

Reviving ‘the Primitive Standard’: the Religious Society Rules of Anthony Horneck, Josiah Woodward and Samuel Wesley

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Reviving ‘the Primitive Standard’: the Religious Society Rules of Anthony Horneck, Josiah Woodward and Samuel Wesley¹

The Religious Society Movement in the Church of England

The origin of “religious societies” within the Church of England can be dated back to around the year 1678, when groups of young men organized themselves for weekly meetings under the direction of Dr. Anthony Horneck (1641-97), a native of the Rhine River town, Bacharach in the Lower Palatinate. After studying at Heidelberg and Wittenberg, Horneck traveled to England and entered Queen’s College, Oxford where he took his Master’s degree in 1663. Horneck was ordained into the Church of England and ministered successively as Chaplain of Queen’s College; Vicar of All Saints’, Oxford; Tutor to Lord Torrington (son of the duke of Albemarle); Rector of Doulton, Devon, and a Prebendary of Exeter before returning to Germany in 1669 for a two-year visit. Horneck was in Germany when the father of German Pietism Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) founded his “*collegia pietatis*” as religious meetings for the promotion of religious devotion among his parishioners at Frankfurt in 1670. At these twice weekly meetings which first met in his house and later in the church, Spener reviewed his sermon from the previous Sunday or read a selection from a devotional work and encouraged members of the society to engage in religious conversation. Spener viewed the societies which soon spread to other towns as *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* or little churches within the church. In order to maintain the unity of the Lutheran Church, the meetings were not to interfere with the regular hours of public worship, strict doctrinal orthodoxy was to be maintained, and controversial issues were to be avoided. Women were allowed to attend Spener’s societies but they were required to sit behind a partition where they could listen but not take part in the men’s conversation. F. W. B. Bullock has concluded that “We cannot be more definite, but it would seem at least highly probable that Horneck heard about the *collegia pietatis* while he was on his German tour, that he bore the idea in mind on his return to England, and that seven years later when the occasion was ripe, he developed a similar organisation.”² If he did not become aware of Spener’s *collegia*

¹ The paper was presented at the Ecclesiastical History Society Postgraduate Colloquium on the History of Christianity at the University of Manchester in February 2006.

² F. W. B. Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies 1520-1799* (St. Leonards on Sea: Budd & Gillatt, 1963), 130. Following this conclusion, Bullock details the similarities between the German and English religious societies. Information from Bullock’s (pp. 51-64) section on Spener’s “*collegia pietatis*” has been utilized throughout this paragraph.

during this visit then he may have become aware of them by reading Spener's *Pia Desideria* (1675) which recommends religious societies as a means of renewing the church and realizing the Lutheran ideal of the priesthood of all believers.³

Upon his return to England in 1671, Horneck was appointed to the Savoy Chapel where he ministered for the last twenty-six years of his life. The precise origin of the religious societies is unknown; however, the rapid growth of the societies suggests that they filled a desire for religious fellowship felt by many Anglicans. Horneck's friend and biographer Bishop Richard Kidder (c.1634-1703) was not sure whether Horneck moved "these young men at first to enter into such societies, or whether they first applied to him."⁴ In any case, during the early years of the religious society movement, Horneck was their chief patron and had direct care over several of the societies.⁵ For his devoted pastoral work, Horneck was widely respected by his fellow clergymen. Regarding his pastoral zeal, an anonymous biographer wrote that he was for bringing the best of his Parishioners to a higher state of Christian Perfection, to more pure and Primitive Lives than they practiced. He had always in view, the Innocence and simplicity of the first Professor of our most Holy Religion, and burn with an ardent desire of bringing our Practice to their Standard, as his Predecessors had brought our Doctrine.⁶

In this description, Horneck embodies the characteristics idealized by pious High-Churchmen. His life exemplified the dynamic spirituality of primitive Christianity and he inspired his parishioners to live "pure and Primitive Lives." As seen through the eyes of his contemporary admirers, Horneck's key contribution to the Church was his efforts to reform Christian practice to the primitive standard. His biographer aptly reveals that the purity of Anglican doctrine as handed down since the English Reformation and the conviction that the promotion of practical Christianity was the most pressing current need were the working assumptions shared by the Anglican divines who promoted the voluntary movements.

³ John Wesley read Spener's *Pia Desideria* just a few months after his return from Georgia in April 1738. JW, *Diaries* (April 6, 1738), 18:572.

⁴ Richard Kidder, *The Life of the Reverend Anthony Horneck, D.D. Late Preacher at the Savoy* (London: Printed by J. H. for B. Alymer, 1698), 13.

⁵ Kidder, 12.

