

**LEARNING FROM WESLEY'S STRATEGY OF USING LAY PREACHERS
AS A GUIDE TO DEVELOPING NEW MODELS FOR MINISTRY
ON THE REEMERGING FRONTIER OF THE PRAIRIE LANDS
OF THE USA**

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Introduction

This brief paper attempts to examine John Wesley's use of Lay Preachers and Assistants as a potential guide for learning how to adapt ministry on the re-emerging Frontier of the prairie lands of the upper Midwestern region of the United States. As the United Methodist Bishop of the Dakotas Conference, I am eager to learn from any perspectives that might help us with the task of ministry in the early 21st century. Following a brief examination of Wesley's attempts to revitalize the Church of England and Wesley's use of Lay Preachers and Assistants, this paper will attempt to discern some guiding principles which seem to be the basis for his willingness to make unique ministry provisions (while admitting that I am certainly not a Wesley scholar). Finally, the paper attempts to make a "leap" from Wesley's day and situation to our present time and to consider some ways one might apply Wesley's guidelines in order to provide ministry in the upper Midwest of the USA.

Wesley's attempts to revitalize the Church of England

The amazing record of the life and ministry of John Wesley, when viewed from the distance of time and geography and circumstances of the United Methodist Church in the Dakotas Conference, could lead one to miss the central truth that Wesley was attempting to revitalize the Church of England, not to start something new in terms of bureaucracy or institution. Wesley never left the priesthood of the Church, although he did take steps to allow his Methodist followers in America to form a church, and he did take steps to provide a structure for his Methodist followers in England to form a church. He always emphasized that his Methodist followers should be faithful to their local parishes and their local parish priests, especially for receiving the sacraments, although he did take the extraordinary step of ordaining clergy for the American colonies.

Wesley's record is that of one who sought revitalization and renewal of the Church, yet also that of one who experimented with new models of ministry and risked separation from and rejection by that same Church he sought to change. His might be called a "lover's quarrel" with the Church, in the sense that he guarded his loyalty to the Church while openly naming the Church's failures and pointing to her need for reform.

Our understanding of Wesley's new models of ministry, then, must be understood in this context: a man who hoped to see large numbers of other Anglican clergy join his renewal movement, and yet a man whose focus upon renewal allowed him to consider alternative means of ministry.

Wesley's use of Lay Preachers

One of the risky new means of ministry, which John Wesley tried and then nurtured, was the use of Lay Preachers or Lay assistants. Several have noted his reluctance to do so. There is even evidence that his own mother had to intervene and ask John to “hear before deciding” about a layman who had moved from merely reading and teaching the Scripture into exhorting or preaching. Wesley paused, listened, saw the fruitful results, and allowed for this new option of ministry.

However, once Wesley began to employ Lay Preachers and Lay Assistants, he was proud to defend them - even daring to compare them with educated Anglican clergy. This defense was necessary because his use of Lay Assistants prompted serious accusations from the hierarchy about Wesley and his Methodist movement. As Albert C. Outler has noted (in John Wesley, edited by Albert C. Outler, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964):

“The bishops and clergy came to have a common image of the Methodists as a rabble of fanatical preachers and hysterical converts. This disapproving judgment was exacerbated by Wesley’s decision to ‘employ’ laymen as preachers and personal assistants. The bishops were unimpressed by the fact that Wesley carefully avoided calling his lay preachers ‘ministers’ and steadily refused them any authority whatsoever to administer the sacraments. These men, he said, were his personal ‘helpers,’ directly responsible to him in their work, as he was responsible for them to the Church.” (page 19)

However, Outler also notes that it was Wesley’s use of lay preachers and assistants, which gave the Methodist revival a shape and a structure which allowed that revival to continue and to grow:

“This effectual stress upon organization and the use of lay preachers as associates in the Revival mark off the principal difference between the long-term, cumulative results of the Wesleyan movement and the rather more episodic successes of other popular evangelists in the same epoch.” (page 18)

