

Small Group Discussion Guide for the book, *John Wesley and the Origins of Methodist Missions* by Philip Wingeier-Rayo (Abingdon Press, 2025)

Overview: It is broadly understood that John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement that spread around the world in the eighteenth century. He is known for being a missionary in Georgia, his “heart-warming” experience at Aldersgate, field preaching, and the famous quote “the world is my parish.” It is also assumed that Wesley was a proponent of world missions and helped spread the Methodist movement around the world. This study examines this assumption and, after a closer look, reveals John Wesley’s reluctance to send missionaries overseas. The book uncovers several examples of Wesley’s rejection of world missions and occasions when he thwarted plans. Wesley undermined the efforts of Thomas Coke, the Father of Methodist Missions, who wrote an appeal to send missionaries abroad.

John Wesley and the Origins of Methodist Missions reveals that it was unheralded lay people, ordinary immigrants, merchants, planters, soldiers, enslaved persons, and former slaves, who carried Methodism with them to such far-off places as Antigua, Maryland, New York, Gibraltar, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone. Persons such as Nathaniel Gilbert, Sophia Campbell, Mary Alley, and Bessie started a multiracial Methodist Society in Antigua—the first outside of Europe. These lay people, and several others, were not officially commissioned or authorized by Wesley to plant Methodist societies. Rather they traveled on their own, motivated by the love of God and neighbor, to share their faith with others. It was only after these Methodist societies were established, and after multiple appeals, that John Wesley and the British Conference conceded to send missionaries to assist. John Wesley was not anti-mission. He was very missional in his context in England and his message of God’s grace was at the heart of the Methodist movement. Yet he was cautious and reluctant to send missionaries overseas. This book offers some reasons for his hesitancy and highlights the stories, challenges, and successes of these pioneer men and women who spread Methodism around the world.

About the author: Philip Wingeier-Rayo was born in Singapore to missionary parents and grew up in Evanston, Illinois. He currently serves as the Executive Director of Education at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church. His academic work is informed by his upbringing in Singapore and fifteen years of missionary experience where he served in Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico, and the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas near the border with Mexico. He is married to wife, Diana, and they have three adult children.

Study Guide

Chapter One: John Wesley's Exposure to the Wider World

Opening prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”* Matthew 28:18–20

This chapter sets the context in which John Wesley was born and grew up. It describes the world into which he was socialized as a young man in the British Empire at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

1. John Wesley believed that the Methodist movement's mission was “to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” Like the Great Commission, his vision was expansive and missional. How does this calling to “make disciples of all nations” challenge us today as a church?
2. Wesley's encounters with people of many cultures—Native Americans, Africans, Germans, and Jews—deepened his understanding of the gospel's global reach. How has encountering people from different backgrounds shaped your own faith and witness? What might it mean for us to be Christ's “witnesses to the ends of the earth” in today's interconnected world?
3. Wesley's parents nurtured in him a love for missions through reading and prayer. Their example reminds us that faith formation begins at home and in the community of believers. How can families and church communities today nurture a sense of global concern and compassion for others? How can we share this vision with youth and children? In what ways can we reflect God's light to people who feel forgotten or marginalized?
4. The Wesley brothers cared deeply about both spiritual renewal and social justice, speaking against slavery and poverty. Mission for Wesley meant caring for both spiritual and physical needs alike. What does it mean for mission to include both spiritual and social transformation? How can our church bring “good news” not only through words but also through actions that encourage others?

5. Wesley dreamed of a faith community that crossed boundaries of race, language, and nation. This vision mirrors the unity and diversity of God's eternal kingdom. How can we practice that diversity and unity within our own congregation or community?

Closing Prayer

Chapter Two: The Missionary Context of the Eighteenth Century

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: "*And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'*" Mark 16:15

This chapter explores the missionary models and styles that were being employed around the world leading up to the eighteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church was the first to do mission work around the world, but shortly after the Lutherans, Anabaptists, Calvinists and the Church of England were engaged in world missions at the time John Wesley was born and raised.

1. How did the close connection between colonial expansion and Christian mission—especially in the Roman Catholic model—shape both the successes and failures of missionary work in the eighteenth century? What tensions did this create for Protestants who did mission work like John Wesley?
2. Martin Luther and other Reformers emphasized *Sola Scriptura* and personal faith yet showed limited interest in foreign missions. How did their theological priorities both hinder and later enable new forms of mission activity among Protestants?
3. The Anabaptists viewed even Christian Europe as a mission field. How did their emphasis on adult baptism, voluntary faith, and separation of church and state challenge dominant mission models of their time—and anticipate later evangelical and Methodist approaches?
4. Calvinist and Puritan understandings of divine election and providence had deep missiological implications. How did Puritan beliefs influence the pilgrims who arrived in America and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny?

