TOWARDS A WESLEYAN EVANGELISM

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Wesley's highly organized, methodical, and theologically comprehensive mission within the 18th century Church of England was intensely evangelistic. While other denominational traditions often trace their roots to disagreements regarding confessional or theological points, the Wesleyan tradition emerged from an evangelistic and missional imperative. The mission statement of The United Methodist Church adopted at the 1996 General Conference continues to demonstrate the characteristically Wesleyan evangelistic imperative: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Although Wesley referred to Methodist itinerant preachers as "evangelists," he did not use contemporary language in his discourse regarding evangelism. By discerning characteristics of Wesley's evangelistic imperative, this essay will work towards naming and appropriating significant themes of a Wesleyan evangelism in an effort to form church praxis through historical and theological reflection.

The following discussion begins with a description of characteristics from a Wesleyan practice of evangelism followed by reflections on two embodiments of those characteristics within the Wesleyan heritage. These reflections will provide an overview of evangelistic ministries while also demonstrating the necessary complexity of Wesleyan characteristics rather than their distillation as isolated practices. Finally, the essay will examine the role of Methodist Episcopal Deaconesses organized and led by Lucy Rider Meyer in the late 19th century as a case study representative of Wesleyan characteristics of evangelism.


3James Logan, "Offering Christ: Wesleyan Evangelism Today," in Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism, ed. Randy Maddox (Nashville; Kingswood Books, 1998), 118. According to Logan, "Wesley never employed the term 'evangelism' itself. This noun was simply not in currency in his day, though he did speak of his itinerant preachers as "evangelists," denoting their sole responsibility to preach."
Defining the concept of evangelism can be an elusive task. Essential to any definition of evangelism are scriptural roots and examples regarding content and methodology of sharing the good news. For the purpose of this discussion, the language of evangelism will refer to those ministry activities that proclaim the message of salvation and facilitate an individual's introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ and initiation into the kingdom of God. Such ministry activities usually imply but are not limited to the office of kerygma since the process of Christian initiation and belief may also necessitate ministries of koinonia and diakonia.

Characteristics of a Wesleyan paradigm for evangelism include a scripturally based, theologically comprehensive, balanced and compassionate approach to ministry addressing the needs of the whole person. Each of the characteristics may be found in the Wesleyan tradition beginning with John Wesley's ministry as well as in evangelistic activities found later in the Wesleyan tradition. These distinctive characteristics include: 1) the centrality of scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ, 2) comprehensive theological reflection, 3) dialectic tension maintaining a holistic balance between distinct emphases of Christian doctrines, and 4) the consistent challenging of socially prescribed boundaries such as class, race, and gender.

The most significant characteristic of Christian evangelism in most traditions is the presence of scriptural foundations. Evangelistic ministries find their impetus in scripture and culminate in the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to John Wesley in his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," the words faith and salvation include the substance of the entire Bible. Christian scripture provides examples of the proclamation of God's message of salvation, the good news of Jesus Christ. The Wesleyan tradition shares with other Christian traditions the functions of scripture as a source of Christian doctrine, as well as a norm for Christian behavior. Scripture provides not only the message of salvation, its urgency and relevance, but also shapes the methodology of its communication in both verbal proclamation and practice. John Wesley saw scripture as a cohesive unit inspired by God, especially with regard to understanding salvation. Although it is tempting to consider scripture as John Wesley's primary authority distinct from other sources, the concept of wholeness permeates Wesley's understanding of reli-

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7Jones, 53.
gious authority. For Wesley, scripture is a primary, though not exclusive, source of Christian authority.

