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# **The Reopening of John Wesley's City Road Chapel: A Call for Methodist Renewal**

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*by Frank Bateman Stanger*

Wesley's City Road Chapel in London, England, is to Methodism what Canterbury is to Anglicans and Wittenberg is to Lutherans. It is the place where it all started — the visible roots — the symbolic center for Methodists around the world. In a real sense it may be spoken of as the cathedral of world Methodism.

## **The Opening of the Chapel in 1778**

For nearly 40 years (1739-1778), the former King's Foundery at the northeast corner of Finsbury Square near Moorfields, London, served as the headquarters of the new Methodist movement. John Wesley had acquired it for 115 pounds, but it was so dilapidated that 800 pounds had to be spent on repairs before it could be used as a Methodist chapel and headquarters. Out of this vast uncouth heap of ruins Wesley made a chapel that would accommodate 1,500 people. There was a smaller meeting room for 300 and also a room for selling books. Over these buildings were living quarters for John Wesley, his preachers and domestic staff.

Here at the Foundery, preaching services were held at 5:00 a.m. on working days for the working people. Here in 1746 Wesley opened the first free dispensary in London since the dissolution of the monasteries, engaging an apothecary and a surgeon. Here also he founded a free school with two masters for 60 children, a lending

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society in 1747 and in 1748 rented an adjoining house to be an almshouse for widows and poor orphans.

After nearly 40 years of hard use, almost everything in the Foundery was worn out; and despite repeated repairs, the premises were in ruins. The lease had nearly expired, so there was need to find a permanent home for what had become an influential spiritual movement.

Nearby the Foundery, across from the burial ground of Bunhill Fields on the other side of a lane now known as City Road, was a large bare field which had been created in the swamps by cartloads of earth from the building work at St. Paul's Cathedral Churchyard. In 1777 John Wesley leased an acre of the field and planned his "new Chapel."

Many financial difficulties had to be overcome in the building of the Chapel, but help came from rich and poor alike. King George III gave masts of battleships from the Deptford dockyards for pillars, and these supported the gallery for 100 years. A Mr. Andrews of Hereford gave the pulpit which is still in use.

On April 21, 1777 Wesley personally laid the cornerstone which had a brass plate on it containing the words: "This was laid by Mr. John Wesley on April 21, 1777. Probably this will be seen no more by any human eye, but it will remain there until the Earth and the works thereof are burnt up."

Upon this stone Wesley stood while he preached from the text in Numbers 23:23 — "What hath God wrought." In his sermon he declared: "Methodism is not a new religion, but the old religion of the Bible . . . of the primitive church . . . of the Church of England . . . no other than the love of God to all mankind."

Nearly 18 months later, on All Saints Day, November 1, 1778, the new Chapel was opened. John Wesley's regard for All Saints Day — "a festival I dearly love" — may have decided the date of the opening of the new Chapel before it was quite complete.

Mr. Wesley made the following entry in his *Journal* concerning the opening of the new Chapel "in the City Road" —

Sunday, November 1, was the day appointed for opening the new chapel in the City Road. It is perfectly neat, but not fine; and contains far more people than the Foundery: I believe, together with the morning chapel, as many as the Tabernacle. Many were afraid that the multitudes, crowding from

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all parts, would have occasioned much disturbance. But they were happily disappointed: there was none at all: all was quietness, decency, and order. I preached on part of Solomon's Prayer at the Dedication of the Temple; and both in the morning and afternoon (when I preached on the hundred forty and four thousand standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion) God was eminently present in the midst of the congregation.

No official report of the opening was issued, and none of the London preachers, who were surely present (John Pawson, Thomas Coke, John Atlay, and Thomas Olivers), left even a personal record of the day's events. Nothing survives except the bare reminiscence that Olivers, the writer of the hymn "The God of Abraham Praise," was seen standing at one of the doors holding a collection plate. Perhaps that was why he did not have time to make any journalistic notes, although he was Mr. Wesley's "corrector of the press."

