

LEADERSHIP ON A JOURNEY

Methodism and Leadership

Methodism was born in 1738 as a society of religious revival, at a time when congregations in Britain were ebbing away from the established Church. For Methodism to grow, effective leadership was a necessity.

Strong governance and a clear direction grounded in the belief that God's love is for all, coupled with some unique talents of its early leaders, enabled the rapid development of the Methodist Church.



Above: George Floyd mural in Berlin, Germany Image: *Rex Features*

We live in a fast-changing world. Recent events, including the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, are poignant reminders of social and political change.

Methodist leadership and congregations are evolving, including that at John Wesley's first purpose-built church in London, here at City Road.

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Many Methodists in Britain and elsewhere are rooted in black and minority ethnic cultures.

Their heritage, gifts and vision contribute much to the life of the Methodist Church. In fact, they have helped to shape the Church for a long time. This exhibition and the 'Leadership on a Journey' project are a celebration of the contribution of black and minority ethnic Methodists to the rich life and diversity of the Methodist Church.

They seek to inspire reflection on how Methodists from a wide range of ethnic communities have helped to shape the Church, and how this leadership may be nurtured going forward.

In this first part of our journey, we explore the history and examples of such Church leadership through objects and images in our museum collection.



Above: Ghana Fellowship Choir at Wesley's Chapel, and Leysian Mission, City Road

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You may feel that the number of museum objects and images illustrating our journey is small.

You are right. Comparatively few items in our museum have a direct connection with black and minority ethnic leadership in Methodism. Museums worldwide have only recently realised that their collections may be missing important material to tell society's full story. This includes the history and story of Methodism.

But this should not lead to the conclusion that there were no Methodist leaders from diverse backgrounds in the past. Or that their contribution in Britain, as indeed elsewhere, wasn't significant. Far from.



Above: Volunteers from Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, City Road, helping at Whitechapel Mission

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Journeys

Black and minority ethnic leadership in Methodism in Britain could be thought of as a product of recent years, possibly in connection with the so-called 'Windrush Generation'. But the story is more complex.

There were some highly successful, influential and very interesting leaders from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the Church's early life.

Right: The SS Empire Windrush, 1948.
Image: [inews.co.uk](https://www.inews.co.uk)

People often refer to the 'Windrush Generation' when talking about black and minority ethnic immigrants from the Caribbean to the UK. They either travelled on the SS Empire Windrush, or between the years 1948 to 1971.



But it is true to say that in Britain, black and minority ethnic Church leadership in the past has been less visible. Why? Because:

- **In comparison to the majority of Methodist leaders in the British Isles, the number of those from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds was small and their achievements may have been overshadowed.**
- **Minority ethnic leaders, some of whom were women, often worked at the local level and their role may have been little known, celebrated or even recognised.**
- **Leadership is a quality which is not always exercised top-down but also from the bottom-up. Thus, it can be missed.**
- **Perhaps we failed to look and question.**



Above: Caribbean immigrants arriving in the UK in the 1940s and 1950s. Images: [Reddit](https://www.reddit.com)

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Leadership Elite

If there has been a degree of diversity among Methodist leaders in Britain for a while, leadership at the top of British Methodism used to favour certain individuals. In part this was because the Church originated in a society and times different from our own.

The most widely known and recognised concept of leadership in Wesleyan Methodism is perhaps that exercised by its founder, John Wesley (1703-1791). Certain select churchmen at the heart of the Church followed in his footsteps.

In the past, these men were often seen as the 'great and good'. Their vision - if sometimes controversially - shaped the Church. And for a long time, the outlook of British Methodism centred on their gifts.



Left:
Thomas Coke

Below left:
Adam Clarke

Below right:
Jabez Bunting
Image: npg.org.uk



In keeping with British society in the 1700s and 1800s, most early Methodist Church leaders were British, white and male. Some came from families with existing connections to Methodism, influence or wealth.

Many early leaders were exceptionally well educated. Quite a few were theoreticians and very intellectual.

At this time, there were virtually no women among them. Women assisted but could not be ordained ministers.

Well-known early leaders in Methodism were Thomas Coke (1747-1814), Adam Clarke (1762-1832) and Jabez Bunting (1779-1858), among many others.

