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'Why should not we do what we can?' How does revisiting the history of the Methodist commitment to education help us to evaluate our work in faith schools today?

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Methodism was born long before the benefits of universal education had gained widespread acceptance. It is therefore significant that the early Methodists directed so much energy to the provision of schooling, with the first school established by Wesley himself within ten years of his conversion. Although today's Methodists operate within a very different socio-political framework, the discussions and actions of our nineteenth-century counterparts identify themes which resonate across the centuries. Reflecting on this history informs the thinking of the contemporary Church about what can be achieved by our continued involvement in the challenging world of education provision.

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It is a moot question: if the British Methodist Church did not already have schools as part of its historic legacy, would we be getting into the education business now? The social, religious and educational climate which provided the impetus for Methodism's early involvement in education is now much changed: secular voices more loudly challenge the legitimacy of religious drivers in educational provision and, while schooling is now universally offered by the state, political interest is focused more on the material imperatives of educational and economic competitiveness. Since the summer of 2014, there has been a significant further shift in the educational landscape following the so-called 'Trojan Horse'[1] controversy in which a number of schools in Birmingham were revealed as nurturing Islamic fundamentalism, with a suspicion that this was more widespread across the country. Although none of these was a 'faith school', this has subjected the role of faith in schooling to greater scrutiny. Also in the summer of 2014, the British Methodist Conference received a report indicating a significant fall in Methodism's current numbers and projecting further major decline. In this current context, what role have the schools played in Methodism and how do they continue to serve the Church?

John Henry Newman once observed that 'To live is to change and to become perfect is to have changed often'.[2] Nowhere is this more true than in the world of education where the landscape is constantly shifting and the changing ideal of perfection remains ever beyond our grasp. The material experience of schooling is always on the move: when I started as a teacher in 1981 we still used chalk on a 'black' board and the small supply of very rudimentary computers was kept in a special locked room. Walking into a classroom in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the observer may find that the teacher has different tools in their 'bag' and, more subtly, a different pedagogical armoury at their disposal, although the classroom may look reassuringly (or perhaps stubbornly) the same. Teachers are necessarily the product of the previous generations' learning, preparing children for life in a world which we do not yet know. Beyond the changing material aspects of schooling, the philosophical and political understandings of what our schools are for are also fluid and contested.

The relationship of Methodism with formal education has also been a changing one. John Wesley and George Whitfield founded the first Methodist school at King's Wood (now 'Kingswood'), Bristol, in 1745. At the time, education was not seen as the politicians' business; it generally served noble liberal principles in its offer to the few (mostly rich, mostly male) while also serving the political

purpose of securing the advantage of the wealthy over the poor, a somewhat less liberal intention. Leading up to this period, from the end of the Roman Empire, education in Christian Europe was frequently driven by some sense of a life lived under God and funded privately, charitably or by the Church. It met some of the needs of commerce but the trades, through apprenticeships, fulfilled the need to provide a skilled workforce to meet society's needs. The labouring masses, first in the countryside and later in the factory towns, were unconsidered. Many of us do not have to go back very far in our family history before finding ancestors who could only mark an X to fulfil the rudimentary task of writing their name, for example.

Against this background, the school at Kingswood was a radical though short-lived departure. Moved by Wesley's and Whitfield's preaching, the miners challenged the early Methodist leaders to translate their life-changing message into life-changing reality by establishing a charitable school for the education of their children. Miners were not just the average poor: poverty and the accompanying squalor, hunger and disease made colliers a byword for social exclusion. The outworking of Methodist theology through practical, therapeutic action in the lives of the children of the disadvantaged was established as a principle from the earliest days of the movement and is still a fundamental principle in the commitment to schools today. This is not solely a Methodist concern. Most significant religious communities in the UK have a presence in education, although other 'faith providers' may be working out different priorities, influenced by a different combination of theology, history and circumstance. The perspective of some of our partners, motivated by more confessional concerns, prioritises supporting parents to bring up their children in the faith. Methodists see themselves at the other end of the spectrum, tracing through their history a philanthropic golden thread recently described by the Archbishop of Canterbury as 'a deeply felt moral obligation to provide education for all, a gift of grace overflowing from the grace and love of Christ lavished in the Church then and now'.[3]