One press correspondent was present, however, and his report gives an interesting though inadequate account of the event. The following was his report which though it reads like a caricature today, gives a clear picture of the plain, unadorned character of early Methodism:

The first quarter of an hour of (the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's) sermon was addressed to his numerous female auditory on the absurdity of the enormous dressing of their heads; and his religious labours have so much converted the women who attended at that place of worship that widows, wives and young ladies appeared on Sunday without curls, without flying caps, and without feathers. . . .

The Chapel was not finally completed until 1779. On August 8, 1779, Wesley notes in his *Journal* that he moved into his new home, just in front and to the left of the Chapel. Here Wesley lived for the last 12 years of his life, until his death on March 2, 1791.

Mr. Wesley was pleased with the new stage in his ministry which resulted from the opening of the new Chapel. He wrote to Sarah Crosby: "The work of God prospers well in London. A new Chapel brings almost a new congregation, and hereby the old is greatly stirred up. Let us all work while the day is!"

During John Wesley's extensive travels away from London, his brother Charles was usually minister of the Chapel. He was assisted by three ordained Anglican ministers. At first no laymen — no preacher not especially ordained — was allowed to officiate within the Chapel except on weekdays. Finally, at the insistence of the trustees of the Chapel, this rule was relaxed.

After Wesley's death in 1791, City Road Chapel continued as a preaching place and gradually gained recognition as the center of Methodist tradition, as the Methodist movement became worldwide.

On December 6, 1879 the Chapel was nearly destroyed by fire. The firemen had difficulty in finding the hydrant because of the thick fog and then had to thaw out the tap with salt because the water was frozen. At last the fire was extinguished but not before considerable damage had been done.

This necessitated an expensive restoration which was completed in time for the centenary of John Wesley's death observed in 1891. The beautiful Adam ceiling was replaced by a replica. George III's ship masts were replaced by pillars of French jasper given by the Methodists of America, Canada, South Africa, Australia, the West Indies and Ireland. Stained glass windows were presented by the Primitive Methodists, the United Methodist Free Church and the Methodist New Connexion, now all united in the one Methodist Church of Great Britain. A vestibule, choir stalls and an organ were added.

During the 1939-45 war years the Chapel was in the midst of one of the most badly damaged bombed areas of London. Between it and St. Paul's Cathedral very little was left standing, yet both shrines remained intact. On the night of the worst raid of the war, the buildings all around were gutted by fire. Wesley's Chapel was saved only by the heroism of volunteer fire watchers and by the fact that the wind miraculously changed twice in the same night.

### **The Restoration of the Chapel — 1973-78**

Wesley's City Road Chapel was in continuous use from its first restoration in 1891 until 1973. In this latter year the building was condemned by the Borough Council as unsafe for public gatherings.

Mr. Trevor Wilkinson, chief architect of the recent restoration, described the reasons for the condemnation of the Chapel. He said the original building was built on a timber raft, little of which now remained. Dry and wet rot had attacked a number of the structural

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timbers and dry rot was later found in the apse area. There were ominous bulges in the north and south external walls caused by the walls themselves being too frail for the amount of window openings and the weight they had to carry. The roof required major repairs. The general appearance was that of a building badly in need of restoration.

The issue before the British Methodists was whether or not to attempt such an extensive restoration of the Chapel. For a time it looked as though it would not be attempted, for in 1974 the British Methodist Conference decided to tear the building down.

The battle to save Wesley's Chapel actually began in the British House of Commons. It started with a successful attempt to set afire with enthusiasm for the rescue of this historic Methodist site two of Britain's leading politicians, both Methodists, but from different political parties. They were the then Speaker of the House, the Rt. Hon. Selwyn Lloyd, and the then Deputy Speaker, now the Speaker, the Rt. Hon. George Thomas.

The Rev. N. Allen Birtwhistle, then pastor of Wesley's City Road Chapel, called on the honorable gentlemen and told them of the plight of the Chapel and the dismal prospects for its restoration. George Thomas says he will never forget the way in which the Rev. Mr. Birtwhistle sat down in front of them both and talked and talked. The result was they were "set afire" with the prospect of rescuing the Chapel from destruction and they helped create a plan of campaign. Mr. Thomas recalls that early in the planning was the sense of needing to appeal to American Methodists for substantial help.

