

## CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

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### PART 18: CONTROVERSY

We have been following Wesley's spiritual quest in some detail. It was the dominant force in his life, becoming especially acute from the voyage to Georgia with the Moravians in 1735. His sense of failure in Georgia and the continuing association with the Moravians after his return to England made it very clear to him that he was lacking a vital connection to God. It all came to a head in the "heart warming" experience at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738, followed about a year later by the "descent" into field preaching on April 2, 1739. Had Wesley died before his 36th birthday, June 17, 1739 (a full year after the Aldersgate experience) he would have disappeared from the pages of history. His very effective ministry began in the summer of 1739 and was not without controversy.

Returning to London and the Fetter Lane Society, Wesley quickly found himself becoming more and more at odds with the Moravians. Whereas Wesley had seen the effects of an aggressive outreach as a means of religious advance and had "descended" to participate himself, he found a rising spirit of quietism among the Moravians. With eight or ten others he founded what he called the United Society. They agreed to meet every Thursday evening. (Recall that this was the time that John's mother had set aside for "little Jackie" when he was growing up.)

Wesley had gone into debt to get the building in Bristol built and now on November 11, 1739 he went much further into debt to buy the Foundry in London. This was a long unused government building that had been used for the casting of ordnance. Wesley was expelled from the Fetter Lane Society on July 20, 1739 and on July 23 he transferred his United Society to the Foundry. It was the headquarters of Methodism in London until the opening of the City Road Chapel on Nov. 2, 1778. These buildings have been restored and can be visited today. By 1743 he had opened two more chapels in London.

At Bristol in 1740 Wesley preached what is known as his "free grace" sermon. This created a rift with the Calvinists and with George Whitefield in particular. Whitefield and Wesley had many forthright exchanges, but by 1742 they reached an agreement and remained mutually supportive until Whitefield's death. By Whitefield's request Wesley preached at his funeral.

The rift with the Moravians however was more difficult. In August 1745 Count Zinzendorf placed an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* that the Moravians had nothing to do with Wesley. They did make a fresh outreach to him a year later however, and he corresponded with Peter Bohler as late as 1775. (Incidentally, today there is a strong Moravian community at Mountain Lake in southwest MN.)

In summary, consider Wesley's situation in the spring of 1739. He had decided against returning to Oxford (he soon resigned his fellowship) where they thought of him as "being a little cracked brain". He had led societies at Oxford, Georgia and London with no visible lasting effects from any of them. He was a bold critic of the Establishment but had no political instincts or power base. He had been converted not once, but twice: first at Oxford in 1725 and then at Aldersgate in 1738. He had four years of involvement with the Moravians but he was still orthodox in doctrine, striving for personal faith, overly strict and self-righteous. Yet, ten years later, this little man emerged at the head of the most effective mass movement in eighteenth century England. It brought about a great surge in Christian faith and widespread social reform in a fiercely oppressive society.