Wesley's Methods: An Organizational Analysis

Tomas F. Tumblin

It is an honor to present this paper in celebration of the tercentennial of Wesley's birth. I come to this topic not as a Wesley scholar but as an organizational theorist. While Wesley tops my list of favorite ecclesial saints, my research falls primarily in the areas of organizational behavior. Therefore I will filter selected events in early Methodism using organizational constructs. Doing organizational analysis from events more than two hundred years old allows the luxury of bracketing experience while also providing the liability of imposing motive. I will trust the Wesley scholars among us to correct my false mental leaps and factual fuzziness.

I have another bias of jealousy to disclaim as I confess I serve both as a part-time leadership professor and as a District Superintendent in the United Methodist Church. This bias probably arises as I discover that, by the time he was my age, Wesley had not only taught at Oxford, been a missionary to Georgia, pioneered field preaching with George Whitefield and helped launch the great English revival, he had written prolifically and organized the initial Methodist societies for over two thousand adherents. Some heroines and heroes are too productive to emulate.

I plan to examine Mr. Wesley's movement from the perspective of how the various decisions and structures adopted (for the most part) during the early years of Methodism impact the enterprise Wesley sought to launch. The focus will be on the developments in England, as tempting as American Methodism is to we natives. For example, the decision of the American Methodists to split in 1828 over the authority of the bishops and role of the laity (resulting in the Methodist Protestant branch) nearly distracted me as I was visiting one of our United Methodist conference centers in August. Nonetheless, I chose to be hedged in to the resulting exploration of Methodism in England during the 1700s.

The discussion is organized using organizational concepts such as organizational...
framing, culture and leadership development. We will touch on the formative influences of the Moravian and Oxford strategies on how Wesley organized the early renewal. We will then inquire about the adaptations he made during the first decades after 1738 as “form followed function” in the group dynamics. Finally we will discuss his attempts at stewarding the Methodist legacy in the latter years of his life.

AN INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

Organizational theorists Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn remind us there are various ways to understand organizations – by their functions (productive/economic, maintenance/socialization, adaptive/educational and managerial/political) and by their purpose (transforming objects vs. molding people) (143ff). As we review the Wesleyan influences on the greater Church, certainly the focus moves toward people development in eternal terms. Methodism like most renewal movements was an innovation for renewal of the Church of England, calling it to live in the values and priorities of first century Christianity. The workings of the Anglican structures, themselves a reaction to the restrictions of Catholicism, had become more staid than effective in yielding changed lives. Indeed, the resulting revival called the British society to Scriptural Christianity lived out in both personal change and societal transformation.

Kast and Rosenzweig suggest various vantage points from which to understand organizations: the use of differences between organizations, differences within organizations, strategic orientation and differences between business units for classification (537ff). The early Methodist movement easily falls into a socializing type of enterprise committed to the shaping of people for eternity. The Gospels calls that strategic orientation the making of disciples. Historians have explored the contrasts between Wesley’s approaches to making disciples and Whitefield’s, as an example of differences between organizations. Methodist history captures the debates within the movement as Wesley wielded his authority to organize followers into societies, classes and bands. We will focus our attention primarily on the dynamics within Methodism and how Wesley’s organizational prowess positioned them for long-term impact.

METHODISM FRAMED

One helpful approach to understanding organizations is described by Bolman and Deal as organizational framing – how an organization understands its existence and brings meaning to what it experiences. They suggest that an organization can be viewed from four primary frames of reference and intentionally changing perspective, or reframing, can help enrich our understanding. The four frames also provide language and paradigms for better communication among varying perspectives.

The structural frame can be described as bureaucracy with committees, boards, clearly defined roles, relationships and goals. The symbolic frame is looser, often with few structures, but rich with icons, myths, beliefs and spirit. The human resources frame is people-centered over mission-driven, and values investing in employees and creating mutual rewards. The political frame is power-centered and is characterized by bargaining and negotiation. Typically organizations can be best understood using more than one organizational frame.
While Wesley often engaged in an apologetic for his ministry (which would lean toward a political frame for the movement), he excelled in devising structures for maturing Methodists. Since most organizations evidence more than one frame at a time we can begin to understand our Methodist heritage from the structural and human resources frames. Wesley pragmatically gathered those who inquired after his preaching sessions into large groups and then into groups of ten to twelve to allow for more spiritual interchange. For John, the structures served to mature the people toward personal and social holiness and those structures kept showing up as he led the people called Methodist.