Undoubtedly to Bishop James Mathews of the Washington D.C. area of the United Methodist Church goes the credit for sparking the initiation of the campaign among American Methodists to save Wesley's City Road Chapel. After he had learned during a visit to England of the dismal prospect of any restoration, he went home and shared his deep concerns with the Council of Bishops. Soon plans emerged which made it possible for American Methodists to play such a significant role in helping finance the restoration.

Recently in London, the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt. Hon. George Thomas, paid tribute to Bishop Mathews as "a watershed in saving Wesley's Chapel." He said that the Bishop's indignance at the thought of the demolition of the Chapel had made him ashamed and stirred him to action.

Mr. Charles Parlin, Methodist layman in the United States,

contributed more than \$30,000 to publicize the cause of restoration so that every dollar contributed in North America could go directly to the reconstruction of the building. The United Methodist Heritage Foundation under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Frank Wanek, by bringing hundreds of American Methodists to London annually, made sure the restoration campaign received word-of-mouth publicity.

The work of restoration began in 1975. The original estimate for the work was approximately one million dollars. No reader aware of the times in which we live will be surprised to learn that the actual cost has nearly doubled, reaching an approximate total of 1.9 million dollars.

The work of restoration encountered serious difficulties. No sooner was it decided to restore the Chapel than an Alliance of Radical Methodists was formed to oppose such a project. These persons wanted to spend the money for a new mission in London's East End, where John Wesley had ministered to the poor.

Several times the work of reconstruction was about to be called to a halt because of lack of funds. Two centuries before, similar circumstances had occurred when Mr. Wesley was first building the Chapel. The work would stop until Methodist societies to whom Mr. Wesley had appealed would send in the necessary funds to resume the work of construction. So, too, during this recent restoration a generous gift or gifts always arrived in time for the work on the Chapel to continue.

Even though the contributions for the restoration of the Chapel came mainly from Methodists in Great Britain and the United States, gifts were also received from Methodists around the world. In the closing months the financial campaign was guaranteed success by a challenge grant of \$150,000 from the Kresge Foundation.

The actual work in restoration included major projects such as stabilizing basement and superstructure walls; stiffening and supporting gallery structure with additional steel work and structural timbers; restoring extensive elevations, including taking down and rebuilding parapets and repairs to brickwork facings and stone features; restoring the main chapel roof and smaller roofs; restoring and improving the interior, including repairs to walls, marble, ceiling, gallery, stained glass and other features; redecorating and gilding the walls, ceilings and gallery; dry rot repairs; restoring the Foundery Chapel and refurbishing Radnor Room;

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cleaning and restoring the John Wesley statue which adorns the courtyard in front of the Chapel.

There are only limited changes in the Chapel as a result of the restoration. The replacement of the heavy late nineteenth century vestibule screen by a plain glass one allows the worshiper entering the front door to appreciate the proportions of the original building. While retaining the original communion area in the apse behind the pulpit, a new communion space with a new communion table and chairs in front of the pulpit has been designed. The new altar is glass topped, and is etched with the dove and serpent motif symbolic of peace and healing which is used throughout the chapel. The framing for the table is in the shape of a cradle, a unique reminder that God came to earth as a baby in a manger.

### **The Reopening of the Chapel: November 1, 1978**

The restored Wesley's City Road Chapel was reopened on Wednesday, November 1, 1978, exactly 200 years to the day that the Chapel was first opened and consecrated by Mr. Wesley. My wife and son and I were privileged to be present at the first service held in the restored Chapel. It was an unforgettable experience, with memories to be treasured forever.

It was a mild autumn afternoon in London. There were alternate periods of sunshine and clouds. It had rained earlier in the day, but the rain was all over long before the 3:00 p.m. service which was the first of the three services scheduled for the day of reopening. We will never forget the sight when we first arrived at the Chapel. With a crowd of people already gathered along both sides of the street and in front of the large iron gates, the security officers were making their final checks in preparation for the visit of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, and His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. Uniformed boys and girls — members of youth brigades — were busily at work trying to keep the leaves picked up which were steadily falling from the many trees in the courtyard, in order that the pavement might be as clean as possible for the royal guests.

Great solemnity was given the 3:00 p.m. service by the presence of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness, Prince Philip. This was the first time in history that a reigning British Sovereign has attended a Methodist service.

