John Wesley, the founder of what is now the United Methodist Church, experienced a heart-warming, life-changing burn by the Holy Spirit at small group meeting on Aldersgate, London, England, on May 24, 1738. Following that experience, his preaching was considered so radical and controversial that he was banned from the pulpit in the Church of England. Now a priest with no parish, John Wesley truly began to practice ministry in ways that would for him, and for the United Methodist Church, redefine “parish.”

Wesley had been encouraged by his friend and colleague, George Whitefield, to focus on the those who could not afford or did not have the time off from work to attend Sunday worship. He began preaching and teaching the Good News of Jesus Christ anywhere he went, particularly to the poor and working classes. He preached in the fields, the city squares, and outside the coal mines to anyone who would hear. Many local priests accused Wesley of crossing parish lines and therefore “trespassing” on the work that belonged to the priest assigned to that geographic area, i.e. parish.

When responding to critics of his radical methods of ministry, Wesley said, “I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, [it is my] duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that his blessing attends it.”[[1]](#endnote-1) It is from this act of preaching where the people were, that made itinerant preaching a part of the Methodist Church today.

Members of the Methodists Societies supported one another by regularly tending to each other’s spiritual and physical lives; with daily prayer, study of the scripture, helping one another in hard times, and serving and helping the poor and those in prison, especially debtor’s prison. Even the poorest of those in the Methodist Societies helped to organize, raise funds, provide food and find shelter for the impoverished. Tending to the poor and the needy, (whom the church most commonly left behind), was an essential component of being a Methodist.

John Wesley believed that when one’s heart, mind and soul is transformed to the believing of Jesus Christ as God’s Holy Child, who gave sacrificially for us to have eternal life, then that one is ‘caught on fire’ by the Holy Spirit to give that witness, and do the work of caring for the least of these. John Wesley believed that our faith changes not just our hearts and minds and souls, it changes our practices as well. As God is a hands-on God, so too, is our faith in that same God a practical faith. We live and work and have our being in and from our faith. One does not shy away from sharing their faith out of fear of offending the hearer, for it is the hearer who judges and decides what she or he will hear. One does not find other more important things to do with their time to not see and act for the needs of the hungry, imprisoned in body or mind or both, or the poor. For John Wesley and for Methodists, our lived-out faith is knowledge and vital piety, sacramentalism and evangelism, faith and good works, justification and sanctification, *sola fide and sola gratia*, piety and mercy, personal holiness and social holiness.[[2]](#endnote-2)

One cannot have a personal holiness without social holiness. If there is a hallmark of United Methodism it is that our personal faith is intimately tied up with our social faith – the works that we do in supporting one another and in supporting and transforming the lives of the poor. As the Methodist Church added more middle-class people John Wesley’s greatest fear would be that the middle class would become too occupied with their own financially security and that of their immediate family that the middle class would find ways to limit their time in small groups supporting one another and especially supporting the poor, not just with their money but with their time as well.

The majority that comprised the Methodist Societies in both England and the US of A were working class people who worked hard to keep their own families out of debt. Yet they found time and resources to build schools so that all children could read and write, built hospitals open to all, built shelters for the poorest and visited those in prison bringing extra food, reading and praying with them.

One of the earliest Methodist Churches was Pipe Creek “Brick” Church, in New Windsor, Maryland which lived out practical divinity built a school in the early 1800s for both boys and girls. That school was the forerunner to Western Maryland College, which birthed Westminster Seminary and on moving to Washington changed it names to Wesley Theological Seminary. Western Maryland College became McDaniel College named after a Methodist pastor, educator and administrator. Today there are 119 US colleges and universities including 13 seminaries and their students, supported by Methodist through the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry through grants, loans and scholarships. Our Special Sunday for United Methodist Students directly benefits the GBHEM. As we recently heard several of our children have received such scholarships. This is who Methodists are.

John and Charles Wesley, along with members of Methodist Societies visited those in prison, especially those facing the death penalty, sometimes to the consternation of the prison wardens. They pursued these men right down to the hangman’s scaffold, at times even getting into the cart with the condemned prisoners to sing and pray with them. John also took the opportunity on at least one occasion to preach to the mob that had gathered to watch the hangings at Tyburn (J&D, 19:362).[[3]](#endnote-3)

Today United Methodist Churches around the US of A and the world have small groups of people intentionally are trained in visiting those in county jails and in state prisons. Methodist churches have formed alliances with other groups to support refugees fleeing natural and human devastation. Our sister church, Buena Vista UMC in Alameda, CA uses what was the former parsonage to provide housing for such families, and Taylor United Methodist Church on 12th Street is transforming their parsonage into a home for 12 men who will transition from prison to civil life.

Lake Merritt UMC is at this location, formed from the blending of St. Stephen’s UMC and First UMC in Oakland, because in the pooling of their resources had the opportunity to move outside of downtown Oakland, the members overwhelmingly voted to stay in downtown Oakland particularly to serve the poorest and disenfranchised. Today, Lake Merritt members and volunteers serve meals twice weekly to the unsheltered around the lake, provide kitchen space for non-profit organizations to cook meals for poor families, provide Thanksgiving Dinner to 400-800 people on Thanksgiving Day. We are beginning again our work with the city of Oakland on supporting those moving from tents and sidewalks into community cabins where they will receive holistic care and support; work with immigration organizations to support and defend refugees and undocumented people; work with institutions to support LGBTQ+ students and adults, advocating for racial and ethnic justice through marches, letter writing campaigns and provide both gift cards and gifts to young adults through Covenant House in Oakland. There is room for more of us to join in these social holiness endeavors. There will always be room for more of us until all of us take part. Lest we get confused, as Methodists we do not do these things because it is the social justice thing to do; we do these things because we know in heart, mind and soul that the grace and mercy God has given to us through Jesus the Christ is an unmerited gift and being touched by the Holly Spirit we cannot but be moved to acts of mercy and acts of piety together.

I’d like to close with a prayer John Wesley wrote that I believe is just as valuable today as in his day.

*Lord God,*

*Deliver us
From a lazy mind,
From a lukewarm heart,
And an unwilling spirit,
Which deaden our love for you.*

*Give us a passionate, alive and joyful spirit,
To boldly do whatever you command,
To suffer whatever you call us to,
To be eager to serve your holy love
In all things.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

– John Wesley (1703-1791) (edited in Modern English)

1. Wesley’s journal entry on 11 June 1739 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Heitzenrater, Richard P.. Wesley and the People Called Methodists (p. 358). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Heitzenrater, Richard P.. Wesley and the People Called Methodists (p. 137). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)