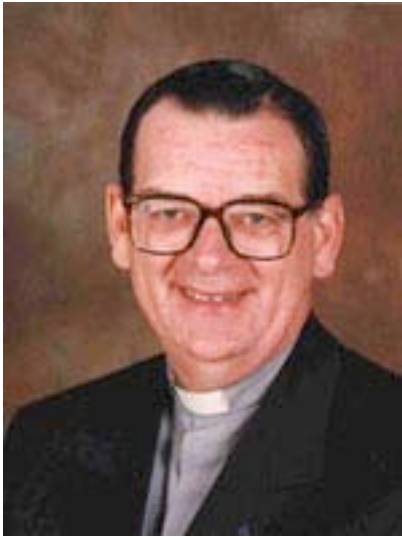


**THE SPIRIT OF THE FOUNDERY
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The spirit of the Foundery: The dynamic of the provisional



This morning, before I left London, I crossed the courtyard that divides my house from that which was once inhabited by John Wesley and climbed the stairs to the small apartment Wesley once lived in. I stood in the quiet of the early morning in the little study that still contains Wesley's books and furniture. I looked out through the front window, across the City Road, and into the cemetery where so many famous people lie buried: Wesley's beloved mother Susanna; the great hymn writer Isaac Watts; the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe; the early Romantic poet William Blake; the great Quaker George Fox; and the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan. Suitably inspired, I moved through the little bedroom (where John Wesley died on March 2, 1791) to the tiny room beyond it where Wesley said his prayers every morning. Before leaving for my Texas adventure, I wanted to kneel too. I said my prayers, asking God to give me traveling mercies and to bless this great gathering here in Houston. Then I set out for the great adventure.

Wesley's Chapel, which is nearly as old as the United States of America, was built in 1778. It is stunningly beautiful, and I love it with all my heart. But I find myself constantly battling its seductive powers. I keep reminding myself that, for 40 years before this lovely Chapel was built, Wesley was headquartered in the Foundery. It was from there that he undertook all that traveling that saw him plant his Methodist Societies across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. It was tireless and heroic work. It gave the gospel of hope to the new urban masses that were gathering in what were soon to become the great cities of industrial Britain. This was a time of social change, and Britain's agrarian past was gone forever. John Wesley's Methodist cause was the very first to harness the new energies that were being made available and the first to respond to people's pastoral needs in the new teeming cities that were developing. And his response to those needs and opportunities was fashioned while he lived in the Foundery.

The Foundery had originally been a munitions factory fashioning arms for the British army's wars against the French. A mistaken procedure in 1716 had led to some water being introduced to molds where molten metal was to be poured. This led to an

explosion, a great deal of destruction, and loss of life. John Wesley was at that time a 13-year-old schoolboy who would certainly have heard the blast from the Charter House School that he had entered two years previously.

After his failed American mission and his desperate search for spiritual enlightenment in Count Von Zinzendorf's Herrnhut in Central Europe, Wesley (a driven man) was finally relieved of his spiritual tension when his heart was strangely warmed on May 24, 1738. For a while, he made common cause with the Moravians at their little meetinghouse in Fetter Lane in the City of London. But soon there was a deep theological division that caused Wesley to seek his own accommodation. The Foundery was where he ended up. He rented it from the government. He patched it up and repaired it as best he could, and he used it in brilliantly creative ways. And yet, to the very end of the occupancy of the Foundery, buckets had to be strategically placed to catch the rainwater that persistently fell through the defective roof.

I believe that all the significant things that happened to shape the Methodist Church we all love took place during the 40 years Wesley was headquartered at the Foundery. And right at the top was his struggle to establish a theological stance that matched his own understanding of faith and mission. Let me look at the theology first. There were two major strands to this particular preoccupation.

First, there was his difference of opinion with his beloved Moravians. They practiced what was known as a doctrine of "stillness." They were "quietists." They opened themselves to the working of God's spirit and believed that, until God chose to bless them with his grace, their only appropriate stance was to be open and waiting. This didn't suit Wesley at all! He advocated the use of the "means of grace" – Bible reading, prayer, fasting, attendance at church services, the receiving of Holy Communion. To his mind, these were "converting ordinances"; they actually predisposed the believer toward a God who was constantly reaching out to them. There was no possibility in his mind that a believer should ignore them. To the minds of the Moravians, however, this constituted a doctrine of works, and they repudiated it wholeheartedly. The difference became so acute that Wesley was obliged to leave Fetter Lane and to set up his own meeting place at the Foundery. He came at the end of 1739 with a religion and spirituality that concentrated on the cooperation between the believer, actively engaged in the search for grace, and God, who was always holding out the offer of that grace. Both sides of this equation were important, and that was established by Wesley from the outset.

