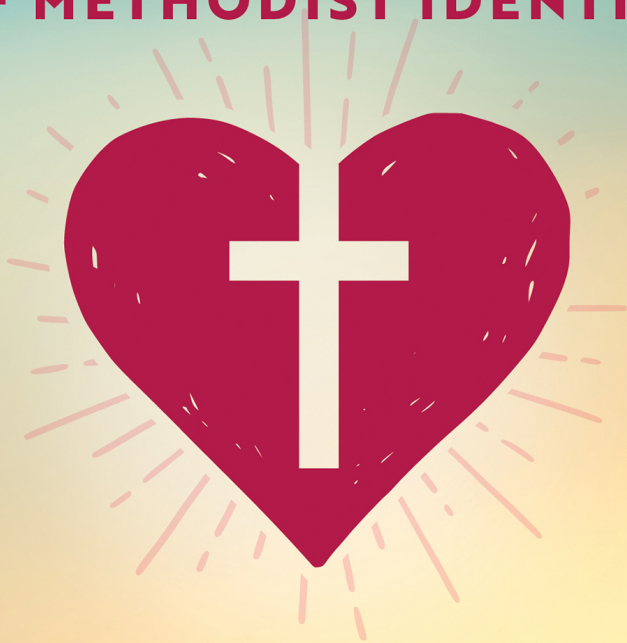


WESLEYAN VILE- TALITY

**RECLAIMING THE HEART
OF METHODIST IDENTITY**



ASHLEY BOGGAN

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1

THE CALL TO WESLEYAN VILE-TALITY

In Death There Is Resurrection

The first time I visited the Wesley heritage sites in England, I was sixteen years old. I was traveling with my family to visit my sister, who was spending a semester studying abroad at Oxford University. My mother and father—who were both ordained clergy in The UMC—dragged me to City Road, and we looked at John Wesley’s grave through a fence. I remember pulling on my dad’s shirt and saying, “Why are we looking at some dead guy’s grave?” Little did I know that within a decade, I’d be seeking a PhD studying *that* dead guy.

It would be twenty years before I returned to these sites but with a new, more appreciative lens. In the summer of 2022, I had the immense privilege to travel with other Metho-nerds on the Wesley

Pilgrimage hosted by Discipleship Ministries. It was led by Rev. Dr. Paul Chilcote, Rev. Dr. Steve Manskar, and Rev. Melanie Gordon. For this trip, I put on my pilgrim hat; I was going as a United Methodist laywoman, as a person in need of spiritual renewal—not as a scholar, and definitely not as a general secretary. I was there to learn, not teach. I was excited about seeing London and walking down Aldersgate Street where John had his heart strangely warmed. In Oxford, I was anxious to get to Christ Church and see the pulpit from which Wesley preached. And I couldn't believe that we would get to go to Epworth and see the home where John Wesley was raised and sit at *the* table where Susanna taught her children. However, I was not as excited about Bristol; in all honesty, I really couldn't remember what happened in Bristol. But little did I know that I would have a similar experience in Bristol to that of John Wesley—it would change everything.

Arriving at the seaport town of Bristol, we got off the coach and walked down what seemed like an outdoor mall. I couldn't help but think, *Where are we going?* And in the middle of these shops, tucked back from the main walkway, was an unassuming white building. It had a large statue in front of it with John Wesley on horseback, and honestly, without this statue, I might have walked right by it.

We walked inside and wow! The stark white of the plaster walls contrasted with the wooden pews, benches, and pulpit. Its interior screamed old Methodist. All of the pilgrims wandered around a bit before finding our seats in the (nineteenth-century, not original) pews. I sat next to a person who would become a true friend, Rev. Chris Heckert. Into the main room walked a joyful British man, David Worthington. He welcomed us and started talking about all of the Methodist things that happened in Bristol. As he was talking, I started remembering how crucial Bristol was to the Wesleys. How could I have forgotten?

As David talked, I began to remember the revival in Bristol of 1739, and I began to vaguely recall that Wesley did something for the first time in this place. And that's when David read from John Wesley's journal. And it all came rushing back. But it came rushing back in a renewed way, a way that suddenly made everything make sense. My mind began racing as I listened and I kept thinking, *There's something about this place that's different. There's a message here that we all need.* David read from John's journal...

