

# HOLINESS VOLUME 1 (2015) ISSUE 2

## *Holiness & Mission*

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## Editorial

Janet Morley

Just after Pentecost, Wesley House was delighted to launch its new online journal at an event in Cambridge that drew more than eighty people and attracted greetings from a wide range of scholars and well-wishers internationally. We have received many subsequent messages warmly approving the initiative and the standard of the articles and their presentation. Scholars working within the Wesleyan and Holiness traditions are beginning to offer contributions unprompted. The Editor is always keen to encourage both eminent academics and those still establishing a reputation, along with ministry practitioners with reflections on practice or creative devotional material to share.

The second issue focuses on Mission, and the selection of articles and authors reveals important insights: that mission rightly involves ecumenical dialogue, and that there is a complex interaction between different cultures and contexts within the mission of God. Mission cannot be a one-way matter only, as used to be thought. Neither is it only addressed to the human heart, but necessarily involves issues of human dignity in the social and political realm. Space is given to revisiting and reapplying the insights and example of John Wesley, and to considering the implications for Methodist practice and ecclesiology today, if we are to take seriously the call to be shaped by mission.

We are pleased to start the second issue with an article by Stephen Bevans SVD, who from the perspective of a Catholic US scholar offers a courteous but challenging overview of the task of mission in a highly secularised society: 'Mission in Britain: some modest reflections and proposals'. This paper was first delivered to an ecumenical audience, the Cambridge Theological Federation, and it tackles the tendency of the Church to see the missiological endeavour as one which simply requires greater dedication and improved techniques,

rather than addressing the need for truly adaptive change. In terms of ecumenical dialogue, this article is complemented by a more personal reflection from Tim Macquiban, 'Holiness in the Methodist tradition – an ecumenical pilgrimage'. After serving as minister at Wesley Church, Cambridge, Tim is now the Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office in Rome. Looking at the Methodist approach to the call to a holy life, he particularly reflects on being a 'consecrated people' in the light of what that means for those living within Catholic religious orders.

In this issue it is noticeable how many authors have roots, formation or significant current engagement in more than one part of the world. David Field is based in Switzerland but is a research associate of the University of South Africa. His article, 'Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church', argues that the praxis of social justice as an expression of holiness is integral to mission. In particular he shows how Wesley's reiterated phrase, 'justice, mercy and truth', underlies his appeal to Methodists to focus on 'the outcasts of men'; and Field reflects on Europe's current experience of migration issues in the light of this. Valentin Dedji is currently a minister in London, but he is also a visiting lecturer in missiology in Cameroon and Benin. His article, 'Holiness, grace and mission: revisiting John Wesley's missiological mandate', offers a fresh look at the mandate 'You have nothing to do but to save souls', taking this startling simplicity seriously, but without failing to recognise how utterly the world context has changed since Wesley's time.

Oseias da Silva, originally from Brazil, has been a Methodist minister in both rural and urban contexts in the UK, sent as a mission partner by his church to the Western context from which it originally received missionaries. His article 'Reverse mission in the Western context' explores this fascinating phenomenon, which some British congregations find initially perplexing but then deeply enriching, discovering that they too are a legitimate mission field, needing to hear the gospel afresh. Stephen Day's very personal reflection, 'Into Africa: a mission partner reflects', reminds us what is involved for those who are called to become mission partners, as he shares the journey of transition and transformation undertaken by himself and his wife as they prepare to leave their home in Britain for South Africa.

Our column 'What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?' is written by someone who has been shaped by his Welsh upbringing and his early ordained ministry in Haiti, and who now sits at the heart of the British establishment in the House of Lords. In his article, 'Free Grace – theology with

the gloves off', Leslie Griffiths gives us an arresting account of this sermon, and its origin in a passionate, polemical dispute between John Wesley and his associate George Whitefield, about whether Methodist identity should be located within Calvinism or Arminianism. Griffiths hints at where the legacy of this theological battle may have echoes in the modern world.

Joanne Cox-Darling's article, 'Mission-shaped Methodism and Fresh Expressions', effectively focuses on what the kind of adaptive, kenotic change called for by Stephen Bevans might mean for the Church. She takes encouragement from earlier Methodist experience and tradition and argues that the 'fresh expressions' impulse is deeply within Methodist DNA and that Methodists have a good deal to offer the current ecumenical initiative. And Val Reid's intriguing exploration of a particular form of 'fresh expression' in the church at Hinde Street, 'A gathered stillness: meditation as a fresh expression of Church?', begins to suggest how creative we might become in mission if we allow ourselves to be genuinely 'emptied out' of our preconceptions in this area.

Finally, our podcast in the series 'An eye to God in every word – praying the hymns of Charles Wesley', offers a fresh take on the traditional Love Feast hymn, 'Come and let us sweetly join'. It reminds us that the grace of God is 'social', and that blessing comes upon Christian communities, not just individuals. The joining together of diverse perspectives, with a whole variety of 'hands and hearts and voices', is the authentic source of mission to the world.

Janet Morley, Commissioning Editor  
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# Mission in Britain today: some modest reflections and proposals

Stephen Bevans

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*While 'Mission in Britain today' includes many aspects, this article focuses on the witness of the Church within Britain's contemporary highly secularized culture. Rather than 'technical change', the Church is called to work at 'adaptive change', and so to concentrate less on strategies and more on internal renewal. Such adaptive change involves freeing people's imagination from simplistic and abusive images of God, offering a positive image of God that is inspiring and truly challenging, recognizing the kenotic nature of the Church, and realizing that mission is carried out in a world of grace where God is already present and working*

MISSION • EVANGELIZATION • BRITAIN • SECULARISM • GOD • CHURCH • SPIRITUALITY

## Introduction

Like the language we share, there are enough similarities between my US culture and context and the culture and context of Britain to give an American a false sense of understanding what British culture is all about. As any of us knows, that seeming similarity is dangerous, something like the ‘false friends’ that we are warned about when we begin as English speakers studying French. Because of this, especially as someone who is known as a contextual theologian and who has advocated that a contextual theology be done best by an ‘insider’ in a culture or context, as I begin to reflect on how mission might be thought of and practiced in Britain today, I have to begin with a caveat. *Take everything I say here with a grain of salt. Approach what I say with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.*<sup>1</sup>

That having been said, however, I have a modest hope that what I write here about mission could be useful to those who engage in mission in Britain. This is because, while there are significant differences in our cultures and contexts, we still share a Western, secularized culture that has experienced tectonic change in the last several decades, and a context in which formal religious adherence has been in drastic decline. There are, I believe, enough similarities-in-difference to offer some kind of coherent reflection on how we Christians might partner with God in Trinitarian practice.

From another perspective, what I say may be so off the mark that it might stimulate you to reflect on why I am wrong and how your reactions are right. I offer, in other words, a missiological reflection here that employs what I have called the ‘transcendental model’ of contextual theology. Some things that I say may strike you as exactly right; other things might strike you as absolutely wrong. What I hope, however, on both accounts is that what I write here gets you thinking. If I am able to do that, these reflections will not have been a waste of time, either for you or for me.

These reflections are, in any case, the result of a lot of thinking that I’ve been doing in the past months about the way that we Christians need to engage in mission. Some of them are pretty practical; others are quite foundational, theological, and perhaps theoretical. All of them, especially the theological ones, are very personal, however, and come not only from my head but also from my heart. In the transcendental model of contextual theologizing, as I have described it in my book *Models of Contextual Theology*,<sup>2</sup> this kind of authenticity is essential. I rely on that great line of the American psychologist



Carl Rogers, who observed that 'the most personal is the most general'.<sup>3</sup> This is why, despite my great trepidation, I offer these reflections for your consideration.

Before beginning, however, let me offer another caveat, or perhaps a clarification. I want to focus in these reflections only on the question of mission in the context of contemporary Western secular culture. There is a lot more to mission in Britain today – and indeed the West. I think particularly of the challenges of migration and the pastoral care and evangelization of the millions of migrants from all over the world, many from former colonies of the British Empire. I think too of the challenges for mission of women and men of other religions who have come to the West and the UK in particular – Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, African traditional religionists to name a few. I think of the huge and pressing social issues of poverty and race that plague both my own country and the United Kingdom as well. The harvest for mission is indeed great – overwhelming even – but I only want to focus here on witnessing and preaching the gospel in contexts of unbelief, alienation and the profession of 'being spiritual but not religious'. These, I believe, if not the only areas for mission in Britain and the West, are certainly some of its most neuralgic points. Again, with trepidation, let me begin.

## The challenge of adaptive change

In a powerful, challenging article in the *International Review of Mission* in April 2013, Welsh pastor Peter Cruchley Jones paints a bleak picture of the state of religion in Europe in general and the UK in particular. Reflecting on the theme of the World Council of Churches' Tenth Assembly that would take place later that year in Busan, Korea – 'God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace' – Cruchley Jones observes that the theme 'would come as a surprising and provocative statement to many in a European context'. This is because, he says, in Europe today

God is associated not with life, but with death. God is associated not with justice, but with prejudice; and after centuries of religious war and rivalry, not with peace, but with intolerance. For many the claim for God is a conservative one, not a transforming one.<sup>4</sup>

These attitudes toward God are borne out in the results of the 2011 Census in the UK. Whereas in the previous census of 2001, 71 per cent of Britons identified

themselves as Christian, only 59 per cent did so in 2011, and those who claimed to have no religion at all rose from 15 per cent to 25 per cent in the same decade.<sup>5</sup> Writing in 2005, Nick Spencer, reflecting on the attitudes toward Christianity and the Church revealed by the Diocese of Coventry's 'Beyond the Fringe' project conducted in 2003, reported that ordinary people saw the Church as 'dull, narrow, bigoted, hypocritical, unfriendly, unreal, prescriptive, judgmental, patriarchal, unquestioning, inflexible, nerve-wracking, alienating, corrupt and unable to handle doubt.'<sup>6</sup> In the same volume, Bishop Graham Cray pointed out that 'the Church of England is only beginning to grasp the scale of the social and cultural changes that have transformed the missionary context in recent years.'<sup>7</sup>

A page toward the end of Nigel Rooms' *The Faith of the English* identifies, I believe, the problem that we face in engaging in mission in Britain today, and I would argue in places like the United States, Canada, and other secular societies like Europe, Australia and New Zealand as well. Referring to the American leadership theorists Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Rooms writes of their distinction between 'technical problems' and 'adaptive challenges'. Technical problems, Heifetz and Linsky say, are problems for which people already know the answers. What is needed is a new organizational plan, or more personnel, or a fresh motivation. Technical solutions like these effect technical change. 'But there are a whole host of problems,' Heifetz says, 'that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures.' These he calls 'adaptive challenges,' 'because they require new experiments, new discoveries and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community'. The solutions to adaptive challenges produce adaptive change. Without the development of new attitudes, values and behaviors, people will only be stuck in past ways of seeing and doing.<sup>8</sup>

In the Catholic Church, my sense is what we have called the New Evangelization is an attempt at technical change. In a situation like secular Europe, proponents of the New Evangelization say, we Catholics need to develop a bolder attitude toward sharing the faith and educating the faithful. If we do that we will solve the problem of lapsed Catholics and the continuing rise of the 'Nones'. The more dialogical approach developed out of the Second Vatican Council was seen by some as a 'flawed pastoral strategy.'<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, however, seems to me to see something deeper at work, and so calls not just for renewed efforts of evangelization but for a conversion to take place in the entire Church – to rise to the challenge of adaptive change. The Church, he says, needs to understand itself as a 'community of missionary disciples,' and take a 'missionary option ...

capable of transforming everything so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.<sup>10</sup>

This is where the Church is in Britain today. As Rooms says:

There are no technical changes we can make which will solve our problems; rather, we are consciously incompetent about what to do and can only experiment (or we could say 'play') to see what works – and we might expect experimental failures ... All of which is a deeply spiritual task, as it requires us to stay with uncertainty, weakness and struggle while living by faith.<sup>11</sup>

We are facing, in other words, a situation that calls for adaptive change, and this means, as Bishop Graham Cray expresses it, 'to resist the temptation to turn every tentative question into an excuse to preach the "right" answer, without giving evidence of attentive listening'.<sup>12</sup>

My thesis in what follows is that mission in Britain today – or in other secular and unchurched contexts in the West – is to be done not so much by a strategy of technical change as by a response to a call to rethink or reimagine the foundational understandings of the Christian message and their implications for Christian missionary practice. By rethinking some of the basic aspects of our Christian message – our understandings of God, of the Church, of the 'big questions' that people are asking today – we might discover new ways of living out and presenting the gospel that are nevertheless faithful to the age-old Christian tradition. I certainly don't have all the answers here – not by a long shot! But I hope this might be a way that together we can develop ways of thinking and acting that are worthy of the gospel in today's world and today's Church.

## **Mission in Britain today**

The reflections that follow will be in four points. First, we must work to expose any simplistic or abusive understandings of God that still persist in the way we present the message or in the way that people understand the message. Second, we need to present an understanding of God that is inspiring, consoling, challenging and exciting. Third, we need to move to a thoroughly missionary understanding of the Church, one that does not focus on the

Church itself, but on the God and the world order that it preaches. First and foremost, the Church needs to embody in its community life the joy, wholeness and flourishing that is the result of living the Christian gospel. Fourth, we have to recognize that we do mission in a world of grace, helping people understand the spiritual experiences that they are already having, or the haunting questions that grace raises. I think that by reflecting on these questions we will come a long way to foster the adaptive change that is needed to be a partner in God's mission of prophetic dialogue in Britain and our world today.

### *De-constructing the 'hollow über-God'*

Peter Cruchley Jones describes the God that most people imagine today – and don't believe in – as a 'being who is egotistical, punitive, and divisive, whose mission is to quell a rebellious humanity by tipping most of it into hell and damnation'. To most of his neighbors, he says, once more referring to the WCC theme, 'this God has lost, is lost, and it is laughable to suggest that he is able to lead anyone anywhere.'<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that a first task of mission today is to expose this simplistic and abusive God as an idol. People who have rejected this false God are absolutely right. In rejecting such a God they are our allies rather than our enemies.

When I teach my course on God at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, entitled 'Trinity and Mission', my first lecture is entitled 'The idols we carve', and I ask the class to consider four expressions of idols. Of course there are many more. The first is the scene in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in which two of the main characters, Cely and Shug, are discussing their understandings of God. Cely, when pressed, confesses that although she is an African American woman she still imagines God as a white man, with a long white beard, and blue-gray eyes. It's amazing how that image of the 'old Man with a Beard' persists in people's imaginations. As one respondent in Coventry's 'Beyond the Fringe' project responded: 'The problem is I can't relate to a man with a big beard sitting on a cloud somewhere. That does not feel real to me.' Indeed.

Next I show the students an advert in an evangelical magazine that I came across some years ago. The advert simply reads: 'In the time it takes to read this message ten Muslims will die and go to hell.' Then I show one of my favorite *Far Side* cartoons – of an old, white-bearded man looking at a computer screen at a man walking down the street under a piano that is being lowered down from a window. The old man's finger is about to hit a button on the computer that says 'Smite', and the caption says 'God playing at his computer'. Finally, I

read the chilling story of the American author Mark Twain, entitled 'The War Prayer', in which a local congregation prays for victory and honor as their troops leave for war – only to be confronted by a prophetic figure who tells them about the other side of that prayer: that for every victory for their soldiers children will lose fathers, mothers will be raped, lives will be destroyed. The congregation hears but cannot understand, and continues to pray for God to be on their side.

A male God, a vengeful God, a capricious God, a God who condones unspeakable violence – these are all images of God that many people believe in, but that many people have also rightly rejected. And yet these images persist in people's imaginations, even in the Church. They are undergirded by the language of our liturgies, in which God is addressed as a king on a throne, reigning over a celestial court. They are perpetuated by our exclusive male language about God. They are upheld by patriarchal structures – in the family, in society, in the Church – that appeal to divine sanctions for their validity and perpetuation.

A first step in mission today, I am convinced, is to work to root out these idols from our imaginations – especially in our Church, as much as possible in our liturgies, in our preaching, in our public statements like pastoral letters. Peter Cruchley Jones writes of 'the missiological task of deconstructing the hollow *über-God*'.<sup>14</sup>

One of my deepest religious experiences was when I realized that I'd rather be in hell than in heaven if such an abusive, angry, unloving God really exists. I think we have to work hard and constantly to insure that the true God, the God of Jesus Christ, is not obscured by our obscene images and unworthy behavior. The Second Vatican Council was so right when it declared that Christians, 'to the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral, or social life ... must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion'.<sup>15</sup>

### *Constructing an understanding of God that inspires and excites*

It is, of course, not enough to expose idolatry. Mission today has to offer understandings and images of God that are awe-inspiring, consoling, challenging, exciting.

One of the ways of understanding and imaging God that has blown me away in the last several years is to think about God in the context of the 'new creation story' that contemporary astronomy and physics has provided for us, and in

the context of biological evolution. One of the most powerful ways to think about God, I believe, is to present an image of God based on the new creation story and evolutionary theory. Rather than imaging God as an old man with a beard, or any noun, think of God as the very power of sending, of the Spirit present in creation from its first nanosecond, coaxing, cooperating with creation's freedom, challenging, persuading the processes in the seconds after the Big Bang, and in the billions of years as the universe has expanded, planets have formed, earth's atmosphere has developed, life of all kinds has emerged, and religious consciousness has unfolded, especially clear for us in the biblical record of Israel's history. As US feminist/ecological theologian Elizabeth Johnson reflects in her amazing book on Darwin and the God of Love, the Spirit's presence in creation ensures creation's freedom. God is always a God of freedom and participation:

Far from being merely a tool, instrument, or puppet in divine hands, the world acts with its own free integrity to shape its own becoming. It is empowered to do so by the transcendent mystery of the Spirit of God, who pervades the world, quickening it to life and acting in and through its finite agency.<sup>16</sup>

This freedom is most clearly revealed in the life, ministry, death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life gave concrete expression to the Spirit's all-pervading presence. His ministry was the continuation and concretization of the ministry of the Spirit: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, God has anointed me' (Lk 4:18). Elizabeth Johnson quotes US theologian Sallie McFague's succinct summary of Jesus' ministry: 'liberating, healing, and inclusive love is the meaning of it all!'<sup>17</sup> Jesus' death on the Cross, the direct result of his ministry of fidelity to the Spirit's presence in the world is, in Cardinal Walter Kasper's powerful words, 'the unsurpassable self-definition of God.'<sup>18</sup> If we want to know who God is or what God is like, we need only to look to the Cross. But then also, to the Resurrection, for both point to God's power, which is revealed in God's total vulnerability. Peter Cruchley Jones notes how 'the God of Life is absent from figures of power, yet found in figures of strength whose life is conveyed especially as spirit.'<sup>19</sup> A vulnerable God, who knows suffering and identifies with the suffering of the world, is ultimately more powerful than any force in our world. A patient God, patient enough to cajole and try to persuade the movements of evolution over billions of years, is a God who is always ready to forgive – overflowing in mercy, as Pope Francis has insisted over and over again.<sup>20</sup>

Danish theologian Niels Gregerson speaks of 'deep incarnation', meaning that Jesus' taking on flesh is much more than simply becoming human.<sup>21</sup> Becoming human means becoming part of the entire creation, and, like our own bodies, Jesus' body is inscribed with 'the signature of supernovas and the geology and life history of the Earth'.<sup>22</sup> That body, like all living creation, experienced death, but in the Resurrection, as Australian theologian Denis Edwards says, 'the Word of God is forever flesh, forever a creature, forever part of a universe of creatures'.<sup>23</sup> The God that we present in mission, in other words, is a God who from the beginning of time is connected to all creation, who loved everything into being, and brings every creature to fulfillment. The only thing that can stop that fulfillment is our own refusal to take part in it, to 'go with the flow', as it were.

To me this is amazing, overwhelming good news, something worth staking my life on, something I'm excited to share with women and men in today's world. The more we open ourselves up to this loving, vulnerable, patient God, as Karl Rahner has argued, the more we become ourselves.<sup>24</sup> I think we can argue as well that the more we give ourselves over to God, the more we are committed to justice and care for creation, to life. Although, as Cruchley Jones says, it might surprise many in our day, faith in the God of Jesus Christ will lead us to justice and peace. Religion does not 'poison everything', as Christopher Hitchens famously argued.<sup>25</sup> Just the opposite, it gives purpose and life.

### *Letting emerge a kenotic Church*

Mission in Britain and in the secularized West today needs once and for all to recognize that the point of the Church is not the Church, but the reign of God. British-born theologian Paul Lakeland offers a striking reflection on this in an essay on a recently published book on Catholic ecclesiology.<sup>26</sup> He spoke of three types of Apostolicity, the mark or dimension of the Church that I have come to understand as fundamental to the other three of Catholicity, Unity and Holiness.

A first kind of apostolicity Lakeland calls 'Build it and they will come', and it is an understanding that is wholly centripetal – an apostolicity, he says, of maintenance. This is a mission strategy that some have taken in the Church. If only the Church is faithful to the tradition, if it keeps its orthodoxy, it will attract. The Church may be smaller, but those who will be members will be deeply committed to its doctrines and values. Lakeland, however, suggests that this form of church will continue to decline, despite the support it has had from a



more traditionalist coalition. The future of the Church cannot be built on Latin liturgies, strict orthodoxy, a denial of the importance of human experience, or hierarchical authority.

Lakeland sees a second form of apostolicity in what has come to be called in Catholicism the New Evangelization, highly promoted by both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. This is a more centrifugal approach than the first, but, as Lakeland puts it, it is centrifugal for the sake of being centripetal – ‘to a high degree the outreach of the New Evangelization is also in-reach’. The idea here is to be more proactive in preaching the gospel, but the focus is much more on former church members than people who have little or no Christian belief. Lakeland observes that ‘the new evangelization movement seems to have little sense that its message need be any different from that of the old evangelization. “New” seems largely to mean a new attempt, rather than an attempt to do anything new.’ John Paul II spoke frequently of a new ardor, new methods, and new expressions needed in the New Evangelization.<sup>27</sup> Efforts in the Catholic Church have focused almost exclusively on the ‘new ardor’ aspect.

Lakeland’s third understanding of apostolicity – and the one that he espouses in his paper – is one that ‘understands concern for the world beyond the Church to be the primary if not exclusive meaning of apostolicity’. This is an apostolicity that is totally centrifugal in its approach, and so can be called ‘kenotic’ – in two senses. On the one hand, the apostolic Church imitates Christ in his own emptying of himself as described in Philippians 2, leading to a humble, de-centered Church. On the other hand, a kenotic apostolicity is one that is concerned with emptying itself of any and all Western cultural baggage, so that it can be attuned to the context in which it works. This would result in a listening Church, an open Church, a Church of dialogue.

A kenotic Church would be a Church that recognizes that it is ‘missionary by its very nature’.<sup>28</sup> Its focus, in other words, is not on itself as such, or even on recruiting new members, but on the reign of God. This does not mean that Christians in mission do not invite people to join the Church, but they do so in order to invite women and men into a community that has its eyes set beyond itself, a community that itself already anticipates by its faith, vitality and mutual support the full reality of the reign of God. The Church works at being in itself a sign, a sacrament of the reign of God. This is the task of mission *ad intra*, of being constantly evangelized itself, so it can more credibly witness and preach the gospel – of a merciful, liberating, humble, incarnated God who suffers with humanity and gives the strength to resist evil and work for liberation.



Much more important than gaining new members is its reform of itself for the sake of the gospel. Lakeland quotes French theologian Ghislain Lafont's conviction that 'evangelization absolutely presupposes that the Church regain the confidence of men and women'.<sup>29</sup> This is not so much for the sake of the Church but for the sake of the message and the person to which and to whom the Church witnesses. If the Church is not willing to model itself on the vulnerable, humble, dialogical and listening God with whom it is a partner in mission, it will have no right to speak or act in the world. Australian missiologist Noel Connolly remarks that the Catholic Church in Australia is calling people to return to regular practice at the very moment when it has never before been so mistrusted.<sup>30</sup> We have to work hard to win people's trust back.

A kenotic Church will be a patient Church, once again in imitation of and participation in the life of the infinitely patient God who works with a world coming to be in an evolving universe. As Anne Richards writes, 'perhaps if we concentrated on waiting patiently, we should see the prodigal from far off more clearly.'<sup>31</sup> In the words attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, our task in mission is not to be successful but to be faithful. If we can be a Church that truly reflects the nature of God, we can have confidence that our kenosis will bear fruit – perhaps in ways that we cannot even imagine today.

### *Doing mission in a graced world*

We carry out our mission in a graced world. Rather than seeing ourselves being sent into a godless, evil world, we need to develop the conviction that we are being sent into a world where God is already at work, and in which people are responding to God in ways that we need to discover.<sup>32</sup> Nick Spencer writes that the diocese of Coventry's 'Beyond the Fringe' project 'reminds us that God has indeed set eternity in the hearts of mankind but that, all too often, we cannot fathom what he has done. In doing so, it encourages us that even though the workers may seem few, the harvest is plentiful.'<sup>33</sup> Recently I attended a conference in which a young evangelical pastor spoke about his ministry among young, upwardly mobile adults in a fashionable area in the city of Charlotte, North Carolina in the United States. Of all the young adults that he encountered in various ways – at the gym, at the swimming pool, in casual conversations in bars – he said that there was not one young adult that he met that did not have some kind of spiritual experience in her or his lifetime. Much of the point of the book *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age* is to alert the Church to the fact that the quest for spirituality is indeed a widespread, perhaps even

universal, phenomenon. In her essay in the book, Yvonne Richmond writes about her being struck by,

first, the extent to which people of no apparent faith ... were actually very spiritual in their makeup. Second, how prepared they were to discuss spiritual things when taken seriously as people of faith and given permission to talk. Third, how prevalent mystical and paranormal experiences seemed to be; fourth, how easily this could be translated into a tentative step of Christian faith whatever people's experience, since they needed little convincing of a spiritual world.<sup>34</sup>

The task of mission, given this grace-filled context, might well be described as *naming, articulating* that grace as it is experienced in people's lives.<sup>35</sup> As Yvonne Richmond implies, the first thing that the Church needs to do is to listen with respect to what people are experiencing, and then enter into a dialogue with them. This, sadly, is often not the case, as Anne Richards writes:

Research shows that many people don't trust us with their stories of spiritual search, the rituals and activities they've tried, because they believe Christians will laugh, humiliate them, assert their superiority ... It is important for us to accept the different ways in which people do search for a spiritual identity and that they, like us, can make mistakes which they need to work through.<sup>36</sup>

It will only be in respectful listening and learning from others that Christians will be able to make the connections between people's experiences and the wisdom of the Christian tradition. I think we have to do mission with the conviction that our tradition is the clearest, most powerful way to express the adventure of the human spiritual journey, but we have to leave space for people to come to this conviction themselves, on their own. This is why the task of inculturation is such an essential one in Christian mission. We need constantly to find ways to help people understand that *their* story is best understood in the light of *the* story in the Bible and in the wealth of Christian doctrine and practice. Inculturation, I always insist, is not to water down or simplify the gospel, but to allow it to be preached more effectively.

