty; hence, whoever touches that, touches the apple of the planter's eye.

Using Stevenson's lack of formal education and ordination as a pretext for persecution, the Bermudian legislature passed a bill 'to exclude all persons pretending, or having pretended, to be ministers of the gospel, or Missionaries from any religious society whatever, and not regularly invested with holy orders...from propagating any doctrine upon the gospel or otherwise.' Stevenson felt conscience bound to disobey the ordinance. He was promptly jailed for six months and fined fifty pounds for his efforts. Carving his own defense in the prison cell floor with his knife, Stevenson wrote: 'John Stevenson, Methodist Missionary, was imprisoned in this jail six months, for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to the poor negroes.'

Marsden's Arrival

This was the foundation laid for Marsden when he received his commission from Coke and the Methodist Conference of 1808. Knowing something of what they would face, it is not surprising that he and his wife immediately set aside every Friday until their departure for fasting and prayer. Marsden described the news as 'an appointment that was as unwelcome to the flesh and blood as "smoke to the eyes, or vinegar to the teeth".' Yet, it seems that Marsden's strenuous eight-year apprenticeship in Nova Scotia had specially prepared him for the challenges of his new task.

Personal apprehensions aside, Marsden's official reply to Coke was energetic, and full of hope that God would be laying the right foundation for his witness:

> When I think of the forlom condition of the Bermudians, my heart longs to be with them, to preach the precious gospel of my Lord and Master in that island. O that the God of Abraham may send me good speed, and prepare the people for the reception of his dear Son's gospel, that you may have cause to rejoice in your exertions to supply Bermuda with a missionary.

No doubt these were cheering words to his mission boss. However, by the time of their arrival at port in Bermuda, Marsden plainly admits he had no hope of success. 'I knew not a single person; and was come upon an unwelcome errand.' The description of his first venture ashore captures some of the dynamics of the situation:

> I inquired, in vain, for Methodists;—the hated sound seemed to startle even some who appeared as if they wished to show me civility if I had come upon another errand: as a tumbler, buffoon, dancing master, or conjurer; I might have been welcome; but to preach the gospel, yea, and to preach the gospel to negroes: this shut up every avenue of civility, and rendered my person as forbidding, as my errand was disagreeable.

Marsden finally found one old Methodist man on a neighboring island—apparently the last survivor of the earlier persecution—but the condition of this fellow only deepened his despair. 'I returned to St. George with a heavy heart, not without frequent starting, tears, and mingled desires to change my gloomy and unpleasant situation for the quiet of the grave.' Adding to his concern was the safety and comfort of his wife, 'far advanced in her pregnancy,' and seventeen-month-old daughter still staying aboard the ship because he could find no housing ashore. Sympathizing with his situation, the captain offered to take them on to the Bahamas and back to Nova Scotia,

'adding,' Marsden records, 'in his honest and blunt manner, "they are not worthy of a Missionary;—let them die in their sins."'

Marsden declined the captain's offer, and shortly began to see signs of light. A letter of recommendation from a British Colonel—recently converted under Methodist ministry in Nova Scotia—provided Marsden access to the governor of Bermuda who assured him 'he would do all in his power to further my mission, for the sake of his friend Colonel Bayard.' After conferring with the attorney-general and chief justice (who was very reluctant to accept Marsden's credentials) the governor gave him provisional permission to proceed with his preaching until further notice. That same day 'an unknown friend' found two rooms available in the house of 'man of colour.' He moved in immediately and, wasting no time, asked his new landlord to give public notice of the first preaching service scheduled for the next day.

The first Methodist congregation consisted of no more than ten people, including Mrs. Marsden, 'the ship's captain, the mate, the supercargo and his wife, the rest black and coloured persons,' but by then Marsden was prayerfully hopeful:

> I continued to labour with many prayers and fears; and though my prospects of doing good to the whites were rather gloomy, yet a glimmering of extensive usefulness among the black and coloured people often revived my spirits and cheered my path. My little domestic congregation [they met in one of Marsden's two rented rooms] continued to increase, so that by the time I had preached six weeks, the six who first attended, were multiplied to sixty, and some of these afforded signs that the word was not as chaff blown away by the wind of carelessness.