⁶ *A Summary Account of the Life of the Truly Pious and Reverend Dr. Anth. Horneck, Minister of the Savoy* (London: Printed by E. Whitlock, 1697), 25-26.

Horneck wrote up a set of rules to govern the societies which came to number about forty in London by 1700.⁷ Following his lead, an influential set of rules for the Poplar Society were published by their minister, Josiah Woodward (1657-1712), in 1698, forming part of his *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London*.⁸ Woodward's *Account*, which became the standard history of the movement, named Anthony Horneck along with William Smythies (bap. 1635?-1715), lecturer at St. Michael Cornhill, as the chief founders and propagators of the movement. Woodward's rules for the Poplar Society were published in the year after Horneck's death and clearly reveal his basic dependence upon Horneck's rules. For example, the first rule or order of Horneck is "All that enter into such a Society shall resolve upon a holy and serious life." Woodward's first rule is

That the sole *design* of this *society* being to promote real Holiness of Heart and Life: It is absolutely necessary that the Persons who enter into it, do seriously resolve, by the Grace of God, to apply themselves to all means proper to accomplish these blessed Ends. Trusting in the divine Power and gracious Conduct of the holy Spirit thro' our Lord Jesus Christ, to excite, advance and perfect all Good in us.

Both rules encourage "Practical Divinity" (Horneck's words) and "practical holiness" (Woodward's words) over and against disputation.⁹ Overall, eight of Woodward's fifteen rules show a close relation to those of Horneck. Important points stressed in common are that only faithful members of the Church of England should be admitted and members must be consistently be in attendance;¹⁰ doctrinal and political disputes

⁷ For Horneck's Rules see his *Several Sermons upon the Fifth of St. Matthew: Being Part of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. To Which is added, The Life of the Author, by Richard, Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (London: Printed by J. R. for B. Aylmer, 1706), viii-x. Horneck's rules have also been printed in full by a number of subsequent authors including, Kidder (pp. 13-16), Bullock (pp. 128-29), and Portus (pp. 256-58).

⁸ Josiah Woodward, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London*, 6th ed. (London: Printed and Sold by M. Downing, 1744), 108-114. This was the second edition of his work and the earliest to have survived. See John Spurr, "Woodward, Josiah (1657-1712)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004). Woodward's rules from the fifth edition of his *Account* have been reproduced in the appendix of David L. Watson's, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985).

One scholar has commented that despite the prominent role Woodward played in various voluntary religious movements, "he remains a shadowy figure whose personality and public role attracted less attention from contemporaries than might be expected." John Spurr, "Woodward, Josiah (1657-1712)," *ODNB*.

⁹ Horneck Rule 7; Woodward Rule 3.

¹⁰ Horneck Rule 2, 10, 14, 16; Woodward Rule 2, 7, 8.

should be avoided;¹¹ and at each meeting members should contribute towards a general fund for charitable uses.¹² Despite Woodward's general dependence on Horneck, he does take liberty to modify some of Horneck's rules as well as create new rules to fit his own context. Perhaps the most sticking difference between the two sets of rules is the contrast between Horneck's stress on the clergyman's authority over the society compared to Woodward's stress on lay "Stewards" as elected leaders of the Society.¹³ Woodward's rules make it clear that the two elected stewards were to lead the Society. One important role of the stewards was to keep a register of money received and distributed for charitable uses.¹⁴ Church of England ministers are only mentioned in one of his rules, which states that new Society rules must be approved of by three Anglican clergymen.¹⁵ The importance of charitable work outside the Society's confines became a prominent concern for Woodward. Society members were to "express due Christian Charity, Candor and Moderation towards all such Dissenters as are of good Conversation."¹⁶ The origin of Horneck's Society rules, being twenty years closer to the Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century, makes no mention of Dissenters. He was probably concerned that Religious Societies avoid being associated with dissenting conventicles popularly associated with the short-lived period of Puritan supremacy during the wars.¹⁷ A further unique aspect of Woodward's rules is their specification that Society members were to cultivate family religion and to assist the recently formed (1690) Societies for the Reformation of Manners by contributing towards "the punishment of publick Profaneness."¹⁸ Woodward's *Account* was published at a time when Church and society had become more accepting of voluntary societies within the Established Church. The religious

¹¹ Horneck Rule 4; Woodward Rule 4.

¹² Horneck Rule 11, cf. 12; Woodward Rule 5, cf. 7.

¹³ Horneck Rule 3, 7, 14-15; Woodward Rule 5-8, 14. Horneck (Rule 12) does mention stewards but does not specifically define the nature of their duties.

¹⁴ Rule 5.