The motivations underpinning the Methodist commitment to education have not always been the same. Themes fade in and out: although Louden comments on the unrecognisable distance between the worlds of the Churches' educationalists then and now,[4] it is interesting how issues in the early Methodist records might strike a fresh chord with contemporary readers. The miners' school fades from history as Wesley opened a new 'Kingswood' in 1748, refocusing his interest in schooling to provide for the pressing needs of the children of his itinerant ministers; it is fair to say that this is an issue which is no

longer at the forefront of church education policy. Lay people's needs were not accommodated at Kingswood until after the First World War, although Methodists gradually opened other schools admitting the children of laity. One such was The Leys (Cambridge) and here the issue of educational excellence was the key driver: after rules prohibiting the admission of Nonconformists to the universities had been relaxed, lay families were looking for a level of educational opportunity that would enable them to win places at Oxbridge. Although times have changed, this aspirational challenge has a very modern ring to it as schools are pushed externally by political rhetoric and internally by their own aspirations to achieve an educational excellence which will open up children's futures to life-transforming opportunities.

The determination of Methodists to transform wider society through education, first raised among the Kingswood colliers, slowly spread nationally as local societies began to set up schools in connection with their chapels. Almost 100 years after the British initiative, the Methodist Conference of 1837 records 9 daily infant schools under the immediate direction of members of a society and 22 weekday schools for older children. However, most children would only be able to access learning on a Sunday and here the numbers are staggering: 341,442 children attending 3,349 Sunday schools. There were 1,766 chapels and preaching places with no Sunday school – a fact noted as a challenge to expansion. Interestingly, while there were far more Anglican day schools, the numbers of Sunday schools bear favourable comparison.[5] Although the impetus for growth can be credited to the social awareness and transformative commitment of church members, more was made possible by the limited availability of new government grants. This opportunism is mirrored by the encouragement given to twenty-first-century Methodists to capitalise on the diversification of government funding which once again encourages interest groups to set up their own schools.[6]

The first Conference involvement in education came in 1837 when, to manage the burgeoning situation and maximise new financial opportunities, Conference set up the first Wesleyan Committee of Education. Their first report, in 1838, echoed at Conference in 2012, gives a strong ethical impetus for Methodists to take seriously the opportunities offered through involvement in education as well as highlighting the opportunities offered by government money. However, then as now, the relationship with government combines threat with opportunity, with the question of what control politicians can have over the religious messages of state-funded schools a key contested area. This debate has been renewed since the 2014 'Islamisation' controversies. Another

point of similarity, now as then, is the anxiety that the resource demands of involvement in education may lie beyond the capacity of the Methodist Church. The same response applies: members are urged to see that the opportunity to have impact through schooling is a valuable investment in mission. The 1830s was a time of so much educational change that some argued the wisdom of waiting until the situation had clarified. Conference, however, was moved to act rather than miss chances. The words of exhortation used 200 years ago speak eloquently to modern Methodists similarly trying to make sense of the shifting world of educational policy:

> Mr Wesley said he would not neglect the performance of a present duty through a fear of distant and uncertain consequences. But, supposing that the necessity for our labours should, a few years hence, be superseded by a better system of education, why should not we do what we can in the meantime?[7]

In comparing Methodist education then and now, it is the numbers of children which show the biggest difference, and it is not a favourable comparison. After a buoyant period of school development throughout the 1800s, the Church found the financial challenge of running schools overwhelming and took the opportunities of turn-of-century legislation to cede most schools to the state. Numbers began to grow again from the late twentieth century such that, by 2014, the number of Methodist schools stands at 80, of which 15 are in the independent (fee-paying) sector. Scrutiny of individual school stories reveals a consistent theme which is one of the distinguishing points of Methodism in education: that the real ownership lies with individuals, local congregations and circuits whose persistence, loyalty and opportunism has opened, or kept open, their own school. Some enable the Church to maintain a ministry in areas in which the chapel could not survive: for example, in a former agricultural village now an attractive dormitory with no other community facilities, or a suburb of a former mill town where local demographics have seen the area change from mainly Methodist to mainly Muslim. Others mark the determined outreach of the churches into difficult new housing estates in advance of any formal ecclesiastical building. This localism is consistent with the current educational thrust repositioning control of schools with local enthusiasts and away from Local Authorities. In a numerically declining Church, the schools gain in importance: the number of children encountering the gospel through our Methodist ethos for roughly 30 hours a week is approximately 24,500. For comparison, the numbers of the same age who attend Methodist services on

