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## A Holistic Good News: Missional, Effective Evangelism and Lessons Learned While Traveling in the Hoof Prints of Wesley

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**A HOLISTIC GOOD NEWS: MISSIONAL, EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM  
AND LESSONS LEARNED WHILE TRAVELING IN THE HOOF  
PRINTS OF WESLEY**

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Bob Whitesel

**abstract**

The Good News can be understood as the message of the *missio Dei* to which varying *methods* can be attached. Churches, however, often specialize in a specific part or *method* of that mission, e.g., helping the needy, emphasizing conversion, or promoting discipleship. This article suggests the Good News has yielded significant historical impact when churches embrace a comprehensive or holistic understanding of the Good News that includes three methodological components: establishing legitimacy by meeting the needs of non-believers, effectively facilitating conversion, and spiritual formation in small communal groups. *Missional* and *effective evangelism* nomenclature will be discussed in relation to this holism. Finally, examples of simultaneous methodology will be drawn from the experiences of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, as well as from experiences of the author while studying Wesley's original letters and traveling the settings of John Wesley.

George G. Hunter III has inspired many with his ability to see principles of effective ministry at play during various revival movements in history. Readers may recall contemporary lessons Hunter derived from his analysis of the Celtic

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movement toward Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In this influential tome Hunter reminded us that though Donald McGavran may have popularized many of the principles of effective evangelism in the latter twentieth century, these principles are evident in the spread of the Good News not only in New Testament times, but also in authentic historical revival movements.

More recently, Hunter has penned a long-awaited volume titled, *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (2012). He discusses why the contemporary United Methodist Church (and its various theological cousins) bears significant resemblance to the irrelevance that characterized the Church of England during John Wesley's time (c. 1703–1791). Hunter also argues that the *Methodist Movement* that Wesley inaugurated bears a striking resemblance to the so-called missional movement today.

How did the Methodist Church become the very ecclesial organization that it sought to reform? Is the missional movement today doomed to follow in their footsteps and become marginalized, sedate, and uninspiring? The answer may lie in holding a comprehensive view of God's mission. Toward that end, this article will look at the comprehensive nature of the mission that fueled the Wesleyan renewal.

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### **effective evangelism: a holistic view of the good news**

The idea that evangelism is best viewed as a comprehensive Good News that begins before conversion and continues afterwards, is founded in the emerging idea in communication and organizational theory of *holism*. This idea emphasizes that to truly understand the parts you must first grasp the ethos of the whole. Harvard's Nicholas Christakis and others have railed against a modernist view that knowledge about specialization is preferred over knowledge of generalization.<sup>2</sup> Though she does not use the term, organizational theorist Mary Jo Hatch argues that mission-driven organizations rely upon generalists, who understand the holistic culture of organizations and who can motivate those who specialize in the parts.<sup>3</sup> For many years, generalists were denigrated as not really being experts because the field they studied was so comprehensive. Hatch and others believe that

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<sup>1</sup> George H. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

<sup>2</sup> Nickolas A. Christakis, *Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How They Change Our Lives* (New York: Harper and Row, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Jo Hatch with Ann L. Cunliffe, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Whitesel: A Holistic Good News: Missional, Effective Evangelism and Lessons organizations denigrate into petty fiefdoms if they do not have generalists leading the organization in addition to specialists.

The Church Growth Movement suffered some of the same micro-emphases, because the missiologists who started the movement were often eclipsed by the popularity of the specialists who followed and their bedazzling methods.<sup>4</sup> Ed Stetzer stated, “I champion missiologists like Donald McGavran, Win Arn, and others who wanted a missiological focus (to the Church Growth Movement). I don’t blame them for all of the negative outcomes of Church Growth thinking . . . . Our American consumer-driven culture, as well as an unhealthy obsession with success, has resulted in a formula-based approach to God’s mission. The movement became less missiological and more Americanized . . . .”<sup>5</sup>

