Missions and Societies

John Pritchard

The earliest British missionary society was SPG, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, founded by Royal Charter in 1701. It was the inspiration of Thomas Bray, an Anglican clergyman, who, returning from an assignment in Maryland, appealed to King William in these terms:-

> The humble petition of Thomas Bray, DD, humbly sheweth
> That the Numbers of the Inhabitants of your Majesty's Provinces in America have of late Years greatly increased [the reference is plainly to migrants from Europe]; that in many of the Colonies … they are in very much Want of Instruction in the Christian Religion, and in some of them utterly destitute of the same, they not being able of themselves to raise a sufficient Maintenance for an Orthodox Clergy [orthodox meaning here Anglican, not Dissenting clergy] to live among them, and to make such other Provision as shall be necessary for the Propagation of the Gospel in those parts.
> Your Petitioner therefore, who has lately been among Your Majesty's Subjects aforesaid, and has seen their Wants and known their Desires, is the more embolden'd, humbly to request, that Your Majesty would be graciously pleased to issue Letters Patent, to such Persons as Your Majesty shall think fit, thereby constituting them a BODY POLITICK AND CORPORATE.[1]

Many of the terms Bray used in petitioning the King found their way into the SPG Charter. Its first missionary, Patrick Gordon, who sailed to Long Island in April 1702 and – like many who would come after – died of a fever shortly after landing, rejoiced that the Church of England now had its own counterpart to the RC *Propaganda Fidei*, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. But SPG's primary concern was to staff the colonial parishes which were the responsibility of the Bishop of London. Henry Compton, Bray's chief backer, had found when he became Bishop in 1675 that there were 'scarce four ministers of the Church of England in all the vast tract of America'.[2] Notwithstanding Bray's reference, reproduced in the Charter, to 'such other Provisions … as may be necessary for the Propagation of the Gospel in those parts', the Society was not at its beginning a pastoral mission to the colonists rather than an evangelistic mission to the 'heathen'.

I must mention in passing to two other 18th century SPG agents. One was John Wesley, whose brief sojourn in Georgia was disastrous. He had hoped to take the gospel to native Americans but was confined to colonial ministry for which he was palpably unsuited. Wesley has commonly been described as an SPG missionary but that is inaccurate. He was neither employed nor paid by the SPG. He was recruited by General James Oglethorpe, the founder and Governor of the colony of Georgia. The trustees of the colony sought and received permission from the SPG to appoint him as a minister in Savannah in succession to Samuel Quincy who had been supported by the Society. It appears that Wesley was not consulted about the arrangement, though his severe disciplines and strict observance of worship reflected the instructions given by the SPG to its missionaries 'With Respect to their Parochial Cure'.[3] The other – and here again 'agent' is a more appropriate term than 'missionary' – was Philip Quaque at Cape Coast. In 1720, the Royal Africa Company asked

[1] H.P. Thompson, *Into All Lands* (SPCK 1951) pp. 15-16
[2] D. O'Connor, *Three Centuries of Mission* (Continuum 2000) pp. 8-9
[3] H.D. Rack, 'John Wesley and Overseas Missions: Principles and Practice' in *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, vol. 5, 2013, p. 34, drawing on G. Hammond's doctoral thesis, 2008.

the Society 'to recommend proper persons to be chaplains to their factories abroad, offering to allow them 80 or 100 pounds sterling per annum with diet at the Governor's table'.[4] In Africa as in America, 'what purported to be a missionary operation was primarily pastoral, caring for the English overseas and their dependents'. Thomas Thompson, the first chaplain, arrived – thirty years after the Company's initial approach – in 1752 and stayed for four years before poor health compelled him to leave; his most significant achievement was to select Quaque and two others and send them to England to be educated by the Society. One of them died, another went out of his mind, but Quaque, after eleven years' training, was ordained and returned to Cape Coast where he ministered at the castle for fifty years, 1766-1816. The first African in Anglican orders, Quaque received little support from SPG; his letters went unanswered for years on end. Although he was styled 'Missionary, School Master and Catechist to the Negroes of the Gold Coast', 'his English education had estranged him from his own people, he had forgotten his mother tongue'[5] and 'he did not appreciate that Christianity had to be Africanized rather than Africans Christianized and Europeanized'.[6]

