Meet John Stewart

Greetings!

Say the name John Stewart and a person is likely to think of the former host of The Daily Show, the smart-alecky political satirist of cable TV fame. But did you know there's another John Stewart (1786-1823), a notable in Methodist history? Though one of the UMC's most important forebears, this John Stewart flies under the radar---if he even gets a mention at all.

The Methodist John Stewart is a key figure in the story surrounding the Wyandott Indian Mission in Upper Sandusky, Ohio. The Wyandott[1] Indian Mission is one of the 49 United Methodist Heritage Landmarks, the most sacred places in global United Methodism.

A contemporary of early American Methodist Episcopal Church leaders like Francis Asbury, Richard Whatcoat, and William McKendree, Stewart was our original missionary, inspiration and impetus for the first permanent denominational mission enterprise. His outreach engaged Native Americans from the Wyandott (or Huron) nation settled in northern Ohio after the French and Indian War (1754-1763). Rediscovering John Stewart's impact, the agenda of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) will include Stewart as a key figure when marking their bicentennial in 2019.

Traveling to the Heritage Landmark with colleague General Secretary Thomas Kemper and members of the GBGM team, we got to know more about Stewart, his calling, vision and life's work at the Wyandott Indian School. We left the visit shaking our heads in astonishment and with some chagrin that we did not previously know or lift-up this difference-making disciple.

John Stewart was born in Virginia to Baptists of mixed European and African descent (1786). Leaving home to move to Ohio, he began a long personal journey through difficult spiritual wilderness. Robbed of all his possessions during the trek, he turned to alcohol to dull the pain. Drinking, dissolute living, and depression brought him to the brink of death. He
thought about ending his life until one day he heard a voice calling his name. He saw no one but to him, the voice was real enough that it brought him to his senses. If this story was being told in a feature film, the Negro Spiritual "Hush, Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name" would be playing in the background.

The era of John Stewart's life coincided with the popularity of camp meetings---evangelistic, religious, revival gatherings held in frontier forest clearings where enthusiastic preaching, inspired singing, impassioned praying, deep personal reflection and come-to Jesus conversions were commonplace. American Methodist evangelism flourished in the camp meeting environment and indeed much of the MEC's growth in its early years was seeded in these early camp meetings. The journals of the likes of Francis Asbury and William McKendree are full of references to camp meetings and their dramatic effects on people's lives.

John Stewart's turning-point came at a camp meeting. While in prayer at a camp meeting, Stewart heard a voice again. It said: "Declare my counsel faithfully." By these words Stewart sensed God saying to him 'tell other people about me!'

For a time Stewart struggled against this calling, to the point that the inner turmoil caused serious illness. Fearing death, he vowed to commit himself to mission work among Native Americans and to follow this calling to the northwest Wyandott country in and around today's Upper Sandusky, Ohio.

Those who write about Stewart's life say he "sang and preached his way to the Delawares on the way to the Wyandotte." Don't you love that visual? His preaching was interspersed with singing. It is so Methodist! I wonder what he sang? Perhaps:

Love Divine all loves Excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling, all they faithful mercies crown.
Jesus thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art,
visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.

Apparently the enthusiasm expressed in his ministry was contagious.

After reaching the Wyandott, he was befriended by another person of African descent, Jonathan Pointer. Pointer was first captured by and now living with the Wyandott. Pointer, fluent in Wyandott language and interpreter for and confidant to Tarhe, the paramount Wyandotte chief, was invaluable in helping John Stewart connect.

Stewart's preaching and singing resulted in friendship and religious conversion by Wyandott chiefs and leading women in their community. They said the Christian message John Stewart presented brought them inner peace they hadn't known before. This peace brought reconciliation to estranged and fractured relationships in
the tribe, not to mention the significance of the Methodist's temperance message at a time when "strong drink" (something Stewart knew about) was becoming a serious problem in their tribal community.

With neither money nor credentials, only the passion of his experience of God's grace and enthusiasm grounded in his calling, Stewart began work with the Wyandott in the winter of 1816. The obstacles he faced were formidable. A black man was perceived as an inferior human being in the eyes of many whites---not to mention the law---despite Methodism's egalitarian appeal and engagement of blacks. The call to mission Stewart heard and accepted from "the voice" was to people with their own experience and reasons understandably suspicious of outsiders.

