

The Praxis of Wesleyan Ecclesiology and the Effectiveness of the Methodist Mission in Scandinavia

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1. The Profile of British Methodism

First, John Wesley described in his "A Short History of The People Called Methodists"¹ from 1781, how the Methodist movement started as three "rises of Methodism" before the real beginning in April 1739 in Bristol. This description is important because Wesley reflected on how Methodism started to retrospect forty years later, after it became a well developed and major organisation. Using the formulation "rises of Methodism", Wesley saw his own contributions as secondary to the main initiative of God.

The first rise of Methodism, according to Wesley, was Oxford Methodism². In the environment of the University, students and teachers founded small groups for prayer and reading of the Bible and Patristics. Small groups were well established in Oxford since the late 1600's³, and the Wesley's were familiar with the roots of the small group movement, partly from the continental pietistic groups, and partly from the Catholic lay orders and mystics⁴. When John and Charles Wesley, in November 1729, started a small group nicknamed "The Holy Club", it followed a familiar pattern, but by prioritising this work, Wesley became characterised as the primary leader of the small group movement.

¹ Wesley, John, Works, Vol 9. p. 425-503

² Ibid., p. 430

³ Heitzenrater, Richard P. Wesley and the People Called Methodists, p. 21

The second rise of Methodism took place in Savannah, America, in 1736⁵. Far away from the university and the plurality of religious societies in Britain, Wesley founded a society of parishioners in the colony of Frederica.

I now advised the serious part of the congregation to form themselves into a sort of little society, and to meet once or twice a week in order to instruct, exhort, and reprove one another. And out of these I selected a smaller number for a more intimate union with each other: in order to which I met them together at my house every Sunday in the afternoon⁶.

The third rise of Methodism began May 1st, 1738 in London. Wesley, together with Moravian Peter Böhler, founded the Fetter Lane Society. The model of this society was nearly a copy of the Moravian societies⁷, including the structure of smaller groups called Bands. Even though Wesley and a few members soon separated from the Fetter Lane Society due to the characteristic Moravian dominance of quiescence and antinomianism⁸, Wesley counted this society as the third shaping influence of Methodism.

Common to all three pre-Methodist phenomena was the building of intimate fellowships and emphasis on making people accountable to their decision to be Disciples of Christ.

The founding of the New Room society in Bristol 1739 marked a new beginning in the Methodist Movement. The Foundry society in London and societies in Kingswood and Newcastle followed soon after. Two years later Wesley organised Classes and Bands in the New Room society in Bristol. Wesley undergirded this new beginning with his General Rules, which became the rules for Methodism as the movement was rapidly growing all over Great Britain.

This particular way of telling the Methodist story is often the only way the story is told.

Secondly, the Methodist society with a Class and Band structure was, for John Wesley, not “The” Church or a replacement for the church. His writing in the *Arminian Magazine*⁹ and his teaching during several conferences gave priority to the church and showed that the church was more important for Wesley than the Methodist societies. Frank Baker argued in his study 'John Wesley and the Church of England', how Wesley was loyal and faithful to the Church of England, in spite of his critics and ongoing controversy.

Wesley viewed the Methodist societies as tools to reform the church. At the same time, the General Rules linked the individual Methodists to an active relation to the local church by claiming that the individual must utilize the means of grace. At least for some of them, this was possible only in the church.

We are members of the Church of England, we are no particular sect or party; we are friends to all, we quarrel with none for their opinions or mode of worship; we love those of the Church wherein we were brought up, but we impose them upon none: in some unessential circumstances we vary a little from the usual modes of worship, and we have several little prudential helps peculiar to ourselves; but still we do not, will not, dare not separate from the Church till we see other reasons than we have seen yet¹⁰.

⁵ Wesley, John, Works Vol 9, p. 428-429

⁶ Ibid., p. 429

⁷ Watson, D.L., *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, p. 197. Källstad, T., *John Wesley and the Bible*, p. 226-227

⁸ Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, p. 106-117

⁹ "Father Thoughts on Separation from the Church" Wesley, John, Works, Vol 9. p. 538-540

Thirdly, Wesley's understanding of the Kingdom of God forced him to connect with and cooperate with people beyond and outside the borders of the Methodist societies and the Church of England. Like a modern Paul on the Areopagus, Wesley himself was looking for signs of God's activities in the larger faith community. The point is that the platform Wesley had in the Methodist society and in the Anglican Church wasn't a limitation of his ministry. He connected with the wider Church tradition of many confessions in his 'The Christian Library',¹¹ and he saw himself as one of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival, trying to make a union of all Evangelical preachers in England¹², and connecting to politicians¹³ and people with responsibility for schools¹⁴ and prisons¹⁵.

