

Wesley's Small Group Organization¹

by Joel Comiskey

Not only did Wesley believe that small groups were God's instrument to implement change, but God also gave him the understanding concerning how to do it.

Classes

The fundamental unit of Wesley's small group organization was the class system. They were the base, the foundation, and the cornerstone of the Methodist organization. Without them, the Wesleyans would not have experienced their amazing success. Really, the word class is not the best word to describe this small group. We normally think of a class room with black board and eraser. That image doesn't even come close, as we shall see.

Early History

There seems to be at least two reasons for the origin of the class meetings:

The classes were originally organized as a plan for raising money. Each member was required to give one penny each week.

In 1742, four years after starting the bands, there was the realization that too many Christians were falling away (Doyle 1989:112). Something had to be done, so the classes were started-- out of necessity

Leadership

A large part of the success in the class system had to do with the leadership. Here are a few key principles that Wesley established:

The leaders were appointed . In the bands, the leaders were elected by the group, but not in the classes (Pallil 1991:110)

The majority of these lay leaders were women (Brown 1992:39).

Selection of leadership was based on moral and spiritual character, as well as common sense (Brown 1992:39).

In the classes, there was also plural leadership, that is, more than one leader. Spiritual oversight was shared (Doyle 1989:113).

Groups were not started unless there was leadership to manage the group. Hunter notes, "He

¹This article is extracted with permission from Joel Comiskey, *History of the Cell Movement: A Ph.D. Tutorial Presented to Dr. Paul Pierson*; the entire tutorial (including bibliographical resources for notes) is available at <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/tutorials/cellHistory-1.html>.

[Wesley] saw no virtue in starting new ministry or group life that dies soon after birth, or is stunted in growth” (Hunter 1989:119).

The class leaders were in fact pastors. Snyder says, “This was the normal system, based in part on Wesley’s conviction that spiritual oversight had to be intimate and personal and that plural leadership was the norm in a congregation (Snyder 1980:58).

The class leadership met weekly regularly with the upper society leadership. In other words, they practiced the Jethro model. Watson says, “They met weekly with the preacher appointed by Wesley as minister of their society, both to report on their members, and themselves to receive advice and instruction” (1986:38).

The leader was usually male in mixed groups or in all male groups. A woman would lead the female groups (Pallil:1991:108).

Activity In Group

The class meeting was not a highly organized event. Although they would only meet for one hour, the main event was ‘reporting on your soul’ (Snyder 1980:55). The class had a similar progression:

Open with song or prayer

Leader shared religious experience

Leader made inquiries about others

Each person gave testimony to his or her spiritual condition

Each member contributed to support of ministry

Close in prayer

A song or prayer

David Lowes Watson, who wrote the book, *Accountable Discipleship*, which is a modern day manual on the class system, writes, “It was a weekly gathering, a sub-division of the society, at which members were required to give an account to one another of their discipleship, and thereby to sustain each other in their witness” (1986:13).

Probably the best way to describe the emphasis is in the word ‘transparency’. The meeting was build upon the sharing of personal experience of the past week (Pallil 1991:107).

Participation

Along with the idea of transparency in the class meeting was the goal of participation. Everyone was encouraged to be a part of the class, to share his or her experiences. Mallison writes,

Wesley not only reached the masses, he provided a structure in the local organization of Methodism which gave an utterly new set of opportunities for men and women to know

themselves valued and useful. The class meeting was the basis of every Methodist society; every member was expected to belong, to speak freely and plainly about every subject for their own temptations to plans for establishing a new cottage meeting or visiting the distressed. Under this scheme working class men and women, who had no vote, no say in fixing wages and nothing to do with making decisions in society, found that they were not expected to take responsible leadership. They learned self confidence and the ability to organize and to speak public (1989:127,28)

From early on, Wesley learned the importance of allowing each member of the body to use his or her gift. In the early days, various members from the classes began to preach the gospel. Wesley hesitated. Was this from God? Yet, he heard the Word of the Lord from his mother Susannah. She told him that by not letting them preach that he would be quenching the Holy Spirit. He yielded, and lay preachers became an outstanding feature of Methodism” (Latourette1975:1027)..

Discipline

How did the class meeting contribute to the overall objectives of the Methodist society? It seems that the class meetings kept the society under tight control, or discipline. Snyder says it this way, “The class meetings were not designed merely as Christian growth groups, however, or primarily as cells for koinonia, although in fact they did serve that function. Their primary purpose was discipline” (1980:38). As we’ll see, the band was more of the confessional unit, while the class was to bring order and control into the movement.

Wesley did not hesitate to expel someone from the society, if they were not following the Lord wholeheartedly. Wesley knew the condition of each member through the class accountability structures. Cell reports were regularly received. (Snyder 1980:57)

Required Attendance

Before a person could even be part of the Methodist society, he or she had to join a class. To put it another way, in Methodism, you weren’t allowed to join the large group (society) before joining the small group (class) (Doyle 1989:113). How did the rest of the society know if one had been faithful in attending the classes and following the Lord? The members were issued tickets which had to be renewed every three months (Pallil 1991:105). Hunter notes,

...every Methodist belonged to a class. Indeed, the class was Methodism’s main point of entry for ‘awakened’ seekers who had not yet experienced justification and new life but who desired such experience. People, believes, and seekers, first joined a class that met weekly (1996:85).