¹⁵ Rule 13.

¹⁶ Rule 2.

¹⁷ In his recollections of the beginnings of the movement in the 1680s Bishop Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715) reveals that he associated these sorts of Societies with dissenters. Whether or not he was aware of the earlier origins of the movement in the late 1670s, he commented that: "In King James's reign [1685-1688], the fear of popery was so strong...that many, in and about London, began to meet often together, both for devotion and for their further instruction: things of that kind had been formerly practised only among the puritans and the dissenters: but these were of the church, and came to their ministers, to be assisted with forms of prayer and other directions: they were chiefly conducted by Dr Beveridge and Dr Horneck." *Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time*, vol. 5 (Oxford: OUP, 1833), 18.

¹⁸ Rules 11-12.

societies and SRM helped pave the way for Thomas Bray to establish the SPCK and SPG; two societies which naturally received moral and financial support from the religious societies.

In common with other contemporary and subsequent leaders of religious societies, Woodward saw the societies as a means of restoring in the Church of England the primitive piety modeled by the early church.¹⁹ John Walsh has since noted that a central goal of the religious society movement was “to restore to practicality that elusive vision of a pristine ‘primitive Christianity’ which mesmerized so many post-Restoration Anglicans.”²⁰ A second key element linking the various the voluntary society movements was the perceived need for “practical Christianity” that could be actively lived out in the world. This emphasis was represented in the literature of all wings of the movement; for example, it can be seen in the Religious Society rules of Horneck, Woodward, and Wesley, as well as the SPG’s advice to its supporters among the clergy “to promote Charity, Piety, and Practical Christianity among their parishoners.”²¹

The Wesley Family’s Relation to the Religious Society Movement

The Religious Society movement was part of the wider Anglican interest in the ancient church which had captivated the Wesley family. In 1700 Samuel Wesley (1662-1735) published *A Letter Concerning the Religious Societies* at a time when he was beginning to consider forming a religious society amongst his parishioners at Epworth. His interest in this subject was increased by reading Woodward’s *Account*. Wesley’s *Letter* lends support to Woodward’s recommendation of religious societies and specifically advocates the formation of societies in rural parishes. In his letter, Samuel was concerned to show the distinct differences between the Religious Societies and the Societies of the Reformation of Manners. As with Woodward, Wesley expressly linked the renewed religious societies with assemblies of the early Church. In support of the societies, Wesley wrote:

I know few good Men but *lament* that after the *Destruction of Monasteries*, there were not some *Societies* founded in their stead, but *reformed* from their

¹⁹ Woodward, 38, 98.

²⁰ John Walsh, “Religious Societies: Methodist and Evangelical 1738-1800,” in *Voluntary Religion*, eds. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 281.

²¹ *Abstract of Proceedings for 1713* (London, 1714) quoted in Samuel Clyde McCulloch, “The Foundation and Early Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 8 (1944-45): 255.

Errors, and reduced to the *Primitive Standard*. None who has lookt into our own Church-History, can be ignorant how highly influential such *Bodies of Men* as these, were to the first planting and propagating of Christianity amongst our Forefathers.

He went on to say “that a great part of the *good Effects* of that way of Life, may be attained without many of the *Inconveniencies* of it, by such *Societies*.” Wesley believed that since the English Reformation, Nicholas Ferrar’s (1592-1637) retirement from the world to his estate at Little Gidding had provided the best model of ascetic piety.²² However, the religious societies provide a better model because “Men of *Trade and Business*” can remain in the world while promoting personal holiness through participation in a society. Gaston Jean Baptiste de Renty’s (1611-1649) pious societies provided a model of how this could work in France. He devoted himself to reforming and sanctifying the lives of tradesmen “that some at least in each profession, might live like the Primitive Christians.” What he had in mind was forming tradesmen into religious communities where they would pray together, sing psalms, recite their rosary (Wesley’s omitted this facet), read a devotional work and discuss the Catechism.²³ De Renty also formed another brand of Societies in several towns which met once a week to confer with one another about assisting the poor and “preventing offenses against God.” A key difference between these Societies and their Anglican counterparts is that de Renty explicitly included women in them. In his “Certain Directions for Ladies and Gentlewomen,” de Renty urged women to lead household and neighborhood devotions in the absence of her husband. In common with Wesley, de Renty encouraged gatherings of pious clergy to discuss strategies for carrying out their duties.

Wesley saw the religious societies as similar to organizations that business men are involved in on a daily basis. They could serve as a means to draw men away from the “Progress Heresie and Infidelity have made by their poisonous *Clubs*.”²⁴ Why should we not learn from our enemies, Wesley reasoned? The model of

²² On Ferrar’s “family” at Little Gidding see Bullock, 121-22.

