

How the West was Won – Methodists and Baptists on the American Frontier

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Between 1776-1850 as the US frontier opened up, the 'upstart' Baptist and Methodist movements won over large portions of the previously unchurched population. In doing so they eclipsed the established mainline churches and have since that time dominated the religious landscape.

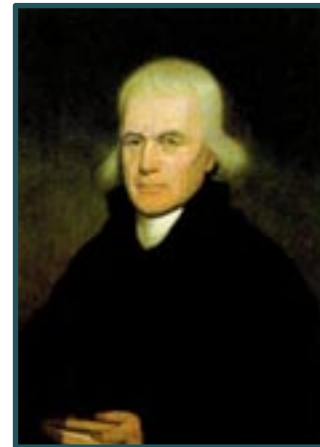
How did they do it? What can they teach us about church planting movements in the Growth phase of the movement lifecycle?

In the beginning was Francis Asbury

When the twenty-six year old Methodist pioneer, Francis Asbury, arrived in the American colonies in 1771 he believed he was called to fulfill a great destiny. He was right—although that destiny was far greater than he ever imagined.

Like his mentor, John Wesley, Asbury modelled the commitment required to achieve such success. Throughout his ministry he gave more than 16,000 sermons. He travelled nearly 300,000 miles on horseback. He remained unmarried so that he could devote himself fully to his mission. He was often ill and had no permanent home. He was still travelling when he died at 70 years of age.

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Asbury's leadership and example inspired an army of circuit riders, many of whom followed his example and remained unmarried. No formal vows bound them. Yet in the early days of the movement the majority of the riders adhered to the three rules of the Roman Catholic monastic bodies—chastity, poverty and obedience.

Latourette describes these riders as “a kind of Protestant order, fully Protestant in faith and spirit, admirably adapted to the new land with its rough life and scattered populations and

bound by their organisation into a force which could be directed by its master mind to cover comprehensively and systematically the entire country.”²

Jacob Young provides an example of a typical circuit-rider. He was just 26 years old when in 1802 he took on the responsibility of forming a new Methodist circuit along the Green River in Kentucky. He had little prior training and little prospect of outside assistance. He developed his own strategy to evangelise the region: “I concluded to travel five miles... then stop, reconnoitre the neighborhood and find some kind person who would let me preach in his log-cabin and so on till I had performed the entire round.” On a number of occasions he found groups already gathered, waiting for a preacher to arrive. Wherever he could, he established class meetings run by local leaders to carry on the work in his absence. In one location he discovered a society run by Jacob, an illiterate African-American slave. Jacob’s preaching and leadership impressed Young. By the end of his first year as a circuit-rider Young had gathered 301 new members and for his efforts received just \$30—a cost of 10 cents per new member.³

Circuit riders like Jacob Young began with little formal education. But they soon became students as they followed the example of Wesley and Asbury who used their time on horseback for reading. Their language was that of the frontier. They faced ridicule and even violence with courage and endurance. They sought, above all, conversions. Methodism’s advance would have been impossible without these preachers.⁴

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Rise of the ‘upstarts’—decline of the ‘mainline’

Finke and Stark have examined denominational statistics on the US church between 1776 and 1850. They concluded: the “Protestant ‘mainline’ (Anglicans, Presbyterians and Congregationalists) began to collapse rapidly, not in the past several decades as is widely supposed but in the late eighteenth century. Hence by 1850 the Baptists and Methodists — vigorous, evangelical sects in that era — dominated the religious landscape.”⁵ These two denominations grew significantly because they reached previously unchurched people. In 1776 only 17 percent of the population was affiliated with a church. By 1850 that number had doubled to 34 percent. Most of the growth was as a result of the gains by the Methodists and Baptists on the frontier.



Methodist Camp Meeting, New York State

The 'mainline' denominations had been infected with secularism resulting in a loss of vigour in evangelism. For Finke and Stark secularization means "to move from otherworldliness, to present a more distant and indistinct conception of the supernatural, to relax the moral restrictions on members and to surrender claims to an exclusive and superior truth."⁶ The consequence of secularization is a diminished commitment to evangelism. It's hard to witness to a faith that lacks conviction and offers so little.

The message of the mainline churches had become too vague and too accommodating to have an impact. As a result, the mainline churches watched from the safety of the larger towns and cities along the Atlantic seaboard while the Baptists and Methodists moved west with the frontier.