Saturday [March] 31, [1739]

In the evening, I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields...having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should've thought the saving of souls a sin if it had not been done inside of a church.

[Sunday] April 1, [1739]

In the evening (Mr. Whitefield being gone) I begun expounding our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, (one pretty remarkable precedent of field preaching, though I suppose there were churches at that time also) to a little society which was accustomed to meet once or twice a week in Nicholas Street.

Monday [April] 2, [1739]

At four o'clock in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and preaching the glad tidings of salvation from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city to about three thousand people.

There was so much to unpack in those words, but what kept repeating in my head, and the phrase that David Worthington read twice was "submitted to be more vile."

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Submitted. To. Be. More. Vile.

Submitted.

Vile.

I'd heard or read this journal entry from April 2, 1739, probably a dozen times. It never hit me the same way as it did sitting there in the New Room, in Bristol, hearing John's words read by a guy with a British accent.

When David finished with his talk, we all got up, got our pictures preaching from the pulpit, toured the (amazing!) museum, and left. But Bristol wouldn't leave me alone. Something changed there for me. And I couldn't get David's voice out of my head—*be more vile*. Some of us pilgrims gathered at a pub later that night, and we all agreed that Bristol was our favorite stop on the pilgrimage. It was the first Methodist preaching house—the first Methodist building in the world! And it's where John Wesley's entire ministry changed. Little did I know it's where my entire ministry would change, too.

A few days later, through tears, all the pilgrims hugged each other and said goodbye—as if we'd never see each other again despite our all being very involved in the UM connection. And I boarded my plane. When I landed back in New Jersey, my life changed—but not for the better.

You see, my parents lived back in Arkansas. In February of 2020, right before everything shut down due to COVID-19, my mom (who was my best friend) had a brain bleed. Two months later—in the middle of the shutdown—she had another. After her second one, she was unable to communicate either through speech or writing. After being discharged from one month of rehab (where, because of COVID restrictions, we couldn't see her at all), she had aged what looked like thirty years. Where a strong-willed, funny, wise woman once sat was now a frail, confused person. She was

gone. She was physically here, but she was gone. She was alive, but my mom, my best friend, was gone.

With the ongoing shutdown, my father stayed home through the rest of 2020, all of 2021, and into 2022, and he cared for her 24/7. He refused help (stubbornness runs deep in my DNA). In fact, for Christmas 2021, I gifted him a spot on the Wesley Pilgrimage—I guess I felt like I needed to apologize for pulling him away from Wesley’s grave all those years before. But with Mom sick, he felt like he couldn’t leave. He wouldn’t be able to enjoy the history or sites with his mind back on her at home. So, he stayed in Arkansas caring for Mom, and I flew to England.

When I landed after the pilgrimage in July 2022, I immediately called him. I had to tell him about all of the things I had seen, and I had to tell him about Bristol. I knew he’d roll his eyes in a loving, proud manner when I began to rant about “be more vile.” But he’d listen because he always did. He was one of the few people—at that time at least—with whom I could truly Metho-nerd out. He didn’t answer, but I didn’t think anything of it. It was late, after all. The next morning, I tried again. Still no answer. I called my sister, who was with her family at Disney World. “Hey, I’m back. Have you talked to Dad? He’s not answering?”

“Yeah, I talked to him yesterday. He had COVID last week and didn’t sound great, but he’s no longer testing positive. I’ll call the neighbor and see if he can go over and check.” The neighbor knocked on his door, but there was no answer.

I ended up calling the police to do a wellness check. I remember that moment, hearing those words as if they weren’t actually coming out of the phone: “Ma’am, I don’t know how to tell you this, but he’s dead.” I don’t know what else the police officer said after that; I just remember collapsing. Eventually I heard him asking, “Is someone else here with your father?”

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And then I came to again, “Yes, my mother. She’s on hospice and cannot communicate. Is she ok?”

“She’s still nicely tucked in bed, but she’s awake.”