²³ John Baptist S. Jure., *The Holy Life of Monsieur De Renty, A Late Nobleman of France* (London: Benj. Tooke, 1684), 158-59, 149, 157, 155.

²⁴ This letter was published as an appendix to his *The Pious Communicant Rightly Prepar’d; or, A Discourse Concerning the Blessed Sacrament* (London: Printed for Charles Harper, 1700). The unnumbered sixteen page letter can be found a few pages after page 187. See also Samuel Wesley’s letter on this subject to the SPCK on July 10, 1700, SPCK Abstract Letter 135; printed in Allen and McClure, 87.

business associations has proved successful and the Catholic Church had utilized Societies to her advantage. As a country parson in the enormous diocese of Lincoln, Wesley knew about the difficulties faced by the diocesan episcopacy in visiting hundreds of rural parishes. Where rural Deans were active, religious societies could assist them in their work, and in the many deaneries where they were absent, societies could “in some measure supply their *Want*.”

Wesley moves on to defend the religious societies against the fear that they might incite schism within the Church. After consulting Woodward’s *Account* and the intentions and rules of Horneck as the first founder of the Societies, Wesley concludes that the Societies should not be stigmatized as conventicles which in Bishop Wake and Gibson’s visitation returns for Lincoln Diocese were defined as any licensed dissenting meeting house. The returns show that Wesley had a higher proportion of dissenters in his parish than other neighboring parishes.²⁵ This may have driven him to be even more adamant than he might have otherwise been to prove that the Society was by no means formed “to forment *New Schisms and Divisions*.” As far as Wesley was concerned there would inevitably be some overzealous individuals who would taint the reputation of the Societies, however, there would be no schisms since the groups were to operate in strict “*Subordination to the lawful Ministry*.” The *Letter* closes with a quote from the widely-read and influential *Whole Duty of Man* (1657) in support of *Combinations*, and *Publick Confederacies* in Virtue, to balance and counterpose those of Advice.”

Wesley’s *Letter* was distributed to a fairly wide audience since the SPCK included it (and Woodward’s *Account*) in its packet of books drawn up in February 1700 for inclusion with the Society’s second circular letter to clergymen who were corresponding members of the Society.²⁶ In years to come, the *Letter* continued to have a measure of influence as evidenced by a request made in 1709 by Robert Watts of St. Johns in Oxford that the *Letter* be reprinted in its entirety and included Society’s catalogue of books.²⁷

As a corresponding member of the SPCK, Samuel Wesley was at this April 11, 1700 meeting at which Robert Nelson, Sir John Philipps and other subscribing

²⁵ Epworth contained above eighty dissenters while only three Anabaptists and one Quaker were to be found in the neighbouring parish of Haxey.

²⁶ Allen and McClure, 167.

²⁷ Robert Watts to the SPCK (March 20, 1709), SPCK Abstract Letter 1588. Watt’s simply requests that the *Letter* be “added to the Society’s Letter” presumably meaning that he wished for it to be included in the Society’s catalogue of books distributed with the Society’s circular letters.

members approved of and signed the abovementioned circular letter.²⁸ Following the Society's directive to corresponding members, Wesley kept up a correspondence with the SPCK detailing his ministerial initiatives at Epworth.²⁹ During the first five years of the Society's existence, he sent at least six letters to the SPCK that were summarized in abstract form in the Society's letter books. The abstract of Wesley's second letter to the Society (July 10, 1700) reveals his successful efforts to solicit James Gardiner (1636/7-1705), the current Bishop of Lincoln, to unite the local clergy under Rural Deans so that they might come into association with one another, presumably for the mutual promotion of religious piety among themselves and their respective parishioners through such means as the cultivation of religious societies, societies for the reformation of manners and charity schools.³⁰ He informed Gardiner that the SPCK had already begun to unite the clergy under rural deans in several parts of the country and gained a promise from Gardiner that he would not "discourage" those who formed themselves into clerical societies. In this letter, Wesley requested that the Society send him "the Short Account of Societies." Here, he was probably thinking of Josiah Woodward's *Account* of the London Religious Societies first published in 1698.³¹

The third letter comes about a year later (June 10, 1701) with Wesley's request of books based on a SPCK "List of Books and Papers" previously sent to him by the Society. Among the books Wesley asks for are few copies of the "Account of Charity Schools," and "Woodward's Sermons on the same subject," "Dr. W's Accounts of Religious Societies," and "History of the Societies for Reformation." Also requested were a number of what were to become standard SPCK tracts related to the Society's

²⁸ McClure, 57.