In September 2014 Catholic Theological Union in Chicago was host to Jonny Baker, director of the CMS Pioneer Program of ministry training, and one of the Pioneer students, Steve Leach. The theme of the conference was 'Finding Grace

in Young Adult Culture', and Jonny and Steve helped us to have confidence in the fact that grace is indeed present in the music, the clubs, the poetry and art of young adults today. Entering into that world is indeed to enter into a *Terra Periculosa*, a seemingly dangerous and unexplored world, but it is a journey that being faithful to the gospel today requires. Indeed, we enter into mission today in Britain and the West confident, as Orthodox theologian Michael Alexa said originally and is quoted by Nigel Rooms, that 'we can never be sure where God, or Christ, is not'.<sup>37</sup>

The questions people have – often deep, disturbing ones – are also evidence of God at work. Nick Spencer reports that the results of Coventry's 'Beyond the Fringe' project discovered six burning questions that people of all types kept surfacing in their responses. The first was the question of human destiny – what happens when we die? The second was the question of the purpose of human life – what does it all mean? The third was about the existence and nature of the universe – how did it start? How is it designed? How is it controlled? Fourth, the question of God – as if the previous three questions were not about God – does God exist? If so, what is God like? Fifth, the question of a spiritual realm and how it influences a person's life. Finally, the perennial question of suffering, and why there is so much of it in the world. Spencer comments that, 'for the vast majority of respondents interviewed, the traditional Christian responses to these questions are either incredible or literally incomprehensible ... Re-establishing this link is one of the most important tasks facing the church today.'<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion: no magic wand

On 24 September 2014, Pope Francis addressed a group of pastoral workers assembled in Rome. In his usual fresh way, the Pope told the group that while we must trust in God, 'who accompanies us and never abandons us', we still 'do not have a magic wand for everything'.<sup>39</sup> As Nigel Rooms said in terms of our responding to adaptive change, we 'can only experiment (or we could say "play") to see what works – and we might expect experimental failures'.<sup>40</sup> If, however, we cleanse our minds and imaginations of the idols we have carved; if we work creatively and carefully at constructing images of God that inspire and excite our hearts; if we work to build a Church that empties itself of all pretense and cultural accretions; and if we look to find ways of tapping into the spiritual journeys of the peoples of our cultures and our lands, we can have

fair hope of success, or at least of being faithful as partners of a patient and gracious God. Speaking of how the Holy Spirit assists the Church in its decisions, Pope Francis said that it happens 'when the dialogue among the people and the bishops goes down this road and is genuine.'<sup>41</sup> Perhaps as we continue to dialogue among ourselves at all levels, asking and reflecting on the fundamental questions of our image of God, the true nature of the Church, and the fact that God goes before us in mission, the Holy Spirit will assist us as we try to bring the beauty, the truth, the joy and the love of God to this 'green and pleasant land.'<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

1. It is important to know the context of this article. It was delivered first at the annual meeting of the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies, and subsequently, as the annual Cambridge Theological Federation Lecture, both in October 2014. The author, Stephen Bevans, is a Roman Catholic priest of the Society of the Divine Word and Louis J. Luzbetak SVD Professor of Mission and Culture (Emeritus) at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. The article has been edited to address a more general audience.
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12. Cray, 'Foreword', p. ix.
13. Cruchley Jones, 'You Have Not Sought the Lost', pp. 69–70.

14. Cruchley Jones, 'You Have Not Sought the Lost', p. 79.
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34. Yvonne Richmond, 'A Spiritual Snapshot' in Croft et al. (eds), *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, p. 5.
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# Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in contemporary context

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*John Wesley summarised Methodism's mission as spreading 'scriptural holiness'. This article argues that the praxis of social justice as an expression of holiness is integral to the mission of the Church. The following themes from Wesley's theology are examined: holiness as love; 'justice, mercy, and truth'; social holiness; works of mercy as a means of grace; stewardship, and 'the outcasts of men'. It argues that the praxis of justice, mercy and truth is integral to holiness and hence to mission of the Church. A contextualisation of this theme in the context of secularisation and migration is then developed.*

HOLINESS • SOCIAL JUSTICE • SOCIAL HOLINESS • MIGRATION • MISSION • JUSTICE, MERCY AND TRUTH

## Introduction

John Wesley described the mission of Methodism as: 'To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.'<sup>1</sup> In Wesley's understanding, Methodism's mission was the formation of holy people whose presence and praxis would reform the Church and society.<sup>2</sup> The gospel that Wesley proclaimed was that God, in love, not only desired to forgive people but also to deliver them from the power of sin and transform them by the Spirit. His goal was that people who responded would become holy people. Hence his emphasis on their integration into classes and societies through which they could grow in holiness. In contemporary Europe the understanding of the mission of the Church as 'spreading scriptural holiness' or as the formation of holy people does not resonate with the majority of Methodists. For Christians and churches grappling with how to interpret, proclaim and live the gospel in an increasingly secularised culture the concept of 'holiness' appears to be esoteric, archaic, irrelevant, and even alienating. This is intensified where 'holiness' has been associated with other-worldliness and legalistic piety.

Another aspect of historic Methodist praxis that has greater resonance with some Methodists is the commitment to addressing the needs of the poor and suffering through social and sometimes political engagement. While this was and in some cases continues to be an important aspect of the mission of some Methodist churches, its significance was reduced during the twentieth century in Western Europe by the development of state-sponsored welfare systems and in Eastern Europe by the restrictions enforced by communist regimes.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary economic and social dynamics are creating new spaces in which this aspect of the Church's mission is becoming relevant again. One particular space is that created by the migration into Europe of significant numbers of people from outside Europe and the migration of people from Eastern Europe into Western Europe.

This new space challenges Methodists to critically rethink the relationship between holiness and social justice, and hence to reconceptualise their understanding of the mission of the Church. I argue below that an analysis of the relationship between holiness and justice in Wesley's theology provides resources for reconceptualising the mission of the Church in secularised contexts which can be concretely embodied in the presence of migrants.



## Holiness and justice in Wesley's theology

It has been popular within the Methodist tradition to relate holiness to social justice by referring to Wesley's phrase 'social holiness' as a designation for social engagement which must be added to the pursuit of personal holiness.<sup>4</sup> This, however, is problematic from two perspectives. First, it fosters a bifurcated understanding of mission which divides the personal and the social into two spheres whose interrelationship is unclear. One is left with the suspicion that it is possible to be personally holy without being socially holy or vice versa. Second, given that this phrase only occurs in one passage of Wesley's writings where it does not relate directly to social justice, it cannot bear the theological weight it has been made to carry.

In this article I will examine themes from Wesley's theology and their relationship with each other. This forms the basis for the development of a contemporary interpretation of holiness in which the pursuit of social justice is an integral component.

### *Holiness as love*

Wesley's interpretation of holiness, particularly as it is consummated in Christian perfection, has raised considerable controversy. The controversy is intensified due to the developments and ambiguities in Wesley's writings on the subject. A key issue is whether entire sanctification is to be understood substantially, that is, as the removal of sinful 'substance' from the human person, or relationally as the transformation in a person's relationship with God and neighbour. Both aspects can be found in Wesley's writings; for the purposes of this article I will emphasise the relational aspect.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of which aspect is emphasised there is a common core to Wesley's understanding of the goal of sanctification. The goal is that the person would live a life that fulfils the commands to love God and one's neighbour. He proposed: 'What is holiness? Is it not, essentially love? The love of God and of all mankind? Love producing "bowels of mercies, humbleness of mind, meekness, gentleness, long suffering"? ... Love is holiness wherever it exists.'<sup>6</sup> In another context he stated, 'Love is the sum of Christian sanctification.'<sup>7</sup> Hence Christian perfection is

nothing higher and nothing lower than this the pure love of God and man – the loving God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves. It is love governing the heart and the life, running through all our tempers, words and actions.<sup>8</sup>

Holiness as love for God and our fellow human beings is rooted in and arises out of God's free love for us as individuals. In love the Spirit of God draws people to God, enables them to believe, transforms them in response to their faith, giving them new birth and making them children of God. The Spirit bears witness within believers to God's love for and acceptance of them as children of God. Believers' love for God and their fellow humans arises out of their experience and assurance of God's love for them. This love for God and human beings encompasses both inner attitudes and dispositions and outward actions – an inner transformation manifest in a transformed way of life in the world. As Wesley explains it:

[W]e are saved from our sins only by a confidence in the love of God. As soon as we 'behold what manner of love it is which the Father hath bestowed on us,' we love him ... because he first loved us'. And then is that command written on our heart, 'that he who loveth God loves his brother also', from which the love of God and man, meekness, humbleness of mind, and all holy tempers spring. Now these are the very essence of ... salvation from sin. And from these outward salvation flows, that is holiness of life and conversation.<sup>9</sup>

### *'Justice, mercy, and truth'*

Wesley goes beyond the assertion that holiness is love to explicate the content of love. Thus in his sermon 'Of Former Things,' Wesley wrote:

By religion I mean the love of God and man, filling the heart and governing the life. The sure effect of this is the uniform practice of justice, mercy, and truth. This is the very essence of it, the height and depth of religion, detached from this or that opinion, and from all particular modes of worship.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar way, in 'On Living without God,' he stated, 'Indeed nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>11</sup> This triad of 'justice, mercy, and truth,' which reoccurs frequently in Wesley's writings, has been neglected in interpretations of Wesley's understanding of holiness.

The vital importance of the triad arises out of Wesley's rooting it in the character of God. 'Justice, mercy, and truth' are a summary of the moral attributes of

God.<sup>12</sup> They are the concrete expression of the love of God which is God's 'reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable light on all his other perfections'.<sup>13</sup> As the summary of God's moral character they are also the summary of the moral image of God in which humanity was created.<sup>14</sup> Holiness is the restoration of the moral image by the Spirit of God so that a person's life becomes characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'. Wesley commented, 'While thou seekest God in all things thou shalt find him in all, the fountain of all holiness, continually filling thee with his own likeness, with justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>15</sup> And in another sermon: 'we are moving straight toward God, and that continually; walking steadily on in the highway of holiness, in the paths of justice, mercy, and truth.'<sup>16</sup>

While 'justice, mercy, and truth' are the essential outward manifestations of holiness, holiness is not to be reduced to them. Holiness has both an inner and an outer dimension. The inner dimension is the transformation of people's motivations, desires and attitudes by the love of God so that they love God and their neighbours. Genuine holiness comprises an integration of both dimensions. It is possible for people to practise a measure of 'justice, mercy, and truth' without the inner transformation by the love of God as a consequence of prevenient grace. However, there is no inner transformation that is not expressed in outward action.<sup>17</sup>

Because 'justice, mercy, and truth' are the outward form of holiness, Wesley could argue, in a letter affirming the loyalty of Methodists to King George II, that the Methodists 'unite together for this and no other end – to promote, as far as we are capable, justice, mercy, and truth, the glory of God, and peace and goodwill among men'.<sup>18</sup> Hence these are not merely personal virtues but also characteristics of a Christian engagement with society. In this letter Wesley assumes that the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' would not result in conflict with the state and would be welcomed by the king. However, in other contexts he uses these virtues as a standard to evaluate the moral character of a nation or society, regardless of whether they are Christians or not. He thus uses it to compare so-called Christian Europe with non-Christian nations in relation to the slave trade and colonial conquests. Here 'Christian' Britain is found wanting while non-Christian nations display far more of 'justice, mercy, and truth'.<sup>19</sup> In his Journal he provided a detailed evaluation of the trial of a smuggler on the basis of its conformity to 'justice, mercy and truth'. The smuggler was clearly guilty, yet Wesley is extremely critical of the trial and sentence. The poor must not be exploited even if they are criminals. He lamented: 'O England, England! Will this reproach never be rolled away from thee? Is there anything like this to

be found either among Papists, Turks, or heathens? In the name of truth, justice, mercy, and common sense.<sup>20</sup> Hence, contrary to the letter to George II, the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' could be subversive of the socio-political status quo.

Drawing on examples in Wesley's writings we can say that justice refers to treating someone in accordance with who they are as a human being and in accordance with what they have done. Depriving someone of life and liberty for no reason is unjust, punishments must fit the crimes, and a person should be rewarded for their action. A society must be structured in such a way that all humans are given their full dignity and freedom as human beings. Wesley thus argued in *Thoughts upon Slavery* that the Angolans have the same right to liberty as the English.<sup>21</sup> The prime example of Wesley's personal involvement in the struggle for justice was his commitment towards the end of his life to the struggle against slavery.<sup>22</sup> This involvement was not without precedent in other periods of his life. While at Oxford he was prepared to take the unpopular and despised step of defending a person accused of sodomy, and while he was in Georgia he engaged in supporting those he held to have been treated unjustly by the authorities.<sup>23</sup>

Mercy refers to active compassion for the suffering and the needy. This refers not merely to individual actions but to laws and institutions of society – they must be instruments of mercy. The pursuit of mercy both personally and through the Methodist societies for the poor, the suffering, the sick and the imprisoned is well known as a constant feature of Wesley's life.<sup>24</sup>

Truth refers to integrity, veracity and honesty. Wesley's understanding of truth is influenced by a realistic and empirical epistemology whereby he expected to reach and ascertain knowledge of the truth through empirical means and the testimony of those who had empirical knowledge. An example of this is to be found in *Thoughts upon Slavery*, where he set out to describe the socio-cultural conditions of Africa prior to the slave trade, and the cruelties involved in slavery and the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

### *Social holiness*

The only place where Wesley uses the phrase 'social holiness' is in his Preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.<sup>26</sup> In a critique of the 'mystic divines' he refers to three fundamental issues. The first is the 'foundation' of the Christian religion; for Wesley this foundation is justification by faith on the basis of Christ's death. The second is the manner of building on the foundation;

Wesley argues that holiness is to be achieved through active participation with other Christians in the life of the Christian community.

The third problem that Wesley identifies is the 'superstructure' which is being built: that is, religion itself. The religion of the 'mystic divines' is 'solitary religion', which is focused on contemplation and does not include outward works.<sup>27</sup> It is in contrast to this understanding of holiness that Wesley states: 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness.'<sup>28</sup>

Wesley goes on to describe what he means by social religion or holiness as follows:

'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. 'This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;' and that we manifest our love 'by doing good unto all men, especially to them that are of the household of faith'. And, in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be zealous of good works. He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire of spending and being spent for them. My Father, will he say, worketh hitherto, and I work and, at all possible opportunities, he is, like his Master, going about doing good.<sup>29</sup>

Hence 'social holiness' describes Wesley's understanding that holiness is love; this love is manifested in the pursuit of the good of others. It thus only exists in the contexts of relationships with other people. Love, and hence holiness, cannot be manifested in solitude. To withdraw from people is to refuse to act in love and is thus a denial of holiness. It is important to note that by 'social' Wesley is not referring to the relationship between people and social structures; he is referring to interpersonal relationships between people. Hence 'social holiness' is the concrete manifestation of 'holiness of heart' in our relationships with other people through concrete acts which promote their good.

### *Works of mercy as a means of grace*<sup>30</sup>

In Wesley's terminology 'works of mercy' refers to practical action to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others. Scattered in his writings we find overlapping lists of these works. For our purposes two will suffice. In his sermon 'The Scripture Way of Salvation' he lists them as

feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavouring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to succour the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death.<sup>31</sup>

In 'The Important Question' he includes, 'to be as eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame; an husband to the widow, a father to the fatherless.'<sup>32</sup> 'Works of mercy' is an integrative concept that treats human well-being in a holistic way; Wesley does not prioritise the 'spiritual' over the 'physical' nor is the 'physical', merely a means to the 'spiritual'. Evangelism, pastoral care, spiritual guidance, social welfare, charity, psychological support and encouragement, and practical bodily help are all included.

By integrating the spiritual and the physical, 'works of mercy' address both the perpetrators and victims of human sin. In *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley argues that he is motivated both by love for the suffering slaves and for those involved in the slave trade.<sup>33</sup> Wesley's critique of those involved in the slave trade is a work of mercy instructing and reproofing them and thus promoting their spiritual well-being.<sup>34</sup>

An important characteristic of works of mercy is that performing them requires effort and self-denial. Providing for the needs of others comes not out of our excess but through giving up that which we enjoy and believe we have a right to. Visiting the sick and prisoners in the eighteenth century, for example, required going into uncomfortable, dangerous and disagreeable places.<sup>35</sup> In his sermon 'The Danger of Riches', Wesley describes the zeal for works of mercy:

You once pushed on through cold or rain, or whatever cross lay in your way, to see the poor, the sick, the distressed. You went about doing good, and found out those who were not able to find you. You cheerfully crept down into their cellars, and climbed up into their garrets ... You found out every scene of human misery, and assisted according to your power.<sup>36</sup>

Works of mercy are the expression of love for one's neighbour; however in some of his later writings Wesley adds a further dimension, works of mercy are also a means of grace. He explains this in his sermon 'On Zeal':

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; – longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in ‘the mind which was in Christ Jesus.’ In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers – by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace.<sup>37</sup>

Works of mercy are a means through which God encounters and transforms people’s characters; they manifest a transformed character and through this manifestation they lead to further transformation. They are an expression of holiness and a means to become more holy.

### *Stewardship*

Wesley proposed that the image of a ‘steward’ is an appropriate way of representing human beings in their relationship with God.<sup>38</sup> Stewardship emphasises that all we have comes from God and we are responsible before God to use God’s gifts according to God’s purpose, and we will have to give account to God for how we have used these gifts. Wesley’s understanding of God’s gifts was holistic and comprehensive; they included our mental abilities, affections, bodies, bodily faculties, possessions, education and influence. God’s gifts are given as resources to be used in works of mercy for the good of others. In his eighth sermon on ‘Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount’, he uses this motif to particularly address the rich, urging them to use their resources and influence, among other things, to ‘Defend the oppressed, plead the cause of the fatherless, and make the widows heart sing for joy.’<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that in addressing those who by virtue of their social status had greater social and political influence and rights Wesley includes what could be termed social engagement in his list of responsibilities.

Wesley’s concluding sections of *Thoughts upon Slavery* can be understood as an application of this theology of stewardship to the particular case of the slave trade. Here he applies his message to various categories of people involved in the slave trade, emphasising that they are responsible for the use of their resources in the enslavement of people and will be held accountable by God for this.<sup>40</sup>

### *A Focus on the 'Outcasts of Men'*

Wesley wrote to the 'men of reason and religion'; 'The rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing ... to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men.'<sup>41</sup> Wesley used the phrase 'outcasts of men' in a number of places in his writings to refer to those who are excluded from the benefits of human society and culture,<sup>42</sup> and it provides a useful way of describing the socially marginalised. These people were the focus of his ministry since his time in Oxford.<sup>43</sup> He ministered to those who were excluded from society on economic grounds – the poor; on social grounds – the under classes;<sup>44</sup> on legal grounds – convicted prisoners; on nationalist grounds – prisoners of war;<sup>45</sup> on health grounds – the sick.<sup>46</sup>

This focus was, for Wesley, a concrete expression of what it meant to imitate Jesus in the world – that is, to walk as he walked. This is a phrase that Wesley regularly uses to describe outward holiness. As he stated in his sermon 'On the Wedding Garment', 'In a word, holiness is having "the mind that was in Christ", and the "walking as Christ walked".'<sup>47</sup> In the letters quoted below he describes this concern for the poor and sick in terms of walking as Jesus walked: that is, it is a facet of outward holiness expressing God's love to the deprived.<sup>48</sup> He wrote to 'A member of the society':

The lengthening of your life and the restoring your health are invaluable blessings. But do you ask how you shall improve them to the glory of the Giver? And are you willing to know? Then I will tell you how. Go and see the poor and sick in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman; you bear an higher character.<sup>49</sup>

In a further letter he stated:

I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward on their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith, and the love of God in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these, in spite of dirt, and a hundred disgusting circumstances; and thus put off the gentlewoman. Do not confine your conversation to gentle and elegant people. I should like this as well as you do. But I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord, or any of his Apostles. My dear friend, let you and I walk as he walked.<sup>50</sup>



Theologically rooted in the conviction that God cares for and in a particular way has chosen the outcasts to be the objects of grace,<sup>51</sup> and power of God's grace is demonstrated in that God works from the least to the greatest,<sup>52</sup> this solidarity with and focus on the 'outcasts of men' had important consequences for the way in which Wesley perceived social issues. A striking characteristic in *Thoughts upon Slavery*<sup>53</sup> is that Wesley interpreted and addressed the issues from the perspective of the enslaved people whom he described as 'outcasts of men'.<sup>54</sup> The crucial triad of 'justice, mercy, and truth' was understood from the perspective of the 'outcasts'. This is clearly seen when Wesley's perspective is contrasted with the pro-slavery pamphlets of his time. The supporters of slavery argued that justice required the protection of the 'property rights' of the slave owners (their right to own slaves) and the right of merchants to buy and sell Africans.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, for Wesley justice required the affirmation of the rights of slaves to their liberty.<sup>56</sup> Mercy required that the cruelties of slavery be unconditionally condemned and rejected. This contrasted with the argument by the supporters of slavery that cruelty was necessary to ensure that the slaves worked. This is more striking when seen in conjunction with Wesley's warning to slave owners, in a context where violent slave revolts were frequent, that it would be their own fault if their slaves cut their throats, for the masters had 'first acted the villain in making them slaves'.<sup>57</sup> Telling the truth entailed not only describing the sufferings of slaves but also interpreting the behaviour of slaves. What the masters experienced as the slaves' stupidity, laziness, stubbornness and wickedness, Wesley described as their legitimate resistance to slavery.

### *Weaving the threads together*

Holiness and social engagement in the service of and in solidarity with the poor, oppressed and excluded are not equivalent. However, the Wesleyan threads described above suggest that such social engagement is an integral aspect of holiness. A contemporary interpretation of holiness needs to make this more explicit by reweaving these threads so that the pattern of relationships is clearer. As such this entails going beyond Wesley to creatively reimage what it means to embody holiness in our contexts.

Such a contemporary account should begin where Wesley begins, with a transforming encounter with the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is the taproot of holiness, and hence the proclamation of the gospel of God's love in Christ through word, example and action is central to mission. The transforming encounter is not a one-off event but a continuing praxis of living with and

before God in the fellowship of others on the same journey. Hence there is a need to emphasise the importance of small groups as the locus of the continuing encounter with God through mutually accountable fellowship. The goal of such groups is to nurture people in holiness that is outwardly expressed in a life characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'.

Wesley's triad of virtues continues to be a valuable summation of outward holiness. They provide a way to affirm the importance and comprehensive character of holiness which moves beyond individualistic piety and moralistic legalism. 'Justice, mercy, and truth' are not a set of principles or rules but rather orientating directions that provide a creative stimulus to discover in new contexts how holiness should be embodied. Hence for Wesley they stimulated a creative response to slavery that went beyond and contrary to individual biblical texts. Wesley's use of them to critique social, political and economic life provokes us to embody them in new ways in our engagements with society. Wesley's active engagement against slavery is an example of how works of mercy also go beyond personal charity and diaconal service to include action for social, political and economic transformation.

Historically, Methodists have engaged in diverse contexts, supporting a variety of social and political policies and projects often representing contradictory ideological perspectives and political goals. In the light of the argument above, social and political engagement is creatively faithful to but moving beyond the heritage of Wesley when it is committed to the transformation of the lives of the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed, when it stands in solidarity with them and addresses social, political and economic dynamics from the perspective of their impact on these people.

Works of mercy that include social engagement in solidarity with the excluded are both an expression of holiness and a means of growing in holiness. Action in solidarity with and for the other is a dynamic interaction in which the Spirit of God is present, stimulating, enabling and calling forth the transformation of all people involved. They are a means of grace through which God encounters and transforms people. This understanding of works of mercy as a means of grace enables us to reconceptualise social holiness to include an engagement not only on the personal but also on the structural level of society. We express holiness and become holy not only in our personal interaction with others but also as we respond to structural injustice, cruelty and untruth. This reconceptualisation of holiness affirms that such engagement is integral to what it means to be holy. It reaffirms the prophetic tradition of Isaiah that 'holiness'

that is merely personal piety and morality, and that does not in some way engage structural injustice, cruelty and untruth in solidarity with the excluded, is not scriptural holiness.<sup>58</sup> The motif of stewardship provides an important nuance to this integration of social engagement. The possibilities of social engagement are constrained by resources and context. We are responsible for using the resources and influence we have for the good of others, recognising that other people in other contexts and with different resources will have other responsibilities. While there will be a diversity of concrete expressions of 'justice, mercy, and truth', such expressions are integral to the identity and mission of churches who claim to embody the Wesleyan heritage.

## **Holiness and mission in the context of migration**

The social and political context of Europe is vastly different from that of eighteenth-century England and we cannot simply apply Wesley's insight to contemporary issues. Rather we are required to reimagine critically and constructively what 'justice, mercy, and truth' require in our context. A key feature of contemporary European context is migration. To rephrase Wesley's famous dictum, 'the world has come to our parish'.

Migration has been a feature of human history since early humans left the African savannah to spread throughout the globe. European history has been shaped by the complex interaction of diverse national, ethnic and political groupings which have migrated from one area to another. Despite this, the dynamics of contemporary migration have become an increasingly contentious political and social issue across Europe.<sup>59</sup>

The rise of migrant communities within Europe is happening at the same time as rampant secularism is eroding the traditional role played by Christianity in many European societies. Formerly dominant Churches are losing or have lost their position of socio-cultural authority and influence, and are increasingly being reduced to interesting relics or tourist attractions from a past age. However, the intersection of rising secularism and the increasing presence of migrant populations creates a new opportunity for Churches to rediscover and reconceptualise their identity and mission. It is a *kairos* for Christianity, a time of unique opportunity but also radical challenge that has the potential to reshape the future of Christianity in Europe.

The challenge posed by the presence of migrant populations is multifaceted. I will focus on the space created by the intersection of secularism and migration

for European Churches within the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition to reconceptualise one aspect of their identity and mission. That is, what it means to be a community committed to the formation of a holy people – a people whose life is characterised by ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. The focus here is not on migrant Churches or congregations but on Churches whose membership is predominantly constituted by people who are rooted in the socio-cultural identity of the particular country.

### *(Re)discovering the identity of the Church*

Over the centuries the identity of European Christianity in its diverse expressions has been deeply entwined with the dominant socio-cultural matrix. On the one hand, Churches have legitimated and nurtured the ideological and cultural identity of European societies; on the other, influential forces within the socio-cultural matrix have supported dominant Churches. This symbiotic relationship between Christianity and the socio-cultural matrix is unravelling, resulting in a sense of loss of identity and purpose for many Churches. At the same time the presence of migrant populations poses a challenge to the dominant secular socio-cultural matrix as a consequence of their alternative cultural values and practices – values and practices that are often complexly related to deep-seated religious convictions.

In this context the Churches of all confessions must resist the temptation to seek to recover the role of being the guardians of the European cultural heritage. Methodist Churches need to (re)discover their identity as communities of ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. In contrast to Wesley’s letter to King George III such a (re)discovery will not lead to a position of passive submission to the state nor to an alignment with conservative political forces. Rather it will lead to Churches becoming critical and troublesome communities within society whose identity is shaped by its creative embodiment of ‘justice, mercy, and truth’. Their proclamation, but above all their praxis, ought to become a constant challenge to society, representing an alternative to the dominant culture, an alternative whose primary characteristic is not legalistic moralism nor increasingly exotic piety, but rather concrete engagement on behalf of and in solidarity with the excluded and suffering other.

The increasing presence of migrants of other faiths, particularly but not exclusively Muslims, has provoked a vigorous reaction from many conservative Europeans that argues for discriminatory action and legislation against Islam in the name of defending Europe’s Christian identity. The consequence is that,

despite increasing secularisation, the traditional identification of European culture and Christianity has been reasserted to reject the presence of migrants from other cultural and religious traditions. Hence Churches are challenged to articulate clearly in word and action what constitutes Christian identity. Wesley's critique of European society as a consequence of its failure to be characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth'<sup>60</sup> points in an alternative direction. Authentic Christian identity is not verified by claims to a historic tradition, nor by religious practices, but by the praxis of 'justice, mercy, and truth'. Hence, with Wesley, contemporary Methodist Churches need to critique and reject the simplistic identification of Christianity and European culture. In contrast they ought to assert in word and praxis that 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with those excluded by the dominant society is central to the identity of Christianity. Hence the identity of the Churches in the Methodist tradition is manifested as they embody 'justice, mercy, and truth' towards those of other religious and cultural traditions and not in the xenophobic rejection of the other.

### *Migrating to the margins*

Secularisation is increasingly removing Christianity from the centre of European cultures and societies. Decreasing church attendance is accompanied by loss of status and the traditional social and cultural influence of the Churches. This change needs to be grasped as a challenge to renewal by relocation. Churches are called to follow Jesus outside the city gates, rediscovering the Wesleyan wisdom of locating themselves among those who exist on the margins of society. It is here that the presence of migrant communities provides a new opportunity for Churches to discover a new centre among the excluded.

Migrants are not a uniform group. There are highly qualified migrants who have been headhunted by major companies for lucrative positions. There are foreign executives employed by multinational companies at the expense of local people. There are people who have left their home country temporarily or permanently in order to escape desperate economic conditions to find the resources to provide for their own needs and those of their families who remain behind. Some are undocumented workers who perform menial tasks for starvation wages, many in appalling conditions and under constant threat of discovery and deportation. Others are documented but their educational qualifications are not recognised and they are forced to work in basic jobs. There are temporary workers, particularly from Eastern Europe, who are paid low wages, with little legal protection and who suffer a variety of forms of

discrimination. There are asylum seekers and refugees who have fled violence and war and who face a mountain of bureaucratic obstacles to obtain the right to live and work in the country of refuge. Then there are the victims of human trafficking who work in the sex industry. Churches that relocate themselves on the margins are Churches that stand in solidarity with the victimised and excluded migrants and embody 'justice, mercy, and truth' in relation to them.