54 The term *church growth* seemed to play into an overly mechanical critique. Gary McIntosh emphasizes that “Originally the term *church growth* was coined to reference the results that could be expected from faithful disciple-making. A congregation that wins people to Christ, assimilates new converts into the local body, and then teaches them all that Christ commanded can expect to see church growth—numerical and spiritual.”<sup>6</sup> However, another early church growth missiologist, Ralph Winter, suggested: “Like many other words, the phrase ‘church growth’ can be hijacked and flown to unintended destinations. Clearly this has happened.”<sup>7</sup>

McGavran was not unaware of such criticism. He seems to have agreed that the term church growth was misleading and did not focus upon the real goal of effective presentation and reception of the Good News. Toward that end, McGavran suggested the term *effective evangelism* as more comprehensive.<sup>8</sup> Hunter, too, is aligned with the missiologically-focused version of the Church Growth Movement that embraced McGavran’s term.

This more precise term, though, did not have the sensational or emotional cache of the term *church growth*, and regrettably the term *effective evangelism* did not catch on. After all, many people still wonder, “What is evangelism?” Evangelism is a Latinized version of a Greek word (*euangelion*) that can be translated *good news*. Evangelism can thus be thought of as spreading this Good

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<sup>4</sup> Gary McIntosh has penned a helpful analysis of the Church Growth Movement from both sides in his book, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Ed Stetzer, “What’s the Deal With the Church Growth Movement,” blog post of Oct. 15, 2012; retrieved from <http://www.edstetzer.com/2012/10/whats-the-deal-with-the-church-2.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> “An Insider’s View of McGavran,” *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena, CA: The US Center for World Mission, June, 1990), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub Co., 1988).

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News. Rooted in Greek and Latin idioms, however, the term is often too far removed in history and geography for most people to appreciate. Also contributing to the popularity of the *church growth* term was that it readily signified a numerical goal that could be lionized or criticized.

The idea that evangelism was telling and receiving the Good News allowed McGavran to stress that evangelism was not just numerical growth, though this could be a measurable outcome. He also stressed that evangelism included conversion, which was the apex of the Good News. Reading McGavran, it is apparent that for him evangelism was a process method, including the stages leading up to conversion (e.g. James Engel's stages<sup>9</sup>) as well as the phases of faith that develop after conversion (e.g. Robert Clinton's phases of development<sup>10</sup>). Evangelism was not just about conversion, though transformation was pivotal. When someone did a kind deed in Jesus' name, and it testified about the heavenly Father that loved him, this became part of the good news to that person.

Effective evangelism was sharing this message about humankind's loving heavenly Father who wants to be reunited with his wayward offspring. A cup of cold water given in the heavenly Father's name prior to conversion is part of this *good news*. It is also good news when a person post-conversion discovers he has been given spiritual gifts by that same Father. Spiritual discovery before conversion as well as spiritual discovery after conversion is "good news" to those that receive it.

Without conversion, though, the most essential *news* can be missed. C. Peter Wagner summed it up better than most when he stated, "When a person dies without hearing that 'God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish but have eternal life' (*John 3:16*, RSV), it is too late. The best thing that could possibly happen to that person has been denied."<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, Billy Graham, too, emphasized the holistic nature of the evangelistic process, suggesting that we are to take regeneration in one hand and a cup of cold water in the other.<sup>12</sup> Therefore when *effective evangelism* is thought of as a process that seeks effective ministry at all waypoints leading up to conversion and all waypoints after, it becomes a holistic depiction.

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<sup>9</sup> See James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?: A Communication Strategy for World Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975), 45; James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 63–87, 225, and James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 100–101.

<sup>10</sup> J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 1988).

<sup>11</sup> *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham, *Peace With God, The Secret of Happiness* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1953, 2000), 237.

## Whitesel: A Holistic Good News: Missional, Effective Evangelism and Lessons how missional is losing its holism

Today a similar misconception has arisen. The term *missional* has caught on as a catchphrase for young, emerging churches that are trying to refocus churches away from the numerical and programmatic cheapness that also troubled the missiological-focused McGavran, Arn, McIntosh, Stetzer, and others.