²⁹This directive is stressed in "The Second Circular Letter to the Clergy Correspondents, &c." circulated by the SPCK. SPCK Wanley MS E1/1, item 2; published in McClure, February 8, 1700, 45-46.

³⁰ Samuel Wesley's first letter to the SPCK is recorded under the date of March 22, 1699 with the note that he "accepts the correspondence" (see SPCK Abstract Letter 65; published in McClure, 283).

James Gardiner, Bishop of Lincoln since 1695, was Wesley's predecessor as rector of Epworth. Gardiner lamented the demise of rural deans in the diocese of Lincoln whom he believed might assist the bishop in his many duties by reporting "The Ignorant, the Factious, the Scandalous, the Negligent, and the Dissenting" to the archdeacons, who should be resident in their archdeaconry although this often was not the case. *Advice to the Clergy of the Diocese of Lincoln* (London: John Everingham, 1697), 7. Wesley should have read Gardiner's *Advice* since it was issued prior to his 1697 visitation, but the abstract of his letter to the SPCK does not indicate this was the case, although the abstract does report on Gardiner's support of Wesley's suggestion. Gardiner supported the movement for the reformation of manners and, as Wesley reported, did not oppose the formation of "Societies" in his diocese (see W. M. Jacob, "Gardiner, James (1636/7-1705)," *ODNB*).

³¹ SPCK Abstract Letter 135; published in Allen and McClure, 87. It is possible Wesley was referring to Woodward's *An Account of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners* (1699).

concern for promoting the reformation of manners; these included: “Help to a National Reformation,” “Vindication of Informers,” “Caution to Profane Swearers,” “Persuasive to Observing the Lord’s Day” and “Christians Daily Devotion.” This letter shows Wesley’s interest in religiously-motivated social reform stretched well beyond the boundaries of his own parish. He furthered the Society’s knowledge of social and religious reform movements distant from their London offices by pledging to forward them a copy of an account of a workhouse in Hull and forwarding an account of charity schools in Nottinghamshire that was in his possession.³²

The abstract of Wesley’s fourth letter dated six days after the third (June 16, 1701) gives account of his labor for “Ten years to carry on the bussiness of Reformation, and the greatest part of the last year in a small Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.” Although he has thus far had “very little Success,” he reported on his “Expectations from the Society of 10 or 12 Clergymen” that he had been endeavoring to promote. In addition he noted “that he ha’s taught the Children of his own Parish near 2 years” and was running something of a makeshift school with 100 scholars under his care.³³ Indicating he saw his ministerial responsibilities as expanding beyond his own parish, Wesley reported that his duty was look after the souls of the 1,100 people living in Epworth and the 7,000 residents of the Isle of Axholme. All of his pastoral care had been conducted without the advantage of a properly endowed public or charity school. However, he was not without hope that Colonel Whitcho(t) patron of Harpswell, some thirteen miles from Epworth in the deanery of Aslaoe part of the archdeaonry of Stow, might be persuaded to “Interest himself therein.”³⁴ Wesley goes on to complain of the extreme ignorance of his people: “not one in 20 can say the Lords Prayer right;” he instituted “Monthly Sacraments, but ha’s not above 20 Communicants at them.” Nonetheless, he has faithfully devoted a day of each week to visit and “examine” both servants and adults who “have not yet been at the Sacrament.”³⁵ A fundamental problem hindering the

³² SPCK Abstract Letter 321; partially published in Allen and McClure, 87-88. The concluding remarks of the letter on the workhouse and charity schools are omitted by Allen and McClure.

³³ A later parish visitations returns noted there was “an endowed school” at Epworth and “A Charity School endowed with £10 p. ann.” at Wesley’s other parish of Wroot. R. E. G. Cole, ed., “Speculum Dioceseos Lincolniensis Sub Episcopis Gul: Wake Et Edm: Gibson A.D. 1705-1723,” *Publications of the Lincoln Record Society* 4.1 (1913): 157, 175.

³⁴ Cole, 162.

³⁵ SPCK Abstract Letter 317; published in McClure, 343-44.

progress of Christianity in the region is that the poor lack access to Bibles and devotional books except for those he is able to procure for them with his own money.

