## Class Meetings & Early Organization

In previous essays 'class-meetings' have been mentioned, and for current-day Methodists, what exactly is a 'class' might be uncertain. However, for early Californian Wesleyans, like Revs. Elihu Anthony or Willaim Roberts, membership in a class-meeting (with a quarterly ticket) made a person *bona fide*. This article will provide more background on classes and their practice.

As with Methodism itself, class-meetings developed in England under the tutelage of John Wesley. Wesley's United Societies were a direct offshoot of the older Anglican societies formed during the Stuart-Restoration era, 1670-1680's. These church fellowships sought to deepen loyalty to the established Church as well as generally spread works of apostolic charity. Indeed, John's entire family were active in such fellowships before John and his brother attended ministry in the American colonies[1]. Moreover, it was at J. Hutton's religious fellowship at Aldersgate St. where John's heart was famously warmed in 1738.

But it was the German emigres, namely, the Moravian pietists, who pressed Wesley by their own religious society at Fetter Lane to consider the merits of 'stillness' doctrine. And though Wesley avoided more problematic aspects of their doctrine, he retained their manner of mutual examination, adding to it his own zeal for Anglican pious works. Consequently, in the years that followed, Wesley created a system of religious discipline that was more comprehensive, or complete, than either the individual Anglican or Moravian practice.

Classes presupposed the need for Christians to need assistance in their walk. Membership was open to all ranks of people sincerely desiring to be saved from their sin, independent of church denomination[2]. As the travelling preacher stirred interest in salvific matters, hearers (at meetings or revivals) were solicited to attend local class-meetings. Classes were ideally limited to twelve people, with a probationary period of six months for new members. Each quarter reviews were conducted and membership tickets renewed.

Each class had an appointed lay-leader who weekly inquired upon the welfare of each person's soul. As a guide for discussion, Wesley's General Rule was used. Participants would keep journals, and answers to the leader's queries were recorded. Thus, circuit ministers could systematically keep track of spiritual growth or declension, interceding in a timely manner when needed to ward off despair or advance those who prospered in grace[3].

The General Rule consisted of three heads: Did a person avoid evil of all kinds? Did they do good of all sorts? Were the ordinances of God attended? Underneath these tenets were about twenty-five more specific queries. But all these particulars could be shed if a sinner graduated from the mourners' bench unto perfect love, leaving the class for the higher band-meeting. In other words, the liberty of the band depended upon the horse-bit of the class.

For the Methodists of early California, classes often proved the first organizational step to forming a church[4]. Elihu Anthony formed classes in 1847 in San Jose & Santa Clara. In 1848 Rev. Anthony made another class in Santa Cruz. When Rev. Willliam Roberts arrived upon our shores, he formed classes in San Francisco, Monterey, and Coloma (respectively 1847, and the last two, 1849). Campbell and Los Gatos MEC also began with class meetings. Classes today can be found in Christian support groups like Santa Clara UMC's Faith Friends. – C. Bartlett

[1] Wesley did this through the charter of Gen. Oglethorpe and by SPG stipend.
[2] Wesley biased his movement to Establishment by choosing fellow helpers who were either already Anglican ministers or lay-preachers loyal to the Church.
[3] This was how an evangelical testimony was acquired—through the trials and joys of class meetings. These testimonies were then given at Love Feasts and Quarterly meetings, etc.. .
[4] Prayer circles might be preferred in mixed company as apparently was the case with some of Aram's wagon train.