However, many writers aligned with the missional movement appear to view missional congregations as those who exemplify one method above others: *reaching out*. Emerging writers, perhaps after seeing their parents' churches overly consumed with an inward or numerical focus, have reacted by campaigning for the method of *going out*. When I ask my seminary students to define *missional* after reading several contemporary books on the topic, they invariably respond, "A missional church is a church that *goes out*." The method, rather than the holism of the mission, has become paramount in their minds. I have observed that churches which primarily focus on *going out* can devolve into an unbalanced ministry, devoid of supernatural change for the better.

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Still, a passion for *going out* is correctly based on David Bosch's depiction that "God is a missionary God."<sup>13</sup> John Flett further emphasized the importance of *going out* when he stated, "The Father sent his Son and Spirit into the world, and this act reveals his 'sending' being. He remains active today in reconciling the world to himself and sends his community to participate in the mission."<sup>14</sup> William Willimon popularly intoned, "It is the nature of this God to reach out . . . .A chief defining content of this good news of God (*1 Thess. 2:1, 8, 9; Rom. 1:1*) is this sort of relentless reach."<sup>15</sup> Thus, *going out* or *reaching out* has become an almost defining characteristic of the missional movement. Here, like earlier in the Church Growth Movement, an emphasis upon specific methods is replacing a more vital emphasis upon the holism of the *missio Dei*.

While going out is vital, it can make a church asymmetrical if the going out is not balanced with the centrality of conversion and then post-conversion disciple making. This is the point that Hunter makes so well in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Hunter argues that the evangelism of St. Patrick to the Celts was not just about conversion, but it was also about need meeting, culture learning and the nurturing of Christ-like community. For Patrick, and we can imagine for Hunter, going out is the inaugural step. *Going out* may be daunting, as it must have been for

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<sup>13</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

<sup>14</sup> John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 5.

<sup>15</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 239–240.

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Patrick to return to the Celtics who had savagely kidnapped him. Though *going out* is vital, it is only a first step. Patrick took with him across the Irish Sea a message, which he then culturally translated to his hearers. Hunter shows that while Patrick's decision to *go out* to the uncouth people of his childhood captivity may have taken great determination, it was the work of conversion and discipleship among them that required more effort and took longer.

Being sent out is a vital and inaugural part of the method that God uses to accomplish his mission. Churches partially participate in that mission by embracing a *sent out* methodology. However, being sent out cannot replace the mission: reconnecting people to their loving heavenly Father.<sup>16</sup>

What would have happened if Patrick in his *going out* had not also taught conversion and nurtured a Christ-like maturity among the Celts? Hunter shows us that Patrick was holistic in his missional strategy. Shortly we shall discuss a more recent missionary from Britain, who similarly embraced a holistic approach to evangelism.

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When comparing the work of Patrick among the Celts to the writing in the missional movement today, one can see how *going out* can be an incomplete strategy (and eventually even marginalize a movement). I have encountered many churches today that went out but did not carry the entire Good News with them.<sup>17</sup> They simply “went out” and hoped the rest (conversion and discipleship) would organically emerge.<sup>18</sup>

Similar vein to how McGavran saw church growth as narrowly becoming defined by programs and tactics, the term missional is today becoming narrowly misconstrued as programs and tactics that get churches to *go out*. Therefore, we are indebted to McGavran and Hunter among others, for reminding us about the holistic message we carry outward.

## **the holism of missional: a missional church participates IN GOD'S MISSION**

A holistic Good News can further be seen by considering the etymology of the term *missional*. Missional has become an adjective describing something or

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<sup>16</sup> McGavran was emphasizing the Church Growth Movement is not about a methodology (to increase church size) but about a mission (i.e. effective presentation of the good news that we have a loving heavenly Father who loves us and wants to reconnect with us.) The same misapplication of the term that McGavran sought to combat with his term and book *Effective Evangelism* now has arisen in the term missional which most authors use as a synonym as a methodology for *going out*.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Whitesel, *Inside the Organic Church: Learning from 12 Emerging Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> The follow up on several of the congregations from *Inside the Organic Church* can be found in *An Analysis of Organic Churches and Their Current Views on Conversion* published in *The Journal of Evangelism and Mission* (Memphis: Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer 2011).

