

Forefathers, Mothers, and Others Biographies

Francis Asbury (1745–1816)

Between 1769 and 1774, John Wesley sent eight missionaries from the Church of England to America. With the American Revolution brewing, all but Asbury soon went home. From 1771 to 1784, Asbury traveled the country on horseback, sharing the gospel and establishing Methodist societies. A serious student of the Bible, he would get up before 5 a.m. to study, often turning to Hebrew and Greek texts to get the full meaning of what he was reading.

The Church of England stopped sending clergy to the American colonies during the Revolutionary War, prompting Wesley to ordain the first Methodist superintendent in the new United States, Thomas Coke, in 1784. Coke then ordained Asbury as a second bishop of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church. Asbury remained an important leader of the church until his death in 1816. (Coke returned to England in 1785.)

During his ministry, Asbury traveled 270,000 miles, or about 6,000 miles a year. He preached 16,000 sermons, or about one a day. Under his leadership, the church grew from 15,000 members and 83 preachers to 211,000 members and more than 700 preachers.

Barbara Heck (1735–1804)

Barbara Heck was an Irish Methodist who emigrated to America around 1760. She's often called the mother of American Methodism.

In 1766, Heck grew concerned that her fellow Methodists—including her cousin, Philip Embury, a lay preacher—were neglecting their faith and drifting into sin. After discovering a deck of playing cards (which she considered sinful because of their possible connection to gambling), Heck begged Embury to hold church services in his home, saying, “You must preach to us, or we shall all go to hell together, and God will require our blood at your hands!”

Embury responded, preaching in his home to a group that included Heck, her African-American maid, and three other people. The congregation soon outgrew Embury's house. Two years later, 250 members joined together to fund their first building.

Heck and her husband, Paul, remained loyal to Britain during the American Revolution. They fled to Canada during the war, where they helped establish more Methodist societies.

John Stewart (1786–1823)

John Stewart, not to be confused with television personality Jon Stewart, overcame many early problems, including alcoholism and depression, to become one of the Methodist Church's first missionaries.

Stewart was poor and of mixed ancestry (white, African American, and Native American), traits that didn't give him much status in early nineteenth-century America. After years of struggling with addiction, Stewart accepted Christ at an 1815 Methodist camp meeting in Ohio.

Stewart felt a call from God to preach to the Wyandot Indians in the frontier country of northern Ohio. He received a preaching license and founded the Wyandot Methodist Mission—the church's first officially recognized mission—in 1816. Sadly, Stewart died of tuberculosis in 1823, a year before a permanent church building was constructed for the Wyandots. That building is now a historic shrine of The United Methodist Church.

In a letter to the Wyandots, Stewart wrote words that could have applied to his story: "If you persevere in the way of well-doing," he wrote, "when you have made your way through much tribulation, and lie down on your dying bed, you will be filled with the glorious prospect of the reward that awaits you."

William Wadé Harris (c. 1860–1929)

William Wadé "Prophet" Harris was a Liberian missionary who helped establish Christianity in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) during the early twentieth century.

Harris was born into the Glebo tribe in Liberia. As a teenager, he spent six years with his maternal uncle, a Methodist pastor, who baptized him and taught him to read and write. When he was about 21, he had a powerful conversion experience, and he soon began working for the Episcopal Church in Liberia.

Within a few years, however, Harris felt a strong urge to become a missionary. In 1913, he traveled to nearby Côte d'Ivoire and began going from village to village, encouraging people to turn to Christ. Within 18 months, more than 100,000 people had been baptized. When Protestant missionaries, including Methodists, arrived in 1924, they found thousands of people ready to be taught by "the white man with the Book" that Prophet Harris had told them to expect.

In 2004, the million-member Protestant Methodist Church of Côte d'Ivoire, built on the foundation Prophet Harris laid, merged with The United Methodist Church.

Forefathers, Mothers, and Others Cards

<p>Francis Asbury (1745–1816)</p>	<p>Was a missionary sent from England to America</p>	<p>Served as leader of Methodist Episcopal Church from 1784–1816</p>	<p>Rode 270,000 miles on horseback and preached 16,000 sermons</p>
<p>Barbara Heck (1735–1804)</p>	<p>Was called “Mother of American Methodism”</p>	<p>Prompted cousin Philip Embury to start preaching in New York</p>	<p>Helped start Methodist societies in Canada</p>
<p>John Stewart (1786–1823)</p>	<p>Was a freeborn man of white, African-American, and Native American heritage</p>	<p>Struggled with alcoholism and depression</p>	<p>Started the Methodist Church’s first official mission, working with the Wyandot Indians</p>
<p>William Wadé Harris (c. 1860–1929)</p>	<p>Was born in Liberia and served as a missionary to Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast)</p>	<p>Had a conversion experience about age 21</p>	<p>Baptized more than 100,000 people in 18 months</p>