The picture of Methodism during Wesley's time was:

- 1) The profile of an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* structure - the Methodist societies sub-divided in Classes and Bands.

This structure corresponds with the Wesleyan teaching on accountable discipleship and sanctification, as well as demanding and exclusive membership.

Drawing on the first part of the ecclesiology of Confessio Augustania and the Anglican Art. of Rel. XIII: "The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men ..." Later re-formulated in the EU Art. Rel. V: "... the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ."

- 2) The profile of Methodists as depending on and faithful to *the function of the church*.

The church structure corresponded with the Wesleyan reformatory preaching on justification. The church was public and open to all people. There were low demands for membership, as well as service for the people of the country coming to the church.

Drawing on the second part of the ecclesiology of CA and the Art. Rel. XIII: "... in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance..." Later re-formulated in the EU Art. Rel. V: "... in which the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment."

- 3) The profile of being connected to *a larger movement of God's activity in the world*, the Kingdom of God in the present world.

This corresponds with the Wesleyan teaching on evangelism, diaconal ministry, ethics and the task to go out and seek the lost sheep of God.

Drawing on what is formulated in the last part of the EU version Art. Rel. V: "Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the redemption of the world."

Methodism in the time of Wesley consisted of not one, but *all three elements in a dynamic interaction*.

¹¹ Langford, Thomas A, Practical Divinity, p. 20-21

¹² Wesley, John, Journal V, p. 47; Letters II Vol 26, p. 613-14

¹³ Marquardt, Manfred, John Wesley's Social Ethics, p. 67-76

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51-59

2. Methodism in the American setting

The planting of Methodism in the American Colonies meant that Methodism had to find its place in a totally different context. In the period up to 1784 American Methodism was partly a fellowship of travelling lay preachers on revival missions, and partly a number of religious societies formed after the model of Methodist societies in England¹⁶.

When Wesley in 1784 initiated the founding of the first Methodist church, he was aware that the founding of an autonomous church in America included more than giving independence to the American preachers and the Methodist societies. His book 'The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America' turns the perspective of the Methodist movement into establishing a church institution at the centre of the understanding of Methodism in the U.S. after 1784.

While British Methodism took form as an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* and the Methodist society was placed outside the churches, American Methodism had the task of developing the existing religious societies into the broader function of church. The risk in this process involved the idea of the religious society limiting the church and making it a closed sect for the self-promoted elite. Or that the ambition to be a church should absorb the function of the religious society sub-divided in classes and makes it a high church institution without any transforming power.

John Wesley understood that God had raised the Methodists to reform the nation. In the U.S. this statement had much more influence on the society because the state was so young. The ideas of a democratic state formulated by the French philosophers of the Enlightenment and the forming of people in the Methodist congregations were two movements that stimulated one another. Methodism became a movement of the new state.

In the rapid growing period under the leadership of Francis Asbury and his first successors one can find the three original profiles in American Methodism. But Methodism also developed in new directions according to the very fortuitous context in America. 'The second Great Awakening' in the 19th Century opened up for interaction between the denominations in a way not known in Europe.

The tension and interaction between the three movements, i.e. Methodist society, the established church and the evangelical and social-political movement in society, which characterized Methodism in England, changed in the U.S. Perhaps the three melted together into one; perhaps the tension between them disappeared.

3. Scandinavian Methodism - imported from the U.S.

A very large immigration from Scandinavia to America took place from 1830 to 1910. Approximately 10 % of the total population in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland immigrated to America. (In Sweden 1/3 of the population left for America.) Most of these immigrants were, after a generation or two, integrated into American society and established an American identity. But in the Midwestern states around the Great Lakes, the concentration of Scandinavians was rather high. In the 1850's, the first Scandinavian speaking Methodist churches were founded in Wisconsin. This was the beginning of Scandinavian Methodism on

both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. When Scandinavian speaking Methodism in America was largest, it amassed 20,000 Swedish speaking members in four annual conferences and two missionary conferences. On the Norwegian-Danish speaking front, Methodists were organised into one annual conference with 5,000 members, around 65 ordained pastors and 90 local churches.