Whitesel: A Holistic Good News: Missional, Effective Evangelism and Lessons someone that participates in the *missio Dei*. The term *missio Dei* was first used in this sense by missiologist Karl Hartenstein. He employed it to describe God's mission in contrast to Karl Barth's emphasis upon God's action (the *actio Dei*).<sup>19</sup>

What is God's mission? "The *missio Dei* is God's mission to reintroduce himself and restore fellowship with his wayward offspring."<sup>20</sup> Therefore:

The *missio Dei* (is) indicating our loving Heavenly Creator is seeking, much like a father would, to reconnect with all of His offspring, even the wayward ones.

When churches participate effectively in this mission, they are sometimes called *missional* congregations.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, missional is not just *going out*. *Going out* is *part* of the method. The mission is God's mission only and can only be understood by looking at what God does. He does not just *go out*. Though he sent his Son to the earth, *coming to us* with great effort (c.f. Phil. 2:5–11), the arduous tasks of sacrifice, death, and resurrection were still ahead. *Going out*, even by Christ, would have been

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*Going out* combined with *teaching spiritual transformation* and *intentional discipleship* created a holism in the Wesleyan revival, since this created a balanced ministry before conversion, at conversion, and after conversion. Part of Hunter's argument in *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* is that balance in these areas is missing in churches today. Though there were many methods for which the Methodist movement became famous, this holism between social advancement, conversion, and intentional discipleship struck me with new vigor when comparing Hunter's books with my research travels, whereby I crisscrossed England in search of better understanding the land and context of John Wesley.

### john wesley's world

I recently visited in John Wesley's haunts, from the high moors of Derbyshire, to the alleys of industrial Sheffield, to the cosmopolitan bustle of City Road in London.<sup>22</sup> Amid these journeys I sought to better understand Wesley's writings (to which I was kindly provided access to the originals in various locales) and the development of his holism regarding evangelism. Though for months I had been

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of missional terminology see John Flett's *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Whitesel, *Organix: Signs of Leadership in a Changing Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Bob Whitesel, *The Healthy Church: Practical Ways to Strengthen a Church's Heart* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 164. In addition, a missional church can be defined as "a church that seeks to work together with the Holy Spirit to convey the Good News that our Heavenly Father wants to restore fellowship with his wayward offspring." Bob Whitesel, *Cure for the Common Church: God's Plan to Restore Church Health* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 77.

<sup>22</sup> Here Wesley established a preaching venue called the Foundry in the ruined remains of a cannon factory.



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studying the massive reams of his journals, letters, and books, I found his  
comprehensive view of the Good News become clearer as I trekked into his world.

Wesley lived in a world that was surprisingly not too different from the one we live in today. It was rampant with unethical new technologies that cheapened people, their self-esteem, and their moral values. Compounding the problem, the Church of England had denigrated into parish fiefdoms where pastors amassed private fortunes, catered to society's elite, and harangued one another over private theological perspectives. Worship services had become uninspiring and lethargic.

This pattern was sometimes broken at regional-wide churches which adopted a performance-orientated tactic. In these regional churches, only the best musicians and preachers were invited. Still, the masses were not attracted, for they had been driven to the cities by the promises of an Industrial Revolution where factories provided stability over agriculture. Here in the cities the masses struggled to recover a communal life they left behind. Churches who practiced excellence or preached politics did not offer them the communion with God or one another they sought. Into this unexciting, stratified, and irrelevant church Wesley had felt called to be a pastor . . . but to pastor differently.

