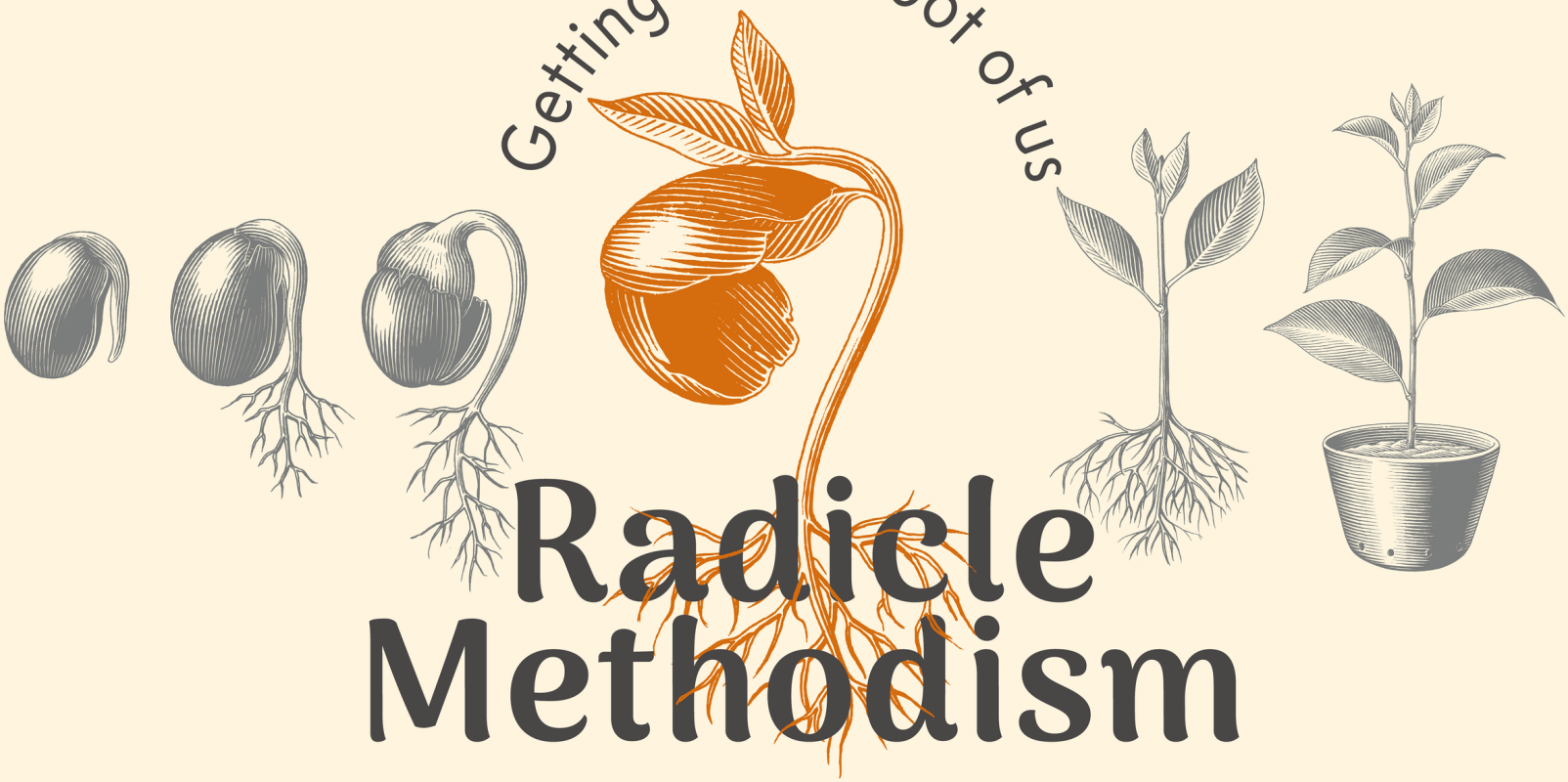
Getting to the root of us



Radicle Methodism

Participant Guide

General Commission on Archives & History

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Produced and published by the General Commission on Archives and History
36 Madison Ave, Madison NJ 07940

This Participant's Guide is meant for us by those attending the sessions of "Radicle Methodism: Back to Our Roots." In it, you'll find the introductory text for each module. We encourage you to read this text prior to the Module's session. It will provide pertinent background material for the videos and discussion. If you are doing this course as an individual (and not in a class setting) use this guide alongside the Leader Guide.