*'Justice, mercy, and truth' in the context of migration*

What concretely do 'justice, mercy, and truth' require of Methodist (and other) Churches in Europe today?

The commitment to truth requires that all our responses to the issue of migration be based on a careful, critical and nuanced analysis of the causes and consequences of migration. Such an analysis must recognise the contested character of knowledge and the diverse political and economic interests that influence and in some cases distort information provided to the public. In keeping with Wesley's focus on the 'outcasts of men', such an analysis needs to assume the perspective of the impact on the marginalised, the poor, the exploited, the powerless and the victims, rather than on the wealthy and the powerful. The analysis must be nuanced, recognising the complexity and diversity of contexts, motivations and consequences of migration. The commitment to truth challenges Churches not only to analyse but also to propagate the truth and hence to provide the broader public with the information that they have discovered.

The commitment to justice challenges Churches and Christians to become involved in the political processes to promote legislative approaches that are rooted in a critical analysis of migration, that affirm the dignity and value of all human beings, the right of all to due legal process, and an orientation towards the powerless and the victims. Concretely this includes educating congregation members, particularly those who have voting rights, and a direct engagement with broader society in the form of public theology. Many migrants, particularly asylum seekers, victims of various forms of trafficking and exploited labourers, have no access to legal support or even information as to legal processes. A practical embodiment of the commitment to justice could include a variety of projects to provide legal information and support to such people.

The commitment to mercy challenges Churches to be the voice of the voiceless, the silenced and the victims – these include not only those who are present in European countries but also those who never arrive. Mercy requires deeds as

well as words. Many Churches and Christian organisations are engaged in a variety of projects aimed at addressing the basic needs of migrants, ranging from providing food and household necessities, helping people find accommodation and work, to language course and skills training. Further, mercy as Wesley viewed it included a concern for the spiritual well-being of all, hence it requires Churches to challenge their members to engage in the pursuit of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in relation to migrants for this is integral to the spiritual well-being of those who are not migrants, who have the resources to empower the marginalised or who benefit from policies and practices that discriminate against and exploit migrants.

### *(Re)affirming the centrality of worship and spiritual formation*

This (re)discovery of the identity of Churches of all traditions as communities characterised by the practice of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with outcasts does not undermine or reduce the significance of the communal worship and sacramental life of the Church, nor the importance of spiritual formation. On the contrary, they obtain a new and intensified significance.

The communal worship of the Church, particularly as it is consummated in the Eucharist, is of fundamental importance. In the Eucharist the congregation gathers in the presence of God manifested in the Crucified One; it comes to a renewed awareness of the love of God in Christ; it discovers again God's 'justice, mercy, and truth'; it brings to God society in all its complexity and pain, and is renewed and strengthened for its mission in the world. In the context of a secularised society Wesley's affirmation of the importance of regular communion regains a new and heightened importance as the place where God's personal accepting, liberating, healing and transforming presence is encountered. It is this that distinguishes Churches from a host of non-governmental organisations. The regular retelling and exposition of the narratives of God's presence and action in the life of Israel and Jesus gives a particular shape to the Christian praxis and proclamation of 'justice, mercy, and truth'.

Churches will only become communities of people characterised by 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with the excluded through a process of deliberate spiritual formation. Central to the early Methodist praxis of holiness was the system of classes and related small groups. These groups provided the context for mutual accountability, encouragement and support for the difficult task of living a holy life in a hostile society. In the context of secularised societies shaped by diverse political, social and economic forces such small groups can



become places for mutual strengthening, reflection, encouragement and accountability as Churches become counter-cultural communities.

The proclamation of the gospel regains a new significance as the call to experience the transforming love of God within the community of the Church and so to participate in its embodiment of 'justice, mercy, and truth'. In contrast to Wesley's emphasis on 'fleeing the wrath to come', a concept that has lost any meaning and significance in contemporary Europe, evangelism becomes the announcement of what God has done in the crucified and resurrected Christ, what God is doing through the Spirit, and an invitation to turn around and participate in God's action in the world. Such an invitation includes the critique of lifestyles, behaviour patterns and institutional forms that embody injustice, cruelty and falsehood as detrimental to the spiritual well-being of perpetrators and bystanders. In this way evangelism becomes the recovery in new words of Jesus' call: 'Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust the good news!' (Mk 1:14, Common English Bible).

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of resonance between the language of holiness and contemporary European cultures the understanding of mission as spreading scriptural holiness can contribute to a relevant conceptualisation of the ministry of the Church in a pluralistic and secular context when holiness is understood as the practice of 'justice, mercy, and truth' in solidarity with the excluded. To affirm this is, however, to begin a journey to a new way of being the Church. The goal of this journey will be discovered on the way as we grapple with the complex issues of what the praxis of justice and mercy require in the concrete context of migration in Europe.

## Notes

1. 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley and Others' in Wesley 2011, p. 845.
2. This basic understanding is described in 'The General Spread of the Gospel', Sermon 63, in Wesley 1985, pp. 485–499.
3. Details of these developments can be found in Streiff 2003.
4. See Thompson 2011.
5. See Runyon 1998, pp. 82–101 and 222–233, and Klaiber 2014, pp. 184–223. For a relational interpretation of Wesley, see McEwan 2015.



6. *The Doctrine of Original Sin: According to Scripture, Reason and Experience*, in Wesley 2012, p. 277.
7. 'On Patience', Sermon 83 in Wesley 1986, p. 175.
8. *Thoughts on Christian Perfection* in Wesley 2013, p. 63.
9. *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* in Wesley 1989, pp. 67 and 68.
10. 'Of Former Things', Sermon 102 in Wesley 1986, p. 448.
11. 'On Living without God', Sermon 130 in Wesley 1987, p. 174.
12. See for example 'The Lord our Righteousness', Sermon 20 in Wesley 1984, p. 452, and 'Original Sin', Sermon 44 in Wesley 1985, p. 175.
13. Comment on 1 John 4:11, Wesley 1976, p. 914.
14. See Sermon 44, 'Original Sin' in Wesley 1985, p. 175, and 'New Birth' in Wesley 1985, p. 188.
15. 'Sermon the Mount VII', Sermon 28 in Wesley 1984, p. 614.
16. See 'The Witness of our Own Spirit', Sermon 12, §12, in Wesley 1984, p. 307.
17. See 'The Almost Christian', Sermon 2 in Wesley 1984, p. 140.
18. 'To His Majesty King George II' in Wesley 1987b, p. 105.
19. 'The Mystery of Iniquity', Sermon 61, §33, in Wesley 1985, pp. 467 and 468, and *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 70–75.
20. Journal entry for 3 July 1761 in Wesley 1992, p. 333.
21. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 70.
22. See Brendlinger 2006.
23. See Green 1961, p. 178, and Hammond 2014, pp. 178–189.
24. See the many examples in Marquardt 1992.
25. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 59–79.
26. Wesley 2013, pp. 36–40.
27. Wesley 2013, pp. 37 and 38.
28. Wesley 2013, p. 39.
29. Wesley 2013, p. 39.
30. For a detailed discussion of works of mercy, see Cummings 2014.
31. 'The Scripture Way of Salvation', Sermon 43 in Wesley 1985, p. 166.
32. 'The Important Question', Sermon 84 in Wesley 1985, p. 191.
33. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 76 and 77.
34. See Cummings 2014, pp. 41 and 42.
35. See 'Self Denial', Sermon 48 in Wesley 1985, p. 248.
36. 'The Danger of Riches', Sermon 87 in Wesley 1985, p. 244.
37. 'On Zeal', Sermon 92 in Wesley 1985, p. 313.
38. 'The Good Steward', Sermon 51 in Wesley 1985, pp. 282–298.
39. 'Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Eighth', Sermon 28 in Wesley 1984, p. 630.
40. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 75–79.
41. *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part III*, §3.35, in Wesley 1989a, p. 316.
42. See for example Hymn 29, verse 5, in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodist* (Wesley 1989b, p. 117): 'Outcasts men, to you I call,/ Harlots, and

- publicans, and thieves'. He also uses the phrase to describe the poor who were the audience of his open-air preaching: see *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* Part III (Wesley 1989a, p. 305), to slaves in *Thoughts upon Slavery* (Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 79), to people in countries whom he considered to lack the benefits of civilisation (see Sermon 69, 'The Imperfection of Human Knowledge' in Wesley 1985, p. 579).
43. Wesley describes aspects of this in sections 10–15 of his 'A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist' in Wesley 1989c, pp. 272–280. For a discussion of his ministry in Oxford, see Heitzenrater 2013, pp. 44–54.
  44. For detailed discussions of Wesley's focus on the poor and underclasses, see Marquardt 1992, pp. 27–34, Heitzenrater 2002, and Lloyd 2002.
  45. See Marquardt 1992, pp. 77–86.
  46. See Madden 2010.
  47. 'On the Wedding Garment', Sermon 127 in Wesley 1987, p. 147; similar examples can be found in 'On the Death of George Whitefield', Sermon 53 in Wesley 1985, p. 243, 'The General Spread of the Gospel', Sermon 63 in Wesley 1985, p. 488, Hymn 515 in *A Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodist* in Wesley 1989b, p. 707, and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in Wesley 2013, p. 190.
  48. See Heitzenrater 1995.
  49. Wesley 1979, vol. 12, p. 300.
  50. Wesley 1979, vol. 12, p. 301.
  51. See Hymn 204 in Wesley 1989b, pp. 335 and 336.
  52. See Sermon 63, 'The General Spread of the Gospel' in Wesley 1985, pp. 494 and 495.
  53. *Thoughts upon Slavery* in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 59–79.
  54. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 79.
  55. See Pettigrew 2013.
  56. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, pp. 70 and 71.
  57. *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4:9 in Wesley 1979, vol. 11, p. 75.
  58. See Leclerc 2001, and Gammie 1989, pp. 71–96.
  59. For a helpful summary of contemporary migration and the issues it raises, see Snyder 2012, pp. 51–126.
  60. See for example 'The Mystery of Iniquity', Sermon 61, §28–36, in Wesley 1985, pp. 464–470.

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# Mission-shaped Methodism and Fresh Expressions

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*The Mission-Shaped Church report by the Church of England prompted the Methodist Church and the Church of England in the UK to respond to the dislocation being felt between the inherited model of church and the missiological challenges of the twenty-first century. The most significant ecumenical development arising from the report was the formation of the Fresh Expressions initiative, whose sole task was to release leaders and communities to found churches for the 'unchurched'.*

*Examples of Anglican fresh expressions are much researched, but Methodist contributions less so. This essay argues that Methodist people, as people of a holiness movement of mission and ministry, have much to offer to the current ecclesial debate. There is a need for fresh expressions to be denominationally distinctive before they can be distilled into something new.*

EMERGING CHURCH • FRESH EXPRESSIONS • LEADERSHIP • METHODIST • MISSION • EVANGELISM • CULTURE

## Introduction

Fresh Expressions and Methodism have a long and intimate history. This essay explores the context of this ecumenical relationship, before arguing that a rediscovery of denominational distinctiveness may enable Methodism to gain self-confidence afresh, and ultimately liberate the Fresh Expressions organisation from the threat of mediocrity.

The essay is structured in two parts. The first section explores the influence of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report of 2004, and the subsequent missional move of a 'mixed economy' which has flourished across the UK in the subsequent decade.<sup>1</sup> This rehearses the ongoing discourse surrounding the development and evolution of fresh expressions around the world. The second section takes seriously the underlying Anglican tone, tenor and behaviour within the charitable organisation, and offers four charisms by which Methodism is not only seen to be a significant contributory missiological and ecclesial partner to the initiative, but pushes still further to contest that Methodism always has been a fresh expression – a pragmatic missiological response to a contemporary context. It is no surprise that fresh expressions have gained traction – not only are they pragmatically attractive (they work), but the missional imperative is not alien to Methodists or Methodist missiologists and practitioners. The four charisms are: a history of tensions and schism; Central Halls as a model example of context-driven mission; small groups as a vehicle for formation, accountability and fundraising; and an open table which speaks of both inclusivity and Christology at the heart of what can occasionally be the province of independent-minded leaders.

This essay is a development from a DThM thesis awarded in 2012, entitled 'Challenging Leadership: Mission-Shaped Presbyters in Methodist Fresh Expressions'. Some of the evidence in this thesis has been anonymised to protect the identities of those involved in this particular piece of qualitative work.

## Context

In 2004, the Archbishop's Council published the much-awaited *Mission-Shaped Church* report. It subsequently became a best-seller, and laid the foundation for the Fresh Expressions Initiative. The report itself was the result of a two-year consultation process responding to the challenges discovered during the

'decade of evangelism' and taking into consideration some of the challenges beginning to be heard via the emerging church debate in the UK and the USA. As such, it is the most significant piece of missional work done by the Church of England in the last 20 years, commanding a reimagining of ecclesial vision, a multimillion-pound budget for the Fresh Expressions Initiative, the development of Ordained Pioneer Missioner<sup>2</sup> training and the institution of Bishop's Mission Orders<sup>3</sup> in order to support the work of communities within the parish system. The report has subsequently influenced the missional strategy for many denominations and agencies, inspired a Pioneer Ministry Pathway in the Methodist Church, provided the basis for a canon of literature through two series of books: one themed on mission-shaped contexts, and the other on theological and ecclesiological discoveries from fresh expressions practitioners across the Global North. It was a report which stimulated (and still stimulates) a great deal of debate and discussion both about the current outcomes and the theological rationale within it.<sup>4</sup>

According to *Mission-Shaped Church*, the Church 'must prepare for change. New expressions of church and mission will be needed, new ways of thinking on ethics, politics and evangelism.'<sup>5</sup> The report outlined the contemporary cultural climate by drawing conclusions from data on social trends, and then further developing the changing themes of a networked society,<sup>6</sup> consumer culture, and post-Christendom. 'Church plants and fresh expressions of church represent the emergence of a diametrically different approach [to mission] that is both theologically appropriate and strategically significant.'<sup>7</sup> The report notes the cultural shifts taking place in a UK context and offers a narrative which both takes these shifts seriously and offers the Church of England means and methods of response. The intention is a missiology based on an incarnational model of contextual theology, rather than the attractional model that inherently superseded the report.

The influence of networks, globalisation and consumer culture can be seen in the suggested groupings of the then newly coined term 'fresh expression'. Although the list of 12 groupings no longer forms a part of Fresh Expressions working definitions, it is important to note the influence of consumer culture and third-space literature with the inclusion of cafe-church;<sup>8</sup> the contextual theology of liberation theology in the inclusion of base-ecclesial communities; the importation of American evangelicalism through the language of seeker church;<sup>9</sup> and the liturgical rituals developed by alternative worship communities.<sup>10</sup> The report attempts to provide the cross-sections of church life and experience being experimented with at the turn of the millennium. It is a report



which gives permission for creativity and intentional mission, theologically defended using *missio Dei* missiology as its foundation. It is significant that much of this early language, rich and broad theological reflection and global conversation regarding mission seems to have been lost in current practice. The World Council of Churches' statement on mission and evangelism, *Towards a Common Vision*, offers a significant pneumatological counterbalance to Fresh Expressions' pragmatism.<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, 56 per cent of Methodist circuits had at least one self-defined fresh expression, totalling 846 fresh expressions of church occurring in association with Methodist churches. Fresh expressions of church are thus present in a majority of circuits and are becoming an increasing feature of church life. In turn, presbyters and deacons within these circuits are being asked to provide more and varied forms of worship and community for the various groups within the local circuit and church context. The statistics for the current quadrennial are yet to be released, but they nonetheless seem to maintain this trend towards self-identified missional experiments taking place in local contexts and churches. Fresh expressions are a vital part of twenty-first-century mission and ministry, and yet qualitatively may not be achieving what is expected of them.

According to the Fresh Expressions organisation,

A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.

It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.<sup>12</sup>

There is an argument, to suggest that many self-identified fresh expressions are extraordinary experiments in mission and ministry, but are not actually fresh expressions. They use *missio Dei* missiology as their theological framework, and they are beginning to engage in creative forms of mission and worship – but their outcome is not an ecclesial community in its own right. This is not to criticise what is happening in local contexts, but to suggest that new confidence and inspiration might be better placed not by seeing these



ventures as exotic, or even worse part of the mission-shaped bandwagon, but as expressions of Methodism in missional mode which does not need an external agency and language to justify their behaviour and existence.

Although much debunked in missiological literature and practice, one achievement of Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank's scorching criticism of Fresh Expressions, *For the Parish*, is to recognise that at its heart *Mission-Shaped Church* is about the preservation or evolution of the parish system. For Fresh Expressions as an ecumenical organisation at its inception, this remains a neglected outcome and yet a hidden agenda.

*Mission-Shaped Church* states that 'it explores how we are called to be and to do church, and the benefits and disadvantages of existing Church of England expressions of church'.<sup>13</sup> As the strategies of Fresh Expressions have been invested in, this language of inherited church is still dominant. Fresh Expressions is not offering an ecumenical or 'deep'<sup>14</sup> vision of ecclesio-missiology, despite the openness to intentional dialogue and funding from denominational and agency partners. I want to suggest, along with Roger Walton, that it is important for all Christian discipleship to 'dig deep into the traditions as we have received them, to read them critically and creatively and to be open to their readings of us'.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the report is from the Archbishop's Council, the Church of England terminology should not be over-critiqued. However, if the report is going to continue to challenge and renew all the Churches in strategic partnership with the organisation, the Anglican default for church and mission needs to be challenged. 'The Anglican calling, because of theological conviction, is to be a church for all ... To be a Church for the nation, the holes in our national network need to be filled'.<sup>16</sup> Neither in ecumenical conversations and commendations of this report, nor in the subsequent missional development, has such a theological conviction been scrutinised, which given the assumption of a post-Christendom context seems somewhat naive.

The relegation of denominational DNA to something that is secondary to the debate could be seen as a manoeuvre made from a position of organisational power. Denominational DNA after all does not matter if the presumed model is that which is already known, cherished and held in esteem. Fresh Expressions has an Anglican default setting which transfers into all parts of the organisation, often without critique or comment. One anonymous conversation revealed that Methodists often feel like 'second-class citizens' to both the Methodist circuit and to the Fresh Expressions organisation. It may well be that once again,

one of Methodism's inheritances is the ability to question assumed authority structures and thus give the opportunity for other denominations and parachurch partners and associates to begin to share their codes of DNA in the theological reflection too. Although not meant to be complimentary, it is no bad thing that 'our [Anglican] doctrine of the Church has leapt, not drifted, in the direction of Free Church Protestantism'.<sup>17</sup> The DNA metaphor is useful as it also provokes the potential for shared genes and identity markers, and for offspring to evolve who resemble their parents but who have a unique identity all of their own, just as Methodism evolved out of Anglicanism and Anglicanism out of the Reformation. An unappealing alternative vision to this is that fresh expressions merely evolve from the known gene pool of theological and ecclesiological knowledge and reproduce the congenital substance of what has been before.

*For the Parish* sees no irony in critiquing the ecumenically diverse Fresh Expressions initiative on not being parish based, 'they are not intended to be out-workings of the mission of the local church but independent entities without any relation to the parish in which they operate'.<sup>18</sup> *Mission-Shaped Church* indicated that missional ecumenism was aspirational. The cross-denominational constituency of Fresh Expressions (the organisation) means that it is impossible to suggest that a parish model will now universally work for fresh expressions (local communities and contexts).<sup>19</sup> Yet the felt sensibility is that an ecumenical missiology is still aspirational in policy as well as in practice.

More recent works in the fresh expressions canon are willing to be more critical of the Anglican bias to the organisation, with Mike Moynagh beginning to advocate for a progression in understanding and practice which demonstrates that 'churches are not bringing something entirely novel into the church. Nor are they just repeating the past. They are opening a chapter that carries the church's story forwards'.<sup>20</sup> However, there is little strategic policy or even accidental engagement with the many denominational and parachurch partners who now make up the core supporters (numerical and financial) to the fresh expressions corpus, regarding how their theological and ecclesiological contributions can challenge and evolve Fresh Expressions.

The intention of this essay is not to fuel more of the binary debate about the effectiveness and success of fresh expressions (or otherwise) – but instead to inspire a dwindling Methodist Church to take the challenge of contextual mission and faithful discipleship seriously, and to press deeper into the

potential of Methodism to once again be a community of people who are socially and biblically literate and engaged, and who invite people to participate in the kingdom of God wherever it is discovered. Methodism has certainly not got it all together, and the current statistics about terminal decline indicate that there are many things which are failing to connect with those inside and outside of the Methodist fold. Methodist people can still transformatively contribute to the ecumenical landscape of mission in a postmodern context.

## Denominational distinctiveness and contributory DNA

The missiologist Stuart Murray Williams notes, 'For the church to understand itself as a movement, not an institution, it needs to know its history and destiny. Movements are dynamic, people sharing history and traditions and journeying together towards a longed-for future.'<sup>21</sup> If, as I suspect, he is right, then the contemporary challenge for Fresh Expressions (the organisation) and fresh expressions (the local context-driven examples of missional communities) is to become more confident in the wider Methodist identity narrative, and to begin to incorporate their own practice and understanding into their community stories. This is a zeitgeist moment for Methodist people to reclaim and rehearse some of our history and experience, and to live confidently in the reality and challenges of being a Church with a mission-shaped praxis at our heart.

Methodism has a narrative to contribute to the mission-shaped picture, which risks being drowned out in the prevailing societal consumer desire for all things new and better. Jane Craske comments: 'Given Methodism's origins, it should be at the forefront of mission ... Methodism should equally be at the forefront of enabling British Christianity to see what the contemporary equivalent of that past Methodist calling should be in its mission.'<sup>22</sup> In this subsection, I want to suggest four themes (or charisms) that could enable Methodism to contribute to the prevailing mission-shaped agenda: a history of tensions and schisms; Central Halls as a model of context-driven mission; the discipling role of small-group fellowship; and an open sacramental table. A rediscovery of these, and an intentional focus on some of our expectations and deployment of leadership at all levels of the Methodist Church would, I argue, increase Methodist confidence at a time when denominational identity is treated in a

lacklustre and apathetic spirit, and when this ambivalence is assumed to be post-denominationalism rather than lack of clarity.

### *Tensions and schisms*

In a context of profound cultural and philosophical shifts, it is no surprise that current missiological endeavours are faced with tensions and conflict. This subsection identifies three key areas of tension and conflict: the tensions between church and state authority – and why Methodism may have a powerful influence in the wider Fresh Expressions evolution because of its dissenting history; the tension between inherited forms of leadership and mission; and finally the real and present danger that communities which are authentically fresh expressions may need the freedom and permission to schism well. Methodism is no stranger to tensions, conflict and schism – indeed we are less than a century from the 1932 Deed of Union which sought to respond to the increasing fragmentation of the Holiness movements of the Evangelical Revival. It is this history, therefore, that can be part of Methodism's contributory DNA into the Fresh Expressions agenda: how to approach conflict, dissention, power and schism without fear or heavy-handed bureaucracy.

## **1. Tension between Church and State**

Murray-Williams asks 'whether we can re-imagine Christianity in a world we no longer control'.<sup>23</sup> Reimagined Christianity will need to understand power in a way not experienced by Anglicanism. Individual examples of fresh expressions offer examples of what 're-imagined Christianity' might look like in a post-Christian environment from a denomination that has never sought to be in political or ecclesiological control. Steve Bruce goes so far as to conclude that the very reason for Methodism's success was that it was a movement of social protest,<sup>24</sup> and Malcolm Gladwell uses Methodism as an example of the transformation that can come about with a small group of people committed to change.<sup>25</sup> Methodism is positioned in such a place that as a denomination it has a history of schism and unity, small units of class meetings which are intentionally outward-focused for the purpose of mission, and a passion deep within its DNA which is about enabling people of every social class within society to have an identity and a respectability that other power structures have been and are keen to prevent. Even within a secularised society, therefore, this juxtaposition between a corporate missional unit and personal esteem means that Methodism is implicitly able to adapt and adjust for the priority of mission in a way that other more powerful organisations fail to do.

Furthermore, Methodism offers a continuing model of a renewal movement, with all the pervading features that that entails. Howard Snyder identifies the markers of a renewal movement as including tensions that appear between the institution or denomination and the new movement. This tension consequently means that the movement also finds itself in conflict with the world, and subsequently calls people to greater radical commitment. Renewal movements are also noticeable because of the significant number of lay people who take on positions of leadership. Radical engagement with and against the world begins to evolve in working on behalf of the poor and those who are marginalised for whatever reason. Renewal movements have a strong sense of justice. The final mark of a renewal movement is the energy it creates as more and more people are enlisted.<sup>26</sup> Conflict, justice, lay leadership and energy are all features of renewal movements and could provide the language to describe what is happening in fresh expressions of church in a more Methodist-friendly language. By maintaining the language of renewal, there is also the implication to underpin missional activity with a pneumatological source – which, although inherent in Fresh Expressions ideology, can often be neglected.

## **2. Tension of missional and inherited forms of leadership**

There is a subversive undercurrent within much missional experience in the Methodist Church, especially for ordained colleagues who are engaging in missional and fresh expressions forms of ministry, that they are doing so at the cost of a circuit appointment. Financially, this may well be true – many fresh expressions are expensive projects to facilitate and run in the long term – although this does not make them any less significant. Anecdotally, one Messy Church participant was overheard to say, 'I like Messy Church. This is the only hot meal my child has all week.' Needless to say, that context improved the quality of food provided in light of that disclosure.

What becomes more problematic, however, is where leaders involved in fresh expressions – either lay or ordained – begin to be publicly exposed as those who are predisposed to doing the 'fun parts' of ministry at the cost of what is expected within inherited models. One practitioner has reflected, 'I am treated as though my leadership of a fresh expression is the cherry on a cake the circuit never asked to be iced in the first place.' Fresh expressions leaders are often seen as rebellious, entrepreneurial – or even infantile – in their opinion and behaviours, with their exuberance and questioning seen as threatening to the status quo. On more than one occasion, comments have been made about leaders needing to 'grow up'; a sentiment towards their childish behaviour

rather than a discipleship desire. In turn, and anecdotally, the risk is that these leaders become over-managed, rather than enabled to flourish in a context.

Fresh expressions and community development is viewed by some in circuit and district oversight as an additional, extra-curricular activity for a presbyter – and a problem for lay people who are no longer taking up formal lay appointments in the Church. Inherited and missional modes are set at odds with each other, and one risks suffocating if not euthanising the other. This tension, therefore, may require some significant policy work in order to facilitate a true ‘mixed economy’ rather than a competitive market.

The Methodist Church, if it takes seriously its history and heritage, will always be a place of protest, social transformation and mission. The risk of the current mixed model of leadership is that both communities and leaders become confused about what they are called to do and be. This in turn fosters a lack of confidence in the local congregation about both the value of the denomination and the cultivation and sharing of a community and individual narrative. Ultimately, the risked consequence of this is a lack of confidence, or disappointment, in God. There is a clear and present danger with the current tension between Church as institution and Church as mission, which results in leaders becoming de-churched themselves, and thereby becoming frustrated, cynical, embittered and angry towards the institution that enabled (and funded) their experimentation in the first place.

I want to suggest that the tension between inherited (or institutional) Methodism and the excited fervour enabled by fresh expressions is not a call to something new – but a rediscovery of our Methodist and missional DNA. There is greater freedom, creativity and verve if we are able to narrate fresh expressions as being authentically Methodist – rather than having to justify their existence as something distinctive and other. Furthermore, this intentional shift of language would free up Fresh Expressions to press deeper into its own aims and outcomes to enable true fresh expressions to develop with greater ecclesiological and denominational connectedness. There are examples of local leaders working and praying hard in new missional opportunities, and yet their work is misunderstood, stymied; it is still perceived as an extraordinary threat to the status quo, rather than a spirit-led and pragmatic response to terminal decline, dislocation from public opinion, and limiting understandings of lay and ordained ministry.