Division & Size

Classes were divided according to where members lived (Pallil 1991:110); Bands were divided according to age and status. It seems that the class averaged from six to twelve people

Evangelism

One of the most exciting aspects of the class system was the evangelistic emphasis. Brown says,

The groups also had a clear evangelistic function as people were converted during the meetings and lapsed members were enabled to renew their commitment to Christ. Wesley knew that the beginnings of faith in a person's life could be incubated into saving faith more effectively in a warm Christian environment than it could in the chill of the world" (1992:39).

Hunter echoes that fact, "To Wesley, evangelism...took place primarily in the class meetings and in people's hearts in the hours following the class meetings (Hunter 1987:58).

In other words, Wesley did not have the crusade mentality that is sometimes more interested in decision than discipleship. Wesley wanted to 'see' if he person was really saved according to the fruit, rather than the decision itself. The beauty of the class meeting was that it was an evangelistic tool and at the same time a discipling instrument. Doyle states, "The classes served as an evangelistic tool (most conversions occurred in this context) and as a discipling agent" (Doyle 1989:113).

Multiplication

According to George Hunter, Wesley was a church growth strategist. Hunter comments, "He was driven to multiplying 'classes' for these served best as recruiting groups, as ports of entry for new people, and for involving awakened people with the gospel and power" (Hunter 1987:56). Wesley would preach and then invite the people to join a class. His first objective in his preaching was the starting of classes (Hunter 1987:57).

Wesley's preaching always had two primary objectives:

To awaken people

To enroll awakened people in a class, that is a lay led redemptive cell (Hunter 1987:58).

At the same time, Wesley would not start a class, if he couldn't manage it. He would only start as many classes as could be effectively managed and he would not preach where he could not enroll people into classes (Hunter 1987:56).

It seems that most classes started from scratch. In other words, there wasn't a lot of actual cell multiplication. Dean says, "Cell division was much less common than might have been expected. The formation of new classes was by far the most frequent approach to growth" (Dean 1985:266).

Bands

Bands represented another level in Methodist organization.

Various Characteristics

The bands were started in 1738--before the classes. They followed the Moravian pattern by forming the overall society into bands in order to aid the spiritual nourishment of each member (Latourette 1975: 1026).

At one time, there were several types of bands, but eventually they were dissolved and the classes took their place (Pallil 1991:105).

The Penitent Bands were provided for people who had fallen away from serious discipleship and were now seeking restoration (Hunter 1996:85)

About six people were in each band

The bands were organized according to sex, age, and marital status (Brown 1992:38).

Only about 20% of Methodists ever joined a band (Dolyle 1989L112).

Unlike the classes, attendance in the bands was not required.

Requirements

There were several requirement for the band:

Let nothing spoken in this Society be spoken again, no, not even to the members of it

Every member agrees to submit to the minister in all indifferent things

The members should have all things in common (material goods)

Activity In The Band

There were four questions that were asked in the bands:

What known sins have you committed since the last meeting?

What temptations have you met with?

How were you delivered?

What have you thought, said, or done which may or may not be sin?

Purpose

Doyle sums up the purpose of the bands quite well,

...these were small groups of around six members, men and women in separate groups, who met weekly for confession of sin and pastoral care. Only people assured of salvation could join and only those who desired a deeper, more intimate fellowship (1989:112)

Societies

The society was the congregational level, as we know it. People who remained committed in their pursuit of a new life, and attended the class meeting regularly were automatically made part of the society after three months (Hunter 1996: 85)

Hunter makes an important comparison,

A Methodist Society was composed of the sum total of classes attached to it. As one's membership in early Christianity was primarily to a house church and somewhat secondarily to the whole Church within the city, so in early Methodism one's primary membership was in the class and somewhat secondarily in the society (1996:85)

Wesley's Role

Wesley acted very much like a Moses in the supervision of his system. He kept on stepping back and delegating to higher levels of leadership. Latourette says,

For a time Wesley himself visited each of the societies to supervise them and enforce discipline. As they increased this became impossible and he assembled his preachers in 'annual conferences...' "As societies and preachers further grew in numbers, he established 'circuits' with traveling preachers and soon, as an assistant to himself, a superintendent' was placed in charge of each circuit. He himself kept an autocratic control of the whole (1027).

The Growth of the Movement

We are told that eventually, hundreds of thousands of people participated in the small group system (Brown 1992:39). Snyder reports, "By the time Methodism had reached 10,000 members at the end of the century, the movement must have had over 10,000 class and band leaders with perhaps an equal or larger total of other leaders (Snyder 1980:63). This system of bands and classes continued for over a century (Snyder 1980:62). Here are some exciting facts:

1738 movement began

1768 forty circuits with 27,341 members

1778 sixty circuits with 40,089 members

1788 99 circuits with 66,375 members

1798 149 circuits with 101, 712 members

Critique of Small Groups in Methodism

I only have the highest praise for Wesley and his small group system. In my opinion Wesley is the forerunner of the modern cell movement. Like no one before him, he combined discipleship with evangelism. One can 'read' Wesley from the stand point of his evangelistic emphasis (Hunter) or his discipleship focus (Snyder). Actually, both are true.

Wesley used the Jethro system before it was popularized. He was a master at delegation and organization, and the fruit of his system still stands as example for us today.