All that by way of Prologue. From the SPG Charter of 1701, we must jump to the end of the century before more Societies were formed, by Baptists in 1792, by other Dissenters in 1795 and by Evangelical Anglicans in 1799; later, by Wesleyans in a halting process between 1813 and 1818. Note that 1788 does not figure in that chronology, yet in 1888 a ten-day 'Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World' was held in London. Apparently it commemorated no precise moment or event, but it serves my purpose in distinguishing the beginnings of foreign missionary work from the official foundation of missionary societies. Wesleyans may have been relatively late in formalizing their Society, but their first overseas branch was begun in 1759 in Antigua, when Nathaniel Gilbert, a planter, lawyer and future Speaker of the Island's House of Assembly, returned from a visit to England where his brother was one of Wesley's 'travelling Preachers'. He had gone expressly to meet Wesley; John Wesley had baptized two of his slaves in Wandsworth, and wrote of 'the first African Christian' he had known. Back in Antigua, Gilbert began a house-church. He wrote to Wesley:

> I signified to one or two persons that as there was no service at the church in the afternoon, any person disposed to join my family was welcome. I had on the first Sunday six besides my own family, on the second nine, and on the third about eighteen; and it is now not only spread through the town that I have preached, but I believe through this island.[7]

It was not however until a quarter-century later that a missionary was appointed to work among the Antiguan Methodists, and that was done by the American Conference, in the wake of Wesley's fateful decision to lay his unepiscopal hands on Coke, Whatcoat and Vasey in 1784. Thomas Coke, who spent the ensuing twenty years shuttling across the Atlantic – eighteen voyages in all – had in turn ordained Francis Asbury as his co-superintendent of the American work, and among those they proceeded to ordain as 'elders' was Jeremiah Lambert, instantly dispatched to Antigua. Lambert died within months, but before sailing for England Coke ordained his successor John Baxter, a shipwright and preacher who had already been working at the island's naval dockyard and leading the Methodist worshippers for over six years. Then, eighteen months later, Coke unintentionally came to Antigua in

[4] J.S. Pobee in O'Connor, p. 410
[5] Thompson, p. 69
[6] Pobee, p. 411
[7] 10 May 1760, reproduced in the *Arminian Magazine*, 3 (1780): pp. 387–9.

person, blown off a Nova Scotia-bound course by a storm. Landing on Christmas morning he was amazed to find a large congregation. One of his companions, William Warrener, had been appointed by the 1786 British Conference to join Baxter and was the first Wesleyan foreign missionary, as distinct from those sent to European congregations in America. Coke now unilaterally decided that his two other companions, designated for Newfoundland, should be redeployed in the Caribbean as well. These were small beginnings by comparison with the Moravians, who by 1760 had 226 missionaries at work in 28 fields. But they long pre-dated the organization of a Missionary Society.

In fact it was Baptists who made a formal, though equally small, beginning – twelve ministers from small churches around Kettering, at their semi-annual ministers' meeting in October 1792. Among them William Carey, whose famous pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, had been published in May. Carey's watchword, 'Expect great things from God; Attempt great things for God' stirred the group to action, and there and then they formed the *Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen.* A few months later William Carey and John Thomas were set apart for service in India, and sailed in June 1793. Carey's first letter from India arrived in July 1794 and among those with whom it was shared were Dr David Bogue, who ran a training Academy for Dissenters in Gosport, and Henry Overton Wills of Bristol, founder of the tobacco dynasty. Said Wills to Bogue, 'Why could we not have a society of the same kind?' and Bogue was moved to write a paper which appeared in the recently-started *Evangelical Magazine*, addressed 'To the Evangelical Dissenters who practise Infant Baptism' (who formed the core of its readership. He wrote:-

> The Church of England has a society of considerable standing, for the propagation of the Gospel. The Kirk of Scotland supports a similar institution. The Moravian Brethren have, if we consider their numbers and their substance, excelled in this respect in the whole Christian world. Of late the Methodists have exerted themselves with a most commendable zeal. An association is just formed by the Baptists for this benevolent purpose; and their first missionaries have already entered on the work. *We alone* are idle. There is not a body of Christians in the country, except ourselves, but have put their hand to the plough … It is surely full time that we had begun. We are able. Our number is great … Nothing is wanting, but for some persons to stand forward, and to begin.
>
> It is highly probable that some zealous men would present themselves, who are well qualified to go immediately on a mission to the heathen. But in general they will require some previous instruction, and therefore it will be necessary to found a *Seminary*…
>
> For the support of the seminary, and of the missionaries, funds must be provided and … I am fully persuaded, that in every congregation among us annual subscribers will be found, and an annual collection granted … sufficient for maintaining at least twenty or thirty missionaries among the heathen.[8]

