John Stewart (1786-1823) was an extraordinary American missionary who never even left the borders of the United States. The Lord sent him to the Wyandotte Indians in Sandusky, Ohio, to introduce the gospel with his preaching.

Though he was freeborn, John's freedom was limited in another way entirely; bouts with illnesses over the course of his life were a constant trial. When he was only a boy, his parents moved from their hometown of Powhatan County, Virginia to Tennessee. He was not even capable of traveling with them. John was left behind and grew up with an informal education and limited training in the Scriptures. Upon reaching his twenties, John resolved to find his parents and left home around the year 1811. Things would only get worse, for on the way he was plundered and beaten by robbers, leaving him alone and destitute.

Under the weight of so many troubles, John compromised, succumbing to the temptation to drink. Once upon this path, he found himself deep in depression and his thoughts turned to suicide, but this season became the very context for John to return to his roots and to cry out and pray. When he did, God delivered him. His deliverance was not instantaneous, however, for though he found a measure of freedom, John struggled to really believe that he was worthy of so great a salvation.

His depression persisted in doubt and confusion until the night he came upon a certain prayer meeting. Upon entering that prayer meeting, John experienced the conviction of the Holy Spirit as it moved him to repentance. With the help of fellow believers, he began to open his heart to receive the love of Christ. Long standing walls of bitterness against the church crumbled as he allowed the mercy of God to fill his heart. John began to express his newfound love for God through fasting, prayer, and study of the Scripture. The Holy Spirit would speak to him, commanding him to “declare His counsel faithfully” to the Native Americans who had never heard the gospel.

So John began journeying northwest, unsure of what awaited him. In time, he would reach his destination: Sandusky, Ohio. Here he found the Wyandotte Indians practicing false religion. He could not speak their language and was unable to preach for some time, but in a truly timely appointment, he met Jonathan Pointer. Pointer, a fellow African-American, had been imprisoned by the Wyandottes in his youth, and so had learned to speak the language of the tribe. Though himself no friend of the gospel, Pointer nevertheless became John’s translator, which allowed the gospel to go forth. However, Pointer’s resistance would ultimately crumble, for not only he, but also many of the Wyandotte leaders became Christians.

Indeed, the entire community showed marked transformation in time. Testimonies of conversion were typical and the rampant drunkenness among the tribe all but vanished as many renounced the worship of idols. John’s preaching was powerful and cutting. He warned those in sin of the coming wrath of God, imploring them to repent and receive His free mercy. The community benefitted immensely from John’s witness to the truth.

This continued for several years until other missionaries arrived in Sandusky. They found John living and working among the natives, yet as they learned that John had been preaching, it caused some alarm.
John was not a licensed preacher—a matter of great importance in those days. Resistance mounted against him, and John departed Sandusky, leaving Southern Ohio in 1817.

Though this was undoubtedly a trial, church leaders would eventually change their minds about John, and his missionary work would come to be appreciated for its worth and authenticity. In 1819, John would return, and was licensed to preach by the Methodist church. None could dispute that he had borne much fruit among the Wyandottes.

It has been said that Stewart’s work marked “the real beginning of American Methodist missionary work.”7 On August 7, 1819, the Methodist Church officially launched a full-scale mission to the Wyandottes, all on account of this foundational work.

John Stewart’s life is a testament to more than ministry. It demonstrates how God can take a weak young man and empower him to do great exploits for heaven.

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5 McTyeire, Ibid.