

INCONCEIVABLE!
 FIELD PREACHING, DIGITAL CHURCH, & THE METAVERSE
 EMBRACING JOHN WESLEY’S LEGACY OF INNOVATION
 TO INFORM THE VIRTUAL MINISTRY OF TOMORROW
 By David J. Swisher

Introduction

Most pastors and scholars are familiar with John Wesley’s extensive preaching, revival efforts, and prowess in organizing effective discipleship of followers. Only slightly less well known, however, is his creative entrepreneurialism and technological innovation. From his creative repurposing of the Foundry in London (complete with semiotic aesthetic designs and strategic structural designs for missional applications) to his surprisingly practical *Primitive Physick* (a health and wellness manual) and other publishing forays to equip and resource the general laity, Wesley demonstrated a brilliant entrepreneurial acumen coupled with insightful practical theology early on. As his ministry matured, Wesley demonstrated an incredible ability to leverage current technology, creative applications, and innovative approaches to ministry in culture-shaping ways. This is particularly evident in his development of “The New Room,” a multi-purpose ministry headquarters in Bristol which was designed to not only pastor and disciple the converts from Hannam Mount, but to also serve as a dispensary, schoolroom, bookstore, prison ministry, respite for itinerant preachers, and home, as well as an active church meetinghouse. What follows are a few specific examples.

The Foundry

As the revival among the people called Methodists grew, John Wesley repurposed a former royal foundry for cannon¹ in Moorfields on the north side of London to serve as a multipurpose facility, which soon became his ministry headquarters.² It was the site where he had preached to 7000-8000 on Nov. 11, 1739,³ and its availability arose through the two gentlemen who had arranged that preaching opportunity.⁴ The timing could not have been more fortuitous, since the tensions with the Moravians were steadily increasing and his break with them was imminent. Also, The Asbury Triptych explains further: “With the harsh winds of the winter of 1739 imprisoning the Christian faithful indoors and the ill favor of the Anglican priests forcing John Wesley outdoors, the supernatural paradox resulted in John Wesley coordinating the acquisition and renovation of the old artillery foundry of King Charles.”⁵

¹ A foundry is “a factory where castings are produced by melting metal, pouring liquid metal into a mold, then allowing it to solidify.” Reliance Foundry (n.d.), “What is a Foundry?” retrieved Feb. 28, 2023 from <https://www.reliance-foundry.com/blog/what-is-a-foundry>

² Richard P. Heitzenrater (1995), *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 109 (illustration).

³ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 11 November 1739, Ed. By Percy Livingstone Parker, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.i.html>.

⁴ Heitzenrater, 109.

⁵ Al DeFilippo (n.d.), “John Wesley’s Foundry Church,” The Asbury Triptych Series, Retrieved Feb. 27, 2023, from <https://www.francisasburytriptych.com/john-wesleys-foundry-church/>

For slightly over £1,000 (£340 in purchase repayments and £700 in refurbishing),⁶ Wesley was able to turn “that vast uncouth heap of ruins”⁷ into a ministry headquarters which became “a beehive of activity.”⁸ The Foundry Church was a simple structure featuring brick and mortar on the outside, with several support columns and wood pews on the inside. Upstairs were two apartments used by the Wesley family.⁹

As Howard Snyder explains:

In remodeling the old structure Wesley had built a galleried chapel to hold fifteen hundred people, a large room that could accommodate three hundred, a dispensary, and a book room for the sale of his books and pamphlets. Here he opened a free school for sixty children, a shelter for widows, and the first free dispensary in London since the breakup of the monasteries.¹⁰

Geographically speaking, it is very close to Whitefield’s Tabernacle (who challenged Whitefield to take the gospel out into the streets) and the Bunham Hill cemetery where many notable saints and dissenters are buried.¹¹

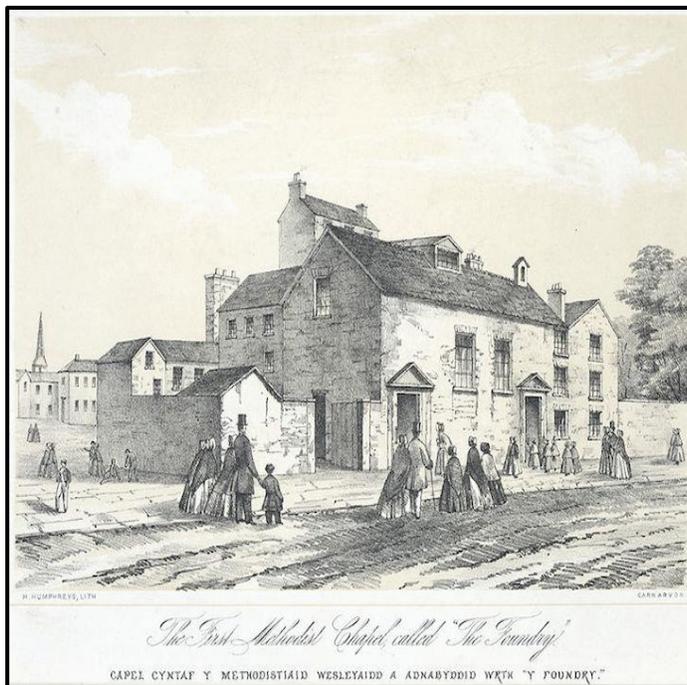


Fig. 1 – Sketch of The Foundry Chapel in Moorfields, north London. SOURCE: Public domain.

⁶ Heitzenrater, 109-110.

⁷ Heitzenrater, 110.

⁸ Howard Snyder (2014), *The Radical Wesley: The Patterns and Practices of a Movement Maker* (Franklin, TN: Seedbeed), 56.

⁹ Al DeFilippo (n.d.), “John Wesley’s Foundry Church,” The Asbury Triptych Series, Retrieved Feb. 27, 2023, from <https://www.francisasburytriptych.com/john-wesleys-foundry-church/>

¹⁰ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 56-57. Note that this was in the 1700s, although his strategy sounds more like a modern-day megachurch.

¹¹ David Swisher (2013), “Wesley’s Chapel, the Foundry” [photo album]. Facebook. Retrieved Feb. 14, 2023, from <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10200232108342328>; Wesley’s Chapel and Leysian Mission, <https://www.wesleyschapel.org.uk/your-visit/virtual-tour/>

Especially important was that Wesley installed plain benches instead of pews. Wesley himself even noted that “all the benches for rich and poor were of the same construction.”¹² Considering how widespread the practice was in the eighteenth century of parishioners purchasing their pews, this is significant since it contrasted with long-standing tradition in the church of his day.

Also noteworthy is that these benches were multi-use: They featured an innovative construction design which allowed them to double as both a pew and an altar rail.¹³ They functioned as seating whenever pews were needed, yet easily converted to altar rails when spaces for parishioners to kneel were needed.¹⁴ So not only was he able to save on the costs (and space) of having additional furniture dedicated for only limited uses; he was able to make a statement about the importance of practicality and frugality while simultaneously emphasizing a theological concept. This is a great example of Wesley’s pragmatic nature coupled with his entrepreneurial spirit.