This was followed in the November issue by a long review of Melville Horne's *Letters on Missions; addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches*. Horne was an Anglican clergyman; he was a nephew of Nathaniel Gilbert, the Antiguan pioneer; he had lately spent fourteen months in Africa as Chaplain to the Sierra Leone Company. This kept the subject at the forefront of the paper's concerns, and in January 1795 Bogue followed up the September article, writing:-

> That something may be done *with effect*, it is hoped that not only *Evangelical Dissenters and Methodists* will be found generally disposed to unite in instituting a *Society* for this express

[8] Letter dated 26 August 1794, published in the September issue.

> purpose, but that many *Members of the Established Church*, of evangelical sentiments, and of lively zeal for the cause of Christ, will also favour us with their kind co-operation.

That is what happened. On a very different scale from the humble beginnings of the BMS, the Society which would in due course (from 1818) be known as the LMS – but at the outset was grandly called 'The Missionary Society', as if there were no others – was launched with a series of meetings over four days, including six public services, in September 1795. The last of the sermons was preached by Bogue:-

> We have now before us [he said] a pleasing spectacle, Christians of different denominations, although differing in points of church government, united in forming a society for propagating the Gospel among the heathen. This is a new thing in the Christian Church. Some former societies have accepted donations from men of different denominations, but the government was confined to one. But here are Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and Independents, all united in one society, all joining to form its laws, to regulate its institutions and manage its various concerns.

Methodists were mentioned; but four days later a letter came from Thomas Coke, to whom the Conference had accorded the title 'Superintendent of the Missions', asking about the relation of the new Society's missionaries with those connected to other institutions. The Directors' reply was that 'It is the purpose of this Society to act as brethren towards missionaries from other denominations'. They intended to focus their intention on the South Pacific, where Methodists had no plans, and an initial contingent of 30 missionaries with six wives and three young boys sailed for Tahiti in 1796. The ecumenical intent of the founders was demonstrated when a motion 'that every missionary shall subscribe to a Confession of Faith' was brought to the Directors and they resolved that it be not put. But the doctrinal emphasis of the Society was before long quite clearly Calvinistic; and when Coke learned that the Directors were contemplating work in Jamaica, he expressed strong concern: 'I sincerely wish and request, Gentlemen, that you would be pleased to suspend your operations, or intended plan, concerning the West Indies…'. The LMS's centenary historian commented that Coke 'appeared to think that his Church had an exclusive right to mission-work in that island. The Directors expressly state in reply their view, that there was ample room in Jamaica for all the workers that could be sent, and on November 27, 1797, it was resolved to send out four missionaries as soon as possible'[9] (which in the event was however some years later.

The LMS was formally constituted at a meeting held at the Crown and Falcon, a coaching inn where for some time previously fortnightly gatherings for 'conference and prayer' on the matter of foreign missions had been held.[10] The inn was on Aldersgate Street, close to where John Wesley's life was dramatically changed back in 1738. And in 1799 another notable event took place on Aldersgate Street, possibly at the selfsame inn. A small group of Anglican clergy and laymen met and founded 'The Society for Missions to Africa and the East'. They agreed that it should not be wholly dominated by clergymen, but it would be 'loyal to the leadership of bishops and the Book of Common Prayer' – an Anglican Society.[11] It was soon known as the Church Missionary Society, though the nickname did not become official until 1812. The bishops, however, were lukewarm about the project and for a decade the Society failed to recruit any English missionary. Its first recruits were two German Lutherans from the Berlin Seminary who had little English, but sailed for Sierra Leone in 1804. By 1813, a mere fifteen missionaries had been dispatched: twelve Germans had gone to

[9] R. Lovett, *The History of the LMS 1795-1895* (H Frowde 1899) vol, 1 p. 103
[10] The landlord at the time bore the name John Mott.
[11] J. Murray, *Proclaim the Good News* (Hodder & Stoughton 1985) p. 7

West Africa and three English laymen were in New South Wales, en route to New Zealand. The first ordained Anglican was appointed only in 1815.