Mom lived another three months after Dad died. It was the exact time that the doctor had given her to live back in April of 2020. But with Dad’s loving care, she “lived” for an unexpected two and a half years. But within three months, they were both gone. My world turned completely upside down. And I threw all of my grief into my work (which my therapist assured me was a healthy outlet).

Be. More. Vile.

Even in the midst of all of this grief, I still couldn’t get those three words out of my head. Luckily, after the pilgrimage, I had stayed in touch with three of the pilgrims. We had even branded ourselves the More Vile Methodist Network. They helped me process grief, provided needed memes, and were my go-to space to Metho-nerd out.

Wrestling with Wesley’s journal entry from April 2 seemed to be healing for me. God works in weird ways. As a Christian people, we are called to believe that in death there is life. And when you think about it, what could be more “vile” than Jesus’s resurrection? In fact, when you really think about it, who better an example of a “vile” person than Jesus? I know I just insinuated that Jesus is vile, but please don’t shut the book yet. Give me a moment. Think of all the socially-upending, physics-defying, and rule-bending aspects of his life and ministry. He dared to claim that the rich shall be last and the poor shall be first. He associated with tax collectors and women who had been cast aside. And my personal favorite, he turned water into wine! All of this was so abhorrent to the Roman government that it sanctioned his killing in the lowliest form of execution possible: crucifixion. And then he had the *vile* audacity to defy death. His story lived on; his ministry and witness lived on as

others embodied his call to be a witness for and to all in this world. In my parents' death, a new journey of faith opened up for me, a new calling to help others reclaim the authentic Wesleyan identity in which they raised me. Their ministries were cut short, but it felt healing to carry their witness, their understanding of Wesley forward—for in death, there is life.

I cannot help but connect the parallels of my own trauma between 2020 and 2023 with the traumatic experiences within The United Methodist Church. After the General Conference of 2019, and with the onset of COVID-19, The UMC was forced into a period of waiting with bated breath, wondering when, how, and to what end it was going to gather next. During this time, the trust clause was shattered, covenants were broken, and some congregations left. The UMC experienced its own grief and identity crisis. And now it's time that we be reminded of who we really were, are, and could be again, *for in death, there is life*. We have a chance to be reborn, to resurrect our true selves, to tell our stories anew. The hard part of doing this, however, is that not everyone likes what I believe to be the true, dare I say "orthodox," perspective of Wesley and the reputation of the people called Methodist. Our true identity claims us as rabble-rousers, outsiders, and rule-benders and blatantly calls us to "be more vile." For the affirming theology that Wesley preached and the ways that those early Methodists pushed the confined boundaries of church and state, they were beaten, jailed, harassed, and disowned. Again, this has a very close parallel to those early Christians. For telling the story of a resurrected Jesus, they were persecuted, jailed, martyred, and cast out. But that didn't stop them. Those early Methodists didn't stop either... at least for a bit. Embracing our core identity requires a deep faith, a deep commitment to the very idea that God can do anything and all if

we are willing to submit to God's call for us—even if that calls us to new fields.

Coming out of this parallel trauma, and putting back on my scholarly historian and general secretary hat, I hope that the stories throughout this book help us collectively move on and reclaim our identity and lead us toward a Pentecost, one that might signal a rebirth of The United Methodist Church as a connection that has, once again, found its willingness to be a bit more vile. After all, it was on Pentecost that John Wesley famously felt his heart “strangely warmed.” Might The UMC seek a similar moment of renewal and open our hearts, once again, to the strangely warm inner workings of God.

For Wesley, It All Changed in Bristol

Typically, when Methodist scholars speak of Methodist history, we begin with the “three rises” of Methodism. This was, after all, how John Wesley himself described the beginnings of the movement. But, if you ask me, Methodism doesn't start with Oxford, Georgia, or London—yes, it has crucial components that were formed in those spaces, and John's faith and mission were shaped by the particularities of certain experiences in these three rises, but John Wesley didn't really figure out what his true calling was, what he was doing (or how or why), until Bristol.

