

Faith Working Through Love: The Wesleyan Traditions Today

**WTS and Bahamas Wesleyan Fellowship Celebrate
Tri-Centenary of John Wesley's Birth, 8-10 January 2003**

by

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From 8-10 January 2003, scholars, pastors, church executives and laity gathered in Nassau, The Bahamas, for an International Conference in Celebration of the 300th Anniversary of the Birth of the Reverend John Wesley. The event was hosted by the Bahamas Wesleyan Fellowship and co-sponsored by the Wesleyan Theological Society. Planning was led by the Reverend Carl Campbell, longtime WTS member and pastor of Heritage of Redeeming Love Methodist Church, Nassau, The Bahamas¹ in consultation with Professor Barry Callen, editor of the Wesleyan Theological Journal. The Conference met at the Bahamian owned and managed Nassau Beach Hotel, just a few minutes from the center of Nassau. This was the first international conference of the U.S. based Wesleyan Theological Society.

Arguably, the high point of the conference was an ecumenical church service at Ebenezer Methodist Church, the oldest Methodist church building in The Bahamas (built 1802). Gathered under the theme, "Born to Serve the Lord," it was perhaps the most ecumenical gathering of the Methodist family ever held. At this service were representatives of the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church of the Bahamas, Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, independent Methodist congregations, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Church, the Church of God (Cleveland) and Church of God of Prophecy, Church of the Brethren, Church of God (Anderson), the Seventh-Day Adventists, Baptists, the United Church of Belgium, the Methodist Church of Mexico and the United Methodist Church (U.S.A.). This historic and unprecedented diversity and participation in the conference of Wesley's children, grand-children and great-grand-children, united in worship of God, honoring of Wesley

¹ A number of important essays were presented by Carl Campbell in the extensive program of the conference: Faith Working Through Love: Wesleyan Traditions Today. An International Christian Conference [Conference Program] (Nassau: n.p., 2003). These included: "Reflections on WTS" [p.27], "Understanding the Wesleyan Theological Society" [pp. 29-31], and, "Bahamians Who Have Attended the Wesleyan Theological Society Since 1991" [p. 48]. See also Mavis A. Holmes-Hanek, "Reflections on WTS Influences," Ibid., 48, and E. Brian Seymour, "The Wesleyan Theological Society: My Experience," Faith Working Through Love [Conference Program], 54. Several members of WTS accepted invitations to the Bahamas during the past decade: "W.T.S. Visitors to the Bahamas," Faith Working Through Love [Conference Program], 50.

and in the singing of Methodist hymns, augurs well for the future of the tradition. Dr. Anderson, Superintendent of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, came from Panama to participate in the conference and to preach at the worship service. A number of the representatives served as chairs and moderators of the conference lectures.

The main body of the conference was devoted to a series of lectures by WTS and Bahamas Wesleyan Fellowship members. The first lecture, by Dr. Gail Saunders, Director of the Archives of the Bahamas, commented on the development of Methodism in the Bahamas from its beginnings until the present.² She highlighted the missionary origins of the tradition and the role of the Methodist church in the development of education, primarily for the elite, in the Islands before the advent of Majority Rule in 1967.³

This was followed by a lecture entitled "Thomas Coke, the Bahamas and the Beginnings of Methodist Mission" by David Bundy, President of the Wesleyan Theological Society. He argued that while Wesley and Coke created cultural space for Methodist mission and developed a tradition of self-supporting mission,⁴ Methodist mission in the Bahamas (and in many other places in the Caribbean) was, in the early period, initiated, led, guided and funded by persons of African descent. Special attention was given to Joseph and Sussanah Paul from New York who had recently purchased their freedom, and Anthony Wallace. African-American missionaries to the Bahamas from South Carolina sent by William Hammett who had become estranged from Thomas Coke failed miserably and publicly. The Pauls and their three children arrived at Abaco Island, the Bahamas, on 30 November 1783, served a year as indentured servants to pay their fare, and moved to Nassau sometime after 1788. They began the first Methodist services in Nassau. African-American missionaries to the Bahamas from South Carolina sent by William Hammett, who had become estranged from Thomas Coke, failed miserably. By 1802, there were 160 Methodists in the Society, all Black. For more than a decade, the Methodist revival in the Bahamas had been undertaken without assistance from any missionary society. In the sources it is clear that it was African-Bahamian, self-supporting, self-governing and self-perpetuating. After the arrival on 22 October 1802 of the first Methodist missionary, William Turton, little changed until he and later arriving missionaries established worship centers primarily for Whites both on Eleuthera (1805)