These men were charismatic, successful and pivotal in the development of Methodism. But they, and their message, reflected the time and society in which they lived.

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Breaking the Mould

White, British-born churchmen were the most prominent Methodist Church leaders in the British Isles in the 1700s and 1800s. But there was a minority of other, lesser-known Methodists from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and their achievements were remarkable.

Considering the social and cultural context of the times, the challenges in their way to success were daunting.

An outstanding British-born, mixed race Methodist leader in the early 1800s who overcame such challenges was Thomas Birch Freeman.

Thomas Birch Freeman (1809-1890)

Thomas came to be of crucial importance to the spread of Methodism in Africa. His father was a freed slave from Africa, his mother a white British woman.

Early on Thomas developed an interest in Methodism and decided to become a minister. Following his ordination in 1837, he was appointed a probationary Wesleyan minister at Cape Coast (Ghana) in Africa.



Above: Thomas Birch Freeman (1809-1890), c. 1850

Image: *Wikimedia*

Many early missionaries in Africa struggled; Thomas, however, was very determined and succeeded where others failed. In part this may have been connected to his mixed-race background as he adapted well to the African climate and had good health.

Thomas established multiple schools and his missionary activity took him far afield to Dahomey (Benin) and Western Nigeria. Today he is regarded as one of the early pioneers of Methodism in West Africa and is often referred to as the 'Founder of Ghana Methodism'.

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Leading Women in Antigua

Not all Methodist leaders were male. Certainly in Britain, women's roles in Methodism were limited until the late 20th century. They could be group and class leaders overseeing other women and from the 1890s they were employed as deaconesses. But hardly any were involved in the day-to-day leadership of the Methodist societies.



Above: Font with carved stone step at Wesley's Chapel, City Road

Methodism came to Antigua through the plantation owner Nathaniel Gilbert (1736-1774). Nathaniel baptized his slaves and established the first Methodist meeting house on the island. Following his passing it was mainly the local women who helped turn the first sparks of faith into a fire. Later, British Methodist missionaries followed and continued the work.

In other places, particularly in less formal surroundings, women were able to contribute more. Notably on the tiny Caribbean island of Antigua, Methodist women had active involvement in preaching, advocacy and managing the local Methodist society.

In fact Antigua became one of the first places where women became central to the development of Methodism as early as the 1700s. Many of these women were black or of mixed race.

Below: Nathaniel Gilbert's plantation house



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Antiguan Voices

In Antigua, black women preached and campaigned actively for the abolition of slavery. They helped manage the finances of the Antiguan Methodist society. Some had started life as slaves.



Five early Antiguan Methodist women stand out: Sophia Cambell, Mary Alley, Sarah Moore, and sisters Elizabeth (Thwaites) and Anne Hart (Gilbert).

Sophia Campbell, in early documents referred to as a "negress", and Mary Alley, described by contemporaries as a "mulatto", were two devoted Methodist women. They kept the Antiguan flock together with prayer meetings in the immediate aftermath of Nathaniel Gilbert's death.

Left: Sarah Moore preaching (1818)

Sarah Moore in turn was born into slavery but freed by her owner. She became known as a powerful local preacher and was involved deeply in the running of the Antigua Methodist society. An engraving in the collection of the Museum of Methodism and on display nearby shows her preaching in a pulpit in confident pose.

Elizabeth Hart Thwaites (1772–1833) and Anne Hart Gilbert (1773–1833), were sisters. They were born on Antigua to free black parents. Converted to Methodism, they became educators and opponents to slavery. Both were especially concerned about and engaged with the representations of slaves and black people then circulating in the West Indies. The sisters used their writings to challenge the existing order and, over time, their writings and work helped to change perceptions.

There were countless other black and ethnic women in Antigua and also in Britain who provided moral and practical leadership in their faith and in everyday life. They had vision and worked with practicality. But they had fewer opportunities for formal training and self-expression. As a result their leadership in Antigua, as in Britain and in other places, is not always remembered as it deserves.

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Odd one Out?

In Britain, Methodist leadership was still shaped by traditions until the 1900s and beyond. Change was slow. However, as time went by, some colourful characters introduced more diversity.

Evangelist Rodney 'Gypsy' Smith, whose family background was different from that of most Methodist leaders in Britain at that time, was one of them.