Fig. 2 - In the Foundry Chapel, one of the curators (front, right) explains the innovative seating the Wesleys used, which can double as both a pew and an altar rail.

As Adam Hamilton explains it, “For Wesley, evangelism and ministries to the poor were inextricably linked; you could not have one without the other.”¹⁵ And as Wesley scholar & biographer Ken Collins puts it, “For the sake of giving the gospel as wide a hearing as possible, Wesley not only, at times, put aside the ‘rites and ceremonies of the church,’ not only preached outside consecrated walls, but he also violated the parish boundaries of the Anglican Church to the annoyance and frustration of many of its clergy.”¹⁶

¹² John Wesley (1786), “Thoughts Upon Methodism,” *Works*: 9:528.

¹³ All photos included here, unless otherwise noted, were taken by the author and are part of the author’s personal collection. They are Copyright © 2013 David J. Swisher, but are available for church & ministry use under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND. See license details at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/> (notice of re-use is appreciated).

¹⁴ David Swisher. 2021. “Did you know John Wesley was a technology innovator?” Facebook post. *Digital Disciplemakers Facebook Group*. August 6, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/digitalwesleyans/permalink/554817565535522>. As explained to us by the museum’s curator, pictured above.

¹⁵ Adam Hamilton (2014, Sept. 19), “The Foundry in London: Two Sides of the Gospel.” Adam Hamilton (blog). Retrieved Feb. 28, 2023 from <https://www.adamhamilton.com/blog/the-foundry-in-london-two-sides-of-the-gospel/>

¹⁶ Kenneth J. Collins (1999), *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 72.

At Wesley's Chapel in London (nearby), which served as the first Methodist preaching house, built in 1778 to allow for the celebration of communion, Wesley had the artisans design:

- *A seating arrangement which gave the unchurched (the poor, marginalized, and disenfranchised) priority seating in the upper (balcony) area, with a highly elevated pulpit so that he could communicate with them at their level face-to-face, while giving the long-time church folk the towering & imposing feeling they preferred (& which was so typical of the colonial era).*
- *An archway at the base of the pulpit that permitted his established parishioners to see the Bible through the pulpit from their seats. Visually, Wesley stood upon the Word of God as his foundation.*^{17 18}

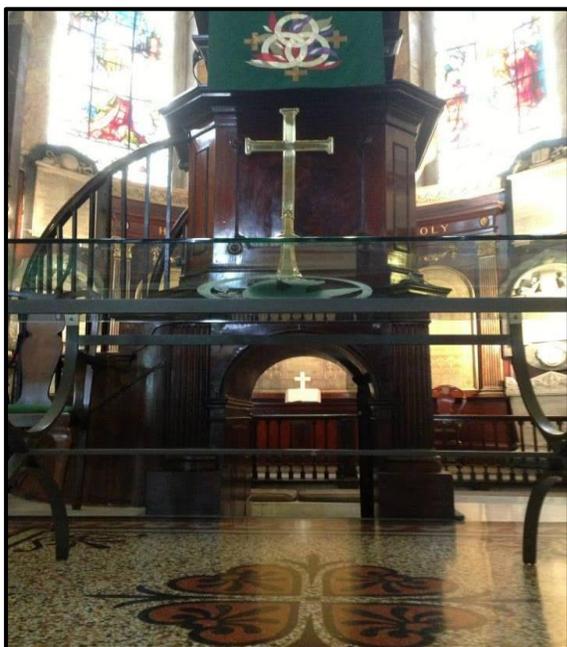


Fig. 3 – The pulpit at Wesley's Chapel in London features an archway at its base which permitted congregants to see the Bible through the pulpit from their seats



Fig. 4 – Front of the sanctuary area of Wesley's Chapel in London, showing the pulpit in its larger context.

¹⁷ Swisher, "Did you know...technology innovator?" Facebook post.

¹⁸ For more pictures and context of Wesley's chapel, house, the Foundery, & museum, see my Facebook photo album titled "Wesley's Chapel, the Foundery," at <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10200232108342328>

The Wesley Family's Home in Epworth

Innovations like these were fairly commonplace in Wesley's life and upbringing. At the Wesley's home in Epworth (the Old Rectory), not far from the church his father Samuel pastored, and which was built to replace the one burned by fire when young John was a "brand plucked from the burning," there are several practical innovations. One example is the clock pictured here, which was originally a mantle/wall clock, but Wesley's father Samuel had a local carpenter adapt it to turn it into a standing clock.¹⁹



Fig. 5 – Barry Clarke, a Trustee of Epworth Old Rectory who is part of the facility's restoration team (and who served as my personal tour guide when I visited) explains how the mantle/wall clock was modified.

Another example was his mother Susannah's specially constructed prayer desk, a



Fig. 6 – Susannah Wesley's prayer chair was a regular chair which could quickly be converted into a kneeling desk for private prayer.

SOURCE: Epworth Old Rectory (used by permission).

chair whose back folds down into a table and whose seat cushion becomes a cushion for kneeling so that she could commune with God regularly amidst the hustle and bustle of her busy home.²⁰ For impromptu occasions, Susannah was known for her practice of using her apron as a portable "quiet space" when she needed time alone to for patience and peace. She trained her children to recognize that cue...if she had flipped her apron over to cover her head, she was praying and was NOT to be interrupted unless there were a fire or someone was dying.²¹

¹⁹ Barry Clarke, tour of Epworth Old Rectory, Epworth, UK, June 20, 2013.

²⁰ Sarah Friswell, "Susanna's prayer desk," Epworth Old Rectory, Epworth, UK, https://epwortholdrectory.org.uk/the_collection/susannas-prayer-desk/.

²¹ Barry Clarke, tour of Epworth Old Rectory.

Likewise, the kitchen table in the Wesley's home had multiple uses, serving not only as the place of eating and fellowship, but where Susannah homeschooled and tutored each of her children.²² These are just a few of a great number of examples of frugal & practical provision – virtues John Wesley embodied in his ministry, but which likely began with his father Samuel and mother Susannah.²³ It is not surprising in the least, then, that John Wesley employed many of these same practices in the construction of church facilities and ministry sites that he oversaw.

Saint Andrew's Parish Church & the Village of Epworth

Soon after John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, his preaching became enlivened by his new-found enthusiasm, and he spoke often of the importance of the new birth, as well as an emphasis on "heart holiness" rather than mere head knowledge of the truths of Christianity.²⁴ Consequently, he frequently found himself barred from churches who resisted this emphasis on personal experience. A poignant example of this happened when he revisited his own hometown of Epworth in 1742: At age 41, John visited the Saint Andrew's Church (where his father had previously been the rector) and prior to the service, asked the Curate, a Mr. Romley, if he might assist with the service, who promptly declined his offer: "He did not care to accept of my assistance," as Wesley put it.²⁵ However, rumors had spread that John Wesley would be preaching, so the crowd was much larger than usual.



