

OXFORD INSTITUTE / Working Group on Systematic  
/Contemporary Theology  
"Good News to the Poor in Wesleyan Tradition"

A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT, GROWTH, TRAINING IN  
RESPONSABILITY AND LEADERSHIP

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1. Support for whom and for what ?

God, through the church, offers special means to support life. In the living body of Christ, people are called for different kinds of ministries, lay or ordained, following natural and spiritual gifts. The church community gathers people in the name of Jesus Christ (Mt 18,20). Part of church's vocation and message is to offer the means for a living community to support life in Christ. But support, training, growth is not only an internal process developed by church. It's a very common mistake to prepare people for the maintenance of the church for itself. Dr. Kraemer said sometime ago that church is mission. To support the life in Christ is to support the life in Christ for mission. The supportive community is not committed to preparing or training specially minded people endowed with leadership gifts to sustain itself. Usually the most brilliant and scholarly formation, when not linked with people and their social conflicts, serves the existing structures of power.

In the movement of a semper reformanda church we need discernment to see the social matrix in which the church is living. The community support, growth and training is neither institutionally oriented nor is it a question for trained individuals without any social concern. We need to think of training and leadership in a way other than that exclusively guided by either personal piety or intellectual formation. Training for ministries and leadership get its raw material in interaction with the social matrix. And in the social matrix we must discern the people to whom the church is being called to be a pastor. The "ordained minister" or pastor is just a part of the total pastoral task and ministry of the church. The church's ministry is to be a pastor of a very diversified flock. One of its tasks is discernment to see what kinds of people are needing more effective pastoral support and training for responsible leadership. The poor people, the scattered flock, who live without a pastor (Ez 34; Mt 9.36; 15.24; 26;31), the suffering masses, the marginalized and excluded people of our "god's machine" (the market, following A. Smith), the starving people, these are the most needed people desirous of the pastoral care and support from the church. To prepare people for leadership in this context means that we cannot avoid the social matrix. We need to be amongst the people, participating in their movements and supporting its popular organizations and civil actions.

John Wesley, minister by the grace of God, had a feeling for the poor, a critical sensitivity for poverty and its consequences. And this was decisive for some of his confrontations with the anglican church structures (with an ideology neglecting the people). The Methodist movement assumed as one of its characteristics, a vocation to meet the needs of the poor people with a message and with supportive communities providing concrete means for releasing suffering. Nevertheless, in accordance with the spirit of those times, Wesley thought of the social matrix as part of the ordo naturalis in opposition, and complement to the ordo salutis. This was an inhibiting factor for a more critical social concept of a committed social life like John Wesley's. He was not able, limited by the resources of his time, to see history and society as a specific and dialectical realm of human life. His commitment for the poor and to deal with some social problems, as good christians for a sane society was but an open door for a more comprehensive understanding of grace, faith and holiness towards a social incarnation of the church in society. Coherently, with the wesleyan horizons of society and history, in our times, there is a qualitative transformation of this correlation of faith and social structures, in a way that neither Wesley, nor his contemporaries could realize.

When we talk today of training and leadership, as christians, we need to be sensitive to the people as the more important factor for reflection and action inspired by God's Grace.

Most of the descriptions and evaluations of the Methodist movement, called attention to the distinguished leadership of the Wesleys, Whitefield, Dr. Coke, and other personalities. It seems, to me, that there is a lack of equilibrium in evaluating the role of English people as far as individuals are concerned. A kairós, is a historical and a social time, a special moment of God's grace in time (Mc 1.15), when people emerge as historical subjects. Charismatic personalities appear or are raised up to serve and to be embodied in a specific time, in a specific people, and in a specific society. The people are the main historical subject, the hermeneutical key for comprehension of Charismatic personalities. And charismatic personalities have no meaning in and for themselves, but for a mission within society and its historical subjects, specially the poor people. Accordingly most of the descriptions of English people of those times, they seem a passive mass, with all the vices to which Methodists and specially, personalities, are committed. Some secular and professional historians were more sensitive and balanced in considering English people as a historical subject with specific historical possibilities where the Methodist movement emerged, than most of the theologians.