### 3. The freedom to separate from a centralised institution

So far, much of the supporting data on fresh expressions and post-Christendom mission as presented in this essay is from within a mainstream approach to the topic. However, there are more radical voices who would prefer a more permanent shift away from any institutional backing. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, for example, argue that the strain between movement and institution is necessary, suggesting 'that renewal movements typically live in tension with the dominant church institution.'<sup>27</sup> They develop their argument inciting the conclusion that movements exist better without an institutional infrastructure. Academics such as Peter Rollins push this further by concluding that by adopting Fresh Expressions into the institutional fold is actually a subversive action designed to silence the movement altogether: 'By the very process of [providing space], the radical voice of these groups is actually suppressed.'<sup>28</sup> Methodism has been referred to as the 'second-class citizen of Fresh Expressions' and as an institutional Church has a long history of remaining a small player on the denominational playing field. Further insights into the significance of power and separation rather than integration might also be found within the practical theology of Hyun Kyung Chung in Asia. Chung 'raises the question not only of the way in which one dominant (colonial) culture can silence another (indigenous) expression; but also how issues of power and difference within a culture can be adequately considered and addressed.'<sup>29</sup> Such a conversation is beyond the scope of this essay, but raises some interesting points of cognition with the Belonging Together project and the ongoing development of Cultural Fellowship groups in the UK.

Methodism has never been immune to splits, schisms and division on missional grounds. A rediscovery of Methodist identity at the heart of current missional and fresh expression praxis may have the (un)desired effect of requiring a more local and context-driven form of oversight than the Methodist Church institution is able to offer. Facilitating this as a positive experience, especially in light of earlier comments about the psychological well-being of leaders, remains a potential outcome to which attention may need to be paid both locally and connexionally.

#### *Central Halls*

As one Superintendent has observed, 'Central Halls were the Fresh Expressions of their day.' Central Halls, therefore, have the renewed potential to enable focused and specifically contextual ministry and missional appointments for



teams of presbyters, deacons and lay people. In contemporary terms, this need not be about buildings per se. The rediscovery of a theology and ecclesial practice of Central Halls enables flexibility within Methodist structures, as Central Halls have their own standing orders and legal status. There is also the intentionality that the context is the primary focus of mission and ministry, not necessarily the original inherited congregants. The *missio Dei* necessarily means that God is active in and around all areas of culture and community life. Central Halls have intentionally focused on spiritual, social and civic engagement in missional terms.

This is not to say that the Central Hall experiment of the twentieth century was a wholehearted success story. Indeed, the urban prioritisation of the mission of the Halls has been an abject failure in many locations. However, the missional theory of Central Hall ecclesiology maintains a focus on contextually appropriate service to a local community and a relevant vehicle for authentic and passionate communication of the gospel. As John Hull notes, 'the purpose or function of mission is to bring in the Kingdom. In order to do this effectively the mission has (among other things) a church. But the mission is not the church.'<sup>30</sup>

It would be easy to suggest that the city context of the Central Halls has limited appeal and interest for the wider Connexion. However, the missiology and practice of ministry in and around Central Halls, therefore, offers a significant Methodist model of mission which pre-dates Fresh Expressions and the *Mission-Shaped Church* report, and yet offers a model of mission which is about a context-driven expression of worship and mission for the prevailing culture, at a time when arguably the preceding inherited model of church was ineffective for a certain section of society.

Central Hall ecclesiology and missiology, therefore, offer a narrative of fresh expressions which is inherently Methodist, and yet is anything but consumerist, new or alternative. Methodists have been doing 'fresh expressions' for a very long time: in fact, perhaps Methodism has always been a fresh expression. If this is the case, then perhaps reclaiming this narrative is the first step towards a greater confidence in our own identity – and an opportunity and invitation for Fresh Expressions the organisation to incorporate more denominational, historical and ideological DNA into their language, practice and education tools.



### *Small groups*

Statistically, most fresh expression communities attract a small number of people – although in context so do a majority of Methodist congregations, so there is some parity required in how this is explored. However, what remains a significant observation for both fresh and inherited forms of church and worshipping communities is that small groups and fellowship units remain the vehicle for growth, discipleship and pastoral oversight. A focus on small groups within Methodism enables a conversation based on the complementarity of intentional faith development, personal and corporate accountability, financial governance and missional endeavour.

Within the Fresh Expression canon, Davison and Milbank assume that the parish is the formational unit of discipleship. The *From Anecdote to Evidence* report would refute this; there is still the underlying assumption within a primarily Anglican initiative that a parish system, and not a small-group system, is the foremost unit of ongoing formation. Davison and Milbank note, ‘the Parish is where we begin to learn the grammar of the Christian life, to play ourselves like an instrument. It is the nursery of heaven where we encounter all ages and sorts of people.’<sup>31</sup> What if, however, any form of worshipping community – Anglican, Methodist or other – is not the ‘nursery of heaven’ but is one of a number of ways that spiritual development occurs; and that formation as an intentional outworking of that development happens in smaller-sized, context-driven, units?

This is no surprise within a Methodist narrative. As Walton notes:

Wesley was clear what he wanted his system to do. It was to promote scriptural holiness and enable people to make the journey of discipleship together. In doing this, he knew where the groups were located in relation to mission and worship. Class and band meetings were not substitutes for worship ... nor was the small group a primary means of evangelism.<sup>32</sup>

The contribution that Methodism makes to the current missional agendas at work, therefore, is that communities of people intentionally formed, and potentially covenanted together, remain the vehicles for formation and mission. Walton is keen to note, however, that

our context and John Wesley’s are different. This ought to be a warning to those of us who wish to use small groups for our own

and other's formation within our church's life. Valuable though a study of Wesley's small group is, it is unlikely to provide an off-the-shelf model for our own generation.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps fresh expressions are one way of challenging the one-size fits-all 'off-the-shelf' model of formation, and begin to provide Methodism with the renewed sense that context matters. Once again, Methodism's inheritance has the potential to be Fresh Expression's gain if small groups and communities continue to make intentional moves towards faith formation, missional endeavour outside of themselves, and accountability.

Small groups of contextually engaged, prayerful individuals who engage in theological reflection and mission together remains the core of Methodist identity – inspired by the Holy Spirit who is active in the world, however conflicted faith and the world appears. The interest in new monasticism indicates that there is a desire for accountability and spiritual direction. Rules of life and covenantal promises are significant in the ongoing life of some fresh expressions. Methodism's history and heritage has a great deal to offer this conversation, from accountability bands, an annual covenant and covenant discipleship groups.<sup>34</sup> David Lyall concludes, 'Christian discipleship is discovered in living dialogue between the traditions we inherit and our own.'<sup>35</sup> The challenge, therefore, is to promote the dialogue between the Methodist tradition and that experienced by local leaders. The work of Elaine Heath has much to offer this conversation in terms of a Wesleyan paradigm for intentional missional communities in a new monastic matrix.<sup>36</sup> Once again, Methodism's history and contemporary practice are neglected from the Fresh Expressions writing on this subject, and yet there is much to be explored from Methodist spirituality in terms of rules of life, Wesleyan and Holiness communities, and a contemplative posture for whole-life discipleship and missional leadership.

Furthermore, one criteria now projected for the longevity of a fresh expression, beyond its initial missional impetus and towards an ecclesial identity of its own, is that of being self-sustaining. Once again, a Methodist approach takes this seriously. Walton again notes:

It is widely acknowledged that John Wesley's much-admired class meetings started for a purpose different from the one for which they became famous. Originating as a scheme for collecting money to pay off the loan on the Bristol Building, they rapidly became the engine of Methodist spirituality.<sup>37</sup>

There is the potential for a reverse move here: a re-ignition of Methodist confidence as an authentic and intentional missional community invites consideration of financial as well as ethical accountability. In a UK context where financial irregularity remains headline news, a missional approach that has something to say about justice, economics and spirituality may indeed be a prophetic and attractational model of community engagement.

The Methodist practice of small groups for accountability and pastoral oversight, alongside the prevailing house group model for scriptural engagement and faith formation, and the increasing significance of contemplative forms of missional engagement, offers a critical insight into the importance of the number of people actively engaging in any form of Christian community – fresh or inherited. Once again, the Methodist Church is able to share this DNA in the missional conversation as a tried and tested model, and thus further enhance the suggestion that fresh expressions currently work in Methodism because they inherently employ Methodist theology and practice.

### *Open table*

Albert Outler's often misappropriated and much debated Wesleyan quadrilateral finds an ideological home in the theological reflective practice of fresh expression communities. In a context where, in the words of emerging church specialist Dan Kimball, Western culture 'like[s] Jesus, but not the church',<sup>38</sup> mainly due to issues of inclusivity, accessibility and scientific evidence, there is an opportunity for the Methodist Church to be more articulate and overt about prevenient grace and inclusion at the open sacramental table. Taken even further, Methodism's ability to navigate some of the sacramental roadblocks that other denominations within Fresh Expressions face offers once again a model towards the organisation.

The American Methodist missiologist Leonard Sweet states that 'the story of Jesus is the story of the table. You can't think about Jesus without thinking about the table, its meals and its rituals. In fact, if you are reading the Gospels and not getting hungry, you are missing the meat of the Gospels.'<sup>39</sup> This offers a justification for the amount of food consumed at fresh expressions, and the significance of a meal table for contemporary mission. At a deeper level, within the context of Holy Communion, the open table offers a vision of inclusion which remains a central tenet in criticisms of the Church. A recognition of the place of the meal table as a narrative vehicle of the Christian story, as a way of providing sustenance to those who are struggling to cope under austerity, a mechanism to form community, and a memory of the early Church in Acts 2,

the open table is a tangible invitation. Although a pragmatic response to the new, methodical revival movement, the open table may be reinterpreted for contemporary contexts in a way which revitalises traditional Methodism and opens up the invitation for all to participate in the kingdom of God across biblical and ethical boundaries traditionally espoused.

The gift of this for the wider catholic Church is that at the heart of Methodist mission and ecclesiology is a desire to include rather than exclude people. Although not always present in a consensus model of policy-making, the intention and sentiment remains. At the heart of Methodism is a desire to enable all people – whatever cultural, transnational, gender, sexual or financial background they have – to encounter the risen Christ in their midst through the power of the Holy Spirit. The *missio Dei* is about invitation and encounter of all parties involved and necessarily demands willing, robust and intentional openness to change. Questions of power in *missio Dei* are largely ignored, and thus at worst fresh expressions become quirky versions of their founding parents; rather than indigenously authentic expressions of faith development from within the new context.

Crucially, such a reflection also offers a theological counterbalance to the charismatic hyperbole of some fresh expressions practitioners. Rather than leave the identity of the community resolutely in the hands of individual leaders, a refocusing on prevenient grace and the work of the Spirit reshapes the missional endeavour towards a relationship with Jesus rather than an individual leader. Methodism speaks much of this grace and provides the opportunities for this christological calibration – sacramentally and missionally. *Missio Dei* speaks of God's divine action in the world, and our invitation to participate in this. Far too often, growing and mission-minded communities become entwined in the identity of the leader (and vice versa), rather than in the identity of Christ. The fact that all can be saved mitigates this risk, and enables leaders to be vulnerable, servant-hearted and flawed, as much as the people to whom the community is reaching. Such a message is vital in a world where the gospel of media influence is powerful, where celebrity is celebrated and heroes of the faith are hard to come by.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay suggested that the DNA of Fresh Expressions might in fact be subversively and subconsciously Methodist. Therefore, fresh expressions

within Methodism offer the experience and opportunity for the Methodist people to be confident in their traditional identity as a mission-shaped Church. Such a conclusion consequently releases Fresh Expressions to achieve what it set out to achieve – new communities of contextually rich and relevant spiritual seekers finding a brand new ecclesial expression – and something which I contest they are not yet achieving. Further, the conclusion that fresh expressions might actually be Methodist, and that Methodism is in fact a fresh expression in its own right, challenges some of the prevailing economics of mission and policy-making. In turn, this may enable Methodist people to gain confidence in their own pragmatic, missional and discipleship calling in a way that begins to challenge the powerful narrative of terminal decline and insignificance which is restricting revival, growth, vision and significant intentional change.

This essay has offered four themes or charisms to underline this contestation: a history of tensions and schism; Central Halls as a model of *missio Dei*; small groups for financial backing, accountability and formation; and the open table for inclusive invitation to a relationship with Jesus, over and against a relationship with an individual leader or ideology.

Methodism has the potential, if not the present reality, to offer much to Fresh Expressions and wider society, and a renewed self-confidence and inspired narrative may be the first step towards offering more of our DNA into the missional petrie dish. Methodism matters – on its own terms, and because of what we can offer the mission-shaped conversations of the future.

## Notes

1. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004.
2. [www.acpi.org.uk/downloads/Ordained\\_Pioneer\\_Ministers\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://www.acpi.org.uk/downloads/Ordained_Pioneer_Ministers_Guidelines.pdf), accessed 13 April 2011.
3. [www.churchofengland.org/clergy-office-holders/pastoralandclosedchurches/pastoral/bmos.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/clergy-office-holders/pastoralandclosedchurches/pastoral/bmos.aspx), accessed 13 April 2011.
4. See Hull 2006.
5. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 3.
6. The report cites the work of Castells 2000 when it describes the networked society of the twenty-first century. The theory of networks has continued to be of interest to sociologists and to the continuing developments in social media. Further evidence of this can be found in Holland 1998, Johnson 2001, Surowiecki 2004, Brafman and Beckstrom 2006, Shirky 2009, Leadbeater 2009, and Shirky 2010.
7. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 12.

8. Schultz and Jones Yang 1997), Hashemi and Hashemi 2002, Lloyd 2006, Brown 2005), Cohen and Greenfield, 1997), and [www.cafechurch.net/](http://www.cafechurch.net/), accessed 17 April 2011.
9. Hunter III 1996.
10. Baker Gay 2003, Ward 2004, Baker 2010, and Dawn 2010.
11. [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision).
12. [www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis).
13. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 1.
14. 'Deep Church' is a phrase initially coined by C. S. Lewis, but is now used by a number of constituencies to describe what Bretherton and Walker note as 'neither an attempt to simplify, restate or repristinate the Christian tradition, this is tantamount to ancestor worship, nor does it take its bearings from the emerging culture, to do this is simply to assimilate to the prevailing hegemony, rather, to be a deep church means to stand on the cusp or the breaking point of both the Christian tradition and the emerging culture, deeply rooted in the former while fully engaged in the latter'. Walker Bretherton 2007, p. xvii. See also Belcher 2009, and Orr-Ewing and Orr-Ewing 2008.
15. Walton 2009, p. 26.
16. Church of England, Mission-Shaped Church Working Party, 2004, p. 35.
17. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. 41.
18. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. vii.
19. See also Croft 2006, and Bayes and Sledge 2006.
20. Moynah 2012, p. 192.
21. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 277.
22. Jane Craske, 'The Threads With Which We Weave: Towards a Holy Church' in Craske and Marsh 1999, p. 177.
23. Murray-Williams 2004, p. 8.
24. Bruce 2002, pp. 159–161.
25. Gladwell 2000, also quoted by Angela Shier-Jones, 'Pioneering Circuit Ministry', *Epworth Press* 36(3), July 2008, p. 45.
26. Snyder 1997, pp. 24–25.
27. Frost and Hirsch 2003, p. 205.
28. Peter Rollins, 'Biting the Hand that Feeds', in Nelstrop and Percy 2008, p. 72.
29. Graham, Walton and Ward 2005, p. 220, and Chung 1990.
30. Hull 2006, p. 2.
31. Davison and Milbank 2010, p. 211.
32. Walton 2014, p. 124.
33. Walton 2014, p. 124.
34. Walton 2009, p. 179.
35. Lyall 2010, pp. 269–270.
36. See Heath 2010, Heath and Duggins 2014, and Heath 2008.
37. Walton 2014, p. 136.
38. Kimball 2007.
39. Sweet 2014, p. 61.

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# Holiness, grace and mission: revisiting John Wesley's missiological mandate

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*The essence of this article is a fresh exploration of John Wesley's missiological mandate. The objective is to reflect on how to engage in mission in a European context, particularly Great Britain today, from John Wesley's perspective: revisiting the context of Wesley's mission and ministry; exploring some key concepts in John Wesley's making of Methodist theology; and revisiting Wesley's missiological mandate in our contemporary context of mission and ministry. In conclusion, I will contribute to the debate with some practical proposals: rescuing the language of mission, reaffirming the doctrine of the organic unity of the Body of Christ, reinventing ecclesial practices of grace and gratitude, and repositioning Methodist heritage in a bigger perspective.*

MISSIOLOGICAL MANDATE • PREVENIENT GRACE • PERFECTION • SOCIAL HOLINESS • ARMINIANISM • JOHN WESLEY • GRACE • GRATITUDE • REVIVAL • HUMAN DIGNITY

## Introduction

I am a British Methodist minister originally from Benin, West Africa. Here I must confess that deep within me there is a creative tension between what it means to remain truly African as well as being a Christian with British nationality. Being Methodist does not solve but epitomises this dilemma.

It is from that background that I reflect on the challenge of engaging in mission in the European context, more specifically in the UK today. This explains my fascination for rule number 11 as formulated by John Wesley and the early Methodist preachers in their *Helper's Manual*: 'You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you but to those who want you most.'<sup>1</sup> This is a missiological mandate of almost alarming simplicity. However, I agree with William Abraham that we should not 'read this mandate through the lens of the popular evangelicalism that prevails today in our culture.'<sup>2</sup> For, Wesley's evangelical theology was quite different from many forms of twenty-first-century Evangelicalism. In John Wesley's view, what is at stake here is the making of robust disciples who will become salt and light in the world.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, in Wesley's jargon, it is a thorough 'Christian initiation' which encompasses justification and sanctification as the primal goal of salvation. All this is woven into a system of key concepts that include mainly: conviction of sins, repentance, good works, regeneration, adoption, access to the kingdom, assurance, the witness of the Spirit, holiness, perfection in love. This systematic configuration was underpinned by a prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. The presence of this grace was entirely compatible with urgent action in and out of season on the part of those called and equipped by God to preach the gospel and ground people in the faith. So the mandate to save souls is not an authorisation for mere statistics or filling membership returns forms. Nor is it a recipe for cheap conversion.

In the past, some official publications have endeavoured to emphasise the evangelistic roots and the self-identity of Methodism. Such was the case of *Message and Mission of Methodism* (1946), which aimed at revitalising the evangelistic outreach of the Church. In his book *The Social Witness of Methodism* (1948), Maldwyn Edwards highlighted social action by Methodists, modelled by John Wesley as an option for a great social reformation. Tim Macquiban rightly comments that Wesley's witness among the poor, his opposition to the slave trade, as well as providing health and educational services for the masses, 'resonated with the call for Methodist involvement in the affairs of the welfare state.'<sup>4</sup>

The key factor that revived my interest in John Wesley's evangelistic actions and his views on 'holiness, grace and mission' was one of the decisions adopted at the recent Methodist Conference in Birmingham in June 2014 to go back to 'mission and evangelism' as some of the top priorities of the Methodist Church in Great Britain today.

Methodologically, by starting with a fresh assessment of the context in which John Wesley engaged in his ministry and mission work will help us, as William Abraham put it, to avoid the temptation of putting Wesley's missiological mandate 'in the theological microwave and serve it immediately for our own day.'<sup>5</sup> My session on Wesley's contribution to the making of Methodist theology can only be a bird's-eye view. It would be impossible to capture in a short article like this the exhaustive list of all the multiple and complex theological themes developed by Wesley. My analysis of our contemporary context would be vital for the formulation of the practical options that will appear in my concluding section. My argument would be that what is at stake is a challenge to Methodism to move its stories into a bigger perspective. There is an ambivalence between a 'theology of mission' and a 'missionary theology', which remains even though it is true that Methodism started as 'a missionary movement' and that Methodist heritage and contemporary mission is still a crucial topic.

## **Wesley's mission and ministry in context**

One of John Wesley's merits is how he achieved his work against the backcloth of the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century in Britain.<sup>6</sup> In his early days Wesley was influenced by the philosopher John Locke, though he was not one of his wholehearted disciples. Against the official option of the University of Oxford for Aristotle's philosophy, privately people began to read and use John Locke.<sup>7</sup> This is where Wesley had the merit to rise above the standard empiricism of his days represented by John Locke. By doing so, he managed to offer a form of philosophical rationale that was appealing to religious experience as the foundation of Christian faith and theology. Such a philosophic-religious atmosphere influenced Wesley's elaboration of 'Christian perfection' as 'the most distinctive feature of Methodist theology'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, one has to observe that the general political and religious configuration, within which Wesley lived, was one that was shaped by a confessional state and a confessional church. Clearly, religion played a vital role in everyday life

in England in the eighteenth century. Thus religion shaped the political thinking of the period. More specifically, the Church of England was deeply influential, exercising enormous power by insisting on confessional tests for political office and supporting the monarchy in its claim to rule by divine right. Viewed from this universe, William Abraham describes Wesley as a good, solid conservative figure 'committed to the carefully constructed alliance of parliament, church, and monarchy'.<sup>9</sup>

However, if we rely on Wesley's own narrative, he portrays himself as a man on a mission and, like most people on a mission, he makes his case by painting the religious context of his time in pretty gloomy terms. Besides, Wesley's standards as to what constitute real Christianity are so high that not even his beloved Methodists could escape the hammer of his wrath. But, what we now know is that Wesley lived in a society and in a world that was more Christian than he allowed.

This complex background situation explains why Wesley could devote his zeal and passion to the saving of souls. As such, the whole life of John Wesley was built around the understanding and promoting of the Christian life. His officially published sermons are remarkable if read from this angle. Here, we may observe that in compiling his standard collection of sermons he claims that he set himself to be 'comparatively' a 'man of one book' – the Bible – as the guide to salvation. Yet the Bible has always to be interpreted, and Wesley never entirely abandoned the use of tradition, especially for apologetics purposes; and he was a thoroughly eighteenth-century man in his desire to appeal to 'reason' and, increasingly, to experience: his own but even more that he observed in others. In this regard, Wesley was really successful in his endeavour at serious experiments in catechesis and group spiritual direction that would be effective in making robust disciples of Jesus Christ in his day. We will elaborate on this point in our next section regarding the process through which John Wesley and his followers contributed to the making of Methodist theology.

## **John Wesley and the making of Methodist theology**

It is quite interesting to follow the process through which John Wesley influenced the making of Methodist theology. There is no doubt that Wesley was a voracious reader. As such one can understand why some of his polemical pieces of writing were influenced by a variety of sources such as the Church

Fathers, the sixteenth-century Reformers and the Revival movement.<sup>10</sup> One of the major merits of John Wesley's evangelistic zeal was that he practised what he preached. He tirelessly endeavoured at saving souls. For instance, in response to his assistant Whitfield's plea, Wesley made himself more 'vile' by preaching to thousands of the working poor in the open spaces around Bristol (1738–1739). Undeniably, the Wesleyan Revival materialised through the unprecedented response from the miners to Wesley's preaching of grace, in a context where the first stages of a brutal labour-intensive economy were unfolding. Though at its inception the Revival was primarily led by lay people – mostly uneducated, unordained preachers, class leaders, stewards and trustees – Wesley became later the theologian, teacher and organiser of the said movement. More specifically, Wesley saw in the Revival God raising up the Methodists 'to reform the nation, especially the church, and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.'<sup>11</sup> Wesley's theology developed on the ground, as it were, out of the exigencies and new experiences of the Revival. As rightly put by David Hempton, 'the hallmarks of Wesley's theology emerged in constant tension with the Moravian emphasis on faith alone and the Calvinist emphasis on election leading to the doctrine of predestination.'<sup>12</sup> Hempton goes on to comment that the simple assumption that faith was the only prerequisite for salvation led, in Wesley's view, to Quietism. And predestination cut off the lifeblood of Christian discipleship.

In terms of methodology, Wesley resembled Luther rather than Calvin, for like Luther his main concern was with the way of salvation, though if Luther focused on the way of justification, Wesley may be said to have focused on the way of sanctification. Both men took many traditional doctrines for granted and did not make any fresh significant contributions to them: for example on the Trinity, the Person of Christ, the atonement, heaven and hell. Given the limitations of the Oxford disciplines, John Wesley turned to the Moravian way of justification by grace through faith and the means by which his holiness project could be undertaken and achieved.

Wesley's portrayal of himself as an 'evangelical' Protestant may seem confusing, and his close link with a number of Catholic sources as well as the very language of perfection have suggested an affinity with the Catholic tradition. Additionally, he always maintained that his theology was in harmony with the doctrinal standards of the Church of England and only a hair's breadth different from the Calvinist. Therefore, it may be argued that 'the Catholic tradition provided the goal while the Protestant emphasis provided the dynamic'. However, it is important to recognise that Wesley never borrowed anything

without setting his own interpretation upon it, and that in its mature form his version of perfection was certainly not one that can be ascribed to a Catholic writer. However, his ideas and language do bear a more obvious affinity to the tradition of Catholic than to Protestant spirituality.

Having said this, let's point out that Wesley identified three doctrines in *A Short History of Methodism* (1765) that summed up the core of Methodist and Wesleyan-Holiness teaching. What he says there essentially reflects his thought contained in two key short documents, *Character of a Methodist* and *The Principles of a Methodist*, both published in 1742.

First, the doctrine of prevenient grace ('grace that goes before'), which Wesley gleaned from the Church Fathers, points to a God who saves the lost without transgressing their moral freedom to choose. Such grace enables the individual to repent of their sins and to believe in Jesus Christ.

Second, Wesley taught that salvation, or justification as it is termed, comes by faith alone. He dismissed the notion that righteous works, even though good in themselves, accrue any merit whatsoever towards salvation. Wesleyans teach that the moment one believes, he or she is saved; and by believing they may expect to receive an inward witness of having been delivered from bondage to sin and eternal damnation to freedom from sin and eternal life. The fullness of salvation can take place only in the beloved community of disciples; the only true holiness is 'social holiness'.

Third, Wesley elaborated his own version of the doctrine of Arminianism which was originally initiated by the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius. This doctrine presupposes God's universal and unlimited love for all through the atonement provided by Jesus' death. One of the key arguments of Arminianism is that God's grace can be resisted, making it possible for believers to fall from grace. Wesley's version of Arminianism reconceived the concept of atonement to incorporate an understanding of justice, implying that although Christians could lose their salvation, acts of apostasy were not final.<sup>13</sup>

Fourth, Wesley advocated that genuine faith produces inward and outward holiness. His approach to the doctrine of holiness takes its roots in the command to be holy as God is holy (Lev 19:2 and parallel Old Testament passages). Similarly, Jesus commanded, 'Be perfect therefore as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Mt 5:48). Also, through 'the Great Commandment' Jesus taught that true Christian discipleship requires loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving neighbour as self (Mt 22:37–40). Wesley

understood perfection in the theological sense as having to do with maturity of character and ever-increasing love for God. Therefore, whenever Wesley discussed holiness, sanctification or perfection (all theologically synonymous), he preferred the expression 'Christian perfection'. By appending the adjective Christian, he sought to avoid comparisons with the Reformers whose idealistic notions of perfection led them to believe that holiness or personal sanctity is not possible in this life. Christian perfection, for Wesley, is achievable in this present life because it has to do with the affections. When, by the grace of God infused into the soul through the Holy Spirit, one's love for God and others is made pure and complete their lifestyle cannot help but increase in virtue, finding expression in loving, selfless actions. Faith working outwardly through love was one of Wesley's favourite biblical themes (Gal 5:6).

One of the most distinctive and contentious debates within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is whether Christian perfection or, as it is often termed, 'entire sanctification', is an instantaneous second work of grace or the gradual working of the Spirit. Is it crisis or process? In fact, Wesley said it is both. Wesley consistently argued that salvation must produce holiness of heart and life, but he never viewed the process as a ladder of ascent of sorts, as ancient and medieval Christian mystics had. He never envisioned a stage in this life where one has arrived and can go no further. Instead, Wesley viewed Christian holiness biblically as a linear movement forward. He taught that despite the inner assurance and regeneration of character that results from justification, it is never too long before the new believer discovers that there is still a root of sin within. Unlike the Reformers, who had taught that sanctification only occurs at death, Wesley argued that he could see no reason why it could not occur many years before death. Certainly, he said, there is no biblical evidence that would lead one to think otherwise. Though he never claimed himself to be entirely sanctified (he believed that claiming it was a fair sign that one was not so), Wesley recorded the experiences of others whom he had no doubt were delivered from all sin and filled entirely with the pure love of God.

## **Wesley's missiological mandate in our contemporary context**

It is clear that the intellectual, political and ecclesiastical world in which John Wesley lived is completely different from our context in the West, Great Britain in particular, today.