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### **john wesley and social advancement**

The term *methodist* was used in a derisive manner to slander Wesley and his student friends at Christ Church College in Oxford.<sup>23</sup> They had gained notoriety for attempting to live lives more purposeful and godly. They drafted for themselves rules to help them grow in their Christian spirituality and service:

1. To lead a "holy and sober life"
2. "To take communion at least one a week"
3. "To be faithful in private devotions"
4. "To visit the prisons regularly"
5. "To spend three hours together every afternoon, studying the Bible and books of devotion."<sup>24</sup>

One of Wesley's friends had suggested that the group go to Oxford's most outcast inhabitants, those who were housed in the nearby XXX prison. This had an amazing effect upon the Holy Club. Eventually Wesley and his friends would even ride with prisoners in the carts on their way to execution, consoling and comforting them.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2, The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 213.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: Journals and Diaries*, Vol. 19, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 362.

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From his years at prestigious Christi Church College and forward, Wesley

would view meeting the needs of society's most estranged, be they believer or non-believer, as a fundamental element of the Good News. Though fellow Oxford students would derogatorily call them "The Holy Club," their methods of holding each other accountable, receiving the sacraments, and helping the needy only required one more element for their movement to become whole—that was for these young men, who grew up in Christian homes, to experience an inner transformation.

### **john wesley and conversion**

As a fledgling pastor, Wesley would not ignore the poor. After all, he had been involved in social advancement ministry since his days at Oxford. Still, he did not feel he had not holistically experienced God's Good News. True assurance that he would be saved from damnation eluded him. The following recounts how I gained a better understanding of how Wesley's holistic view of the Good News developed.

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### **wesley's conversion: from savannah to aldersgate**

John Wesley, perhaps like some of the readers of this article, always knew he was going to be a pastor. In preparation, he had attended the best pastoral-training school in the British Empire and was sailing to the New World in 1735. An impressive intellectual and well respected despite his Holy Club activities, Wesley had received a prestigious appointment to be the first pastor of the Church of England congregation in Savannah, Georgia.

On his voyage to Savannah, a fierce storm threatened to sink the ship. Even hardened sailors were said to be in fear of eminent death. John Wesley was no different and by his own admission cowered in the ship amid many of the people he would soon be expected to pastor in Savannah. Cowering in fear of his life, he felt himself a poor example of the eternal certainty that he must soon preach to the congregants who traveled in the ship with him.<sup>26</sup>

Also on the ship were a group of Christians that demonstrated a remarkably different reaction to almost certain death. Known as "Moravians," they were Christian reformers from Germany who had emphasized quietude, mediation, and prayer as a means to spiritual growth.<sup>27</sup> In the midst of the tempest and impending death, Wesley and others were amazed at their calm and confident trust in God's

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<sup>26</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2, The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 209ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

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protection. Their resolve convicted Wesley that something in his life was missing: a  
lack of trust and assurance in God.

The ship weathered the storm, but a series of miscalculations in his first  
pastorate together with his spiritual uncertainty sent Wesley back to England with  
the thought that “I who went to America to convert others, was never myself  
converted to God?”<sup>28</sup>

### **st. paul’s and a small group meeting on aldersgate street**

Back in London, Wesley frequented the meetings of the Moravians and similar  
like-minded Christians who met in small groups for quietude, prayer, meditation,  
and accountability. Wesley also kept up his attendance at Church of England  
worship services, since he never wanted to leave the Church of England. Wesley  
always believed that the Church of England was God’s instrument, and he never  
advocated leaving it, nor did he want to. Many years later when “preaching  
services” of the Methodists sprouted up all over England, Wesley asked that they  
never meet at the same time as Church of England services. Wesley did not want  
the Methodists to become a rival denomination with rival meetings. Instead,  
Wesley always believed the Methodist societies should be a renewal movement  
within the Church of England. If anyone was dedicated to turning around a  
church, even a denomination, it was Wesley.

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One evening he attended Evensong<sup>29</sup> at the mother church of the Church of  
England, St. Paul’s Cathedral. Only twenty-seven years earlier this stately church  
facility had been completed from a design by the famed architect Christopher  
Wren. St. Paul’s had been Wren’s architectural *tour de force*, and in Wesley’s day as  
today, it was a hub of tourist curiosity.