The church is an instrument open to permanent renewal. As stated by the protestant principle of ecclesia reformata semper reformanda, but this essential feature of the church is frequently bypassed by a struggle for institutional self-

preservation. A main evidence of this renewal is the rise of new community forms or the rediscovery of the essential ones. Nowadays middle class churches have difficulty to see the poor as the emergence of a new historical subject in society and church. This new subject is rediscovering, or is revealing some essential questions involving Christian community, e.g., the community based on solidarity and the significance of popular movements for faith. The renewal of the church is a "kairos" where some Christians may arise as leaders. However, the authentic subjects are not the personalities ahead of the community. The authentic subject is the people as living community searching ways to be Christian in a specific social matrix. The "kairos" is with the poor people called to live in solidarity. "God is passing amongst the poor" (Mt 11.15)(1).

We live in a historical moment where radicalism of forces of death are confronting the forces of life. The economic injustice has a killing power as it never did before. The expansion of structural injustice makes more visible the idolatrous dimensions of the "god's machine". Many good christians from more privileged classes are asking now, how can they live their faith in this context. One possible answer is very simple: empowering the weak. A Christian community of support, growth and training in these days, must have a clear and a preferential option for the poor. To prepare and support a community cannot be a mere consequence of preparing and supporting individuals. The reverse mode is the right way. To prepare and support the poor people in their communities must be the criteria for training individuals. The rediscovery of essential forms of christian community is being possible because the poor are an emerging subject in the church as well as in society. How to prepare people with the real background of these emergent communities and movements is a question that we must answer according the concrete contexts.

We have instruments for analysis that John Wesley had not. John Wesley's commitment was to a relative new social order, to the reformation of the nation and reformation of the Church. But his firm commitment to the poor, was not without some social and anthropological ambiguities. He did not understand evangelization exclusively as a personal or a individual question. He had a practical social gospel. Yet he had not a vision for re-structuring power or the economic system among the nations, inside England, or even inside the Church.

## 2. Ecclesiolae as supportive community

A living theology cannot arise without the experience of a living community of faith. A living theology needs to be a "practical divinity", as John Wesley called it. John Wesley in practice and in theory distinguished the church and its "means" as Christian institutions, on the one side, and the church as a gathering of the people in Jesus Christ's name and its "prudential means", on the other side. Under the

last title he puts the Methodist societies, the classes and the bands. These prudential means, as he called them, gave to many Christians a community that the institutional order of the church was not able to give. We will discuss this in the next section in a more detailed form. For the moment, I would like to call attention for an ecclesiological proposition: little groups or "informal groups" (as sociologists call them) are not accidental in the church and this from the beginning. They are essential part of it, from a theological viewpoint as much from a sociological one.

It is a relevant ecclesiological question to ask if the church is primarily an institution or an event of little groups gathered in name of Christ. The tension between institution and the concrete form of gathered people is usually the answer for the real conflicts which arose in the history of the church when many "gatherings" were not accepted as real church by the institutional order. However, informal groups are not just possibilities for the church, they are required parts of the church itself. The tensions caused by small groups are always present in the church.

From the beginning christianity lived in small groups. On each time church developed more informal groups with different characteristics. Recent studies point out a pluralistic universe in the apostolic communities of the New Testament times, headed by the Lord's brothers, or the johanine group or some "gatherings in houses" .(2) Diversified small communities were detected in Mediterranean Africa in ancient times. During Middle Ages a number of special communities were created and some of them were crucial for reformation. (3) The importance of these groups seems to me veiled by official versions of church history. We know the role of Moravian communities and English societies within the Methodist movement. The conception of ecclesiola in ecclesia is essentially theological and part of the concept of church itself. Dynamically and dialectically, not only formally or functionally, the church's life is primarily in its roots. The meaning of authority, tradition and doctrine, in a sense, is to empower the roots where life is expressed in a more concrete way.

Bucer, perhaps the reformer more concerned with ecclesiology than any other, tried to put an end to these little congregations in the church. But he became convinced that it was not possible to eradicate these groups without cutting the roots of church. R. Peter, from Strassbourg, wrote the following: "In three papers of 1546 and 1547, Bucer called for the establishment within each parish (Gemeinde), of a community (Gemeinschaft). To put an end to confusion caused by informal groups, he was recommending the formation of informal groups within the church. He agreed with the leaders that the church cannot exist without discipline. Therefore he sought to create cells of committed people who would freely submit to the discipline and would have no ambition except to be the leaven in the mass. Here we have "the little church within the church", so much so that when Spener would launch his idea of the collegia pietatis, he

would cover himself with Bucer's authority by republishing the latter's third paper in 1691 and again in 1692." And Peter concludes: "As it has developed historically, Protestantism has known the two forms of church; in their action and reaction they have had their moments of fruitfulness and their moments of tension." (4)

