



# A discipleship movement shaped for mission: forming a new ecclesial identity for British Methodism?

Roger L. Walton

THE REVD DR ROGER WALTON is Chair of the West Yorkshire Methodist District. Formerly Director of the Wesley Study Centre, Durham, his publications include *Learning for Ministry*, *The Reflective Disciple* and *Disciples Together*.

chair@wymethodist.org.uk  
West Yorkshire, UK

*The article tracks the development of a new ecclesial strapline for the British Methodist Church in the period between 2007 and 2014 and assesses the initial impact of the identity on education and ecumenism. It argues that the theme and practice of holiness has been underplayed and underdeveloped in the discourse to find a fresh expression of Methodism's calling but that there are surprisingly creative elements latent in the expression, especially in a new era of ecumenical relations.*

DISCIPLESHIP • HOLINESS • ECCLESIOLOGY • METHODISM • MOVEMENT • MISSION

## Introduction

In 2011 the Methodist Conference received a report from its General Secretary under the title *Contemporary Methodism: A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission*. Within a year this identity slogan was widely used; and now, three years later, these are the first words that greet you when you tap into Methodism's daily Bible readings and prayers, they regularly appear as the introduction to and justification for reports and projects of the Methodist Church, they adorn the bottom of emails from connexional officers and can be found at over 300 places on the Methodist Church website. They can be recalled and recited by many Methodists, lay and ordained, and feature in numerous circuit and local church mission statements. As an exercise in corporate identity-building it is a remarkable achievement, which might be the envy of any organisation with considerably less than the 250,000 members and almost 5,000 centres of operation that comprise Methodism in Britain.

My paper explores this phenomenon. In it I trace the forming of this phrase through the work of its General Secretary of the last six years, the Revd Dr Martyn Atkins; examine the concept for its faithfulness to Methodist theology and spirituality as seen in its founders; assess the impact on the Church, especially its effects on education and ecumenism; and make some suggestions about what is lacking in this new identity and how it may be addressed.

The paper is thus structured in four sections:

1. The contribution of Martyn Atkins.
2. The adequacy of the identity strapline.
3. The effects of the programme.
4. Conclusion: the unfinished agenda.

### 1. The contribution of Martyn Atkins

The role of Martyn Atkins cannot be overestimated in the process of forming a new identity for Methodism. While it would be severely mistaken to imagine that 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' was a ready-made phrase in the mind of the General Secretary waiting to be revealed, it is clear from careful reading that the church identity slogan has been arrived at by the drive of Atkins to secure an expression that can encapsulate and enable a renewal of the sense of calling for the Methodist Church. This can be seen as early as 2007 in his book

*Resourcing Renewal*,<sup>1</sup> which was written to coincide with his year as President of the Methodist Conference. The title clearly reveals his intention and in the book he draws on material from Vatican II on the renewal of religious orders to indicate his core method.<sup>2</sup> Of the five principles identified in *Perfectae Caritatis*, he homes in on three basic steps in the recovery of purpose and energy:

- return to the gospel
- return to the founding intentions or charisms of the founders
- read the sign of the times.

This core idea was repeated in his presidential address in June 2007. Again Atkins cites Vatican II as his 'favourite model of renewal' and goes on to urge the Church towards a rediscovery of its calling by visiting its founding charisms and reconnecting with its core DNA. He outlines the cost of the change that might ensue and ends with a modern parable about an organisation running orphanages which by the end of the twentieth century had become moribund and was renewed by examining afresh why it was originally set up in the nineteenth century. Being clear about the significant challenges of renewal, he suggests that the time is ripe for this exercise. Interestingly, the opening story about his own period of time in hospital in 2001 when faced with an unknown illness, causing him to wonder whether his own time of ministry and perhaps life was at an end before seeing a sign through a digital clock face, is portrayed as a divine revelation and calling. His epiphany moment in hospital is connected strongly with Methodist renewal and, it might not be unfair to say, he sensed a personal calling to this task.<sup>3</sup>

Atkins had an unparalleled opportunity in Methodism to press his vision further by being appointed General Secretary<sup>4</sup> immediately as he finished his year as President of Conference. Whereas it is common, indeed expected, for a President in his or her year of office to urge the Church to attend to some key, possibly neglected, aspect of the gospel or church life, in reality the ongoing shaping of connexional policy and practice lies with the Connexional Team and in particular with the General Secretary, who is also the Secretary of Conference and leader of the connexional officers. With an initial five-year appointment ahead of him in this post, Atkins wasted no time in pursuing a renewal agenda by proceeding with a major conference entitled 'Holiness and Risk'. This conference took place over three days in February 2009 and was 'aimed at enabling those in positions of change leadership to explore this heritage and think deeply about what it means to be Methodist, and what it might mean to

express the charisms of the tradition in the 21st century'.<sup>5</sup> It was actively led by Atkins and one quickly recognises in the title a first attempt at identifying the charisms of the founding fathers. For the Wesleys, the pursuit of holiness was the central agenda of their enterprise and in the desire to draw others onto this journey, they were prepared to take bold and controversial risks, such as preaching in the open air in other people's parishes, commissioning lay preachers and affirming the leadership of women. As a first stab at identifying and reflecting on key foundational aspects of Methodism, the title of the February 2009 conference, 'Holiness and Risk', was reasonable and fair, and the fact that it was attended by many of those in positions to influence and affect change meant that there was a huge potential for wide ownership.

