

John Wesley's Plan for Multiplication

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Excerpted from the book,
The Rise and Fall of Movements
by Steve Addison

Steve Addison is a catalyst for movements that multiply disciples and churches everywhere. He is an author, speaker, podcaster and mentor to movement pioneers. This article is an edited extract from his new book, *The Rise and Fall of Movements: A Roadmap for Leaders*. Visit Steve at movements.net.

Growth phase—John Wesley and the Methodist movement

No one would have predicted that John Wesley would be among the great founders and builders of a multiplying movement. Wesley, the founder of Methodism, went to America hoping to convert the Indians. But he returned to England despairing of his own salvation, wondering, "Who shall convert me?"

On May 24, 1738, Wesley reluctantly attended a study on the book of Romans. As the leader was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed." He wrote in his journal, "I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

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Transformed by God's grace, Wesley traveled Britain with a vision for the conversion and discipling of a nation and the renewal of a fallen church. His passion drew others to the cause. Wesley initiated the Birth of the Methodist movement and led it into Growth. Wesley showed how a movement leader in Growth turns vision into action while maintaining flexibility

and control. He released authority and responsibility, and empowered the movement to embody the Methodist cause.

In March of 1739, Wesley knew it was time to act. He headed to Bristol, invited by the evangelist George Whitefield. Wesley was shocked by what he saw; he believed Whitefield was acting like an extremist and heretic by preaching in the open air to vast crowds. On a Sunday afternoon, Wesley watched Whitefield preach to 30,000 people. The fruit of Whitefield's methods changed his mind. The next day Wesley preached outdoors. By September, he was preaching to crowds of 12,000-20,000.

The common people were less likely to attend church, so Wesley went to them, and he was gladly received. He preached to thousands, standing on a tombstone with the church behind him serving as a sounding board. He preached in market squares. He preached in public parks in the evenings and on the weekends. He preached at 5:00 A.M. before the workday began. Wesley adopted methods from other movements and shaped them to his purpose. Whitefield showed him how to reach the masses through open air preaching. The Moravians taught him how to gather them into disciple-making groups.

In the 1740s he explored and adapted Strategies and Methods that served a growing movement. These included field preaching, classes, bands, societies, itinerants, circuits, annual conferences, and publications. He borrowed from other movements, constantly implementing, adapting,

and evaluating. He combined the elements into a consistent whole that became Methodism.

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Wesley's flexibility with Strategy and Methods was tempered by his dependence on the authority of the Word, the leading of the Holy Spirit and his clarity of Mission. He loved church tradition, but for Wesley, the Bible was "the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion." He said, "I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures." This view of Scripture left him free to experiment by dispensing with church traditions that no longer served a purpose. He adapted his methods under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he pursued the Mission of discipling a nation. Wesley experimented, tested, and refined simple but effective methods and structures, so the movement could expand but still remain focused once it moved beyond his direct control. His Spirit-inspired Adaptive Methods enabled him to mobilize leaders and workers in an expanding movement and still keep it on track.

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Wesley was now preaching to crowds of thousands. But his mission didn't stop with people who made decisions—he wanted disciples. He could have become the pastor-teacher of a great church, but he wanted to reach a nation. He needed a simple method for discipleship in a rapidly expanding movement. So wherever the gospel was met with faith, he set up Methodist societies. He formed the first of these in London in an unused cannon foundry.

Methodist societies were the functional equivalent of a local church. Society meetings included worship, Bible reading, a message, and prayer. The use of the term "society" enabled Wesley to avoid conflict with the state-sponsored Anglican church as he reinvented the nature of church. After Wesley's death, Methodist societies became Methodist churches. Wesley divided each society into classes, which were groups of twelve with an appointed leader. The condition for membership was a desire to flee from the wrath and to come and show the reality of conversion through conduct. As class leaders visited members they discovered behavior incompatible with true conversion, such as domestic disputes and drunkenness. In response, Wesley turned the class meeting into a pastoral and disciplinary structure, which became the building block of a disciple making movement.

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The purpose of field preaching was to gather those seeking salvation into the societies and classes. Most conversions took place in the classes, and those converted then joined bands, which were even smaller discipleship groups. The focus of the class was conversion and discipline. The focus of the band was the

confession of sin and pastoral care. Through the system of societies, classes and bands, Methodists came together to encourage each other, confess their sins, pray for each other and hold one another accountable. The class leaders were the backbone of the movement. Wesley examined them to determine “their grace, their gifts and their manner of meeting their several classes.” Discipline and accountability were Wesley’s effective methods for dealing with an expanding movement.

Overwhelmed with opportunities, Wesley experimented with evangelistic preaching that wasn’t followed up with new societies, classes and bands. It was a failure. Wesley observed, “Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit of it remaining.” The awakened souls could not “watch over one another in love,” and believers could not “build up one another and bear one another’s burdens.”

Wesley could not disciple a nation alone. He multiplied himself through a system of circuits and circuit riders.

London and Bristol—the cities under Wesley’s direct influence—were the movement’s strongholds. Methodism was also springing up across the nation because of local revivals. It further expanded by adopting local groups and leaders from outside the movement. Inevitably, this added both momentum and new challenges, as the absorbed groups came with many theologies and practices—Calvinists, Moravians, Baptists, and Quakers. How would Wesley unite pockets of revival into a cohesive movement? Leadership was key. He and his brother Charles were constantly on the road both advancing and unifying the movement. In an expanding movement the founder must not depend on positional authority but on the authority of a life devoted to the Word, the Spirit, and the Mission.

Wesley learned from Jesus’ example as a founder. When Jesus left this earth, His disciples had the memory of His life and teaching. But they had more than a memory: Jesus led them

into the same relationship he had with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

He told them it was for their good that He went away (John 16:7). His physical absence enhanced their leadership. Through the Word and the Spirit, His presence went with every disciple as they pursued the Mission He gave them. Wesley brought others into the same experience of saving grace he encountered. He mobilized them into an army of committed followers who embraced the Methodist cause. They knew who they were, and they knew what to do. The movement had vitality and form, enabling it to surpass the direct control of its founder.

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LEADERSHIP TASKS: GROWTH

Put the idea to work: Ground the founding vision in effective action that produces the results for which the movement exists.

- **Balance flexibility and control:** Utilize effective methods and functional structures that enable the spread of the movement.
- **Release authority and responsibility:** Mobilize workers and leaders to consolidate and expand the movement.
- **Let go:** Avoid the Founder’s Trap by empowering the movement to embody the cause.
- **Pursue Prime:** Put in place the people and systems to achieve the results for which the movement exists. 