The real question is that the church, originally presupposes brotherhood, community, friendship, comradeship and supportive gathering. The grassroots are a real challenge for the church. The "parish" was a creation or, better, a historical adaptation from the Roman Empire that fits well with its institutional aspects: hierarchy, order, institutional goals, unity, "episkopein" and church official delegates around the world and among the nations. My former teacher R. Mehl points out two defects in the parish conception: "One is that geographical boundaries are most often arbitrary, in the sense that they do not coincide with a genuinely human area and that consequently the bond which is supposed to exist among the faithful has no natural basis. Moreover, the parish assembly does not make possible the formation of a community. The communion in Word and Sacrament, however intense it may be, has no follow-up; it is not translated into any shared project. simply because, once they leave the church, the faithful do not meet again until the next gathering in church, whether on the next Sunday for some or at more distant date for others, and because if they do meet again they do not recognize one another."

"The second defect is that the parish systematises the duality of sacred and profane. It is, in effect, offering a shelter for all who, as the saying goes, "have spiritual needs" and regard themselves "harmonious souls" (in the Hegelian sense of the words). But these fine spirits continue to lead a secular existence that is unchanged, except perhaps in the limited sphere of personal and familial life. ...In other words, the parish community is an artificial community." (5) These important considerations give us a key to see the ecclesiola in ecclesia, as an essential component of the church. In an anthropological and theological perspective, small groups are more fitted to create authentic communities and to establish concrete relationships with the world in terms of service and projects than traditional parish.

Mehl comments that Jesus de-absolutized natural bonds (familial, professional, racial, cultural, political, etc.) but re-affirmed them in another level. The twofold aspects are dialectically correlated: to refuse conformation with the world's ways and to affirm that the missionary community travelling the road with human beings belong together as church's mission.

There is a tendency for parish to affirm orthodoxy, and the tendency of small groups to affirm orthopraxis (Wesley himself did not see opinion or doctrine as the main part of religion). We have corruption if we have orthodoxy without orthopraxis as well as a distortion if we affirm orthopraxis

without orthodoxy. But it is a real factor for renewal of the church that the ecclesiola in ecclesia provides the roots for ~~life in community and for projects that may renew the~~ relationship of church with society. The established church often re-acted in history as it viewed these churches within the church as a threat for itself. When the roots were cut at the same time some base for renewing was lost.

A community that offers support for training, growth and leadership cannot prepare people for establishment as a self-centered organic institution. Formal and non-formal training get its vigour from its more fragile roots because these fragile roots have much more intercourse with the concrete and ordinary life in specific ways than any other form of church.

### 3. Ecclesiolae as an essential constituent of church support for training and growing

As some Methodist scholars pointed out, Outler for example, the distinctiveness of Methodist conception of church as the "little churches within". To prepare leadership is to prepare people for firm commitments. Theologically, anthropologically and sociologically, the church depends on base communities to improve leadership within concrete social structures. The future for training and personal growth in a real Christian sense cannot be dissociated from the practice and projects linked with the people involved in struggles for justice or breaking barriers, creating new forms of solidarity and interpersonal life. The distinctiveness of the Methodist conception of church is a sine qua non condition for the church really committed to community and mission with a special concern for these aspects. And these "small gatherings" founded on solidarity are the main instrument to insert christian practices in the ordinary actions and conflicts of society.

David Watson in his study on the The Early Methodist Class Meeting (6), tries to see the class in a theological perspective. He calls attention to the fact that real marturia presupposes a more profound solidarity than institutional bonds can create. Faith traditioning has been a process much more dependent on communal interpersonal relationship than on institutional means. He grounds this perspective upon some of Wesley's ecclesiological considerations. John Wesley did not profess the doctrine of invisible church, at least as it appears in Luther and other reformers. The visible church upon the earth needs much more attention and it is the visible church of Christ that matters for the ordo salutis ("According to the twentieth article, the visible Church of England is the congregation of English believers, in which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered. (But the word "Church" is, sometimes, employed by John Wesley in the broadest sense for "a congregation professing to believe". So it is taken in the

twenty-sixtieth article; and in the first, second and third chapters of Revelation)" (7) Wesley develops his ecclesiology on two bases: from Anglican ecclesiology (including the experience of English Christian societies since the XVIIth century) and from a practical ecclesiology he learned from pietists (specially the Moravians). However, Wesley thought the ecclesiola in ecclesia was non essential for church concept. So, in theory prevails the institutional doctrine of church, meanwhile in practice he cannot avoid the broadest interpretation of church as expressed in other writings.