Adding an ecumenical note was the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rev. Dr. Donald Coggan; the Bishop of London, the Rev. Dr. Gerald Ellison; the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, the Rt. Rev. Christopher Butler; the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, the Rev. Stanley Turl; and the Mayor of Islington, Councillor Mrs. Doris Rogers, in whose borough the Chapel is located.

Gathered for the service were Methodists from Great Britain, the United States, Malaysia, Japan, Kenya, India, Sri Lanka, Germany, Sweden, Korea, Liberia, Ireland, Australia and the Philippines. Two hundred years before John Wesley went from City Road Chapel into the world which he considered his parish; on this day the world beat a path to his door.

Though soldiers once were flogged for attending Methodist services, trumpeters of the Honourable Artillery Company sounded a fanfare as Her Majesty, the Queen and His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh moved into the Chapel at 3:00 p.m. The Queen was dressed in a fitted turquoise coat and matching hat, with black patent accessories. The processional hymn was the best known of all of Charles Wesley's hymns, "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise." Three other Charles Wesley hymns were used during the service: "Love Divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down"; "O Thou who camest from above the pure celestial fire to impart"; and "Captain of Israel's host, and Guide of all who seek the land above."

Marked more by simplicity than by drama, the service of hymns, prayers, lessons and sermon lasted only 45 minutes. The service was presided over by the Rev. Dr. Donald English, President of the Methodist Church of Great Britain. The reading of the lessons brought to the reader's desk, in succession, an American layman, Dr. Charles Parlin, who read from I Kings 8; a British prince, the Duke of Edinburgh, who read from I Peter 2; and a British laywoman, Mrs. Mary Lenton, Vice President of the British Methodist Conference, who read from Matthew 5.

Prayers of thanksgiving included the ministry of the Wesleys, the house of prayer which was being reopened, the life and witness of all those who have worshiped in the Chapel, and the fact that for 200 years the Gospel has been "preached in this place." God was also thanked for "the skill and craftsmanship of those who have renewed this building and for the generosity of those in many lands who have



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made this work possible.”

The prayers of rededication were focused upon the restored Chapel, a renewed commitment to the Wesleyan theological tradition, and the present and future ministries of the Chapel.

During the service intercessions were made for the holy, catholic, apostolic church; the ministry of the church at home and abroad; the Queen and the Duke; the leaders of the nations of the world; the city of London and its concerns; and “the sick, the lonely and the bereaved; for prisoners of conscience and victims of poverty and oppression, that they may be strengthened and comforted.”

The sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Colin Morris, former minister of the Chapel, ex-President of the Methodist Church of Great Britain, and now Deputy Head of Religious Broadcasting of the British Broadcasting Company. He chose the same text which Mr. Wesley had used 200 years before when the Chapel was first opened. It is found in I Kings 9:3: “. . . I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put my name there forever; and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually.”

‘Even two centuries later,’ said Colin Morris, ‘that text has a very churchy ring about it for a preacher who either rejected or was ejected from many of the sacred places of his time, who celebrated the God he saw at work not within hallowed walls but in the market place, down the mine and on slave ships. It is an even more unfashionable text by today’s standards when the trendy thing is to declare that God is at work everywhere and anywhere in the world — anywhere except possibly in the Church which, say the critics, is the one place on earth God avoids like the plague.’

But, he added, Wesley knew his Old Testament. He realised that God became our God, not as he is generally present in his creation, but as he specifically accepts hospitality in ours.

‘God’s name is upon this place,’ said Dr. Morris.

‘In its 200 years of history, this building has been known by a number of names — The New Foundery, City Road Chapel, The New Chapel . . . but the name by which it is best known, Wesley’s Chapel, is not one that Wesley himself would have

allowed. He knew whose name is upon this place, and it wasn't his.'

'Out there God is indeed at work secretly, anonymously, and imperceptibly, and may be known by many names or none, but here in this place and all like it, he is identified, known as God and Saviour. . . .'

The Church, said Colin Morris, must always be the focus of distinctive and recognisable Christian belief:

'What is Christian preaching but the Church declaring roundly that in his name and in none other is salvation to be found?'