Indeed it is true that Wesley himself saw his use of Lay Preachers and Lay Assistants as a new model of ministry that was divinely guided. From Wesley’s sermon “On God’s Vineyard” come his own reflections on the use of lay preachers/assistants to help himself and Charles with their work:

“God gave a signal blessing to their word [work?]. Many sinners were thoroughly convinced of sin, and many truly converted to God. Their assistants increased, both in number and in the success of their labours. Some of them were learned, some unlearned. Most of them were young, a few middle-aged. Some of them were weak; some, on the contrary, of remarkably strong understanding. But it pleased God town

them all, so that more and more brands were plucked out of the burning.” (page 110 of Outler’s John Wesley)

From the same sermon, Wesley continues to talk about his use of lay preachers, including some observations for the success of this new model of ministry:

“That this may be the more effectually done, they have another excellent help in the constant change of preachers; it being their rule that no preacher shall remain in the same circuit more than two years together, and a few of them more than one year. Some, indeed, have imagined that this was a hindrance to the work of God, but long experience in every part of the kingdom proves the contrary. This has always shown that the people profit less by any one person than by a variety of preachers while they *Used the gifts on each bestow’d, Tempered by the art of God.*” (page 111 of Outler’s John Wesley)

Wesley’s Rules for Lay Preachers and Lay Assistants

Fortunately we have written record of the rules that John Wesley used for these Lay Preachers and Lay assistants. From the notes of the First Annual Conference, June 29, 1744, are these comments in Wesley’s usual method of asking and answering the questions:

“Q. 1. Are Lay Assistants allowable?

Only in cases of necessity.

Q. 2. What is the office of our Assistants?

A. In the absence of the minister, to feed and guide, to teach and govern the flock:

To expound every morning and evening.

To meet the United Societies, the Bands, the Select Societies, and the Penitents every week.

To visit the classes (London excepted) once a month.

To hear and decide all differences.

To put the disorderly back on trial, and to receive on trial for the Bands or Society.

To see that the Stewards and the Leaders, schoolmasters and housekeepers, faithfully discharge their several offices.

To meet the Stewards, the Leaders of the Bands and Classes weekly, and overlook their accounts.

Q. 3. What are the Rules of an Assistant?

A. 1. Be diligent. Never be unemployed a moment, never be triflingly employed, never while away time; spend no more time at any place than is strictly necessary.

Be serious. Let your motto be, ‘holiness unto the Lord.’ Avoid all lightness as you would avoid hell-fire, and laughing as you would cursing and swearing.

Touch no woman. Be as loving as you will but hold your hands off ‘em. Custom is nothing to us.

Believe evil of no one. If you see it done, well. Else take heed how you credit it.

Put the best construction to every thing. You know the judge is always supposed to be on the prisoner's side.

Speak evil of no one, else your word especially would eat as doth a canker. Keep your thoughts within your own breast till you come to the person concerned.

Tell everyone what you think wrong in him and that plainly and as soon as may be; else it will fester in your heart. Make all haste, therefore, to cast the fire out of your bosom.

Do nothing 'as a gentleman.' You have no more to do with this character than with that of a dancing-master. You are the servant of all; therefore:

Be ashamed of nothing but sin; not of fetching wood or drawing water, if time permit; not of cleaning your own shoes or your neighbour's.

Take no money of any one. If they give you food when you are hungry or clothes when you need them, it is good. But not silver or gold. Let there be no pretence to say we grow rich by the gospel.

Contract no debt without my knowledge.

Be punctual: do everything exactly at the time. And, in general, do not mend our rules but keep them, not for wrath but for conscience' sake.

Act in all things not according to your own will but as a son in the gospel. As such, it is your part to employ your time in the manner which we direct: partly in visiting the flock from house to house (the sick in particular); partly, in such a course of reading, meditation and prayer as we advise from time to time. Above all, if you labour with us in our Lord's vineyard, it is needful you should do that part of the work which we direct, at those times and places which we judge most for his glory." (pages 145-146 of Outler's John Wesley)

From this remarkable list one can see an organizing genius, a persistent control, and a willingness to risk a new model within very clear delineations. Thus it appears to even the casual observer that John Wesley did not enter into this new model of ministry in a rash or haphazard manner, but rather with his typical sense of organization and clarity of purpose.