Thus three Societies with an important future before them were created in the seven years from 1792 to 1799. But while the CMS was an organized Society with few recruits, the Methodists – Wesleyans, we should specify after 1797 to distinguish them from the breakaway Methodist New Connexion and others that followed – Wesleyans had their supply of missionaries (at the Conference of 1813, 42 were listed) but no Society. The Wesleyan enterprise has been rightly called (by Coke's biographer, John Vickers) a One-Man Band.[12] Thomas Coke selected his missionaries, not always judiciously, and brought their names to the annual Conference which formally appointed them; Coke ordained them, by virtue of the authority bestowed on him by John Wesley back in 1784; Coke arranged their passages and raised the funds to support them, digging into his own pocket and the fortunes of two successive wives when the fruits of his ceaseless, arduous begging were inadequate; and Coke produced the occasional report – the earliest, in 1804, entitled *An Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Methodist Missions by the Rev Dr Coke, General Superintendent of these Missions* and addressed 'To the Subscribers for the Support of the Missions among the Negroes in the West-Indies, the Roman-Catholics in Ireland, and the Welch in North-Wales'. Although the 1790 Conference, the last attended by Wesley himself, appointed a committee 'for the management of our affairs in the West Indies' there is no evidence that it ever met and a 'Committee of Finance', set up in 1798, seems to have met only once. All was in Coke's hands. But administration was not Coke's forte. Andrew Porter summed up scathingly 'Coke's own impulsiveness, his chaotic personal control swelling debts and a complete lack of any financial or administrative system'.[13]

Two examples of his impulsiveness: disappointed when he was not elected President of the Conference following Wesley's death, Coke eventually offered to abandon his other responsibilities and devote himself wholly to America, where he was still co-Bishop with Asbury: 'all I am and have, with my talents and labours in every respect, without any mental reservation whatsoever'.[14] There were some who wanted to insist on the condition that he first become an American citizen, but the case was not pressed. He sailed for England with a letter requesting the British Conference to release him. The response of the Conference was to elect him President at last, and he instantly abandoned the plan. He went on to marry at the age of 57 and then, having lost two wives in the space of 24 months, he had the temerity – this is another manifestation of his impulsiveness – to write to the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool offering to be the first Bishop of Calcutta, a diocese created, oddly, in the context of the 1813 renewal by parliament of the East India Company's Charter. He was, after all, in Anglican orders, and observed

> that I should, in case of my appointment to the Episcopacy of India, return most fully and faithfully into the bosom of the established church, and do everything in my power to promote its interests, and would submit to all such restrictions in the fulfilment of my office, as the government and the bench of bishops at home should think necessary – that my prime motive was to be useful to the Europeans in India; and that my second (though not the least) was to introduce the Christian religion among the Hindoos by the preaching of the Gospel, and perhaps also, by the establishment of schools.[15]

[12] J.A. Vickers, *Thomas Coke Revisited* (Wesley Historical Society 2010) pp. 56-68
[13] A. Porter, *Religion versus empire?* (Manchester University Press 2004) p. 32
[14] Minute book of the Baltimore Conference, quoted by Vickers, *Coke*, p. 233.
[15] Recounted in a letter to *Wilberforce*, 14 April 1813; see Vickers, *Coke*, pp. 341–3.

Needless to say – for the estrangement of Methodism from the established Church was now unequivocal – this ambitious initiative was yet another non-starter. Instead, he persuaded the Conference to appoint a mission team to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), with himself at its head. They sailed on 31 December 1813 and he died at sea.

Two questions are prompted by this account. First, why had Methodists not already set up a Missionary Society like the BMS, LMS and CMS to undertake the task? And secondly, why in 1813 did they get round to doing just that?

Collaborative ministry was not Coke's style and he would certainly have resisted being shackled by the demands of an organization, but there is a more fundamental reason. The Methodist movement itself was a society, a missionary society within the Church of England. The title of the second report to appear, in 1809, is instructive: *The Annual Report of the State of the Missions which are carried on Both At Home and Abroad by The Society Late in Connexion with the Rev John Wesley.* The third, for 1812/13 was slightly different: *The Annual Report* (though it was not yet appearing annually) *of the State of the Missions, Foreign and Domestic, conducted by the Conference and supported by the members and friends of the United Societies late in Connexion with the Rev John Wesley.*

Wesley scholar Frank Baker declared that 'John Wesley was born with religious societies in his blood'.[16] The anonymous writer of *The Country Parson's Advice to his Parishioners*, published in 1680 and well-known to Wesley, exhorted readers:

> If good men of the Church will unite together in the several parts of the kingdom, disposing themselves into friendly societies, and engaging each other, in their respective combinations, to be helpful to each other in all good Christian ways, it will be the most effectual means for restoring our decaying Christianity to its primitive life and vigour, and the supporting of our tottering and sinking Church.

