This is less a paper, more a report from the front line. It is my opportunity to open what I am doing in my daily work to the scrutiny of those who know much more about the Wesleys than I do and to note your comments and suggestions.

It may or may not surprise you to learn that, in spite of a Methodist theological education which was felt at the time to be one of the best available, I emerged from theological college with what I now perceive to be a rather inadequate understanding of the Wesleys. I was happy to go along with the usual mythology of John the travelling evangelist and Charles the domesticated hymn-writer. I was happy to use Charles' hymns to give gravitas to worship and to use the exploits of John as illustrative material for sermons. The lack of deeper insights did not appear to be a particular handicap in my work as a Methodist Minister amongst those who I assumed were as at ease with the legend as I.

This all changed when I went, only slightly unwillingly, not to Aldersgate Street but to Bristol. I was charged with creating a ministry in the centre of a city where Methodism had long ago moved out to the suburbs. The move brought to mind what it must feel like to be parachuted behind enemy lines. There were a few friendly faces amongst the pastors of city centre Churches, though they also felt isolated from the mainstream of their own denominations. Their congregations consisted largely of people who passed other Churches to attend and who therefore sought some esoteric manifestation of religion which only the city Churches could offer or were avoiding, for their own reasons, their neighbourhood Church.

There was also the New Room, John Wesley's Chapel, miraculously preserved through the ravages of Methodist fragmentation, its sale to the Welsh Calvinists, the Bristol blitz and the major post-war redevelopment of the city centre, a true haven of peace in a bustling commercial and administrative centre. There was no congregation or Sunday worship, only lunchtime services in Advent and Lent and occasional musical programmes. The worship room was indeed peaceful and used as a haven by individuals seeking a quiet space in the middle of the city. The living rooms above were presented as a museum, with plenty of curios in glass cases, and, if you happened to call on the right day, a small band of people with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of Methodism. Unfortunately, most of this was quite inaccessible to me as I did not know the right question to ask in order to release this knowledge or to gain insights from the historic artefacts. What must it be like for someone with an even sketchier knowledge of the origins of our Church?

As I sought a base for my city centre work, I met a South African Minister visiting the New Room. As we stood together upstairs in the Living Rooms, he was clearly excited at being in the oldest Methodist building in the world. In his
enthusiasm, he waved his arms in the sacred space and declared, "This is the theology of Wesley in bricks and mortar! Worship and living all under one roof - no division!". In a few breathless sentences, he opened my eyes to the building which had been a prototype theological college where the early preachers studied together and worshipped together in the context of a flexible building in which the gospel was proclaimed, the faithful gathered for fellowship, medicine was dispensed, education promoted and the hungry fed. From here prisoners were visited and the poor relieved. This was my theology too! It was time to reassess the Wesleys, to begin again with Methodism.

As I began to read of the coming of the Wesleys to Bristol, I heard many echoes of my own journey into the heart of this city. They did not come to a barren land. Like Elijah, they discovered others who 'had not bowed the knee to Baal'. They visited the religious Societies which were already here and by their presence galvanised them into active fellowships which grew to the point where a new room was required in which to meet and to serve the city's poor. I too had not come into a vacuum, but needed to find a way of developing what I found into a vibrant and creative network of fellowships which would resurrect the life of faith in the centre of the city. Our Church has become adept at dealing with life in the suburbs. There is where our largest Churches flourish and where we deal best with the issues related to how people live at home, family life, personal morality, etc. We do less well in the city, the place of work, where power is exercised and wealth created, and with the issues of the city - politics, the ethics of the work place, the lack of community. The Wesleys took what they found, and for the rest, made it up as they went along. That is a way of working with which I am quite content.

Because the city and living in the city are now completely different from how it was when the Wesleys came, there can be no simple following of the previous pattern. In fact, nobody lives in the city at the moment. A million people are in the city during the day, but they all go home again in the evening. Community, and in the Church fellowship, will therefore be of a different order. People will belong in short cycles, forming close but short-term relationships. Changed working patterns mean that no-one has a proper lunch break and can only attend something less than three minutes walk from their place of work in the middle of the day. Gatherings must be brief, well ordered, temporary yet engaging. Immediate issues must be addressed. Deep, but short-term relationships fostered.

