

FREE METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Newsletter

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B.T. Roberts  
(1823-93)

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## Pentecost Band Work

BY VIVIAN A. DAKE

*Published in The Free Methodist November 23, 1885*

*Editor B. T. Roberts*

*In 1885 while serving as Free Methodist pastor in Michigan, Dake began the Pentecost Bands, an evangelistic effort for youth in the Free Methodist Church. While it had the denomination's founder, B. T. Roberts', blessing it never came under the denomination's authority, leading to conflict and resulting in the bands eventually withdrawing from the denomination, eventually in 1925 taking the name Missionary Bands of the World and then in 1958 merging with the Wesleyan Church.*

The work moves on gloriously. Pentecost Band No.2 has closed at Hanover (Michigan) with twenty-five clear conversions. A number joined the Free Methodist Church and we organized a local band of twenty-six members who are already engaged in another meeting. Pentecost Band No. 1 tried to close at Parma (Michigan) on November 17, but three came to the altar and about a half dozen rose for prayers. The death groans are on the people and the fire spreads. The band, of whom my dear wife is a useful member, are shouting the victory. No. 3 still see souls saved in the tent. Glory! Hallelujah! If our good editor was out on the field of battle where some of us are, he would blow a blast that would make the dry bones rattle. Awake! Souls are perishing! Where is the early Methodist pioneer spirit? See the tide of popularity coming in on us. Rich Free Methodists are holding onto their thousands and the work of God is suffering. Judgment fires will consume our hoarded wealth and we will leave

out thousands in time, and if we are not careful, we shall be beggars in eternity.

We need an advance all along the line.

Superintendents, editors, chairmen, sound the alarm! Set the example! At what an infantile pace we are creeping along. Some conferences are losing ground, some are barely holding their own, while a few are gaining quite moderately. Years are rolling by like a forest before a cyclone! Men are going into eternity. The judgment is at hand!

## News & Notes

- Marston Memorial Historical Center is digitizing books in its collection before certain books become too fragile to preserve. It's only \$100 to digitize a book! If you would like to participate you can use Marston's online payment option (<https://give.fmcusa.org/givemarston>).
- The MMHC staff is providing a resource on how to put together a milestone celebration. The Free Methodist Church is 155 years old, how old is your church? Go to [fmcusa.org/historical/resources](http://fmcusa.org/historical/resources) and click on Celebrating Church Milestones. Please remember to document your celebration by sending us material for the archive.
- Recent visitors to the Historical Center include conference historians Gayla Green (Great Plains) and Marti Theune (Acts 12:24 Churches).

The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

# Embodying B.T. Roberts

BY DR. PAUL PATTON

*For the 2011 and 2015 Free Methodist General Conferences Spring Arbor University Communication Professor and Playwright Paul Patton spent months learning, memorizing and embodying B.T. Roberts. In 2011 at Roberts Wesleyan College Patton wrote and with his wife Beth Patton, Grace Patton, and Todd Holton performed a series of one act plays based on moments from the life of B. T. and Ellen Roberts. For the 2015 General Conference Roberts Wesleyan College hired him to again perform as Roberts but this time as Roberts preaching to the public spontaneously in the main eating court of the conference area. Patton shares in his own words what the journey to being B. T. Roberts is like.*

In October of 2008, I received an email from Howard Snyder on behalf of the Free Methodist Sesquicentennial Committee to inquire as to my interest in writing some short stage plays surrounding the life of Free Methodist founder, B. T. Roberts. The idea was to premiere the plays at the 2011 Free Methodist General Conference on the campus of Roberts Wesleyan College in North Chili, New York.

First of all, Howard Snyder has been a heroic figure since my younger days as a Baptist pastor in metropolitan Detroit. His books, *The Problem of Wineskins* and *Community of the King* were influential works in shaping my thinking about the nature and ministry of the church. So, as a theater teacher at my alma mater, Spring Arbor University, and one who loves being a part of new works of performance art, and, especially, receiving a personal invitation from one of my heroes, I found it impossible to turn away from the invitation.

Howard had already given me a transcript of his forthcoming biography of the Free Methodist founder. *Populist Saints* would be a profound resource in the months and years of preparation—and I was excited about the privilege of ingesting the book to find the spirit of B. T. Roberts and discern which scenes from his life might be stageable. I immediately arranged for another local actor to take on the role of B. T., thinking from the few photos that I'd seen that Roberts was a large man (and reading some of his sermons it sounded like he was a giant). I had asked my friend and fellow-thespian, Jarred Cole, to play the role. Jared is over six feet tall and built like an NFL linebacker. I was happy that he agreed to take on the challenging role.

When I let Howard know that I'd secured the commitment of another actor to play B. T., he gently asserted that he wanted me to play the role. I suggested I was too short and thin, given my assumptions about Roberts' physical stature. Howard informed me that B. T. Roberts was a little shorter than me and twenty-

pounds heavier. Professor Snyder suggested that I could attach a small pillow around my waste and pull off an impersonation fine. I was surprised, and with some reluctance, committed to do my best in preparing for the role.

By this time, fellow sesquicentennial committee member Gerald Bates had joined forces with Howard to encourage me in my preparations. These two men make a formidable duo of support and clarity!

My first task as a playwright in adapting a play from Snyder's thousand-page biography was to read it, taking copious notes of biographical data, choosing what needed to be memorized, and finding scenes from his life that could be adapted for the stage. It was quickly evident, sometimes thrillingly so, that Roberts was a man passionate about social justice for all. His commitment to interracial justice stirred me deeply. His convictions regarding the ordination of women and the just causes of farmers and citizens overrun by the railroad monopolies inspired me. I was learning about a pastoral giant whose prophetic concern for social justice was matched by his evangelistic energies to win the lost and preach the gospel to the poor. As an actor, I found B. T. Roberts to be a historical figure I would be deeply honored and energized to portray.