Wesley clearly differentiated "institutional means" from the "prudential" ones: "That with regard to these little prudential helps we are continually changing one thing after another, it is not weakness or fault, as you imagine, but a peculiar advantage we enjoy. But this means we declare them all to be merely prudential, not essential, not of divine institution. We prevent, so far as in us lies, their growing formal or dead. We are always open to instruction; willing to be wiser every day than we were before, and to change whatever we can change for the better. ...You seem not to have observed, that the Scripture, in most points, gives only general rules; and leaves the particular circumstances to be adjusted by the common sense of mankind." (8)

By the influence of Edward Stillingfleet and Peter King, Wesley adopted a latitudinarian view of the apostolic church and of hierarchy. Hierarchy and institution are oriented for order and unity, but cannot restrain freedom for a living faith. He affirmed that prudential means can change every time it is needed. It is implicit that prudential means, although not essential and unchangeable as institutional means, are necessary and constitutive for a church conception and practice. Both institutional means and the prudential ones, are necessary for church and for a vital and living faith. In practical ecclesiology, small groups for fellowship, comradeship, mutual progress in faith and holiness, in works of piety and works of mercy, is a constitutive principle for church existence (as small groups are constitutive for the existence of society itself). In practice, Wesley worked in this direction. The emphasis falls in the gathered church in the name of Christ and having its holy origin in him, as in the description we find in his "Letter to a Roman Catholic": "I believe that Christ by his Apostles gathered unto himself a church, to which he has continually added such as shall be saved; that this catholic, that is, universal, church, extending to all nations and all ages, is holy in all its members, who have fellowship with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; that they have fellowship with the holy angels, who constantly minister to these heirs of salvation; and with all the members of Christ o earth, as well as all who are departed in his faith and fear." (9)

The ecclesiola in ecclesia principle is not merely a pietist or methodist mark. It is constituent of the church although not specially instituted by Christ. It is constituent for church practice and for church living faith

in the world. The small groups in the church have a dynamic and liberating power. Personal religion without these groups, usually degenerate in individualism. To share experiences and common projects, to instruct and to exhort one another, to project life in community and society, practical christianity in short, is not possible without a supportive structure. We are frequently exhorted, by John Wesley, to keep close with the established church, its authorities and its public ordinances. However the ecclesiola cannot be strangled by the ecclesia. Watson says that "the larger ecclesia must be affirmed as inherently valid and necessary if the freedom of ecclesiola is to be exercised responsibly." (10) The ecclesiola, finally, seems to me socially congenial with the practical origins and a constituent of church, as much as instituted means are part of the historically established church.

#### 4. The Methodist Classes and Ecclesial Base Communities

Since the Christian church realized that we live in a profound ecclesiological crisis, specially in the second half of this century, there is a quest for ~~new~~ forms of community in the church. The examples grow in number with a common desire and different goals. The common desire is to share christian life. The proposed ideals are extremely diverse. Sometimes oppose one to another. We have new communities trying to rescue the traditional structures of the church. Other groups are committed to a more experimental christian life, but in complete obedience to the institutional order, serving at the same time the hierarchy and the institutional ideals. Some others try to adapt Christian demands to the life-style of more privileged classes. It is a matter of fact that we have pluralistic community experiences.

I think that Methodist Classes and Ecclesial Base Communities, as we have in Latin America and in other places, specially in the Third World, spring out from particular situations of the church and from the poor people. These two movements present characteristics that gave them much more relevance for marginalized people from the social and ecclesiastical structures. The poor people in their struggles for survival were marginalized by social structures and were abandoned by ecclesiastical structures. The frustration of the poor people with the church does not smash their hopes from christian inspiration.

Under these movements, beyond its social and pastoral strategies, we can discern some profound questions having to do with the meaning of Christianity and Christian church for our times. And, at the same time, they have to do with the meaning of life, the meaning of human beings in concrete and conflicting situations.