First Fruits

It is interesting to see Marsden's manner of discerning signs of spiritual awakening. He apparently made no strong evangelistic appeal, rather he noticed those among the attenders who stayed later than others in prayer, or who seemed most interested in the preaching. These he would 'speak to...concerning their souls.' The first converts were two women who came to him 'and after some hesitation, informed me that they wished me to direct them how they might save their souls.' Marsden expressed his joy in the language of the Biblical growth metaphors: 'These first buddings of a gracious nature...were as pleasing to my heart as the reviving sun to the Greenlander.'

The next converts were 'Tony Burges, a venerable old black man,' and his wife. Their children soon 'followed the example of their parents, until the whole family was drawn to God.' A neighbour, Sally Tucker, was next. She was followed by the Marsdens' 'coloured' landlord, Mellory, and his wife. The impact was not limited to the black portion of the congregation. Marsden mentions several other white young men and the three daughters of a sea captain, all of which, with the first black converts, were to make up the first Methodist society:

> All became close attenders of the preaching, and were graciously drawn to a serious and impartial inquiry after divine things; these, with many others whom I could name, inclining in the same way, and becoming reformed and serious, I formed into a little society, reading the rules, and pointing out to them the nature of each, for all

> this was new and interesting respecting Christian fellowship;—this was the first Methodist society ever raised up in the Somers Islands, about forty in number.

Marsden's joy in this speedy response among his hearers in this seemingly hopeless setting was understandably exuberant:

> I rejoiced over them as a tender father over a first-born son; the seed that was sown in tears I now began to reap in joy; the design of Providence began to unfold itself in my appointment to the island, and I no longer walked with my book in my hand through the cedar trees and by the sea side as a solitary and mournful exile, unconnected and alone in the islands.

Pastoral Care and Community Building

The formation of the society of more serious seekers, in addition to the general congregation, called for specific pastoral attention. Marsden began a programme of house-to-house visitation. It was a time of building the deep, well-rounded relationships that characterized his ministry for the next four years.

He also made trips to some of the communities on the neighbouring islands, preaching where he could among the small Anglican congregations. By comparison with his fervent congregation in St. George, Marsden's ministry with these was pale:

> My congregations were respectable people, who treated me with attention, politeness and hospitality; but alas! they had need of nothing: they were too polite to treat me rudely, too complaisant to gainsay, and too innocent, moral, and good to need a Saviour.

In spite of initial apathy, Marsden adopted a method calculated to win the hearts of the Anglican whites. He began by preaching in terms of the 'data' familiar to them all, namely the primary faith affirmations of the Church of England. He also attended the Anglican services whenever he could. Gradually and gently Marsden won their confidence, and even some of their support:

> By these means, their prepossessions against us as a body, gave way, and many respectable people expressed themselves as glad that I had come to the islands: Stowe Wood, Esq. a respectable magistrate, invited me to his house, as did also Captain Walker, Mr. White, and Captain Newbold, and a number others.

Immediately following this progress report, however, Marsden writes the following, indicative of his ministerial priorities, 'Meanwhile, I omitted no opportunity to bring forward my little black and coloured flock in St. George.' Here is a clear example of the effective combination of outreach and pastoral care. Marsden had learned in his struggles on the Nova Scotia circuits the desperate need of Christians for on-going pastoral nurture. While reaching out to new areas, he was intent on 'keeping' what he had already gained. To this end he began serious efforts in literacy training in order to provide the new society with the means for its own support in the Scriptures.

He also lost no opportunity to build the self-esteem of the recently-liberated former slaves. In his visitation he provided Scripture portions and Testaments to those who

were showing progress in their reading. He also composed 'a little pamphlet of hymns' designed especially to encourage the faith and confidence of the black Christians.