² Well known scholar and archivist of The Bahamas, Gail Saunders, has, among other titles, published: Slavery in the Bahamas, 1648-1838 (Nassau: n.p., 1985); Social Life in the Bahamas, 1880s-1920s (Nassau: Rosebud, 1996); Bahamian Loyalists and their Slaves (London: Macmillan, 1983).

³ See also, Colbert Williams, The Methodist Contribution to Education in the Bahamas (circa 1790-1975) (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1982). A different, and very important perspective is found in: Nadeen Beneby, "A Brief History of Methodism in the Bahamas. From Joseph Paul to Autonomy," in Faith Working Through Love [Conference Program], 38-40.

⁴ See also, D. Bundy, "Pauline Missions: The Wesleyan Holiness Vision," in Charles Yrigoyen, ed. The Global Impact of the Wesleyan Traditions and their Related Movements (Pietist and Wesleyan Studies, 14; Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

and in Nassau (1811). The development of congregations among the Whites and the increased ease of travel for missionaries from the British Isles led to the segregation of the Methodist Church, the exclusion of Black Methodists from educational opportunities and to other compromises on racial and class issues.

Randy Maddox, Seattle Pacific University, lectured on “John Wesley as Holistic Healer: Reclaiming a Strand of the Wesleyan Tradition.” He emphasized Wesley’s concern that Christ might “heal body and soul together. He wants to give you ... both inward and outward health [Letter to A. Knox, 26/10/78, Letters (Telford) 6:327]. Wesley recognized the connection between the physical and the spiritual, understood the need for communal support for achieving and maintaining health, advocated using the best science of the day, and was concerned about the professionalization and increasing costs of medical care. The increasing cost of access to medical advice prevented the poor and middle classes from having access to information that was available in the public domain. Wesley used the most recent texts to access medical treatments and procedures, organized them in his Primitive Physick and then took his medical expertise to the poor and members of his societies. Maddox gave particular attention was given to Wesley’s Primitive Physick and its sources.

Dr. J. Emmette Weir, a much-published minister of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, contributed a lecture entitled “Concern for the Poor in Wesleyan and Liberation Theology.”⁵ Weir described the concern for the poor in the early Methodist revival and suggested that the concern for the poor in liberation theology is parallel and analogous. Wesley and Gutierrez, suggested Weir, were making similar arguments about exploitation of the poor, the structural evil imbedded in the culture and the need to change the structures of society to enfranchise the poor.

Professor Jean-Pierre Van Noppen, Free University of Brussels, is a specialist in English language and literature and has pioneered the use of computer technologies for analyzing language and texts.⁶ A Belgian member of the United Church, from a long time Methodist family, Van Noppen lectured on “Reading Wesley Today: With the Computer and With the Heart.” Using the Works of Wesley on CD-ROM and OxUP WordSmith to perform word and frequency counts, Van Noppen was able to establish the first forty key words in the Jackson edition of Wesley’s works, in the Sermons, and in John Wesley’s Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists. The most frequently used terms revealed the central theological themes and hermeneutical processes of the Wesley texts. These were found to be in radical discontinuity with a corpus of other standard and popular eighteenth century literary texts, including contributions by both American and British authors. Using the results of this research, Van Noppen went on to discuss central questions posed in international Methodist research. He responded to claims that Methodist discourse was manipulative, and that it was politically and socially

⁵ J. Emmette Weir, Sow Seeds of Hope (Nassau: Executive Printers, 1984); idem, March on Bahamaland (Nassau: Media Publishing, 1998).

⁶ Jean-Pierre Van Noppen, Transforming Words: The Early Methodist Revival from a Discourse Perspective (Religions and Discourse, 3; Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang, 1999).

reactionary. These are central questions that must be addressed if Wesley is to have a continuing influence in the evolution of Christian thought. Van Noppen provided innovative methodological and theoretical approaches for responding to critics of the Methodist revivals.