“The Society of 10 or 12 Clergymen” that Wesley refers to provides evidence that he followed through on his previously stated commitment to organize a society of local clergymen. He mentions the already acted upon resolution of “their Society on the South side of Trent...to Catechise their Parishes all the somer-half-year.” There appears to be a good case for concluding that this Society was meeting in Gainsborough where Anthony Smith was the incumbent. Wesley was interested in gathering the clergy to meet under the authority of rural deans and the parish of Gainsborough was the deanery of Corringham as was Epworth. In Wesley’s second letter of July 10, 1700, he urged the SPCK to write to Smith on the subject of forming a clerical society. By this time, he already had spoken to some local clergymen and was able to report “That there appears a good disposition among several of the Clergy to associate.” Wesley also noted that Sir Willoughby Hickman, an influential noble man who lived in Gainsborough, would be a “usefull Correspondent.” In the fourth letter of June 16, 1701, he told the SPCK that Smith had received no letter from the Society and would be able to “return an Account that would be very Acceptable” presumably of the clerical society and his own ministerial work. He again urged the Society to contact Sir Willoughby believing that with his blessing and patronage, he could work with Smith and “influence half the Countrey.” There is no mention of this society of clergymen in Wesley’s later correspondence but we do know that they had been meeting together for several months at this point.

Most of our knowledge of Samuel Wesley’s religious society in Epworth comes from a letter sent to the SPCK (dated February 1, 1701-2) in the form of “An Account of the Religious Society Begun in Epworth.”³⁶ This was a religious society amongst his parishioners quite distinct from the clerical society. The first half of the letter gives an account of the steps by which the religious society was formed, while the second half consists of Wesley’s rules for the Epworth society. Wesley began the account by expressing his frustratingly “sad Experience that little or nothing was to be don here towards the Reformation of manners, by ordinary methodes, by reason of the negligence of the officers.” Despite his failure to coax the local magistrates into

³⁶ A contemporary copy of this “Account” can be found in the SPCK Wanley MS E1/1. Humphrey Wanley (1672-1726), Old English scholar and librarian, served successively as assistant secretary and later secretary of the SPCK until June 1708. The “Account” can also be found in the same form in Allen and McClure pp. 89-93 indicating they may have utilized the Wanley MS.

suppressing immorality, Wesley believed a kind of providential judgment had been inflicted on the local people since “no less than fourteen people in about 3 years last pass’d having com to untimely Ends in the very act of Drunkenness.” Wesley appears to have been persuaded that a general reformation of manners was necessary before making an attempt at forming a religious society; however, he eventually became convinced that founding a religious society was his best hope for reforming his parishioners. But before presuming to establish a religious society, Wesley again sought and received the approval of his “Rt Reverend Diocan,” the Bishop of Lincoln, James Gardiner. For Wesley, this was a necessary step to ensure the Bishop saw his Society as a loyal Anglican institution rather than a subversive conventicle. Even after gaining this approval, Samuel confessed that at first he hesitated to attempt forming a society when he considered “the Genius of my People and the great Ignorance, carelessness of their souls, and notorious Vices which were so common among them.” Wesley’s resolve was renewed and strengthened when he received a packet from the SPCK which included a copy of Josiah Woodward’s *Account*. Although he had previously read this work, he now read it “with more attention then formerly” and was struck by the example of a society in the rural village of Old Romney in Kent. Wesley identified with the description of “the character of those people” which he found to be “like that of my own.” Indeed, the language used by John Deffray, the Huguenot refugee vicar of Old Romney from 1690-1738, to describe his “ignorant and irreligious” people is closely echoed in Wesley’s “Account.”³⁷ Wesley’s first reading of Woodward’s *Account* would have been either the first or second edition of 1698 (the second edition is the earliest version to have survived). As Wesley indicates, his second reading of Woodward was the third edition of 1701; this was the first edition to have included the account of the founding of the religious society in Old Romney since Deffray’s letter was written in December 1700 in response to the SPCK’s request for an account of his Society.³⁸ Deffray’s Society emerged from his endeavor “teach three or four youths the skill of singing Psalms orderly, and according to rules.”³⁹ It may be that Wesley utilized the account of Old Romney as a model for his efforts in Epworth to form a Society around the young men he called his “singers.” Jeremy Gregory has shown that Deffray’s use of

³⁷ Woodward, (3rd ed., 41).

³⁸ John Chamberlayne to the Revd. Mr. Deffray (October 19, 1700), SPCK Wanley MS E1/1, item 19.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 41.

music to attract the common people to greater religious devotion was met with a positive response by some parishioners. The singing of psalms and hymns was central enough to the Society's pursuits that they printed a hymn book containing both traditional psalms and newer hymns for the use of religious societies and family devotions.⁴⁰ Interestingly, both Deffray and Wesley had observed religious societies in London before setting up societies in the country and both clergymen thought it would be impossible to form societies in the country since they believed no parishioners were disposed towards this kind of voluntary religion. Deffray and Wesley's efforts to promote religious revival both focused on the instruction of youth.