It was because the eyes of God are here, said Dr. Morris referring to the text, that the Church often seems to be cross-grained to the life of our time. Christians must try to see through the eyes of God.

'It is not that we Christians are cantankerous by nature and happiest when swimming against the stream. . . . We try to see with the eyes of God through the refractive lens of the Gospel. . . . Through God's eyes the first are already last, and the last, first; the strutting tyrant, swollen with self-importance, shrinks to insignificance and the falling sparrow occupies the centre of the stage.'

'The Church marches to a different drummer and her gaze is so preoccupied that she can neither be excited by the promise of Utopia nor cast down by the threat of Armageddon. She sees the invisible, looks through the eyes of God upon an unpromising present and discerns in tiny portents, unnoticed by the generality, already prefigured Christ's Kingdom stretching from shore to shore, Christ's reign consummated, his victory already complete.'

As the text said, God's heart was also in this place, said Colin Morris.

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‘Because God’s heart is cruciform, it is not the object of mystical veneration but a source of moral energy, the power of personal regeneration. Since God’s heart is here, the Church is the place of boundless resource. Here there is an endless store of that one commodity the world is not stock-piling but for want of which it is dying — the thing that makes God God, holy love.’

‘When Wesley set out to build this place, the Corporation of the City of London gave him a 59 year lease. Wesley with cavalier disregard for local authority had carved on the foundation stone — “This edifice will remain until the earth and all its works are burned up.” Wesley well knew it would take much longer than 59 years for the spring of holy love which issues from the heart of God to run dry.’

‘This edifice will remain until the earth and its works are burned up. Well, it was a close-run thing this time. This artifact of brick and stone is destined to pass away in due time, but that edifice, the Church of living stones, upon which God has set his name, which is the eyes of God and is gathered to his heart — that Church will stand even when the earth and its works are burned up, until it is transcended in the Kingdom of the glorified Christ.’ (— as reported by Byron Breed in *The Methodist Recorder*, November 9, 1978.)

The reopening service reached its spiritual climax in a moving prayer for the renewal of Methodist work in our generation.

Immediately following the benediction and preceding the recessional the congregation joined in the singing of the British national anthem, “God Save Our Gracious Queen.”

As I was present at the service, and as afterwards I wandered around the courtyard and the adjoining cemetery where John Wesley is buried, I thought about some of the similarities between the opening of the Chapel in 1778 and the reopening in 1978 and also tried to imagine some of the contrasts.

There were many similarities. We were worshiping in the same sanctuary. We were singing Charles Wesley’s hymns. There was the same warmth of fellowship which is experienced when Methodists gather together. The order of worship had been prepared so carefully

that its progression and dignified format and theological content would have been pleasing to Mr. Wesley who was so enamored by Anglican worship. The same Gospel of redemption was being preached from the pulpit. The sermon revealed a high Wesleyan view of the church as a divinely-appointed institution. There was a sensitivity to and concern for the needs of a whole world.

But there were also some drastic contrasts between 1778 and 1978. What a contrast in credibility and respectability. During Wesley's time even British soldiers were flogged for attending Methodist services. However, in 1978 Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh were present at the reopening service, and the Duke read one of the Scripture lessons.

I recall reading that Charles Wesley Jr.'s ambition as a musician was to play the organ in St. Paul's Cathedral, London. But the privilege was denied him because they "wanted no Wesleys here." But today in the main part of Westminster Abbey there appears a beautifully inscribed wall plaque in tribute to the lives and ministries of John and Charles Wesley.

There was also the contrast between an ecclesiastical ostracism in 1778 and a genuine ecumenism in 1978. The pulpits of Anglican churches were closed to John Wesley. The early Methodists were often persecuted by angry religionists. But in 1978 the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, and the Auxiliary Bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster were present to help celebrate the reopening of the Chapel.

As the honorable Speaker, Mr. Thomas, commented in reflecting upon the events of the reopening days: "How was Wesley to dream 200 years ago that 200 years later the Monarch of the realm, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Roman Catholic Bishop would gather to recognize his work?"

I thought also of the contrast in the striking evidences of urbanization. When Mr. Wesley opened his Chapel it was located in what might be called the country section of the city. It was built in an open field. City Road was just a lane.