Though there are still some residues of Christianity in our contemporary context, it is obvious that our culture today is mostly post-Christian and is generally terrified of all forms of religious specificity and orthodoxy. Abraham's reflections on this matter are insightful here.<sup>14</sup> Pluralism, tolerance and scepticism about the place of religion in the public order are endemic. The very idea of an aggressive form of Christianity committed in a serious way to the conversion of people is greeted with alarm, suspicion and fear. Robust forms of Christian orthodoxy, no matter how generous in tone or content, will immediately be dismissed as fundamentalism within the Church and as a revival of theocracy within the culture.

Secondly, the practices of band, class and society and the regulations governing them are gone for ever, even in the most loyalist and conservative Wesleyan circles. Most forms of robust 'Wesleyanism' are really a reworking of the moralism, legalism and revivalism of the nineteenth century. These have rendered an invaluable service in keeping alive neglected features of the Wesleyan heritage, but none seriously pretend that they are a straight recapitulation of Wesleyan catechetical practice. Moreover, self-confessing conservative Wesleyans are currently under great pressure to conform to the theological convictions and practices of generic Evangelicalism. Methodism as it existed in the early period is no longer with us in the West.

Thirdly, Christians have lost the intellectual debate in high culture. The scandal of the Church is that the Christ-event is no longer life-changing; it has become life-enhancing. We have lost the power and joy that makes real disciples; we have become consumers of religion and not disciples of Jesus Christ. Could it be that today the Western Church has a Bible but has lost her Holy Scripture, resulting in biblical illiteracy within the community of faith? In these circumstances it is no surprise that many have turned to postmodernism for relief. Nobody can really secure positive rationality, justification or knowledge, so we should settle for the possibility of mere true belief. Consequently, postmodernity becomes the ticket to academic respectability and a seat at the cultural table.

Here, I humbly attempt to make a few practical proposals.

### *Rescuing the language of mission*

Christian faith is always at the crossroads between hope and despair, between the Cross and Resurrection. However, what we must not permit the current crisis in evangelistic zeal and in missionary identity in the West to do is to curtail



our missionary vision in such a way that it becomes nothing more than an exercise in ecclesiastical self-preservation: 'we'll leave the fate of the rest of the world to the rest of the Church; we in Britain are going to ignore global responsibilities and put all our energies into reversing our declining membership rolls'. Such a commitment to self-preservation is the very antithesis of mission, and is surely the recipe for further decline. Missiology still remains fundamentally divided between those who are passionate about evangelism and those who are passionate about justice, and there will be no real recovery of mission in British Churches until we are equally passionate about both.

### *Reaffirming the doctrine of the organic unity of the Church*

The theological point at stake here is the reaffirmation of the doctrine of the organic unity of the Body of Christ. There is one Body of Christ, and one mission to which it is called. That mission will be weakened and impoverished if one part of the body turns its back on the world beyond its own shores. More gravely, the implications would be that the Church is committed to mission or it is committed to extinction. There is a compelling point to be clarified here: mission is a participation in the life of the Trinity. As such, mission is not an external activity imposed by church leaders on top of all the other demands on church members. Mission is a heartfelt but spontaneous outworking of the inspiring, transforming, life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

### *Reinventing ecclesial practices of grace and gratitude*

Let's face it: our contemporary context is one of a dehumanising market, political schemes with no credibility, a judicial system that favours the powerful, a loss of values breaking up our families together with communities and societies. In such a context, the calling of churches should tend towards becoming more communities of belonging/inclusion, of celebration and rejoicing, joy and hope, rather than communities of law or exclusion. Consequently, ecclesial structures and church polity actually hinder mission and therefore develop into monuments and not mission movements. This may explain why there is a blatant lack of emphasis on *grace* and *gratitude* (*charis/eucharistia*) in our ecclesial practices. In a paper presented at a mission forum in 2001, George Kovoov (then Principal of Crowther Hall and CMS Mission Education Director) argued that 'the language of the Western Church is cerebral ... and preoccupied with political correctness'.<sup>16</sup> Following St Augustine and the sixteenth-century Reformers, the German theologian Karl Barth emphasised the importance of the relationship between grace and gratitude

by insisting that grace should be the central principle of our theology of mission and gratitude the driving force of our ethics. It is important to link grace and human dignity; both refer to God, and both refer to human beings. Human dignity and divine grace are inseparable because it is not possible to experience grace without human dignity. Where there is no human dignity, there is an absence of God's grace; where there is human dignity, in some way God's grace and God's glory are present. Churches that fulfil God's mission should enable the manifestation of God's grace and gratitude, together with his glory.

### *Repositioning Methodist heritages in a bigger perspective*

For this to be credibly implemented, we will have to look again at the whole history of Methodism after Wesley, paying particular attention to the shift from a movement to that of a network of Wesley denominations. In particular we need to come to terms with what we may now call the canonical history of Methodism. In this we must pay careful attention to the official, canonical decisions made, identifying the specific canonical heritages created, and the canonical mechanisms invented for adjusting them over time. It helps enormously to set this in good Wesleyan fashion against the backcloth of the canonical heritage of the Church of the first millennium. One of the central points here would be the renewal of robust baptismal and eucharistic practice. Equally important is a full updating of what we may have learnt about the manifold working of the Holy Spirit from Wesley's grandchildren, the Pentecostals.

### *Conclusion*

The general conclusion to be drawn at this juncture is clear. Wesley's commitment to saving souls was lodged in a cultural, ecclesial and intellectual context that has collapsed over time. It was at home in a network of spiritual and evangelistic practices that have been eroded. Personally, I have a boundless admiration for John Wesley's labour, his ingenuity and successes. However, any attempts to reinstate Wesley's project of saving souls without attending to the intervening developments is simply a non-starter. We can and we must come to terms with the wider challenges that knowledge of Wesley's background brings to light. Hence, we cannot come to terms with the saving of souls in a way that will begin to do justice to Wesley if we do not face the tough choices that confront us in the doctrinal and intellectual renewal of the Christian faith as a whole. If we were to opt for keeping Wesley's commitment

to the saving of souls, we would need to retrieve the patristic core of the doctrinal and intellectual DNA deployed by Wesley, and we would take seriously the task of epistemology and apologetics, all the while reinventing, as we proceed, the ecclesial practices and disciplines that will both feed into and be fed by those doctrinal and intellectual resources. That is my preferred option, which William Abraham has called the 'renewalist alternative'.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. This rule was added at the Conference of 1745. The other rules, 12 in all, were developed at the Conference of 1744. They can be found in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Britain* (London: Epworth Press, 1988), vol. 4, pp. 116–119.
2. See Abraham 2003, p. 1.
3. Abraham 2003, p. 3.
4. Macquiban 2004, p. 18.
5. Abraham 2003, p. 4.
6. The title *Reasonable Enthusiast* that Henry Rack gave to his book on *John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* is a clear indication of this success.
7. For more details, read Rack 1992, pp. 158ff.
8. Macquiban 2004, p. 20.
9. Abraham 2003, p. 6.
10. For a detailed account of such influences, see Rack 1992, pp. 166–169.
11. Quoted by Hempton 2010, p. 794.
12. Hempton 2010, p. 794.
13. For more details, see Jeffrey 2010, p. 74.
14. Abraham 2003, pp. 8–9.
15. See Kim 2009, p. 30.
16. Kovoov 2001.
17. Abraham 2003, p. 13.

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## Reverse mission in the Western context

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*The new missional movement experienced in Europe has been called 'reverse mission'. The process of immigration and the need of mainstream Churches to bring personnel from the Global South has engendered a very creative and dynamic missional practice in the Church in the West. The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) has been a pioneer in bringing mission partners to this country with the intention of exchanging experience, culture, pastoral and theological practices and mission. This article reflects on the concept of reverse mission and also the contribution of the author as a mission partner to the MCB. The experience demonstrates that any cultural exchange challenges us to take an incarnational and contextualised approach to fulfil God's mission in the world.*

REVERSE MISSION • GLOBAL SOUTH • MISSION PARTNERS • INCARNATION •  
CONTEXTUALISATION • CULTURE • EXCHANGE • MIGRATION • METHODIST  
CHURCH

Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Mt 28:18–20, NIV)

## Introduction

I grew up in a Brazilian Pentecostal Church hearing good stories about the experiences of missionaries who came over from Europe and North America bringing the 'true' message to our country. They were men and women who left their comfort zones to serve in a country where most people were influenced by Roman Catholicism through Portuguese colonisation. Western Protestantism had established a mission presence from the 1810s, which included Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterian missionaries.

The main paradigm was that the Southern Hemisphere was a mission field with high potential to develop a great Christian influence in the world. In some respects, the Protestant or 'evangelical' (as they are called in Brazil) Churches developed very well, becoming a large Christian presence in the country. The result of this has been that a country like Brazil, instead of receiving missionaries, is now sending them all over the world.

When I was engaged in my theological education at the beginning of the 1990s I joined the Methodist Church. Researching its development, I learned that the Church had a close connection with the United Methodist Church in the USA because of the many American missionaries who came over to serve in the country.

Looking at my Church's participation in overseas mission, it is evident that in the 1980s the Methodist Church in Brazil began to contribute more effectively to world mission, sending missionaries to Western countries such as Portugal, Germany, the USA, Switzerland and Spain, and in 2006 I was sent to serve The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) through the World Church Partnership in Britain (WCPB).

Mission partners are invited to serve in different parts of this country and offer their mission contributions to British Methodism. From this experience of

becoming a mission partner, the concept of reverse mission became a reality in my own ministry. The question in my mind was: Is Britain a mission field? Is Christianity still a relevant religion for people in the West?

Those questions were part of my reflection in my interaction with British people and they challenged me to respond pastorally, theologically, missionally and culturally. In my early days in this country, many people asked me why I had left my country to live in a place where the weather is cold and wet. When I answered that I was a missionary, people could not 'get it' easily. They said, 'No! We send missionaries abroad, we are a Christian country.' I thought, 'Is that true?'

## Comprehending reverse mission

The phenomenon of reverse mission has challenged many Churches and mission agencies to consider the extent of its impact in the Western context. This relates to the established practice in Christian religious experience of going forth and sharing the faith with others who do not know the gospel or have lost interest in Christianity. The missional imperative in Matthew 28 encourages Christians to reflect on the engagement of spreading the gospel everywhere, as Michael Nazir-Ali highlights.<sup>1</sup> However, the dynamic of carrying out mission by people from different cultures and backgrounds challenges any traditional ecclesiology to adapt itself to this religious phenomenon.

For many decades the flow of mission work has been mainly from the West to the South. However, several authorities have discussed the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere. The first was Andrew Walls in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (1996). This was followed and endorsed by Werner Kahl and Philip Jenkins, and has created a new shape, dynamic and interaction within worldwide mission fields.<sup>2</sup>

The mission work done by people from Southern regions has established a new movement that some scholars have named 'reverse mission' or 'mission in reverse'. Hun Kim defines this:

Indeed, reverse mission in the 21st century is part and parcel of the transfer of initiative in mission to the non-Western world as non-Western churches are at the forefront of missionary work around the world. In turn, contribution to reverse mission is a result of incidental mission by non-Western missionaries and ministers or migrant lay



people through their Diaspora networks ... Reverse mission is when non-Western churches return with the Gospel to societies that initially brought the Gospel to them. This flows from a true sense of debt for the Gospel and for the purpose of building capacity for working in world mission together.<sup>3</sup>

Every new term for expressing given social and religious phenomena initiates some form of controversy and this one is no different. Rebecca Catto highlighted 'the historical shift', with Christian missionaries now coming from countries that were traditionally receivers of mission, to work in countries which were traditionally senders of missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Afe Adogame describes this as a process of significant religious, social, political and missiological import within the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

The question that derives from this phenomenon is: Does reverse mission represent a result of migrational movement or an intentional plan from Churches in the South sending missionaries to re-evangelise the West, or both?

There are at least three aspects to consider. First is to analyse the mission movement in the context of the diaspora of those who came over to work after the First and Second World Wars to support the reconstruction of cities in Europe, especially in the UK. Second is the missional initiative by Churches in the Southern Hemisphere sending personnel to support mainline Churches or planting new churches with the intention of bringing the gospel back to a secular Western context. The third aspect concerns Churches who have links in a worldwide organisation and who exchange personnel, bringing a wider view of Christianity into their context. This point is going to be explored through the MCB's experiences.

For many years, Western mission to developing countries was done in places where the social, political and economic reasons were great and some of the missionaries were able to do their work with both aspects in view, both the spiritual and the social. According to Nazir-Ali, this is perhaps the first time in centuries that Christian mission is not following the traditional ways of Western missionaries to Southern mission fields.<sup>6</sup>

The fact is, as Adogame highlights, 'the western world is therefore faced with the arrival of so-called "indigenous" religions in cross-fertilization with contextualized Christian interpretations on its own shores.'<sup>7</sup> Philip Jenkins mentions that this movement is focusing on the West. In his understanding, the future of Christianity's standing in Western Europe can be impacted by the presence

of non-European immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Looking at church growth in relation to the rise of Black Churches,<sup>9</sup> it is evident that many mission developments have originated from those who were part of the immigration process from the Caribbean and Africa and subsequently from other parts of the globe as well.

The immigration movement has a clear impact on reverse mission. People do not just migrate to a new place, they also bring their culture, religion and expectations. It is a phenomenon that takes in a whole spectrum of human interaction. Thus, Western Christianity is challenged by interaction with a more hybrid experience. In other words, Southern people who received the gospel from the West are capable of sharing their religious understanding and spirituality in a new context in the West.

## **Migration, diaspora: people are moving around the world**

Migration has been one of the central social phenomena in the history of human development from the past until now. Movements were and are prompted because of social, political or economic circumstances. One of the terms used in explaining this is diaspora, which itself refers to ‘the situation of any group of people dispersed, whether forcibly or voluntarily, throughout the world’.<sup>10</sup>

Diaspora has been a feature highlighted in the Bible, for example the story of Joseph in Egypt, or even the story of the people of Israel who left that land to travel to the Promised Land. It represents a repeated phenomenon of movement and displacement of peoples throughout history. Movement of individuals, groups and peoples to other parts of the globe creates interactions that affect whole social and anthropological dimensions of human populations and their changing contexts. Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor says that ‘living “in diaspora” may assume a certain accommodation to living away from the homeland – and a sense that it is possible to survive and even thrive in the adopted country’.<sup>11</sup>

Christianity as a social and cultural phenomenon has been a religious movement that has influenced millions by its beliefs. One of the reasons for its success is the Christian calling to share the gospel and evangelise the entire globe. Generally, Christians have been mobile, pursuing their own interests, such as work availability, family matters, economic reasons, environmental problems, studies, etc. They take their spirituality with them wherever they are and attempt to share it with others.

In the last decades, the ongoing effects of globalisation have facilitated migration by individuals and groups moving to other regions in response to some of its demands, such as business interests, moving technological experts from one place to another, global trade, studies and research abroad. It is generally the case that the actual migration has been motivated by a search for work. However, this generalisation is an oversimplification. The patterns of migration are multifaceted and vary according to factors that stimulate or force people to travel around the world. They include labour, economics, war, family, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

Another factor that is crucial to emphasise is that after the First and Second World Wars there were a great many people moving to Europe to work by invitation of governments, to assist the European people in rebuilding the infrastructure and fabric of countries devastated by war. The UK especially benefited from migrant workers from many parts of the world.

The Health Protection Agency produced a report in 2006 describing the main flows of immigration to the UK in its recent history, showing an increased immigration flow to the UK bringing hundreds of thousands of people from different parts of the world.<sup>13</sup>

The immigration flows have brought a lot of problematic social issues, especially related to varied religious groups such as Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. Considering just the Christians, some of them integrated into mainstream denominations relatively well. Hugh Osgood says that because most immigrants were engaged with a church in their home nations, their assimilation within Britain's historic denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Baptist Churches was not as problematic as people were familiar with most of the styles of worship.<sup>14</sup>

The result of the interaction of immigrants is immediately apparent within this country through their languages, cultures, religions and histories, in their contribution to local churches and communities all over the country. This interaction confirms what Jenkins highlights, that 'about half of London's people are now non-White, and by the end of the twenty-first century, Whites will form a minority within Great Britain as a whole. The empires have struck back.'<sup>15</sup>

Looking at Methodism's perspective, the report to the Conference in 2014 highlights that 'Methodist churches have meaningful links with churches from 60 countries abroad, as well as noting worship and fellowship events held in

over 40 languages other than English.<sup>16</sup> London District contains a very diverse sample of mixed congregations or even black congregations hosting a variety of different ethnic groups in its congregations all over the area.

An example is Forest Methodist circuit in North East London, where there are six ministers serving and each of them is from a different part of the globe (Brazil, Congo, Gambia, Korea, South Africa and Britain). Even the British minister is married to a Chinese husband. The congregations are half majority black and half majority white. Some of the churches include people from more than 15 nationalities and a variety of dialects. The diversity creates a rich identity for most of the churches in the London District and highlights the impact of reverse mission as many ministers have a non-British background.

## **Migrant Christians and integration with the Western Church**

The discussion concerning immigration in Europe throughout the last several decades, particularly in the UK, has encouraged us to reflect on the possible benefits that this movement has offered to churches, as I mentioned before, based on the Methodist Church experience. Hun Kim indicates several reasons to explain why migrants can contribute to the mission of this land.

First, he mentions that the new Christian immigrants and their descendants come from a centre of vibrant Christian growth and embody a brand of Christianity that is strongly evangelistic or conversionist.<sup>17</sup> Also, Jenkins highlights that 'if there is a single key area of faith and practice that divides Northern and Southern Christians, it is this matter of spiritual forces and their effects on the everyday human world.'<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that mixed or ethnic churches are the ones where there is growth, especially in the Methodist context. Their vibrancy and the family practice of all being in church contributes towards a church style and standard that attracts people with similar needs. Their practice of faith is more alive and their intensity of believing allows them to ask God directly for their needs. To some extent, this religious experience is in opposition to the beliefs of some Western churches. Western traditional churches base their theology and practice more on their understanding of Christianity or on their traditions. It is more liberal, pragmatic and liturgical.

The second aspect Hun Kim mentions is that 'the new immigrant congregations are more attuned to religious plurality than their Western counterparts'. However, it is arguable that not all migrants are attuned to such pluralism. Perhaps their own context, with greater cultural and social pluralities, provides more openness in relating to others with different cultural elements. When such individuals interact within a different context, and there is a sense of fear and uncertainty, generally they demonstrate some flexibility in surviving in the new environment.

However, the process of contextualisation is not easy and it is necessary for any person to find points of familiar contact within the new context, and also to be able to remove things from their own context that might impede communication in order to gain a hearing for the gospel.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the possibility for openness to a better communication with other people from different backgrounds enriches and enables some of the churches to experience an international expression of Christianity in the UK and other parts of Europe. For instance, some churches in London are experiencing very multi-ethnic congregations, having worshippers from many different cultural backgrounds. Some of the black churches are full of people from different countries, and so their skin colour doesn't place them in the same category. They might be Caribbean or African or Latin American. Christianity has united them in the same place for their worship, fellowship and mission.

Third, Hun Kim challenges us to comprehend the mission field in a wider perspective than the traditional one. For a long time the mission field was understood as being abroad, beyond the European frontiers. Reflecting on reverse mission, the movement to re-evangelise secularised societies requires a new interpretation of mission which involves a multi-dimensional matrix of interactions across geographical, generational, cultural and religious boundaries.

The *missio Dei* concept challenges us to see mission from the perspective of God, using all resources available to fulfil his will of bringing the values of his kingdom to all nations and peoples. There is no restriction that can block God's wish to reach out to his people anywhere. However, it is necessary to overcome the obstacles of traditional mindsets established by the culture of supremacy in the West. Roberta Guerrina indicates that one of the challenges for Europeans is to deal with their historical upbringing in their identifying of Europe as 'the centre of civilization'. Even more complicated is 'the establishment of Europe as Christendom, i.e. the land of Christianity, which also

provides an insight into the importance of Christian values in defining the idea of Europe and the legacy of European civilization.<sup>20</sup>

One of the ways of achieving this purpose is to implement mission in partnership.<sup>21</sup> This partnership relies on our answer to God's calling to do his mission wherever we are. Hun Kim indicates that 'the reverse trend in missions offers the "old heartlands" of Christianity a model for renewal'.<sup>22</sup> However, mission is not done from a single, fixed perspective as the world is both local and global in any given context because of the movement of people in the communities. For instance, it is certain that some ethnic groups are reached when there are missionaries from their own culture, or even in some cases foreign missionaries, who have shared the experiences of a particular group.

## Missional incarnation and context from a Methodist perspective

Reverse mission challenges the missionaries who work in Western fields to observe the context and learn from it to develop any missional work. Considering the integration and experience of many missionaries from the Global South, many scholars have taken into account the significance of this phenomenon in the last few decades.

Each context requires a specific incarnational mission according to the communities and groups involved. The number of overseas ministers who are leading congregations in Britain is increasing and their pastoral and mission ministries are both to British white groups or those composed of mixed ethnic groups.

### *Reverse mission in the Methodist Church*

It is within the DNA of Methodism to advance the interests of sharing the gospel from a worldwide perspective. Before the Methodist movement started to organise itself, we can see people like John and Charles Wesley following the process of British colonisation, having their mission experience in Georgia, USA. The sense of responsibility to *share* holiness or the gospel with the whole world is summed up in a classic phrase of John Wesley's when he said, 'I look upon the whole World as my Parish.'

According to the World Methodist Council, the movement is in 77 countries and represents 80 million people. All the churches have a clear connection with

Wesleyan heritage and have to be open to mission in the world, as one of the classic ambitions and purposes of John Wesley was to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. This has been understood as part of Methodist identity and has been taken very seriously by all the Churches worldwide. The effect of Wesleyan mission theology is seen clearly with a contribution from Churches in the Southern Hemisphere sending missionaries to the Northern Hemisphere. The World Church in Britain Partnership (WCBP) programme has facilitated the process of bringing personnel from the South to serve as mission partners in the UK.

My research on the contribution of mission partners in the Methodist Church in Britain showed that there has been an incredible impact on the local churches involved, as they were able to interact and share new cultural aspects, bringing a new perspective and understanding of Christian faith and Methodism. The initiative has been decisive in the process of transforming British Methodism with an enlarged world-view of the Methodist Church globally.

Another aspect of reverse mission in British Methodism has been to receive feedback on the flame of the 'gospel from the South', which was once again kindled in the West where Christians have lost inspiration and enthusiasm. However, WCBP shared a valuable point: in their reviews with mission partners, they realised that they could share something with the Church having formerly received ministry from Western missionaries.

However, the interaction between The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) and the mission partners revealed some difficulties. The idea of being exposed to a missional situation without exerting any personal influence is extremely difficult, and also the participation process will not happen if the individual remains aloof. Most mission partners have been very willing to interact and to understand their congregations' cultures and traditions. In this respect, the learning process of mission partners has created the possibility to abstract and select what would be more appropriate in facilitating their communication and missional work with the MCB.

In my own experience, I was allocated to a very traditional appointment in Gloucestershire. The churches (Tewkesbury and Apperley) are composed mainly of adults and elderly people. That church profile helped me to understand the culture, as many members were willing to support me throughout my time there, using their skills and experiences to facilitate the interaction and development of the partnership in ministry and mission. The openness



and willingness of a community that understood the challenge of mission partner incarnation and acculturation facilitated a 'successful' ministry in terms of learning and sharing, development and planning, integration and making new friends, and also in exploring new mission avenues and welcoming new people to the life of the church. There was a time that the church had more than 15 'foreigners' worshipping there, as we were able to welcome a few Brazilian, Italian and French people to study and work in the area.

Another example of mission incarnation was during the floods in 2007 when our community took responsibility for supporting some of those who were affected by the flooding. It was a holistic response when we were able to provide shelter, food, water, laundry, pastoral and spiritual support, holidays, etc. On that occasion, I was challenged by some British reserve, embarrassment, frustration and sense of shame. Perhaps my situation as a foreigner opened up connections. A lot of people felt relaxed enough to share some of their stories and experiences with me. It was at that point I felt I was being really useful, because the barriers of culture and communication collapsed, enabling us to share God's grace and compassion with people who themselves had been brought very low.

Reverse mission is not just about personnel, but the willingness of both sides, mission partners and local people, to make the connections positively and with respect for what God's mission requires in the given context.

## Conclusion

Reverse mission is a phenomenon present in many European and British contexts and it is bringing a really important contribution not just to ethnic churches but also to many other churches that are taking seriously the mission work needed to meet the demands found in their communities.

The example of The Methodist Church in Britain shows us that reverse mission is not based on the enterprise of a Church that wants to expand its denomination in the West. The mission partners have been devoted people who wanted to share their experiences with their 'Mother Church'. It is true that their intention was very much based on the flame of sharing the gospel. However, the challenge of dealing with a different culture highlights that reverse mission is more than willingness to serve abroad or be connected with ethnic groups living away from home. It is a process of acceptance of a new

context, culture, language and social environment, which takes those who are involved within the enterprise to a new form of mission.

The effectiveness of reverse mission is an ongoing learning process of being involved in God's mission to proclaim his kingdom in a multicultural context like Britain. The MCB is just a small example of involvement with personnel from the Southern Hemisphere. There is a variety of other mission and church groups where they are experiencing the same.

Undoubtedly, the mission movement in the twenty-first century has a strong link with what is happening in the global world. Reverse mission enriches faith communities and brings a wide and deep perspective on what Christianity is, both locally and globally.

## Notes

1. Nazir-Ali 1990, p. 209.
2. Walls 1996; Kahl 2002, p. 330; Jenkins 2002, p. 2.
3. Hun Kim 2011, p. 63.
4. Spencer 2008, p. 109.
5. Adogame 2008, p. 1.
6. Nazir-Ali 1990, p. 209.
7. Adogame 2008, p. 1.
8. Jenkins 2002, p. 99.
9. Goodhew 2012, p. 107.
10. Jary and Jary 1991, p. 166.
11. Halvorson-Taylor 2015.
12. Held et al. 1999, p. 284.
13. Health Protection Agency 2006, p. 115.
14. Goodhew 2012, p. 109.
15. Jenkins 2002, p. 97.
16. *Methodism in Numbers* 2014.
17. Hun Kim 2011, p. 64.
18. Jenkins 2002, p. 123.
19. Guthrie 2000, p. 127.
20. Guerrina 2002, pp. 1, 13.
21. Bosch 1991, p. 370.
22. Hun Kim 2011, p. 64.

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[www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk)

[www.worldmethodistcouncil.org](http://www.worldmethodistcouncil.org)



# Holiness in the Methodist tradition – an ecumenical pilgrimage

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*In this paper I seek to argue that all of us are called to be saints, to live the holy life, and that Methodists are called to be a consecrated people, through our Baptism and response to God's call to costly discipleship. We do this in the company of other Christians whose spirituality may be expressed in different ways but whose emphasis on holiness enables this vital aspect of Christian experience to be a tool for ecumenical spirituality which draws us into that greater unity to which Christ calls us. I write as Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, building on a range of previous experiences of working alongside Christians of other traditions.*

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION • METHODISM • SAINTS • CONSECRATED LIFE •  
DISCIPLESHIP • ECUMENICAL SPIRITUALITY • HOLINESS

## Holiness and saintliness

If we were to ask people what is the essence of Methodist theology and spirituality shaped by the brothers John and Charles Wesley, then *holiness* might be one key word that recurs again and again. It may be that holiness is out of fashion, though I suspect that the current interest in Methodist spirituality indicates that this is not so. It is certainly a theme we ought to be thinking about, especially as it features so much in the ecumenical dialogues that many of us are engaged with, particularly with the Roman Catholic Church.

‘How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.’ So writes C. S. Lewis in his *Letters to an American Lady*, reminding us all of the importance of the holy life which leads us to God. For John Wesley, the quest for scriptural holiness was central to his platform for the revival of religion within the Church of England in his day in the eighteenth century. He told his followers that they ought to think about heaven and hell daily. Perhaps we ought to think rather more of heaven and rather less of hell than some Methodist preachers have in the past! We should always in our worship give thanks for those saints who worship with us in the nearer presence of God and try to follow their example as heroes/heroines of faith in their striving for holiness and Christian perfection

You may have heard people say from time to time, ‘Oh, so-and-so is a real saint.’ I’ve heard it said of older respected members of congregations who have made an enormous impact on individual lives. There are some who are perhaps readily identifiable as such saints, as God’s holy people, not just the stained-glass window types of ecclesiastical-establishment figures from our glorious Christian past who adorn basilicas and cathedrals and churches with a special place in the different church calendars and their names on the door and above the altar. But we must also remember the towering figures of the last one hundred years, a century of martyrdoms, of those mown down at altars, like Oscar Romero just 35 years ago in San Salvador, or sacrificed for the causes of justice and peace, like Martin Luther King who has been remembered in the fiftieth anniversary of Selma recently. Or figures from our own Methodist tradition, prophetic witnesses rather than blood-martyrs, like Donald Soper, William Sangster and Leslie Weatherhead, whose costly ministries have shaped a whole generation of personal and social holiness among Methodists since the Second World War.