Other materials for the learning sessions are found in the Leader Guide. They include opening prayers, centering scriptures, discussion questions, and brief statements on the primary sources.

The recommended readings are found in the Primary Source Guide. You are welcome to read it in its entirety, but we recommend that the Leader choose one or two per module. These can be read in class or as a reflective homework. Do take time to read these important words of our founders and ponder how they relate or how they might advise us as United Methodists today!

MODULE 1: THE RADICLE AND THE ROOTS

The movement of the people called Methodist began in the early 18th century largely through the efforts of a group of teenagers and young adults connected with Oxford University in Oxford, England. Credit is often given to one man, John Wesley; however, Methodism has never been a voice of a single person or of a singular theology. This first module will briefly survey the Wesleys as founders of the people called Methodist. The video portion will further detail the origins of the movement as it highlights other prominent early leaders.

The Wesleys

John Wesley was born in 1703 in Epworth, England, to Susannah Ansley Wesley and Samuel Wesley. Both Samuel and Susanna, as teenagers, chose to abandon their dissenting families and to join the Church of England. Samuel eventually became an ordained minister within the Church of England and was given the parish at Epworth called St. Andrew's. Susanna was renowned as a proto-feminist who taught her seven daughters to read, alongside her three sons, preached from her own kitchen, and was the primary theological influence on her children.

John occupied a special place in his parent's hearts, particularly his mother's. At the age of 5, John was saved at the last minute from a house fire – a moment that marked him for a special purpose as a "brand plucked from the burning." John had a privileged upbringing, living in a large home, educated by his mother, and eventually attended Charterhouse, a boarding school with direct ties to the University of Oxford.

He graduated from Oxford with a BA and later an MA. Not wanting to go into the parish-ministry, but still feeling a call to ministry, John became an ordained minister in the Church of England and a fellow of Lincoln College at Oxford University. It is here that he began his journey of renewal within the Church of England, which would eventually be called “Methodism.”

Charles Wesley was born in 1707, the younger brother of John, also in Epworth, England. He, too, was educated predominantly by his mother, Susannah, and later at Westminster School in London before attending Christ Church at Oxford University. Charles was more of an artsy kid, a poet. Over his lifetime he would write over 6,000 hymns which expounded Methodist theology and allowed the everyday person an avenue of understanding the Methodist notion of God’s grace for one and all.

As a student, Charles began a small, pietistic, study group on the campus of Oxford, derided as the “Holy Club.” This group contained the main founders of the later Methodist movement, and within a short time, its members were called “Methodists” for their peculiar method of doing religion.

THE THREE RISES OF METHODISM

In his own words, John Wesley described the beginnings of the Methodist movement as “three rises.” It is best to think of these rises as steps that led to the official launch of the missional movement in 1739 in Bristol, England.

The first rise was during the brothers' time at Oxford, circa 1725-1732. Charles was a student, and John was a fellow (i.e., professor). Charles, along with his peers (William

Morgan, George Whitefield, and John Clayton), began a pietistic Bible study group that brought a few students together to discuss their faith and to hold each other accountable to a lived faith. John Wesley joined a bit later and quickly took over leadership of the group. They were derided by others on campus for their peculiar way of doing religion. They rose early, studied Scripture intently, prayed incessantly, and did acts of mercy in and around the community of Oxford. All of this made them an atypical group for the time, and earned them derisive nicknames such as the "Holy Club," "Bible Moths," and "Sacramentarians," before being ridiculed as "Methodists." It was at Oxford that the idea of faith lived out as love was cemented as a key component of the later movement. (More on the time at Oxford will be delineated in the first video of this module.)

