

The Heritage of Wesley Methodist Church

John Wesley was an ordained Anglican clergyman. His first exposure to preaching out of doors was listening to his friend George Whitefield addressing a crowd of thousands at Kingswood in Bristol, England. In Wesley's diary he recalls "I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (til very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church". Later he recorded "At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people".

The growth and development of Methodism was based on the eventual rejection of Wesley and his supporters by the established church, forcing him to use unsanctified premises and outdoor locations. The limited number of early Methodists meant also that they had to travel considerable distances to deliver their message and to spread the Word.

Thus it was that Methodist evangelists became known as itinerant preachers, stopping where they were received and preaching in homes, halls and outside in the fields. Methodism in Bermuda has a similar history.

George Whitefield had been a member of John Wesley's "Holy Club" at Oxford University, and had become on fire with the message of spiritual rebirth. He had left England as a missionary to the British North American colonies, preaching and raising funds for social causes since 1735. One four-year trip from 1744 to 1748 saw him arrive in Bermuda from Georgia in March of 1748.

Although a licensed Anglican, he had not brought his accreditation documents with him. He was therefore denied any further opportunity to use parish churches after initially preaching in those of Pembroke and Devonshire. Encouraged to preach in James Paul's Meeting House, later to become Christ Church in Warwick and private homes, Whitefield preached in the open air to gatherings of hundreds, primarily blacks and was well received. He did not bring the anti-slavery message that many had anticipated from his preaching in Georgia, but rather preached to "black and white sinners who needed to be brought to Christ". He travelled up and down the Islands, preaching wherever the opportunity presented itself.

His stay in Bermuda did not result in a branch of the Methodist Society being formed in the Island.

Captain Travise was master the of a ship that traded frequently between Baltimore and Bermuda in the latter part of the eighteenth century. When in port in Bermuda, Captain Travise acted as an itinerant Methodist preacher, moving from house to house wherever he would be received to preach the Word. Again it appeared that no permanent presence of the Methodist movement was established in the Island as a result of his labours.

By 1798 Enoch Matson, Minister of the now Christ Presbyterian Church in Warwick, and whose background was as a Methodist elder from Virginia, had collaborated with another sea captain, Captain Mackie, to urge Dr. Thomas Coke, the Bishop of the Methodists in North American, to send a missionary to Bermuda.

As a result, 51 years after Whitefield last preached in the Island, a 30-year veteran Irish Methodist named John Stephenson arrived in Bermuda on 10 May 1799.

Stephenson had been ordained by the Methodist Society, not the Anglican Church. His letter of appointment to do missionary work was issued by the Methodist Conference in Ireland.

All of these factors were strikes against him. The Bermuda Governor, upholding the established position of the Anglican Church, had received no request to allow Stephenson to preach in Bermuda and accordingly Stephenson was banned from the parish churches. Bermudians generally concerned that he had arrived from a country rebellious to the English throne, and sensitised to gatherings of black slaves following a recent revolution in Santo Domingo, regarded Stephenson with great suspicion, especially when he announced his intention to preach to Negroes. This could only be effectively done outside the established churches because of the licence issue, and usually after the slaves' work was done – that was at night. Stephenson alarmed the residents of Smith's Parish to such an extent by preaching to one night-time candlelight gathering of blacks that legislation was passed within three months (on 24 May 1800) "to prohibit persons not regularly invested in Holy Orders or inducted into any of the Churches in these Islands, from delivering sermons or orations either to public or private audiences."

Stephenson was soon arrested for a violation of this Act, fined £50 and imprisoned for 6 months, continuing to preach through the bars of his cell. He eventually was released and left Bermuda on April 11, 1802, one month short of 3 years after his arrival, leaving no permanent evidence of his presence.

An Englishman, Joshua Marsden, arrived in Bermuda as Methodist missionary from Halifax, Nova Scotia, on May 3, 1808, six years later. He carried a letter of introduction to the Governor, his ministerial documents and his letters of order from the

Methodist Society. The British Government had declared the 1800 Act (under which Stephenson had been imprisoned) to conflict with the British Toleration Act of 1689, and thus in 1803 it had been allowed to lapse. There was therefore no legal obstacle to Marsden beginning his work as a missionary. He hired rooms in St. George's owned by a free black, Mr. Daniel Mallory, and the first Sunday service he conducted in Bermuda took place in those rented rooms. In addition to the meetings held in St. George's, he preached up and down the Island in typical Methodist style, mostly in homes, but did establish five regular preaching places outside St. George's at Brackish Pond, Hamilton Parish, the town of Hamilton, Spanish Point and Somerset. The first Methodist Society was formed in St. George's, which was responsible for opening the first school for blacks in Bermuda in November 1809: a Sunday school, using the Bible as the textbook. Marsden moved to Devonshire, then to Pitts Bay close to Hamilton, and in 1810 dedicated the first Methodist Chapel built in Bermuda. Zion Chapel, as it was known, was the first permanent home for Methodists in Bermuda and was constructed of stone and timber at the corner of Church and Queen Streets in Hamilton. Marsden records "I petitioned the Corporation of Hamilton, and after some demurs, they granted me a lot sufficiently large for a Chapel and mission house. The lot for the Chapel they gave me; the other we were to buy. At this time a vessel loaded for the West Indies with lumber put into Hamilton in distress, and sold her cargo, from which I purchased most of the timber. I made the best outline in my power of a plan. My next business was to employ workmen.....etc. etc."