In addition to the area around the Great Lakes, Scandinavian Methodism developed in the Utah area and in the area adjacent to New York.

Scandinavian speaking Methodism in America continued organising into independent annual conferences until the church union of 1939.

In Europe, returning immigrants brought Methodism to Scandinavia in the 1850's and 1860's. Many congregations were founded in close connexion to Scandinavian Methodism in the States. The first Methodist history books¹⁷ propound that Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic were one and the same people and organisation. Statistically speaking, they did not differentiate. Many preachers had appointments in Scandinavia and America concurrently. Various books, including the Discipline and Hymnals were printed in a Scandinavian language, primarily in Chicago, and in smaller numbers in Copenhagen, Christiania, Gothenburg and Stockholm.

This close connexion across the Atlantic continued until World War I. Wartime forced the churches in Scandinavia to be more independent, and after the war, a new nationalistic attitude grew among Methodists. The ties to America weakened. The Methodist history books after 1900 give very little attention to the first 50 to 60 years of common history regarding the larger Scandinavian Methodism organised in America.

According to my thesis, the main question is, what kind of Methodism was planted in Scandinavia during the first 50 years?

The Scandinavian context was very different from America. In many ways, Scandinavia actually resembled England more than America. How could Methodism develop in America from the 1750's to 1850's, and then return to Europe, and what did it look like with it's new profile after 'The Second Great Awakening' and the rising Holiness Movement?

1) Methodism in Denmark was established in 1859 with a strong ecclesiological profile and all the functions of church. The founder of the Methodist Church was Christian Willerup, a known pastor from America. In 1856 he published the first Danish Discipline, which included rituals for a fully developed church e.g. rituals for ordination of Elders and Bishops and how to establish a theological seminaries. In Copenhagen, in 1858, he translated and published Thomas Ralston's systematic theology, "Elements of Divinity". The same year, Willerup gained the first 29 members of the Methodist Church and organised them into a congregation. In the process, he asked the Board of Mission in New York for financial support for the building of a large church, with the purpose of signifying to the city of Copenhagen what Methodism was all about. The church was built, and in light of the church dedication, Willerup invited the King of Denmark, the bishops of the state church, professors of the university and members of Parliament. The American ambassador in Berlin, Mr. Wright was invited to preach. 1,000 people were in attendance, with people crowded inside and outside

the church. Yet the congregation at that time had only 95 members, and only 20 of them organised into Classes. Willerup christened the church St. Paul's.

The profile of Methodism as a fully-developed church was clear from the very beginning, and there soon followed the establishing of the St. Johannes Church in Svendborg, the St. Paul's Church in Vejle and several church buildings with towers and bells, organs and educated pastors, serving people for Sunday worship services, also in the buildings of established church of Denmark.

The Swedish Methodist art historian, Goeran Alm, showed in his Ph. D. dissertation, how Methodist Church buildings in the period 1869 to 1910 in Sweden and Denmark and Norway were inspired by the architecture of famous churches from all over Europe. The first Methodist building in Sweden from 1840 was built as a copy of the Wesley's Chapel in London. But the main period of Methodist church building from 1869 to 1910 showed a strong church style which gave the outward signal that methodism was more than a private lay-organisation or an organized low-church revival. Maybe Methodism in Sweden was the place in Scandinavia where Methodist most openly competed with the Lutheran State Church to be an alternative church to serve the people.

All phases of Methodist church building in Sweden can be linked with the architectural development of the Church of Sweden. There is a very close connection in style where the State Church has played the leading role, even though the quality of the Methodist Church buildings often has been surprisingly high and comparable with the best within the Lutheran Church. At least at two occasions the Methodists have inspired Lutheran Church building. Two of the churches in Stockholm, Trefaldighetskyrkan and S:t Peterskyrkan, have been of importance in the development of church architecture in Sweden. The first mentioned because of its interesting an unusual plan, and the second because of a new lead in style-development. The latter has also been pictured in the British Chronicle "Academy Architecture," 1902¹⁸.

2) But Methodism was at the same time organised as a small group movement. Classes and Bands, as well as local Class leaders were part of the structure of every new congregation. Statistics from the first years reveal that the membership of the church, even though it was small in numbers, were higher than those attending the Classes and Bands. Methodism formed as an *ecclesia*, and thus formed its own *ecclesiola*.