Wesley's father Samuel took the advice to heart and founded a society at Epworth. The Holy Club begun by Charles Wesley in Oxford in 1729 was described by William Law in a pamphlet entitled *The Oxford Methodists: being some Account of a Society of Young Gentlemen in that city, so denominated.* In 1735 John and Charles went to Georgia, planning to introduce what they had found to be a powerful means of renewal into the life of the church in Savannah, and John wrote in his Journal:

> We agreed … to advise the more serious among them, to form themselves into a sort of little Society, and to meet once or twice a Week, in order to reprove, instruct and exhort one another.

Wesley's heart-warming experience in 1738 occurred at a meeting of a fellowship known as the Fetter Lane society in London, and the fellowships he established as his itinerant evangelistic ministry got under way were not churches, but societies. The term 'The Methodist Church' was in fact not used until the late eighteenth century, and the lay leaders of local chapels were known as Society Stewards (until the mid-1970s, when they were renamed Church Stewards). The word 'society' was not typically used of the overall structure of the Methodist movement; Methodism was a connexion (with an x) of local societies, but the connexion was on occasion called a Society, as in the 1809 report, while the 1812/13 reference to the 'United Societies' employed a term which dated from the union of two societies in Bristol in 1739 and came to be used, by extension, of all the societies in Wesley's orbit. What Nathaniel Gilbert began in Antigua was a Methodist society. Methodism was a network of local societies with a missionary purpose.

[16] *The People called Methodists – Polity* in vol 1 of *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (Epworth 1965) p. 215

When Wesley died in 1791 there were over 70,000 members of the societies in Britain alone. In theory they were societies, or even a Society, within the established Church. The idea was that their Methodist meetings, on weekdays and on Sundays, should complement not replace their attendance at the parish church. At first, the practice followed the intention, even where societies acquired their own preaching houses; but practice soon began to vary from place to place. As late as 1821 one vicar in the Exeter diocese reported 'They all attend church as the House of God and more regularly than those who have no such meetings'.[17] But it was one thing for those who were familiar with Anglican worship to continue attending. It was quite another for the large number who came from unchurched backgrounds. The Methodist societies were achieving their missionary objectives and drawing in many who found themselves at home in Methodist meetings but had never frequented the parish church. They were unused to its style, uncomfortable with its people, alienated by its atmosphere. By conviction they were Methodists. For them the question of a breach with the Church of England was meaningless; there was no rapport to be breached.

Several components of an answer to the second question have become apparent. Methodism was no longer a society within the Anglican Church. Coke's disorganized administration was not adequate to the task as the number of missionaries grew, nor were his untiring fund-raising efforts – his 'frenzied begging', John Vickers called it, among people of wealth and standing – adequate for the increasing costs. And in 1813 he was in any case preparing to embark on a mission to Asia which would permanently remove him from the co-ordinating centre of the enterprise. Yet the 1813 Conference, while it 'authorise(d) and appoint(ed) Dr Coke to undertake a Mission to Ceylon and Java, and allow(ed) him to take with him six Preachers for that purpose', made no provision for replacing him. A Committee of Finance and Advice, set up in 1804, was still in existence but had done little – Coke had made it clear from the outset that Finance and Advice did not mean 'control and superintendency'. It was rather the Irish Conference in July 1813, where Coke presided for the last time, and which provided three of the Preachers he recruited, which called for Auxiliary Societies to be established throughout Ireland to raise annual subscriptions for 'our missions throughout the globe'. The notion of Auxiliary Societies had been seized upon earlier by the LMS: an article in the Evangelical Magazine in January 1807 advocated them, arguing that:

> many persons, not blessed with affluence, and whose convenience it would not suit to become Annual Subscribers, may unite their efforts, and by small but regular contributions afford a valuable assistance to the Society.

and in 1812 Coke had noted that

> The LMS are forming committees of two or three of our friends, to raise annual subscriptions among our Societies and hearers for the support of *their* missions …When we are so pressed with debt, and if we are to employ hundreds or thousands of pounds in Asia, shall we employ them in establishing Calvinism in that immense country instead of Methodism?[18]