Let's set the stage. It's winter 1738, and John Wesley was in London, having had his heart “strangely warmed” early that May. Charles, his younger brother, had a similar experience (“a strange palpitation of his heart”) *three days prior* (sibling rivalry is an age-old custom!). Charles was working with James Hutton to reshape a religious society more toward a Moravian understanding of faith—one focused on God's all-assuring love. After Georgia, John was in

Germany with a friend, Benjamin Ingham while George Whitefield, a fellow Methodist leader (although of a more Calvinist bent), was preaching in the American colonies. But that New Year's Eve of 1738, the OG Holy Club—the spiritual formation group that John had started in college some ten years earlier—reunited, exchanged ministry stories, and attended a Moravian watch-night service. During this service, the seven old Oxford buddies had a collective Pentecost experience—a call from the Holy Spirit to reform the Church of England from the inside out. After this, they returned to their respective corners of England and brought a more evangelical flair to their preaching.¹

Now *evangelical* in this sense does not mean the same thing that we think of in 2025. The evangelical voting bloc or nondenominationalist rise in the 1970s and forward is an entirely different theology and ideology. In the eighteenth century, evangelical meant an emphasis on four things: on initiating a conversion experience, on Scripture as authoritative guide for life, on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and on testimony of the heart changed.² These four things, especially combined, could have been transformative for the eighteenth-century Anglican faith, which predominately relied upon static (sometimes sleeping) butts in the pews on Sunday morning and not necessarily the active working of the Holy Spirit in and through us every day.

Opposite of this, the “evangelicals” of the eighteenth century tended to speak more to the heart than the brain. They tended to use language that was body-centric and spoke of how God or the Spirit would affect you internally. Evangelical sermons were evocative, emotional, energetic. They spoke of Jesus's body and its suffering on the cross. And then they encouraged you, the listener, to act on these newfound feelings—either seeking to convert others or seeking to change the world by living out your love of God.

Wesleyan Vile-tality: Reclaiming the Heart of Methodist Identity offers a brilliant exploration of the historical narratives of the Wesleyan movement. The book calls United Methodist to reconnect to their roots, engage in communal study, and move forward with renewed vile-tality, purpose, and hope. A must-read for anyone seeking to understand and strengthen the future of The United Methodist Church.

—**DELORES J. WILLIAMSTON**, Bishop, Louisiana Conference, The United Methodist Church

In this courageous book, Ashley Boggan combines the insight of the historian with the vision of the prophet. She displays her unique ability to place history at the service of a more faithful future filled with hope. *Wesleyan Vile-tality* is open-eyed, honest, penitent, and redemptive. Boggan invites us to reclaim those aspects of our identity we tend to forget. This book is a must-read for those who desire an authentic church for a time such as this.

—**PAUL W. CHILCOTE**, Research Fellow at Wesley House, Cambridge, and author of *Multiplying Love: A Vision of United Methodist Life Together*

In *Wesleyan Vile-tality*, Ashley Boggan leads The United Methodist Church into clearly articulating who we are and what we stand for by pointing us toward our roots. In submitting to be more vile, Wesley proclaimed the fundamental tenet of Methodism: no one is outside the love and grace of God. Boggan offers us two visions: a church constrained by a version of vitality that trades respectability for faithful risk-taking or a church alive with vile-tality, standing in solidarity and humility with all.

—**KRISTIN G. STONEKING**, Bishop, Mountain Sky Conference, The United Methodist Church

This book is a powerful, compelling narrative that brings the radical heart of John Wesley's ministry into focus. It takes us beyond the comfortable confines of established faith practices and challenges us to step into the gritty, messy spaces where the Spirit is moving. With deep insight and vivid storytelling, my friend Ashley Boggan helps us reimagine what it means to be a Wesleyan today: a people who boldly love, serve, and share hope in places where others might hesitate to go.

—**MICHAEL ADAM BECK**, pastor, professor, sociologist, Director of Fresh Expressions for The United Methodist Church, and author of *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*



ASHLEY BOGGAN is a scholar, laywoman, and currently the General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History. In this role, she ensures that The United Methodist Church understands its past in order to envision a more equitable future for all. She is the author of *Nevertheless: American Methodists and Women's Rights* (2020) and *Entangled: A History of American Methodism, Politics, and Sexuality* (2018) and contributed to *American Methodism: Revised and Updated* (2022).

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