Mrs. Marsden found the climate of Bermuda not to her liking, as she had been in ill health and the heat of summer was too much for her. She left Bermuda in November

1811 and husband Joshua followed in April 1812. His replacement, James Dunbar, had arrived in February 1812 and began to organise, consolidate and stabilise. He obtained proper title for Zion Chapel and built the mission house beside it. A Board of Stewards was formed.

From its itinerant maritime and land-based beginnings, Methodism had at last a permanent establishment.

A second chapel was constructed under Dunbar and opened in August 1814. Made of wood and built in St. George's it became a target for those who disagreed with social changes being brought about by Methodism. The Bermuda Gazette of 11 November 1815 advertised a reward for the apprehension of those "persons throwing stones and breaking windows in the chapel".

Methodism flourished in Bermuda despite this, under the care of the British Wesleyan Missionary Society, and later in 1855 Bermuda was transferred to be a part of the Canadian Methodist Conference. Places of Methodist worship were constructed and dedicated throughout the Islands during the nineteenth century as the number of Methodists increased: following the chapel in St. George's came Bailey's Bay in 1816, Cobb's Hill in 1827, Tucker's Town in 1835, Collector's Hill in 1841, St. David's in 1858, Somerset in 1861, Port Royal 1869, Ireland Island 1891 and North Pembroke in 1900.

The congregation of Zion Chapel had outgrown its premises and early in 1868 the trustees sent to London for plans for a new and larger building. By February 29th 1868, Elijah Hook, Architect of 16 Craven Street, Charing Cross, London had completed plans and specifications for a new church. The trustees of Zion had started a subscription list

and had negotiated with the Corporation for the purchase of two lots of land north of the Sessions House on Church Street.

By 1876 the trustees of Zion Chapel decided that they had enough money to begin the construction of the new church. They held a public meeting on August 1st 1876 under the Chairmanship of Rev. Robert Wasson, and we have a small extract from the minutes of that meeting:

“Moved by Bro. John Harnett and seconded by Bro. W. T. James that it is desirable to build a new Church”..... carried.

“Moved by Bro. Andrew Turnbull and seconded by Bro. S. White that the new church be built on the lots north of the Court House”.....carried.

Mrs. W. T. James reported on behalf of the Bazaar Committee that a meeting of ladies had been held for the purpose of raising funds in aid of the new church.

Bro. John Harnett stated that the promises that had been given thus far represented something like £500.

The Chairman dismissed the meeting with the Benediction.”

Days later, on 16th August 1876, the trustees met on the site of the new church to lay-out the ground in preparation for the laying of the foundations, and on 19th September 1876 the foundation stone of the church was laid by Rev. A. W. Nicholson, former President of the Methodist Conference who eventually became responsible for the “mission” in Bermuda. Bros. James and Harnett were authorised to see Bro. Henry Hallett for the purpose of engaging him to construct the foundation walls. He eventually completed all the mason work.

The church was constructed of Bermuda stone hewn from the Pitts Bay quarries of Mr. Samuel A. Masters.

Mr. J. H. Jackson was engaged to do the carpentry, while the Royal Engineers slated the roof, constructed of blue slate. However while promises of financial help had been made, by April 1877 only £148 of the expected £500 had materialized and a Finance Committee and a Building Committee were both set up by the trustees. Progress was slowed considerably by the lack of funds, and as a result the architect returned to England in May 1878. Two years later the trustees took a loan for £1200 in order to complete the building to a stage sufficient for worship and another architect, Mr. Edward Elliott of Halifax, Nova Scotia was recruited to see the project through to completion. It is his final design that we see.

When the church was dedicated for worship on 29 December 1881, the building had cost £3509, and while usable, was unfinished. The main hall referred to as "the basement" had no floor, and, according to the Royal Gazette, "The South front has an unfinished appearance".

The church was eventually finished in 1896, and in that year Zion Chapel was sold back to the Corporation and the debt on Wesley Church was retired.

It took five years from the laying of the foundation stone to the dedication of the building, and twenty years from the foundation stone to the completion of the church. Thus it is that in September 2001 we are celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the laying of the Wesley Church's foundation stone, and in December we will remember that the building has been in use as a place of divine worship for 120 years.

We also need to remember that a building is not the key to the spreading of the Good News. Methodism was spread by people with conviction, taking the message to homes, halls, highways and the open fields. Today's sophisticated electronic communications networks are important alternative ways of reaching large groups of people.

The history of Methodism in Bermuda shows how it developed from being an itinerant-based, outdoor way of spreading the Good News and achieving social change to being an established denomination with a major physical presence. Having reached the position it holds in the community, Wesley Church has the opportunity to review its past, build on it, and prepare for the future.

PJH
2001