Clericalism contributed to this growing secularism and was also the result of it. The clergy of the mainline churches were of genteel origins and well educated. Higher education lifted the mainline clergy further out of the social status of their congregation and turned them into religious professionals. Secularised theological education and social background influenced both the content and form of the message that was delivered. They were more "respectable" but less likely to gather the unchurched.⁷

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Despite the theological and organisational differences between the Baptists and Methodists their clergy were almost identical. They came predominately from among ordinary folk. Their frontier preachers had little education, were poorly paid, spoke the language of the people and preached from the heart. The local preacher was likely to be a neighbor, friend, or relative of many of the people he served.⁸ Baptists and Methodists emphasized the need for personal conversion and salvation from sin. The power of God was not only to be spoken about—it was experienced.

One contemporary observed, “Their mode of preaching is entirely extemporaneous, very loud and animated. . . . They appear studiously to avoid connection in their discourses and are fond of introducing pathetic stories, which are calculated to affect the tender passions. Their manner is very solemn and their preaching is frequently attended with surprising effect upon their audiences.”⁹

Despite their denominational differences, Baptists and Methodists tended to be self-governing at the local level. Even the centrally governed Methodists had to allow local autonomy as their circuit riders never had the time to settle in one place.¹⁰ These self-governing congregations were suited to multiply rapidly in the frontier culture.

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The mainline churches were led by clergy who preferred to educate rather than convert their hearers. “If the goal was to arouse faith, the carefully drafted, scholarly and often dry sermons of the learned clergy were no match for the impromptu, emotional pleas of the uneducated preacher.”¹¹ They were out of touch with the common people. They were also in short supply on the rapidly growing frontier. The expectation of a well-educated, well-paid clergy, resulted in a shortage where they were needed most. This meant clergy could choose the safety of an established congregation rather than the challenge of pioneering a new one.

White-hot faith and rapid deployment

The Baptists and Methodists did not require an upfront investment of money and education from gifted lay people wanting to minister. Methodism gave unprecedented freedom to both women and African-Americans to participate and make a significant contribution.¹² These pioneering leaders made the sacrifices to move with the people to the areas of greatest opportunity. "It is hard to imagine any sum of money that would have caused an Anglican Bishop to travel nearly 300,000 miles on horseback as Francis Asbury did, disregarding weather and chronic ill health, 'to goad his men and to supervise their work.'"¹³

The Baptists and the Methodists developed systems that made it easy for gifted and committed laypeople to enter the ministry and to be deployed where the greatest opportunities were.

Historian Nathan Hatch describes how, "From preachers like themselves, people received an invitation to join a movement promising dignity of choice and beckoning them to involvement as class leader, exhorter, local preacher and circuit rider. Lay preaching, the hallmark of American Methodism, served as a powerful symbol that the wall between gentlemen and commoner had been shattered. Methodism had great appeal for upstarts who hungered for respect and opportunity."¹⁴

Methodist growth was most dramatic—from 2.5 percent of the church going population in 1776 to 34.2 percent in 1850. This made them by far the largest religious body in the nation and the most extensive national institution other than the Federal government. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Methodists boasted 4,000 itinerants, almost 8,000 local preachers and over one million members.¹⁵

Epilogue

The Methodist rise was short-lived. By the end of the century the Baptists had overtaken them. Before 1840 and during their meteoric rise, the Methodists had virtually no college-educated clergy among their thousands of circuit riders and local preachers.¹⁶ Their relative slump began at the same time that their amateur clergy were replaced by seminary-educated professionals who claimed episcopal authority over their congregations.¹⁷



Richard Allen, Founder, African Methodist Episcopal Church



Endnotes

¹ By 1830 membership stood at nearly half a million. If you add regular attenders who were not members and children of members, the actual number who attended may have been ten to twelve times greater. See John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1998), 3-4. Methodism won most of its adherents from those who had no previous church connection. See Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity . Vol. IV, The Great Century in Europe and the United States of America, A.D. 1800-A.D. 1914* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1941), 190.

² Latourette, 188.

³ Wigger, 21-22.

⁴ Latourette, 188. "In their devotion, their zeal, their poverty, their style of preaching and their wide-ranging activity they had likenesses to the Franciscans and Dominicans who in the thirteenth century did so much to bring the Christian message to the nominally Christian masses of Western." Europe. Latourette, 185.

⁵ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. "How The Upstart Sects Won America 1776-1850". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 28:1 (March 1989): 27.

⁶ Finke and Stark, 28.