By the time of his first General Secretary's report to Conference in 2009 the agenda was, however, shifting towards the motif of discipleship.<sup>6</sup> The report began by setting out a commitment to discern God's will 'for our church at this time in our life'. It then went on to identify a series of (18) themes that had emerged from various conversations, including at the Holiness and Risk gathering. The first theme is a shared desire to be '*bolder and more courageous about being Methodist disciples*'. The report then goes on to talk about the need for a new narrative – 'those stories that articulate who we are and what we seek to be ...' in order to move away from a self-defining narrative of decline and 'a wistful appeal to a golden past'. The final two themes are both concerned with discipleship. The penultimate one identified what it called a yearning for 'a whole life discipleship', for which Methodism should reshape its structures and fellowships. The final theme announces a commitment to discipleship as 'a key theme for our Church'. This is the beginning of the new narrative.

There is no denying that a discourse wider than British Methodism was underway around the theme of discipleship. The Church of England's Hind Report of 2005 championed a strand of training for lay Christians called 'Education for discipleship',<sup>7</sup> many of the new Churches and para-church agencies were emphasising the concept<sup>8</sup> and even the academy produced a flurry of books which featured discipleship in the title.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the United Methodist Church (UMC), principally based in the USA, added to its *Book of Discipline* in 2000 a mission statement for the Church which reads quite simply, 'The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.' This was amended in 2008 to read, 'The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.'<sup>10</sup> This theme of discipleship has been running since the mid-1990s in the UMC – the largest part of the Methodist family of Churches – and as such has developed a critical discourse.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his reports, over the five years, Atkins repeatedly appeals for British Methodism to be more strongly connected to world Methodism, in which the UMC continues to be the lead player. There can be little doubt that the focus on making disciples advocated by the UMC exerted some influence on his thinking. The expression of this discipleship theme in British Methodism, however, for Atkins was to find a particular and distinctive shape.

The following year (2010) there was a brief General Secretary's report, but in it the notion of discipleship is expanded and coupled with the idea of mission.<sup>12</sup> These themes take up the first and prophetic part of the paper, the other succeeding sections being largely reporting on how the tasks and responsibilities of the General Secretary's post had been exercised in the past year.

The concept of discipleship is now articulated as 'life long, encompassing the whole of life and ... world transforming',<sup>13</sup> and the term 'discipleship movement' is used for the first time. Having urged and encouraged discipleship as 'a particular emphasis across several years on Christian discipleship' for Methodism in his 2009 report, Atkins now reports widespread and increased enthusiasm. What had been identified as 'a key theme' in the 2009 report has become in 2010 a longitudinal commitment embraced by the Conference and a 'distinctive identity'.<sup>14</sup>

The theme of discipleship, now established, is given a particular form because of Conference's plan to celebrate 2011 as the 'Year of the Bible'. Linking the commitments together, Atkins argued, would allow the Year of the Bible to become 'a focus for deepening Christian discipleship throughout the Connexion' and, what is more, this theme of discipleship would enable 'priorities to be identified and choices to be made by the Connexional Team and other connexional bodies' with budgetary implications.<sup>15</sup>

The report was accompanied by the production and wide distribution of a booklet entitled *Discipleship and the People Called Methodist*.<sup>16</sup> After an initial print run of 10,000 copies, it was reprinted a second and third time, with over 26,000 finally being dispersed free within Methodism and a pdf version available for free download on the Methodist Church website.

The introduction of 'Mission' as a second major category in the 2010 report<sup>17</sup> sets the scene for the emergence of the strapline to appear in 2011. Mission, it is noted, is not new in Methodist discourse. Indeed Atkins relates mission to contemporary developments in Methodism as his starting point. In particular he recalls the Conference's commitment to 'Mapping the Way forward:

regrouping for mission' in 2007, a process for the audit and redevelopment of circuits, and he notes that the subtitle has now replaced the original title as a designation of the process. In other words, the Methodist Church has incorporated a regrouping for mission ethos and, because structural reorganisation for mission has already begun, mission is portrayed as the second key concept in the foci of Methodist renewal.

In these two reports, 2009 and 2010, it is possible to trace the build-up and the emergence of the key components for a new identity statement. The scene is thus set for the 2011 report, which came to the Methodist Conference as a tour de force.