Rodney 'Gypsy' Smith (1860-1947)

Rodney was probably the best known - and possibly the best loved - Methodist evangelist of the early 1900s. He was born in a Romani bender tent in Epping Forest, close to London.

Rodney received no formal education and his family, of Roma or gypsy origin, sold small items of homeware, like baskets and clothes pegs. Referring to himself as 'Gypsy', and known widely by this name, he converted to Primitive Methodism aged sixteen.



Above: Rodney "Gipsy" Smith MBE



Gypsy started teaching himself to read and write and excelled at singing and preaching. This brought him to the attention of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army.

Following six years with the Army, Gypsy became an independent evangelist, visiting America, Australia and South Africa. Gypsy spent 1889-91 working at the Manchester Methodist Mission where he converted George H. McNeal. McNeal went on to become Superintendent of Wesley's Chapel, City Road (1924-35).

Left: Gypsy Smith as a young man, c.1895. Image: myprimitivemethodists.org.uk

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Building Bridges

After 1897 Gypsy Smith became a travelling evangelist for the Church. His singing and emotional appeals enjoyed great success, influencing many to consider becoming Methodist themselves. In the course of his life, Gypsy was awarded an MBE for his outstanding work. But was he exceptional?

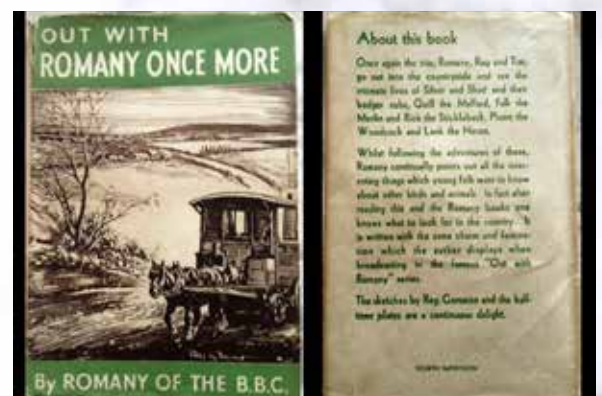
In his own way he was, but Gypsy's nephew George Bramwell Evens shared his cultural background and calling. He was not as well known, but he is a further example of small but perceptible changes in British Methodism by the early to mid 1900s.

See on display nearby Gypsy's glasses, or 'pince-nez', the harmonica Gypsy used to accompany his indoor and outdoor singing and praying, and a photograph of Gypsy and his nephew George.

George Bramwell Evens (1884-1943)

Known by the pseudonym 'Romany' (and, sometimes, 'The Tramp'), George was a trained and stationed minister of the Methodist Church.

He was also a British radio broadcaster and writer on countryside and natural history matters. George's mum was Gypsy's sister and like, him, was Romani.



Above: One of GB Evens's later publications.
Image: blogspot.com

George enjoyed a more systematic and wider education than Gypsy, and came to hold various Methodist ministries in England.



Above: Cocker Spaniel 'Raq'. Image: ebay.co.uk

One was Goole, in his early years. This was followed by the Methodist Central Hall, Carlisle (1914–1926); Huddersfield (1926–1929); and, later, the King Cross Methodist Chapel, Halifax (1929–1939).

Looking back, George Bramwell Evens is best known for his radio series, 'Out with the Romany'. This commenced in 1933 on the BBC's Children's Hour and was also published in book format. The series accompanied Romany in his own horse-drawn caravan on travels in the countryside, with Comma the horse, his dog Raq, and friends Muriel and Doris.