Fig. 7 – John Wesley preaching to a gathered crowd on top of his father Samuel's grave, in front of Saint Andrews Parish Church (Epworth, UK). SOURCE: "John Wesley Preaching from His Father's Tomb at Epworth" by George Washington Brownlow (1835–1876), photo credit: Boston Borough Council, used under fair dealing (UK) / public domain (US).

Further, to add fuel to the fire, the Curate preached a sermon (ironically titled "Quench not the Spirit," on I Thess. 5:19) explaining that one of the most dangerous ways of quenching the Spirit was by enthusiasm, and he did so "in a very florid and oratorical manner," with thinly-veiled references to John and his new-found enthusiasm.²⁶ This did not sit well with John nor his friends, so one of them (John Taylor) announced to everyone departing the service that since John Wesley

²² Ibid.

²³ For more illustrations and examples of this (and images of Epworth, John Wesley's boyhood home, a formative place in his life, and the "place [he] loved most in all the world," see my Facebook photo album titled "The Village of Epworth" at <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10200200748078341> and the Epworth Old Rectory's virtual tour at <https://epwortholdrectory.org.uk/epworth-old-rectory-old/visit/virtual-tour/>.

²⁴ For a digital story summarizing John Wesley's testimony and journey, see my YouTube video: David Swisher, "Strangely Warmed: John Wesley's Spiritual Journey," Mar. 23, 2009, YouTube video, 9:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Od4Cvo9NHU>.

²⁵ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 6 June 1742, Ed. By Percy Livingstone Parker, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iv.xiv.html>.

²⁶ The Museum of Methodism & John Wesley's House, "John Wesley Preaching from His Father's Tomb," Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, <https://www.wesleysheritage.org.uk/object/john-wesley-preaching-from-his-fathers-tomb/>

had not been permitted to preach in the church, he would preach outside it at 6:00 in the afternoon that day from the one plot of land where nobody could dispute his right to be...his father's grave.²⁷ That evening, he "found such a congregation as I believe Epworth never saw before."²⁸ He boldly and confidently preached upon his father's tombstone from Romans 14:17, exhorting, "The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."²⁹

This experience may well have been a precursor that God used preventively to open Wesley's heart and mind to the possibility of "field preaching" – i.e., if they won't let you do it in the church (or if the people who need it aren't coming in), then he would take the message to where they were. Regarding Wesley's theology of the church, Edgar Thompson says that "in addition to the accepted definition of the church, [Wesley] added the following: 'Where is the work, there is the church'" and "The church is that 'which does the work of God and saves the souls of men.'" ³⁰

On multiple occasions throughout his ministry, Wesley was known to have preached from a market cross. Although such locations and their use are virtually unheard of in the Americas, they are fairly common in the United Kingdom and were familiar places of public performance and discourse during Wesley's day. Several famous paintings depict Wesley preaching at a market cross. The photo



Fig. 8 – A market cross in Epworth where John Wesley undoubtedly preached.

here depicts an actual market cross in the village of Epworth which stands to this day; it sits in a pedestrian plaza right in the heart of the city, directly across from the Red Lion Inn, and only a couple of blocks from both the Rectory and Saint Andrews Church (these are all places Wesley is known to have frequented and which he describes in his *Journal*). Wesley's choice of such locations for preaching to crowds was both pragmatic and utilitarian, a basic innovation which is very typical of him: These were centers of public business at the heart of pedestrian thoroughfares, and crowds would readily gather whenever he would announce in a community his intention to preach at one. It is also worth noting that other than George Whitefield, we do not have much evidence of other clergy of his day doing this, which is yet another example of Wesley's entrepreneurial acumen and constant ministerial innovation.

²⁷ Wesley, *Journal*, 6 June 1742. He could not be ejected from there because Samuel's gravesite was the property of the Wesley family. The Museum of Methodism & John Wesley's House, "John Wesley Preaching from His Father's Tomb," Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, <https://www.wesleysheritage.org.uk/object/john-wesley-preaching-from-his-fathers-tomb/>

²⁸ Wesley, *Journal*, 6 June 1742.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Edgar W. Thompson (1939), *The Methodist Doctrine of the Church* (London: Epworth Press), 39. As cited in James L. Garlow, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Laity as Demonstrated by His Use of the Lay Preachers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1979), 229, UMI Dissertation Services.

The “New Room” at Bristol

The “New Room” in Bristol, which Wesley established to disciple and pastor the fruit from George Whitefield’s ministry and Wesley’s own “field preaching” to the colliers (coal miners) at nearby Hannam Mount,³¹ was built to be far more than a worship center. It was a place to help people with their finances, with medicine (herbal remedies), with other life challenges, and help them get back on their feet; the facility included rooms for his lay preachers to get rest and recuperation while in between circuits, resources for study and ministerial preparation, and more. It is the oldest Methodist meetinghouse in the world, and literally the cradle of the Methodist movement.

At the New Room in Bristol, John Wesley employed a number of innovative strategies using the latest technology of his day:

- *It was a multipurpose facility featuring moveable benches in the main room to allow them to rearrange the furnishings as needed so that it could serve as a medical clinic, food & clothing distribution center, or sanctuary as needed.*
- *The upstairs was designed to house visiting missionaries on furlough and itinerant preachers stopping through, with bedrooms, classrooms, and facilities for their training.*³²

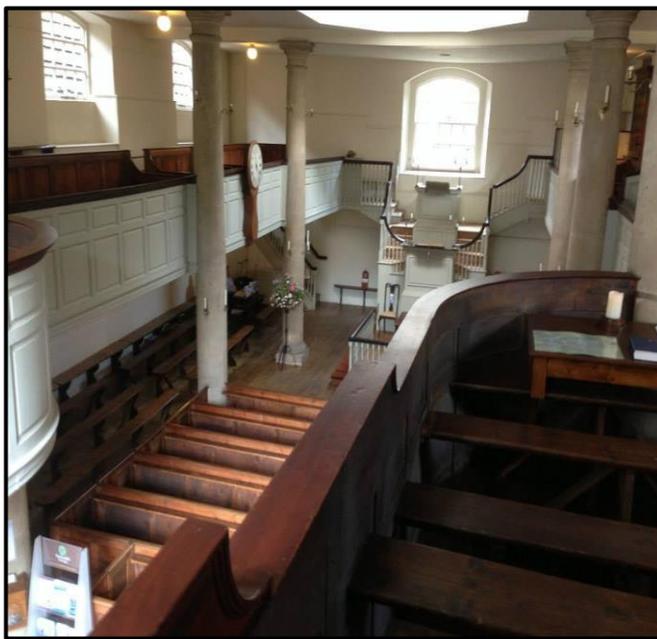


Fig. 9 – View of the sanctuary from the upstairs balcony (right) at the “New Room,” John Wesley’s Chapel in Bristol, UK (the oldest Methodist building in the world, built in 1739).