The General Secretary's report to the Conference of 2011<sup>18</sup> is the watershed of this intentional process to find and articulate the founding charisms of Methodism for a new age. This report is significant in several ways:

1. The strapline 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' appears for the first time in a Conference report, indeed it is the title of the report.
2. It is the longest of all Atkins' reports, running to over 9,000 words. (The reports of the previous two years were of the order of 2,000 words).
3. It lays out a set of commitments or issues for the Church to tackle under this new title. Atkins calls these 'a first grouping of decisive intentions' (#13). In effect, it is an agenda for a programme of wide-ranging changes to the structure and working of the Methodist Church.

These include:

- resourcing of circuit leadership teams (CLTs) (#34)
- greater investment in small-group leadership (#35)
- children's and young adults' ministry (#36)
- identifying, training and resourcing superintendents (#37)
- local pastoral ministry (a revisiting of 'a pastor in every church') (#38)
- a review and re-energising of local preacher and worship leader training (#43)
- tackling the issue of too many church buildings (#46–56)
- patterns of ministry to relate to the growing 'mixed economy' in the Church (#61)
- a commitment to evangelism, which is equated with making more disciples (#65–70)
- a commitment to 'new' ecumenism as well as established patterns of relating to traditional denominations (#73–74)
- stronger links with world Methodism (#75).

4. It embeds 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' into the life of the Methodist Church by asking the Conference to commend it to the Methodist people 'for study, response and action' and to direct various bodies to do work on key parts of the proposed programme.<sup>19</sup> All these were agreed.

The General Secretary's 2012 report suggests that the Church has confirmed the new identity in that the response to the 2011 report has been overwhelmingly positive or at least deeply engaged. This settles and sanctions the discerning and articulating of the concept and programme and further authorises the structural revisions and development set out in the 'first grouping of decisive intentions'. Atkins argues that the direction of travel is now set and thus it is legitimate and necessary to revisit and refine these intentions. Some of the programme items are expanded, drawing on the feedback to the report; other parts of the 2011 report are nuanced. In particular, he reflects further on the nature of connexionalism; illustrates how a focus on mission can be translated into reviewing our life and work; emphasises the need to find an apologetic for 'apt evangelism' as a priority; and reflects back some of the comments on worship that have been expressed. He acknowledges that the word 'movement' is contentious, especially in relation to ecclesiology where some fear that ministry and sacraments may be downgraded, but he defends the notion of movement as resonating strongly with Fresh Expressions and pioneer minister initiatives. The important thing for Atkins is 'not to permit our commitment to discipleship and mission to falter' (#17).

The subsequent reports of 2013 and 2014 are appropriately more concerned with consolidation and the progress of various 'decisive intentions'. More on that later.

For now we must turn to a brief evaluation of the new identity statement and explore some of its implications and effects.

## 2. The adequacy of the identity strapline

There can be little doubt that the use of the word 'movement' has a clear affinity with John Wesley's view that he was not founding a church but spearheading or facilitating a renewal of both church and nation. The notion of movement as a leveller of lay and ordained also resonates. However, in terms of founding charisms there are some significant problems with identifying 'a discipleship



movement shaped for mission' with the theology and practice of the Wesleys, at least on the surface. None of the words 'disciple', 'discipleship' or 'mission' feature much in the extensive writings of John and Charles Wesley. As Randy Maddox has carefully recorded, John Wesley studiously avoided using the term disciple, believing that the common usage of the word disciple in the eighteenth century was to indicate someone who accepts the teaching of another without question, or to designate an 'adherent' or 'pupil'. Wesley's desire was for people to become 'real Christians' of passion and commitment rather than nominal believers and for Methodists to be participants in ongoing transformation of life through faith, on the journey towards holiness or Christian perfection. For him the term disciple was not adequate for the enterprise to which he was committed and thus the terms discipleship and making disciples are never used.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, the term mission in Wesley's day had different connotations, its main reference being overseas missions or missionary work, and was never used of the work of the Methodist Societies or Methodist people in Britain. The modern use of the word as an umbrella term for the range of activities such as evangelism, loving service to others in need, transforming unjust structures of society and ecological responsibility, as, for example, in the Anglican Five Marks of Mission<sup>21</sup> or as embodied in the Methodist report *Sharing in God's Mission*,<sup>22</sup> would have been unfamiliar to John and Charles Wesley and their associates.

However, both these criticisms are unfair in the sense that the mapping of words in an isomorphic fashion is hardly an adequate test of faithfulness. We need to ask whether what lies behind the words, in terms of convictions and practices, can be mapped onto the modern use of these key words.

Here the resonance is much stronger. In terms of mission, the Wesleys were deeply committed to calling people to conversion to the way of Christ, and although their preaching and hymnody were soteriologically driven, it is clear that their commitment to the poor, their opposition to public evils such as alcoholism and slavery, their writings on war and science, as well as their health clinics and other experiments in medicine, are suggestive of a broad understanding of mission. The fact that involvement in politics and trade unionism grew rapidly among Methodists in the nineteenth century further confirms this sense of mission encompassing the whole of life, as set in train by the Wesleys.