Wesley's Decision to Ordain Clergy for America

Another aspect of the life and ministry of John Wesley that reflects his willingness to risk change and to experiment with new models of ministry was his decision to ordain clergy for America. Regarding this momentous decision to ordain clergy for America, Luccock/Hutchinson/Goodlore have noted:

"John Wesley was convinced that he had as much right to ordain to the Christian ministry as any Anglican bishop. He held the whole theory of a bishop's miraculous powers, transmitted by touch of hand on head from the first apostles to the present, to

be an unproved and unprovable myth. His reading of church history had convinced him that in the early church there was no difference between the standing of a bishop and that of any other church elder or presbyter. For almost fifty years Wesley felt clear as to his theoretical right to ordain, if he so chose. But for most of that same period he held back from exercising that right on grounds of expediency. He simply could not bear to see the thousands of his spiritual children cutting even the shadowy ties which bound them to the Church of England. It was... the situation in America which brought things to a head. The Societies in America cared little for the Church of England. In fact, after the peace treaty of 1783, which finally established the independence of the United States, there was no Church of England in America, and had there been one the citizens of the young republic would have done everything they could to avoid being identified with it. England was not popular. The final outcome, when Wesley's common sense sized up the situation, was his ordination of Coke, Vasey, and Whatcoat, so that the Methodist Episcopal Church could begin its career in the United States." (The Story of Methodism, by Halford E. Luccock, Paul Hutchinson, and Robert W. Goodlore. New York: Abingdon Press, 1926, page 176)

The above quote argues clearly that Wesley took this action (ordaining clergy for America) after due time and consideration. However, the impact of his action upon the future of the Methodist revival and the whole history of America cannot be overstated. One can only wonder what a contrary decision by John Wesley might have meant not only for the Methodist movement but also for the people of the American frontier.

From the history of the Dakotas Area come numerous accounts of the courage and effectiveness of these new Methodist lay preachers who followed (or even preceded) the pioneers into this region. An early history of this area records the following account of the first such Methodist circuit rider in the Dakotas:

“A lone horseman began an historic journey from the frontier settlement of Sioux City, Iowa, to the land of the Dakotas on October 12, 1860. Septimus W. Ingham had been appointed by the Methodist Church to explore the need for religious work among the new settlers who were staking out claims in the wedge of land between the Missouri River on the south and the Big Sioux River on the east. This was virgin territory, a fertile and inviting area from which the warlike Sioux Indians had retired only the year before, thus opening the region officially to white occupation.

“The young circuit rider had not been a minister of the gospel very long. He was only 23 years of age, but he had already shown his abilities and had tested his mettle while itinerating around Boonsboro and Toledo in the Upper Iowa Conference during the previous three years. When confronted with the assignment, he bravely accepted the challenge of the new field of labor. He was ready to risk the dangers of what was well-known as Indian country and undergo the hardships of the frontier in order to fulfill his mission ... But difficulties immediately arose. The decision was made too

late to secure an appropriation for Ingham's salary from the Mission Board of the Methodist Church. Nothing daunted, Reverend Clifford [the District Superintendent of the Sioux City District] revised his district budget and by cutting \$30 from his own meager salary and small sums from some of the other consecrated brothers, he was able to promise the young itinerant the sum of \$130 as salary for his first year and start him on his great adventure." (Circuit Riders of the Middle Border: a History of Methodism in South Dakota, by Matthew D. Smith, Chairman of The Historical Committee. Midwest Beach, Inc. printers 1965, page 3)

In that same book, it records these words from Septimus W. Ingham about the first days in the Dakotas: "On the 12th day of October, 1860, I left the residence of Brother S.P. Yeomans in Sioux City, enroute for my new field of labor, having received numerous injunctions to be careful of my horse, and to watch for the Indians. I had soon crossed the Big Sioux River, and having inquired if there were any religious persons in the neighborhood, I found that there were none, and consequently that I was not to be greeted on entering my work by the friendly grasp and smile of kindred spirits. Remounting my horse, for I was traveling primitive style, with my saddle bags and umbrella, I pushed on for Vermillion, my destination; passing Elk Point, where there were one or two inferior log cabins with dirt roofs standing and two of a better class being erected. Arriving in Vermillion about half an hour after sundown, put up with Mr. Mulholland, who was keeping tavern at that place, I soon found that he was not a Methodist and that he did not know any in that country." (page 7).