It was the establishment of one such LMS auxiliary, the 'West Riding Missionary Society', which triggered the Wesleyan initiative taken in Leeds 200 years ago. The East India Company's Charter had been renewed in July. After four months of parliamentary debate, the evangelical lobby, led by Charles Grant and William Wilberforce, had managed to overturn the Company's implacable opposition to missionary activity (which the directors had once called 'the wildest, most expensive and most unwarranted plan that was ever proposed by a lunatic

[17] Quoted by J. M. Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation* (Epworth 1985) p. 1
[18] Findlay and Holdsworth, vol. 1, p. 37

enthusiast').[19] The so-called 'pious clause' now inserted in the Charter not only provided for a Bishop of Calcutta and three archdeacons, but acknowledged that 'the Interests and Happiness of the Native Inhabitants' involved 'religious and moral improvement' and undertook to provide 'sufficient facilities … to persons desirous of going to and remaining in India, for the purpose of accomplishing these benevolent designs'.[20] The BMS and LMS had been energetic participants in the campaign to lift the Company's restrictions and were keen to take swift advantage of the opportunities now open to them. The LMS, a non-sectarian society with no prefix to its name – not as yet even 'London' and still less any denominational label – had no reservation about soliciting funds in Methodist circles.

The advent of the West Riding Society roused prominent Leeds Wesleyans to action: William Scarth and his fellow-Circuit Steward Mr Turkington took the matter up and the Circuit superintendent George Morley, together with his colleague Jabez Bunting, resolved to take action. Bunting, formerly a member of the Missionary Committee (Finance and Advice) wrote to its secretary, Robert Smith in London, who replied:

> It is impossible for me to tell you the strong sensations that some of us felt when we read, in the last *Evangelical Magazine*, that the Dissenters had recently preached and made collections in one of our own chapels in Leeds for their Missions, at a time when our own missionary affairs are so awfully embarrassed. I am sure that the Missionary Committee will be exceedingly delighted when they know of your plan for assisting our own missionary cause.

The Committee met and agreed, by 11 votes to 2, that 'something ought to be done in a general way for the support of our own Missions, and to prevent the money which our friends are willing to subscribe for missionary matters being turned into another channel'; but, continued Smith and Coke (the official reply was in Coke's hand), 'as all the brethren were not fully prepared to decide finally on this important subject … they leave you to your own judgement in respect to the plan you judge best to adopt'.[21] Scarcely encouraging, but at least no veto. The Leeds folk pressed on.

The meeting held on 6 October at the Leeds Old Chapel, otherwise known as the Old Boggard House, was the first known Methodist public meeting called for any purpose other than for worship and prayer. It was widely advertised and attracted over a thousand. It was deliberately a Yorkshire affair. Neither Coke nor even the President of the Conference was invited. 19 resolutions were proposed and supported in 39 speeches. 'The Methodist Missionary Society for the Leeds District' was created, and 'All subscribers, whether their subscriptions be paid weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually, and also all benefactors of five guineas and upwards, shall be deemed members of this Society'. The Leeds example was rapidly followed by other Districts: Halifax, Hull, Sheffield, York, Newcastle, Cornwall and Dublin. They were all voluntary associations of missionary-minded Methodists. They were not part of the connexional organization and (apart from the Dublin Society) had no authorization from the Conference. However when Conference met at Bristol in 1814 it congratulated them all and 'strongly recommends the immediate establishment of a Methodist Missionary Society in every District'.

The advent of a connexional, nationwide Society took a little longer. In the wake of Coke's departure and death the 1814 Conference appointed two Secretaries (as yet part-time, with

[19] Quoted by the Bishop of Tasmania in an address on 'The Church and Foreign Missions' delivered in London in 1897 and printed in *The Churchman*, July 1898, p. 506, where the resolution is wrongly dated 1793.
[20] Porter, pp.74-5
[21] Findlay and Holdsworth, vol. 1, pp. 43-4

circuit responsibilities) to the Committee of Finance and Advice, which in 1815 it renamed the Executive Committee. Bunting pressed for the inclusion of lay members on the committee but Conference would add only a lay treasurer, Thomas Thompson MP of Hull, who had chaired the great Leeds meeting; otherwise it still consisted solely of the travelling Preachers stationed in London. Richard Watson and George Marsden, both of them instrumental in the launch of the Leeds Society, were appointed Missionary Secretaries in 1816, and in 1817 Watson was asked to draw up a permanent constitution. He hastily framed five articles which the Conference approved 'in its object and outline'. Over the next year Watson and Bunting worked on the 'Laws and Regulations of the General Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society', which the 1818 Conference adopted. Membership of the Society would consist of all who subscribed, either directly or through one of the Auxiliary Societies, at least a guinea per annum, and those who collected at least 5/- monthly or 1/- weekly. These, and benefactors of £10 and upwards, were entitled to a copy of the annual report (henceforth simply entitled 'The Report of the WMMS').