Similarly, when discipleship is defined as 'life long, encompassing the whole of life and world transforming' it lies close to the testimonies of many early



Methodists who, through the Wesleys' eighteenth-century fresh expression of church, found the motivation and means for living holy lives in the midst of turbulent times. As Ken Howcroft has argued, holiness for Wesley is not withdrawal or separation from the world but deep engagement with it as we are transformed in the love God.

[Wesley] says that scriptural holiness '... is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart; it is no other than the whole mind which was in Christ Jesus ...' He goes on to say that that involves all of what we would call our instincts, feelings, emotional dispositions, ways of thinking and spiritual sensitivities being brought together, made whole and made holy. It makes us respond to God thankfully and lovingly in turn. And, says Wesley, if we start to love God, we shall naturally end up loving the rest of the world as well. We will not be able to help it. God's love will not let us.<sup>23</sup>

Like mission, then, the term discipleship can be seen as an appropriate category into which we may map much of the early Methodist enterprise. There are, however, two weaknesses of this mapping and both are to do with holiness.

The first is to do with the teleological orientation of early Methodism. The structure of the first Methodist societies with their classes, bands and select bands was for the goal of Christian perfection. Whether perfection is defined in terms of a patient journey of growing into holiness or the more contentious idea of the instant gift of God, the end is the same: personal as well as social holiness defined in the practice of perfect love. This was the purpose and end of all that the Wesleys did in forming their Connexion, and, while Howcroft's exposition of Wesley's sermon on *The New Birth*<sup>24</sup> (above) indicates the view of holiness that Methodism has treasured, and hints at the transformations entailed, the current conceptualisation of discipleship lacks the holiness orientation or telos of the founding fathers. Atkins acknowledges in the 2011 report that he has not focused at any length on 'social holiness themes' (#81) but he believes that these are 'intrinsic' to Methodism. The lack of a theological articulation of a contemporary conceptualisation of holiness, however, which was not rectified in subsequent reports, means that an important part of the jigsaw picture is missing.

The second weakness is in relation to the nature of Methodist society membership as embedded in a set of rules and values. The analogy of

Methodism as a monastic order has been made several times.<sup>25</sup> In its earliest form it was a society that sought holiness by articulating and pressing its members to live by a set of rules. These rules came in many and various forms but like the core rules of orders such as the Franciscans they were readily translated in a popular form that all could understand and act on.

Take, for example:

Do no harm. Do good. Love God.

or

Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.

or

Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.

These were popular versions of the society's rules which were also enshrined in the 12 rules for a helper, the rules of the bands and other set-out structures for nurturing the spiritual life.

For John Wesley, the creation of rules, which was a regular feature – perhaps a congenital disposition – of his life, was a way of catching gospel values and engaging with practices for godly living. And these rules were to be monitored and policed in the societies. Indeed he could be ruthless in expelling people from the societies for failing to live by them, in order to preserve the commitment to the end of holiness. Atkins acknowledges the role of rules in *Discipleship and the People Called Methodist* and illustrates the three rules of *The General Rules of the Society of the People Called Methodist* with the way Wesley himself expounded them.<sup>26</sup> However, the tone of the section plays down their importance by emphasising how few and how short the rules are. This fails to do justice to the way in which these, and the many forms of other early Methodist rules, shaped and patterned an intentional community. Moreover, in the presentation and exposition of 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' they appear to have no counterpart. One might argue that the four elements of the Methodist millennium document *Our Calling* are a simple form of discipline for the Christian life, but these commitments, which appear on the annual membership ticket, have little by way of accountability or wider embedding in the life of local churches. They serve as a gentle and broad reminder of the Christian life rather than a rule to live by.

These two together highlight the essential concern with holiness, vital to early Methodism, that is not obvious in the new identity slogan. Missing are the sharpness, severity and accountability that would have characterised early Methodism.<sup>27</sup> Lost is the puritan strictness and the Moravian alternative community, both admired, followed and promoted by Wesley in his societies. Absent is 'the searching challenge to the ways of the world, such as might be expected to produce persecution.'<sup>28</sup> While unintended by Atkins, discipleship in the new strapline is in danger of being too vague and too comfortable.

It may be in that in postmodern culture with its dislike of ultimate or exclusive visions of human being and its concept of freedom as expressed in unfettered, individualised choice, these two aspects of holiness, central to the founding charisms, are the hardest to map. Nevertheless, by attempting to map holiness into a loosely defined form of Christian discipleship, there is something vital missing which limits the renewing power of the expressed identity. This weakness becomes acute when issues of ecclesiology in relation to ecumenism come into play. With that in mind let us turn to our third section.

### 3. The effects of the programme

After only three years there is no way of making any realistic evaluation of this initiative. That is for the future. There has been ample time, however, to observe a number of following decisions and actions taken in the light of the newly articulated identity. I will concentrate on two areas: education and ecumenism, as these are major areas to be impacted by the new identity as it has begun to shape Methodist Church life.