As might be expected, these efforts to strengthen the black population met with mixed responses among the white population. The use of certain 'freedom' metaphors in the hymns led some to fear a violent uprising. Also the mixed worship services in the cramped quarters of Marsden's apartment, drove some of the whites away. Yet the work was allowed to go on, in spite of periodic opposition. The society at St. George remained racially integrated, though the whites were in the minority. At the time, such membership for white Bermudians was a form of social suicide, and so indicated a high degree of commitment. Marsden commented, 'Indeed, joining the society in Bermuda at this time seemed like changing caste in the East Indies, so that none who set much value upon the opinions of others durst come among us.'

Indigenous Leadership and Solidarity

In due course leaders and preachers began to emerge from within the small society. Men such as the Marsdens' landlord, Mellory, and another, Peter Hubbert, assumed pastoral responsibility early on, allowing Marsden to travel and to preach in more of the island communities. In these he met with mixed responses, however, among the most receptive areas was the town of Hamilton. Ironically this town had been the centre of John Stevenson's earlier persecution. There Marsden rented a large room for preaching, and it was quickly filled beyond its capacity. Among the fruit of this particular effort were 'several respectable white females.' Two of these, incidentally, later married Methodist missionaries, and in Marsden's words now 'adorn the precious gospel.'

The time seemed to have come to raise money for a proper Methodist chapel of their own, not only for the sake of needed space, but also to ensure a meeting place that could not be affected by any racial bars. The wealthy white Bermudians who had in the last decade jailed the Methodist missionary gave generously. Marsden interpreted the resounding success of this project as a profound endorsement of his ministry in Bermuda, given the tremendous odds against its success.

Marsden was so energized by the project that his previous lung ailments which had driven him from Nova Scotia no longer bothered him:

> I never had better health in my whole life: the people wondered, and said my constitution must be like iron, as most of the weather was burning hot, and compelled others to take refuge in the shade, while I had often to spend from nine to twelve hours a day, exposed to the range [*sic*] of the almost vertical sun; and then hasten to some appointment to preach, returning home so exhausted as hardly able to pull off my clothes, and rising with new vigor, to pursue the same toil.

In this same exhilarated mood, Marsden greeted the completion of the chapel and his first sermon from its pulpit:

> Thus after preaching two years from house to house in a sultry climate, I had at length the happiness to ascend a pulpit, and proclaim to four or five hundred

> people who had met at the opening, 'This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' I now also realized one of the nearest objects to my heart, that of having a spot in the centre of the Islands, where the neglected Africans might be raised to the dignity of worshipping God, without being separated from their fellow men like cattle in a stall.

The rest of the story of the Methodist mission is characterized by the expansion of the work already established. Marsden, and the local lay preachers continued to minister throughout the islands. With an eye toward the future, Marsden especially focused on providing for schools and training primarily in reading. He also began lectures in doctrine for the more serious members of the society, with the goal of ensuring the continuation of the work.

> My heart being set upon the prospect of doing the blacks and coloured people some lasting good, I set apart one evening every week to instruct as many of them as could possibly attend in the most important and fundamental doctrines of the gospel;

Sadly, this priority apparently was not shared by Marsden's successors. By the time he wrote his account of the mission Marsden had opportunity to hear what had become of the work he left behind. In regretful retrospect he commented, 'I am persuaded that if this method had been continued by my successors, the society would not have fallen away from 136 to 68.' The need for serious, on-going discipleship, already proven by Marsden's success, was now doubly proven by his successors' failure.

After a wrenching farewell, Marsden left the core society 136 members strong, with many times more than that participating in regular worship. Although he remarked later that had he been more 'faithful in the improvement of every opening and the discharge of every duty,' their number might have been five hundred, he was by no means discouraged about the prospects of Methodism in Bermuda. He left strong indigenous leaders, and counted on the arrival of other missionaries to replace him.

Looking back on his departure he summarized the four years:

> Bermuda was a little world to me; I had gone there a despised and unendeared man; God had given me friends, respect, a chapel, a society, a love for the place, and all that could render parting and separation painful in the extreme. Many, of both blacks and the whites, manifested the most poignant grief: they wept aloud, and strongly reminded me of St. Paul's departure from the church of Ephesus.