But everything has changed now. Wesley's Chapel and associated buildings are now almost completely surrounded by office buildings and high-rise apartments. It almost seems as if the widening traffic lanes were trying to swallow up the cemetery behind the church. Wesley's house seems almost to lean on the building erected so closely to it. Everywhere are the signs of the busy activities of a

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teeming city with people and vehicles hurrying to and fro. I recall with what difficulty we finally crossed City Road in order to enter the Church for the reopening service.

I mention a final contrast across the 200 years. In 1778 even though Methodism in England consisted of a system of organized societies and the Methodist movement was beginning to spread into the New World, in no true sense could it have been spoken of as an ecclesiastical institution. One man — John Wesley — was still the head of the church and was able to control it. Church bureaucracy as we know it today — and certainly some of it is necessary because of the magnitude of the churches served — simply did not exist.

But today each of the denominations comprising world Methodism and world Methodism in its totality must be viewed as vast ecclesiastical Methodist institutions. The World Methodist Council represents 62 different Methodist or Methodist-related groups at work in 90 countries of the world. The United Methodist Church consists of nearly 10 million members and a constituency of 25 million. The Methodist Church in Great Britain has a membership of 600,000 and a constituency of one and a half million.

Put Methodists of the world together and there are 20 million. When we consider what appears to be legitimate constituencies, the total figure approximates 50 million. What a contrast between Mr. Wesley and his handful of Methodists on the one hand, and the mighty army of professing Methodists in the world today. Unfortunately, in some contemporary circumstances there may appear a contrast between quantity and quality when we consider the above.

## **The Call to Renewal**

Methodism has moved forward across the years through a series of rebirths. Always a movement of the Spirit, Wesleyanism has been repeatedly re-energized and oftentimes redirected through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 1938 the late W. E. Sangster, long a leader in both British and world Methodism, published his book entitled *Methodism Can Be Born Again*. He called upon his fellow Methodists to recover Aldersgate; to realize that Methodism is primarily a message, not a machine; to engage anew in personal evangelism; to make possible the recovery of fellowship; to refuse to yield to any attitude of

defeatism; and to offer Christ as the only adequate Savior, able to save to the uttermost, delivering from both the guilt and power of sin.

Was Methodism born again during those critical post-war years in response to Sangster's plea? Was Methodism really born again at any time during the author's life? Could Sangster have written a sequel to his earlier book under the title *Methodism Has Been Born Again?*

In spite of the uncertain answers to such questions, let it be asserted boldly that we are now in a period in the life of Methodism which cries out for spiritual renewal. Look at the need for such renewal in the very land of the Wesleys. Membership in the British Methodist Church has been declining since 1905, which means that the church has been reduced by almost one-half its membership during this century. It is estimated that now there are more Muslims in the land of John Wesley than Methodists.

Dr. Jeffrey Harris, head of the missions division in the British Methodist Church, cited the following sociological factors which have influenced the church's decline in membership: philosophical skepticism; the impact of science on religion; the great emphasis on reason, knowledge and progress; secularization; and the rapid movement of populations.

It is evident in Britain that a declining church has not had the penetrating influence upon society which a Christian church should have. At the height of his ministry W. E. Sangster called for a revival in England in his widely publicized sermon "This Britain." In that sermon he pointed out the drastic and widespread effects which a dynamic spiritual renewal would have upon the whole of Britain's life. But actually the revival never occurred.

Again I quote from the Rt. Hon. George Thomas who is so prominent in British Methodist lay leadership today. Appealing for Methodism to bring its message of "redemption, forgiveness and salvation" to bear upon Britains he said, "Never have we had more broken lives, broken homes and lovely youth spoiled before 21. Something is wrong with Christians who do not feel they need to be involved."

Methodism in the United States needs renewal. While the episcopal leadership of the church on the one hand, and the grass roots membership on the other, give evidence of genuine evangelical concerns and commitment, there are many areas in the life of the church, such as the bureaucratic leadership of boards and agencies and the theological emphases of church-related colleges and

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seminaries, which manifest what in my opinion is an unwholesome and debilitating theological pluralism.