Often these people are not cardboard cut-outs of the moral giants that hagiographers like to create, but ordinary people caught up, sometimes reluctantly, in God's extraordinary work. George Orwell once wrote that 'All saints should be judged guilty until proved innocent'. Perhaps that applies to us all and encourages us to strive to be holy people. Perhaps the only thing that marks out the saints is the peculiar sense of going somewhere and trying to live a life as if they believed that to be so. Bonhoeffer reminded us that to be a Christian is not to deny the world or to try to be super-religious in some way but to be fully human as Jesus was, 'taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and its helplessness'. Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican spiritual writer, once wrote that 'in our expression of religion and in the worship which is the expression of our religion, we look towards eternity; and bit by bit, in various ways and degrees, we discover in ourselves a certain capacity for eternity'.

Sometimes, as we reflect on the state of holiness in our Methodist tradition today, we detect a disconnectedness between our worship services and our theology, between our worship also and our mission as the (holy) people of God. But every time we celebrate Holy Communion together, we remember in the great prayer of thanksgiving that we are surrounded by 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven' in that 'unseen cloud of witnesses' who encompass us, enfolding us in the state of blessedness which Jesus promised to those who are faithful disciples to the end.

True worship is that which bids us join Christ's passage from death to life, from time to eternity, beginning on earth and ending in heaven, as Charles Wesley often wrote in his hymns, centred on 'pardon, and holiness and heaven'. Our worship, in our often feeble way, strives to join with that of the saints gathered round the throne of God, so that we can sing with them, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts'. Holiness is our quest, the quest of developing that certain capacity for eternity, a feast to which all God's people are to be invited and included around the table.

John Wesley reminded the people called Methodist that they could not be solitary Christians. The quest for holiness is a false quest if it only consists of personal salvation. By contrast, social holiness seeks to express love of God in love of neighbour. Fellowship is a very Methodist word and a very Methodist emphasis. It shouldn't be a holy huddle on earth alone, locked in our church buildings and remote from the community in which it is set, but a fellowship which gives thanks for those who have gone before who are our examples in



the faith and prayer in which we are invited to participate, to follow them and share in God's heavenly kingdom, serving the needs of neighbours 'nearby and far away'.

Methodists have sometimes in their perverse nonconformist revulsion of the commemoration of saints not been as heavenly minded as our spiritual forebears in faith. Perhaps we should remember C. S. Lewis' *Letter to Malcolm* which posed the question, 'What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?' Those who have lost loved ones will want, as the number of funerals we have in our churches given our Methodist demographics increases, to affirm that they worship in the presence of a greater company. They will want to 'sing with those to glory gone,/ For all the servants of our King in earth and heaven are one', as Charles Wesley wrote.

When I was much younger, I loved those puzzle books where you had to join up the dots. To start with a mass of dots and very little idea of what you might end up with. Gradually the picture unfolds – is it a kangaroo or a hippopotamus? And then the final picture is revealed. 'What we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is,' as John the Evangelist writes.

God calls us to that holy life which was revealed to us in Christ. We are all called to be saints, to be blessed, as those who trust God, through poverty and persecution, through sorrow and warfare. The peaceful and the pure will see God. Paul followed Christ in his striving towards perfection. He urged Christians to do the same. Their lives, lived in Christ, will be taken up to God and transfigured beyond our wildest imagination and intensified within the community and fellowship of perfect divine love as part of the new creation. And our worship gets caught up with their worship so that sometimes we catch glimpses of the glory of God in the thinness of the tissue between heaven and earth.

Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

## **My context: ecumenical work in the past**

My whole ministry has been shaped by the ecumenical encounters I have been privileged to share as I have built on the heritage of the Church of England

which nurtured me in my youth as a result of having been brought up in an Anglican clerical home. It was in Cambridge that I made the transition to Methodism, albeit along the way worshipping in the Anglican Franciscan tradition at St Benet's and formal Anglican college chapel worship, as well as singing with an evangelical Christian choir who practised at Ridley Hall.

After engaging in local church ministry in Halifax and being involved in ecumenical work in West Yorkshire, teaching church history at Wesley College, Bristol, enabled me to make good use of the tools that my studies in Methodist history had taught me, that to be a good ecumenist one needed to be rooted in a thorough knowledge and love of one's own tradition in order to appreciate the differences with other traditions, and to be able to share one's own charisms as well as to discover that often we talk the same language but with different accents and nuances. This is particularly so with the centrality of holiness within our theology and spirituality.

I discovered this most working within the context of Westminster College, Oxford, where I set up the Wesley and Methodist Studies Centre, seeing that talking about our beliefs ecumenically with students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels opened up new possibilities for the enrichment of our Christian growth. I discovered there the importance of our links with the wider Methodist family, particularly churches from the American tradition, as well as participating in an important conference sponsored by the World Methodist Historical Society on 'Sanctification in the Benedictine and Methodist traditions', held near Rome in 1994. The vital link between our worship and our mission was formed in our understanding of each other, as we explored aspects of *lex orandi, lex credendi* in the vital interplay between our worship and prayer and the expression of our holiness in social witness and evangelism.

For six years I served as Principal at Sarum College, a former Anglican theological college at Salisbury, now an ecumenical education and conference centre serving a wide variety of church and community needs. This experience put me in touch with a broad range of church leaders, including Archbishop Rowan Williams, one of our Fellows and Sarum Lecturer in 2003, who attracted 700 people a night for four nights listening to lectures on the significance of church history! The late Cambridge Professors of Church History, Herbert Butterfield and Gordon Rupp, would be smiling at such a thought.

Working with a range of other Christians helps one to define one's own identity, as we found when we brought together Christians of different traditions – Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox – to talk about holiness and

other aspects of our spirituality. These fed through to programmes of catechesis for pre-ordination theological students as well as lay people on Christian education programmes at Sarum and Oxford.

When I moved to Cambridge I imagined that I was starting on the last chapter of my story. I was glad to be back in circuit ministry at the heart of that ancient university and city, and involved in the life of Wesley House within the Cambridge Federation. This was somewhere where ecumenical links could be forged and my maturing Methodism could be related to the challenges 'to serve the present age'. I remained a committed ecumenist in a more difficult ecumenical climate but a more mature Methodist eager to continue to wrestle with these tensions, to tell the story of 'what wonder God hath wrought' by raising up Methodism, not just to serve society but to point people to the living God who is greater than the Churches we all belong to.

## **Present context**

But then I was unexpectedly transferred to my present role as Director of the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, representing British, European and World Methodism in our relations, formal and informal, with Christians of a variety of ecclesial traditions, predominantly Roman Catholic in this centre of the Roman Catholic world. Rooted in local church ministry as pastor of the Ponte Sant'Angelo English-speaking Methodist Church has earthed what could be a lonely ecumenical existence as a single presence in a sea of Catholic strength in an Italy still deeply culturally Catholic.

My reflections on the first Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU) I attended in Rome have been posted up on the ecumenical pages of the Methodist Church website. So here I want only to reflect on that aspect relating to our theme of holiness, particularly relating to the Ecumenical Colloquium for the Year of Consecrated Life, organised by three sections of the Vatican administration to take account of the Pope's renewed commitment to ecumenism in the light of the celebration of 50 years since the closing of the Second Vatican Council. The four-day meeting came in the context of both this WPCU and the Year of Consecrated Life 2014–2016. Participants concluded each day with Vespers in the Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic traditions, and ended with the Papal Vespers presided over by Pope Francis in the Basilica of St Paul's without the Walls on the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. Through contact with the Master General of the Croziers (a religious order founded in

the Middle Ages), over conversation about Albert Outler and his contribution to this Council, I was invited to participate as one of only two Methodists in a gathering of over one hundred religious women and men from around the world, from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions, to explore the implications of what it was to live the consecrated life and how this could contribute to ecumenical dialogue.

One particular evening during the week, I was invited to address students and staff of the Venerable English College on the topic of 'Holiness and heaven: the Methodist contribution to ecumenical dialogue'. I drew on the ecumenical experiences I have had during my life, and opened up a conversation on the nature of shared and common purpose of Catholics and Methodists in their pursuit of holiness as expressed in the formal dialogues, but also in our worshipping and working together practically, as an expression of our visible unity. I started by asking what a Methodist like myself was doing attending a conference for the religious. I answered my own question by making the claim that Methodism could be best understood, *pace* Herbert Workman and Rupert Davies, two of our Methodist historians of the past century, as a quasi-religious order, in a similar relationship to the Church of England, out of which the movement emerged, as the Franciscans and Dominicans emerged from medieval Catholicism as movements of renewal centred on community life, teaching and preaching, and outreach to the unchurched and poor.

The contributions of various speakers to the colloquium underlined the importance for Roman Catholics of listening to and understanding the contribution of others to consecrated life in a spirit of receptive ecumenism. The desire to celebrate ecumenical spirituality where community life spanned ecclesial borders, as with communities at Taizé and Bose, Bari and Iona, should be beacons of hope for all Christians in the quest for unity as we engage together in the conversion of the hearts of all in the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*, taking up the challenges of Pope Francis.

The vital role that men and women religious of different Christian Churches play in the ecumenical journey was at the heart of Pope Francis' meeting on the Saturday of the WPCU with us in the search for Christian unity. In this meeting, the Pope recalled the words of the Second Vatican Council document *Unitatis Redintegratio*, stressing that *spiritual ecumenism* is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. Consecrated people like yourselves, he said, therefore have a particular vocation in this work of promoting unity. The Pope also mentioned ecumenical communities like Taizé and Bose, which have taken up

this vocation and are privileged places of encounter between Christians of different denominations. The Pope spoke of three conditions at the core of the search for Christian unity. First, there is no unity without *conversion of heart*, which includes forgiving and asking for forgiveness. Second, he said there is no unity without *prayer*, and therefore men and women religious who pray for unity are like 'an invisible monastery' bringing together Christians of different denominations from different countries around the world. Third, the Pope said that there is no unity without *holiness of daily life*. So the more we put our search for unity into practice in our relations with others, the more we will be modelling our lives on the message of the gospel.

The rest of the conference was a rich meeting of women and men from very different orders and institutions, some ecumenical, some rooted in one particular ecclesial tradition. Some were ancient (Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, the Croziers) and others were communities with particular charisms to share, some with missionary orientation in different parts of the world. We learnt to listen to the testimonies of the various contributions and see the common threads of people dedicating themselves, as lay or ordained persons, to the consecrated life of holiness, prayer, worship and service, with vows or rules for the disciplined life. I was able to share my understanding of the whole people called Methodist being a religious order, originally as a movement for renewal within the wider Church, 'to spread scriptural holiness through the land' in small groups of women and men bound by mutual accountability for the development of their spiritual life and the expression of it in social holiness.

Cardinal Koch, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, gave an address on 'The importance of ecumenism in the Year of Consecrated Life', quoting from the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who highlights the rediscovery for Protestants of the value of a life of communion, united by prayer and work. Our common roots, in our shared Baptism, and in our use of the traditions of the early Church, should enable us to walk together in the apostolic life and mission of the Church. He reminded us of the example and witness of Fr Paul Couturier, the passionate pioneer of spiritual ecumenism, creating what he called 'an invisible monastery' in the world into which all churches might come together in unity.

In an honest analysis by the prefect of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, we were reminded of the dangers to those who were called to consecrated life which was a gift of God. There was the danger of the weakness of formation,

of teaching in what it means to live the life of holiness, as well as the danger of anxiety over achieving targets rather than concentrating on the quality of the spiritual life. And there was the danger of failing to address inter-generational and cultural issues in a world which barely recognises the value of cloistered or open community life as opposed to the self-centred and hedonistic nature of many individualistic approaches to well-being in a world in search of pleasure, possessions and dominion over others. There was also the danger of failing to connect our worship with our mission, to be witnesses to the joy of the gospel and to awaken the world in converting hearts and minds to Christ. Mission and discipleship belong together in an apostolic life of holiness.

All told, this was an incredibly rich octave of Christian unity in Rome, which opens up for the Methodist Ecumenical Office, Rome, many more opportunities for connections with other traditions, as well as offering to others the chance (sometimes for the first time) to reach a deeper understanding of the particular charisms of Methodism and its place in the wider Church.

Perhaps that is a good point to finish and for us to reflect. If we are called, through our common Baptism, to be holy people, is there any sense in which Methodism does bear the marks of being a religious order of consecrated persons, as some church historians in the past have asked?

- Do the questions we are asked at our confirmation have a bearing on our making a commitment to Christ? And what importance do we put on catechesis and proper preparation and follow-up for confirmation?
- What are the vows we make and what are the marks of faithful discipleship? Do we remember this when we give out our tickets of membership – how sacrificial is our life as a Methodist Christian meant to be?
- What sort of an order are we, and what particular charisms do we have to share? Do they include preaching and teaching, serving and healing in our social witness, praying and worshipping?
- How do we express our community life together in a way which is faithful to the origins of Methodism with its small groups for fellowship of mutual accountability and discipline, as schools for saints as well as sinners?

For, saints we are called to be, as the people called Methodists in the twenty-first century, in an ecumenical pilgrimage with others sharing this quest for holiness, as those that John and Charles Wesley inspire today 'to serve the present age'.







# A gathered stillness: meditation as a fresh expression of church?

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*How might we approach the mission imperative in a Central London church? For the last two years, Hinde Street has offered a midweek meditation group during the Tuesday lunch hour. It is a meeting place for people from a range of local 'communities' which are not merely geographical. This article explores the understanding of mission that underlies the group: not so much the church's mission to the locality, but God's mission both to the church and to contemporary culture. It reflects on the nature of that mission in conversation with works by Walter Brueggemann and Iain McGilchrist.*

ANONYMOUS GROUPS • BRUEGGEMANN • CHURCH • CONTEMPLATION • LEFT BRAIN • MCGILCHRIST • MEDITATION • MISSION • RIGHT BRAIN • SABBATH • SILENCE • WORK

'Be still, and know that I am God!' (Ps 46:10)

It's nearly one o'clock. I hit 'send' on the thirty-seventh email of the morning, and log out of my computer. I grab a candle, matches, clock and book, and set off down the stairs. Halfway down, I realise that I have forgotten the keys to the Quiet Room, so I go back up to my office. The phone is ringing. Sam, our receptionist, tells me that someone has called in on the off chance that I can verify their DBS application now. No, sorry, after meditation. Would they like to come back in an hour? I find the keys, and head back downstairs. I meet Bob, our caretaker, coming up to find me. Would I like to view the CCTV pictures of the guy who sleeps on the church steps being sick all over the entrance to the downstairs rooms? Yes, but not just at the moment – perhaps later this afternoon. As I struggle to unlock the door, turning two handles simultaneously while holding a candle, matches, clock and book, Laura calls down to me. The cereals donated by a local business for our Night Shelter have just been delivered by a courier. They are in her office. Rather more than we expected – 70 boxes of them. The pile is higher than her desk. What would I like her to do with them?

Inside the Quiet Room I set out chairs in a circle. I place the candle exactly in the centre of the table and light it. I adjust the overhead lighting, sit down, put the clock in front of me. I take a deep breath. Tuesday lunchtime. Meditation group. For two years this group has been a regular oasis of quiet, a miniature Sabbath at the heart of my working week. And not just for me. My colleague Sue, Superintendent of the West London Mission, shares in leading this group. A few members of the congregation come regularly. Many of the people who come to our premises to attend an Anonymous Group<sup>1</sup> also drop in to share the space. There are several who live in Marylebone, and others who work in the local area, who spend their lunch hour being quiet with us. This group is important for a range of people. During the first 15 minutes, these people arrive gradually. They take off their coats, put bags under their chairs, finish their takeaway coffees and put the cardboard cups carefully in the bin. No one invades the sacred space of the table and candle with their belongings. Some talk about their week: a difficult decision hanging over them; problems at work; problems finding work; a dispute with a neighbour; too many visitors wanting their time and attention.

Most weeks around a dozen of us gather here. Most weeks there is someone new who has seen the poster on the corner of the street and has come to find out what we do. 'Longing for an hour of peace and quiet?'; it says.

And they are.

Sue and I started the Hinde Street meditation group just over two years ago, in January 2013. The idea for the group came out of two very different trains of thought. The first was an ongoing conversation within the Hinde Street congregation about what it means to be a neighbourhood church in the heart of London's West End. There has been a church on this site for over two hundred years, but the local demographic has changed dramatically over two centuries. Marylebone in the twenty-first century is a wealthy area, characterised by chic shops and expensive flats. Few of our congregation live within walking distance of the church; most commute in from all over Greater London and beyond. Centuries of Methodist tradition give us one way of thinking about mission: as a form of outreach to the local community. But 'Who is my neighbour?' is a complex and nuanced question in this place. There are those who can afford to live in the Georgian terraces of Manchester Square and Harley Street. There are those who work in the shops and offices and international businesses located in this trendy corner of Westminster. There are the hundreds of people who day by day, week by week, come through our doors to attend one of the 69 Anonymous Groups that meet on our premises. Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous: every form of addiction experienced by fragile and needy humanity has a group offering support, encouragement and companionship in the never-ending struggle for a way out of dependency. Most come to their group and go back out into Marylebone High Street without ever realising that there is a church attached to the basement room in which they meet. And then there are the people who sleep rough in our streets. They sleep in shop doorways, tube stations and on our church steps. They have come to London to find a community among the homeless of our capital city. They are our neighbours too.

When I arrived here as a probationer minister in September 2011, I began to think about this question of neighbourhood. It seemed to me that all of these people are our neighbours, but few of them are in the area on a Sunday, when our church doors are open for worship, but the church building is closed to the Anonymous Groups. What might we offer to this disparate community? And when might we offer it?

The second train of thought which inspired the setting up of this group was silence. As a student at Wesley House in Cambridge, I spent a year on attachment with the Jesus Lane Quaker Meeting. Our weekly meeting for worship was an hour of silence. Cambridge Quakers are alarmingly articulate, so this hour was never, in my year of attending, entirely silent. But silence was

the ground out of which came spoken ministry, and the quality of that group silence was extraordinary.

Do you try to set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the divine and to find the inward source of our strength. Seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life.<sup>2</sup>

In September 2012 I attended a course at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham on silent meditation in the tradition of John Main. John Main, who died in 1982, became a Benedictine monk after many years of diplomatic service around the world. In Malaya he was introduced to Eastern meditation, and began to integrate its practice into his daily prayer. As a monk he was advised to give up meditation, but he returned to it through a rediscovery of John Cassian and the Christian monastic desert tradition. Increasingly conscious of the importance of contemplative prayer for modern Christians, he founded a small lay community dedicated to its practice in daily life.

During my days at Woodbrooke, I was introduced to the concept of meditation as one of the 12 steps to recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>3</sup> The eleventh step involves using prayer and meditation to 'improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him'. Here was a link between the given communities of the Hinde Street premises and the Christian contemplative tradition. Sue and I attended a conference exploring research about the use of mindfulness meditation in 12-step programmes, and were encouraged to set up a local meditation group.

Might silent meditation be a place where all these neighbours might meet? Quakers believe that their silence is hospitable. Trying to define what we believe in creedal statements can be divisive. Singing hymns separates those who know the tune from those who do not. Liturgies can alienate those who are not familiar with the pattern. But anyone can be silent. So Sue and I decided to start a weekly meditation group, and to invite our Sunday congregation, those who attend the 12-step groups, those who live and work in the local area, and those who are homeless. These are our neighbours. This is our community.

Over the two years that this group has met, we have found that it is equally attended by members of the first four groups: church attenders, members of the 12-step groups, people who live and work locally. None of those who are homeless have yet come to meditate with us.

*A gathered stillness: meditation as a fresh expression of church?*

The pattern of our weekly meditation group is this: From 1pm to 1.15pm we gather. If there is someone new – and there often is – we introduce ourselves, and say something about why meditation is important to us. Sue or I explain the pattern of the hour, so newcomers know what will happen. At 1.15pm there is a short reading: something about silence, about letting go, about the importance of making space in busy lives. Sue and I usually bring the readings, but recently members of the group have begun to bring something to share. In order not to alienate those who do not come from a Christian tradition, we do not specifically choose Christian texts for the readings. But nor do we exclude the mention of Jesus, and one way or another, the reading nearly always explicitly brings God into the room. At 1.20pm we begin 25 minutes of silence. We have no particular practice of meditation in our group – some use a mantra, some concentrate on awareness of their breathing, some focus on the candle in the centre of the table, some use images from the reading which help them clear their minds. But we are all silent. There is an occasional cough, a shuffle, a rumbling stomach – there are a dozen bodies in this room after all – but the silence is gracious and hospitable. For the final quarter of an hour, we are invited to share any thoughts or insights which have occurred to us during the time of meditation. Often people share pictures which have come to them, which they don't necessarily understand – nearly always someone else offers an interpretation, a reflection, a comment which resonates with the original vision. Sometimes we simply sit in a companionable silence for the last 15 minutes. At two o'clock we head back out into our lives.

When I was completing the annual Methodist 'Statistics for Mission' in November last year, I decided to enter this weekly meditation group as a 'fresh expression of church'. The structure of the hour does indeed follow the structure of a liturgy: gathering, word, response, sending. This is a congregation with its own sense of community and caring. We remember each other's concerns and problems. We welcome familiar faces, and try to make newcomers feel at home. We get in touch with what we would name 'God' and the anonymous groups would name 'some power greater than ourselves' – something that roots us and grounds us and enables us to be present to ourselves and to others. We go out into the world changed.

Those who come regularly talk about an oasis of peace in busy lives. They talk about how this quiet space re-energises them, and about how they seem to be able to let go of problems which have been weighing them down as they sit in silence. Many of them say that when they can't make it, just knowing that we are sitting quietly at 1pm gives them a sense of tranquillity.

But there is more to it than that.

In the four years that I have been at Hinde Street, I have experienced a church that expresses its faith in two characteristic ways. It is a church that likes doing. And it is a church that likes thinking. There is nothing wrong with doing or thinking, but I suspect that there is a temptation to invest too much of our identity in these things. The meditation group reminds us that there is a shadow side to doing and thinking which needs to be recognised. If we are to be whole people, I believe we need to intentionally explore aspects of faith, and aspects of our humanity, which are predicated on not doing and not thinking.

In what way is Hinde Street a church that privileges 'doing'? Hinde Street is part of the West London Mission, a circuit which includes two Methodist churches and seven social work projects. The West London Mission was founded by the Revd Hugh Price Hughes in 1887 as part of the pioneering Forward Movement. For over a century it has engaged with the needs of people who are marginalised in London – homeless people, people with alcohol dependency, people coming out of prison.<sup>4</sup> Hinde Street church runs a Wednesday Club drop-in for homeless people each week, and is part of the Westminster Winter Night Shelter project for four months each year. Social justice is an important part of our Methodist DNA, and doing things to help people is an integral part of how we express our faith. The risk is that we slip into the trap which Paul recognised, the trap of equating faith with good works.

For Walter Brueggemann, the Exodus story is seminal in forming the identity of the people of Israel. He identifies the culture of 'Egypt' as one of endless doing. There the people are enslaved to the ethos of production. There is no rest in Egypt. No rest for the slaves, or for the supervisors, or even for Pharaoh, who is constantly monitoring production. The Egyptian gods are not gods of rest – it is their insatiable demands that legitimate the entire system. A request for three days' holiday to go and worship the Lord is interpreted as unjustifiable shirking.<sup>5</sup> To be liberated from being slaves in Egypt is to be liberated from being trapped in a culture of work. Brueggemann suggests that what God offers to the people of Israel is a covenant based on relationship, rather than a production schedule based on measurable outcomes. The relationship is with God, and with their neighbour. The fourth commandment – 'Remember the Sabbath' – famously bridges the first three commandments about our relationship with God, and the last six commandments about our relationship with our neighbour. Brueggemann suggests that observing a Sabbath in the rhythm of

our lives interrupts the relentlessness of Egypt's hold on our psyche, and reminds us of a different set of values.

I believe that the meditation group offers a Sabbath moment to those that attend it. But more fundamentally, it witnesses to the congregation of Hinde Street – and to Sue and me – that Sabbath is a divine command. To stop what we are doing, even for one hour a week, is to break the rhythm of doing, both physically and psychologically. To sit in silence and to be present to ourselves, to each other and to God, is a reminder that our identity is located not in what we do but in what we are. We are loved, we are held, and all we need to do to access that love and that holding is to sit still. 'In so doing we stand alongside the creator in whose image we are made.'<sup>6</sup>

Hinde Street is also a church of thinkers.<sup>7</sup> For me this is a positive quality. This is a church that loves thinking things through, that loves discussions, that loves exploring the Bible, politics and social issues. It is not a church that is ever satisfied with 'because the Bible says so' as a solution to a complicated debate. It is a church that loves knowing about everything. And yet I sometimes wonder whether 'knowing about' is a substitute for 'knowing'.

The left and right hemispheres of our brain have very different ways of perceiving the world. Iain McGilchrist, Consultant Psychiatrist, Clinical Director of the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospital, London, and former lecturer in English Literature at Oxford University, writes this:

The left hemisphere is always engaged in a *purpose*: it always has an end in view, and downgrades whatever has no instrumental purpose in sight. The right hemisphere, by contrast, has no designs on anything. It is vigilant for whatever *is*, without preconceptions, without a predefined purpose. The right hemisphere has a relationship of *concern* or care (what Heidegger calls *Sorge*) with whatever happens to be.

The world of the left hemisphere ... yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed, static, isolated, decontextualized, explicit, disembodied, general in nature, but ultimately lifeless. The right hemisphere, by contrast, yields a world of individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known – and to this world it exists in a relationship of care.<sup>8</sup>



McGilchrist argues that we live in a culture where the left brain predominates in an unhealthy way. The Enlightenment project has shaped us and defined us. Modernity has left its mark. And the left brain culture of now is frighteningly similar to the symptoms of schizophrenic illness. Schizophrenia is characterised by an imbalance in favour of the left hemisphere of the brain.

When we cease to act, to be involved, spontaneous and intuitive, and instead become passive, disengaged, self-conscious, and stare in an 'objective' fashion at the world around us, it becomes bizarre, alienating, frightening – and curiously similar to the mental world of the schizophrenic.<sup>9</sup>

We are trapped in a Cartesian dilemma, where only our thought-processes, only our analysis of things, only our schematisation of reality seems real. I think therefore I am.

Ian McGilchrist asks what the world would look like if the left hemisphere of the brain were to become dominant. Much as it does now, is his conclusion. A world where the focus is on technology, rational knowledge, scientific explanations for natural phenomena, being in control. 'Knowledge would seem more *real* than what one might call wisdom, which would seem too nebulous, something never to be grasped.'<sup>10</sup> As a culture, we would find it remarkably difficult to understand non-explicit meaning, and would therefore downgrade non-verbal communication.<sup>11</sup> We might value 25 minutes of silent meditation, but only for utilitarian reasons: because it makes us more effective money brokers, or improves our blood pressure, or lowers our cholesterol.<sup>12</sup>

The Hinde Street meditation group witnesses to a reality that is not dominated by our thinking, analysing, rational selves. It is by emptying the mind of thoughts – good thoughts, bad thoughts, helpful thoughts, any thoughts at all – that we come to our buried treasure, our true selves. Week by week, those at the meditation group talk about how difficult this is to do. 'Distractions' – thinking – fog the mind. Settling into meditation is like letting sediment settle in clear water, it is like allowing people to walk past a café window where you sit enjoying a quiet latte, it is like watching clouds scud past in a clear blue sky. You'll notice that what we find helpful is expressed in images, not in words. Frequently, at the end of the group, as we share our insights, we find that what we are sharing is a picture. A picture that speaks in different ways to each of the people gathered. A picture that engages us with complexity and feeling and context. A picture that lodges in the right brain.



For McGilchrist, the left brain should be in the service of the right brain, not the other way around. Our right brain, the brain that connects us with life, the brain that enables us to see things 'in the round' should use the intelligent, analytical left brain as its servant, its emissary. In our twenty-first-century culture, we have made the left brain our master. Hinde Street, and indeed the institution of the Church in the Western world, has bought into this approach. We have accepted the arrogant left brain's assumption that it knows everything there is to be known. That everything non-rational is therefore valueless.