John Wesley is not considered a systematic theologian. His theological reflection was strongly influenced by his own and others' spiritual and life experience. Wesley's scholarly approach to ministry included continual study and theological discourse in conversation with fellow scholars, clergy, and believers around issues of faith and doctrine. The intense theological integration pursued by John Wesley provides a useful model for a contemporary consideration of evangelism. According to William Abraham, a steady decline in theological aptitude has occurred in the last two centuries among those interested in evangelistic ministries. John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards are both considered great scholars and practitioners of evangelistic theology and ministry of their generations. However, the beginnings of a major shift may be detected during the 19th century toward a growing apathy for the classical traditions and lack of interest in theological discourse by those related to evangelistic thought and practice. For evangelistic ministries to be effective and maintain integrity with regard to scripture they must emerge from the integration of not only contextual relevance but also theological reflection. Evidence of shifting perspectives toward returning to a thoughtful approach to doctrine and practice related to evangelism continues to grow. A revisiting of John Wesley's writings and ministry of the people called Methodists can contribute to this positive shift.

A strong theme throughout the Wesleyan heritage fostered by John Wesley's ministry is the continuous effort to maintain dialectic tension between seemingly opposing yet complementary emphases of Christian doctrine. Wesley seemed to labor for the maintenance of such dialectics in order to strengthen the theology and ministry of the people called Methodists. He skillfully articulated the significance of doctrines such as justification and sanctification, faith as event and process, as well as the importance of works of piety and mercy, representing individual spiritual discipline and social responsibility. The importance of the general dialectic of grace and mission within his theology and ministry demonstrates the wholeness that characterized the early Wesleyan heritage. Wesley encouraged those who professed the Christian faith to witness to that faith through...
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its demonstration in both their words and actions. Albert Outler argued that Wesley’s understanding of faith was personal and inward, as well as public and social. This is evident in Wesley’s General Rules written for the societies. According to Outler, authentic evangelism within the church is possible through the recovery of a characteristically Wesleyan evangelism that demonstrates such dialectics included in Wesley’s ministry.

Wesley’s practical theology and ministry challenged contemporary societal and ecclesiastical boundaries in direct and more subtle ways for the purpose of spreading scriptural holiness. For example, Wesley’s reluctant following of George Whitefield’s encouragement to engage in field preaching challenged ecclesiastical boundaries of acceptable behavior. When Wesley engaged in field preaching, instead of preaching to the relatively privileged of the Anglican parish churches, he addressed groups of the poor and marginalized often numbering in the thousands. Wesley also cultivated avenues for women’s participation in activities that blurred acceptable boundaries for their work in the church as exhorters as well as class leaders, stewards, and even as advisors to Wesley himself. Inherent in Wesley’s challenging of socially and ecclesiastically prescribed boundaries was his emphasis upon living out one’s Christianity as an inward as well as an outward experience. The implications of Wesley’s social holiness resulted in his interest and sensitivity to human rights including violence, poverty, and slavery.

II

Each of the significant characteristics within Wesleyan evangelism is manifest in various embodiments of evangelistic ministries within particular

14Outler, 33. According to Outler, “It is the Wesleyan spirit that we must pray and hope for once again: that strange miracle that turned a censorious zealot into a herald of grace, that fusion of mind and heart and muscle in joyful service, that move from passion to compassion, that linkage of revival and reform, that stress on local initiative within a connexional system—that actual willingness to live in and to be led by the Spirit of God in faith and hope and love.”
historical contexts of the Wesleyan tradition. The characteristics discussed above work together within the contextual circumstances and evangelistic methodology in specific ways to create a characteristically Wesleyan paradigm for evangelism. The first example of evangelistic ministry organized and encouraged by John Wesley by and for the people called Methodists addresses preaching, a practice often associated with evangelistic ministry. The second example of Wesleyan evangelism complemented the preaching of the movement through Christian nurture and discipleship within religious societies, bands, and class meetings. Preaching and religious societies within the early Methodist movement should not be considered as exclusive examples of evangelism, but rather as interdependent contributions to a Wesleyan evangelism. The discussion of preaching and societies within the Wesleyan tradition enlightens both the complexity and wholeness of John Wesley's theology and ministry that encourages the living out of scriptural norms with implications for the proclamation and socially prophetic embodiments of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

George Whitefield and John Wesley contributed to the evangelical revival of the 18th century, also described as "The Great Awakening" in North America, which began in Wales and spread throughout the British Isles. Possibly the most definitive characteristic of this transatlantic movement was preaching in general, and more specifically preaching in the open air. As mentioned earlier, Whitefield helped to prompt Wesley's practice of field preaching in 1739. The preaching of the British evangelical revival resulted in thousands of conversions and new members for the Methodists, as well as the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Independents. Through the method of open air preaching, Wesley and other Methodist preachers were able to address a wider audience including the poor and working class. The venues of these events were most often fields, marketplaces, and even public hangings. Preaching in the open air contributed to Wesley's greater accessibility to, and effectiveness among, the lower classes of 18th century Britain who, because of rigid class boundaries, would otherwise not have attended worship or other events within ecclesiastic confines.