The United Methodist Church has also been plagued with a declining membership in recent years. Nearly a million members have been lost in the past decade. Evangelically-oriented Methodists are, likewise, greatly concerned about both the reduction of missionary personnel overseas and what appears to be the shift of focus in the primary objective of missionary activity.

On November 16, 1978 the bishops of the United Methodist Church issued their midquadrennial message. The need for renewal is continually sensed in their message:

The spirit of United Methodism has begun to lessen in the U.S. when measured in institutional statistical terms.

Sometimes the church has failed to be an agent of transformation and renewal . . . has refused to be the Body of Christ . . . has turned back to ancient heresies, in the guise of new moments . . . has sought to save its own life in an illusory quest for safety and security.

Too often its witness has been blunted by a comfortable accommodation to its own cultural setting while its preoccupation with internal concerns has thwarted its engagement with the needs of humanity.

The same need for renewal so evident in Britain and the United States is apparent in Methodism elsewhere around the world. Call the roll of our fellow Methodists — in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands, continental Europe, Central America and the Caribbean, South America — and there is the same call for renewal and rebirth in and through the church.

Dr. George G. Hunter III, evangelism executive in the United Methodist Church, states that the Methodist movement born in evangelism has now plateaued. He declares that it is no longer a powerful, contagious world movement. He points out what he believes to be the towering reason why Methodism lacks spiritual impact and thus is not fulfilling its potential. He writes:

I believe that world Methodism has experienced this

‘Ephesian Syndrome’ in many, many lands. Time and again this basic story is repeated: After some years of exploration, establishing credibility, learning the people’s culture, establishing mission stations and Christian institutions, and in general gaining a foothold and a base among the people, we then experience one or two generations of significant movemental Christian growth — discipling new people, planting new congregations, influencing and liberating society.

However in, say, the third generation we plateau. Christians who were children of Christians, who have never known what it is like to cope with existence completely outside of the realm of Christian faith, arise to become the new leaders of the church. Because they have never experienced being newly evangelized, and because they mistake the masks that non-Christians wear for their real faces, they do not believe that evangelizing non-Christian peoples is supremely important.

So, in our contemporary age, Methodism cries out for renewal!

### **The Reopening of Wesley’s Chapel: A Call For Renewal**

The singing of the first hymn “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise” at the reopening service on November 1, 1978, was a reassuring redemptive experience in itself. The people called Methodists could relax in the knowledge that whatever else might change, the “music in the sinner’s ears” would continue to bring “life and health and peace.”

As previously mentioned, the service of worship at the reopening of the Chapel reached its spiritual climax as the President of the Methodist Church in Great Britain led in the prayer for renewal:

Almighty God, who raised up your servants John and Charles Wesley to proclaim anew the gift of redemption and the life of holiness; be with us their children and revive your work among us . . . .



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Methodist leaders are universal in their expression of the hope that the reopening of Wesley's Chapel will be a fresh stimulus to spiritual renewal throughout all the churches of Methodism. Bishop James Mathews, secretary of the United Methodist Council of Bishops and a moving spirit in the restoration effort, said:

Reopening Wesley's Chapel will give fresh stimulus not only to this congregation but to the Methodist movement throughout the world. It is a tremendous thing for worldwide Methodism to engage in a thrust of this kind. This is not just a shrine but a base for effective mission. No movement can exist without landmarks and this is an important one. Because we chose to invest in reconstruction, this building will make possible a far more effective ministry to human needs.

Dr. Donald English, President of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, is vibrant in his hope of the constructive spiritual effects of the reopening of the Chapel. He declares:

The reconstruction of Wesley's Chapel has affirmed the importance of our history and heritage. We rightly worry about individuals who lose their memories. We should be concerned about institutions which do so, too. A sense of one's origins is vital to a proper assessment of one's prospects . . . . A clearer understanding of our history should make us more aware of what we have to offer to and what we need from fellow Christians of other denominations. We cherish our corporate history as Methodists because of what God has been pleased to do for and through us. Wesley's Chapel, City Road, stands as a symbol of it all. We can be grateful for all that has been done and be renewed in faith for the future. "The best of all is, God is with us"!