I believe that the meditation group is indeed a fresh expression of church, a missional activity. But that mission is not just Hinde Street's mission to the local community in which the church sits as a solid, built edifice. It is, at heart, God's mission to the church, to Sue and me, to our own congregation. We need to be still and know that God is God.

And it is therefore God's mission, through Hinde Street, to the broader pathology of Western culture. It restores a bit of balance. It reminds us of the treasures of wisdom to be gained by giving the right brain room to move, to shake its wings, perhaps to fly.

## Notes

1. Hinde Street is well known in London, and indeed throughout the world, as the meeting place for 69 Anonymous Groups. These are groups of people battling with addiction to alcohol, drugs, eating disorders and other problems. The first such group was Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935: <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/> (accessed 30 March 2015).
2. 'Advices and queries' 2009, no. 3.
3. See <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA> (accessed 30 March 2015). The original 12 steps were:
  1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
  2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
  3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
  4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
  5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
  6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
  7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
  8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
  10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
  11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
  12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.
4. <http://www.wlm.org.uk/what-we-do> (accessed 27 March 2015).
  5. See Exodus 5, noting the repetition of the words 'work' and 'lazy'.
  6. Brueggemann 2014, p. 33.
  7. <http://www.hindestreet.org.uk/about.html> (accessed 27 March 2015): 'We are an inclusive church, and our theological approach is open and thoughtful. We work out the meaning of our faith using the Bible, the traditions of the church, our experience, and our reason. The Holy Spirit helps us make sense of these things for today. We value questions, and we look beyond easy answers.'
  8. McGilchrist 2009, p. 174.
  9. *ibid*, p. 393.
  10. *ibid*, p. 429.
  11. *ibid*, p. 433.
  12. *ibid*, p. 441.

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## Into Africa: a mission partner reflects

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*In July 2013 the Revd Dr Stephen and the Revd Jane Day were accepted as mission partners with The Methodist Church in Britain. They are now based in the city of Germiston, south east of Johannesburg, South Africa. In this article Stephen reflects upon the time of transition from appointment as mission partners, to preparing to leave the UK and their arrival in South Africa. Stephen also reflects upon the ongoing issues and challenges which he and Jane face as they adjust to life in South Africa and their new roles.*

CROSS-CULTURAL • DIVERSITY • FORGIVENESS • METHODIST CHURCH IN BRITAIN • METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA • MINISTRY • MISSION • RECONCILIATION • SOUTH AFRICA • TRANSITION

## Introduction

I first visited South Africa in July 2000 on a month's placement to the Jabavu circuit in Soweto while an ordinand in The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB). It will not take too much imagination to envisage the enormous culture shock I experienced moving from the comfort of life in a theological college in Cambridge, UK, to living in a theological college in Soweto and ministering in a township setting. It was a fantastic experience from which I carry many vivid memories. Little did I realise that I would return to South Africa 14 years later.

## Acceptance as a mission partner

In July 2013 my wife Jane (who is a Baptist minister) and I were both accepted as mission partners with the MCB. At that point we had no idea where in the world we would serve, but we were content that we would willingly go wherever God called us. Later that year we were invited to visit the East Rand, an area to the south east of Johannesburg, to explore potential placements. In November 2013 we visited the East Rand and were able to meet with colleagues and see a number of potential contexts in which we might serve. We returned to the UK with a sense that we and our colleagues in The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) saw roles for us in the East Rand, even though they needed to be discerned from the various opportunities.

## Germiston

In mid-2014 we discovered that becoming the minister of Germiston Central Methodist Church<sup>1</sup> was the appropriate role for me, with Jane working in gender justice with the MCSA; we were happy to accept these roles. It felt strange accepting the invitation to minister at Germiston, having not met any of the members or leadership of the church. While we produced a short introduction for members of the church, nothing was forthcoming from Germiston about the nature of the church or its vision. All I knew about the church before our arrival was that there were three very different congregations worshipping in the same building, but together they comprised the one society. The majority of the members are Zimbabwean Shona speakers, with an English-speaking service in the morning and a vernacular service (predominantly Xhosa and Sotho speakers) in the afternoon. Thus, I was aware

of the significant cultural diversity within the society, but beyond that the church was a mystery to me.

## Entering transition

It is hard to know when exactly Jane and I entered into our period of transition. We began to sense a shift in our thinking as we became aware that we were called to serve in another part of the world. However, this became more tangible when we knew that we would be based in Germiston.

Even before we knew that we were called to Germiston we began to make decisions about which of our possessions to take with us, which to place in storage, and which to sell. We were only able to ship possessions occupying an area of 3.4 cubic metres, which meant that we were forced to make tough choices about what we could take. While we were given a generous allowance to cover storage and resettlement costs, this only allowed us to rent a small storage unit (50 square metres). This reality meant that we needed to sell most of our possessions. In sifting through our possessions we recognised that the value we attributed to things had little to do with their monetary value and more to do with their emotional and sentimental value. We experienced a certain sense of freedom in being able to divest ourselves of things which ultimately we found we didn't want or need, but were aware of the consequences of the decisions we took since things we sold couldn't be retrieved. Having put some things in storage and others in boxes to be shipped to South Africa, we were left with a few suitcases and boxes: everything that would accompany us for the next six months!

We left Huddersfield in early August 2014 with everything packed in our Ford Fiesta. At that point we knew beyond any doubt that we were in transition. We had nowhere that we could call home, which enabled us in some way to identify with Jesus (Lk 9:58), although Jesus may not have had to wrestle with providing a residential address for banks and other organisations in his wandering! Having nowhere to call home, even though only for six weeks, felt very strange, especially having ministered alongside homeless people in Huddersfield while minister of Huddersfield Mission (2011–2014). Thus, I gained a different retrospective perspective on this ministry and became aware of how fortunate Jane and I were to have a strong support network of family and friends. I began to appreciate the enormous challenges facing those who are homeless with no support network. While we had to take our things with

us wherever we went, in common with those who are homeless, we had the benefit of a car to transport them, as well as secure homes in which they could be left overnight.

Our period of 'homelessness' was spent visiting family and friends throughout England and Wales. We planned to see as many people as possible in order to begin saying goodbye before we left the country. This felt important to us intuitively, in preparing ourselves and others for leaving. What we hadn't anticipated was the restlessness we felt as we began to settle for a few nights in one place, only then to pack up to move on again. We also hadn't anticipated the enormous energy needed to have similar conversations with people in each place we visited. It was lovely to talk with people who were interested in where we were going and what we would be doing, but it became draining to face the same questions again and again. We began to become detached from the answers we were giving, having become so accustomed to the questions. It was very difficult to live with other people's anxiety for us and our future. People were anxious to know about practical matters, such as security and healthcare. These were good questions, but we had no real understanding of what we would face in South Africa. While we were content to live with this uncertainty, many of our family and friends were not. We were conscious that as we said 'We don't know' in response to many questions we began to wonder if we should know an answer, which made us uncomfortable.

## Training and preparation

Our 'homeless' period ended in mid-September 2014, when we moved to All Nations Christian College in Hertfordshire, UK. Prospective mission partners with the MCB are sent to do the En Route course run by All Nations. Our course included the Leoni family, who are now serving in Rwanda as mission partners with the MCB. En Route is a 10-week course to prepare people for cross-cultural ministry.<sup>2</sup> The 20 participants were culturally diverse, drawn from countries such as Denmark, Hong Kong, Japan, the Netherlands and Nigeria; this diversity was also replicated among the other students at All Nations. Dr Ruth Wall, the course leader, emphasised that we would not be able to engage in cross-cultural ministry elsewhere in the world if we could not do so at All Nations. The truth of her words were borne out during our time at the college. We began to appreciate the way in which we looked at the world through our cultural lenses, which are not necessarily shared by other people. I particularly valued

my engagement with Daniel Aghanenu, a Nigerian pastor, who helped me to reflect more deeply in preparation for living and ministering in Africa.

Our time at All Nations was a precious gift in many senses. It gave us space to reflect upon the practice of cross-cultural ministry, both at All Nations as well as in Germiston. I enjoyed having space to reread books that had been especially formative in my Christian journey, such as *The Prophetic Imagination* (Brueggemann 1978), *No Future without Forgiveness* (Tutu 1999) and *Resurrection* (Williams 2002).

The principal gift of the course was the opportunity to do a piece of research about the context that each participant was entering. My theme was 'Forgiveness, reconciliation and living the new calling'. I reflected upon the legacy of apartheid 20 years after the first democratic elections in South Africa. I was able to read a number of books, such as *A Rumour of Spring* (Du Preez 2013) and *After Freedom* (Newman and De Lannoy 2014), which revealed the way in which the legacy of apartheid continues to affect and, in many cases, limit the opportunities open to people in South Africa. It was in that context that I reflected upon forgiveness and reconciliation as vital elements of ministry in Germiston, especially in the context of cultural diversity found in the members of Germiston Central Methodist Church. In addition, there is a history of xenophobia within South Africa's recent past, which was likely to be shaping reality for the Zimbabwean members of the church.

I reflected upon the way in which, under pressure, in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (Jn 18:15–18, 25–27), and related this incident to the different responses of the Church in South Africa to the reality of apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Church actively supported apartheid, the South African Council of Churches led the struggle against apartheid, bringing together black leaders from various Churches, and the Methodist Church opposed apartheid, but was slow to address its internal racial discrimination. By contrast, I looked at the encounter of the risen Jesus with Peter on the beach in which he was forgiven, reinstated and received a new vocation (Jn 21:1–17), relating it to Brueggemann's (2014) discernment of reality, grief and hope as urgent prophetic tasks for the Church today. Jesus forgave and reinstated Peter by reminding him of the painful reality of his denial, but showing that the bond of love remained, symbolised in the gift of a new vocation. It struck me that there is still a need for people in South Africa to recognise how the reality of the apartheid regime impacted upon all people's lives, and to grieve for the ways in which all people were dehumanised.

Brueggemann suggests that it is through this process of acknowledging reality and grieving that genuine hope can be discovered, a hope that can be experienced by all. In reflecting upon these matters I became aware that I will not be a neutral presence in Germiston as someone who is British, male and white, historically a lethal combination!

It would give a false impression if I implied that all our time at All Nations was spent reflecting theologically on cross-cultural ministry. Alongside the course, Jane and I needed to deal with the practicalities of leaving the UK for South Africa. Principally, this meant applying for a volunteer visa, which may sound straightforward but certainly wasn't. The requirements for the visa included obtaining a police clearance report, a general medical report and a chest x-ray! It took several weeks to acquire all the paperwork needed to be able to apply for the visa at the South African High Commission in London. We duly arrived to find, after two hours of waiting, that we needed additional paperwork. Thankfully, with help from an administrator at the MCSA, we were able to return the following day with the additional paperwork and our application was accepted. We then waited for a month while the application was being processed only to receive an email at 5pm on the day before collection stating that our visas wouldn't be issued until an additional letter was submitted! Again, the administrator at the MCSA came to our rescue, supplying that additional letter which enabled our visas to be issued – just one week before we were due to fly to Johannesburg.

Having secured our visas we knew that we would definitely be travelling to Germiston in mid-December 2014. Having completed the course at All Nations, we visited both sets of parents to say our final farewells. It was a very emotional week, but one with an unexpected twist. Jane's mum, Anne, had been experiencing some health problems during the autumn for which she received some tests. It was while Jane and I were on the coach to London for our flight that Jane received a call from her sister to say that Anne had a brain tumour. We were then faced with a dilemma: do we get on the plane? The rest of the journey, and our time at the airport, was spent making lots of calls to family and friends discussing the situation and trying to decide what to do. With little concrete information about Anne's situation and prognosis, as well as the potential value of remaining in the UK, we decided to board the plane. It took a huge amount of courage for Jane to take that step, but her family affirmed her in that decision.



## Arrival in Germiston

We arrived in Germiston on the morning of Saturday 13 December 2014 to be greeted by the Superintendent of the Germiston Mission circuit and the General Secretary of the MCSA. We arrived emotionally drained, just starting to digest the news about Anne as well as all the other farewells. Writing in March 2015 I recognise that the last three months have been a whirlwind, in which we are still caught up. Reflecting upon these more recent experiences is harder than the earlier ones, but I will try to capture something of what we have experienced.

We are living in the manse for Germiston Central Methodist Church, which had previously been let to tenants. While much preparatory work had been done, there was still much to do, not least because the tenants' cats had urinated on the carpets making them stink! We took up the carpets to uncover the wooden and stone floors beneath, but we then needed to treat them. For our first six weeks it felt as if we were living on a building site, which was unsettling. This was compounded by the procession of workers and the need to understand what was expected of us in relation to them, such as providing lunch. Relations were also complicated by the fact that the people who gave quotations were rarely the ones who did the work, raising issues about who to speak to about any issues. During our first two months we managed with the things that we had packed in the four suitcases we brought with us on the flight, together with the sparse things provided by the local church members.

The MCB had provided a grant to the MCSA with which they bought a car for us. Thankfully, this was in our drive when we arrived. Having been given a street map of the area we were able to be adventurous; Jane drove while I navigated. There was a real sense of satisfaction when we managed to find our way somewhere – and get back again! What has taken time and energy has been the research needed to find out where we might buy mundane things, about which we would give no thought in the UK. A seemingly simple task such as buying a lightbulb became a major exercise, albeit with a sense of satisfaction when accomplished. Alongside the issues of shopping are navigating systems alien to us. For example, the banking system here is different from that in the UK, with security measures preventing spending over a certain limit without clearance from a branch; it has taken time, energy and much patience to navigate this system.

Faced with so much that is new, our mantra has become 'It's not right or wrong, it's just different!' It has been helpful to think about difference, rather than to view negatively everything that is alien to us. The wisdom of Duane Elmer (2006) has been influential in helping us to consider our posture in entering this new culture. Elmer writes of cross-cultural servanthood based on a posture of openness, acceptance and trust in which people learn about, from and with others so as to understand and see through their eyes. When we have been tempted to retreat into the familiar it has been helpful to remember our need to be open and accepting of others and the unfamiliar.

One significant area of difference from the UK is that of security. We find ourselves living in a manse with a high wall and an alarm system linked to armed response. We are surrounded by houses protected by electric fences, razor wire and dogs; it didn't help us to feel secure. Soon after our arrival we found that overnight someone had tried to open our side gates. Not surprisingly, this attempted break-in didn't help us to feel relaxed. We decided that we needed additional external security in the form of infrared beams. It was interesting to see that some people understood our concerns, but some of our colleagues didn't, and so we had paid for the beams ourselves. It was disappointing that those responsible for our well-being didn't seem to appreciate our sense of insecurity and the different situation in the UK.

In addition to trying to settle into our new home, I have also been ministering in Germiston. The first service I led was on Christmas Day, less than two weeks after our arrival. Christmas felt very different, with it being mid-summer and the peak holiday season. It felt more anti-climactic than in the UK, not helped because we hadn't journeyed through Advent with the church.

The last two months have been spent trying to come to terms with the complexity of three congregations, all of which are semi-autonomous but together form the one society. I have been trying to understand the nature of my role in a society of 438 members, who are drawn from more than three distinct cultures. I now find myself expected to be in a church office several mornings each week, supported by an administrator; this is a novelty for someone used to ministering in the UK.

While Sunday worship is still a critical focus in my week, Sundays feel very different from those in the UK. There are three services each Sunday, each with its particular style and language; I usually lead one or two of these services. The lack of availability of members during the week, coupled with a reluctance to travel at night, mean that meetings take place of Sundays when we gather for

worship. It has felt very strange to move from leading worship to holding a business meeting and then to lead another service. This has been particularly challenging and demanding. However, this change is more than compensated for by the intensity of worship and the way in which worshippers willingly engage in worship. This engagement draws more from me, especially in preaching, and gives a sense of freedom that I find very stimulating. Having spent so many months in transition it feels very good to be preaching in context again, even if I am only beginning to understand the new context.

## Looking to the future

Having been in Germiston for three months we are able to look back and celebrate those things that have been achieved and that help us to feel settled. However, we face a number of questions relating to our long-term settling, which we will only be able to answer over the next few years:

- How do we find an appropriate balance between investing in existing relationships and seeking to develop new ones?
- How do we support our family in a time of crisis from a distance of 5,500 miles? How do we cope with the realisation that the support we can offer is so limited?
- How do we live with the increased risk of crime without becoming paranoid and unduly suspicious of those around us?
- When will we begin to inhabit the cultures with which we are engaging? How will we live with the competing tensions of the different cultures seeking unity while valuing diversity?
- When will we be able to sufficiently adapt to our context that we are able to find ways of relaxing?
- Who will be the people and what will be the resources that help us most to adapt to our context?
- When will we find ourselves spending less energy on the demands of daily living and find that things can be done subconsciously?
- What will be our legacy in Germiston?
- How do we prepare the way for our successors?
- How will God shape us more into the likeness of Christ through our experiences?

## Notes

1. Germiston is a city in the East Rand, south east of Johannesburg, established in 1886, following the discovery of gold. Gold mining has been prominent in Germiston's history, especially since 1921 when the Rand Gold Refinery was built, handling three-quarters of gold mined in the world. While gold mining has declined in significance since the 1950s, Germiston remains a vibrant city with a range of industries and serves as an important railway junction (Bonner and Nieftagodien 2012).
2. [www.allnations.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=120](http://www.allnations.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=120).

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# What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? Free grace – theology with the gloves off

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*In 1739 the Wesley brothers were just beginning to work out their theological position. They did this by differentiating themselves from others with whom they had kept company. They separated themselves from the Moravians over the doctrine of antinomianism ('stillness') and from the Calvinism of a number of evangelicals of their day. Nowhere was this search for an identity more passionately argued than in the sharp exchanges between John Wesley and his friend George Whitefield. Their writing is raw; it shows the polemical skills of these exponents; they fight with their gloves off. Here is theology in the making.*

GRACE • ELECT • REPROBATION • PREDESTINATION • CALVINISM • DEPRAVITY  
• ASSURANCE • FOUNDERY

The first four volumes of the new critical edition of the *Works of John Wesley*, an ambitious project that has taken 30 years to get to its halfway point, are dedicated to the *Sermons* of John Wesley. One hundred and fifty-one sermons make it into this scholarly edition and the one we are about to consider appears in the third of these volumes grouped with others under the intriguing heading 'A Miscellany of Published Sermons', to which is added a note explaining that these are 'sermons not included in any of Wesley's collections of *Sermons on Several Occasions*'. Since we have categorical information about the explosive impact of this sermon on its hearers, and since it seeks to establish and defend a very particular theological world-view with some force, it does seem odd that it has been relegated to the sidelines in this way. It was published by Wesley and, indeed, went through ten or eleven editions during his lifetime, yet he never included it in his collected *Sermons*. It appeared in his *Works* but is found there among what are described as his 'controversial writings'. Albert Outler, the editor of the volumes containing the sermons in the current critical edition, describes this particular piece as 'a useful illustration of Wesley's temper and methods as a polemicist,' a judgement we'll come back to later in this article.<sup>1</sup>

It may be interesting here to turn to a historian of Wesley's Chapel for an early account of the way the sermon and the controversy which it aroused was dealt with in its day.<sup>2</sup> At that time, almost 40 years before the building of the present Chapel, the embryonic Methodist cause was centred on the Foundery – the disused ruin of what had once been a factory for the production of cannons for the British army. There is a reference to the publication of the sermon in 1740 – it was preached two or three times but then filed away and never preached again. Attached to the printed version of the sermon was a hymn by Charles Wesley entitled 'Universal Redemption'. The two items between them constitute a full-blooded argument against Calvinism, conducted in poetry as well as prose. George Whitefield received a copy of the sermon while in America and he wrote a 'somewhat contentious' letter to Wesley taking issue with its argument and rebutting its claims. Some unknown person or persons got hold of this letter and printed it for general consumption. Indeed, it was handed to people gathering for worship at the Foundery. Wesley got hold of a copy and, standing before the congregation, he declared that Whitefield would never have consented to the publication of a letter intended for private use. He then took his copy of the offending article and tore it in pieces in front of the startled congregation who then, 'following their minister's example', tore their own copies in similar fashion and scattered them abroad. A ticker-tape moment in the home of Methodism. A 'fresh expression of church' acted out

long before that idea was minted.<sup>3</sup> I must confess that I had never seen or read Whitefield's letter before sitting down to write this article. Now that I've done so, it's clear to me that we can undertake no study of Wesley's sermon without giving similar critical scrutiny to Whitefield's reply before identifying the ongoing importance of the theological issues at the heart of their exchanges.

It is clear that the dividing line between Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon on the one hand and the Wesley brothers on the other was drawn very publicly by this sermon. It led to a dispute that would last for decades and occasion bitter recriminations in both directions. In view of its impact, it may be wise to lay out in some detail the main argument of the sermon. It's important to sense the energy with which it's invested before standing back to evaluate its importance and its continuing relevance.

## The sermon

The text Wesley used was Romans 8:32: 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' The thrust of his argument was as follows (I have used Wesley's own words wherever possible):

The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all ... It does not depend on any power or merit in man. And it is free for all.

There are those who hold that the doctrine of predestination amounts to 'an election of grace', that is, an unearned gift received by those whom God chooses to favour. Wesley urges everyone to see the inevitable consequence of such teaching – that there will be countless numbers of people who, not being in receipt of such election, will be doomed to 'die eternally'. And, even more challengingly, it will be just as necessary to attribute this negative outcome to the will of a sovereign God as it is to honour God for the positive offer to those who are privileged to find themselves among the elect. You can't hold on to one aspect of this doctrine without the other. If, according to this teaching, some are chosen for salvation then it is equally true that this is a 'decree of reprobation' for others; and the same God who wills some into his presence also determines that others will 'be damned, hardened, fitted for damnation'.

Wesley presses his point. Can those who say they believe in 'an election of grace' point to anyone in the whole of human history who, not having been thus elected, has known the reality of salvation? If not, then they must conclude that it is God's own will that 'the greater part of mankind [should] abide in death without any possibility of redemption'. It is impossible to 'soften' this argument. It all boils down to one simple, incontrovertible fact: 'By virtue of an eternal, unchangeable, irresistible decree of God, one part of mankind are infallibly saved, and the rest infallibly damned.' And those who subscribe to this doctrine must face up honestly to the consequences of their thinking.

Preaching would have no purpose. If you're already among the elect, why bother to listen to sermons? That becomes an activity without purpose. If you're not so chosen, then no amount of preaching can help you. So 'the end of preaching is void'. Those who hold to such a doctrine, often people of immense charm and of a charitable disposition, will soon find that the way they respond to other people will be conditioned by whether they consider them to be in possession of election or not. Too often it can lead to a sourness of spirit, an arrogance of mind for, in the last resort, why have dealings with those who 'have been hated of God from eternity'? The social consequences of this doctrine are horrendous for it robs such people of hope and comfort. It 'tends to destroy Christian holiness, happiness, and good works' ... indeed, 'to overthrow the whole Christian revelation'. Why did Christ come among us if all has already been decided? According to the Calvinist teaching, he died only for those 'whom God hath chosen out of the world'. The selective and skewed way of using particular verses of Scripture to undergird this line of thinking ignores the main thrust of the New Testament. It seems to set at nought the overarching truths contained in such affirmations as these, that Christ is 'the Saviour of the world'; that we place our trust in 'the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world'; that Christ's death represents a 'propitiation, not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world'. It turns a blind eye to the clear statement that 'He (the living God) is the Saviour of all men'; that 'he gave himself a ransom for all'; that 'he tasted death for every man'.

Wesley is emphatic that his own position on these matters should not be taken to imply that all are saved. Universal salvation, however deeply wanted by a God 'who hath no pleasure in the death of him that dieth', who 'is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance', is far from Wesley's mind. Human beings must choose, must will, must embrace the offer of salvation. What is universal is not salvation itself but the offer of salvation. And some people undoubtedly refuse that offer; they reveal themselves to be



‘stiff-necked’. God’s complaint is heartfelt: ‘How often would I have gathered you together, and ye would not?’

At this point, Wesley moves into overdrive. And here we reach the passage in the sermon that caused most offence. This is a doctrine, Wesley argues, that must be considered nothing less than blasphemy. ‘It overturns both [the] justice [of God], his mercy, and truth. Yea, it represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil; as both more false, more cruel, and more unjust.’ It is a blasphemy because it leads to ‘the supposition of which, if one could possibly suppose it for a moment (call it election, reprobation, or what you please, for all comes to the same thing) one might say to our adversary the devil: “Thou fool, why does thou roar about any longer? Thy lying in wait for souls is as needless and useless as our preaching. Hearest thou not that God hath taken thy work out of thy hands?”’ The devil, with all his principalities and powers is reduced to nothing. It is God who becomes ‘the devouring lion, the destroyer of souls, the murderer of men’. This is a doctrine that brings merriment to hell itself; the population of its halls and chambers is constantly being replenished by none other than God himself. ‘Here, O death, is thy sting! Here, O grave, is thy victory! Nations yet unborn, or ever they have done good or evil, are doomed never to see the light of life, but thou shalt gnaw upon them for ever.’

This is strong stuff indeed. Having reached such a climax, the sermon ends with a plea, a plea from the living God: ‘As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked ... Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?’ And so Wesley lays out his case and brings his argument to its conclusion.

## Whitefield’s letter: (a) theology

Whitefield got wind of Wesley’s sermon while he was in America. Since his conversion in 1735, he’d begun to recognise the need for a doctrinal position ‘that emphasised man’s entire depravity, his need of the new birth, and the fact that God can save and God alone.’<sup>4</sup>

Whitefield had been strengthened in these views by his reading of Scripture, his familiarity with the work of the Reformers and the Puritans and, above all, by his personal acquaintance (in America) with Jonathan Edwards, William Tennent and his son Gilbert. He was in America when he received his printed copy of Wesley’s sermon. By then, in his own spiritual development, he had

'grasped the great related chain of truths revealed in the New Testament – the Father's electing love, Christ's substitutionary death on behalf of those whom the Father had given Him, and the Spirit's infallible work in bringing to salvation those for whom it was appointed'. All this, in the words of Murray, amounted to nothing less than a doctrine of 'free grace'. Clearly, Wesley's decision to publish a sermon so at odds with his own theological views and to choose those same two words ('free grace') for its title would have irked Whitefield greatly and prompted him to consider a lively reply. His letter, dated 24 December 1740 from Bethesda in Georgia (but published in February 1741), is the result. I must express my regret that this letter is absent from the critical edition of the *Works of Wesley*, appearing neither in Volume 26, *Letters II: 1740–1755*, nor in Volume 13, *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*. Placing it in contiguity with Wesley's own replies would help students and readers alike to make a great deal more sense of the controversy of which it is an integral part.

Right at the outset, Whitefield seeks to establish his authority. He contemptuously dismisses Wesley's choice of a text. For Whitefield, Romans 8 is the perfect place from which to build an argument in favour of election rather than against it. He accuses Wesley of a wilful abuse of scripture: the very word 'all', so important for Wesley's argument, simply means 'all (and only) those who are really in Christ'. And the grace that God gives so freely to all (ie all saints) is what enables them to persevere in their march towards heaven. So Wesley stands accused from the very outset of special pleading and, to make matters worse, is taken to task for never once referring to his text in the rest of his sermon.

Whitefield counters Wesley's argument that the doctrine of predestination makes preaching unnecessary by suggesting that, on the contrary, since no one knows who has been chosen or rejected by God, it is vital that 'we are to preach promiscuously to all'. Preaching might bring members of the elect to an awareness of their status; it might even do good to others 'in restraining them from much wickedness and sin'. But its main object is to 'quicken and enable' those chosen by God 'to believe' and to an understanding that they 'may be found in that happy number'.

Election turns out to be a much more tantalising matter than anyone might suppose. 'I know that it is unalterably fixed', he writes, 'that I must be damned or saved; but since I know not which for a certainty, why should I not strive, though at present in a state of nature, since I know not but this striving may be the means God has intended to bless, in order to bring me into a state of grace?'

Whitefield goes on the counter attack. He is highly critical of Wesley's belief in 'the assurance of eternal salvation'. He can't begin to understand what good it does to awaken the conscience of a man or woman, to warn them 'in good earnest to seek deliverance from the wrath to come', to feel that his or her sins are forgiven and they are a child of God, 'if not withstanding this, he may hereafter become a child of the devil and be cast into hell at last'.

