

John Wesley and Communication

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, shared his story of faith right here in this city. He used communication very effectively to talk about love, salvation, and discipleship and to work for a better world. His theology and belief motivated his communication and spurred him on.

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Now I would say that John Wesley is my boss, but that isn't strictly true. I do however work at John Wesley's New Room, tucked away in the middle of Broadmead in Bristol (the easy way to tell people where we are is to say we are over the road from Primark)

It is the oldest Methodist building in the world, built on a plot of land bought by Wesley in 1739, now accompanied by a smart new visitor centre, café, museum, library and offices.

Some of you may already know a fair amount about the founder of Methodism but here's a brief potted history:

- Born in Lincolnshire in 1703, John Wesley's young life was full of drama. He nearly died when as a small boy, his family rectory caught fire. The rest of his family escaped but John had to be rescued through his bedroom window. His mother Susanna, a remarkable woman in her own right, exclaimed "He is a brand plucked from the burning!" and from then on believed that God had a special call on his life.
- John was educated at Charterhouse School in London (where he was bullied) but went on to study at Oxford where he planned to become a priest. During his time in Oxford, with his brother Charles, he formed 'The Holy Club', a group of intense young men committed to the spiritual life and to serving the poor. For this organised devotion they earned the nickname 'Methodists' (methodical), which Wesley didn't like, but the name stuck.
- After Oxford and ordination, both John and Charles Wesley travelled to Savannah, Georgia to work with the English settlers there. On the way there the ship they were on was caught in a violent storm and nearly sank: the Wesleys were greatly comforted by the presence of a group of Moravian Christians who sang and prayed through their fear. In America itself, their work lasted only around two years: Charles was ill and John had a love affair with Sophy Hopkey – he couldn't decide whether or not to marry her, so she left him for someone else – they married, and Wesley then refused them Communion! He came home in disgrace.
- In London, feeling low, John was invited to a religious meeting by his new Moravian friends. He wrote in his journal about what happened on May 24th 1738:
"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before

nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

This proved to be a real turning point for Wesley and what is known as his “conversion experience” gave him a new vision and purpose. A year later, in 1739, his friend George Whitefield invited him to come to Bristol. Whitefield was pioneering a strange new way of engaging with ordinary people. He did not stay in a church building, but travelled around Bristol on horseback preaching to working folk wherever they were – in the fields, working in the mines, in the brickworks. John was not at all convinced at first, but then wrote that he “submitted to become more vile” and threw himself into outdoor preaching. Thousands of people began to listen to his message and respond to his call to follow Christ.

Despite his commitment to being outside buildings, later that same year he wrote “let us build ourselves a New Room’ and bought a piece of land in the Horsefair in Bristol, where a simple preaching place was built. It was a place of preaching and prayer but also a place of education, medicine and helping the poor. From it, Wesley campaigned for prison reform, fairer wages and the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. He also established Kingswood School in the east of the city, highlighting his commitment and belief in the transforming power of education.

There are so many many stories that I could tell you about John Wesley and the New Room.

- The riot that broke out in the chapel when he preached against the slave trade
- The window that he used to stand at and listen to other preachers in the chapel to make sure they were ‘on message’ and not going on too long!
- The windows that are placed higher in the chapel so that they were less able to be reached by protesters throwing stones
- The many Anglican churches which banned John and Charles Wesley from their pulpits because they were seen to be ‘dangerous enthusiasts’!

And of course he was not a saint, but a man with feet of clay – he was not always particularly flexible, he regularly fell out with people due to theological differences and he embarked on a disastrous marriage.

What then, can we possibly learn from the life and work of John Wesley when it comes to communication? Let me offer a few reflection points.

First of all, he had to overcome his own suspicions and embrace new and different ways of communication. I live across the road from a small open space called Hanham Mount. It is a small hill really, quite unremarkable, now surrounded by houses, but it is one of the places where Wesley first began to preach outdoors. He was not the first person to share Jesus there – Baptists used to swim across the river to meet there because it was outside the city boundaries and there was less chance of opposition. As I mentioned before, Wesley was not at ALL sure about this strange way of preaching. But he embraced it and saw it as a chance to ‘reach people that others didn’t reach’. He wasn’t even considered to be the best preacher – Whitefield was considered to be much better – but his tenacity and character

won through. He was a rule maker, but he also wasn't afraid to break the rules for the sake of the Gospel.

He enthusiastically embraced not just new ways of preaching but also the 'new technology' of the 18th century. Wesley realised the power of mass communication. He worked with local printers to publish books of sermons, tracts, papers and even a book of natural remedies, designed for people who couldn't afford to visit a doctor. He and his brother Charles published one of the first hymn books in England. They were enthusiastic about "singing their faith". At one point in the 18th century, it was estimated that around half of Bristol's burgeoning printing industry was involved in producing Methodist publications. Wesley's distribution method was simple – as he sent his preachers around the country, also on horseback, they would be charged with taking a bag of books and sermons with them, which they would then sell.

This is not to say that he did not encounter opposition. He regularly had vegetables and other items thrown at him while he was preaching. Sometimes animals like cats were tormented to yowl and scream to make a noise to drown him out – once a bull was set on him. When he faced opposition, especially from a mob of men, he was courageous in his communication. He would identify the ringleader of the mob and seek to speak directly with him, often drawing him aside for a private conversation. This would often dispel the tension and often led to some serious backtracking by the ringleaders.

And his methods were important – because one of the things that inspires me most about Wesley was that as a communicator, **he was not afraid to speak truth to power.** There is a wonderful painting of him in the Mansion House in Bristol which depicts him preaching to all the aldermen and 'the great and the good' in the city. He is leaning over the pulpit, looking intently at the city leaders, raising one hand as though making a very important point.

He regularly challenged those in power to do better, to change their ways, reminding them that salvation was not just for some but for all, and that the mistreatment of others, especially those in slavery, was essentially 'villainy'.

And yet he also used communication as a means of encouragement. His last letter, written two weeks before he died, was to the MP William Wilberforce, supporting his campaign for the abolition of the slave trade and encouraging him to keep on going even though the challenges to get the laws passed on that subject were many.

So let's reflect on what made Wesley an interesting communicator and someone we could take inspiration from:

- He was not a natural storyteller, but he was someone who took what he knew and made the effort to connect with new audiences
- He used the tools of the day to get his message across (we often wonder if he would use social media if he was around now, and we always come up with an enthusiastic YES – (what would Wesley tweet?))
- He wasn't afraid to break the rules and speak truth to power
- He coped with conflict

- He was driven by a desire to share the Gospel, by compassion and by a recognition of deep need in society
- He encouraged others

Today, the New Room seeks to continue that vision by continuing to tell Wesley's story. Through our museum, through publications, through preaching, through engaging with social issues, we believe that Wesley's story can still inspire people today – and point them to a Gospel which always tells us, as Wesley did that no-one is outside the reach of God's love.

"All need to be saved. All may be saved. All may know themselves saved. All may be saved to the uttermost."

Mandy Briggs

Education Officer, John Wesley's New Room

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