In order to accommodate the discipleship and nurture of those newly awakened to faith by such preaching, Methodists in particular benefited from a highly organized and structured system of bands and class meetings discussed in more detail in the next section. Although Whitefield and Wesley's preaching, particularly in the open air, is well documented for its evangelistic impact upon British as well as North American Christianity, their preaching did not stand alone as a method of effective evangelism. Significant to the understanding of preaching as one aspect of Wesleyan

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8For further discussion see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 20f.
9Bebbington, 21.
evangelistic ministry was the prominent practice of preaching in areas where religious societies such as bands and class meetings existed. Although in 1745 the Methodist Conference under Wesley's leadership decided to experiment with preaching wherever opportunities arose, regardless of the presence of societies to nurture those responding to the preaching, that decision was overturned in 1748. As a result of the pastoral care provided by the Methodist small groups organized by John Wesley, a significant number of those moved by the revival's preaching were nurtured and maintained in the faith.

Wesley's sermons, with their heavy reliance upon scripture, represent his own work towards understanding the nature of salvation and his desire to share his spiritual and theological journey. One example of Wesley's theological reflection in the context of an evangelistic purpose is the sermon, "Scripture Way of Salvation," published in 1765, which outlines a detailed process toward faith in Jesus Christ based in scripture. This sermon, which represents Wesley's mature theology and soteriology, demonstrates both his critical theological reflection and his dialectic emphasis upon both grace and good works. In addition to scripture, Wesley also appealed to a variety of other sources for his sermons including classical literature, Christian antiquity, medieval Christianity, the English Reformation, the Anglican and Puritan traditions, in addition to his own contemporary culture. Wesley's favorite New Testament preaching text was Mark 1:15, in which Jesus spoke the following words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (NRSV). Mark 1:15 is a strongly evangelistic text, often described as a summary of Jesus' commission to the disciples in Mark.

Wesley also worked to expand the roles of laity, including women, within the church by cultivating avenues for their participation in a variety of ministries including preaching. Relatively early in the Methodist movement, Wesley developed an acceptance of lay preaching in contrast to the intolerance of his brother Charles. In 1740, there is evidence to support the assistance of two laymen whose duties most likely included

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21 Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 115. Runyon argues that despite George Whitefield's larger crowds and greater public attention, Wesley and his religious societies most likely preserved more fruits from the 18th century revival preaching as a result of their Christian nurture and discipleship.
preaching. Lay preaching, in addition to open air preaching, was not considered an acceptable practice within the Church of England. Germane to John Wesley's challenging existing boundaries was his cautious encouragement of women to fulfill relatively nontraditional roles including leading mixed meetings, exhorting, and at times preaching. Among those women groomed and respected by Wesley for their ministries as leaders, educators, practitioners in evangelistic work and on specific occasions as preachers, were Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, and Sarah Mallett.

The definitive organization of the early Wesleyan tradition was small group meetings for the purpose of Christian nurture that provided a foundation from which to engage in missional and evangelistic ministries. These meetings, organized by Charles and John Wesley beginning in Oxford during the late 1720s and early 1730s, received inspiration from Anglican religious societies, composed predominantly of laity, specifically those associated with the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Characteristic of the Anglican religious societies was a focus on nurture in an effort to reform society one individual at a time instead of pursuing a larger program to execute widespread social reform. Based upon this model of Anglican religious societies, Wesley encouraged the meeting of classes and bands, the former deriving most often from a geographic area, the latter organized around homogenous qualities such as gender, age, and/or marital status.