a weekly basis is approaching 17,000. Where contact with homes and families is factored in, the reach of Methodist schools could be estimated at 100,000 and the presence of boarders in the independent schools extends this impact internationally. From the point of view of the Church, this becomes an important locus of encounter and mission.

If Methodists could time travel, they would see that over the divide of the centuries they have many issues and opportunities in common. To what extent would they also recognise each others' intentions and aspirations? Conference records suggest the nineteenth-century Methodists had twin objectives: to ensure the broader social benefits of educational provision, but also that the schools had a Christian character. They recognised that the government may, in time, take over the responsibilities of the former and acknowledge their work as a Church, to an extent, as infilling as (even ecumenically) the Churches themselves may not be sufficient to this task. Although access to free education is now accepted as a matter of course in Britain, it is important for the debt owed to the Churches in achieving this to be recognised. When secularists argue that the continued existence of faith schools is an inappropriate diversion of public money, it is generally overlooked that in most cases the land and/or buildings were provided, and are still owned, by the Churches. In this way, the Church of England, for example, provides for the education of approximately one million children in this country: its name is above the door of one out of every four primary schools and one in thirteen secondary schools. In addition to 'estate', through their education staff, the Churches provide formal support for school performance coupled with armies of free volunteers to support activities within the schools, from one-to-one support with reading to planting up the school garden.

Universal education is an area in which Methodists continue to be extensively involved and through which they express their active Christian commitment. The examples are broad and varied. Participants on the Methodist Lay Workers' Connecting Disciples course in 2013, for example, reported a wide range of activities, such as taking in 'Friday cake' for the local staff room to show pastoral support for the work of the teachers, or studying for the RE GCSE so that they could be more useful in their support to the RE department in the classroom. Although the Methodist Church no longer has its own teacher training colleges, there is anecdotal evidence that Methodist churches have produced many teachers: in my first school, a large multicultural comprehensive in the West Midlands, approximately one in ten staff was from an active Methodist background, giving themselves over to a role in state education as a vocational

response to God's calling. Methodists remain significantly active in and committed to contributing to the quality and spirituality of universal education.

At the same time, our early coreligionists wanted to build schools as places where children were fully exposed to the Christian gospel. The school ethos and curricular diet should be strongly religious. After all, it was argued, 'no good has ever been witnessed in popular schools where religion was wanting'.[8] This (religious) education was not open-ended – it had the clear objective of salvation: 'to fill the world with saints and paradise with glorified spirits'.[9] However, in true Methodist tradition, salvation was not only about what happened to people after they died but also focused on enabling fullness of life in the present. What is the point, it is argued, of rescuing people from vice when they are older if education could have saved them from falling into it in the first place? Through the schools, Methodists aspired to 'throw a sacred guard around our youth to protect them from the loose and dangerous principles of the false liberalism and latitudinarianism of the age'.[10]

There is also a broad desire for religion to bring people together in good community relationships – in this case between the generations, but based on the religious connection between people. Interestingly, it was also accepted that, although church attendance was the norm, it was not always to be expected: 'children should not in all cases be compelled to attend our places of worship, but … the general rule should be, of course, attendance at our chapels on Sundays'.[11] Methodist schools were distinguished by a more open approach to religious dogma and therefore to admissions: Church of England schools were generally restricted to those able to assent to the catechism. The attitude to partnerships with other Christian education providers in these early documents is striking: despite the rivalry between The National Society and the Free Churches during some of the nineteenth century, a sense of partnership with the Church of England is recorded. It is clearly felt that there is a specific Methodist ethos which is worth preserving through Methodist schools, but there is a bigger religious agenda which is worth pursuing in partnership.