#### *Education*

The largest and most far-reaching change of recent years in Methodism was the decision to radically alter patterns of ministerial formation, training and Christian education. This was focused and enacted through the Fruitful Field process. Fruitful Field, the title of which is a quote from Isaiah 32,<sup>29</sup> was a root-and-branch review of the Church's learning resources and training provision. The Final Report, which came to the Methodist Conference of 2012, proposed the focusing of all training and learning provision at two institutions and withdrawal from or closure of all other courses and institutions for ministerial formation. Alongside this it planned for a new Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN) made up of small teams working in regions to

support and work in circuits and churches for development in relation to three broad fields: discipleship, church and community, and ministries. The team members would be employed and line managed nationally, but also work with districts on learning agendas which were emerging in the locality.

The rightness and effectiveness of this decision is not our concern here. What is of interest is the relationship between this decision and the 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' identity.

It needs to be noted that the two processes evolved together, at least in part, in that the initial thinking about a review of training and learning began as early as 2007, when a settlement was reached about institutions and approaches to training. Some connexional officers, and perhaps others, felt that this was not the most desirable arrangement and was at best an interim measure before something more radical. Martyn Atkins' involvement at the beginning of this thinking would have been limited and, although he advocated some changes to ministerial training in *Resourcing Renewal*, he did not venture into the messy area of institutional provision. However, the timing of the two decisions is highly significant. The fact that the 2011 General Secretary's report appeared months before the Fruitful Field consultation document<sup>30</sup> meant that the consultation document was built around the new identity slogan. Let me present the evidence for this.

First, the Foreword to the Fruitful Field consultation document is written by the General Secretary. Its opening words are, 'The Methodist Church is called to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission.' This notion is then expanded in the document and the need for change in a changing world is highlighted. The General Secretary is careful to point out that it is a consultation document and that it comes from the Ministries Committee rather than from him, but the link between the new identity and the Fruitful Field proposals is made explicit in the penultimate paragraph of the Foreword. It starts, 'The core of this document consists of a vision for a new way of equipping the Church, equipping the Methodist movement and equipping God's people for discipleship and mission.'

Second, the Introduction, in the names of Ken Jackson (Chair of the Ministries Committee), Anne Brown (Vice Chair) and Martyn Atkins (General Secretary), has five sections, the longest of which is a section entitled 'A discipleship movement shaped for mission'. Again it is an exciting upbeat exposition of this phrase as a 'hope-filled' expression, a statement of purpose and a call to some very practical commitments. Urgent action is required, it argues, 'For we also

share the conviction of the general secretary's report that much must be done – and done urgently – to ensure that the Methodist Church can fully deserve that description and be “fit” for that great purpose.’ The text goes on immediately to set out items listed (as decisive intentions) in the General Secretary's 2011 report and describes how these are to be addressed in the Fruitful Field proposals. Fruitful Field is thus portrayed as the mechanism for enacting the vision, or at least key parts of it.

Third, the full phrase occurs throughout the text but equally noteworthy is the fact that ‘movement’ is used to describe Methodism or the Methodist Church 30 times. While Church remains the standard designation for Methodism, at all key points of change and proposal the word ‘movement’ occurs in the text.

It is hard not to conclude that the Fruitful Field consultation document is both a vehicle for extending the message of the ‘discipleship movement shaped for mission’ and the first test case for the ability of the new vision to shape both priorities and decision-making. What is offered to the Methodist people is a scheme and structure which will better equip them to become a discipleship movement shaped for mission, to revitalise the Church's life and work and purpose and to realise a new and exciting future before it is too late.

A revised document built around the same core vision came to the 2012 Conference after consultation, though its final text was only published a short time before the Conference met. The Conference debated long and hard, and various amendments were defeated, including those proposing a longer time for consideration. The proposals of the Fruitful Field report were accepted. The General Secretary was sparing in his involvement at this stage, with the final text coming in the name of the Ministries Committee without Foreword or Introduction as in the consultation document, and little intervention on his part in the long discussions. The General Secretary's report of 2012 refers to Fruitful Field and describes its basic assertions as lying ‘within the direction of travel we have agreed upon’, but otherwise has little to say about the report. The final text regularly used the new phrase, however, and quoted from those who had used it in the consultation feedback, as well as using the word ‘movement’ regularly to describe Methodism. Fruitful Field became in effect the first decision to express the new direction of travel.

### *Ecumenism*

The impact on ecumenism is more complex and not so focused in one decision. Indeed its impact is yet to be tested in relation to the Anglican-Methodist

Covenant and formal bilateral and multilateral conversations, on the one hand, and joint mission initiatives and partnerships with the new Churches on the other.

