Methodism today is a worldwide family of churches, with some 80 million members and adherents. The movement’s beginnings and name may be traced to stirrings of spiritual renewal in mid-eighteenth century Britain.

Origins

Methodism started as a voluntary society within the Church of England. The key leaders were John Wesley (1703–1791) and his brother Charles (1707–1788). They were born and raised in the market town of Epworth, Lincolnshire, where their father Samuel was the Anglican rector. From the formative influence of Epworth, and their parents Samuel and Susanna, the brothers went to school in London and to university at Oxford.

In 1709, aged 6, John was rescued from a fire that destroyed the family’s home, the Epworth Rectory. This gave rise to a belief in his family that he had been spared for some special purpose, and later John drew on this to refer to himself as “a brand plucked from the burning”.

At Oxford University in the late 1720s, Charles started meeting with like-minded friends for Bible study and prayer, to receive Communion regularly and to undertake works of charity. The group were ridiculed for their unusually devout behaviour and called ‘Bible Moths’ and the ‘Holy Club’. The nickname that stuck was ‘Methodists’. John assumed leadership of the group. A later member was George Whitefield, who went on to become a great preacher and an important part of the wider Methodist movement.

The Wesleys’ spiritual quest took them to ordination in the Church of England. This was followed by a period of ministry in America, where they met Protestant refugees from Central Europe, the Moravians. Returning to Britain in May 1738, the Wesleys experienced a profound sense of salvation. John felt his “heart was strangely warmed”, convincing him of the truth of his salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. He began to preach that this salvation was available to everyone. Meanwhile, Charles expressed this faith in hymns that are still well-known and sung today.

John Wesley’s concern to reach everyone with the gospel led him to adopt unconventional and controversial practices, such as open-air preaching. His message centred upon the universality of God’s grace, the transforming effect of love on character, the practical consequences of faith for behaviour, and the possibility of perfection in love during this life. The Wesleys also encouraged practical care for the poor and urged reform in many areas of social injustice.

John organised new Methodists into local societies, which were then sub-divided into ‘classes’, small groups for supervision and pastoral care. Local societies and the preachers who worked with Wesley formed his ‘connexion’ across Britain. In 1744, Wesley gathered the preachers for the first annual Conference.
Separation from Church of England and later history

John Wesley remained a priest of the Church of England until his death. This did not prevent him ordaining ministers in 1784 to work in America, contravening the Church’s rules. By creating a self-governing movement with its own preachers, chapels and ethos, Wesley made a separation from the Church likely. Over the years following his death, Methodism gradually evolved into a separate church.

In the 19th century, Methodism developed through different offshoots, the largest being the Primitive Methodists, whose understanding was that they were the true guardians of the original, or primitive, form of Methodism. The main streams of Methodism were reunited in 1932, forming the Methodist Church as it is today.

Want to know more?

You may be interested in watching the short video series *A brief history of the Methodist Church* on the Methodist YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/MethodistChurchinGB/videos), presented by the Revd Jonathan Hustler. Each film varies in length from 6–10 minutes. To watch the whole series takes just over half an hour. You can also visit www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/history/ or www.methodistheritage.org.uk. For the history of the steward in Methodism, see Worksheet 11.