In the context of bands and classes, individuals encouraged one another in their Christian journeys through public and private prayer, study of scripture, confession, and fasting, as well as praise and worship. These activities, also known categorically as works of piety, were means of grace through which individuals might come to know faith in Jesus Christ. Participation in works of piety also provided avenues through which faith might be nurtured and encouraged to grow. In addition to works of piety, members of religious societies, classes, and bands also engaged in works of mercy, addressing the

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25 Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 115. Although John Wesley protested to his mother Susanna with regard to Thomas Maxfield's lay preaching in 1739, evoking Susanna's well-known response outlining the need to examine the fruits of his preaching, etc., Heitzenrater points out that Susanna's response is not directly supportive of lay preaching.

26 Heitzenrater, 236, 247-248, 298. Crosby and Bosanquet Fletcher established an orphanage and mission at Leytonstone with Sarah Ryan in addition to numbering among Methodist women preachers. Sarah Mallett is most likely the only woman to have received a dispensation to preach from a circuit minister. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher is also well known for her comprehensive defense of women's preaching addressed to John Wesley, which argued for the legitimacy of the "extraordinary call." See also Paul Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1991).

27 Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 21. The Society for the Promoting of Christian Knowledge has its roots in the religious societies founded by Anthony Horneck in the 1670s, the English counterparts to the collegia pietatis organized by Jacob Spener.

28 Heitzenrater, 22.
bodies as well as souls of persons. Whereas works of piety emphasized individual spiritual growth, works of mercy included feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned, sick and afflicted. From the time of John and Charles Wesley's participation in the Holy Club at Oxford during the earliest years of the Wesleyan movement, works of mercy represented a significant commitment of time and of spiritual discipline. An early influence upon John Wesley and the Wesleyan group to participate in works of mercy, William Morgan led the group regularly to visit the prisons, teach orphaned children, and care for the poor and aged. John Wesley encouraged the people called Methodists throughout his lifetime to participate in works of piety and mercy, since such activities demonstrated evidence of the presence of sanctifying grace working in their lives on the journey towards Christian perfection.

A number of examples of Wesley's missions include his visitation of the imprisoned, outreach to orphaned children, the establishment of schools for the poor, as well as aid to the poor and alienated through the construction of a number of facilities for provision of various services. Through the financial support of the "united religious societies" in Bristol with assistance from John Wesley, the New Room, the oldest Methodist building in the world, was built and utilized beginning in 1739. The "united societies" in Bristol in particular, often based at the New Room, carried out a systematic mission to the poor through numerous ministries such as distribution of food and medical services. The New Room, as well as the Foundery in London, served as a center not only for fellowship, worship, and the proclamation of the scriptures, but also the demonstration of scriptural doctrines and practices. An economic support service was also managed through the Foundery and funded by Wesley and the people called Methodists to assist promising entrepreneurs lacking in financial resources. Wesley's missional imperative included work with impoverished and orphaned children addressing the scarcity of educational opportunities. For example, among his efforts in the Bristol area was the establishment of a school for the children of laborers in Kingswood. Similar to Wesley's establishments in Bristol and London, the preaching house built in Newcastle in 1742 was called the Orphan-house and contained several services including an orphanage, a school, and an infirmary. Alongside the interdependent nature of preaching and small groups within the Wesleyan tradition, Wesley's mission and outreach to the poor, infirm, and disadvantaged should not be separated from either the proclamation of the scriptural message of salvation or the small groups of band and class meetings. The works of mercy administered by religious

29 Heitzenrater, 41.
30 Heitzenrater, 170. The New Room was later registered under the Act of Toleration in 1748.
31 Heitzenrater, 103, 105.
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societies and generally represented in the mission activities of the Methodist movement were intimately related and deeply rooted in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the faith journeys of individual Christians living in community.

III

The following discussion will consider characteristics of a Wesleyan evangelism (described in the initial section as scripture, theological reflection, dialectic, and challenging boundaries), within the incarnational ministry of the late 19th century Methodist Episcopal deaconesses founded by Lucy Rider Meyer. The study of the ministry of Methodist Episcopal deaconesses is important to the discourses of both the complexity of feminist ideologies and interpretations of history, as well as the theology and practice of evangelism in contemporary Methodism.

