

Church Growth Principles and Wesleyan Tradition

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10 months after his Aldersgate experience, John Wesley had another conversion. This one, on 31 March 1739, was as momentous as the one that he had experienced the previous May. He was on that day, in Bristol England, and there he met up with George Whitefield.

He saw in person how Whitefield preached out in the fields--something that seemed very strange to him. Wesley wrote in his journal that day, on March 31, 1739, that up until that point in life he felt strongly that if one were to preach about the saving of souls or sin, it had to be done inside of a church. And yet he saw in Whitefield a whole new way of proclaiming the word. On the next day, which was a Sunday, Wesley preached on the Sermon of the Mount in a church. He realized that the Lord's Sermon on the Mount was certainly an illustration of field preaching much like what he had seen from Mr. Whitefield the day before. And so that day, in the evening, Wesley himself began to do something that he had never done before. He began to preach outside of the walls of the church. He began to do field preaching. From then on, he preached on the highways, in front of the mines as workers would go to work early in the morning, in front of the factories, and he preached in the fields. Wesley discovered the joy and perhaps the necessity of taking the word of God to the people rather than waiting for the people to come to the church.

As we take a look at the principles of church health and church growth in these days, in this 21st century, we would be wise to remember the shift that John Wesley made back in March of 1739. Wesley gives us an example of being missional in our proclamation of the Word.

Mike Slaughter, in his book, *Change the World*, says that the attraction model—of enticing people into the church in order for them to hear the Word of God—is not enough in our day. Rather than focusing our time and energy on getting people into the church, Slaughter says that we should “start finding opportunities to move the people who are already there out into God’s service. Religion that honors God is religion with feet.” (Slaughter, p. 24). Maybe we should have, as Doug Rea pointed out this morning, a religion with bare feet.

Cranford UMC put feet to their Sunday morning worship service just over a month ago. I have been serving as the coach for Cranford in their Natural Church Development process over the past few years. Over the summer, a group of leaders from the church read Mike Slaughter’s book and decided to do something different this September.

Many of our churches hold what is called a “Rally Day” on the first Sunday after Labor Day weekend. It marks the return to a normal church schedule after the summer. Sunday School classes reconvene.

But at Cranford, this year’s “Rally Day” took on a new look that no one had ever seen before. On September 12th, congregants gathered in front of the church—outside—for a short worship service and then went out into the community to **do** the mission of God. They followed Wesley’s example. Normally, two worship services are held on Sundays. For this rally day, they decided on a different format. All would meet for a short service at 9 a.m. and then go off for ‘hands-on’ activities either inside the church building or out into the community. Chairs were set out in front of their sanctuary at the corner of Walnut and Lincoln Avenue. A short service of songs, Scripture and message was held. Pastor Ed Hann exhorted the people to go out into the community that day to participate in a number of planned activities. After his message,

there was a service of anointing. They decided to take the people out of the church and into the community. They were blessed with a gloriously beautiful day.

Members signed up ahead of time for a number of service opportunities. For instance, some went inside the building to put together care packages for soldiers serving overseas. Others wrote letters to soldiers while children drew pictures for them. Another group made sandwiches in the kitchen that would be later given to Shelters in nearby Newark. Still another group made packages of fresh produce that would be given to the community food bank.

Other service opportunities included a church clean up crew with specific chores drawn up by the Board of Trustees. A group of women made prayer shawls to give to people who recently lost loved ones. Others went out into the community itself to local parks where they welcomed people giving out bottles of water. One team went into public parks and cleaned up debris. Another went on visits to shut-ins. Another team visited the Cranford Manor Nursing Home to share songs, offer prayers and provide companionship.

Several women went to a park that had a basketball court. They brought orange slices and bottled water and gave them to the young people who were playing. They engaged in some conversation and simply offered the water and oranges to them, not expecting anything in response. One of the women of the church inadvertently left her pocketbook at the playground and she went on to another park. Realizing later that she had left her pocketbook she retraced her steps back to the basketball court. As she and another woman from the church approached the court, they could hear the players say, "Here come those nice church ladies." The youth themselves pointed out where she had left her purse.

All the people engaged in these activities returned to church at 11 o'clock where they had a time of sharing and a conclusion to their worship for the day. People talked about what it felt like to be out into the community actually doing God's service on behalf of others. There was an effusive spirit of joy at being able to make a difference in people's lives.