The second struggle, even more intensely pursued than the first, was the fight with Calvinism. Calvinists had developed a doctrine of *double predestination*. They believed that some believers were chosen by God to form part of his elect. Others, by definition, were predestined for some other fate. This was a horrid notion to John Wesley's mind. He repudiated it firmly, even though that put him at odds with his great friend George Whitfield. Indeed, it was Whitfield who had persuaded John Wesley, the perfect English gentleman, to "submit to become more "vile" and to preach to ordinary people in the open air. This was no mean step for Wesley to take. But he simply could not understand

why Whitfield should want him to undertake such an activity if there were no practical outcome possible for his preaching. What's the point of seeking the response of faith or of presenting a gospel of love, if it is only God who can confer the benefits of grace? The whole point of evangelical preaching is denied once you subscribe to the doctrine of predestination. And with that doctrine goes, of course, the understanding of grace itself. Wesley subscribed to the teaching of the Dutchman Arminius rather than the Frenchman Calvin on this point. As far as Wesley was concerned – and he put this with great force in a sermon he preached in 1739 entitled *Free Grace* – God's offer in Christ is held out to all people without distinction. For whosoever will may come.

Charles Wesley was equally adamant (if not more adamant than his brother). He wrote hymns that we still sing in England where his convictions on this point were very forcibly made. You simply have to listen for the word “all,” which is repeated like hammer blows throughout the hymn. With a little literary imagination, you can pick up all the synonyms for “all.” Just consider:

Father, whose everlasting love
Thy only Son for sinners gave,
Whose grace to all did freely move,
And sent him down the world to save:

Help us thy mercy to extol,
Immense, unfathomed, unconfined:
To praise the Lamb who died for all,
The general Saviour of mankind.

Thy undistinguishing regard
Was cast on Adam's fallen race:
For all thy hast in Christ prepared
Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace.

The world he suffered to redeem;
For all he has the atonement made;
For those that will not come to him
The ransom of his life was paid.

Arise, oh God, maintain thy cause!
The fullness of the nations call;
Lift up the standard of thy cross,
And all shall own thou died for all.

Only Charles Wesley could have those two extraordinarily lines crammed full of their suggestive goodies: “immense, unfathomed, unconfined” and “sufficient, sovereign, saving grace.” And the use of the word “all” twice in the final line is quite simply brilliant.

There was an occasion when this hymn was used to great effect at the Foundery. The followers of George Whitfield and his patron, the Countess of Huntingdon, had picketed one of the evening services there. They had given out leaflets to everyone attending worship on that occasion. The leaflets were a hearty condemnation of Wesley's stance on the universality of grace. The congregation gathered and, eventually, John Wesley appeared to lead the worship. Before he began, he held up one of the offending tracts and asked if others had been given one too. The people sheepishly drew their copies from about their persons. Wesley proceeded to tear his tract in shreds and invited the congregation to do the same. Then they threw their torn papers in the air and, under a tickertape effect, proceeded to sing Charles Wesley's hymn as a direct rebuttal of all that the tract had contained. Such non-liturgical moments made worship in those early days very exciting indeed!

So these were the two doctrinal positions fought for at the Foundery. And it is worth restating them now. In these difficult times, when mainstream Christianity is on the defensive and an increasingly secular and materialistic world has less and less patience with us, it is an appealing temptation to respond to the climate of our times by retreating into a self-indulgent pietism where the only objective is to create "a feel-good factor" that allows us to go home with our spirits high. Such pietism feeds the soul in the way I believe Chinese food feeds the body. It is wonderful at the time, but it is amazing how soon afterward you feel hungry again. Certainly it doesn't meet the great questions of the day head on. It hardly equips the believer for the ups and downs of everyday life.

We should also learn from early Methodism the importance of never narrowing down the good news we preach. It is a tough time for Christians, and there are bewildering issues for us to confront. But we are not faithful to the mind of John Wesley if we respond to the bewildering variety of opinions and feelings that we find around us by resorting to "a spirit of exclusion" to help us resolve these difficulties. Methodism was never an excluding church. It was always *an including church*. The doctrine of the universality of grace, the offer of God to every single creature he ever made, is the sure basis upon which faithful Methodists were built.

The Foundery was not just an arena for theological dispute. It was also a place where Wesley experimented with the more practical outworkings of the doctrines he preached. The outreach activities of the Foundery were simply astonishing. Just consider them now.

First of all, Wesley founded a school. He put a man named Silas Told in charge of it. Told was a former seafarer who had come originally to the Foundery to mock at this upstart preacher whom people were talking about. Told was soundly converted and, within a bewilderingly short time, was made the school principal. The school was for boys and girls, children from the poor neighborhoods around the Foundery. The pupils were provided with equipment and clothing and food – as their circumstances dictated.