³¹ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 37-39. Note also Snyder’s observation, “When Whitefield returned to America in August, Wesley was left totally in charge of the growing work” (40).

³² Swisher, “Did you know...technology innovator?” Facebook post..



Fig. 10 – View of the pulpit at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK. Note how this highly-elevated pulpit puts Wesley's preaching on eye-level with the unchurched, who were seated in the balcony.

One of the unique features of the "New Room" at Bristol is the arrangement of the seating. As you can see in the accompanying pictures, the pulpit is highly elevated (which was a common feature of churches in his day, especially of the Anglican variety), so that alone is not unique, but the placement of the seats for the parishioners is. The seats for the unchurched were in the balcony in boxed-seating arrangement (typical of the pre-colonial era), and the seats for his regular parishioners were in the center, on the floor, on moveable benches.

This arrangement was counter-intuitive and counter-cultural for Wesley's day. In that era, typically the wealthy and long-time members of a church would pay for their seats (privileged box seating) and would thus have premium views and participatory access, and the poor and common folk would be relegated to whatever leftover spaces were available... typically using basic and/or minimalist furnishing and non-optimal views.³³ This approach closely parallels traditions of today, where at concert venues the highest-priced tickets are always nearest the stage and orchestra pit with premium seats, followed by moderately-priced seats with decent seating, and the lowest-priced seats are often very far back or high up in the balconies in what is sometimes derogatorily referred to as the "nosebleed section."

However, in Wesley's design, he upset the apple cart by reversing the cultural norms. His sanctuary design ensures that he stood on eye-level with the unchurched – those who were his primary focus and audience, and who needed his ministry the most, and the long-timers (and wealthy where applicable) gave up their privileged seating to sit as commoners on the floor level with basic moveable benches and no special access (he would, in fact, preach *down* to them). The semiotics of Wesley's design is simply astonishing!

It should be noted here that the pews in the center on the floor level in these pictures were added in the 20th century; according to the facility's curators, prior to that, the lower level was filled with moveable benches (like those you can see on



Fig. 11 – View from the pulpit at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK.

³³ The pews pictured here on the floor level are not original; they were added in the 20th century (because the facility is still used for regular worship services). In Wesley's day, the lower level was filled with moveable benches (like those you can see on the sides under the balcony).

the sides under the balcony)³⁴ to allow them to rearrange the furnishings as needed so that it could serve as a medical clinic, food & clothing distribution center, or sanctuary as needed. Thus Wesley's "New Room" was a true multipurpose room ahead of its time.^{35 36}

And yet, at the same time, by having the pulpit so highly elevated above the floor-level seating, it gave his regular parishioners and long-time church folk the towering/imposing feeling they preferred when attending worship services (it was what they were accustomed to).³⁷ Long before megachurches were a thing, John Wesley was thinking creatively about multipurpose facilities and furnishings, putting unchurched people first (above churchgoers), designing aesthetics that communicate the centrality of the Word and the priority of the cross, and focusing the building's functionality to prioritize multiplication and discipleship.³⁸

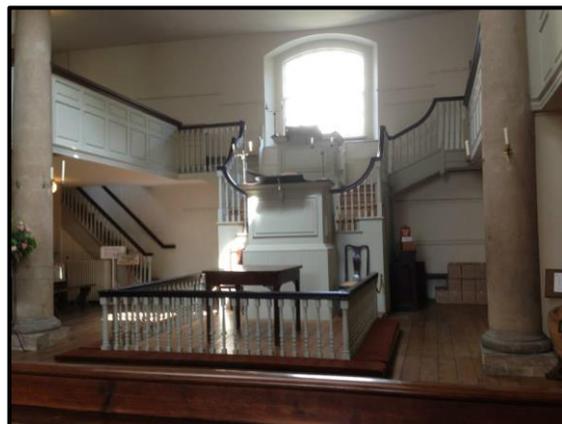


Fig. 12 – View of the pulpit from the floor seating section at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK.

But his innovations don't stop there. In England during Wesley's day, church facilities were



Fig. 13 – Another view FROM the pulpit at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK. Note the octagonal lantern window which functioned as a skylight.

taxed based on the number of windows (the presumption being that a larger facility would have more square footage and thus more wall space, therefore more windows would be required).³⁹ But to reduce his ministry's outlay to the crown and focus as much of the funds as possible on the ministry to the poor, Wesley commissioned a unique octagonal "lantern" skylight, ensuring maximum lighting for the facility while only counting as one window.

³⁴ John Wesley's New Room Chapel (2021), See "A Short History of The New Room" and "Features of the Chapel," <https://www.newroombristol.org.uk/chapel/>

³⁵ Swisher, "Did you know...technology innovator?" Facebook post..

³⁶ For a better perspective on this with full panorama, see my 360-degree video walkaround: David Swisher as WildcatTech (2013, June 21), "Greeting's from John Wesley's "New Room" in Bristol, UK [YouTube Video], 00:45, <https://youtu.be/Kcxu6BRnmhA>

³⁷ Swisher, "Did you know...technology innovator?" Facebook post.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ John Wesley's New Room Chapel, Personal communication (tour), June 21, 2013.

But this wasn't just a strategy for tax evasion; it served a very practical purpose as well. As the New Room's curators note, "the early Methodists were frequently attacked by mobs," and "the lack of windows on the ground floor was a safety measure against such attack."⁴⁰ Although the octagonal lantern window allows substantial lighting into the chapel, this design also ensures that those upstairs can monitor what is happening in the sanctuary⁴¹ (after all, the Horsefair district where this was located wasn't a particularly good part of town).⁴²



Fig. 14 – View of the pulpit (and part of the sanctuary) through the lantern window from the Common Room at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK.

Furthermore, the limited access to the upstairs was an additional safety feature ensuring that it was difficult for any mob that broke in to reach the preacher quickly.⁴³

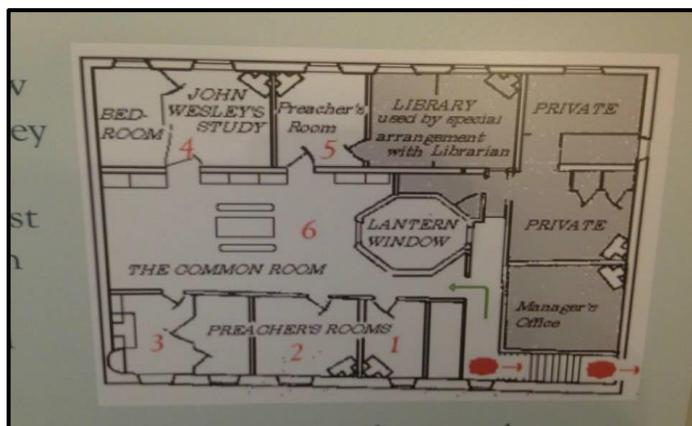


Fig. 15 – Layout of the upstairs level at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK. Note the centrality of the lantern window from the Common Room as well as the limited access via stairs from a corner of the facility.