On Monday, May 111738, our little society began in London [Fetter Lane]. But it may be observed, the first rise of Methodism (so called) was in November 1729, when four of us met together at Oxford; the second was Savannah, in April 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house; the last was at London, on this day, when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet every Wednesday evening, in order to a free conversation, begun and ending with singing and prayer. (Short History of People Called Methodists para. 9)

These group meetings, rising out of the open-air preaching, multiplied in Bristol, Kingswood, Bath and other areas in 1739, to the chagrin of many. "But it [the field preaching calling all who would listen to salvation by faith] was not without violent opposition... the beasts of the people were stirred up almost in all places 'to knock these mad dogs on the head at once.'" (Short History para. 13) Wesley and his leaders interpreted this resistance as a call to more fervor in their work.

**Making Sense of Context**

Wesley could have interpreted the reaction differently. He might have viewed the resistance as God's direction to become more traditional, softening his language and approach so as not to upset so many. Instead, he framed the attacks as Satan's barriers to God's work. Just as he opted for accountability disciplines much like those he experienced himself as a child, he seems to inculcate the Dissenters' spirit (from his parents and grandparents) as he stands against the traditional methods and messages of Anglicanism. His parental heritage greatly influenced how he framed his own experiences.

This influence of Samuel and Susanna Wesley includes an early appreciation for the Scriptures in the original languages, significant guidance in John Wesley's developing epistemology at Oxford University, the encouragement in organizing and participating in the life of religious societies, and the critical decision to open the preaching ministry in Methodist societies to laity. (Giffin 74)

In organizational terms, Wesley was reading the cues and making sense of what he was experiencing based on his past life occurrences and his sense of self, bringing meaning to his current context.
"Sensemaking seems to follow roughly a sequence in which people concerned with identity who they are and what they contribute in the social context of other actors engage ongoing events from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively while enacting more or less order into those ongoing events" (Weick 463).

Wesley read his situation through using the maps he had adopted from past relationships and events. How he perceived circumstances within his own understanding of God's providence and purpose guided how he responded. Certainly, from a biblical perspective, we would want to allow for the influence of the Holy Spirit to shape perceptions and lead how we interpret the cues. Indeed, we might be ones who have lived through great strains as a child and we are on the journey of healing through the grace of Christ. That journey and God's guidance in the midst of it awaken us to live beyond what we can observe. Wesley lived both in the impact of his strict spiritual upbringing and the supernatural visitations of Aldersgate and thereafter. In fact, Robert Moore suggests that Aldersgate was the opening stanza of about a year of transformation in Wesley that culminated with his decision to begin field preaching. (26ff) Moore notes that George Whitefield's invitation to preach at Bristol might even have been an act of contrition toward his father who had died months before and with whom Wesley had argued over being his father's successor at Epworth. Whitefield had sought to bring the revival begun in New England to Bristol via field preaching. He asked Wesley to take his place and John went hesitantly arriving March 31, 1739. "Bohler had told him that he should preach faith until he had it, but he had failed in this. Now he had preached faith until others had it, and the assurance which he could not gain through a sensible change in himself he now gleaned from that which his ministry was facilitating in the lives of others." (Moore 113) These and each life episode contributed to his future ministry decision making.

**Ecclesiologiae in Ecclesia**

The classic understanding of Methodism as a micro-church within the larger church also lends itself to organizational analysis. Every organization exists within a social and historical context. John and Charles Wesley "joined the family business" as they heeded God's call to serve the Church of England. Their parents drew from Puritan roots and Susanna was the stronger in her non-conformist disciplines (Wood 27-28). In addition, there were political tensions during their day stemming from the break of Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth from Rome.

In seeking to unite the English nation in an anti-Roman direction, [Elizabeth] allowed a freedom of belief and practice within the Anglican church which soon led to the growth of strong Puritanism. The increasing strength and dissenting policies of the Puritans issued in 1567 in a split in the Anglican church, with the Puritans separating and beginning to hold services in small private groups.

Under James I (1603-25) and Charles I (1625-49) an open struggle against Puritanism became official Anglican church policy. (Moore 32).

This policy led to the Great Rebellion in 1649 where Charles I was put to death and the Puritan Cromwell was placed in power. Charles II regained power in 1660 and
renewed the attacks on Puritanism. The power struggles continued throughout most of that century with the link between religious loyalties and political rule. "The authority conflict between the established church and dissent, between Jurors and Non-Jurors became an important part of Wesley's family tradition." (Moore 33)

Within these historical contexts Wesley was concerned that the traditional Anglican churches, most of which would not tolerate his enthusiastic calls to salvation by faith, failed to live out mandates of first century Christianity. The culture of the Anglican enterprise resisted the intense and focused message Wesley felt called to deliver even to the least likely. Giffin suggests Wesley created a movement (or sub-culture) with Anglicanism that

reinterprets classical Christianity to an emerging modern world... It was precisely at this point of turning, this place of redirecting and reformulating Christian faith and practice, of not rejecting reason and nature in general nor Lockean empiricism nor Newtonian method in particular, but instead joining these with a transcendent theology as expressed first of all in the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, that enabled Wesley to influence his age in a lasting way. (312)