The evangelistic ministry of the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses was grounded and shaped by scripture. In addition to Phoebe’s diaconate ministry described in the Pauline letter to the Romans, the ministry of Jesus Christ to the outcast served as justification and model for the deaconesses’ ministry. Traits considered appropriate to late 19th century, middle class femininity such as compassion, sympathy, sacrifice, and healing coincided with Christ-like characteristics described in the gospels. These Christ-like traits of the deaconess thereby gave her ministry its incarnational character. By maintaining roles deemed appropriate by their era the deaconesses’ training and ministry opened additional opportunities for women in the church.

Bishop James Mills Thoburn’s contributions to the deaconess movement through his articles and addresses shaped the evangelistic ministry of both Methodist Episcopal and British Wesleyan Methodist deaconesses. Thoburn made the point that among Jesus’ disciples were women who remained faithful to him beyond the hour of his crucifixion, and that women in his day may continue to participate in Jesus’ ministry by caring for those in need. According to Thoburn, the deaconesses’ ministry was based on a Johannine methodology of sent messengers to a broken world, paraphrasing John 17:13–18 and the commission to the disciples in John 20:19–23. Lucy Rider Meyer also carefully exegeted scriptural foundations for the ministry of deaconesses in her text acknowledging the significant number of women

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mentioned in the gospels and Pauline epistles. The consecration service for the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses demonstrates the incarnational character of the deaconesses’ ministry. Included in the “Address to the Candidates,” the following instructions were offered to deaconess candidates. “Like our blessed Master you will henceforth go about doing good, ministering as he did to the wants of a suffering, sorrowing, and sin-laden world.” The duties of the deaconesses explicated more fully the prescription of “doing good.”

The duties of the deaconess are to minister to the poor, visit the sick, pray with the dying, care for the orphan, seek the wandering, comfort of sorrowing, save the sinning, and, relinquishing wholly all other pursuits, devote themselves in a general way to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to her abilities.

The Methodist Episcopal deaconesses offered their incarnational ministry to the outcasts of late 19th century church and society while themselves working within constraints of that same context as indicated by the language, “to such forms of Christian labor as may be suited to her abilities.” Although not a significant statement for late 19th century liberal feminism, the deaconesses’ incarnational ministry utilized aspects of biblical feminism, evident in the feminine traits and roles assumed by the deaconesses. The role of deaconess expanded women’s opportunities within the ecclesiastical structure while proclaiming the message of salvation to the urban poor and oppressed. At the same time, however, the scriptural based incarnational ministry of the deaconesses appeased denominational and societal expectations of appropriate roles for women.

Lucy Rider Meyer demonstrated the importance of theological reflection and education for evangelistic ministry in the Chicago Training School’s curriculum and the credentials of its faculty. The curriculum provided by the Chicago Training School, under Lucy Rider Meyer’s leadership as principal, offered a generous variety of courses to late 19th century women seeking vocations in lay mission work. Although the course of study for deaconess training in the Methodist Episcopal Church was not prepared by the bishops until the 1896 General Conference, training was an essential element of the work from the beginning. “While other missionaries may be trained—and a sentiment in favor of training for all is rapidly growing ... deaconesses must be trained.” The course of study developed in 1896 for use throughout the Methodist deaconess movement was significantly informed by the curriculum established at the Chicago Training School, the

first training school for Methodist deaconesses in North America.

A schedule published in an early issue of *The Message*, the periodical edited by Lucy Rider Meyer, demonstrates the emphasis of the curriculum, which included biblical, theological, and historical studies five times a week. The critical study of the Bible implemented at the Chicago Training School ranked high in priority for Lucy Rider Meyer, serving as a major impetus behind her motivation to found the institution. An equal emphasis on studies in medicine and the practice of evangelistic visitation was also included in the schedule with each occurring twice a week. The dual focus of critical reflection upon scripture, theological, and historical studies with practice in both medicine and evangelistic visitation within the curriculum indicates the thorough preparation provided for the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses for the ministry with the urban poor.