It is noteworthy that, just as the fear of losing funds to the LMS was the trigger which brought the WMMS into being, so in 1821 the Danish Missionary Society was started rather than sending Danish money to the Berlin Society, and in 1822 the *Société Missionaire Evangélique de Paris* to exploit the French resources that had hitherto gone to the Basel Mission. But the WMMS was quite unlike other voluntary Societies. It was a distinct organization, formed of members qualified by their pecuniary contribution, and yet its officers and Committee were appointed by the Conference, its regulations and funds were controlled by the Conference, its missionaries were selected, commissioned and stationed by the Conference. While the constitution of the LMS stated that 'The Annual Meeting of the Members of the Society shall be held in London, on a day in May, not later than the Annual Public Meeting, when the Annual Report of the Society shall be read, and the Directors and Officers of the Society for the year shall be appointed', the WMMS constitution referred only to an 'Annual Public meeting of the members and friends of this Society' to be held in London – an inspirational, not a decision-making event. Conference took the decisions.

Of the other branches of Methodism, the Bible Christians and Primitive Methodists copied the Wesleyan approach; the New Connexion, Wesleyan Association and United Methodist Free Churches had their overseas work but saw no need of a Society to administer it. In 1821 the BCs set up a society 'for the purpose of sending Missionaries into the dark and destitute parts of the United Kingdom, and other countries as Divine Providence might open the way', while the PM Conference passed a resolution about 'the dark and benighted villages of the Peak of Derbyshire' as well as mission in foreign lands, and began to hold missionary meetings. In fact, although they ministered to settlers in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, it was many years before they embarked on other overseas ventures. The PMs formed a General Missionary Society in 1825, but for another eighteen years it existed in name only. Then in 1843 a Missionary Committee was appointed which had oversight of both home and foreign missions and a magazine, *Advance*, was begun which covered both. At the PM Jubilee Conference in 1860 it was decided that part of the Jubilee Fund should be devoted to establishing a mission in South Africa, but it was 1870 before a station was opened. In the same year they began work on the island of Fernando Po off the West African coast, and produced headed notepaper and annual reports variously labelled the Primitive Methodist Home, Colonial and Foreign Missionary Society or the PM African Missionary Society, but as with the Wesleyans it was the Conference which made the decisions and appointments. The BCs eventually began their only non-colonial venture in 1885, when their first missionaries sailed for China. In 1901 their Missionary Society was described by F.W. Bourne, in *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History*, as 'the brightest jewel of the

Denomination, its noblest ornament, its firmest pillar, and has been its most effective instrument';[22] but it went out of existence at the 1907 union: the work continued, but the only references to a United Methodist Missionary Society are to be found in the Wesleyan literature at Methodist Union in 1932, which spoke of the MMS bringing together the WMMS, PMMS and UMMS. The Wesleyan Edgar Thompson described how he wrote to his counterpart asking for a copy of the Constitution of the UMMS and received the terse reply that there was no such constitution because there was no such society.[23]

The post-1932 era was a period of feverish adjustment to rapid change. One by one the overseas Churches which were part of the connexion became self-governing Methodist Churches or entered United Churches. Mission in reverse brought members and ministers of those Churches to Europe, to witness in an increasingly post-Christian environment. From 1973 the Society was coterminous with, and better known as, MCOD – initials denoting the Methodist Church Overseas Division but also the new nature of mission, Multi-Cultural and Omni-Directional! The formal winding-up of the MMS at the Conference in July this year was well overdue. The international dimension of the call to share in God's mission, which was embedded in Methodism long before the formal creation of the Wesleyan Society, was, in the globalized twenty-first century, a given: a given that the demise of the MMS is not likely to undermine.

19 October 2013

[22] F.W. Bourne, *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History* (Bible Christian Book Room 1901) p. 99
[23] E.W. Thompson, *The Methodist Missionary Society: Its Origin and Name* (MMS 1955) p. 27