Dr. Alan Walker of Australia who has recently become the leader of evangelism for world Methodism, sees the Chapel as "a symbol of the gathering spiritual restoration in Methodism." He says further: "Far more than a pile of masonry, it not only celebrates the work of Wesley but will stimulate new work."

Methodist Bishop Lawi Imathiu of Kenya said the Chapel is a

reminder that Wesley found it possible to respond in very difficult times and that it is possible for us today, too, to share Christ in spite of great difficulty.

The signs of renewal in world Methodism are encouraging. In Great Britain the decline in Methodist membership is slowing down. The mood of skepticism seems to have worked through. There is a growing awareness of some sickness in British society and there is the thought again that Christianity has some answers. There is a developing pool of interest in religion. University students are asking religious questions. The “house church movement” is growing. Last year reflected an increase in both new members and candidates for the ministry.

The British Methodist Church seems to be moving out of a period of decline and depression into a period of activation and renewal. The church is once again talking seriously about evangelism after a number of years of silence.

Representative of the new spirit in British Methodism is the projected ministry of the reopened Wesley’s Chapel. The Chapel will seek to fulfill three ministries: (1) the cathedral church of world Methodism, (2) the mother church of British Methodism, (3) a parish church in one of the most difficult parts of London.

Wesley’s Chapel is committed to fulfilling its role as a neighborhood church, with both evangelistic and pastoral outreach. Located in the eastern part of the city of London, a world banking center, the area includes both new high-rise luxury apartments and industrial workers’ quarters. Also there are two hospitals and a City University nearby.

A new ministry of Wesley’s Chapel will be the formation of what is expected to be called the “Wesley Community.” It will be comprised of four theological students, two from the U.S., one from England and one from Africa. They will form an intentional community, be housed in one of the buildings in the Wesley’s Chapel complex, and serve as part of the Chapel staff seeking to extend the outreach and ministry of the Chapel to the neighborhood.

The reopening of the Chapel also will mean resumption of several chaplaincies which were suspended during restoration, including ministries to doctors, nurses and others in two hospitals and to students at the new City University.

There are also hopeful signs of renewal within Methodism in the United States. There are signs that churches are growing in depth of

## *Wesley's Chapel*

spiritual awareness and commitment. The contemporary age appears as one which is becoming increasingly supportive of faith. There are signs of a resurgence in religious life and a new authentic spirituality beginning to stir in our midst. There is a rising tide of evangelicalism within the Methodist Church and the influence of evangelical Christianity is becoming increasingly evident.

There is a new insistence upon biblical preaching and worship forms which make for spirituality. In a very real sense the Holy Spirit is being acknowledged in life and ministry. The evangelistic obligation of the church has not for decades been so thoroughly acknowledged nor so creatively addressed by so many people in so many ways.

What about world Methodism? I quote again from Dr. George Hunter who is bold to say:

There is encouraging evidence that Methodists across the world do believe in Methodism's intended future among the world's peoples. Potentially the most powerful and redemptive years of the Wesleyan heritage lie in its future, not in its past. We are called upon to seize the privilege of betting on, planning for, and helping to lead the Methodist movement's greatest era. The best is yet to be.

Dr. Joe Hale, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, summarizes it all when he says: "I believe our generation can see the Methodist Church become a movement again."

As in his times, so in our day Charles Wesley would rally the people called Methodists as a mighty army to defeat the powers of sin and darkness and to win the world to Christ:

Soldiers of Christ, arise and put your armor on,  
Strong in the strength which God supplies thro' His  
eternal Son.

Strong in the Lord of Hosts, and in His mighty pow'r;  
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than  
conqueror.

Stand then in His great might, with all His strength  
endued;  
But take, to arm you for the fight, the panoply of God.

That, having all things done, and all your conflicts  
passed,  
Ye may o'er-come through Christ alone, and stand entire  
at last.

Stand then again against your foes, in close and firm  
array;  
Legions of wily fiends oppose throughout the evil day.  
But meet the sons of night; but mock their vain design,  
Armed in the arms of heav'nly light, of righteousness  
divine.

Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul;  
Take ev'ry virtue, ev'ry grace, and fortify the whole.  
Indissolubly joined, to battle all proceed;  
But arm yourselves with all the mind that was in Christ,  
your Head. ■