

In 2003, Methodists celebrated John Wesley's 300th

by William Kellon Quick

The cry heard from a Church of England rectory in the small Lincolnshire town of Epworth in northeast England heralded the arrival of the 15th of 19 children of the Rev. Samuel and Susanna Annesley Wesley. John Benjamin Wesley was born June 17, 1703-the second son after 13 girls.



Samuel and
Susanna Wesley

Three hundred years later-2003 A.D.-the global Wesleyan family of faith celebrated that birth. Founder of the Methodist movement in 18th-century England, John Wesley has been called the single most influential Protestant leader of the English-speaking world since the Reformation.

Ten of Susanna and Samuel's 19 children survived infancy-three sons and seven daughters. The sons: Samuel Jr., John and Charles became ordained priests in the Church of England. The seven daughters who survived-Emilia, Susanna, Mary, Anne, Hetty, Martha and Kezia-led difficult lives coping with poverty and family problems.

On a wintry night, February 9, 1709, a fire raged through the Epworth rectory. Susanna, braving the fire, scorched her legs and feet while helping to rescue her family. When the family reached safety, they discovered 5-year-old John was missing.

Fearing his son had died, Samuel knelt down and commended John's soul to God. But when his mother called his name, the child, apparently awakened by the flaming heat, light and noise, appeared in his second-story bedroom window. Two quick-minded villagers rescued him seconds before the rectory roof collapsed.

From then on, Susanna had a particular sense of destiny about John. She saw him not just as a child of the parsonage but a child of Providence-"a brand plucked from the burning."

At age 11, John was enrolled as a charity pupil at Charterhouse School in London. Six years later he applied for a scholarship at Oxford, and in 1721, entered Christ Church College. In 1726, he was elected a fellow of Lincoln College and returned to Epworth to assist his father as a parish priest.



Epworth Rectory

Returning to Oxford in 1728, his brother Charles, a student at Christ Church, invited John to lead a small group of students, including George Whitefield, who met for daily prayer and Bible study, visiting prisoners in Oxford jails and caring for the poor. They were

ridiculed and mocked by their classmates as “Bible bigots,” “Bible moths,” “the Holy Club” and “Methodists” because of their methodical approach to spiritual disciplines.

Following their father’s death and with their mother’s encouragement, John and Charles accepted an invitation in 1735 to go as missionaries to the new colony of Georgia in what would become the United States.

John went as a pastor to English-speaking colonists in Savannah and missionary to Native Americans; Charles went as secretary to General Oglethorpe.

Two years into the mission, discouraged and painfully dispirited, sensing that his Georgia ministry was a failure, John abruptly fled Savannah. On Christmas Eve 1737, he set sail from Charleston, S.C., to London.

Their return was the prelude to life-changing events that would be recorded in 1738 when Charles, on May 21, experienced a long-sought peace in his soul. Three days later on May 24, in a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, John’s heart, in his words, would be “strangely warmed.”

After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley traveled and preached the gospel across Britain. He organized his converts into small groups or “societies” that met regularly for prayer, Bible study and the deepening of the spiritual life.

During his 53-year ministry, he traveled 250,000 miles on horseback and by carriage. He preached more than 40,000 sermons, sometimes four a day, and wrote or edited some 400 books and tracts. His concern for the poor led him to open free medical dispensaries and homes for orphans and widows and provide loan funds. He also began a ministry to prisoners and to the military.



The Holy Club

When Wesley’s voice fell silent, when his eyes closed for the last time that March morning, he left behind a movement of 71,463 Methodists in Great Britain and more than 80,000 in the United States. He had launched an evangelical revival that would, in time, girdle the globe and “offer Christ” to the nations. The global Wesleyan community today numbers more than 76 million persons in 138 countries.