Told was invited by a prisoner on death row in nearby Newgate Prison to come and minister to him. The poor man had no idea what to say. What does one say to someone

who is to die the following day? But he went. And soon other prisoners were claiming the presence of these Methodists too. Charles Wesley was among those who responded to these appeals. Indeed, they were soon accompanying the condemned men on the tumbler that took them from Newgate Prison to Tyburn where the gallows on which they were to be hung stood. Naturally, they hoped against hope that the hangman would know which man in the cart was which!

Wesley went out begging for money again and again. He would knock on door after door, asking for financial help for the work he was doing with the poor. And he established a fund that allowed him to offer primary health care to the poor and needy people of his neighborhood. This help was offered to all who needed it – not just to fellow Methodists. At first, Wesley offered his own homespun remedies (they are recorded in the still-available *Primitive Physic*), although I am not sure I would want to use many of them myself. Soon he had the voluntary support of physicians and apothecaries too.

He established a “revolving loan fund” – a fund that would help families with pressing financial needs to manage their affairs and survive their crises. It could also serve as pump-priming capital for anyone with a small business venture. In 1747 alone, 250 people drew from this fund and were helped by it. A man who was to become the country’s leading bookseller – who at the peak of his activities sold 100,000 books per annum – drew his first sum from this fund.

From the late 1740’s, there was also an almshouse that offered “accommodations to 9 widows, 1 blind woman, 2 poor children, and 2 upper servants, with a maid and a man.” Wesley insisted that the preachers who were resident at the Foundery at any given time (he included himself) should always eat with the occupants of these poor houses. They were to eat the same food and sit at the same table. Wesley was clear on this point. He wrote as follows: “We rejoice herein as a comfortable earnest of our eating bread together in our Father’s kingdom.”

All these initiatives were going on in those early years at the Foundery. Alongside them, was the constant open air preaching that often led to some tense moments where the preacher had excrement or even dead animals thrown at him. And it was in these years that crucial decisions were taken about the use of lay preachers and the incorporating of women’s ministries within the very earliest shaping of Methodist polity and practice. These were creative years indeed. The doctrine went hand in glove with the practice of charity and mutual support. If anybody ever asks me why I am a Methodist, I have no hesitation in answering him or her. It is the combination of personal religion and a commitment to social action that I find positively inebriating. Not one without the other. Both together. Personal piety energizing social commitment. The need to transform the world fueled by a spirit released for action.

This picture of life at the Foundery stands or is drawn clearly on my mind. I can never shake myself free of it as I conduct worship at the Chapel that replaced the Foundery in 1778. As I have already said, I love the Chapel. Its perfect Georgian architecture and its

honored associations fill me with awe. I pinch myself to prove that I am actually the minister of this wonderful place. And yet, I have all the time to invoke the spirit of the Foundery. I see what subsequent generations have done to the Chapel since Wesley's time. The solid oak pews, the stained glass windows, the memorial tablets to the great and the good and the Jasper pillars (!) – all speak of Methodism's "mahogany phase." We all became so respectable. Appearance came to matter more than substance; maintenance more than mission. We lost our driving force. And that is why I constantly work at evoking the sense of what life was like at the Foundery.

As so I'll end simply by outlining some of the activities and concerns that we continue to work at Wesley's Chapel as we seek, within the wonderful architectural heritage that is ours, to be inspired by a broken down building with a leaking roof and crumbling walls. Let me just run through a few of these now.

A statue of John Wesley was put up in the courtyard in front of the Chapel at the time of the 100th anniversary of his death (1891). The statue doesn't show John Wesley facing the Chapel he built. He has his back turned to this lovely building. His face is turned resolutely toward the world outside – the inner city, the city center, at our doorstep. On the statue are engraved the words we always associate with him: "The world is my parish." And the world was indeed his concern. From Wesley's Chapel, the very first initiatives were taken that would see Methodism spread to the United States of America, the Caribbean, the West Coast of Africa, France and other parts of Europe, and even to Thomas Coke's own last journey toward the Indian subcontinent. And now, the fruits of that work have come home to London. People from 36 different nationalities worship in our congregation. They speak dozens of languages. The multicultural nature of the assembly at Wesley's Chapel means that every time I stand in church facing that congregation, I see the whole world in microcosm before me. It is simply wonderful. And then, we receive thousands and thousands of visitors to this place of pilgrimage. They, too, come from all over the world: from Brazil, the United States (every corner of the United States of America), Korea, and so many other places too. And we have a ministry of hospitality toward our pilgrims. And then there is our radio ministry. John Wesley preached in the open air. These days, we use the airwaves to disseminate the truths of the gospel. I have a weekly radio show on a London station and have worked for many years with the BBC on programs that go out across our nation and, indeed, the world. So the world continues to be our parish.