Such was the experience of going out into the world on this Rally Day. Cranford United Methodist Church is already planning similar events for the winter and springtime where they can get out of the four walls of the church and engage the community in ways that make a difference in peoples lives. You could say that Cranford UMC stopped worrying about getting people into its church and found opportunities to serve.

Cranford United Methodist experienced a "Rally Day" unlike any they had ever experienced. When I think of it, what they did was a variation on the tune that John Wesley played in March of 1739. They set aside the "attraction" model and played the melody of a "missional" model for doing church. Now they want to figure out other ways to play this tune in the winter time and the spring time so that they can continue to practice a mission-oriented ministry. I think they are on to something.

I also think that this kind of willingness to do things differently is a logical outgrowth of engaging Natural Church Development. We begin to ask new questions about the way we go about things.

Natural Church Development is all about helping us to become healthier expressions of the church in the world in which God has placed us. I don't know about you, but when I am part of a community of faith that is making an impact in my community or that is making a difference in someone's life, **I feel better**. I am healthier.

The community of people called Methodist have always been associated with the missional model of doing church. It is in our DNA to visit the sick, the imprisoned, to feed the hungry, to provide shelter to the homeless, to build hospitals for the sick, universities for our youth. It is in our DNA to proclaim that the good news of Jesus Christ is accessible to all people—that the grace of God is freely offered to everyone—not just a privileged or preselected few. That is why we celebrate an open table for communion. That is why we consider Baptism—for infants or for adults—as a means of grace lovingly given by God. We invite people to receive the gift that God gives and we even sing about it, we especially sing about it, loudly and boldly and joyously. That is who we have been and that is who we need to remember to be as we live out what it means to be the church in the 21st century. It has always been in our DNA to advocate for justice. Think of John Wesley’s last letter, written just weeks before his death, urging William Wilberforce to carry on the fight to eliminate slavery from the British Empire.

One of the many gifts that Natural Church Development gives us is to look behind methods and programs and to find the principles that are behind them. Christian Schwarz has taught us that it is not enough to imitate the practices of others churches. We need to understand the principles behind whatever it is that they do successfully and carry those principles into our own context. And so, in any discussion of principles of church health and growth, we need to ask: What would it look like today for us to shift our paradigm of what it means to be the church? What would be today’s equivalent that ‘field preaching’ was for John Wesley? Where would we need to go? What would it would like?

As I bring these remarks to a close, allow me to highlight these three quality characteristics in light of our Wesleyan and Methodist heritage.

Of the more than 120 churches from the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference to take the Natural Church Development survey, half of them discover that ‘passionate spirituality’ is their minimum factor. That is, they discover that more than anything else they need to address the issues that making their spirituality somehow lacking in passion.

Passionate spirituality has to do with the vibrancy of our faith and our walk with Christ. Remember we are measuring a church’s health so we are talking about the vibrancy of faith collectively—as a community of faith. We are talking about our collective walk with Christ. I like what the online Coachnet resource says about *passionate spirituality*. One of the points Coachnet makes is that Passionate Spirituality is not something that you possess. It refers more to the path you are on. It refers to a natural desire to want to grow closer to Christ. It refers to biblical passages where Jesus tried to help his followers shift from being a “me first” kind of a person to being servants.

I have come to understand ‘passionate spirituality’ as a matter of the heart. I must ask myself, “is my heart in this.” One of Rob Bell’s *Nooma* videos highlighted how our hearts must be in it when he gave the analogy of giving flowers to one’s wife. If I show up to the house and ring the doorbell, making my wife open the front door and if she sees in my hand a bouquet of flowers that I extend to her, she smiles. But if, in the act of handing her the flowers I were to say, “yeah, they were on sale at Shop-Rite,” does she even want those flowers any more? The flowers, as Rob Bell points out, underscores that they are symbols of what my wife really wants—she wants my heart. God doesn’t want us merely to show up to church. God wants our hearts and the way we show up, the way we worship, the way we engage in ministry and mission tells God whether or not our hearts are in it, whether or not we are *passionate* about our

spirituality.