Mr. Ingham goes on to tell of starting his first Methodist services with the few interested persons he could find. He continues, "During this my first week two brother Methodists with their wives, arrived, making a reinforcement of four ... On Sunday I preached from Romans 1st, 16, what was, so far as I can learn, the first sermon ever preached by a member of our church, above the mouth of the Big Sioux River, or at least in the Missouri Valley. I had about twenty persons at the services, which were held in the dining room of Mr. Mulholland's tavern. On the following Sabbath, I preached at Yankton, the first sermon ever delivered by a Methodist preacher at that point. I had a congregation amounting to seven persons: five males and two females, the balance of the community being called away by a steamboat arrival. My subject was this: 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'" (page 8)

Reading the history of these early Methodist lay preachers and circuit riders leads one to this obvious conclusion: what Wesley decided (namely using lay preachers and ordaining clergy for American) resulted in a profound opportunity for the people of the American frontier to hear the Gospel, to be brought into the life of the church, and to receive the sacraments. More than that, these early Methodists provided the very foundations for the fellowship and community-building of an entire frontier culture. Wesley's "new models of ministry" (if we may call them that from our 21st century perspective) did not simply tinker with the bureaucracy of the Church of England. They provided the means to a revolution in the availability of religious life to a whole continent of frontier people.

Guidelines from Wesley's Strategy of Using Lay Preachers

While it is always dangerous to look into the past and attempt to define another's guidelines and strategies, the following points might summarize the guidelines used by John Wesley in his eventual strategy of using Lay Preacher:

Work first within the "normal" system of the church

Emphasize renewal and revitalization of the church

Be willing to take extraordinary steps for extraordinary situations

Focus upon the laity as a source of creative new leadership

This list may well be partial, and it certainly may reflect our 21st century understandings written in retrospect. However, such a list can become a potential guide for those who wish to consider new ministry options in a new day. As such, it seems appropriate to comment briefly upon each point of these guidelines.

1. Work First Within the "Normal" System of the Church

For those who would too quickly jettison the current practices and models of the church in favor of the latest "fads" in church theory, business practice, models from the "new science," or other quick-fix answers which are popular among church leaders, writers of books, and leaders of seminars - to all of those, John Wesley's first principle seems clearly to advocate for working first within the existing church structures and practices. After all, it can be argued, Wesley never left the Church of England or gave up completely his hope for renewal within the church.

2. Emphasize Renewal and Revitalization of the Church

It is clear that Wesley's new models of ministry and his proposed changes for the church arose out of a conviction that the church needed renewal and revitalization. When pressed to defend his decisions, his leadership, and his strategies, it was typical of Wesley to look to the purpose and vision for his work. Indeed from the perspective of 1769, he looked back on his Oxford days and wrote, "When I was at Oxford, I never was afraid of any but the almost Christians" (from Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, page 116). This emphasis upon the distinction between nominal and real Christianity guided Wesley's attempts to revitalize the church and to consider new models for ministry.

3. Be Willing To Take Extraordinary Steps for Extraordinary Situations

Wesley's decisions to ordain clergy for America and to make use of Lay Preachers and Lay Assistants arose out of his sense that he was facing extraordinary situations that required solutions beyond the usual. Collins notes:

“Wesley justified his ‘new measures,’ his innovative evangelistic techniques, to Charles and others by making a distinction between an ordinary call and an extraordinary one. ‘My ordinary call is my ordination by the bishop ... My extraordinary call is witnessed by the works God doth by my ministry, which prove that he is with me of a truth in the exercise of my office.’” (from Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, page 72).