Then there is education. We have a teaching ministry, a preaching ministry, a wonderful scholarship scheme that sees inner-city kids go off for a marvelous education in our Methodist High School in Cambridge. This has been made possible by the benefaction of an amazingly generous man. Other colleagues and I are also involved in the governance of local schools in the amazingly diverse borough where we live in London.

Then there are inner-city partnerships of all kinds. We work with local businesses, with locally based charities, with churches of other denominations, and with leaders of other faiths. We invoke the spirit of John Wesley's sermon, "The Catholic Spirit," and also his "Caution Against Bigotry." We will work with anyone of good will. Anyone who will

put his/her hand in ours is someone we will do business with. The well being of our community is our motivation.

We continue to struggle with self-indulgent pietism and harsh and excluding Calvinism. We offer a religion of heart and mind and soul and strength, a religion that springs from the affective, intellectual, psychological, and physical dimensions of a person's being. And we offer it to all. To all without exception – the lowest, the lost, the least, the last.

Let me end with two illustrations. I am indeed now a member of the Upper House of the British Parliament. I claim the title Lord; but hope always to remember that, in my world, there is only one Lord! But what an opportunity my life in Parliament gives me! Just yesterday, I had so many experiences, and I simply must give you a flavor of them. I spoke in a debate about world poverty and was able to address the need of governments of rich countries like ours to address the crushing poverty of so many countries in the world. And I was able to illustrate my intervention with a description of the plight of my beloved Haiti. Before the debate began, I was drawn into a small caucus with the government Minister of Education. She wants me to head up the group of people who will be speaking to a bill currently in Parliament that seeks to offer a better deal for children with behavioral problems. As a Methodist, I will be arguing that they should never be expelled from their schools, however bad their behavior. Methodism is not about excluding. It is about including! But what a brilliant thing to be involved in the shaping of my country's laws in this way. And then, after the debate on poverty, I was drawn into a discussion with two senior members of the government party, one a Jew and the other a lapsed Catholic. They urged me to instigate a debate in Parliament about the relationship of religion and culture in our contemporary world. In all these ways, I felt that I was able to bring my theological and pastoral experience into the area of public policy and the shaping of public values.

But the last word does not lie with me and my endeavors. Pastors and ministers are revered for being wise and strong people. Throughout my ministry, I have come to understand that if I am wise in any way it is because I have been given wisdom by the people I have pastored. And if I am strong in any way, it is because of the strength that they have given me. Their trust has empowered me, and the truths I seek to articulate are a response to the questions my people are struggling with. One such is Louie Colly. He was the victim of a murder attempt recently. His best friend, seeking to protect him, became the victim in his place, clubbed to death and stabbed on a sidewalk no more than 150 yards from our front door. I went to see Louie the day after the incident and had a difficult conversation with him. I don't slip easily into conversational mode with black teenagers, and we both knew that our efforts were stilted. So I prepared to leave; I thought that the mere fact of my having been with him would have to serve. Then the phone went. It was one of Louie's friends ringing to ensure that he was all right. Louie acknowledged the call, but then said something like this: "Yeah, Yeah, thanks man, Yeah. But I got my Reverend with me just now and he's the fellow I need. So you call again man later. Yeah." And he put the phone down. And I felt a thousand feet tall, for Louie needed me. He made sure that I said a prayer with him before I left, and he gave me the biggest hug anyone could ever have received.

Three or four weeks later Louie made his first outing onto the streets of London since the incident had taken place. All his pals came with him, a brilliant bunch of youth; and I congratulated them on not having retaliated. They had formed themselves into a gang and had gone out seeking vengeance against the mob who had murdered Louie's pal. But that particular Sunday morning, they were in church for a reason. Louie wanted to give his testimony. He read Psalm 121: "I lift up mine eyes to the hills whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made Heaven and Earth. He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." There wasn't a dry eye in the house. This young man's faith was so patent. And afterward, his mother Sally, fed the whole congregation. Hundreds of us. Huge amounts of food, tasty and appetizing West African dishes galore. All we needed afterward was 12 baskets to pick up what was left over.

I am sure that John Wesley would have loved the experience that saw Louis Colly come to church that Sunday morning to give his testimony. The spirit of the Foundery was honored in that service. And, I suspect, in so much else that we do at Wesley's Chapel in our day.

So while I enjoy the aesthetics of our lovely building, I find I'm more focused on holiness. While enjoying a sense of settledness in a ministry that is now nearly 10 years old, I still invoke the dynamic of the provisional. And while agreeing that John Wesley's body lies amoldering in the grave, I can't but rejoice that his soul goes marching on.

Glory, glory hallelujah!