The second rise took place in Georgia, circa 1736-1737. Still an English colony at the time, John Wesley volunteered to go to Georgia on a mission to bring renewed faith to the settlers and to the Indigenous persons there. Normally deemed a failure, due to the lack of interest in spiritual renewal by both parties, Georgia was formative for John and the Methodists. On the way to Georgia, John was introduced to the Moravian doctrine of assurance, the idea that one can know one is saved by Jesus Christ and can anticipate salvation. Assurance brought John and later Methodists a sense of peace, joy, and happiness in their lived faith. The time in Georgia also helped John design his systems of small groups (classes, societies, and bands) that would later be so characteristic of and essential to the spread of the movement both in England and later in the United States. Due to personal

issues, however, John was forced to leave Georgia and head back to London, England in December 1737.

The third rise was London, 1738-1739. When John arrived back in London, he was pleasantly surprised to find the "Methodists" continued to develop without him predominantly under the leadership of George Whitefield, a former classmate from Oxford and member of the original "Holy Club." Whitefield was a transatlantic evangelical preacher of fame, albeit he was more of a Calvinist bent than John Wesley (more on that in the videos of this module).

Upon returning to London, John joined the Fetterlane Society and began to again focus on his own spiritual formation. On May 21, 1738, Charles Wesley recorded having a new birth or conversion experience. Three days later, on May 24, 1738, John recorded his "heart strangely warmed" while walking down Aldersgate Street – a moment which marked his first experience of assurance of God's love and salvation. From thence on, this "new birth" or "conversion" experience would become a hallmark of the people called Methodists, and it would mark that moment when one was assured of God's love and found a renewed sense of purpose in this world to spread the love of God to as many persons as possible. For John and Charles, the primary characteristic of Methodists would be persons who acted out their faith through love – through engagement with the poor, the outcast, the ignored, and the disadvantaged.

MODULE 2:THE ROOTED CONNECTION

PROBLEMS IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

Methodism came to the American colonies organically through immigration. As Irish Methodists came to the northern American colonies they began to establish Methodist societies.These societies slowly spread throughout the smaller cities and into the rural areas between New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland. As it spread, one major problem emerged – access to the sacraments. The Methodists remained a missional renewal movement within the Church of England. Their leaders were authorized to preach and do mission, but not to administer the sacraments. For baptism and Communion, Methodists were still expected to attend an Anglican service on Sunday mornings.

However, in the American colonies, two problems emerged. First, there was limited access to an Anglican sanctuary as Methodism spread across the frontier and into the rural areas. As Methodist preachers were bringing people to Christ and they were wanting to seek Baptism into the Christian community, there were not enough Anglican sanctuaries nor ordained ministers to perform this critical rite. Second, as the brewing revolutionary spirit spread throughout the American colonies, persons became suspicious of those assumed to be “Loyalists.”Since Methodists were still part of the Church of England, they were assumed to be loyal to the monarchy, as the King was the head of both church and state. Therefore, it became physically dangerous to be seen walking in or out of an Anglican sanctuary. As individuals became less and less willing to risk their physical safety for Baptism or Communion, the need for more ordained clergy increased alongside calls for separation from the Church of England.

After the Revolutionary War and with the establishment of the United States of America, John Wesley faced a crisis of heart. He wanted to maintain connection to the Methodists in America, but also knew that it was time to let them exist separately in a newly independent country. After theological discernment, John took it upon himself to break the rules of the Church of England, and he ordained persons to send to the Americas with the specific task of ordaining Francis Asbury as an elder and then consecrating him as a "general superintendent." With this task, John included a set of documents which would form the theological and policy basis of an independent church. As these persons and documents left England and headed for the United States of America, the history of Methodism would be forever changed.

THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) officially formed in 1784 at the Christmas Conference, held at Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland. Here, those gathered elected Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke as their "general superintendents" (what we now call "bishops"). The doctrines and disciplines that formed the MEC are still part of our United Methodist tradition today, and we encourage you to explore these foundational texts included in this module.