Although the social climate around religion has changed and, with it, the language of zeal, the Methodist aspiration to offer schools which are not only 'good' but also demonstrate a Christian ethos remains similar albeit differently expressed. Echoing the early Methodists' perception of the whole school as 'religion', Methodists aim to provide schools in which children's full potential is nurtured and in which they have the opportunity to flourish into a fullness of

life in a context which offers a rich breadth of experience and a rounded approach to the whole person. This goes beyond a secular ambition for schooling because we intend our schools to be Christian communities where the whole experience of growing and learning is framed against the Christian narrative and values. Our schools deliberately give space and priority to aspects of personal and spiritual development which can sometimes be overlooked. Alongside our colleagues in other denominations and faiths, we perform something of a prophetic role here, which is as important in the contemporary landscape as it was in the past: the recent strengthened focus on academic progress and achievement in schools has combined with the tight financial climate to restrict the breadth available to many youngsters, particularly in the maintained sector. Many voices have called for a broader approach which would restore the value of sport and the arts, especially in extracurricular activities. However, for schools of a religious character, the understanding of what a school is and is for goes beyond this and encompasses serious time given to the spiritual against a backdrop of lived religious tradition. This is intrinsic to the school, not an optional activity which can be isolated to RE lessons and the assembly slot. Our schools take faith seriously and this is part of the learning: our objective is not to make more Methodists, but to offer a more authentic encounter with lived Christianity. Because we are in the business of education and not indoctrination, it is an open-ended encounter. Two hundred years ago, the religious style and social context were different. However, then as now, it is the same: the response of faith is always a matter of choice.

As in the early years of the nineteenth century, the beginning of the twenty-first century is a period of great change in the organisation of education, bringing with it both opportunities and uncertainties. The Methodist commitment to the transformational power of learning has seen the establishment of Methodist schools all over the world and played a major role in the development of free universal education in Great Britain. Service through education continues to be a key plank in Methodist thinking, both at connexional and local level, but anxieties about our involvement remain, particularly around issues of capacity. The early Methodists, from Wesley onwards, recognised the value of giving a religious framework to the full breadth of children's experience, seeing this as the only true foundation of what, today, is known as spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. Even with our relatively small schools estate, the continued Methodist presence in school provision not only allows us to sustain this impact at school level but also gives us a seat at the

table of government, adding a Methodist perspective to debates about national policy. Inspection reports show how the schools contribute to the lives of children and how the mission of the Church is enriched by the work of the schools. Inspection, vision, strategic planning and vibrant, focused leadership typify their success. Many of our schools are also a vibrant base of extended church activity, hosting prayer groups, Messy Church, chaplaincy and a range of community activities – including, in some places, Sunday worship itself. Schools are not churches and they function in a different way, but it is interesting to consider whether the Church has anything to learn from its schools and the extent to which they offer a route for the new ways of touching people's lives which the Church seeks for the future.

Notes

1. In the British educational context, the term 'Trojan Horse' refers to the concerted efforts of some very conservative Muslim governors to influence unduly a number of state schools in major English cities including Manchester, Bradford, Luton and parts of London. The issue, first highlighted in Birmingham, was separately investigated by a number of national and local agencies including Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) and the EFA (Education Funding Agency). There are many press references to the ongoing controversy, and separate reports on each school are available on the Ofsted website. Peter Clarke's government-commissioned report provides a thorough overview of his investigation (Clarke 2014).
2. Newman 1909, p. 33.
3. Welby 2014.
4. Louden 2012, author's note.
5. Louden 2012, p. 20.
6. The Methodist Church 2012.
7. The Methodist Church 1837, p. 10.
8. The Methodist Church 1839, p. 13.
9. The Methodist Church 1837, p. 8.
10. The Methodist Church 1839, p. 14.
11. The Methodist Church 1839, p. 16.

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