Reflection

Throughout this account of Marsden's work we have made note of principles and practices which seem to account for his success:

1. Prayerful dependence upon God in what appeared to be an impossible missionary assignment;
2. Humble determination and a willingness to start small;
3. Confidence in the preceding work of the Holy Spirit preparing hearts for the Gospel, and with that a gentle, sensitive approach to work with what God was

already doing;

4. Patience to accept slow growth at first, rather than pushing for immediate 'success';
5. Keen awareness of the importance of Christian community and fellowship, seen in the nurturing of group activity and corporate worship;
6. Commitment to on-going discipleship and pastoral care;
7. Determination to anchor new believers in the Word and sound doctrine, extending to such practical concerns as literacy;
8. Willingness to nurture and trust indigenous leadership;
9. Sensitivity to psychological factors of self-esteem and confidence in the lives of previously oppressed persons.

In addition to these listed, one further commitment in Marsden's ministry bears comment. In recent years Church Growth theorists have debated the now famous 'homogeneous unit principle.' This principle is based on the observation that people tend to come to Christ most easily and to receive Christian nurture most readily in the context of their own culture, race, or class group. In practice this has led to a form of segregation in which Christians of different cultures and background enjoy worshipping together with 'their own people.'

Clearly, Marsden was not prepared to accept any such segregation, even though in the early stages of his ministry in a context of extreme economic, racial, and cultural diversity such divisions might have seemed more practical. Marsden was prepared to accept very small results rather than make concessions to what he saw as irrelevant social differences. Those who were reluctant to seek God's grace and sing God's praises in the presence of their former slaves were, in Marsden's mind, not truly sincere in their intentions. And he was willing to let them wait for the Holy Spirit to instill a deeper sense of need, rather than provide a more comfortable alternative.

In the great English revival of the previous century John Wesley had called people to gather into groups on the sole basis of their shared desire 'to flee the wrath to come'—rich and poor, educated and illiterate alike. True to his Wesleyan heritage, Marsden recognized that the only relevant distinction between human beings anywhere was the difference between those who are responding positively to the wooing of the Holy Spirit and those who are resisting His call to repentance. Likewise, the most significant bonds between human beings are not cultural or racial, but the shared communion of repentance and faith. On this foundation Marsden built a strong, integrated community of believers in Bermuda. It remains to be seen if a modern application of the same principle today would meet with similar success.

Theologically, most of Marsden's missionary practice can be traced directly to John Wesley's understanding of God's 'prevenient grace.' Briefly outlined, early Methodists understood prevenient grace to be: 1) the completely unmerited activity of God on the basis of Christ's atonement alone, 2) reaching out universally to persons blinded and paralyzed by the effects of sin, 3) providing for all an initial salvation from the effects of the Fall, for which they bear no personal responsibility, 4) giving all persons some awareness of their inadequacy, guilt, and prideful resistance toward God and his previous overtures of grace, 5) providing the freedom/power to respond positively to subsequent directions from God, 6) for the purpose of preparing them for the gift of

faith and a fully saving relationship with God here and now.

It would be difficult to articulate a more energizing and confidence-inspiring basis for missionary activity. But even more, for those who apply its implications, this understanding of God's always-previous grace offers profound guidelines for mission practice. Marsden went out in the confidence that God did not want any of His children to perish, and that He had sent His Holy Spirit to the hearts of all men in preparatory activity. Marsden expected to find God at work even in the dark and difficult Bermuda field. Because of that confidence he took time to observe the signs of God's activity and tried to align his own work with God's. Yet, while affirming what God was doing already through prevenient grace, Marsden never lost sight of the purpose of this grace—the preparation of souls for full salvation. Such was his confidence in the broader provisions of God's salvation plan that Marsden was unwilling to make any concession to the 'flesh.'

The Methodist doctrine of prevenient grace can be seen in Marsden's work to provide a theological basis for respecting and striving to understand people as they are, under God's love and provison. Yet, at the same time we see no weakening of the missionary zeal to see people become all that God wants them to be. In contemporary missiology these two dynamics continue to challenge us both theologically and practically. This case study is offered as a contribution to the goal of sensitive, yet determined, mission outreach in harmony with the Holy Spirit's preparatory ministry on the basis of the full atoning work of the 'Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.'