⁴⁰ John Wesley's New Room Chapel (2021), See "Features of the Chapel," <https://www.newroombristol.org.uk/chapel/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² New Room Chapel, Personal communication (tour), June 21, 2013.

⁴³ New Room Chapel (2021), "Features of the Chapel." Rioting and mobs were a legitimate threat in 1738-1740, as Snyder notes in *The Radical Wesley*, 38-39.

Lastly, Wesley designed the Common Room in the upstairs floor as a central place where his lay preachers and guests would gather. In addition to Wesley's own living quarters, this upper level included guest bedrooms, classrooms, and a common area for training missionaries and itinerant preachers. Wesley's "New Room" was built to be far more than a worship center; it was a place to help people with their finances, with medicine (herbal remedies), with other life challenges, and help them get back on their feet. It also provided rooms for his lay preachers to get rest and recuperation while in between circuits as well as resources for study and ministerial preparation, and more.⁴⁴

Lay preachers were, after all, the heart of Wesley's strategy. In one of his letters, John Wesley writes, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the Kingdom of heaven upon earth."⁴⁵ Jim Garlow observes: "Wesley understood the laity in this activated sense. He viewed them as ministers even though he never allowed lay preachers to be called by the term. To Wesley, ministry was not dependent upon ordination. It was expected of the laity. It was demanded of every lay preacher."⁴⁶



Fig. 16 – View of the Common Room at the "New Room," John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol, UK.

Although Wesley did not allow laypersons to administer the sacraments⁴⁷ (no doubt a reflection of his Anglican high church roots and convictions), as Garlow notes, "Laypersons could, however, engage in mutual ministry. Laypersons could care for each other, bear each other's burdens, watch over each other, exhort one another, provoke one another to love and good works and confess faults to each other."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ This is particularly noteworthy since it is the oldest Methodist meetinghouse in the world, and literally the cradle of the Methodist movement.

⁴⁵ John Wesley (1931), *The Letters of John Wesley*, VI, John Telford, Ed. (London: Epworth Press), 272. As cited in James L. Garlow, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Laity as Demonstrated by His Use of the Lay Preachers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1979), 229, UMI Dissertation Services.

⁴⁶ James L. Garlow, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Laity as Demonstrated by His Use of the Lay Preachers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1979), 229, UMI Dissertation Services.

⁴⁷ John Wesley (n.d.), *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Vol. 1, reprint ed. (London: Epworth Press), 821; *Letters*, VII, 372. As cited in James L. Garlow, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Laity as Demonstrated by His Use of the Lay Preachers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1979), 229, UMI Dissertation Services.

⁴⁸ John Wesley (1958), *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., 1872; reprint ed. (Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan Publishing House): *Works*, VIII, 254; *Works*, VII, 412; *Works*, VIII, 224; *Letters*, II, 94; *Works*, VIII, 258; *Works*, VII, 278. As cited in James L. Garlow, "John Wesley's Understanding of the Laity as Demonstrated by His Use of the Lay Preachers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1979), 229, UMI Dissertation Services.

Other Culture-Shaping Innovations

Another significant innovation during this time period of highly-productive ministry (1740s) in both Bristol and London is Wesley's publication of *Primitive Physick*, which became "one of the most popular volumes published in England during the eighteenth century."⁴⁹ It was a practical guide for the treatment of common ailments using a compilation of herbal remedies coupled with advice from medical doctors of the day, and it filled a valuable gap by giving common people access to medical wisdom and what today we would consider over-the-counter medicines and useful "life hack" remedies for those who often could not afford medical care. And of course it is filled with advice and insight for the "cure of the soul."

Wesley certainly wasn't the first to produce such a volume,⁵⁰ but his was by far the most popular, reaching its 23rd edition by the time of his death in 1791.⁵¹ And its publication and distribution went hand-in hand with the ministry done for the unchurched: At the Foundery in London, Wesley engaged a surgeon and an apothecary to provide medical care on Fridays, which eventually became a full-fledged dispensary, with an average of a hundred patrons a month.⁵² The "New Room" ministry center at Bristol also featured a dispensary with regular medical care.⁵³ Wesley's intention was "to help those with chronic rather than acute illnesses, and to send all difficult and complicated cases to physicians."⁵⁴

Similarly, compassion for the needs of the poor led to a very practical yet entrepreneurially-savvy solution in London: A short-term small-business loan program offering patrons 3 months to repay debts so they could recover from economic woes and unanticipated challenges served 250 people in its first year.⁵⁵ Medical care, counseling, health & wellness, food distribution, financial assistance, a bookstore, & more...these are the kinds of holistic and service-oriented outreaches one might expect a megachurch in the 2020s to offer, but this was a reality that John Wesley pioneered in the 1740s. And they are simply an outflow of John Wesley's heart for the poor, passion for the unchurched, and awareness of the very practical nature of their needs.

⁴⁹ Samuel J. Rogal (1978), "Pills for the Poor: John Wesley's *Primitive Physick*," *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 51 (1978), 81-90.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2595647/pdf/yjbm00130-0080.pdf>

⁵⁰ In fact, the *Yale Journal of Biology & Medicine* names 11 pamphlets and publications by various authors which were published between the 1670s and 1780s. See Rogal (1978), "Pills for the Poor."

⁵¹ Rogal (1978), "Pills for the Poor." See also The Museum of Methodism & John Wesley's House, "Primitive Physick, or, an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases," Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, <https://www.wesleysheritage.org.uk/object/primitive-physick-or-an-easy-and-natural-method-of-curing-most-diseases/>

⁵² Heitzenrater (1995), 166-167.

⁵³ John Wesley's New Room Chapel (2021), "Explore John Wesley's Thoughts on Those in Need," <https://www.newroombristol.org.uk/those-in-need/>

⁵⁴ Heitzenrater (1995), 167.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, the worship Wesley oversaw was also innovative, entrepreneurial, and strategic in its use of technology. While organs today represent older-style music and church worship that is steeped in ecclesiastical tradition, that was not the case in Wesley's day. Back then, the organ was a product of the secular world, a popular item from street fairs and traveling performers, and it was considered "vulgar" (too common – meant for people on the street). Using the organ in worship and singing songs with upbeat and engaging music styles was a way to attract and reach the unchurched, much like how multimedia and digital technology is used today.

Digital Church

With this legacy in mind, one wonders how far Wesley might have been willing to go in today's culture. With the digital technology available today, discipleship and ministry are no longer limited to physical buildings and in-person gatherings, nor constrained by travel by horseback. Couple that with the dramatic rise of the "nones" (the religiously unaffiliated) over the last few decades⁵⁶ and massive decline in mainline church attendance,⁵⁷ and we find entire sub-cultures and communities which are effectively unreached by the gospel within our own churches' backyard...yet these folks are unlikely to darken the doors of any church as we know it.