In a similar fashion, he rejects the notion of universal redemption, suggesting that such a doctrine depends entirely on human free will, 'a sandy foundation' to build on. Those who hold such views are to his mind 'dead and lifeless, dry and inconsistent, in comparison to those on the contrary side ... they might begin in the Spirit, but they end (whatever they may say to the contrary) in the flesh, they build up a righteousness founded on their own free will: whilst the others triumph in hope of the glory of God, and build upon God's never-failing promise and unchangeable love, even when his sensible presence is withdrawn from them.' He then names an impressive list of known Calvinists and dares Wesley to suggest they know nothing of the 'liberties of Christ'. Bunyan, Flavel, Halyburton, New England and Scottish divines are brought forward as evidence at this point.

Now he cuts to the chase. 'Surely Mr Wesley will own God's justice in imputing Adam's sin to his posterity'. All deserve to die and the fact that God, in his own free way, has condescended to save some is to be taken as a sign of his grace. Not to believe this, to cling to the notion of universal redemption, is to place oneself in the company of such arch disbelievers as Deists, Arians and Socinians. If Wesley accused Whitefield of blasphemy, this is where he finds the compliment returned. It is Wesley who is the blasphemer, his doctrine of universal redemption 'is really the highest reproach upon the dignity of the Son of God and the merit of his blood'. And he even taunts Wesley: 'Consider whether it be not rather blasphemy to say as you do, "Christ not only died for those that are saved, but also for those that perish."'

And so, at a theological level, Whitefield brings his rebuttal of Wesley's arguments to a strong conclusion. And that might have been thought enough. But there is a great deal in the tone of the letter that is highly personal and we cannot leave this consideration without recognising it.

## Whitefield's letter: (b) personal

The cudgels are thrown down right from the outset. Wesley held back from printing his sermon while Whitefield was in England but felt no hesitation in doing so once he'd sailed for America. That smacked of cowardice on his part.

What's more, he took this decision after drawing a lot – a piece of paper (presumably taken from among others) on which was written the simple instruction 'preach and print'. Whitefield is scathing about Wesley's readiness to 'tempt God' in this way and he goes on to describe another incident that occurred in the early part of 1738. Whitefield was heading for Georgia at the very time that Wesley was returning from America. Their itineraries crossed at Deal, near Dover. Whitefield would have liked to see his friend but Wesley, resorting to lots, drew one that stated 'Return to London'. He sent this as an instruction for Whitefield who was, however, unable to obey it. He was irrevocably committed to his journey. Later, Wesley confessed that he'd been wrong to resort to such a tactic and to put Whitefield's sense of vocation under the stress of such an instruction. Whitefield now used this example, previously known only to the two of them, to suggest that Wesley was just as foolish and wrong in his use of lots to justify the printing of this sermon as he'd been in that earlier example. He was scathingly dismissive of Wesley's readiness to claim such an 'imaginary warrant' to underpin his own very wayward desires. Whitefield's readiness to rake all this up and make it public really got under Wesley's skin.

So too did Whitefield's accusation of blasphemy, putting Wesley in the company of Deists, Arians and Socinians. It led Wesley to put up a spirited defence against such an allegation but it certainly wounded him.<sup>5</sup> Whitefield was as adamant in his convictions as Wesley. He even expressed the conviction that one day, when this earthly life was over, while in heaven 'casting down his crown at the feet of the Lamb', John Wesley will come to his senses and 'be filled with a holy blushing for opposing the divine sovereignty' in the way he has done. But why wait for eternity? Whitefield hopes his friend can come to that conclusion before he shakes off his mortal coil.

The final thing to remark on in this extraordinary letter is its tone. It seems to play with Wesley, to poke fun at him, to contrive at gentle satire. There are constant references to 'dear Mr Wesley' that feel either patronising or sarcastic. One example must suffice in support of this contention. Whitefield rejects 'dear Mr Wesley's' claim that 'the doctrine of election and reprobation tends to

destroy holiness.' 'Dear Mr Wesley' should know better than that, he declares, and then goes on to accuse his correspondent of manipulating evidence by choosing people to illustrate his contentions whose views are known to be extreme. 'Dear Mr Wesley perhaps has been disputing with some warm narrow-spirited men that held election, and then he infers that their warmth and narrowness of spirit was owing to their principles.' This patronising tone runs through the whole document and it must surely have irked Wesley.

## Aftermath

There were some fitful exchanges between Whitefield and Wesley over the following two years. It was clear that each man regretted the way things had turned out. There is clearly a bond of friendship apparent even in the fiercest of exchanges. Wesley ends a letter written in April 1741, a letter in which he has fiercely rebutted the charges made by Whitefield with the injunction (no doubt directed at himself): 'Spare the young man, even Absalom, for my sake.' The young man himself, writing just six months later, expresses regret for having revealed the secret (and private) matter of Wesley's use of lots. 'I am sorry now that any such thing dropped from my pen,' he writes, 'and I humbly ask pardon. I find I love you as much as ever.'<sup>6</sup> But he recognises that his beloved friend may have been frightened by his outbursts from continuing a correspondence with him. For all that, the intense feeling seems to have petered out by October 1742<sup>7</sup> when, in reply to a letter from Wesley urging that a line be drawn under their recent dispute, Whitefield writes, 'I can heartily say "Amen" ... and let the king live for ever and controversy die.' This is a letter which ends pacifically with the words, 'In much haste, and with great thanks for your last letter, I subscribe myself, reverend and very dear sir, your most affectionate, though younger brother, in the gospel of our glorious Emmanuel!'

There would have been no desire to keep old wounds open after these tender words had been exchanged. Hence, no doubt, the decision not to publish this sermon with others being gathered together for the general edification of the Methodist preachers and people.

## The ongoing importance of this sermon

Calvinism is no longer as contentious an issue as it once was. Even the Church of Scotland has now virtually purged itself of the overt Calvinism that once

determined its theological position. But Calvinism, which under Théodore de Bèze morphed into 'neo-Calvinism', has shown itself capable of further mutation. A world-view where God can (and does) choose some people for his elect (while rejecting others) has been found near the surface of so many of the socio-political troubles of our modern world. I can only mention them here, but they form an impressive and worrying list. Just think, for example, about the troubles in Northern Ireland where a Calvinistic Protestantism defined itself against an infallibilist and exclusive Roman Catholicism. The forces released by the First Vatican Council were ranged against those who held fiercely to the Augsburg and Westminster Confessions. They certainly expressed themselves through social and political groupings which, while ostensibly disavowing their theological roots, bore all the marks of the traditions in which they were grounded. It all amounted to an unstoppable force (*extra ecclesia nulla salus est*) hitting an immovable object (No surrender!).

The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa played a huge role in maintaining the apartheid regime. It held fast to its dogmatic position till the end. It merely equated those doomed for hell with all the non-white populations around them. A similar observation can be made of those who played a key role in the development of the slave trade. Indeed, one could go even further and trace the way American exceptionalism is but an outworking of the Puritanism that came with the earliest settlers. New England congregationalism took a firm hold on emerging American sensibilities. George Whitefield's Calvinism was, after all, strengthened and deepened by his personal contact with the teaching of the American revivalist Jonathan Edwards.

It would be fruitless to go on with these unsubstantiated suggestions – they might make an interesting article for a future edition of this journal. Just one last word on the spat between Whitefield and Wesley remains.

## Postscript

In the record of the second Conference held by John Wesley, which took place at the Foundery in 1745, the following detail appears:

*Question 22: Does not the truth of the gospel lie very near to Calvinism and antinomianism?*

*Answer: Indeed it does – as it were, within a hair's breadth. So that 'tis altogether foolish and sinful, because we do*

not quite agree either with one or the other, to run from them as far as ever we can.

*Question 23: Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?*

Answer: (1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God;  
(2) In denying all natural free will, and all power antecedent to grace;  
(3) In excluding all merit from man, even for what he has or does by the grace of God.<sup>8</sup>

From this we can only conclude that the questions raised five years earlier in the contentious exchanges between Wesley and Whitefield continued to rumble on. And it seems that Wesley took to heart some of the remonstrations of his opponent and took steps to ensure that his adherence to the Arminian doctrine of grace was not entirely at the expense of the understanding of the sovereignty of God that lay at the heart of the Calvinist view. A mature outcome to a highly charged debate.

## Notes

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 3. Sermons III: 71–114, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, p. 543.
2. George J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel London and its Associations*, 1872, p. 26.
3. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*, p. 26.
4. 'Iain Murray on Whitefield and Wesley', an article that first appeared in the 1960 edition of *Whitefield's Journals*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust. What follows, both in these remarks and in the following synopsis of the letter, owes a great deal to Murray, a debt I am delighted to acknowledge here.
5. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 2. Sermons II: 34–70, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, pp. 58ff.
6. Wesley, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 66.
7. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley (Bicentennial Edition)*, vol. 10: *The Methodist Societies – The Minutes of Conference*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011, p. 87.
8. Wesley, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 153.







## Reviews

*Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1760–1900*, John Pritchard  
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 293 pp, £74.00 hbk

*Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1900–1996*, John Pritchard  
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 333 pp, £75.00 hbk

John Pritchard, the last General Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society prior to its being wound up in 1996 and its activities and interests absorbed into the wider compass of the British Methodist Church, has undertaken an impossible task. Were he to have said everything about his subject worthy of mention he would have written the history of the British Empire and more, so diverse was British Methodist activity over his period. These two volumes chart the astonishing achievements of a denomination that never numbered much over a million in Britain but that, virtually from its inception, was passionately committed to the propagation of its brand of Christianity wherever the opportunity arose in the world. As with all European denominations, those opportunities came hard on the heels of trade and empire, both for good and ill. Few could read Pritchard's 600 pages without significant benefit and enrichment, yet few will reach the end without some sense of disappointment, a sense that Pritchard shares. For though he says a little of most things, in the vast majority of cases he only says sufficient to whet the appetite for more. His method is to paint his picture in outline only, but to illumine it liberally with anecdotes of the deeds of particular heroes by way of illustrating the general tenor of their colleagues' work.

The scale of the achievements of the European missions taken as a whole is almost beyond belief. In the first volume, Pritchard maps the slow, painful, faithful, often foolish and misguided work of the first century and a half, in

which the yield was tiny in proportion to the cost in terms of funds and workers. In the second, he records the absolute explosion of Christianity in China prior to 1950, and how 'in 1900 one African in ten was Christian, by the year 2000 one in two'. To this he adds an astonishing testimony to autonomy and indigenisation: 'Whereas the Protestant community in China was estimated at a million or less in 1950, at the turn of the millennium there were 20 million at the very least.'

In the first volume we read about the collisions between Western Christian missions and slavery, caste, cannibalism, polygamy, nakedness, tribal warfare, apartheid, opium, and Western commercial and military interests. Should missionaries engage in commerce (set up a printing press), interest themselves in education, health and local economy? Should the Bible be translated? Christianity met the other great religions of the world and, in general, did not clothe itself in glory. Pritchard charts all these collisions, setting contemporary liberal voices against conservative where he can. He does not shield us from the folly and pig-headedness, but neither does he overindulge the wisdom of hindsight.

In the second volume we read about the reverse struggles – the struggle for political independence matched by the local Methodist struggles for autonomy, the anguish of Methodists at home and abroad where independence movements were at war with the British, and the struggle to find a theological vocabulary to cope with newly independent churches generating newly independent indigenous theologies. Where, for instance, does 'indigenous Christian theology' end and syncretism begin? But, as Pritchard observes, this is a problem as old as Christianity itself, but in a new garb. Pritchard charts how newly independent churches often found their European denominational heritage utterly irrelevant. Chinese ex-Methodists, he reports, were proud of their Methodism but even more of their 'ex-'. Pritchard reports for us the contortions of a declining home denomination to cope with all that was being asked of it. All this makes deeply provocative reading.

The titles of these volumes mislead. These are not histories of Methodism but histories of *British* Methodism. Whenever Pritchard's tale reaches the point where an overseas district turns into an autonomous body, the narrative ceases. There is barely an aside about the deeds of American Methodism, for instance. Further, in the first volume especially, virtually all Pritchard's attention is given to the activities of the *Wesleyans*. Without doubt, the Wesleyans were the first to venture abroad, and their activities were more extensive than any other, but

not in proportion to the 250 pages devoted to their activities and the 20 afforded to what Pritchard calls 'Parallel Missions'. These few pages do no justice at all to British Methodist work (by Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians, United Methodists etc) in Canada, Australia, colonial New York and Philadelphia, New Zealand, South Africa, West Africa, East Africa, Fernando Po, Cameroon, Jamaica, Tasmania, Nova Scotia and great swathes of China. Perhaps the greater blame for this lies with the editors at Ashgate. Pritchard admits in his Preface that he has not attempted parallel accounts. The reason he gives is that the written histories of these denominations do not yet exist. His is secondary research, collating from a twenty-first-century viewpoint the work of others. His primary sources for the Wesleyans are the annual reports of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the now-outmoded published histories. For the other Methodist denominations, neither the societies, nor the reports, nor published histories exist. Thus the title is technically correct. The *only* British Missionary Society before 1932 was Wesleyan. But that nicety does not completely absolve the editors (and the title) of the charge of misrepresentation, surely?

This criticism applies far more to the first volume than the second. After the union of 1932 the activities of United Methodists and Primitives were caught up into the work of the united denomination, and the achievements of each became the achievements of all. Thus, in particular, the twentieth-century part of what was originally Bible Christian and then United Methodist work in China gets far more extensive and appropriate treatment in the second volume than in the first. The same is true of Primitive Methodist work in Africa.

The level of citation is disappointing. This is not produced as a scholarly work. Far too often one looks in vain for a footnote revealing a source. Anyone wishing to build on Pritchard's work would have first to retrace Pritchard's footsteps. There is a further difficulty, not of Pritchard's making, and which he himself laments: materials over half a century old are still locked away in the vaults of Methodist Church House, uncatalogued and not available for scholarly research. Pritchard was given access, but was not free to cite as he would have liked. Perhaps a valuable additional fruit of Pritchard's monumental labour will be the freeing up of late twentieth-century Methodist archival material to further scholarly research.

Michael Wilson

*Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, Karen Armstrong  
(London: Bodley Head, 2014), 499pp, £25.00 hbk

A prolific author on a range of faith issues, particularly concerning the monotheistic religions, Karen Armstrong has produced another 'big story' text that engages across the sweep of world history and religion to challenge the lazy academic linkage between religion and violence. There is a connection, but Armstrong mounts a very well-argued case to discredit the view that religion and violence are inevitably and intrinsically linked.

Some of Armstrong's best work has been in telling these big stories. Her *A History of God* and *The Great Transformation* are such, and *Fields of Blood* adds to this. Starting in prehistory, and working through the development of the nation state to modernity and into contemporary life, Armstrong very cogently argues that violence is related to the establishment and development of agriculture, which enabled settled populations to develop that could have a surplus of production and so become attractive to raiders and theft. As populations expand, war is caused by the battle for scarce resources, not religion. That religion at times has underpinned a claim for legitimacy for violence is clear, but religion is not the main cause of violence.

In the sweep across history, individual chapters work very well as church history, Islamic history and so on. For example, the argument that, post Constantine, Christianity was imperialised rather than the empire Christianised is well put. Reasons why rulers acted in the way they did are clearly articulated, with violence consistently caused by the desire to accumulate wealth, power, influence and prestige. While not always being the opponent of state violence, Armstrong ably demonstrates that when religion has supported violence it has normally acted contrary to its own teachings.

I think Armstrong is very sharp until she reaches the twentieth century. I thought she missed some opportunities to discuss further the secular causes of violence, with many of the genocides of the past 100 years being motivated by factors other than religion, such as those perpetrated by Stalin, Pol Pot, the Nazis, etc. At times the book is focused on formal history, and so read through the eyes of the leaders of society and those that recorded history, normally of course the victors. While this text covers Europe, Asia and to some extent North

America, I think at least some attention could have been given to sub-Saharan Africa, and more to the South American civilisations. Engaging in argument with more recent forms of primal religion might have added to the work, although a 500-page book is likely reaching the maximum.

Overall, this is a sharply argued and very well-referenced challenge to the misconception that there is an inevitable link between religion, especially monotheistic religion, and violence. We live in a world where some who claim to be people of faith act in terribly violent ways, citing religious justification. *Fields of Blood* is an important resource in this current debate and is highly recommended.

Stephen Skuce

*Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening*, Jeremy Begbie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216 pp, £35.00 hbk

Jeremy Begbie's latest book gives added value to his high reputation and growing list of publications dealing with the expanding interest in the relationship between theology and music.

*Music, Modernity and God* is a collection of essays representing Begbie's unique and engaging ideas. These essays are, he says, 'to a large extent, the result of numerous conversations, debates ... exchanges ...', which have taken place over a number of years. Consequently, some of the thoughts expressed in this volume will be familiar to those who have read his *Voicing Creation's Praise*, *Theology, Music and Time* and *Resounding Truth*.

The introductory essay sets the scene by stressing the importance of 'listening' correctly in the modern world and helps us to consider seeing (and hearing) musical dimensions in contemporary universal social, political and theological issues. Begbie here addresses the difficulty of defining the word 'modernity', included in the book's title, explaining that he intends to discern that which 'has flowed into the postmodern ... [rather] than an account of the postmodern itself' (p. 5). This is helpful not only for clarity's sake but also because so much of Begbie's earlier work, especially from a musicological position, appears to avoid the advances and challenges of many twentieth- and twenty-first-century innovations.

The first main chapter launches into the period of the Reformation with an enlightening view of Calvin (1509–1564) and his changing views about music in worship. This is a welcome positive approach which is often found to be quite the opposite. Then follows an in-depth study of J. S. Bach (1685–1750), working through a vast array of contemporary, 'modern' work in this area. He highlights the tension between 'reason' and 'revelation' which will resonate in many Wesleyan ears.

We then move to a consideration of 'natural theology', as reflected in the differences of Enlightenment thinking in the work of the philosopher Rousseau (1712–1778) and the composer Rameau (1683–1764). Again, this is useful material for those who listen for background notes to Wesley's theological position in the same period.

The chapter 'Early German Romanticism' is profound and fascinating, especially in the way Begbie explains the nineteenth-century movement towards the emancipation of 'absolute music' (ie solely instrumental and orchestral music), and how the 'thorny' question of how, and if, music without words can express itself as its own language capable of sounding (or standing) alongside the all-important written and spoken word.

The remaining chapters address this complex matter of the validity of a 'musical language' and how this relates to the pursuit of truth. Begbie refers a little to Wittgenstein and his exploration of 'language games'. This could be taken further, as a way of elucidating the significance of the inflections, resonances and fine-tuning of all that surrounds the experience of meaningful language-making. However, Begbie's references to Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses und Aron*, with its agonised cry 'O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt' ('O word, thou word, that I lack'), provides a powerful springboard for this crucial discussion.

*Music, Modernity, and God* is, as Roger Lundin writes on the book cover, a 'deep, sparkling book [placing] music at centre stage in the drama of late modernity'. Our careful concentration on Begbie's essays, along with our dedicated listening skills, will bring us great rewards and fresh sounds to explore.

Harvey Richardson

*The Edge of Words*, Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 204 pp, £20.00 hbk

*The Edge of Words* is based on Rowan Williams' Gifford Lectures, which he delivered in 2014. When Adam Lord Gifford endowed this esteemed lecture series in the late nineteenth century, he wanted to promote the study of 'natural theology'. As Williams carefully notes in his lectures, the approach with which Gifford was familiar is exemplified by the work of William Paley, who attempted to build rational arguments for the existence of God from observation of the natural world. Natural theology posits a form of religion stripped of necessity for divine revelation. Williams resists this historic approach and, instead, redefines natural theology through a sophisticated argument about the significance of the created world and the habits of human (and sometimes not only human) communication within it.

Language and communication are natural parts of a world in which embodied creatures mediate, interpret and reinterpret what they encounter, and by doing so participate in a reality that they cannot quite capture fully in any form of language. Although the process of material evolution gives rise to speech, formation of language and its expression in speech is more than mechanistic, biologically determined response to environmental stimuli. Williams writes:

Rather than looking to material processes, understood in mechanical fashion, as the key to understanding what language is, it would be nearer the truth to say that we look to language to show us what matter is. That is, language exhibits a pattern of cooperative agency in which the structure of life or action in one medium is rendered afresh (translated) in another. (p. 102)

Recognition and expression of reality that is both form and motion, that is part of our experience and yet beyond full description, is 'represented' in the material process of speech. Through language we participate in 'a given quality in what we encounter, as if we are always catching up with a reality never seen as standing still enough to be absorbed or fully embraced or mastered' (p. 93).

Williams argues that there is much about the nature of language as 'representation' that opens us to the possibility of what is in, behind and



beyond language. Representation is a key term in the text, but Williams' understanding evades clear and concise definition. The most detailed explanation of 'representation' is in the Appendix. Williams acknowledges the view that theological language is metaphorical, but it would be simplistic to describe his use of representation as synonymous with metaphor. His version of 'representation' is an adaptation of Hegel's concepts of *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*, which Williams translates roughly and respectively as 'imaginative deployment of sensuous depiction' and 'analogical objectification' (p. 193). 'Representation' includes language standing as a symbol for another reality that is active and interactive with us, mediated through our subjective experience as embodied creatures and intelligent beings. Yet, words are not only symbolic, as if they were standing in for some passive reality that is beyond us. Speech, and the intelligence required to formulate it, contain some essence of that reality.

The arguments developed by Williams are rich and complex. He respectfully engages with previous Gifford lecturers who countered natural theology with the need for separate divine revelation. A religious tradition that rests on divine revelation 'need not necessarily be appealing to a simple model of divine utterance – an otherworldly agent providing otherwise inaccessible information' (p. 176). Christianity, for instance, relies on the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian tradition owns that Jesus has a real physical body – a material revelation. Jesus' body, says Williams,

is an active and speaking body, then a helpless and suffering body, then a dead body, then a body that is both significantly absent and at the same time believed to be present in very diverse modes – as the community itself, as the food the community ritually shares, as the proclaimed narrative and instruction derived from the record of the literal flesh-and-blood body. (p. 176)

In a way that resembles the view of Thomas Aquinas of a material world participating in the ever-moving, continually generating divine reality on which it is dependent, Williams resists modernist tendencies to separate natural theology from revelation as if they had different sources.

The depth of Williams' thought is as rich and astounding as the range of sources from which he draws. *The Edge of Words* shows all of the theological and philosophical influences one normally expects to find in Williams' writings – Vladimir Lossky (and other contemporary strands of Orthodox theology),

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Origen, Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross. He also incorporates a host of material from philosophy of language, neuroscience, literature (both classical and contemporary) and (Welsh) poetry. It appears that Rowan Williams reads everything and remembers everything he reads. Similarly, there is no neglect of art, film, music and dance, since these are material and even embodied forms of 'representation'. When Williams is writing for a popular audience, he communicates Christian theology in plain language that requires no background in theology. *The Edge of Words* is of a different order. It is a complicated work that will appeal to those with an interest in the philosophy of language and current trends in the relationship between natural science and theology.

Cindy Wesley

*The Book of Strange New Things*, Michel Faber (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2014), 592 pp, £14.99 pbk

In the Richmond Room on the first floor of Methodist Church House in London are the boards that previously hung in the entrance hall of the now closed Richmond College. Here are listed Wesleyan missionaries who served overseas, for often all too brief periods before they died 'on station'. Each inscribed name and date of service is a powerful historical testimony to the faithfulness of our forebears, and behind each one is the hidden story of those who travelled with them, often at great personal cost, and of those family and friends they left behind.

In his second novel, *The Book of Strange New Things*, Michel Faber explores themes of loss and separation that would have been recognisable to those listed in the Richmond Room, as well as the challenge of enculturation faced in any age in bearing witness to Christ in a culture unfamiliar with the language or the conceptual framework of the gospel. This challenge is here faced literally in an alien culture: Peter, a sincere and dedicated missionary, is sent to a faraway planet at a time when natural disasters are bringing life as we know it on Earth to an end. There he tries to juggle the communication of the Christian message to the native Oasans, many of whom are keen to hear it despite the linguistic and cultural barriers, with communicating back home with his wife Bea, who through the tragic happenings around her is experiencing a growing sense of social and personal dislocation.

Faber himself was brought up as a Baptist and while in interviews he now describes himself as an atheist he has also expressed his desire to write about people of faith with empathy: in this novel he succeeds admirably. Peter's belief is portrayed as sincere throughout the book: here is neither naive untested fundamentalism, nor a reductionist faith that makes the demands of Christ easier to swallow. Rather, Peter's back-story of salvation from a life of drugs, drink and violence through meeting Bea is inseparably bound up with his understanding of salvation through meeting Jesus in her. At only one point does Faber's instinct fail to ring true: for an evangelist with such a heart to make faith relevant, Peter's attachment to the King James Version of the Bible ('the book of strange new things') seems more in keeping with a missionary journey through time than space.

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At nearly 600 pages Faber's book may seem daunting, but it is stylishly written, funny, poignant and moving. Sadly the tragic death of Faber's wife Eva from cancer as he wrote it informs both the tender understanding of loss and separation in the novel and his decision that he will not write one again. His final novel is a triumph which will offer especial enjoyment and insight to pioneers and mission partners, honouring as it does both those that make journeys for their faith and convictions and those they lose or leave behind in the process.

Tim R. Woolley

*Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality*, Gavin D'Costa, Eleanor Nesbitt, Mark Pryce, Ruth Shelton and Nicola Slee (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 209 pp, £19.99 pbk

The title of this book echoes Auden's paradoxical aphorism 'poetry makes nothing happen' and invites the reader to share in the intriguing adventure of describing life, God and meaning in a handful of carefully chosen words.

The authors are 'persons of Christian faith (generously understood), and theologians (of differing kinds) who seek to explore and reflect on the mysterious, graced potential of poetry to open up a space that some may describe as sacred, spiritual or religious'. They form a group called 'The Diviners' and have met for over twelve years, three times a year, to respond to and critique each other's writing. Each chapter of the book begins with an autobiographical theological reflection and leads to a short collection of poems by that writer. In each case I was left wanting more and found myself coming back to some poems a number of times to tease out meaning or to reflect on the use of language in a way that challenges or surprises. Each chapter stands alone, as does each poem, but there is value in the juxtaposing of these poets' offerings alongside each other. Mark Pryce's work as a male writer working out what it means to become a Christian poet takes the reader back to Nicola Slee's chapter, 'Writing as a woman', to find resonances and comparisons. Pryce's poems demonstrate an intimacy and compassion that cuts across gender stereotypes, particularly in 'Girl playing with a magic cloth' (p. 106). Slee's are deeply grounded in the feminist tradition that she inhabits, the graphic agony of 'A Mother's Rage' expressing Mary's experience in words that can only leave the reader standing before an imagined Pietà.

I'd give my life for that anger now,  
when all that is left to me is weeping and grief  
as I cradle his dead body on my lap. (p. 35)

Ruth Shelton's chapter draws on her Roman Catholic background and her experience of leading a charity working with homeless people in Nottingham. She is influenced by other writers, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Donaghy. Her work has an objective and observed quality. Occasionally,

as in 'Prime Time' (p. 73), her imagination takes flight and one glimpses the 'Holy' for which she is searching among the mundane.

Eleanor Nesbitt resists religious labels but draws on Quaker, Anglican, Sikh and Hindu influences. She reflects on 'Where Poems Come From: Spirituality, Emotion and Poiesis'. The second stanza of her short poem 'Examination Question' gets somewhere to the heart of the questions of mystery that she explores:

Does human tendency to anthropomorphise  
initiate, inhibit or distort  
theology? Discuss – while life allows –  
but do not try too hard to understand. (p. 147)

Gavin D'Costa draws on his academic and Roman Catholic contexts as he explores 'The Miracle of Poetry: Divine and Human Creativity'. He teases out the idea that a poet is a 'miracle worker' because the poem has the ability to make you see things differently. His selection of poems has a strong death-related theme and explores the way that life continues around the edges of the experience of grief. This thread weaves in with some poems that challenge concepts of comfortable religion. This is sharpest in 'The Shadow of the Holy Innocents':

Did Gabriel realise that he initiated a blood bath?  
Had this sublime angel missed Jeremiah's prophecy,  
that Rachel's weeping in Ramah would turn into  
a wailing that would never stop, not even to welcome  
angels in that dung-rich Bethlehem stable? (p. 199)

The book offers a great deal to explore and casts light on a range of theological perspectives as well as offering an anthology of poems that can be dipped into again and again.

Michaela A. Youngson