The normal picture of a Methodist congregation was a central church, with small groups connecting to the larger church. Some groups organised in private homes, in local neighbourhoods or church buildings. Others organised in prayer houses a substantial distance from the local church, thus resulting in sporadic church attendance. The small groups assumed the character of a religious society, Class or Band, with meetings once a week. But the degree of activity was self-determined; there were no rituals or liturgical order, and the fellowship, i.e. *koinonia*, and friendships bound the participants together. If one had a friend or was invited by a friend, it was easier to enter the small group meeting. But it was not the institution that opened the doors to people in general.

3) Finally the first Methodist pastors had an impeccable identity and demonstrated the ability to assume leadership for many activities in the local society outside the boundaries of the local church. They initiated social care for the poor, establishing of the first health care associations, organised the first system of home health care, started day care schools for children, and started the temperance movement. On the political side, Methodists worked

together with the first Social Democratic leaders, and many Methodist laypeople were on the frontline in the process of democratisation.

Methodists engagement as public opinion-formers and Methodism as a common movement involved more than 10 times the number of people who came to worship services.

The picture of Scandinavian Methodism in the first 50 to 60 years was thus:

- 1) The profile of an *ecclesiola* in *ecclesia* structure - the Methodist societies sub-divided into Classes and Bands.
- 2) The profile of Methodism as church institution open to and serving all people, who wanted to utilise it.
- 3) The profile of being connected to a larger movement of God's activity in the world, the Kingdom of God in the present world, social, political and economical.

All three profiles are obvious when you look at the local congregation and how the pastors worked - *all three in a dynamic interaction*.

After World War I the picture changed. Several things influenced the situation, for instance:

- A schismatic conflict in the church involving the Pentecostal Movement.
- An unsolved relation to the working class people and the labour movement.
- The growth of secularisation because of the war and common poverty.

The inner church situation was changing radically:

From 1850 to 1910 the connexion across the Atlantic was very strong. The Methodists saw themselves as one Scandinavian Methodist church on both sides of the Ocean. The absolute majority of all pastors were educated in the U.S. and trained in well-functioning Scandinavian speaking local Methodist churches in the U.S. before they started ministry in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. They brought with them the knowledge of Methodist ecclesiology, and they were trained in its praxis in life. They knew of Methodism as a church serving large groups of people in a specific area. They were trained in work with small groups. And they knew how to engage in the society around the church.

The pastors in the first 50 to 60 years were proud leaders, coming from a mature, strong and high-profile church.

After World War I, a new nationalism grew in Scandinavian Methodism. The contact to Methodism in America disappeared. Pastor's education in Scandinavia took over all education of new pastors. The new generation of pastors' never served large, strong and high-profile congregations abroad.

For one reason or another the result was:

- 1) The Methodist Church as a church changed. The worship services of some congregations developed into copies of the established church's liturgy. Other congregations developed into Low Church meetings, and thus private in character.

2) The Methodist Class system changed in some congregations to simple bible study groups. In other places a strong pietistic attitude influenced the small group people into becoming very moralistic, thus withdrawing themselves from contact with non-Christians.

3) Methodists developed a typical attitude of minority thinking: “we are small, we have nothing to offer society but prayer and preaching and church hymns”.

Statistical decline in all Scandinavian Countries began in the 1920's and 1930's.

Methodism in Scandinavia today has traces of these three profiles in all Scandinavian annual conferences. Some Methodist churches are well respected as churches, open and easy for people to enter, and not private family lodges where one needs a specific invitation or an inside connection to make one feel welcome.

Some Methodist congregations have Classes and small groups making Disciples of Christ and helping people to be accountable to spiritual formation.

A few Methodists have the ability to present the gospel and the church outside the parameters of the church building or beyond the congregation itself.

But in general, Methodist churches have neither a clear knowledge that these three Wesleyan profiles should be the natural profile of every local Methodist church or a natural understanding of the correlation of our ecclesiology and our theology.

4. Church growth theology and Methodist ecclesiology.

Church growth is on the agenda all over Scandinavia. The future of Methodism has a very narrow horizon, judging by the current available resources. In light of the situation, Methodists are opening up to inspiration from all places of the world where churches are growing. The available sources of inspiration come from all denominations, and only seldom from Methodist churches.

This variety of church growth theology and methodology is a melting pot for various denominations. But it is also a development that ushers in new schisms, further dividing denominations. There are, for example, local churches that follow one church growth program or another, while other local churches follow no program, relying instead on a stifling tradition formed over the previous 10 or 20 years of stagnation. The situation is nearly the same in several other free churches in the Scandinavian Countries.