Methodism spread rather quickly throughout the growing United States of America because of its circuit system. Preachers on horseback rode hundreds of miles every month spreading the Methodist message to those who were eager to hear it. These preachers, at least in Asbury's day, were usually unmarried, uneducated, and had no home or money to their own names. Perhaps because of this lack of communal ties, these preachers were well-suited to a life

constantly on the road, bringing the message of God's love of and to all persons as they ventured further and further into the frontier. By the 1820s, a married, localized, and settled preacher would become the norm, and circuits would begin to be smaller in size. Over time, the local parish replaced the circuit, the Sunday School replaced the class meeting, and the primary form of connection between congregations would be centered on Methodism's vastly growing publishing enterprise.

THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST

United Methodism, however, has denominational roots beyond John Wesley, Francis Asbury, and the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1767, Martin Boehm, a Mennonite preacher, shared his call story at a camp meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In the crowd was William Otterbein, a German Reformed pastor. Ottebein was so moved by Boehm's call story that he got out of his seat, embraced Boehm, and said "wir sind bruder" or "we are brethren." The movement was rather loosely formed for its first few decades, spreading predominantly among German-speaking communities, and at times, in partnership with Methodism as both Otterbein and Boehm were friendly with Francis Asbury and other early Methodist leaders. By 1800 they held their first General Conference and adopted their denominational name the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, and elected Boehm and Otterbein as bishops. It is believed that it is the first denomination to officially begin within the United States – all other denominations, including the MEC, were transplants from Europe.

Another denomination whose history is part of our rooted system is the Evangelical Association which was begun by Jacob Albright. Albright was converted around 1792,

arguably under the influence of Otterbein, and began preaching to German populations in eastern Pennsylvania shortly after. Through his preaching, classes were formed and eventually The Evangelical Association was begun by Jacob Albright. Albright was converted around 1792, arguably under the influence of Otterbein, and began preaching to German populations in eastern Pennsylvania shortly thereafter. Through his preaching, classes were formed and eventually an annual conference by 1807, all modeled on the Methodist tradition but with German as the official language. Albright died in 1808, but his legacy continued. A German translation of the Methodist Book of Discipline was produced in 1814 and the first General Conference of the newly named Evangelical Association was in 1816.

In 1946, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ joined the Evangelical Association to form the Evangelical United Brethren. In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren merged with The Methodist Church to form The United Methodist Church. Thus the word “United” in our denomination’s name does not actually describe our form of Methodism but more importantly points to the joint heritage of our UBC brothers and sisters in Christ.

MODULE 3: CONNECTION TO DENOMINATION

CREEPING INSTITUTIONALISM

As Methodism expanded across the American "frontier" (which, at this time, was Ohio, Indiana, and across the Southern states) during the 19th century, the connection slowly became an institution. Preaching houses became brick churches. Circuits decreased in size from hundreds of miles around to a few yoked parishes. Circuit riders became more settled; they began to marry and have families. The publishing agent expanded into a publishing house and soon became a thriving publishing enterprise. Methodism began to establish external, parachurch organizations, all of which were supported through its innovative apportionment system. Most of this "institutionalization" occurred after Bishop Asbury died in 1816, and it occurred under the intentional leadership of Nathan Bangs, the "radicle" figure of this section. Bangs believed that the MEC needed to align itself more with American respectability and stop being an 'outlier." In order to do this, Bangs focused on "the 3-Ps": publications, pensions, and parsonages.

NATHAN BANGS AND METHODIST PUBLISHING

Nathan Bangs was a Methodist minister and served as a presiding elder before becoming the Book Agent of the MEC in 1820. In this role, he was arguably the centering voice of the denomination. He was in charge of editing the "Methodist Magazine" and the weekly "Christian Advocate." It was through these publications that Methodists heard about the ministry and mission of Methodism. In fact, more people knew of Bangs and his version of Methodism than of the bishops who served during his time. Arguably, the Methodist publishing venture, through its Book Agent, "succeeded in creating a textually defined national Wesleyan community, putting into hands

and homes the Methodist witness in verse, in narrative, in doctrine, in discipline."