From the initial establishment of the Chicago Training School its faculty consisted of two basic categories of instructors based on practical circumstances. The first category of instructors, and the minority group throughout the school’s existence, were the “ Resident Teachers.” These instructors lived on the school’s premises and offered their courses receiving only room and board in the form of remuneration. These instructors, including Lucy Rider Meyer, usually consisted of women, with the exception of Josiah Shelley Meyer, Lucy Rider Meyer’s husband. The second group of instructors were described as “Outside Helpers.” The majority of the visiting faculty members were men with the exception of a few women at any one time. These non-resident instructors would volunteer their services in the way of offering courses at the Chicago Training School in addition to their professional careers as ministers, professors, nurses and physicians in the Chicago area.

39 The Message: (July 1887), 2; Mary Agnes Dougherty, “The Meyers: Josiah Shelley and Lucy Jane Rider,” *Methodist History* 37 (October 1998): 54. Mr. Meyer and Mr. Blackstone remained distinctly disagreeable to Lucy Rider Meyer’s interest in biblical criticism especially in the later years of her life and ministry, evidence of the pervasive tension between male narrators and the expanding Deaconess movement. Josiah Shelley Meyer expressed his opinion that “Modernism is the old Unitarian whims of doubt. The Fundamentalis[sic] are the fighting cocks in the pulpit, they are both wrong,” in Josiah Shelley Meyer, *Modern Miracles* (unpublished), 41. Although Josiah Shelley Meyer was most likely more conservative than Lucy Rider Meyer with regard to biblical criticism his position was not exclusively fundamentalist.


41 Rosemary Skinner Keller, “Belle Harris Bennett and Lucy Rider Meyer,” in *Something More than Human* Charles E. Cole, ed. (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1986), 15. According to Keller, since most of the faculty was part-time and female, they received no salary.

42 Lucy Rider Meyer, “Course of Study,” *The Message* (January 1887): 4. In the listing of courses and faculty this submission named Lucy Rider Meyer’s husband as Rev. J. S. Meyer, the instructor of Bible and Church History.
Many of the outside helpers on the faculty were professors in theological institutions or religious departments such as Garrett Biblical Institute and the University of Chicago.\(^4\) In addition to the contributions of respected scholars from the local academic community to the Chicago Training School, Lucy Rider Meyer assumed a prominent role in the formation of the deaconesses. Lucy Rider Meyer in particular offered her academic and pedagogical expertise in the fields of biblical studies (in which she was proficient in the original languages), methods of mission work, and medicine (she earned a M.D. from Woman’s College, Chicago in 1904).\(^4\)

Meyer was well educated, having worked her way through Oberlin, and a respected and skillful teacher. Therefore, it is not unexpected to see Meyer contributing to the curriculum as an instructor in addition to her post as principal. As a result of Meyer’s background and leadership the Chicago Training School emphasized the importance of theological reflection for the evangelistic ministry of Methodist Episcopal deaconesses in the late 19\(^{th}\) century.

The Methodist Episcopal deaconesses led by Lucy Rider Meyer embodied a Wesleyan dialectic in their incarnational and holistic evangelism by holding in tension evangelistic and social justice ministries. Mary Agnes Dougherty, a prominent historian of the Methodist deaconess movement, argues for the inclusion of Methodist Episcopal Deaconess work as an agent of the Social Gospel based on: "its advocacy of social service over evangelization."\(^4\) However, Dougherty does not explore significantly the nature of the partnership of social and evangelistic ministries in the Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement.\(^4\) Meyer’s balanced emphasis of evangelism with social service embodied in the deaconesses’ ministry is characteristic of Wesleyan theology and practice.

