

## Methodist History

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England pastor, John Wesley was not satisfied with a passive faith. He began forming small groups and missions to the poor. The movement caught fire among lay persons until preaching stations became necessary. Wesley appointed lay preachers including the first female preacher. So, Methodism, at its heart, is small group ministries and missions that today include healthcare and education.

Methodism crossed the Atlantic to the American colonies. After the revolution the Methodist Church was formed making it the first denomination birthed in the new United States of America. The church moved west with the population ministering through "circuit riders."

A circuit was made up of two or more local churches and a pastor was appointed to care for these local churches. During the course of a year, he was expected to visit each church on the charge at least once and possibly start some new ones. This force of traveling preachers became known as circuit- riders. Their mission was grueling. Francis Asbury, one of the first circuit riders, was thought to have traveled 270,000 miles and preached 16,000 sermons. They traveled light and endured hardships for the greater calling of spreading God's word. They preached daily often at any site available, whether it be a log cabin, the local courthouse, a meeting house, or an outdoor forest setting. Unlike the pastors of settled denominations, these preachers were constantly on the move. Their assignment was often so large it might take them 5 or 6 weeks to cover the territory. These circuit riders had an extremely important job, but also a dangerous one. They typically traveled 200 to 500-mile routes horse back. Exhaustion, illness, animal attacks, and unfriendly encounters were constant threats. Days and nights were spent in the elements hunting or fishing for food and depending on the hospitality of strangers. The General Commission on Archives and History records historian Dale Patterson as saying, "You could travel days before you got to a town, and a day or so from one farm to the next, and once you go into the frontier it was even more lonely." But Francis Asbury, (one of the first Bishops appointed by John Wesley) knew their importance, "We must reach every section of America, especially the raw frontiers. We must not be afraid of men, devils, wild animals, or disease. Our motto must always be FORWARD!"

According to church records in 1844, the Methodist Church had a membership of over 1 million with 4,000 ministers riding circuits in the U.S.