Would Wesley's theological entrepreneurialism have propelled him into these digital and virtual spaces if he were alive today? He was, after all, a reluctant convert to field preaching (and a high church Anglican clergyperson at that), finding it difficult to reconcile this "strange way of preaching in the fields" with ministry norms. And yet, it was this same Wesley who stood atop his father's grave to preach, as well as at a market cross, in Epworth. And it was Wesley who later exhorted, "Employ whatever God has entrusted you with, in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree to the household of faith, to all men!"⁵⁸ So what can we learn from Wesley's legacy of innovation to inform how we approach ministry in digital, phygital, virtual, and metaverse spaces?

Well, most importantly, John Wesley's introduction to field preaching came about due to the amazing success that his Oxford friend George Whitefield was having, where even the secular media of the day noted that Whitefield was regularly drawing crowds of 5,000-6,000 at Hannam Mount, and on some occasions, multitudes as large as 20,000.⁵⁹ Familiar as he was with Wesley's preaching



Fig. 17 – The organ on which John's brother Charles composed over 9,000 hymns and choruses

⁵⁶ See Ryan P. Burge (2021), *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press).

⁵⁷ See Ryan P. Burge (2021, July 13), "Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That's Not Good News for Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/mainline-protestant-evangelical-decline-survey-us-nones.html> and Pew Research Center (2019, Oct. 17), "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

⁵⁸ John Wesley, Sermon 50, "The Use of Money," Wesley Center Online, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-50-the-use-of-money/>

⁵⁹ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 38-39.

power and organizational prowess, Whitefield sent for Wesley,⁶⁰ asking for his help. But up to this point, John Wesley had only preached in regular church services in England.⁶¹ Uncertain about whether he should help with the open-air meetings in Bristol, he submitted the decision to the Fetter Lane Society. After casting lots, it was decided he should go.⁶²

That decision led to one of the most fascinating entries in Wesley's *Journal*: "In the evening I reached Bristol and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he [Whitefield] set me an example on Sunday; I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."⁶³ That was on a Saturday (March 31st). The next day, he spoke to a little society on Nicholas Street about the Sermon on the Mount, reflecting in his *Journal* that this (Jesus' own example of delivering his famous teaching) was "one pretty remarkable precedent of field preaching."⁶⁴

While we don't know the extent or substance of Wesley's dialogues with Whitefield on the matter, Kenneth Collins reasonably speculates, "Whitefield probably convinced Wesley that he could save more souls outside a church than within it, especially since Wesley was now being excluded from so many churches."⁶⁵ Whatever it was that Whitefield shared, it worked: On the following day (Monday), Wesley notes, "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."⁶⁶ In fact, that week he preached outdoors *multiple* times...to a crowd of about a thousand in Bristol, then 1,500 atop Hannam Mount, then about 5,000 at Rose Green (on the other side of Kingswood).⁶⁷ As Howard Snyder notes, "The Wesleyan Revival had begun," and characteristically, Wesley began organizing.⁶⁸ Furthermore, "within a few months of beginning field preaching in 1739, Wesley had set up the basic structure that was to mark Methodism for more than a century."⁶⁹

When his brother Charles challenged him regarding disturbances that sometimes arose in the context of these open-air sermons, John not only justified his "new measures," but chastened his brother. In a carefully-worded response, John Wesley wrote to his brother Charles, "How is it that you can't praise God for saving so many souls from death, and covering such a multitude of sins, unless he will begin this work within 'consecrated walls'? ... But I rejoice to find that God is

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 29 March 1739, Ed. By Percy Livingstone Parker, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.i.html>.

⁶⁴ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 39. Wesley, *Journal*, 1 April 1739.

⁶⁵ Kenneth J. Collins (1999), *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 72

⁶⁶ Wesley, *Journal*, 2 April 1739.

⁶⁷ Wesley, *Journal*, 8 April 1739.

⁶⁸ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 40.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

everywhere. I love the rites and ceremonies of the Church. But I see, well-pleased, that our great Lord can work without them.”⁷⁰

As Ken Collins observes, “For the sake of giving the gospel as wide a hearing as possible, Wesley not only, at times, put aside the ‘rites and ceremonies of the church,’ not only preached outside consecrated walls, but he also violated the parish boundaries of the Anglican Church to the annoyance and frustration of many of its clergy.”⁷¹ Why? Because it worked! As innovative and entrepreneurial as John Wesley was, he was even more pragmatic. And if it was working and God was using it, who was he to deny it? In fact, Wesley justified his “new measures” by appealing to their effectiveness: “My ordinary call is my ordination by the bishop: ‘Take thou authority to preach the Word of God.’ My extraordinary call is witnessed by the works God doth by my ministry, which prove that he is with me of a truth in the exercise of my office.”⁷²

A Personal Experience

Wesley’s initial reluctance and later enthusiastic support reminds me of my friend Stuart McPherson’s testimony about his own reluctance to engage in VR ministry:

“About a month prior to the coronavirus first showed up in the United States, an article came out about a new and innovative way of doing church: church in Virtual Reality. When this article came out, some of the staff at the church I was working at during that time gathered around together to discuss whether or not we thought that Church in Virtual Reality could ever duplicate the benefits of meeting in a ‘real church.’ This was a short discussion met with a lot of jokes made at the expense of the idea and, at the end of it all, we agreed that church in VR would never be a true expression of the Church. To be honest with you, because this was before lockdowns, we all agreed that Church Online could never be a true expression of church. And in full transparency, my voice was maybe the loudest and filled with the most objection to these ideas that day.

⁷⁰ Kenneth J. Collins (1999), *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 72; Frank Baker, ed. (1980), *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol. 25, Letters (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 694-695.

⁷¹ Collins (1999), *A Real Christian*, 72.

⁷² Reginald W. Ward & Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial ed., vol. 18, *Journals and Diaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 223. As cited by Collins (1999), *A Real Christian*, 72.

Fast forward one year. On March 28th 2021, the church I now work serve soft launched our first Virtual Reality service, and I was asked to co-lead the charge with our Next Generation pastor. To say I was hesitant to launch into this is a bit of an understatement, especially because of my feelings a year prior. But a lot had changed in that year and church online was not only a necessity, it was widely accepted with different levels of comfortability worldwide. This meant we were given “permission to play” and figure out other avenues of doing church on any digital platform.

So here I am, a Virtual Reality Church doubter, now spearheading a Virtual Reality Church.”⁷³

Indeed, Stuart has an amazing ministry serving as the VR Campus Pastor for one of the nation’s best-known metaverse ministries (Lakeland Community Church in Wisconsin), and he now co-hosts the “Metaverse Church” podcast. His rationale and determination echo the logic Wesley gave in his day: “I am well assured I did far more good to them by preaching three days on my father’s tomb than I did by preaching three years in his pulpit.”⁷⁴ And it’s a wide-open mission field.