5. The Bible version in Acts 1:8 states: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” What does this passage teach us about our mission today at Hughes UMC?

Closing Prayer

Chapter Three: Moravian Contributions to Methodist Missions

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* Luke 4: 18-19

This chapter reviews Moravian missionary work and its contributions to Methodism. This small denomination headquartered in Germany forged the modern missionary era and sent many missionaries around the world. John Wesley had a close relationship with the Moravians and incorporated many of their beliefs and practices into the early Methodist movement.

1. How did the Moravians’ emphasis on heartfelt religion and assurance of salvation influence Wesley’s own conversion experience at Aldersgate? What practices can we adopt today to cultivate a more heartfelt faith?
2. Wesley’s experience in Georgia initially may have felt like a failure. How did Wesley’s experience in Georgia prepare him for renewal and future ministry? How might our own disappointments serve as spiritual formation?
3. What did Wesley learn from the Moravians? What did he adopt from Moravians for the early Methodist movement?
4. What was unique about the Moravian approach to mission compared to the other models Wesley knew? What can their Spirit-led, lay-driven approach teach our church about mission today?

5. How did small accountability groups like bands, classes and societies contribute to the early Methodist movement? In what ways can our own congregation learn from the Moravians? Does your church have small groups? Would they be helpful in your ministry context?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 4: John Wesley and World Missions

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Acts 1:8

This chapter explores the complex relationship between John Wesley and world missions. While it may appear at first glance that the founder of Methodism was a proponent of world missions, upon closer examination Wesley was actually hesitant to send missionaries abroad. The chapter names some of the possible causes of his reluctance and why he finally agreed to send missionaries.

1. John Wesley traveled thousands of miles to share the gospel and dreamed of “spreading scriptural holiness over the land.” What does it mean for us today, in our own community, to “spread scriptural holiness”? What might that look like in our church or neighborhood?
2. John Wesley’s parents, Samuel and Susanna, passed down a strong love for missions and learning about God’s world. How has your faith been shaped by your family, church, or mentors? How can we help the next generation develop a heart for God’s mission?
3. Wesley’s time in Georgia introduced him to people from many cultures—Native Americans, Africans, Jews, and Germans—which changed how he saw the world. When have you met someone from a different background who helped you see God or faith in a new way? What did you learn from that encounter?

4. Wesley faced many challenges and even failures in Georgia, yet those experiences deepened his understanding of God's grace. Name some of his challenges. How has God used a difficult experience in your life to teach you something about faith or calling?
5. Even after returning to England, Wesley kept learning about the wider world through reading and correspondence. In what ways can our church today stay connected to what God is doing around the world? How can we support world missions United Methodists?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 5: John Wesley's Encounters with Non-Christians

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *"Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'"* Acts 10:34–35

This chapter reviews John Wesley's relationship to non-Christians, for instance Native Americans, Jews, Muslims and Deists. The author theorizes that Wesley evolves in his faith and understanding of non-Christian traditions and becomes less judgmental and more open-minded through his personal experiences and relationships.

1. John Wesley's view of people of other faiths moved from seeing them as "natural men," to a hopeful belief that God's grace is at work in all people. Wesley also changed his view of Native Americans from "noble savages" to a belief that they were not so innocent or simple in their beliefs. How do you see God shaping your own understanding of people of other faiths over time? What has helped you grow in that understanding?
2. Wesley's personal relationship with Dr. Nunez, a Jewish physician in Georgia, challenged his assumptions and deepened his faith. When have you had a relationship or encounter that changed how you saw people of another background or religion?

3. Wesley taught that God's grace is at work in all people—even those who have never heard the gospel. What does this belief say about the character of God? How might this shape the way Methodists approach mission and interfaith relationships today?
4. Wesley lamented that Christians often give a poor witness, becoming an obstacle for others to believe. In what ways might Christians today be “stumbling blocks” to people of other faiths? What can we do, personally and as a church, to offer a more faithful witness?
5. In his later years, Wesley preached with “eschatological hope”—that the Holy Spirit is working quietly across the world, drawing all people to God. How does this hopeful vision encourage you in your own faith? What does it mean for the church's mission in a world of many religions?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 6: A Wesleyan Missiology: Original Sin, Prevenient Grace, and Eschatology

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: “...repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Luke 24: 47

This chapter examines how John Wesley's theology of mission was attractive for world missions. The chapter explores three main doctrines that are key for evangelism: original sin, prevenient grace and eschatology. The Methodist doctrine of prevenient grace is particularly key because it teaches that God's love is already working in everyone's heart before they even know it.