How incredibly paradoxical that we Methodists should be talking about our spirituality in this way. If Methodists were known for anything, they were known to be the people of the religion of the heart. The movement began when John Wesley heard a reading of Luther's Preface to the book of Romans and felt his "heart strangely warmed." We were known as the people of the warmed heart. It was the heartfelt experience of knowing that God loves us; that God wants a relationship with us that gave birth to Methodism. The quest to address issues of passionate spirituality is to rediscover our first love as people called Methodist. It is to rediscover the religion of warmed heart.

The good news is that churches *are* rediscovering warm hearted religion. As they turn to a missional model of being and doing, they are rediscovering the joy of belonging to a community of Christ. Newcomers who do find their way to these churches feel an almost immediate connection with others. There are plenty of volunteers for various tasks in the church. There is a sense, in these passionately spiritual churches that church is not just about Sunday, but that God works in us and through us every day and the excitement of being part of the church is contagious. Children are eager to come to worship in these churches. The people in these churches share their faith with sensitivity and authenticity and they are not ashamed to share who they are as Christians because their enthusiasm is such that they cannot help but do it.

Another quality characteristic that will be discussed in one of our break out groups this afternoon is 'inspiring worship.'

The critical aspect of worship that makes it inspiring is whether the conditions are such that lives can be transformed. That can happen in a myriad of ways: through music, through

liturgy, through preaching, by means of the hospitality that one receives.

The Rev. Michael A King, Pastor of the Spring Mount Mennonite Church helped me understand what we mean by ‘inspiring worship’ in a sermon he preached on the subject.¹ King said that "inspiring" should be understood as that which comes from the Spirit of God.

“Whenever the Holy Spirit is truly at work (and his presence is not merely presumed), He will have a concrete effect upon the way a worship service is conducted including the entire atmosphere of a gathering. People attending truly "inspired" worship services typically indicate that "going to church is fun."²

Christian Schwarz, the author of *Natural Church Development* has always emphasized that style of worship is not what makes it inspiring. We are not talking about the outward forms of worship. We are talking about the inward spirit of it. Whether it is a traditional service or a more contemporary styled service, what we are looking for is whether or not the worshipers are pro-actively open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in and through the act of worship.

The Wesleys gave much attention to worship. John preached enthusiastically and Charles Wesley inspired people of his day and continues to inspire today through the thousands of hymns he wrote. In fact, the theology of the Methodist movement came more through the hymns of Charles than any other means. Charles used good melodies to transport the lyrics into the hearts of worshipers.

We might ask how we can take the principles behind what John and Charles Wesley

¹Michael A. King, “Inspiring Worship,” preached at the Spring Mount Mennonite Church, July 12, 1998.

²Ibid.

included in worship and make them relevant for our 21st century.

The third quality characteristic that we will focus on this afternoon is “Holistic Small Groups.” A ‘holistic’ small group goes beyond the meaning of getting together for bible study or prayer or singing in the choir. What makes any of those groups more holistic is when there is genuine caring that occurs naturally in the group. A small group is an opportunity for us to experience Christian community on an intimate scale.

For those of us who claim the heritage of John Wesley, a discussion of ‘holistic small groups’ hearkens back to the origins of the Methodist movement when people formed class meetings. They met together to hold each other accountable for their walk with Christ. They cared deeply for each other.

Church movements and even political movements have been imitating the Wesleyan Class Meeting ever since they were introduced to people in England in the 18th century. These class meetings exemplify what we mean by ‘holistic small groups.’ They didn’t just meet to study the Bible or to pray. They met to care for one another. They formed Christian community in the context of a smaller grouping of people.

I began my ministry as a Counselor for one of our Methodist camps, now called Aldersgate Center. Our goal as counselors was to try to help the campers experience authentic Christian community during the week they stayed. We played together, swam together, hiked together, sang together—everything we did had as its goal the formation of authentic Christian community. Sometimes it came together nicely, sometimes it was hard to achieve. Small groups in a church have the opportunity to be miniature models of what we hope will be authentic Christian community for the entire church.

When we talk about church health we are wise to remember our Wesleyan heritage and how class meetings helped infuse holistic small groups into the DNA of the people called Methodist. We are wise to remember how music that moves the heart and preaching that inspires people to respond with their lives lays the foundation for inspiring worship. We are wise to remember that the people called Methodist were always a people whose hearts were strangely warmed by the power of the Holy Spirit so that everything they did and everything they did was done with passion, with their hearts in it. These principles transcend time and cultures. May God bless you in your quest for church health.