Edgar Schein and others, regarding this renewal movement within the Anglican Church, would describe this as creating an organizational subculture within the larger cultural context. Methodism raised the bar on the value of Scripture, discipline, and life change. It adopted the foolishness of field preaching, the accountability of large and small groups and other innovations for renewal. As a sub-culture they developed a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein 12)

In time, this strong subculture would become the Methodist Church, especially as the movement moved to North America.

John Wesley went out from the Aldersgate experience to begin the preaching, organizing, and administrative work which was to result, at the time of his death over fifty years later, in some half a million souls in England called Methodists, and an infant church in America. Wesley remained a clergyman of the Church of England until his death, and insisted that his societies in England should remain that—societies—and not become a church. However, after the American Revolution had taken place, he recognized that the Church of England could no longer function in America and that an ordained clergy was needed. His efforts to get the Bishop of London to ordain some of his preachers failed, so finally Wesley himself ordained two men and set aside Dr. Thomas Coke as a superintendent for the work in America, giving him directions to ordain Francis Asbury a second superintendent. (Jack M. Tuell, The Organization of the United Methodist Church, rev'd 1982 ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1982, pp 14-15.)

FOUNDING CULTURE

How did Wesley, as a founding leader, establish this Methodist sub-culture? In organizational terms, founders and leaders early in an organization's life utilize what Schein calls
tumblin
culture-embedding mechanisms (231). How the founder interacts in the context and with the participants in the culture sets the expectations. In Weick's language, how the leader interprets the cues of the experience, thereby bringing sense and/or meaning to the experiences, sets the culture. As Wesley embraced the radical mode of field preaching to call those outside of the established church to full salvation, he created an expectancy of diverging from the religious norm. The new inquirers sought instruction which prompted Wesley to extend his group experiences at Oxford and Georgia and initiate the primary vehicle for maturing the saints—the small group. Within the groups themselves, he further embedded a cultural expectation for serious religious consideration. Any reading of these queries points to the high standards Wesley intended for each of the people called Methodist. Further, since the questions were asked of all group members, they fostered a group cohesion the violation of which meant being invited to leave the group. In the “General Rules of the United Societies,” John and Charles Wesley wrote this epilogue: “If there be any among us who observe them not... we will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our souls.” (para. 7)

Another indicator of this cultural expectation comes in Wesley’s Journal entry the week after the first Methodist Conference held in the Foundery in 1744. Thomas Neely notes that Wesley and his leaders removed those who failed to live according to the Gospel, bringing their number to nineteen hundred. (8) At this inaugural gathering they

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Embedding Mechanisms</th>
<th>Secondary Embedding Mechanisms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis</td>
<td>Organization design and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises</td>
<td>Organizational systems and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed criteria by which leaders allocate scarce resources</td>
<td>Organizational rites and rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching</td>
<td>Design of physical space, facades, and buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed criteria by which leaders allocate rewards and status</td>
<td>Stories, legends, and myths about people and events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed criteria by which leaders recruit, select, promote, retire, and excommunicate organizational members</td>
<td>Formal statements of organizational philosophy, values, and creed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
practiced a love feast, set apart ministers, set doctrinal understanding, and, soon thereafter, "excommunicated" those who did not meet the cultural (and theological) expectations.

Various other evidence can be highlighted as mechanisms Wesley used to set the culture: Charles Wesley's hymns, hundreds of letters in response to questions about and attacks on the movement, numerous tracts like "The Character of a Methodist," Journal and Diary records, and the testimonies of preachers who documented their own ministries under Wesley's authority.

**Flexible Structures**

Howard Snyder, in his book *Decoding the Church*, observes Wesley's pragmatic spirit in accomplishing the mission. One indication of his practicality is the way he borrowed from the Moravian model of organizing believers into "choirs" by marital status and age and voluntary bands of five to ten by level of spiritual development. Wesley also built on Horneck's model for religious societies in England, according to Rupert Davies. (Introduction to The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9, Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.) Horneck imposed the following conditions on those who would want to be part of the religious society: they must commit to a holy and serious life in Christ, be confirmed by a bishop, and allow no theological or political debates during the meetings. Discussion of personal spiritual concerns was not required, most of the time was spent in prayer and devotional reading, and dues of six pence when present and three pence when absent were expected from each member. The disciplines we see in Wesley's classes and bands mirror many of these expectations, including the eventual collection devised by Captain Foy to help retire the debt on the New Room in Bristol.