One sees clearly in *Resourcing Renewal* that Atkins favours a mission-led form of ecclesiology. He devotes almost three chapters to the topic and makes a strong case for the *missio Dei* to be the starting point rather than traditional understandings of the Church. He accuses both the missionary movement and the ecumenical movement of artificially dividing church and world and is ill at ease with traditional hallmarks such as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. His own convictions about ecclesiology are:

- God wants the Church to share in the *missio Dei*.
- The Church needs to be incarnate like Jesus.
- The Church is impelled and empowered by the Spirit.

Atkins is aware of the issue of continuity for this position. If church changes radically over time, how is it authentically and consistently Christian? His answer is that '*there is a continuity of themes and values more than unalterable content or expression*'.<sup>31</sup> By this he means community, worship, a credo to live by and Scripture will always be there, but he recognises that these may not always be used or deployed in the same way.

The effect of all this is to loosen the shape of ecclesiological discourse so that ecclesiology is always emergent, growing from the bottom up rather than the top down and preferring evocative images of church to tight definitions.

As an ecclesiology, 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' expresses well Atkins' desire to find a mission-led understanding of the Church. Its flexibility, provisionality and openness to both context and future allows a much larger space for fresh expressions of church, pioneer ministry and mission-based partnerships with the growing and diverse range of new Churches and 'ministries' which focus on specific generations or ethnic groupings. This intention is made explicit in the 2011 report.<sup>32</sup>

The problem, which is acknowledged at the outset of the 2011 report, is whether such an ecclesiology is adequate for Methodism, which over time has increasingly seen itself as a church and part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Atkins suggests that the designation of a discipleship movement shaped for mission is not a complete ecclesiology for the Connexion but 'an appropriate ecclesiological statement ... consonant with recent

declarations of the Conference, such as *Called to Love and Praise*, and 'the key ecclesial theme to be prioritised and emphasised at this time'.<sup>33</sup>

It is hard to know how this will stand up in ecumenical dialogue. Certainly the amount of space given to ecumenical matters in the General Secretary's reports since 2011 suggest that this is a tricky area to navigate. On the one hand, there is repeated affirmation of the Covenant with the Church of England and the close working of the Methodist Church with the URC and, on the other, a regular argument that partnership with other parts of the Church of Christ has to be seen as taking place within a large and diverse landscape and must include world Methodism, the cultural-based congregations and fellowships in Britain today and the new Churches with their enviable emphasis on mission and making disciples. It also refocuses the discussion of our topic. Is this a theme or programme for our Church for a limited period of time akin to setting some priorities such as the Church of England's Quinquennium Goals<sup>34</sup> or is it a paradigmatic shift in self-understanding and ecclesiology? Methodism has always struggled to find a way to live with its history of being a society of members and being a church. Is this a slight shift back towards the society identity so as to recapture the spirit of a vibrant movement, or is it more fundamental in paving the way for a type of ecclesiology that is more appropriate for Churches in postmodernity? The crunch may come over Methodism's response to the repeated challenge from the Church of England to take some form of episcopacy into its system that could be recognised as being in continuity with apostolic succession and open the door to the interchangeability of ministry.

My own view is that the adoption of 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' may in the medium term prove to have opened up a potentially more creative seam for Methodism in the realm of inter-church relations, particularly if the possibility of having 'internal and external' ecclesiologies is explored. By this I mean different ways of speaking about the nature of the Church depending on the constituency and relationship. For its internal self-understanding a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' may allow Methodism to recover something of its particular calling and focus, as a quasi-religious order, but in relation to other Churches it may need to assert its church credentials by connecting with the received language of ecumenical dialogue. Walter Brueggemann has provided an insight for this kind of internal and external language in his highly evocative exposition of 2 Kings 18 – 19.<sup>35</sup> In his essay, Brueggemann argues that in the face of Assyrian confrontation the Hebrews need to use their own language internally or 'behind the wall' because



different languages allow for different thought patterns and possibilities. He explores how the conversation 'behind the wall' is both necessary and contributes to the conversation 'at the wall'. His point is that using Hebrew enables the Israelites to explore the world from their particular faith perspective, where Yahweh is the heart of the language. Rather than being absorbed into the discourse of a larger power (Assyria), speaking Hebrew liberates both imagination and energy which in turn contributes to the public dialogue.

In ecumenical relations, dialogue has often sought out a single language to which all Christian Churches have attempted to connect. The icon of this single language game was *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* but it would be true of many of the bilateral and multilateral conversations. As a way of searching for visible unity, it has served the Churches well but its cost may be the limiting of internal theological reflection which necessarily needs to draw deeply on an individual denomination's own history, charisms and language. There are hints that we are entering a new era or phase of dialogue where internal coherence and external connectivity may need to be related but may be cast in different vocabulary. There are suggestions of this in the recent Joint Implementation Commission report, where alongside urging Methodists to adopt a form of personal *episcopē* in the person of a bishop so as to connect with the signage of continuity embodied in the notion of historic succession, both Churches are asked to recognise the ways in which Methodism has held with integrity both apostolicity and *episcopē* throughout its history. At one time these might have been exclusive of each other but by being pursued together by both Churches they may be complementary and mutually releasing of the other while guarding the internal integrity of each tradition.