This guideline seems to remind us that leaders in the church are required to be creative and risk-taking - in order to help the church accomplish its mission. This guideline is especially true in the face of unique and challenging new situations, or what Wesley called “extraordinary” situations.

4. Focus Upon the Laity as a Source of Creative New Leadership

The final guideline which one might draw from Wesley's use of Lay Preachers and Assistants is that new leadership can and should be drawn from the laity. Certainly Wesley was disappointed that more Anglican clergy did not join in the Methodist revival. However, the lack of ordained leadership did not prevent him from seeking new leadership from the laity. When his use of such lay leadership was criticized and questioned, Wesley responded to defend his new lay leadership with fervor, as illustrated by his letter to Dr. Lowth, the Bishop of London, in August of 1780:

“I have heard that your Lordship is unfashionably diligent in examining the candidates for Holy Orders - yea, that your Lordship is generally at the pains of examining them yourself. Examining them! In what respects? Why, whether they understand a little Latin and Greek and can answer a few trite questions in the science of divinity! Alas, how little does this avail! Does your Lordship examine whether they serve Christ or Belial? Whether they love God or the world? Whether they ever had any serious thoughts about heaven or hell? Whether they have any real desire to save their own souls or the souls of others? If not, what have they to do with Holy Orders? And what will become of the souls committed to their care?” (from Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, page 137).

While this diatribe might suggest that Wesley devalued education for pastors, Wesley's own life demonstrates a strong commitment to education. No, Wesley was not opposed to education;

rather, he was affirming that the laity can and or a source of creative, new, and faithful leadership.

The Re-Emerging “Frontier” Situation on the Prairie Lands of the US

While the current situation in the upper Midwest of the United States is not an exact parallel to the “extraordinary” situation facing Wesley with the American colonies, there are similar challenges involved. The next sections of this paper will attempt to make that “leap” by asking how Wesley’s apparent guidelines for choosing to use Lay Preachers and Assistants might apply in this new context.

All across the prairie lands of the upper Midwest of the United States (especially in the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, and even to a lesser extent in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa), the “Frontier” is re-emerging. An illustration of this is the state of North Dakota, where 37 of our 52 counties are now labeled by the US Census Bureau as “frontier” counties, not “rural” counties. By their definition, a county is “frontier” when it has a population of less than 1,000. This population reduction is the result of many factors, including the school consolidations, the removal of railroads, the decline of the birth rate among Anglo people, and the increasing size of farmlands needed to provide an adequate income (the average farm in North Dakota now has more than 3,000 acres!). Most farmers would point to the underlying factor of ever- decreasing farm commodity prices, a series of years of bad weather (too much moisture in some areas, too little in others), and the “success” of farmers in producing more and more food per acre (thus driving down prices and causing farmers to have to produce more and more to earn less and less). In truth, no one factor can explain it, but it is clear that the prairie lands of the upper Midwest of the USA are experiencing a rapid de-population which is resulting in the re-emergence of the “frontier.”

The effect on small rural towns and small membership rural churches is dramatic and painful. Towns are simply disappearing, as people move out and their homes are bulldozed to create more farmland. One small United Methodist congregation in Clyde, North Dakota, voted to close in 1999, and their report to their District Superintendent stated: “The railroad stopped running through here, the schools consolidated and left, businesses moved out, and finally the last saloon closed. We have to close as a church, because there are no more people left, but at least we can be proud that we out- lasted the saloon!” While one can affirm the good humor in their report, one can also hear the pain and the grief.

A whole way of life is ending on the prairie lands, and this new circumstance provides church leaders with huge challenges.

Our “Ordinary” Methodology of Pastoral Leadership Is Not Working

In the face of this new situation on the prairie lands, our “ordinary” methods of providing pastoral leadership for small, rural churches are not working. Our usual way of supplying pastors for these churches has been to group them together into parishes large enough to afford a

full-time, ordained pastor. Here in the Dakotas Conference, that strategy has also included paying for the pensions and medical insurance for these clergy through our Conference apportionment system. While that has helped with the costs for these smaller rural parishes, that system has also placed a greater and greater burden on our larger parishes which end up paying proportionally more of the costs (because they have been based on a per-member basis). This whole system, then, has created stress and even subtle conflict between larger parishes in our towns and cities verses these smaller, rural parishes.