We will try to see, despite the cultural and historical distance, the similar points and meanings we discern between the two movements:

1. As a first point, Base Communities as Methodist classes, are equated with those who were not attended by

*Base  
similarities*

traditional structures of church, specially the poor, as the favourite place of God's revelation and grace. "The poor have the Gospel preached to them". Wesley considered himself a God's minister to serve the poor. Both movements made the poor people more visible for church and society;

2. Another common characteristic and a fundamental one, is that Methodist Classes and Ecclesial Base communities were a seminal source for a re-creation or a re-invention of the Church, not beginning with the existing structures, but with the people of the grassroots. They are not the kind of movements desiring partial reforms, renewing some functional aspects or adding some appendices to existing structures. They begin with the poor and meet the concrete needs of the people, providing a new form of community life having in the center a new form of sharing the Bible (this is particularly true respecting the Ecclesial Base Communities where the poor people rediscovered that the Bible contains a story springing from the same kind of people as themselves). The emergence of the poor people as subject in decisions, interpretation and action is the central element of these movements that search to renew the church. In this "ecclesio-genesis" (as Leonardo Boff called it, in the case of Base Communities) was, at the same time, the rediscover of the horizons for an another kind of ecumenicity;

3. A third common mark of similar nature is that both, the Methodist Classes and Ecclesial Base Communities had tremendous troubles to be recognized as "Christian communities". Despite all John Wesley's efforts to maintain the Methodist Societies and its classes as "Christian gatherings" in the church, the rejection forced these Societies to find their own way. The first Base Communities had the same trouble, and by a patient struggle with hierarchy and Bishop's Assemblies (Medellin, 1968) they were finally recognized as Ecclesial Base Communities. In more recent years the Catholic Church, the higher hierarchy, is doing its best to destroy the Christian vigour of these grassroots communities, with autocratic decisions aligning them to the control of parish structures, limiting them in a functionalist system, marginalizing the more progressive bishops, policing and spying, or closing, the most important Catholic schools of Theology (specially in Brazil) as well as punishing some theologians (as Leonardo Boff, who is asking now for disconnection and release from his votes as Franciscan Brother);

4. A fourth common mark between Methodist Classes and Ecclesial Base Communities is that both challenged the church for a new reformation. The instituted church (theologically as well as sociologically) had no ear to hear the voice of the poor claiming for new forms of church, more missionary, more democratic and devoted primarily for the weak. The church cannot recreate the living tissues of life in human relationships of men and women if it refuses to recreate its ruined tissues. Ecclesial Base Communities challenged not only the traditional ecclesiastical structures but the theological abstract systems as well;

5. A fifth similar characteristic is that both had social and political consequences for the people and society as a whole. The irruption of the poor as an historical subject introduced a strong point of discussion in the political and economic agenda of the world. The voice of the poor are still sounding in many ears.

### Conclusion

The church has not learned yet that we cannot close history and the historical subjects in a system or formal structures. Our churches did not learn to live with the vigour of the weak roots. We have a Portuguese proverb saying that "God writes straight with crooked lines". The church is too much preoccupied with the ecclesiastical straight lines, but it is writing a tortuous way forgetting the poor.

In this time we have a big loss of hope, a loss of points of contact with reality, and a radicalism between the more empowered rich, and a weakened poor. In these times we need connection with the poor and attention in supporting people, preparing and training leadership with new patterns. We need pastoral agents and new ministries open to all believers, specially living and learning with the poor, sharing life, sharing love, with the force springing out of the weakness as the Christian first fruits of a new order.

### Notes:

1. Shaull, R. - "The Christian Base Communities and the Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda.", in The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 12 (2), July 1991, p 202.

2. Schmitt, J. - "The Johanne Group and Apostolic Christianity", in Informal Groups in the Church, Cerdic Colloquium, Strasbourg, The Pickwick Press, Pittsburgh, 1975, p 183 ff.

3. Rapp, F. - "Informal Groups at the End of the Middle Ages: Rhenish Types", in Informal Groups in The Church, p 197 ff.

4. Peter, R. - "Informal Groups in the Reformation: Rhenish Types", in Informal Groups in the Church, p 231.

5. Mehl, R. - "Informal Groups in the Church: A Protestant Viewpoint.", in Informal Groups in the Church, p 264-265.

6. Watson, D. L. - The Early Methodist Class Meeting, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, 1985.

7. Wesley, J. - "Minutes on Some Late Conversations", in The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Emory Ed., v 5, p 197.

8. Wesley, J. - "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists", in The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Emory Ed., v 5, p 180. For a more systematic distinction between institutional and prudential means, see, in the same

volume, "The Minutes of Several Conversations", p 228 f.

9. Wesley, J. - "A Letter to a Roman Catholic", The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Emory Ed., v 5, p 763.

10. Watson, R. L. - The Early Methodist Class Meeting, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, 1985, p 127.