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JOHN WESLEY'S 300th ANNIVERSARY (JUNE 17 2003)

There are "Wesley" missions and parishes across Australia. June 17 2003 was the 300th anniversary of the Rev John Wesley's birth. He remains as relevant today as he did when he was one of 18th century England's most famous and influential people.

John Wesley lived and died an Anglican clergyman. But he tried to reform what he saw as a decaying church. In due course, there was no room in the Anglican Church for his followers and so eventually the Methodist church was formed. (In June 1977, the Australian end of the church was amalgamated with parts of the Congregational and Presbyterian churches to form the Uniting Church, Australia's first home-grown mainline church).

Wesley was an innovator. For example, he developed a form of mass evangelism outside church buildings. On April 2 1739 he began preaching in an open field to passersby. As Anglican churches closed their doors to him, so this innovation became all the more important.

England was then undergoing the world's first industrial revolution. Coal mines and factories were opening up. People were leaving rural areas in search of work in the cities and industrial areas. But this new working class were not necessarily welcome in Anglican churches.

Wesley went to them. He travelled over 225,000 miles and preached 44,000 sermons. He often preached his first sermon of the day at 5 AM. This early hour was not for his benefit - but for theirs. He was the greatest communicator of his era. He was an Oxford scholar who could talk in terms that working class people could understand.

Another innovation was the "class meeting": basically home churches. They met for one evening per week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs, and received the support and prayers of the others. Today the "house church movement" is an area of Australian church growth.

Wesley was also an early feminist. Many of the class leaders and lay preachers were women. He provided women with opportunities for leadership that they could not get elsewhere in England at that time – or even in some Australian churches today.

Wesley saw what the industrial revolution was doing to people and so sought to improve their lot. This meant both taking the Christian message to them and in providing social services for them. He created a free school for children, a shelter for widows and the first free



dispensary in London for two centuries, and set up revolving loan funds for the poor. He also wrote a home medical handbook that went through twenty editions.

There were no "God-free zones" in Wesley's world. He had opinions on all the big issues of the day. One of his last acts was to support William Wilberforce, supporting his campaign against slavery. This was at a time when most of the financial interests of the day supported slavery and some Christian leaders claimed that the Bible justified it.

Wesley was not worried about whom he offended in speaking truth to power. He angered many financial interests with his opposition to alcohol and gambling (then as now major industries). But he was a voice of the voiceless - he saw what harm these social evils were doing and so he spoke out on behalf of the victims.

Wesley's ministry of "Word" and "Deed" – proclamation of the Good News and the provision of welfare services - is the same formula followed by the Wesley Missions across Australia. Indeed, Wesley Mission Sydney is one of the world's largest parishes because of its extensive welfare programmes. Meanwhile, all the Wesley Missions remain active in speaking out.

In short, Wesley remains relevant for today. This does not mean we should seek to apply his techniques (after all, some conditions have changed). But we should apply his insights: be bold for the gospel, be innovative and be willing to speak out against social evils.

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