

A Closer Partnership in the Love of God

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Driving along Route 1 in Frederica, motorists pass Barratt’s Chapel, which was built in 1780. This plain and simple structure is the oldest surviving church building in the United States built by and for Methodists. Barratt’s Chapel has been called “the cradle of (American) Methodism” because a key event took place there on November 14, 1784 – the meeting of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury. This meeting laid the groundwork for establishing the Methodist Episcopal Church —directly or indirectly the beginning of America’s Methodist communities — during a conference in Baltimore on Christmas Day, 1784.

Readers may wonder why Methodist history might be of interest to Episcopalians. There are two reasons:

- First, because both denominations share mutual roots in the Church of England. Methodists are “family” to Episcopalians in a unique sense. Methodism began as an evangelical revival within the English church, as a voluntary society of Anglican believers, before becoming the separate and independent denomination we know today.

Both John Wesley (1703–1791), Methodism’s founder, and Charles Wesley (1707–1788) were priests of the Church of England. Neither withdrew from his lifelong allegiance to Canterbury; neither conceived of Methodism as a separate denomination. By the way, the Wesley brothers are commemorated in the calendar of The Episcopal Church (TEC) on March 3, and 24 of Charles Wesley’s hymns can be found in *The Hymnal 1982*, including such standards as *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing; Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*; and *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*.

Episcopalians may be surprised to learn that it was the popularity of Charles Wesley’s hymns that spurred TEC’s authorization of congregational hymn singing in 1789. That’s right — it was the Methodists who got Episcopalians singing hymns in church. Previously, church singing had been mainly restricted to psalms and canticles, their texts based directly on scripture.

- Second, a 22-year-long dialogue pursuing the establishment of full communion between The Episcopal Church (TEC) and the United Methodist Church (UMC) is moving forward. General Convention re-affirmed this goal in July 2024. The initiative will likely come to a vote at the next General Convention in 2027.

What do we mean by full communion? Let’s be clear: What is *not* meant is the merger of both denominations, the compromise of the identities and distinctives that are the legacies of each church’s history and common life. What is meant is that both churches seek a “closer partnership in the mission and witness to the love of God and thus labor together for the

healing of divisions among Christians and for the well-being of all” (A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness, A Proposal for Full Communion, United Methodist-Episcopal Dialogue, 2018).

What this would mean, in practice, is mutual recognition of each other’s clergy and sacraments and the authorization of full participation by the laity in each other’s worship, above and beyond the already existing partnerships the churches have embraced in Christian witness and supporting good works.

“This full communion agreement is not proposing a merger of our churches. Yet we seek to live into the vision given to us by Jesus, who prayed that we may all be one (John 17:21), and strive for the day when we may be drawn into more visible unity for the sake of mission and ministry, ‘so that the world may believe’” (A Gift to the World).

Full communion is based on the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilaterals (The Book of Common Prayer, pg. 876), a statement of the grounds for Christian unity as affirmed by the Anglican Communion in 1888.

In brief, unity is based on mutual acceptance of the following:

1. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as ‘containing all things necessary to salvation,’ and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
2. The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol, and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
3. The two Sacraments ordained by Christ himself — Baptism and the Supper of the Lord — ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s Words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by him.
4. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into Unity.

TEC has already entered into full communion agreements with eight denominations: The Church of Sweden (Lutheran); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, Germany; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada; the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India; the Moravian Church (Northern and Southern Provinces); the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, and the Philippine Independent Church.

Also, both TEC and the UMC remain in dialogue with historically African American Methodist churches, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME); the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion (AME Zion), and Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME).

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?” John Wesley asked. “May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

In Delaware, more than 100 congregations are part of the Peninsula-Delaware Conference of the UMC (the equivalent of a diocese), under the leadership of Bishop LaTrelle Easterling.

Methodism began in 1729 when the Wesley brothers organized a private group of Oxford University students who were seeking to live lives of spiritual depth. They focused on a discipline of prayer, scripture study, fasting, frequent Communion, mutual support, simple lifestyle, and volunteer work with the poor and needy. Their more worldly-minded Oxford peers dubbed them “the Holy Club” and their disciplined approach as Wesley’s “method” — hence “Methodist.”

What set the Methodists apart was their emphasis on personal conversion and sanctification and their missionary zeal.

“It was not enough intellectually to understand the basic Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, one had to ‘feel’ the doctrine at a personal level,” writes historian Robert Prichard.

Both Wesley brothers had experienced life-changing instances of personal conversion. Because they were Arminians in theology — that is, believers that salvation by faith in Christ is an invitation to all people, not just the predestined elect, and further that believers can inwardly experience the assurance of this salvation — they sought the revival of spiritual fervor within the church and the opening of all doors to whomever would enter.

“It was the intention of the Wesleys and their colleagues that their ‘Methodist Societies’ should be a group within the existing structure of the Anglican church,” writes historian James Kiefer, “but after their deaths the Societies in America, and to a lesser extent in England, developed a separate status.”

The early Methodists became famous for extraordinary preaching and indefatigable missionary work. Sermons and “testimonies” were emotional, dramatic, spontaneous, and populist; and they intended for all levels of society, but especially for workers, farmers, enslaved people, criminals — for all those overlooked or left out of regular parish life. And John Wesley began authorizing women to preach and teach within Methodist societies in the 1760s, a virtually unprecedented development.

Methodists were preaching anywhere they were permitted, including fields, factories, mines, city squares, churchyards, parks, and prisons, reaching crowds of thousands. The hymns of Charles Wesley became widely known teachers of doctrine and tools of inspiration. James Kiefer reports that John Wesley himself averaged 8,000 miles of travel a year, mostly on horseback.

At the time of Wesley’s death there were more than 500 Methodist preachers in British colonies and the United States (Kenneth Hylson-Smith: *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734–1984*). Total membership of the Methodist societies in Britain was recorded as 56,000 in 1791, rising to 360,000 in 1836 and 1,463,000 by the national census of 1851.

Methodism grew rapidly in the United States, becoming the nation's largest denomination by 1820. From 58,000 members in 1790, it reached 258,000 in 1820 and 1,661,000 in 1860 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, 1976).

Anglicans and Methodists shared rough times during the American Revolution. They were believed, with good reason, to be loyal to the Crown.

When peace was restored to the new United States, John Wesley acknowledged that American Methodists deserved independence also. He dispatched the Rev. Thomas Coke (1747–1814), one of his closest friends and an Anglican priest, to find American Methodist leader Francis Asbury (1745–1816) and begin discussions about American Methodism's future. Coke found Asbury at Barratt's Chapel. The men embraced and set out to make history. They became the Methodist Episcopal Church's first bishops. A star in Barratt's Chapel's floor commemorates their meeting.