Stewart also faced impediments from other religious groups already working the area. Stewart's early success with the Wyandott made missionary competitors envious to the point of accusing him of dishonesty and threatening to expose him as a runaway slave--a serious, life-threatening, incarcerating, deportable charge. They said he had no credentials to follow the call he'd embarked on. Through all this, Stewart persevered with courage and determination.

The Methodist quarterly conference licensed John Stewart a "missionary pioneer" in 1818 on lands "allotted to" the Wyandott by the US government. The following year, the Ohio Conference established an official mission to the Wyandott. The Methodist Episcopal Church supported his mission work financially and appointed missionaries to assist him. Stewart's work and example inspired the formation of The Methodist Missionary Society in 1820, the forerunner to today's General Board of Global Ministries.

John Stewart's health was never robust and he found he could do less and less even though he was still a relatively young man. His friends collected enough money to buy him a small farm, where he lived with his wife until his death in 1823 at 37 years of age. By the time he died, Stewart noted he had not only "declared my counsels faithfully," his personal experience of the life-changing love of God in Jesus Christ had brought many Wyandott to experience the same. His passion and vision started a mission school in Upper Sandusky not FOR but WITH the Wyandott. This mission school was NOT the "kill the Indian save the man," type of Indian schools Methodists and other churches were infamously and perilously party to 25 years later. The Wyandott Indian Mission School of John Stewart and those who followed in his footsteps was a school run by blacks, whites, and Indians side by side. In this school Native American culture and identity would not be shamed but be a key in coming-together, established in the vision of a black man to have a school and a church together.

The words he spoke to his spouse, on his deathbed, embody his testimony from the first voice he'd heard decades
before to and through his following its lead: "be faithful."

As a result of his faithful efforts, John Stewart was adopted into the Wyandotte nation. Thirty years later, a Methodist Church (now UMC) was named in his honor. In more recent times, the church sponsors a Native American Awareness Day in the Upper Sandusky public schools, bringing local and national leaders of the Wyandott nation in for a day of immersion in Wyandott language, culture and history. And all because this extraordinary Methodist missionary John Stewart inspired the conviction that Wyandotte life has been and still needs to be woven into the mainstream of Upper Sandusky life.

In this spirit, GBGM will, as part of its bicentennial celebration in 2019, turn the title of the land of the Wyandott Indian Mission back to the Wyandotte Nation—its original owners. Sadly, like most American stories with the indigenous peoples, the Wyandott, despite John Stewart and the Mission School's positive influence, were forced from Upper Sandusky due to increasingly intolerant white-European encroachment and the enforcement of an 1830 Indian Removal Act in what amounted to another "trail of tears.”

John Stewart's story gets at the heart of Christian mission. Words like acceptance, tolerance, collaboration, and breaking down barriers come to mind. Mission and ministry WITH instead TO and FOR others come to mind and stands in stark contrast to words like arrival, assessment, exploitation, occupation, forced assimilation or alienation—all too common in the paradigm of the history of Christian mission.

Stewart's experience of "coming to his senses" because of God's goodness and love compelled him to do difference-making good for others. To have a sense conversion and calling so strong it defied internal and external perceptions of inferiority, insurmountable obstacles, unknown terrain, lack of credential and ill health.

I grew up in an era (1950s and 60s) when the idea of being a missionary was to be sent to some far off, primitive land. Later in my life, the church recovered a sense that missions could and also needed to be in cities and rural areas here in the US where human need is as great as any far off land. I have come to realize that mission is neither near nor far. It is, in the contemporary expression of the
Even more than that, mission is embodied in a person like John Stewart. Mission in Methodist history is often centered in and motivated by people experiencing God's grace, agonizing over their life circumstances and surroundings and sensing God meeting them right where they are. God's love calls to the best in them and calls the best out of them, to be holy difference-makers. Mission is moving-out and ahead, not being able to sit still because of what God has done and will do.

"Declare my counsel faithfully" the voice said to John Stewart. Go tell what I have done for you. Go tell my story, the voice still says. Is that voice speaking to you? Where you are?

God open our ears.

Wyandott Chief Billy Friend shared the mission statement of the cultural committee of the nation: "to preserve the future of our past." I have never heard a better mission statement for all of us in the history and mission business of The United Methodist Church.