Just as science recognises that an electron may be both a wave and a particle, so it may be that ecclesiologies can have internal cohesion and external connection without having to surrender to a single vocabulary or language.

#### 4. Conclusion: the unfinished agenda

We could discuss other effects on Methodism of the new strapline. I am conscious, for example, that in all the accompanying discourse little or nothing has been said about Christian faith in the multifaith context of Britain today. A discipleship movement shaped for mission for our age might have had much to say about this but in reality next to nothing has been articulated and as a

consequence inter-faith work struggles to find a place in the new Methodism. Suffice to say, accepting a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' as an identity has already had significant implications for Methodism. It has led into a major reconfiguration of ministerial formation, training and Christian education and as such has set in motion a set of structures that will shape Methodism's pedagogical ethos and focus for ten to twenty years at least. At the same time it has relocated the site and self-understanding from which the Methodist Church will enter into ecumenical conversation, cooperation and partnership.

Within both these areas there are hopeful as well as worrying signals. The radical switch to a new approach to learning and formation may provide the opportunity for Methodism to consolidate and concentrate its limited resources into focused education and development for effective mission, but the desire to enact the new identity in this area quickly, which appears to have been the effect of Fruitful Field following on so closely after the 2011 General Secretary's Report, may have unintended but now embedded weaknesses that will be difficult to rectify. On the other hand, the seeming retreat from the established language of ecclesiology within ecumenical dialogue, which a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission' implies, may have an advantage. While appearing to undermine much of the progress made in inter-church relations, it may herald a new way of strengthening the internal identity of Methodism (behind the wall) so as to enable a critique and rich contribution to the conversations with other Christian denominations (at the wall). Methodism's root identity as a society for the pursuit of holiness, as well as its development into a mature form of church, is a contributory factor to the particular gifts it brings to the ecumenical table. The recovery of Methodism's monastic dynamism, which being a discipleship movement it seeks to recapture, may signal an advance rather than a retreat. Moreover, the shift from blueprint theologies of church to those that are shaped by the empirical context of mission, for which Nicholas Healy has argued,<sup>36</sup> may need to be matched by the rediscovery and fresh application of particular charisms, of ecclesial communities, as well as a humble form of receptive ecumenism.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the General Secretary has announced his resignation from post in August 2015. This means that, as I write, there is one more report to Conference in the summer of 2015. All the signs are that this will highlight the issues of (too many) buildings and apt evangelism, two of the 'decisive intentions' identified in the 2011 report. It will be interesting to see how the project fares after that point, as his successor takes up office. The next few years will to some

extent test the longevity of the new identity and its implications. At this moment the resilience of 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' is an open question.

I hope that the basic idea is retained, refined and extended, especially in relation to holiness. As identified above, the teleological and monastic dimensions of early Methodism need to be recovered within this movement. Discipleship requires more definition in terms of personal and social goals and should be embedded within a more intentional Christian community. Elsewhere I have argued that disciples are formed by engagement with mission, by worship and by participation within a community of practice that is intentionally attending to Christian values and gospel practices.<sup>38</sup> In the recent past we have assumed that worship together with some form of Christian education will do the formational work. Having begun to recover the formational dynamic of engagement in mission, we still have to rediscover the power of intentional Christian community. To go deeper into the identity of early Methodism for today will mean seeking to live by a rule (or rules) of life that provides a teleological orientation and re-engages with the pursuit of holiness. Such a discipleship movement will be more true to our roots and better shaped for mission.

## Notes

1. Atkins 2007.
2. *Perfectae Caritatis*.
3. The text of the speech appeared in *The Methodist Recorder* on 12 July 2007.
4. The post of General Secretary of the British Methodist Church was created in 2003 to integrate the work of the Conference Office and the Connexional Team and to be convening officer for Connexional Leaders' Forum. The intention was to offer a visionary and strategic leadership role. Martyn Atkins was only the second person to hold this post. Both he and his predecessor were appointed to be Secretary of the Conference and General Secretary of the Methodist Church. The Conference in 2014 agreed to the post being abolished or rather to be reintegrated into that of the Secretary of the Conference, as Atkins steps down in 2015. For the purpose and tasks, see *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 2013, SO 300, p. 372.
5. [www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/vision-values/priorities-for-the-methodist-church/holiness-and-risk](http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/vision-values/priorities-for-the-methodist-church/holiness-and-risk).
6. General Secretary's report, Section 2, *The Methodist Church Annual Conference 2009 Agenda*, vol. 1, London: Methodist Publishing.
7. Named after the Bishop of Chelmsford, the Rt Revd John Hind. See *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2005). See also *Shaping the Future: New Patterns of Training for Lay and Ordained* (2006).