I, too, attended Evensong at St. Paul’s at the same approximate time of year to  
take in for myself what Wesley saw and heard. Just days before, I had been in the  
John Ryland’s Library at the University of Manchester, holding in my hands and  
studying Wesley’s letters about this and other experiences. I had read what he said  
in hindsight, but now I wanted to experience the intangibles. Though times have  
changed in many ways, they have not changed in other ways. The Church of  
England is in much the same crisis of faith and irrelevance that concerned Wesley.  
Though St. Paul’s Evensong on the night of my attendance was attractive, it was  
hollow.

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<sup>28</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 261.

<sup>29</sup> Evensong services are typically comprised of sung liturgy accompanied by a homily. In describing such services, Wesley  
seems to indicate this was the practice he experienced.

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The service began with a steward waving an incense censer as he led the procession of priests and singers. Over the years, ecclesiologists had reinterpreted these incense censers as symbolic of the soothing fragrance of the Holy Spirit's presence. In Wesley's time, people knew the real purpose for incense censers. As a member of the aristocracy, Wesley would have been particularly familiar with incense censers as standard fixtures in rooms where noblemen held counsel. Over centuries, this practice had slowly made its way into the church. On my trip I had toured the country homes of English noblemen and palaces of the royalty, only to find in most places, large incense censers were meant to protect the aristocracy from the putrid odors of the masses. Large metal burners, stationed in these homes directly between the aristocracy and the commoner, conveyed a sense of elitism and separation. This practice in the church, regardless of a theological attempt to reinterpret their function, would have conveyed at least a subconscious impression of exclusivity to Wesley's generation.

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Yet most notable in St. Paul's was the massively artistic ornamentation and presentation. Here was everything the Church of England could muster in excellence and quality. Then, as today, only the best musicians, singers, and pastors were invited to participate at St. Paul's. This night was no different. The organ voluntary was magnificent, and the surroundings were heavenly with all the other-worldly flair that famed architect Wren could muster. The preaching was engaging and politically nuanced.

To Wesley this would have been the Church of England at its attractive best. Wesley had been familiar with such methods of attraction since his college days. Christ Church College had been the *de facto* college for the religious elite of the British Empire. Daily he ate dinner in its stately dining room, amid grandly set tables under imposing larger-than-life portraits of English statesmen and religious leaders.<sup>30</sup>

At St. Paul's, this was reflected in a way that many churches tried to copy: an impressive atmosphere of religious excellence that would inspire the religious indifferent to exchange their old ways of life for a journey into Christian maturity. However, the churches in the 1738 were largely empty, even amid a quest for attractive experiences that would lure the masses back to church.

As in Wesley's time, the majority of the attendees when I visited St. Paul's were tourists. One small row was set aside for "St. Paul's Community," of which only a few seats were taken. The sensation was of grandeur, artistry, and emptiness. This

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<sup>30</sup> Today Wesley might have found it humorous that amid the prestigious portraits in Christ Church College's Great Hall looking down on the students, now hangs a portrait of John Wesley.

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tactic was not wooing them in then, nor in my experience is it today.<sup>31</sup> The large  
sanctuary, sized more for coronations and state funerals, produced only a hollow  
resonance. Thin echoes led to a feeling of beauty inexperienced. It was not too  
dissimilar to a mausoleum, where beauty seems wasted upon so few.

When I left Evensong, I stepped out the front doors into one of the most  
bustling intersections of London. Here Fleet Street, the venerable headquarters of  
the British press, climbs Lundgate Hill toward London Wall Road. This is the  
ancient center of the City of London. In 1738, this was also the center of English  
business life where the work of business did not subside at 5 p.m. The broad and  
central steps of St. Paul's provided a fitting place to gather. Add to this the tourists  
from across the empire that visited this center of the ecclesial smugness, and the  
dissimilarity between what was going on inside and outside of St. Paul's could not  
be ignored. In Wesley's time the streets would have been teeming with humanity in  
all of its liveliness and energy. It is again today.