This current methodology has also created a “dependency” for these smaller rural parishes that has been stifling for them. It is common to hear laity from such parishes complain about “the conference” - even though it is through the conference that they are subsidized. Part of their complaint is based upon the reality that the conference tends to send them only the pastors who are new in ministry or those who are “on their way out of ministry” and willing to accept lower salaries. The most common complaint from these smaller rural parishes is, “Every time we get a good pastor, the conference moves him/her to a larger church which can pay more.” While there certainly is truth to that complaint, it also illustrates the extent to which dependency (no matter how well-intentioned) is not a healthy condition for any church or parish.

Of course the other problem with this current model of providing pastoral leadership for small membership rural parishes is the simple problem of “supply” - how does the conference find enough pastors who are willing to serve in parishes in remote areas, often with three or four congregations grouped together over long distances (some pastors drive over 100 miles on a Sunday morning to conduct services in three small churches), and in places without the kind of cultural amenities to which those pastors have been accustomed during their seminary training days.

New and Emerging Models for Providing Pastoral Leadership on the Prairie/Frontier

In the face of these “extraordinary” circumstances, new models are emerging for providing pastoral leadership on the prairie. One of these models is what can be called the *blended parish*. In this model, a full-time ordained pastor serves two or three churches, but also supervises lay speakers who go forth from those churches to serve even small ones. An example is Groton, South Dakota, where the pastor directly serves Groton and Conde, but also supervises a team of lay speakers who serve Andover Church. Thus, the very small congregation at Andover is enabled to say in ministry, because they are “blended” into an adjacent parish. This “blend” allows the very small parish to maintain its separate identity, without some of the dependency issues which are prevalent in other arrangements. The negative evaluation of these blended parish often comes from the larger congregations who wonder, “Why should we share our pastor’s time and energy to provide supervision for another small church? Why don’t those people just merge and join with us?”

Another emerging model is the *ecumenical shared ministry (or ESM)*. These parishes have

arisen in small towns where two or three or even four small congregations of different denominations have gone together to share a full-time ordained minister, usually on a rotating basis among the denominations. For example in Timber Lake, South Dakota, we are a part of a four-denomination parish which includes a United Methodist church, a Evangelical Lutheran Church of America congregation, an American Baptist congregation, and a United Church of Christ congregation. Currently their pastor is a United Methodist clergy from South Korea! Such ESM arrangements do often allow a community to have at least one full-time clergy, and often the local congregations do cooperate quite well. However, there are real struggles in these ESM's when a pastoral change occurs - due primarily to the different pastoral placement processes in the participating denominations. It is often true, for example, that the United Methodist laity in such an ESM do not understand that lengthy time required by other denominations' placement systems. Indeed, oftentimes those other systems are unable to "call" a pastor, and eventually the ESM parish comes back to the United Methodist bishop and requests an appointed pastor.

The Pilot Project in Our Northeast District

Another "extraordinary" effort to provide pastoral leadership for churches on the prairie lands in the Dakotas is our *Pilot Project* in the Northeast District of our Conference. This project involves the appointment of five "Presiding Elders" rather than one District Superintendent for the NE District. Those five Presiding Elders are continuing to serve their own parish, while also accepting the additional responsibility of leading what we call their "Ministry Area Team" of United Methodist clergy in a smaller geographic area. Each Ministry Team meets monthly (much like a staff of a larger congregation) to pray together, to share concerns, and to coordinate ministry in their Ministry Area. Included in each Ministry Team is a combination of ordained Elders, Deacons, Local Pastors, and Lay Speakers - all of whom are led by a Presiding Elder who also conducts the Charge Conferences in all of their parishes. The Ministry Team also includes lay leadership in their meetings about once a quarter, and those lay leaders help to shape the coordinated ministry plans for their Area.