Bangs embraced his role as Book Agent and began to argue for an educated clergy. Using his role as head of the publishing house, he formalized a course of study for all ministers, including John Wesley's "Sermons and Notes," John Fletcher's 4 volume "Checks to Anti-nomianism," Joseph Benson's "Sermons on Various Occasions," and Thomas Coke's 6 volume "Commentary on the Holy Bible." Bangs would be the primary editor of the course of study and largely defined how persons prepared for the ministry.

EFFECTS ON METHODIST PREACHERS AND LAITY

As newly educated preachers traveled, they carried with them various Methodist published books, tracts, and magazines. They were allowed to keep commissions from sales, which encouraged them to sell and provided a necessary supplement to their often meager salaries. One of the main avenues through which Methodism became more universal, more connected, and more institutionalized was via the writings of its publishing houses and particularly its regional magazines. Prior to Bangs, the works sold were largely British and written solely by Wesley. Through Bangs, the publishing house became Americanized as he "expanded the serious and popular adult fare, entered the tract market, established Sunday School literature,[and] added serials for children and youth…." Under his leadership the "Christian Advocate," the newspaper of the MEC, became the authoritative voice of Methodism and the most widely distributed periodical in the world! By the 1840s, there would be 6 regional versions of the "Christian Advocate" which "covered national and world events, scientific developments, medical remedies, farming information, obituaries, and everything Wesleyan, in short, anything and everything

that would appeal to Methodists as citizens and saints and sustaining a connection-wide textual community."

As Methodist ministers began to "locate" or cease itinerating, they began to spend their ministry serving two to three congregations or "charges" instead of months on the road, circumventing their 200 mile circuits. As they spent less time on the road, they began to be able to work other jobs, get married, and have children. However, this created a new issue for the Methodism movement as it institutionalized: where do our Methodist ministers live? As circuit riders, they stayed wherever they could find semi-safe refuge: be it under a tree or in a guest room of a welcoming family. As circuits grew smaller and as minister's families grew larger, the need for permanent housing emerged. Thus, one of the signs of an institutionalized church is the building of parsonages to house the clergy and their family. Nathan Bangs was the primary person behind the building of parsonages, arguing that Methodism would be better integrated into the life of a community if the minister was located, housed, and given stability.

As the itinerancy changed and as Methodist ministers began to become more settled, with wives, families, and homes, Methodism itself changed. Previously, the movement was sustained through lay leadership. Lay persons held class and society meetings weekly while the circuit rider was absent. It was predominantly lay persons who preached in the minister's absence. When the minister was settled and assigned to a few congregations, they became more present, and thus the leadership of lay persons diminished. In fact, the function of the class meeting" diminished as well. In its place,

the minister, the minister's wife, and the Sunday School became the primary disciple-making ventures of the MEC. With this, "Methodists began building larger, main-street facilities, structures with two-rooms and eventually two-story [buildings] suitable for meeting and teaching."

PARACHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

As buildings grew and as class meetings diminished, para-church organizations emerged. Primarily in the form of missionary societies, these groups took on the missionary, action-oriented impulse of the Methodist faith. Individuals in these groups focused on disciple-making to better the world around Methodists, or focused primarily on Wesleyan ideals of social holiness. In this decline of the Methodist class meeting, the duality and conjunctive theology of personal holiness and social holiness was ripped apart. The Methodist class meeting had been a primary agent for personal holiness, the primary space where a Methodist worked on their personal relationship with God and was held accountable to this relationship by others in their class or band. Without the class meeting individuals often remained focused outward and lost the importance of a personal relationship with God in order to sustain social relationships with others. This would have drastic implications later on, as other groups emerge to re-focus Methodists on their personal relationship with God, but failed to connect and embed this with their relationships with others. In other words, as Methodists built parsonages and brick churches, they lost the very mortar of the Methodist faith – the intensely connected and codependent relationship between personal and social holiness.