1. How does this change the way we look at our "unchurched" neighbors in our community? If God is already at work in them, how does that change our approach to sharing our faith?
2. What is the “imago Dei”? How does Wesley's theology of understanding that every person is created in the likeness and image of God impact our church's outreach ministry?

3. What is personal and social holiness? How can we live into both person and social holiness in our personal lives and in our community outreach?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 7: Unheralded Witnesses: Antigua, North America and Gibraltar

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Acts 1:8

We often think of missions as something started by famous preachers, missionaries or evangelists, but this chapter shares the stories of "unheralded" laypeople who were soldiers, immigrants, and enslaved person. The unassuming laity who started Methodist societies were not doing this ministry for fame or fortune. They were just trying to be faithful wherever they lived and worked.

1. Name on the lay persons in this chapter with whom you most identify? What did this person do that speaks to you and your life experience?
2. Who was your favorite Methodist lay person shared in this chapter?
3. Looking at the history of our own church or community, who are some of the "unheralded" people who kept our faith alive?
4. Do you the history of your local church? How was it started?
5. How can we, as laypeople today, take more initiative in our local mission work?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 8: Thomas Coke: The Father of Methodist Missions

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“An argument arose among them concerning which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side ⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest.” Luke 9: 46-48*

While John Wesley was sometimes reluctant to send missionaries overseas, Thomas Coke was a tireless fundraiser and recruiter who was much more intentional about sending missionaries abroad.

1. Why was John Wesley hesitant to send missionaries abroad? What were some of the reasons why he was reluctant?
2. Why did John Wesley eventually relent and allow missionaries to go to America?
3. What role did Thomas Coke play in sending Methodist missionaries abroad? How did he promote global missions?
4. What was the difference between Coke’s first and second missionary plans? What did the second one succeed?
5. What can we learn from Coke’s passion for mission? Can we glean any ideas for our church ministry context?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 9: Women in Mission: Methodism in Asia

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *“But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his*

disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples.' Matthew 28: 5-8

This chapter highlights the vital role women played in starting schools, hospitals, and orphanages, particularly in Asia.

1. Who were "Bible women"?
2. Why weren't single women allowed to be missionaries? How could women participate in international missionary work?
3. Name one of the pioneer woman missionaries in the chapter that you most identify with. What about their ministry speaks to your personal experience.
4. How and why was the Women's Foreign Missionary Society? What was the mission statement goal of the WFMS?
5. In our local church context, what are the specific needs of women, children and families that our church is uniquely equipped to meet?

Closing Prayer

Chapters 10: Methodist Missions in Africa

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?^[e] And how are they to believe^[f] in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵ And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"* Romans 10: 14-15

This chapter discusses early Methodist mission work in Africa, as well as the story of the start of the Colony of Sierra Leone.

1. What was the African Affair?
2. Who were Moses Wilkinson and Boston King? How did they travel from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone?
3. What was Thomas Coke's role in supporting Methodist missionary work in Africa?
4. How were David Bosch's translation principle, indigenizing principle, and interreligious dialogue effective for spreading the Gospel in Africa?
5. What is Ubuntu? How does it relate to Wesleyan theology in Africa?

Closing Prayer

Chapter 11: Methodist Missions in Latin America and Ecumenism

Opening Prayer

Key Bible Verse: *"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"* Luke 2: 10-14

This chapter examines John Wesley's relationship to the Spanish influence in Georgia and Florida, as well as his attempt to learn the Spanish language. It also describes Methodism's gradual growth and missionary work in Latin America. The chapter describes the various phases of Protestantism in Latin America and ecumenical relations.

1. Where were John Wesley's early impression of the Spanish?
2. How did John Wesley come to study Spanish?

3. What were the origins of Methodist work in Latin America and the Caribbean?
4. Why was it so challenging to establish Protestant mission work in Latin America? What were some of the obstacles?
5. How does the United States' proximity to Spanish-speaking countries in the Western hemisphere impact U.S. culture?
6. How should we as Methodist relate to our neighbors to the south?

Final Reflections

After reading this book, we see that Methodism didn't just grow through a centralized missionary plan or through a mission board, but rather through the faithfulness of many different people in many different places.

1. What is the one thing you've learned from this book that changes how you view your role as a Christian today?
 2. If "the world is our parish," what is one small, practical step our church can take this month to serve our "parish" right here in our community?
- Would you like me to focus more on any specific missionary figure or theological concept mentioned in these chapters for your study group?

Closing Prayer