Dr. Patrick Roberts, M.D., a Methodist layperson and medical doctor for the Bahamian Olympic Sports Program, lectured on "Sports in the Bahamas: Influence of Religion on Sports Performance." He insisted that there is a close relationship between sports and religion, on both personal and performance levels. This is seen in the use of prayer as a tool to prepare for competition and to readjust after competition. It is also seen as a major factor in developing solidarity on the sports teams. In a nation where Christianity is not marginalized as in the U.S.A. and Europe, the role of religion can be and is more overt and less restricted by social structures and court decisions. This has afforded the athletes freedom of expression of religion and Roberts access to pursue his research that would not be available in the other contexts.

Dr. Clark Pinnock, McMaster Divinity College, presented a lecture entitled "The Beauty of God: John Wesley's Reform and its Aftermath." Pinnock expressed gratitude to Wesley for "his revivalism and his advocacy of Holiness." He asserted that Wesley provides "a better way to read the Bible...following a personalistic (biblical) rather than an absolutist (philosophical) conception of God." Wesley's approach and contribution were framed in the context of the evolution of the debate about "freedom" in the Church. It was noted that except for Augustine (who adopted Manichaeian understandings of Predestination) the early church considered theories of determinism to be heretical. The Augustinian bent of the magisterial reformation meant that it did not arrive at new paradigms. Wesley's contribution was "a truly relational model" of God and humans. He allowed as how his own search for God and a paradigm for Christian living might have been facilitated by an earlier encounter with the theology and praxis of John Wesley.

Professor M. William Ury, Wesley Biblical Seminary, contributed "A Wesleyan Concept of 'Person.'" ⁷ Ury explored the structures of Wesley's assertion, "I want, I value, I preach, the love of God and man." [Works, XII: 62-63]. He noted the need for a clear understanding of "person" in Wesley if one is to understand the nature of God, of humans and of their interaction. Ury demonstrated that Wesley, did not clearly distinguish between attribute and essence but insisted on a "logic" of "trinity, holiness, love." The concept of "trinity" is central to Ury's analysis of Wesleyan theology and spirituality. Significantly, Ury insists that Wesley's understanding of God and of divine relationality cannot be grounded alone in either the eastern Christian or Latin traditions.

Professor Thomas J. Oord, ⁸ Northwest Nazarene University, spoke to those assembled for the closing luncheon banquet on the subject, "Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love."

⁷ M. William Ury, Trinitarian Personhood: Investigating the Implications of a Relational Definition (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, Publishers, 2002).

⁸ Thomas J. Oord and Bryan P. Stone, Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001)

Taking as central to Wesleyan theology a concept of “love,” Oord reflected on the efficaciousness of the values of the Enlightenment and Post-Modernity as tools for articulating Wesley’s concerns. Many of the values of the enlightenment, he insisted, facilitated the Wesleyan revivals. The Enlightenment provided a base for the Wesleyan insistence on individual responsibility before humans and God, individual salvation, the experience of holiness in community. The optimism of the Enlightenment provided a basis for calling for social transformation and redemption of the world. Also at the luncheon, a painting commissioned for the Conference was unveiled. The world-renowned Bahamian painter and sculptor Antonius Roberts produced the work. The painting will be shown at various Methodist gatherings and conferences during the tri-centenary year.⁹

The final colloquy was led by Professor Donald W. Dayton, Azusa Pacific University. Dayton reflected on the ecumenical nature of the event, and identified ten visions of Wesley available in the secondary literature. He noted that each of these understandings of Wesley has a certain validity, in that each can be defended in the life and work of Wesley. However, it was Wesley’s ability to hold all of these realities in living tension that made possible his multi-faceted ministry. Dayton urged those present to develop a vision of Wesley that is sufficiently complicated to be true to Wesley and sufficiently complex to address the needs of the world.

It is anticipated that the papers of this Conference will be published. It will also be important for the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Bahamas Wesleyan Fellowship to nurture this newly collaborative relationship and to explore together other forms of discussion with the larger Wesleyan world.

⁹ “The Antonius Roberts Painting,” Faith Working Through Love [Conference Program], 15.