Lucy Rider Meyer’s writing and the deaconess movement’s periodical, if examined in total beginning with Meyer’s establishment of the Chicago Training School, is arguably not representative of later Social Gospel principles. Jean Miller Schmidt describes two opposing ideologies of this era. One party accepted biblical criticism, the scientific age, city, industry, and

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\(^4\)Diana Shaenberger, “As a Physician and Scientist,” Deaconess Advocate (June 1904): 10. Meyer received the M.D. degree from Woman’s College of Chicago.


new challenges in general. The second party reacted negatively to change, viewing evolution and biblical criticism as an affront to the Bible and morality, and above all, stressing the importance of saving souls.\(^7\) Meyer possessed characteristics of both parties maintaining the importance of evangelism to individuals within the context of social concern coinciding with the early Social Gospel movement, social Christianity.\(^8\)

Particularly in her later years, Lucy Rider Meyer provided women seeking the office of deaconess a strong education thereby making them, “trained experts in the field of Christian social service.”\(^9\) She did not, however, insist on the advocacy of social service over evangelism. Rather, she encouraged an equally profound theological practice by advocating social service with evangelism. For example, an article written at the height of the deaconess movement’s involvement with social service stated that the church needs to be awakened to her social opportunity and obligation since social service outside the church still manifests the Christian spirit and wishes to “win to Christ.”\(^50\) In the Chicago Training School, Lucy Rider Meyer envisioned an institution to equip women as deaconesses to address the whole plight of the urban poor. Meyer wrote in her article, *The Mother in the Church*, of the multitude of impoverished children, abandoned and neglected, in need of compassion, sustenance, and education, as well as salvation.\(^51\) Although the deaconess may be recognized as an early embodiment of Social Gospel principles, she did not dismiss biblical and evangelistic emphases.\(^52\) The efforts of deaconesses in the Methodist Episcopal Church maintained a connection with their evangelical roots, while at the same time


\(^6\)Mary Agnes Dougherty, *The Methodist Deaconess, 1885–1919: A Study in Religious Feminism* (University of California, Davis, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1979), 20, 122. Dougherty’s work, although significant, does not consider in much detail the partnership of evangelistic and social ministries during the nineteenth century.

\(^7\)Winifred Chappell, “The Deaconess and Social Service,” *Deaconess Advocate* (January 1912): 7. Meyer’s position of maintaining social service with evangelization most likely received some formation from Shailer Mathews as Meyer’s instructor, for example Shailer Mathews, *The Individual and the Social Gospel* (New York: The Presbyterian Department of Missionary Education, 1914).


\(^9\)Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 261; “After the war, the social gospel moved in several divergent directions, none of which would probably have had Rauschenbusch’s entire approval. As the synthesis of personal religion and social concern, which had been so important to him, proved more and more difficult to maintain, the tendency of the social gospel (along with much liberal theology in the 1920s) was toward humanism.”
embodying the late 19th century heritage, which included social responsibilities in light of the teachings of Jesus Christ contained in scripture. Meyer and the deaconesses she trained maintained a holistic ministry to the whole person, body, mind, and spirit, while acknowledging the centrality of evangelism: “What then? Would you have everybody interested in the evangelistic work? Jesus would.” Meyer’s position and work demonstrated a complexity and adept skillfulness in bridging the status quo roles of women with a holistic approach to evangelistic and social ministries.

Methodist Episcopal deaconesses challenged prescribed boundaries not only by their participation in ecclesiastically recognized ministry roles, but also by their awareness and work against the systemic nature of poverty. Methodist Episcopal deaconesses participated in numerous ministries that integrated social action with evangelistic visitation. The impetus of the Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement and its primary constituency of the deaconesses’ ministry were the urban poor in late 19th century industrial society. The following statement from the periodical edited by Meyer described the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses.

What are they? Simply women who are set apart for the whole lay work of the Church. . . . There are reformatories and poor houses, and orphanages, and there should be Methodist orphanages all over the land; there are prisons and hospitals, and ought to be Methodist hospitals in every part of the country; and there are immigrants and waifs, and Magdalens, and strangers that are being lost in the swirl of the great cities; and there are poor work-women and overburdened mothers whose children can be cared for while they secure employment or take a half day’s rest or recreation; there are unschooled children to be gathered into night schools, and sick people who want flowers as well as doctors, who know nothing of human cheer or helpfulness.