A scene from the one act plays performed during GC11 with Paul and Beth Patton performing as B. T. and Ellen Roberts



Early on in the process, I asked my dear wife, Beth, to play the role of B. T.'s wife, Ellen. As an actress whose experience in the theater came at a much earlier age than mine, I knew that Beth would be perfect for the role. Fortunately, she agreed to take on the role. As I read of the vital role that B. T. and Ellen's love for each other played in working out their mission and theology of ministry, I was thankful that I had a wife and acting partner committed to telling their story. We both were fascinated by the Roberts' romantic and entertainingly quirky courtship, especially their first date—a stroll near the campus of Wesleyan College, a young B. T. climbing a tree and reciting a Henry Kirk White poem!

Another highlight in the information gathering process was traveling to North Chili, New York, and visiting the campus of Roberts Wesleyan College (RWC). Especially helpful was hearing the favorite stories about the Roberts from RWC historian and librarian Charley Canon. His reference to the 1860 evangelistic service in Buffalo where two teenaged prostitutes came forward to receive the forgiveness of Christ was priceless. When we reenacted that scene, my daughter Grace, another actress, played the role of the "unfortunate woman." She was eighteen at the time and wept through the whole scene. She later told me that she didn't think she had the strength to play the role again.

As an ordained Baptist minister, I found myself becoming more and more in tuned with the Free Methodist passions and pursuits as I became immersed in the life and vision of B. T. and Ellen Roberts. Their vision "to maintain the biblical standard of Christianity and to preach the gospel to the poor" and disenfranchised was refreshingly compelling. I was deeply inspired by their mutual commitment to evangelization and social justice, birthed in the radical needs of the Victorian age and deeply relevant in the 21st century.

I remained thrilled at the privilege of reenacting Free Methodist legacy.



B. T. Roberts sets down at the Marston Historical Center Booth for a deep conversation with Rev. Mindi Grieser Cromwell, Ph.D.



Paul and Beth Patton reacted the lives of B. T. and Ellen Roberts at GC2011. Here they pay tribute at the Roberts' grave

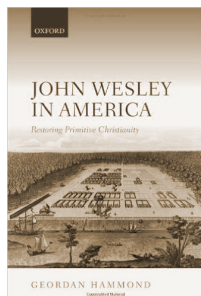
## UNDERWRITE FREE METHODIST LEGACY THROUGH PLANNED GIVING

You are needed to help preserve Free Methodist history and mission. Consider leaving a legacy through gift planning. Include the Marston Historical Center in your estate planning as well as current giving.

Contact the Free Methodist Foundation at 800-325-8975, or visit the FMF website at [www.fmfoundation.org](http://www.fmfoundation.org). A wide variety of giving options is available, ranging from gifts and bequests to annuities, trusts, and family foundations.

# Book Review

John Wesley in America: *Restoring Primitive Christianity*  
By Dr. Geordan Hammond  
Oxford University Press 2014  
ISBN: 978-0198701606



In October of 1735, John Wesley, a young and unknown Oxford graduate, went to America to become parish priest of Savannah in the colony of Georgia. This decision has long puzzled scholars of Wesley and Methodism. Why would a young and promising cleric travel to the absolute outskirts of the British Empire? And why have most historians of Methodism viewed Wesley's time in Georgia as a misguided disaster? In *John*

*Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity*, Geordan Hammond, director of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre and senior lecturer in church history and Wesley studies at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, UK, seeks to answer these questions by arguing that Wesley's time in Georgia should not be treated as a footnote, but instead should be read "as a laboratory to implement his views on the primitive church" (p.4). Primitive Christianity for Wesley meant restoring the purity of the early church by imitating what he saw as the correct forms of liturgy, worship, and holy living.

It was in Georgia, argues Hammond, Wesley first attempted to implement these primitive Christian principles, emphasizing the

importance of sacramental living and of regular communication (taking the Eucharist), an idea which may seem harmless today, but which was unusual when most Anglicans only took communion once a year at most. He also instituted religious societies (a forerunner of Methodist classes and bands) and regularly heard confession from his parishioners. Most controversially, Wesley went out of his way to minister to and include women, the poor, and the marginalized through his ministry, which alienated many of the more powerful male members of the colony. This came to a head over the issue of Wesley's relationship with the young Sophia Hopkey, whom he at one point intended to marry. Though nothing untoward appears to have happened between the two, Wesley's opponents in the colony used this relationship as means of driving him from Georgia—an incident that Hammond uses as evidence of Wesley's dedication to the cause of primitive Christianity and the elevation of those traditionally left out of the Church structure.

It was back in England, encouraged by George Whitefield, Wesley began his ministry as a field preacher who began to attract a huge following. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Wesley left his primitive ideals behind in Georgia. Indeed, there is ample evidence that, especially in the early years of the revival, ordinary people flocked to Methodism not because it was new or flashy, but because it was rooted in tradition—in what they believed were the "primitive" practices of the Church. That this was perceived as a "counter-cultural" act is more a commentary on the prevailing culture of the time, than on Methodism itself. Indeed, in this age of mega-churches and commercialized Christianity where newer and bigger and better are constant objectives Hammond's book acts as a sobering and timely reminder that what matters above all is the gospel of Christ, pure and simple, free for all regardless of race, class, gender, or status.

— Dr. Andrew Winckles

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