Even with his new sense of resolve, Wesley was not yet fully prepared to organize a society. Strategically he first recruited "the most sober and sensible young man amongst my singers with my design." Samuel gave copies of Woodward's book provided by the SPCK to the "singer" and several young men. Wesley was honest enough to acknowledge that the Society was, in part, a lay initiative. However, a contemporary transcription of his letter appears to reveal that he admitted this somewhat reluctantly. He initially wrote that the Society was formed with "my assistance" and later scratched this out altering the sentence to emphasize the role of the laymen. He noted that the young men "at length came of their own accord to me, and desired my assistance in forming 'em into such a society."⁴¹

Wesley showed his credentials as an orthodox clergyman by adapting the established tradition of composing rules for his Society based on the Horneck/Woodward model with allowance for local adaptations. In general, Wesley's rules resemble the somewhat rigid rules of Horneck more than Woodward's rules which leave more room for lay leadership. Five of Wesley's first seven rules focus on his strict standards for admission to the Society. Being removed from the centers of Anglican power and authority, Wesley was particularly careful to ensure that his Society would be seen to be orthodox. Membership was to be limited to twelve carefully selected parishioners. Rule three reads, "if any one desires to be of their Society, it must be done by the Consent of all; and therefore his Piety ought to be

⁴⁰ Jeremy Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform, 1660-1828 Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 246-47. The hymn book is entitled: *The Christian's Daily Manual of Prayers and Praises* (London: J. Heptinstall, 1703).

⁴¹ Wanley MS; Allen and McClure, 90. This conclusion is admittedly somewhat inconclusive since Wesley used the words "my assistance" in the sentence and therefore may have simply gotten ahead of himself and made an innocent mistake.

known to all, lest a little Leaven should spoil the whole Lump.”⁴² If more than twelve desired to be admitted, two members of the original Society could with them form a new society, however, all issues debated in new societies would be required to be “referred to the first society.”⁴³ In agreement with Woodward Wesley urged the men of the Society to promote family religion at home. However, he went a step further stating that since “Women may hear their Husbands at Home,” “They do not take any Women into these Societies, in order to avoid scandal and all other abuses the more easily, to which promiscuous meetings cannot but be liable.”⁴⁴ While Horneck and Woodward’s rules take male only membership for granted, by specifically excluding women, Wesley revealed his concern that the Society be kept free from charges of being a “promiscuous” meeting attended by both sexes. Little did he know that his wife Susanna would lead an informal religious society a decade later while he was absent from Epworth.

In common with Horneck and Woodward, members of Samuel Wesley’s Society were to pay a “Subscription” at each meeting for the promoting of four charitable designs laid out by Wesley: “to set schools for the Poor;” “to procure little Practical Treatises from Holland, England, and Germany, &c. to translate them into the Vulgar Tongue, print them, and so to give or lend them to those who are less solicitous of their own and others Edification;” “to establish a Correspondence with such Societies in England, Germany, &c. that so they may mutually edify one another;” “to take Care of the Sick and other Poor, and to afford them Spiritual as well as Corporal Helps.”⁴⁵

In keeping with all the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century Anglican voluntary movements, Wesley emphasized the need for practical Christianity lived out in terms of an active faith. Members of his Society were “to be Christians not only in name but in deed.” For Wesley, this goal translated into three simple purposes for structuring the Society. “First, to pray to God; Secondly, to read the Holy Scriptures, and to discourse upon Religious Matters for their mutual Edification; And Thirdly, to deliberate about the Edification of our neighbour, and the promoting it.”⁴⁶ The point was not to develop a Christian commune separate from society, but first of

⁴² Allen and McClure, 91.

⁴³ Allen and McClure, Rule 7, 92. The rules for Samuel Wesley’s society can be found in Watson’s Appendix C.

⁴⁴ Allen and McClure, Rule 9, 92.

⁴⁵ Allen and McCulre, Rules 10-14, 93.

⁴⁶ Allen and McClure, Rules 1-2, 89.

all to provide an avenue for spiritual renewal within the Society which would naturally lead to the promotion of moral reformation as a preliminary step towards securing the salvation of wayward members of the local community. This, of course, could only be achieved by a morally pure Society that had earned the respect of the outside community. The reason behind Wesley's stress on select membership in the Society was precisely because the goal of the Society was to reform the surrounding community.

