

What Would Wesley Do?

Mission and Pragmatism in Methodist History

by Rev. Dr. Wesley Magruder

During the first livestream of DEWCOM's seminar concerning the Sacraments during the pandemic, an observer on Facebook asked concerning the validity of celebrating communion online, "What would Wesley and Jesus do?" Leaving aside the question of how the Son of God would approach cyberspace, I suggest that it is safer to probe what our venerable founder might have done in our situation.

It's not ordinarily prudent to ask, "What would Wesley do?" First of all, there is the acute danger that we would not be happy with the answer. For all his spiritual gifts and ministerial successes, Wesley had his share of theological blindsides and shortcomings. More importantly, however, he lived in a very different context from our own. The challenges of 18th-century, pre-Industrial Revolution England are quite different from early 21st-century Southern Africa.

Furthermore, we can't know for certain what Wesley would do; anything we say is pure conjecture, and likely twisted to fit our own agenda. What we *can* do, however, is investigate what Wesley *did* and, as far as possible, ascertain his motives, reasoning, and intentions. By taking the history of the early Wesleyan movement seriously, we may re-discover parts of our own story that will shed light on contemporary problems.

In this brief paper, I highlight one particular episode in Wesley's life which may bear on the question of virtual communion: the events leading to his decision to ordain, by his own hands, two missionaries to America in 1784.

But I preface by pointing out that Wesley is generally remembered for two things: one, for his single-minded mission, and two, for his eminent pragmatism. First, Wesley's mission was to save souls; as we know, he usually spoke about salvation as a wholistic process of the human person which involved the prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace of God, and took place in the here and now as well as in the eschatological future. Everything Wesley did was oriented to bringing people to the saving knowledge and experience of God's salvation.

Second, this mission was so important that everything was subordinate to it, including official Church order and polity. According to at least one Wesley scholar, Wesley was "... utterly pragmatic in planning strategy and establishing policy. Whether his approach was approved by church tradition or his ecclesiastical peers was not of great concern. The question was: Does it work?"

It might be said, then, that in matters of ministry, Wesley always asked two questions before any other: "Does this extend God's grace?" and "Does it work?"

Wesley expressed this view succinctly in a letter to John Smith on June 25, 1746: "What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth."

Thus, for example Wesley embraced field preaching and the use of lay preachers as key components of his ministry, though both practices were frowned upon and discouraged by Church polity and doctrine.

Wesley believed that one of the most important means by which God poured out grace upon people was the Lord's Supper. He exhorted Methodists to take communion as frequently as possible; from his Oxford days, he participated in communion multiple times a week.

Therefore, one of Wesley's most pressing concerns in the second half of his life was the problem of making this means of grace more available to Methodists. From the 1750s onward, Methodists pressed Wesley to allow lay preachers to administer the sacrament; they were increasingly unwilling to attend their parish church because of active opposition from Anglican clergy.

Wesley sympathized with the dilemma, but pressed them to attend church anyway, and refused to allow laypersons to serve communion, which was consistent with Anglican order. Over the years, the cries for communion increased, but Wesley continued to resist, unwilling to be seen as creating a schism with the Church.

The problem reached a crescendo during the growth of Methodism in the newly-formed country of the United States of America, where no ordained Methodist clergy existed to serve communion to the new American converts. Already, Francis Asbury, one of Wesley's missionaries, had intervened to stop a group of American lay preachers from deciding on their own to begin serving communion. But nobody knew how long the impatient Americans would wait.

Wesley found himself at a crucial decision point. The pressing need was to provide communion for spiritually hungry people who were unable to participate.

Three months deep into a global pandemic, we find ourselves in a similar situation. Throughout the world, there are spiritually hungry people who have been unable to gather at the Table for spiritual sustenance. The question that faced Wesley faces us again: What can be done to meet the growing need for communion?

One possibility which has been entertained in this forum is to give permission for laypersons to celebrate and consecrate the elements. Wesley certainly *could* have chosen this option; it might have been the easiest route for him to take, since he already had an extensive network of itinerant preachers spread across the land.

However, Wesley was unwilling to break with Church tradition in this matter. He believed strongly that the ordained presbyter was set apart for the pastoral-priestly role, and that the presbyter was the only one who could rightly administer the sacraments. His preachers were set apart for a completely different role — that of prophet-evangelist, set apart for the extraordinary work of proclamation. In his sermon "The Ministerial Office," Wesley makes clear that the Methodist lay preachers were appointed "as Prophets, not as Priests. We received them wholly and solely to preach, not to administer sacraments." To do otherwise would be to signal that the Methodists sought to establish their own church outside of the Church of England, a development which Wesley never approved.

Wesley instead chose a different option, one which he had been quietly entertaining for years. In 1745, Wesley read Lord Peter King's *Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline,*

Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church and was persuaded that bishops and presbyters were of the same order, meaning that he, as a presbyter, technically had the same right as a bishop to ordain. If the problem in America was the lack of ordained clergy, then Wesley decided that he would simply make more!

On September 1, 1784, Wesley laid his hands on Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat and ordained them deacons; the next day, he ordained them presbyters and set apart Thomas Coke as Superintendent / Bishop (giving him authority to ordain others in America).

Days later, he sent them to America with a letter that explained his decisions to the Methodists there. Interestingly, Wesley defends his actions as being necessary to address the problem of lack of access to communion:

For many years I have been importuned from time to time to exercise this right by ordaining part of our traveling preachers. But I have still refused, not only for peace' sake, but because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the National Church to which I belonged.

3. But the case is widely different between England and North America ... So for some hundred miles together there is none either to baptize or administer the Lord's supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order and invade no man's right by appointing and sending laborers into the harvest ...

5. If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present I cannot see any better method than that I have taken.

The work of Vasey, Whatcoat, Coke, and the rest of the American preachers, clergy and lay, ultimately did a great work in the mission field. One could say that Wesley's two questions were answered clearly in the affirmative: the decision to ordain preachers to provide communion for hungry Americans extended God's grace to people, and it worked.

What would Wesley do, then, in our situation? I cannot be so bold as to anticipate what he would think of the new digital possibilities, but I can offer the following conclusions:

- 1) he would be worried about the lack of availability of communion to people, in general, and would seek a solution that involved making the sacrament available in a safe manner;
- 2) he would be most interested in solutions that extended the Table to the largest numbers of people;
- 3) he would discourage any options which involve lay persons consecrating elements;
- 4) and he would prioritize effective practices over legalistic traditions and customs of the Church.