[1] In researching this article the name Wyandott appears interchangeably in at least three different forms - Wyandot, Wyandott and Wyandotte. I have chosen the form Wyandott because of its longstanding use in relationship to The Wyandott Indian Mission School as a United Methodist Heritage Landmark.

Rev. Fred Day, General Secretary
General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH)
By understanding the past, GCAH helps envision the future!


Excerpt: Stewart Returns to the Wyandot http://www.wyandot.org/stew4.htm


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**Together Art - When a record is also art**

By Dale Patterson

One of my favorite comedy routines that I heard back in my high school years was one by Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary fame. Since it was part of the PPM program, not only was it humorous but it also made one pause and think. It was about magazines. "There was one publication called Life," began Stookey. Just think, a publication devoted to everything, very inclusive. Then another publication came along called People. Not quite the same coverage as Life, but still, there are a lot of people in the world. Then something happened and we ended up with a publication called US.

Our focus had narrowed, and Stookey, giving his famous knowing and bewildered look would say it implied there should be a publication called Them. Stookey wound up his routine with his prediction of a magazine in the future which would be called Me and would only have bright shiny glass-like pages. A roar of laughter and groans greeted this final punchline.

Maybe times have changed, or maybe not, but alongside Life and People there was a Methodist publication written for the whole family. Go into almost any Methodist home between the end of World War II and the mid-1970s and there on the coffee table, next to Life or Time or Newsweek, was Together magazine. When you think about it, it was an interesting name for an interesting time. The Commission is pleased to have a full run of this important publication from the middle of the twentieth century. The title suggested that the denomination viewed all church members, whatever their stage of life, as being in this life "Together." As it turns out, despite several awards and overall quality, the publication had limitations. In an era of increasing specialization it tried to focus on a common core and stands as an important barometer of that changing time. A magazine is more than just the text on the page. In this article I will focus on the publication's artwork and images.
Oddities from the Vault

October is the time to ponder the odd, the unexpected and the unusual. And we have those in the United Methodist Archives and History Center. This month we look at three items which reflect on our changing attitudes toward death and dying over the past two hundred years; the John Wesley death mask, the shoes of a woman who was knocked off her feet by lightning in a church and the "thumb" of the Rev. George Whitefield. What oddities we have!

Check them all out here: Oddities

Social Principles - An ever widening circle

For over 100 years The United Methodist Church has had a statement about the church's attitude and position toward the world around us---the Social Principles and the Social Creed.

Written in 1908, the original Social Creed focused on one of the most pressing problems of the day; our industrial society. Its focus was to encourage the creation of a just, fair and positive modern society. Over the years---in an ever widening circle---the church has realized that its voice needs to be heard in multiple arenas. The images here represent a small portion of the display created by Drew University and the General Commission on Archives and History to celebrate with Drew Theological School the opening of the Social Justice Center housed at the Theological School. The displays were built around the six sections of the Social Principles.

See photos of the displays here: http://gcah.org/resources/social-principles

Greater NJ Celebrates its 30th Historic Site

One of Greater New Jersey's latest United Methodist historic sites was honored on September 29, 2018. The Evangelical United Methodist Church in Clarksboro, New Jersey, recently
The presentation took place during the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference Historical Society Meeting at the church. The Reverend Don DeGroat presented the historic site marker to Betty Ann Warner, church historian, who formally accepted the church's new designation on behalf of the congregation with Pastor Aidan Lee as members of the church proudly looked on in the pews.

Evangelical United Methodist Church is one of the few remaining congregations within the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference boundaries which has its roots in the former Evangelical Association. The German-speaking church was originally incorporated in 1880 as the Zion Evangelical Church.

Locals would often refer to the congregation as the "German Church" well into the twentieth century. By 1924, it became the only rural Evangelical Church congregation within the state. After the 1968 merger between the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Churches, there became a need to rename the church from Zion to Evangelical. The name change reflected not only its historical roots but also prevented confusion with another Clarksboro Methodist Church currently named Zion Community.

Earlier in the meeting, Reverend Fred Day, General Secretary of GCAH, gave a presentation on the 50th Anniversary of The United Methodist Church. He highlighted the events not only at the Unification at General Conference but also the context of national and world events that nascent United Methodists found themselves in at the time. Mark Shenise, GCAH Associate Archivist, gave the devotion to open the meeting.