I had always envisioned Wesley leaving Evensong after twilight in a pensive  
manner. I had envisioned him as making his way down the dark Aldersgate Street  
adjacent to St. Paul's to the small group of Moravians where his heart was  
"strangely warmed" and where Wesley's assurance became solidified.<sup>32</sup> Here, as in  
Wesley's day, the daylight would still have rule, but there were at least two more  
hours before dusk. Furthermore, the masses, since Wesley's day, have used the  
broad and stately steps of St. Paul's as central London's main gathering place.

Today, the steps and streets are no different. What startled me was the drastic  
difference between the stately, yet lonely, beauty of Wren's magnum opus and  
energy of the teeming streets outside. It struck me how St. Paul's leaders so  
desperately wanted the masses to enter and experience God, but the masses seemed  
content to enjoy one another's camaraderie on its steps. No amount of excellence  
in design or execution seemed to meet the needs the masses wanted. They wanted  
community, they wanted fellowship, and the church had created edifices staffed by  
curators.

Before long, Wesley was headed down the adjacent Aldersgate Street to a  
meeting of the introspective Moravians. How much different that small group must  
have been from his experience only hours earlier at St. Paul's. To compare the two  
must have been revelatory for Wesley as it was for me. People needed what the  
church had to offer. Despite its best attempts to recreate the beauty of heavenly  
realms and attract the throngs, the church paled in comparison to the spiritual

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<sup>31</sup> For a comparison of attractional strategies and incarnational strategies see "Incarnation" in Bob Whitesel, *ORGANIX: Signs of Leadership in a Changing Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 121–137.

<sup>32</sup> *John Wesley's Journal*, May 24, 1738 quoted in Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2, The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 212.

Whitesel: A Holistic Good News: Missional, Effective Evangelism and Lessons assurance that came from a small group on Aldersgate Street that encouraged one another in faith development.

### **john wesley and spiritual development**

Wesley had always been impressed with how the Moravians organized their meetings to allow time for quiet reflection (sometimes called quietude), spiritual assessment, and communal accountability. Here in the midst of Scripture, friends and reflection came to Wesley something all the stately grandeur of St. Paul's could not amass. Wesley stated that he felt "my heart strangely warmed" and forever recounted this night as a night that changed the course of his life.<sup>33</sup>

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What came out of that night was a John Wesley who had a new self-assurance that God could help him surmount the foibles that had dogged him most of his life. The smaller community of accountability and reflection gave Wesley something he had benefitted from many years earlier in Oxford. Here was a group that knew him, that knew his struggles, and who helped him overcome his questions of faith.<sup>34</sup> They gave him time to reflect and then commune with the heavenly Father who sought to reestablish a relationship with John.

In both Oxford and London were elements that helped Wesley see how he was to participate in God's mission. In the sacraments administered in the stately halls of St. Paul's were the mysterious workings of God's Holy Spirit in his church. In the company of fellow spiritual travelers were the accountability, support, and divine communication he needed to embark on a journey to serve others.

### **a holistic method emerges**

Probably because Wesley's conversion had been built upon many years of serving the needy, then had been facilitated by the fellowship of a small cadre of friends, Wesley never seems to focus on one part of the Good News over the whole. Wesley had a passionate dedication to holism in his so-called *method* that included social advancement, conversion, and intentional spiritual maturity. Wesley would allow no one element to overshadow the others. They had been closely connected to one another in Wesley's spiritual journey, and spent much of his life convincing others that they must be theologically and practically connected in the method that was emerging.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> C. f. Peter Boehler's encouragement to Wesley in Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2, The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 212.

Wesley's methods were so distinctively precise that over time the equally disparaging *Methodist* would replace the deriding term "The Holy Club." Wesley never liked either, especially the term *methodist*, because he did not think that varying methods should eclipse a holistic mission. Though the mission was comprehensive, it included varying methods that helped complete that mission. Any one or two methods, no matter how publically criticized or glorified, were incomplete without an understanding of the holism that Wesley experienced.

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