PENSIONS AND APPORTIONMENTS

As the Methodist connection grew and matured, another critical development emerged—the Methodist pension system. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Methodist clergy found themselves facing financial hardships in their retirement years. No longer spending years on horseback also meant that Methodist ministers were living longer and actually making it to retirement age. Recognizing the need to provide for their ministers, the church established pension plans to offer financial security to retired clergy and their families. The pension system provided a mechanism for active clergy to contribute a portion of their income towards their retirement fund, which would then be supplemented by the church. This forward-thinking approach not only ensured that clergy could retire with dignity but also helped attract and retain qualified individuals for ministry positions. The Methodist pension system became a model for other denominations, reinforcing the church's commitment to the well-being of its clergy.

With the growth of the Methodist movement came the need for financial support to sustain its ministries. The apportionment system emerged as a solution to this challenge. This system required each local congregation to contribute a proportionate share of its income to fund broader denominational missions and initiatives. The idea behind apportionments was to ensure that wealthier congregations supported less fortunate ones, promoting economic equity within the connection. The apportionment system provided a stable source of income for the Methodist Church, enabling it to establish schools, colleges, orphanages, and hospitals, and to engage in various forms of social outreach. This innovative approach to financing the church's mission made it possible

for Methodism to flourish in both urban and rural settings, as it offered a practical way to support the broader connection while maintaining local autonomy.

During this transition period of the 19th century, Methodists went from an effectively organized movement to an institutionalized denomination with brick buildings, publishing houses, colleges and universities, seminaries, missionary organizations, and hospitals. Its membership morphed from a predominately lower class, multi-racial, frontier-facing, uneducated populace to a more urban, white, emerging middle-class, mainline denomination.

MODULE 4:

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) and The Methodist Church (MC) finally and formally recognized their historic friendship when they merged to form The United Methodist Church (UMC). However, the two denominations were not on even footing in terms of reach and influence. At the time of the merger, the Methodist Church had more than ten times the membership of the EUB, with the former maintaining 10.3 million members and the EUB having 750,000 members. But this wasn't the only way that inequity shone through.

In terms of the newly united polity, the ecclesial structure of the Methodist Church was prioritized such that its jurisdictional system and lifetime appointments of bishops were maintained instead of the EUB's limited-term appointments. In return, the MC agreed to dissolve the segregated Central Jurisdiction by the time of the merger. However, this concession did little to remediate the underlying issues related to the systemic racial discrimination that had led to the jurisdiction's creation in the first place. While it may have been dissolved formally, systemic racism was reabsorbed and re-articulated throughout the UMC structure in less overt ways.

In terms of theology, instead of having deep and vulnerable theological conversations about the denominations' conflicting “Articles of Faith,” the two denominations' prior documents were simply adopted alongside each other. In order to craft an original theological statement that bridged the gap, Rev. Dr. Albert Outler was asked to chair the Study Committee on Our Theological Task. They would spend the next four years preparing their statement, which was presented at the 1972 General Conference. In that statement, Outler affirmed a pragmatic

expression of “theological pluralism” instead of refining a coherent and consistent theology for The United Methodist Church. Not wishing to jeopardize the imminent merger, the General Conference accepted that theological differences within the newly United Methodist Church would be tolerated in order to prioritize church union. As a model through which to negotiate these differences, Outler codified the uniquely Methodist four-tied system of analysis - the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason.”

While The UMC has done great work in the world, the theological fragmentation codified in the 1968 merger has consistently emerged as both the beauty and bane of United Methodism. While the United Methodist Church aspires to house many different theologies, the daily struggle to work together across differences continues to produce conflict. This has proven to be especially true when Methodists have not been vulnerable and authentic about identifying these differences. When theology informs how we understand each other, how we recognize one another's role and authority as an equal in the Image of God, and how we seek to reach out to those who have yet to hear the Word of God, theological differences then grow in importance. Where those differences are vast, resentment can grow and factions emerge that generate political division within the denomination. Over time, this is what has happened within The United Methodist Church. Our initial resistance to having hard conversations about theological differences, not just between the EUB and MC, but also within the MC itself, has led to our contemporary struggle and potential schism.

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