There are each day in the city those who are fully members of Churches elsewhere and who have a natural interest and investment in kingdom activity. There are also those who have a latent or tolerant respect for the Church, who do not normally attend, but who are open to becoming involved in something which seems relevant to them. And there are those who are antithetic
to religion yet who share some of our values and are willing to act in concert on issues in the city, e.g. homelessness. It seems possible to engage with each of these groups by providing some pattern of city centre worship, by offering quiet space for reflection, by gathering people around issues. It must be possible to create temporary, flexible styles of fellowship which are nevertheless deep and meaningful. It happens in a variety of social contexts. There has to be a Method in the Church! Can we become Methodists because of our practice rather than our heritage?

There hang in the New Room two portraits of John Wesley. The old man looks at ease with himself, determined but mellow. The younger man of 35 has yet to have the Aldersgate Street experience etched onto his features. He displays his impatience, his prickly arrogance, his driven-ness. It was this younger who bullied and cajoled believers into his methodical practice of the Christian life. That God's love and grace were with him is evident. Wesley's manner of itself would not have convinced so many. My own experience is that people have to be inspired rather than regimented into Christian living. There has to be discipline in discipleship, but the discipline of the free, coming from the heart, rather than the discipline of the book of rules. What we have often done is to make people feel guilty rather than saved.

With all these factors in mind and having re-read, as if for the first time the Journals of both John and Charles a plan of action began to develop. There could be offered in the centre of the city a free association of any who sought meaning in city centre life, who sought to express meaning and value through companionship and service to others and who were happy to be associated with the person of Jesus. This association should recognise the limitations and opportunities of the city and would need a structure if it were to be coherent. Its values would be proclaimed in its way of working but its theology would develop in response to the actual experience of belonging. There being so few examples of truly city centre spirituality, we would learn to worship by worshipping together. For the details, we would make them up as we went along.

The idea of companionship appealed, partly because the word "fellowship", like "love", has lost its force by overuse, and partly because of its root meaning, those who eat bread together. So the Companions of John Wesley began in 1994 as a small group of individuals who were prepared to commit themselves to prayer, to reading the Bible, to meeting together, to contributing to the cost and to engaging with "the Poor".

Each day, at 7.45 a.m., 1.10 and 7.30 p.m. somebody is praying. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you can pause and join them briefly or at length. If you forget, some
one will probably be praying anyway. The times of prayer coincide with events which happen at those times on particular days so sometimes prayer is communal as well as individual. When we are together, the style of prayer centres in a stillness that allows us to be content with silence or to intercede in detail.

Each week, we are asked to read the key lesson set for the following Sunday. If we remember, when (and if) the preacher expounds it, some prior thought should increase our appreciation of the Word. If we forget, perhaps the preacher will do the job for us! This text will form the focus for our worship, which will include some conversation about the Bible passage.

Although these ways of prayer and Bible reading allow plenty of scope for individual effort, we are committed to meet. There are a range of options from a breakfast to a lunchtime service to running a drop-in for people begging. People set their own pattern of attendance. We have not yet had to face problems of only spasmodic meeting.

There are modest costs to all of this, but not enough at present to warrant serious appeals for funds. Nevertheless, I am impressed by what has been called John Wesley's "evangelical economics", how you spend your money shows what you really believe in. We each pay 50p per week, whether we attend anything or not, just to say that we are actually committed to this. At the moment, companions tend to be deeply committed to a range of other Christian projects. If we begin to attract people without such commitments, the Companions would challenge them (and ourselves) to consider appropriate levels of giving.

And we cannot proclaim good news except to the poor. John's first text in the open air on the edge of the city declared this to be the way of God's Kingdom. This is not about charity, but personal engagement. So we each find opportunities for face to face encounters, to listen to people's stories, to hear their views, and, humbly and gladly, to share something of all that we have learned of grace. Each may find their own "poor"; it is not hard. Part of the fellowship, part of the reflection on Scripture, part of the prayer is fed by these experiences. We have created one engagement of our own. The Preachers' Stable at the New Room has been cleared of the accumulated rubbish of the years and is now open each Monday evening to receive those who beg on the city's street. We offer tea, coffee, soup, etc and try to listen, to understand the 'whys' and 'nows' of poverty.

This project has a long way to go before too many claims can be made for it. It is an attempt to let theology lead rather than follow, to make explicit the treasures of our heritage and to interpret our past in terms of vision and hope.