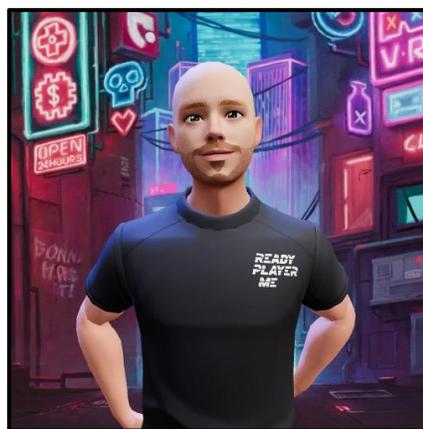


Fig. 18 – Metaverse pastor Stuart McPherson’s avatar in Spatial.io.

I first began to realize the potential of the metaverse for ministry when my daughter’s tenth birthday was looming and COVID-19 lockdowns were in effect. Clearly, there would be no birthday party. Or would there? A few months earlier, she had introduced me to Roblox (a virtual world catering to younger audiences) and I played there periodically as a way to spend time with her and her friends. When she told me that all the friends she wished she could invite hang out there, the solution was obvious: I took party kits around to her friends, she and I met solo at a picnic table in her favorite park, we connected via Zoom with all her friends, and we played Roblox together. The most amazing thing about this was that *none* of them thought this was weird, out of character, “virtual” (or less real), or anything of the sort. For this tight-knit group of preteens, they considered this a perfectly normal way to interact with friends.

How big is Roblox? In October of 2021, Roblox had over 3 *billion* accounts created on the platform, with 47.3 million active daily users and 220 million monthly active users. It has its own in-game currency and has logged over 11 billion hours’ worth of user engagement.⁷⁵ There are over 40

⁷³ Stuart McPherson, “Turning Doubt into Belief: The Metaverse Church,” *Stu on This* (blog), Lakeland Community Church, Sept. 12, 2022, <https://stuartmcperson.org/blogs/turning-doubt-into-belief-the-metaverse-church>.

⁷⁴ Ward & Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, 226. As cited by Collins (1999), *A Real Christian*, 72.

⁷⁵ Angela Kulevska (2023, March 30), “How Many People Play Roblox?,” *CyberCrew*. <https://cybercrew.uk/blog/how-many-people-play-roblox>

million user-created games (“experiences”) on Roblox,⁷⁶ with the most active ones featuring anywhere from 80,000 to 120,000 kids playing them at any one time worldwide.⁷⁷

My second indicator of the potential of the metaverse for ministry was when my oldest son was a freshman at college and his brother (a year younger) was still at home. To ease the transition, these introvert teen boys set up a server in Minecraft and hung out there crafting and chatting for hours on end. These are teenagers for whom the traditional church simply doesn’t connect or resonate, intellectually-minded teens who aren’t impressed with the pat answers so often espoused by church leaders. And they are NOT very social and do not enjoy crowds. But give them a Minecraft server, and they come alive, talking about the issues, frustrations, and challenges of life. As I watched my boys engage so readily in this space (it was as natural to them as their little sister’s presence with friends in Roblox), I couldn’t help but think how this would be an awesome place to plant a church... a church that speaks to teens and young adults, on their turf, in the spaces they frequent, where life is “real”!

How big is Minecraft’s server world? According to their Live Player Count & Statistics,⁷⁸ as I write this paragraph in 2023, there are 970,643 people playing Minecraft (at 2 am in the Eastern U.S.); there are 163,550,458 active Minecraft players, approximately 500,000-800,000 of which play Minecraft concurrently (at any given time), and every month between 1 and 1.5 million people play.

Over the last year, through the Metaverse Church Learning Community,⁷⁹ I have spent considerable time with most of these metaverse pastors and VR ministry leaders, and through them I have been introduced to the earliest pioneers: Daniel Herron, who started the Robloxian Christians church network in 2011 (when he was 11),⁸⁰ and DJ Soto, who started the very first church in the metaverse in 2016, Virtual Reality Church.⁸¹ Their sense of missionary calling to the unique culture of the metaverse is undeniable. My friend Jason Poling (also a metaverse pastor) elucidates this connection in a great whitepaper he wrote on the “Theology of the Metaverse.”⁸² Drawing clear purpose and example from both David Livingstone’s ministry in Africa in the 1800s and the apostle Paul’s ministry to the unchurched, Poling observes:

Throughout the history of the Church, Paul’s model of cultural adaptation has been followed by countless missionaries, and at times, not without a little controversy

⁷⁶ Shubham (2023, March 16), “How Many Games Are in Roblox? (2023),” GamerTweak, <https://gamertweak.com/how-many-games-roblox/#how-many-roblox-games-are-there-in-total-2023>

⁷⁷ Personal observation derived from dozens of visits, including active participation in two of the Top 10 games (MeepCity and AdoptMe!). See also Nikita (2023, Feb. 21), “Most Popular Roblox Games (February 2023),” GamerTweak, <https://gamertweak.com/most-popular-game-roblox/>

⁷⁸ Minecraft Live Player Count & Statistics: <https://activeplayer.io/minecraft/>

⁷⁹ A ministry of Leadership Network, in partnership with TheChurch.Digital and DigitalChurch.Network, coordinated by Jeff Reed, <https://leadnet.org/metalc/>

⁸⁰ Daniel Herron (2018, Dec. 11), “Daniel Herron: Lessons from The Robloxian Christians Online Church,” *Faith & Leadership*, <https://faithandleadership.com/daniel-herron-lessons-the-robloxian-christians-online-church>

⁸¹ VR Church (n.d.), “VR Church in the Metaverse,” <https://www.vrchurch.org/>

⁸² Jason Poling (2002), “A Theology of the Metaverse” [White paper], Cornerstone Church of Yuba City, Retrieved Feb. 20, 2023 from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kBISjrHkVXXviOefBKsEr_nxYuSubijsxE9OAAyNwK3w/edit.

