



Body and Soul

Among the early public health advocates was none other than John Wesley, Methodism's founder.

John Wesley founded the Methodist movement, which would lead to the creation of Methodist seminaries, among them the Perkins School of Theology.

The 18th century Englishman remains a figure of interest at Perkins, and one who can be studied in various ways.

There's Wesley the evangelist, Wesley the preacher, Wesley the theologian, Wesley the organizer, Wesley the abolitionist.

And there's John Wesley the wellness advocate, who advised people on how to take care of their bodies as well as their souls.

"He's almost like a woke health nut, constantly talking about what you should be eating and what you should not," said Ted Campbell, Albert C. Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins, and editor of three volumes of Wesley's letters.

Wesley recommended a "vegetable diet," lots of walking and horseback riding, abundant consumption of water and very little of strong alcoholic beverages.

He was fascinated by electricity and even operated a machine that gave people jolts for headaches and other ailments.

"Some people say he's the inventor of electric shock therapy," Campbell said.

As a young man, Wesley read medical texts for his own edification and to prepare himself for his

missionary stint in colonial Georgia, ministering to Native peoples.

Back in England, working as an itinerant, revivalist Anglican clergyman, he recognized that many people had little access to healthcare or even basic information about diet, exercise and medicine.

Wesley sought to fill those gaps and his efforts had a theological dimension, suggests Elaine Robinson, who earned her M.T.S. at Perkins in 1995, and now is professor of Methodist Studies and Christian Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology.

"I view Wesley's holistic concern for health through the lens of the incarnation," Robinson said. "The Word became flesh, as if to remind us of the goodness of our physical bodies. Wesley understood that the body is the 'temple of God.' Our bodies experience and share the gospel with others. If we don't care for our physical wellbeing, our spiritual lives will likely suffer as well, making it difficult for us to go on to perfection in love."

Wesley's correspondence is a good place to witness his concern for others' health.

"He's always giving medical advice in the letters," Campbell said.

Among the original, handwritten Wesley letters at SMU's Bridwell Library is one he wrote on June 15, 1789, to a friend in London.

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ELAINE ROBINSON

John Wesley believed God cares for the health of our minds and bodies as well as our souls. Perkins School of Theology continues in that tradition, preparing students to serve the community through a holistic lens.



*“If you love the souls
or bodies of men,
recommend everywhere
the Primitive Physick.”*

JOHN WESLEY

Top: November 26, 1776 Letter from John Wesley to Joseph Benson. Wesley writes, “Taking opium is full as bad as taking drams. It equally hurts the understanding and is if possible more pernicious to the health than even rum or brandy. None should touch it if they have.”

Inset: Primitive Physick, or, An easy and natural method of curing most diseases. This 1772 edition was owned by Charles Selecman and donated to Bridwell Library Special Collections.

Portrait inset: Portrait of John Wesley by John Jackson (1778-1831), possibly an early copy or preparatory sketch.

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CATHE EVINS

“It gives me much satisfaction to hear that sister Dickenson’s health, both of soul and body, increases,” Wesley begins. “Certainly, exercise is the best medicine for both. Therefore, you should encourage her to use it constantly and, as far as may be, in the open air.”

In another letter at Bridwell, dated Oct. 13, 1784, Wesley describes nettle tea as “the best bracer in the world” and as a backup suggests “elixir of vitriol,” noting precisely how it should be diluted, and recommending that it be taken at either 10 a.m. or 11 a.m.

In the Bridwell collection is a Nov. 20, 1769, letter in which Wesley writes to a friend: “If you love the souls or bodies of men, recommend everywhere the *Primitive Physick*.”

That was the short book in which Wesley compiled his health advice, and it was a best-seller. *Primitive Physick* “crossed the Atlantic Ocean and made it into the saddlebags of Methodist itinerants and into the homes of the laity,” wrote historian Elizabeth Georgian.

Bridwell has six 18th-century copies of *Primitive Physick*, said R. Arvid Nelsen, curator for rare books & manuscripts and librarian for special collections. The earliest is dated 1747, the year of the book’s publication.

Primitive Physick has some curious remedies — such as, for headaches, applying to each temple “the thin yellow rind of a lemon” — but also sound tips about exercise, diet and rest.

“If we Methodists followed Wesley’s advice, we would have healthier congregations today!” Robinson said.

Campbell notes that Wesley had lots of ailments of his own and often was convinced he was near death, causing him to rewrite his will several times, with consequences for the Methodist movement.

But Wesley lived to age 87 — an extremely long life in the 18th century.

Wesley’s attention to wellness is memorialized in the Wesley Nurse program operated by Methodist

Healthcare Ministries of South Texas.

The program places scores of registered nurses in United Methodist churches of the Rio Texas Conference, headquartered in San Antonio. These parish nurses work closely with pastors, including some who studied at Perkins.

The Rev. Cathe Evins is beginning her fifth year as pastor of First United Methodist Church of Sequin, Texas, and Danna Meyers has been a Wesley nurse there for more than 11 years.

“Danna attends our weekly staff meetings and is truly an asset in planning our ministries and programming,” said Evins, who earned her M.Div. at Perkins in 2000 and serves on the Perkins Alumni/ae Council.

Meyers has set up blood drives, flu shot clinics, parenting classes, grief support classes and Alzheimer’s support groups. For low-income residents, she operates a diaper bank and helps arrange for financial help with prescriptions, housing and utilities.

While based at the church, Meyers is out and about often, a health-care-providing equivalent of the circuit-riding Methodist preachers of yesteryear.

Evins could preach all day on the benefits of the Wesley Nurse program.

“To me, it is a very holistic approach to caring for people — meeting spiritual needs but also meeting physical, mental and emotional needs,” she said.

Many people who get help from a Wesley Nurse are non-Methodists who have no idea who Wesley was.

But as a Perkins student, Evins came to appreciate John Wesley’s life and ministry.

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