⁷ Finke and Stark, 37.

⁸ Finke and Stark, 35. For characteristics of these dedicated itinerants see David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), 24.

⁹ Jeddiah Morse quoted in Finke and Stark, 38.

¹⁰ Finke and Stark, 33.

¹¹ Methodist leader, Peter Cartwright recalled "while I was preaching, the power of God fell on the assembly and there was an awful shaking among the dry bones. Several fell on the floor and cried for mercy. . ." Quoted in Finke and Stark, 38.

¹² See Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism", *Church History*, 63 (1994): 183.

¹³ Finke and Stark, 39-40.

¹⁴ Hatch, 180.

¹⁵ Hatch, 178-9.

¹⁶ Hatch, 179.

¹⁷ Finke and Stark, 42.

7 Lessons for Movement Dynamics

1. The “fringe principle” again

Without exception, the breakthroughs in the expansion and the renewal of the church occur on the fringe and never at the centre of ecclesiastic power (Dr Paul Pierson, Fuller Seminary).

2. Without faith it's impossible

The upstart Methodists and Baptists had none of the resources, education, or social prestige of the mainline churches, but they had faith. By faith they were willing to risk everything in order to win a new generation to Christ. A white-hot faith alone was sufficient to conquer the US frontier.

3. Apostolic leadership

You cannot explain the rise of British Methodism without reference to John Wesley. So you cannot explain the rise of American Methodism without reference to Francis Asbury. His apostolic vision and example, inspired a new generation of pioneering leaders who functioned like a Protestant version of the Catholic religious orders.

4. Rapid deployment

In a crisis you do not ask: Who has proper qualifications? You ask: Who can get the job done? The US frontier confronted the churches with a crisis of opportunity. The movements that deployed under-educated, under-funded, gifted, called and committed lay people, got the job done.

5. Growing leaders

The upstarts were not opposed to training their leaders. They just did their training on the job. The mainline churches preferred well-paid and educated clergy whose faith had been tamed by secularized theology in a classroom environment. The outcome was predictable.

6. Mission structures

Both movements structured for mission and rapid growth. They allowed maximum authority and responsibility on the front line. The ‘glue’ that held these movements together was not a tight organizational structure but their commitment to a common cause. The Methodists had the best of both worlds. Local autonomy supplemented by itinerant circuit riders who pioneered new territory and strengthened the growing network of churches.

7. Eventual but not inevitable decline

Eventually the Methodists joined the ranks of the more sedate mainline churches and moved into decline. Why? Their circuit riders got off their horses to become settled parish clergy. Secularized theological education replaced life-long, on the job, ministry training. A professional elite disempowered ordinary people called and willing to serve. Perhaps some of them went off and planted Baptist churches instead!

Reflection

1. How do the two competing models (upstart vs mainline) of ministry training and deployment compare to Jesus example?
2. How would you describe your own practice of training and deploying leaders? What needs to be different?
3. What is the relationship between “white-hot faith” and rapid deployment in a dynamic movement?
4. Why do you think renewal always begins on the fringe? How can you take advantage of this principle?
5. Why did the Methodists eventually decline? What could they have done differently?
6. What needs to change in your life and ministry to apply what you have learnt from this case study? What do you need to start doing? What do you need to stop doing?

Going further

Try my post on “Spontaneous Expansion” at www.steveaddison.net/2005/04/12/spontaneous-expansion.html.

Roland Allen’s writings are a great cross-reference for this case study. Here’s a pdf version of his Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: www.nextreformation.com/html/resources/spontaneous.pdf.

The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy by sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark is excellent.

I haven’t read it yet, but *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (1971) by Charles Ferguson looks good.

Ed Stetzer’s “Church Planting on the American Frontier” is a must. You’ll find it in the resource section of his website at www.newchurches.com.

About the author

Steve Addison is a life-long student of movements that renew and expand the Christian faith. Steve distills the characteristics of dynamic movements and makes them available to leaders committed to the multiplication of healthy churches.

Steve began his research into Christian movements in the late 1980s while serving as a church planter in Melbourne, Australia. He carried that interest into his Doctor of Ministry with Fuller Seminary. Steve currently serves as Director of Church Resource Ministries (CRM) Australia, a member of the CRM global community. CRM empowers leaders for the church.



Steve's calling is to empower godly leaders who strengthen and multiply churches, everywhere. Visit Steve's blog at www.steveaddison.net for his latest insights.

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