*within the established, sending churches. These churches simply could not understand the culture the missionaries were seeking to reach. Today is no different. God in His sovereignty has ordained the emergence of the Metaverse. This unique culture requires some degree of adaptation on the part of missionaries seeking to reach these largely unchurched and young digital natives from around the globe.*⁸³

As saturated with the presence of the church as we may seem to be in America, there are still huge pockets of cultural expression (and even resistance) in the U.S. where the work of Christ is barely known...places where people live their entire lives without any redeeming presence of Christ-followers, places where a church is just a relic of a bygone era or a place where you go for weddings or funerals. These communities can be found in abundance in the metaverse, but these same denizens of the metaverse will never darken the doors of your church or mine. Indeed, DJ Soto, the pastor who established the very first VR expression of Church observes, “There are people who come to our church, VR Church and MMO Church, that would never step foot in a church, and I think that’s really important to consider.”⁸⁴

To better understand the unique opportunity and the driving passions of those who minister there, pastors and ministry leaders (and anyone intrigued with the missional potential of this type of ministry) should watch this 5-minute interview from the NBC Today Show featuring metaverse pastor Jason Poling:⁸⁵



<https://www.nbc.com/today/video/how-the-metaverse-is-changing-the-way-people-attend-church/NBCN390661832>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jason Daye (July 28, 2021), “DJ Soto: Why Virtual Reality Church Is Just As Legitimate As Gathering in Person,” *Church Leaders*, retrieved Feb. 20, 2023 from: <https://churchleaders.com/podcast/402303-dj-soto-virtual-reality-church-legitimate.html>

⁸⁵ NBC Today Show, S2022, E183, “How the Metaverse is changing the way people attend church,” produced by Erin Farley, directed by Lee Miller, featuring Jason Poling and Cornerstone Church of Yuba City, aired Aug. 3, 2022 on NBC, 2022, accessed Feb. 20, 2023 from <https://www.nbc.com/today/video/how-the-metaverse-is-changing-the-way-people-attend-church/NBCN390661832> .

If these concepts are new Jeff Reed’s book *VR & The Metaverse Church: How God is Moving in This Virtual, Yet Quite Real, Reality* (Leadership Network, 2022) provides an introduction.⁸⁶ In it, he introduces the concepts, defines the terms, identifies the most widely-used platforms, explores the issues and applications, and introduces readers to about a dozen metaverse ministries and leaders. It is no longer a question of “whether” or “if” God could work in this space; instead, Reed provides numerous tangible examples and first-hand testimonies of how God is actually moving already, where He is actively working, and how people are finding Jesus today in these virtual reality and metaverse spaces.

Conclusion

So, would John Wesley have gone there? If he were alive doing his ministry today in the 2020s, would he embrace the metaverse and virtual reality preaching? From my research into Wesley’s own innovation with technology and strategy, I am absolutely convinced he would! He would have been reluctant, likely skeptical at first, perhaps even hesitant (as he was with field preaching): “I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.”⁸⁷ But once he were given the opportunity to don a VR headset, create his own avatar, and interact with the denizens of the metaverse, I think we would easily hear Wesley lament to his ministry peers (or pen in his journal), “I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation.”⁸⁸



Fig. 19 – An AI-generated image by DALL-E in collaboration with David Swisher which envisions John Wesley riding on horseback, using technology

Admittedly, Wesley would undoubtedly have had some reservations about the ordinances, particularly the Lord’s Supper and baptism (Wesley never was able to shed his high-church Anglicanism in that). And these do remain challenges. But fortunately, there are many great pioneers who have already wrestled through these issues to pave the way for the rest of us:

- Jason Poling’s whitepaper on the [“Theology of the Metaverse”](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kBISjrHkVXViOefBKsEr_nxYuSubijsxE9OAAyNwK3w/edit) provides a sound and well-reasoned theological justification from Scripture about all the big issues.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kBISjrHkVXViOefBKsEr_nxYuSubijsxE9OAAyNwK3w/edit

⁸⁶ Jeff Reed (2022). *VR & the Metaverse Church: How God is Moving in this Virtual, Yet Quite Real, Reality* (Dallas, TX: Leadership Network). Available as a free [PDF or ePub from Leadership Network](#) or in [Kindle \(\\$10\) or bound print \(\\$15\) form from Amazon](#).

⁸⁷ John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 29 March 1739, Ed. By Percy Livingstone Parker, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.i.html>.

⁸⁸ Wesley, *Journal*, 2 April 1739.

- *The Wesleyan Church’s general superintendent and director of church multiplication collaborated to develop a core ecclesiology for missional planting efforts which asks what essentials must be present for a ministry to be considered a church.*⁸⁹
- *There is a great chapter in Bock & Armstrong’s Virtual Reality Church which discusses the various ways that churches from a variety of theological persuasions handle both communion and baptism.*⁹⁰
- *And several active communities, including [TheChurch.Digital](https://thechurch.digital/) <https://thechurch.digital/> and [DigitalChurch.Network](https://digitalchurch.network/), <https://digitalchurch.network/> which seek to resource and equip courageous metaverse pastors and ministry entrepreneurs in answering challenges and finding practical solutions.*⁹¹
- *What began with the inaugural Metaverse Church Learning Community has grown into a pair of cohorts for [Digital Discipleship](https://leadnet.org/digital-discipleship-cohort/) <https://leadnet.org/digital-discipleship-cohort/> and [VR & the Metaverse](https://leadnet.org/vr-and-the-metaverse-cohort/) <https://leadnet.org/vr-and-the-metaverse-cohort/> to explore these issues, contexts, and applications.*

Fortunately, we are not alone in this thinking (about what Wesley would do if he were alive today). DJ Soto also notes, resoundingly in the affirmative:

*If John Wesley were alive today, he would likely embrace the metaverse and virtual reality preaching. Wesley's innovative and adaptable approach to ministry, seen in his use of open-air preaching and small group meetings, suggests he would leverage the metaverse to reach a wider audience and establish virtual communities. By incorporating immersive experiences, Wesley could foster engagement, inspire action on social issues, and extend his ministry's impact in innovative ways. His entrepreneurial mindset and commitment to connecting with people make it plausible for Wesley to embrace these technologies as powerful tools for ministry in the 2020s.*⁹²

So, the question is simply what it will take for the rest of the Church to realize the opportunity and embrace it. After all, the fields are expansive, and the harvest is ripe, and there is ample opportunity. And although it might seem counterintuitive to older generations who were raised in a pre-COVID world where work and church were both done in-person and in buildings, for the emerging generations who are moving into adulthood today, virtual reality is quite normal and metaverse spaces are places to connect. In fact, many of them question why we would spend such hefty sums on maintaining facilities that only get used once a week.

After all, these younger generations grew up playing Roblox, Minecraft, and Fortnite, socializing and networking in virtual reality and metaverse spaces, and watching movies like *Ender’s*

⁸⁹ Wayne Schmidt (2018, Dec. 3), “What’s a church?” <https://www.wesleyan.org/whats-a-church>

⁹⁰ Darrell L. Bock & Jonathan J. Armstrong (2021), *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities* (Chicago: Moody).

⁹¹ For Wesleyan-heritage disciplinarians, another resource is the [Digital Disciplemakers Facebook Group](#) (which I coordinate), which exists to network and encourage digital, phygital, virtual, & online church leaders and identify resources and tools for ministry effectiveness.

⁹² DJ Soto (2024, May 30), Personal communication (Facebook message conversation).

Game and Ready Player One where these experiences are normative. They were doing metaverse long before Facebook became “Meta” and the rest of the world began to understand that the metaverse was actually a thing. And if we want to reach the generations of the future, we must do what every great missionary and church planter has done before...go where they gather.

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