This statement not only describes the vast role assumed by the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses’ ministry, but also the focus on the need of such work among the cities’ impoverished. The reference to the need for Methodist orphanages and hospitals represents an editorial position of the Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement that many of these institutions were necessary. Humanitarian work, such as the organization of orphanages and hospitals, was scarce in 1885 with only four orphanages and two hospitals in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1900 twelve orphanages and eighteen hospitals were in existence within the Methodist Episcopal Church, each of the new establishments founded by deaconess organizations. The work of

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55 “The Deaconess Work and Humanitarianism in the American Methodist Episcopal Church,” The Message and Deaconess Advocate (June 1900): 8. Methodist Episcopal Deaconesses voiced their editorial opinion that Methodism needed additional support institutions. This position was related to an element of respect and rivalry towards the work of Roman Catholic women in parallel institutions.
Methodist Episcopal deaconesses represents a significant contribution to the understanding and addressing of issues related to poverty as systemic, moving beyond an understanding of poverty that attributes blame to the impoverished.

The Methodist Episcopal deaconess movement developed for the purpose of ministering to the urban poor and outcast while at the same time maintaining essentially acceptable ecclesiastical roles for women.

It was the vision of the overwhelming need of the unchurched masses in our larger towns and cities that brought the Deaconess into the field. It was the thought of the bitter poverty and need which the churches are not touching by their ordinary lines of service, which leads most women into Deaconess work. . . . The Deaconess Order is often called the "open door" for Christian work for women, but it is a door opening not into the enclosure of the church, but leading from that out into the "highways and hedges," where the cry is heard, "No man careth for my soul."56

This interpretation of deaconess work as an "open door" for the ecclesiastical work for women seemed to represent an expansion of women's opportunities. Yet, while the Methodist Episcopal deaconess, who was led out from the church into the "highways and hedges" for her noble work through this open door, other doors to Christian work, such as ordination and lay representation, remained.57 The ministry of the Methodist Episcopal deaconess addressed the physical and spiritual needs of the urban poor while also working within the ecclesiastical polity gradually to expand opportunities for women's work in the church.

In summary, the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses, particularly those formed at the Chicago Training School founded by Lucy Rider Meyer, embodied Wesleyan characteristics of evangelistic ministry. Despite the different contextual dynamics of the late 19th century Methodist Episcopal Church and society, the women in the role of deaconess appropriated such Wesleyan characteristics in an effective evangelistic ministry to the urban poor. By seeking out ministries that embody the richness of our Wesleyan heritage, similar to the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses, our evangelistic ministry can maintain the integrity of its tradition within cre-

57Although the Methodist Episcopal Church granted local preacher's licenses from at least 1869 in various districts to possibly seventy or more women during the 1870s alone, the licenses were rescinded in 1880 at the General Conference according to the Daily Christian Advocate (May 26, 1880), 90. Faced with petitions regarding the question of the ordination of women, the 1880 General Conference also decided against the ordination of women according to Kenneth Rowe, "The Ordination of Women," in Perspectives on American Methodism Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, eds. (Nashville: Kingswood, 1993), 304. Although other North American Methodist traditions, such as the Wesleyan Methodists and Methodist Protestants, were working toward the acceptance of preaching, local preacher's licenses would not be available to Methodist Episcopal women until following the 1920 General Conference (Journal of the General Conference, 1920) 517.
ative and effective embodiments that offer an incarnational ministry to the whole needs of persons in the world.

IV

By examining characteristics of the Wesleyan tradition that appear within examples of evangelistic ministries, particularly during the life and work of John Wesley, this essay appropriates models for the practice of a Wesleyan evangelism in our contexts. One profound lesson taken from both the Methodist Episcopal deaconesses and John Wesley’s theology and ministry is the complexity of interwoven themes and dialectics that find their foundation and frame in scripture to create a ministry of wholeness. The Methodist Episcopal deaconesses and John Wesley worked ambitiously to relate scriptural values and norms to the contemporary context of the people with which they lived, encouraging the embodiment of scriptural implications for the purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ. John Wesley and the people called Methodists of the 18th century and those of the Wesleyan tradition that have preceded us offer their wisdom and examples for the benefit of the church’s future.