The situation might possibly go in a different direction. For example:

Local churches of different confessions might develop the same theology and congregational life because they all follow the same church growth programs. None of these congregations will fit neatly into what we today can refer to as Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, or any other denomination. This development has ecumenical qualities, but failing to use the resources that come from the long history and experience of each denomination might lead to an “amputated” theology and church praxis, where systematic theology becomes displaced in favour of a more “appealing” methodology. It is possible that several denominations will split, while the “splinters” will build new churches or a network of churches.

Another possibility is that the Methodist Church in each Scandinavian Country will form a church union with the established church or another free church.

My contention is that Methodism in Scandinavia has a major resource for church growth within its own history. The Methodist theology of evangelism, accountable discipleship and responsibility to God's world correspond with the three ecclesiological profiles: church functions, small groups, and political, social and diaconal outreach to society. Our Methodist heritage is very comparable to some modern church growth programs and could even deepen them by offering theological quality. Herein lies the key to a New Creation for Scandinavian Methodism.

We, the people of God called United Methodist, have come to a critical turning point in our history. The world in which our heritage of faith seemed secure is passing away. We must choose now to follow the call of Jesus Christ into a new era¹⁹.

Thomas E. Frank in his book 'Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the UMC' broadens the perspective regarding the process of renewal within the UMC, pointing out the rich heritage in its ecclesiological praxis, which can be combined with the modern and substantial church growth programs.

.... anyone who wishes to get a glimpse of United Methodism tomorrow must look for the signs of life springing up in local churches and activities around the globe. Contrary to the rhetoric of crisis, the emerging vitality of the church today has been developing for a long time ...²⁰

I believe that United Methodism needs a fresh understanding of what its polity is for and what its organizational arrangements can make possible in the church's continuing witness to the Reign of God²¹.

Abstract

This paper is written out of the experience that church growth is the magic word on the agenda of the church and the focus for many young students and pastors. The sub-theme of this subject changes frequently according to the most popular church growth ideology of the present time, which often is very short.

Many church growth programs are in good harmony with Methodist churches in Scandinavia, but only as a stimulation of one specific part of the church work and linked to a limited part of our theology.

My idea was to look at the Wesleyan ecclesiology in the British context and see how the understanding of the ecclesiology and the mission of Christianity are two sides of the same thing. The praxis of the church function is a mirror of the ministry to spread the Gospel.

¹⁹ Vital Congregations Faithful Disciples, The UMC Council of Bishops, 1990.

²⁰ Frank, Thomas E., Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the UMC, p. 33

The first question was how does Wesley's ecclesiology look like in a British context with no limits between the people of the country and the Established church? Was it possibly to plant the British idea of Methodism in the context of America and still find the same ideas about Wesleyan ecclesiology?

The main question is, what kind of Methodist ecclesiology do we find, when Methodism returns back to Europe after 100 years of development in the US? Scandinavia is more like England and the context of British Methodism in its relation to society and the Established church than the total different situation in America. Did Wesleyan ecclesiology survive 100 years of Americanizing before it returned to Continental Europe?

The study of Scandinavian Methodism shows that Methodism had a very strong ecclesiological identity in the first 50 - 60 years, which is very similar to the ecclesiological understanding of British Methodism in the time of Wesley. This ecclesiological understanding fits into the understanding of the Methodist theology and the praxis of Methodist congregations.

After 50 - 60 years the ecclesiological identity and the work of the churches changed. Why? The changes came in the same time that the connexion to the Scandinavian mother churches in the US weakened in the beginning of 1900 and disappeared after World War I. In the beginning most preachers in Scandinavia were trained in US or were appointed for a period to congregations in the US. The hypothesis is that the new generation of leaders in Scandinavia did not have their background, training and environment for theological formation in well-functioned congregations with many ramifications.

The declining of Methodism in Scandinavia started in the same period.

To discussion: Does our Methodist history of ecclesiology help modern Methodism in Scandinavia to vitalize the life of congregations and their mission in the neighbourhood.

This paper draws on:

- Thaarup, Joergen, D.Min. Thesis, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC, 1998. 'Methodism with a Danish Face.'
- Thaarup, Joergen, 'Metodisme på dansk, fra små-gruppe-bevægelse til folkekirke.' Dansk Kirkeliv 1999.