8. See, for example, Greene and Cotterell 2006 and Hull 2006.
9. Brown 200, Ward 2009, Longenecker 1996 and Longenecker 2004.
10. This was adopted in 1996 and reaffirmed in 2008 without amendment. See [www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference-2008-legislation-tracking](http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference-2008-legislation-tracking). For the full mission statement, see the United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline*, #120.
11. For a full critical review, see *Quarterly Review* 23(2), Summer 2003, issue theme: 'Make Disciples of Jesus Christ'.
12. General Secretary's report, *The Methodist Church Annual Conference 2010 Agenda*, vol. 1, London: Methodist Publishing.
13. General Secretary's report, 2010, #2.
14. General Secretary's report, 2010, #1.
15. General Secretary's report, 2010, #4.
16. Atkins 2010.
17. General Secretary's report, 2010, #6–9.
18. General Secretary's report, Section 2, *The Methodist Church Annual Conference 2011 Agenda*, vol. 1, London: Methodist Publishing.
19. The Ministries Committee to address patterns of ministry for fluid economy; the Methodist Council to consider the issue of (too many) buildings; and the Faith & Order Committee to reflect on worship.
20. R. Maddox, 'Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century Church', [www.pulpitandpew.org/other-publications](http://www.pulpitandpew.org/other-publications).
21. (1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; (2) To teach, baptise and nurture new believers; (3) To respond to human need by loving service; (4) To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation; (5) To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. See [www.anglicanwitness.org/five-marks-of-mission/](http://www.anglicanwitness.org/five-marks-of-mission/).
22. Methodist Church Home Mission Division, 1985.
23. Kenneth Howcroft, Presidential Address to the Methodist Conference, 2014. For the full text, see [www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/back-to-the-bible-forward-to-the-world-inaugural-address-of-the-methodist-president](http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/back-to-the-bible-forward-to-the-world-inaugural-address-of-the-methodist-president).
24. 'The New Birth', Sermon 45, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. II, ed. Albert Outler, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985, pp. 185–201.
25. Townsend compares closely early Methodism with the Franciscans, and John Wesley with Francis: Townsend, Worksman and Eayrs 1909, pp. 43–50. Wainwright (1995) draws a parallel between Benedictine and Methodist Spirituality.
26. Atkins 2010, pp. 32–34.
27. See John Lawson, 'The People Called Methodist: 2. Our Discipline' in Davies and Rupp 1965, pp. 183–209.
28. *ibid.*, p. 196.
29. Isaiah 32:10, 15–17.
30. *The Fruitful Field*.
31. Atkins 2010, p. 60.

32. General Secretary's report, 2011, #72.
33. *ibid.*, #6.
34. This is a set of three goals first set out in a Presidential Address to the General Synod of the Church of England in November 2010 and subsequently adopted as a five-year plan.
35. Brueggemann 1991, pp. 41–69.
36. Healy 2000.
37. Murray 2008.
38. Walton 2014.

## Bibliography

General Secretary's Reports (2009–2014) are annual reports to be found in Methodist Church Conference Agenda of the corresponding year and published by Methodist Publishing.

- Atkins, Martyn. 2007. *Resourcing Renewal: Shaping Churches for the Emerging Future*. Peterborough: Inspire.
- Atkins, Martyn. 2010. *Discipleship and the People Called Methodist*. Peterborough: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes.
- Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. 1982. Geneva: World Council of Churches.
- Brown, David. 2000. *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brueggemann, W. 1991. *The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Called to Love and Praise*. 1999. Peterborough: Methodist Church.
- The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*. 2013. London: TMCP.
- Davies, Rupert E. and Rupp, E. Gordon. 1965. *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 1. London: Epworth Press.
- Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church*. 2005. London: Church House Publishing.
- The Fruitful Field: A Consultation Document*. Autumn 2011. London: Methodist Church Connexional Team.
- Greene, Mark and Cotterell, Tracy. 2006. *Let my People Grow: Making Disciples who Make a Difference in Today's World*. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media.
- Healy, Nicholas M. 2000. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hull, Bill. 2006. *The Complete Book of Discipleship*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- Longenecker, Richard N. 1996. *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans.
- Longenecker, Richard N. 2004. *Studies in Hermeneutics, Christology and Discipleship*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Methodist Church Home Mission Division. 1985. *Sharing in God's Mission*. London: Methodist Church Home Mission Division.

- Murray, Paul. 2008. *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perfectae Caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*. 1965. Rome: Vatican.
- Shaping the Future: New Patterns of Training for Lay and Ordained*. 2006. London: Church House Publishing.
- Townsend, W. J., Worksman, H. B. and Eayrs, George. 1909. *A New History of Methodism*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey. 1995. *Methodists in Dialogue*. Nashville, TN: Kingswood.
- Walton, Roger L. 2014. *Disciples Together: Discipleship Formation and Small Groups*. London: SCM Press.
- Ward, Graham. 2009. *The Politics of Discipleship*. London: SCM Press.