We discussed the beginnings of the society meetings at Fetter Lane. As the attendance grew, Wesley created class meetings of ten to twelve who would work through the group accountability questions each week. As they matured, the purpose of the class meetings became prayer, hymns, confession, testimony, counsel and the infamous punching of one's ticket for admission into the larger society meeting. For the more spiritually committed, he created the select bands of five to ten people, typically sorted by gender. For a season he set up select societies, one in each large society made up of the inner circle of the bands who were responsible for the spiritual direction of the society. To accommodate those who had fallen in their discipline, penitent bands were established.

In time Wesley realized that he had over-organized given the rapid growth and volume of people, so he merged the select societies and penitent bands into the bands and classes. Eventually the bands disappeared as well.

Leaders were required to oversee these groupings. Wesley had raised up as many as fifty itinerant preachers by 1745, so he named fifteen of them as assistants and the rest became helpers. Itinerants oversaw the bands and classes, delivered class tickets, led quarterly society meetings, cared for the helpers, supplied books and oversaw financial transactions. Assistants were required to travel a new circuit every year or two to keep their sermons from getting stale. (Sounds like a district superintendent to me!) Groups of trustees were later established to hold the preaching house property in partnership with the stewards as well as ensure sound Methodist doctrine was preached at the houses.

Allow a brief leap. Near the end of his life, as Wesley began to anticipate his own
death beginning around 1769, he explored models of governance to keep the movement growing. His original plan was to establish a team of five to seven trustees who would take up the functions he has been performing. He also attempted to convince John Fletcher to take on his mantle, but Fletcher's refusal and eventual death in 1785 forced Wesley toward another plan. In 1784, through the assistance of Thomas Coke, Wesley unveiled the Deed of Declaration. This legal document literally named one hundred preachers who would become the new trustees of the Methodist movement once John died. Parenthetically, since there were one hundred ninety-two preachers at the time, Wesley had to deal with the jealousy and fears of those preachers excluded from the list who were anxious that the hundred might slight them once Wesley was gone. (Neely 72)

THEOLOGICAL STANDARDS

To ensure the biblical integrity of the preaching, Wesley established his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament and his standard sermons as the theological norm by which all preaching would be measured. He also published tracts like “The Character of a Methodist” and “The Principles of a Methodist” to describe the lifestyle and spiritual expectations of those who joined the movement. (The Articles of Religion of the Church of England were already assumed since they were a sub-group of it.) The Davies edition of Wesley Works on the subject lists thirty-four tracts and letters outlining the administrative and organizational expectations he had for the movement.

A survey of the last five of his standard sermons further illustrates the cultural and spiritual bar he set for the people called Methodist. Wesley’s sermon number forty-eight entitled ‘Self Denial’ challenged followers to trust God’s sovereignty in all circumstances, enter into voluntary suffering as an act of denial of oneself in taking up the cross, and to zealously depend on the means of grace as one walks through suffering.

Sermon forty-nine, “The Cure of Evil Speaking,” called Methodists to exercise Matthew eighteen principles rather than talking behind someone’s back. Rather than entertain the deadly poison of gossip, Wesley calls us to live in biblical healthy relationships.

Sermon fifty dares the follower to reject surplus accumulation and covetousness. Instead “The Use of Money” directs us to care for Christ’s poor by rightly gaining, saving, and giving all we can.

Continuing the theme of managing God’s assets, “The Good Steward” reminds us that all of life and its benefits come from God and require wise management. We are entrusted with soul, body, goods and talents and will be required to give an account at the judgment. Therefore we are to live circumspectly.

“The Reformation of Manners,” standard sermon fifty-two, is Wesley’s call to social activism as part of our biblical witness.

WESLEY’S LEGACY

In his preaching, teaching and superintending Wesley created cultural expectations that fueled revival. Thousands of lives were drawn into the renewal movement and the world felt the impact. He understood the need for effective structures to steward the movement God was bringing as a result of Wesley’s call to a pure faith. His pattern of being the sole director of conference governance smacks of “popery” in twenty-first century terms, but
God's grace allowed John to lead well. He was both shaped by his experiences and intentionally sought to shape the experiences so the society members would be "a company of men and women...having the form, and seeking the power of godliness," united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." (The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, para. 2) God help his spiritual children to be so intentional.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Neely, Thomas B. *The Governing Conference in Methodism.* Cincinnati: Curts and Jennings, 1892.


Snyder, Howard A. *Decoding the Church.* Nashville: Abingdon, 2002.