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Gathering Pace

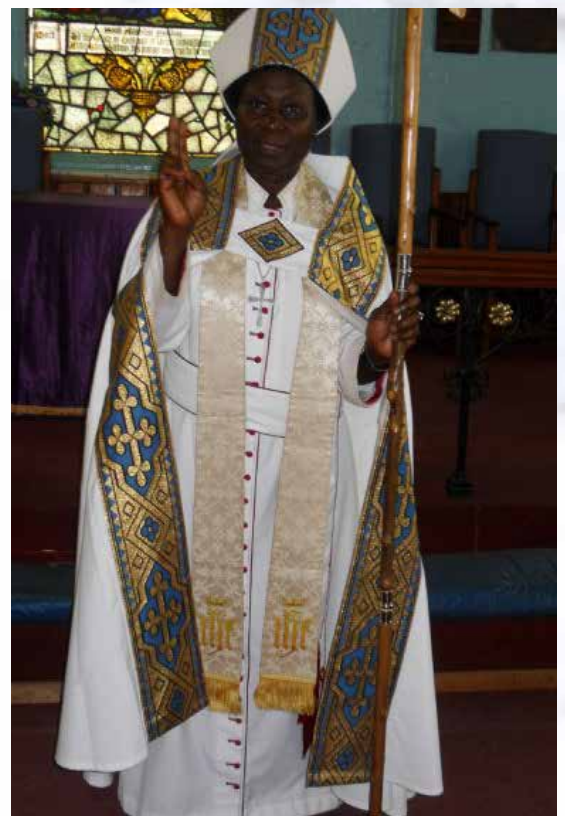
Today, there are similar numbers of men and women preachers in Methodism in Britain. Society is changing and there are more opportunities for women, as indeed non-binary people, of all backgrounds. Some are at the very top of the Church.

This includes the President of the Methodist Conference in 2021/22, Sonia Hicks, a black woman born in Britain. Sonia is the first black woman to become President of Conference in over 280 years. Another remarkable black woman and leader in Methodism can be found in the small West African state of The Gambia.

The Most Reverend Hannah Caroline Faal-Heim, Presiding Bishop of The Methodist Church The Gambia

Hannah Caroline Faal-Heim is the first Methodist Gambian, and the first female Methodist bishop, in West Africa. This is an enormous personal milestone but it is also one for Methodism and The Gambia.

Hannah was baptized and confirmed in the same church building where she was consecrated. Following a teaching career in The Gambia, she moved to Britain where she became a nurse and a midwife. For many years she worshipped at Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, City Road, and her family continue as active members of the church there. Later Hannah taught midwifery in London, but during one of her return visits to The Gambia she became convinced of her call to the ministry.



Above: Hanna Caroline Faal-Heim
Image: *The Point*

After some thirteen years' experience in lay ministry and further training in theology and an MA in pastoral theology, Hannah was elected formally by colleagues in The Gambia as their Bishop.

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Unsung Heroes

Alongside the first day cover commemorating the election of Hannah Caroline Faal-Heim to office, you can see a selection of historic photographs and other documents of members of her extended family.

The images below and the photographs displayed nearby date to the late 1800s. Originally from Sierra Leone, Hannah's family were Methodist and British subjects. They contributed to the creation of The Gambia - then a territory administered by Britain - by working in the frontline of the country's infrastructure. This included employment as optometrists (eye specialists), occupation in hospitals and work in other grass roots professions. Family members were active church and community members. Their leadership, like that of many, was at local level and often went unnoticed.



Images kindly lent by Mr Sagan Daniels.

Looking back, Hannah's family helped their community develop and flourish. Of course, such work rarely receives recognition. As in many walks of life and places, there are many unsung heroes in Methodism, then and now.

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On one Path

Since the mid-1900s institutional Methodist leadership in the British Isles has started to broaden, partially because minority ethnic membership of the Methodist Church has grown as immigration from overseas increased.

Many congregations, especially in towns and larger population centres, have attracted significant new membership. Things are changing and evolving.

These days, there are many talented and leading men, women and non-binary people in British Methodism who are black or from a minority ethnic background.

There is a lot more diversity, also within congregations. Everyone contributes to the life and development of the Church.

One example is Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, City Road, which is also the home of The Museum of Methodism and John Wesley's House.



Above: 'Emerging Talent' show at Wesley's Chapel, City Road

Here, the congregation is rooted in over fifty nations. There are museum volunteers of all backgrounds, and the board of trustees overseeing the chapel and museum is similarly diverse. This is a great asset. Everyone brings personal gifts and their own special talent, and the service and commitment of all helps the Church on its path into the future.

Today leadership in Methodism in Britain, but also elsewhere, is becoming more diverse and more inclusive. Leadership is determined much more by talent and ability, not ethnic or cultural background, or gender. This is also true for society in general and is good news.

But there is still much room for development and improvement, and it is an ongoing and sometimes challenging journey. And it is a journey in which we all share.