While this Pilot Project has come obvious financial advantages for our Conference (each Presiding Elder receives a small stipend for extra expenses but the total of those five is less than one- half of the total cost of a full-time District Superintendent), the largest advantage seems to be in reducing the incredible geographic distances faced in a typical district. In the Pilot Project, every pastor is within a 2-hour drive of their Presiding Elder - while in other Districts many pastors are as much as a 5-hour drive away from their District Superintendent. The Pilot Project is also designed to allow more local input into ministry decisions, with less dependency upon the Conference.

While we are in the very early stages of this Pilot Project, it does offer promise for providing, coordinating, and supervising ministry on the frontier/prairie lands of our Dakotas Conference.

Wesley's Critique of These Emerging Efforts to Provide Pastoral Leadership

While it is difficult (some would say impossible) to suppose how John Wesley would evaluate such emerging efforts to provide pastoral leadership on the frontier and prairie lands of the Dakotas, one might speculate the following:

1. Wesley would likely note our failure to revitalize the existing ordained clergy, and thus we have encountered opposition from some of them to any "extraordinary" models of ministry. Indeed, one of our greatest difficulties has been the sense of "clergy comfort" (a term used by one of our District Superintendents) and "obligation" which exists in our Conference. Many of our clergy are more concerned about keeping their present positions, changing their methods as little as possible, and avoiding any of these new and emerging ministry models. It is no surprise, then, that many of these same clergy have voiced the most opposition to such new models. Wesley would encourage more focus upon revitalizing our current clergy, both as a theological issue and as a pragmatic issue.

2. A second critique from a Wesleyan perspective would focus upon our lack of theological interpretation of these new models. This in fact has resulted in too much emphasis upon issues like the "costs" of ministry, especially medical insurance for clergy, as the priority and driving factors for these new models. It was noticeable, for example, that after the Annual Conference voted approval to try this new Pilot Project in one district, many local church newsletters carried this news under headlines which read, "New Project Approved to Save Money." Somehow many people have not been able to see the theological advantages of this new ministry model, and they have only focused upon the monetary issues. For others, the typical "individualism" of the American frontier seems to be their primary value, and they have not seen the vision of team ministry and shared leadership. Wesley would likely remind us to focus upon the mission, purpose, and theological rationale for any "extraordinary" ministry model.

3. A third critique which we might hear from Wesley would be about our failure to provide the appropriate "connection" for our Pilot Project and other emerging models of ministry. It would be fair to say that there has been too little effort to bring larger city parishes together with smaller rural parishes in order to promote dialogue and "conferencing" around mutual issues. Even though our NE District Pilot Project has some aspects of this kind of connection in our "Ministry Area Teams," still many misunderstandings prevail. It is common to hear pastors and laity from larger, city parishes speak of small membership rural churches in very mythic language (statements such as, "Oh, what a lovely little country church"), often underestimating the pain which exists in our prairie churches. Likewise, one often hears persons from small membership churches describe city parishes in language which demonstrates a lack of understanding (phrases such as "Those rich churches in the city"). Wesley would remind us to bring people together more often, to engage them in "conferencing" together about mutual issues, and to call everyone to a higher sense of the mission of Jesus Christ.

Summary Comments

One of the quotes from John Wesley which seems to energize many people in the Dakotas Conference is his statement, "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." Likewise, the Charles Wesley hymn which we sing each year at Annual Conference asks:

“And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face?
Glory and thanks to Jesus give for his almighty grace!

“What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past,
Fightings without, and fears within, since we assembled last!

“Yet out of all the Lord hath brought us by his love;
And still he doth his help afford, and hides our life above.”

Our new and emerging models of ministry for the “extraordinary” circumstances of the prairie lands of the upper Midwest of the USA may not prevent the demise of the people call Methodists. However, one has the sense that by focusing upon the principles and guidelines of Wesley in his use of Lay Preachers and Assistants, and by heeding his likely critique of our new models of ministry, then our people can be better served by pastors and at least have the opportunity to remain true to the spirit and power of the Wesleyan revival here on the re-emerging frontier.