The Epworth Society met every Saturday evening "in order to prepare for the Lord's Day." In common with Spener's *collegia pietas*, the meetings centered on discussion of one of Wesley's sermons from the previous Sunday. Indicating he allowed the society members a measure of influence in the workings of the parish church, Wesley noted the subject of his sermon to be discussed at the Society meeting in two weeks time "was proposed [presumably by the society members] the Saturday before." The fact that Wesley "dispers'd som of the Books, which the society sent me, amongst them in order to assist 'em in Religious Conference" appears to be further evidence that he granted the society members leeway to exercise leadership by allowing them to utilize what interested them in these books in order to set their own agenda for society discussions. Wesley's emphasis on discussion contrasts with the more liturgically oriented rules of Horneck.⁴⁷

In the year since the society had begun meeting, Wesley observed the members were

remarkable altered since we began: they forebear publick Houses unless when their Necessary occasions calls 'em thither; are much more carefull of their Lives and Conversations, Communicate Monthly with great Devotion and appear very zealous for the Glory of God, and the welfare of their own and others souls and often declare that they find much more comfort in this way of Living, and in their Meetings and Conferences then they could ever have expected and long all the week till the time coms for their Meeting, and love one another and their Minister better than ever.

Despite these improvements "the great Ignorance" of the people did not disappear over night. Although "I cant say they yet encrease much in Knowledg," Wesley commented, "I verily think they do in Piety and Humility, and I hope the other will

⁴⁷ Allen and McClure, 90-91.

com by degrees.” Even though Wesley was somewhat appalled by the members’ lack of intellectual knowledge, they were probably typical members of this remote Isle of Axholme community which as he noted had neither the benefit of a public or charity school. It appears the society was primarily made of particularly impoverished men of Epworth, which caused “The Chief of the Town laugh at us.” The men were offended by the fact “that most of our Society are mean inconsiderable men,” and “that those of the most wealth and best Figure dont joyn with us.” Wesley was not surprised by this, for he was intimately familiar with scriptural language about a “God, who loves to exalt the humble, and the meaner the Instruments are the more Glory will he have, if he pleases to make use of us to do any good amongst our neighbors.”⁴⁸ One trait that both Charles and John Wesley would inherit from their father was expectation of persecution and a sense of fearlessness and even rejoicing in the face of it.

Samuel Wesley’s “Account of the Religious Society” caught the attention of the SPCK who read the “Account” at two successive meetings in May 1702. After the second reading they requested Wesley attend the next society “Meeting about the Charity School mentioned in his said account.”⁴⁹ It is unknown whether this meeting took place, but Wesley continued to receive literature from the SPCK and kept in contact with the Society for years to come.⁵⁰ It is not known whether the Epworth society(s) continued after Samuel Wesley’s imprisonment for debt in the latter part of 1705. Although several London societies and Deffray’s Old Romney Society was still active into the 1730s, we should not necessarily interpret the brevity of Wesley’s Society as demonstrating a major failure of his leadership in light of evidence which suggests the cultivation of religious societies in the country was a fairly unique activity.⁵¹

Many of Spener’s basic assumptions about the social structure of his *collegia pietas* were shared by the Anglican divines who led the English religious societies. Both movements were faced with suspicion and opposition by substantial sections of the established churches which led them to stress the usefulness of their societies as a means of renewing the life of the church from within. To cultivate a culture of

⁴⁸ Allen and McClure, 89-91.

⁴⁹ McClure, SPCK Minutes for May 7 and 14, 1702, pp. 183-84.

⁵⁰ A letter from Wesley to the SPCK is recorded in the SPCK Minutes for May 18, 1704 (see McClure). SPCK Abstract Letter 2289, September 5, 1710 records the reception of a letter by Wesley tanking them for the packet they sent him.

⁵¹ Gregory, 249.

reverence for the established churches, doctrinal orthodoxy and the avoidance of controversy was stressed. Although the German states controlled the church to a greater extent than in England, in one sense, Spener had an advantage in justifying the *collegia pietas*, he could invoke the authority of the Martin Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Horneck's Societies were designed to be placed under the strict supervision of the parish clergyman while Woodward and Wesley allowed a greater freedom for lay participation and leadership. Horneck, Woodward and Wesley shared a common vision that the societies were a means of restoring in the Church of England the primitive piety modeled by the early church.⁵² Another key element of their thought was the perceived need for "practical Christianity" that could be actively lived out in the world. This emphasis was represented not just in the Religious Society rules of Horneck, Woodward, and Wesley, but was part of a wider Anglican movement of voluntary religion which included SPG's who advised its supporters among the clergy "to promote Charity, Piety, and Practical Christianity among their parishioners."⁵³

⁵² Woodward, 38, 98.

⁵³ *Abstract of Proceedings for 1713* (London, 1714) quoted in Samuel Clyde McCulloch, "The Foundation and Early Work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 8 (1944-45): 255.