Holiness Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1

Holiness & the Body

Contents

What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?

Reviews

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Editorial

Janet Morley

This issue has attracted a fascinating range of articles. I am delighted that there is a balance of contributions from very eminent authors and those whose scholarly or ministerial vocations are in their early stages.

Given the theme of Holiness & the Body, it is perhaps not surprising that the discipline of practical theology is most strongly represented. This means that 'embodiment' is not just discussed as a vital concept, but is used explicitly as a method of theological reflection. Narrative stories, often arising from the personal experience of the author, are used to explore and advance theological understanding, in a way that goes well beyond traditional 'illustration' of a conceptual point. Not only ministerial practice or empirical research, but areas involving personal physical vulnerability (motherhood, disability, illness, eating habits) are found to provide illuminating perspectives from which to reflect on incarnational theology and the practice of holiness.

The reader will find that there are often strong resonances between articles that have of course been independently written – for example, the importance of presence, of where the body is placed; the significance of the asymmetric human brain, with its diverse but mutually interdependent hemispheres; the relationship between believing and practising; the refusal to inhabit a false dualism and to separate the body from the self.

We have two peer-reviewed articles in this issue. Hannah Bucke's 'Moving into the neighbourhood: embodiment, sacrament and ritual in urban mission' begins with the narrative of her experiment in providing Holy Week prayer stations/installations in a shopping centre in Southend-on Sea, UK. From her observations of how people participated (or not), especially in relation to the invitation to eat and drink bread and grape juice, she explores the meaning of sacramental behaviour and sacramental presence in such a context. Jill Marsh,

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 1–3
ISSN 2058-5969

in 'Towards an ethnically diverse British Methodist Church', gives an account and interpretation of her empirical research among ministers working in ethnically diverse British Methodist congregations. She argues that the key challenge is to enable power-sharing, and a willingness for all members to allow the whole 'body' of the church to be changed by those who are 'other' and 'different'.

Two of the short articles deal with the matter of food. Charles Wallace, in 'Confessions of a Methodist foodie', draws on his extensive knowledge as a historian of the Wesley family to share some surprising insights into the 'foodways' of the early Methodist movement, and to reflect on what the Wesleys' practice can offer to our practice of holy living today in this area. Greg Obong-Oshotse, in 'Dying to live', offers a passionate personal reflection on the spiritual discipline of fasting, a practice he first developed within the Pentecostal tradition in Nigeria, but which he continues within the context of British Methodism.

There are also two articles explicitly written from the experience of living with bodies that are chronically ill or impaired. Charity Hamilton, in 'When bodies "fail": illness and incarnation', uses her own experience to challenge the common assumption that in this situation your body has 'failed' or 'let you down'. She strongly resists the dualistic separation of the body from the self, and reflects on the nature of embodied identity during illness, in the light of incarnational theology. Heather Noel-Smith, in 'Divine defragmentation', works from within her own lived experience of Parkinson's disease, with its frequently disordered connections between brain and limbs, to reinterpret three familiar biblical passages that read quite differently to her now: Paul's metaphor of the Christian community as a body of members who need each other; Isaiah's image of the suffering servant from whom people turned away; and the gospel contrast between Martha and Mary (now that activism is no longer a choice).

Heather Walton's reflective piece, 'And a sword will pierce your own soul also', again uses intensely personal reflections on her own experience of motherhood and its ambiguities, as she explores the narrative of the holy mother and the holy child in the presentation narratives of Luke 2. She draws on cultural theory and artistic representations of this passage about maternal connection and separation, arguing that the recovery of this ambiguity is necessary not only for understanding this biblical event but also our relations with the divine.

The last two articles in this section both reflect on a practice of ministry that has involved innovative ways of recognising the primary place of the body in

Christian life and spirituality. Barbara Glasson, in 'Falling over and walking anyway', uses her extensive experience of imaginative community projects using bodily sharing for spiritual purposes (eg collective breadmaking and quilting) to question our contemporary ideal of a 'balanced' life. Rosemary Power has led a pioneer ministry in County Clare, Ireland, and her article 'Modern pilgrimage in the west of Ireland' reflects on an ecumenical project opening up ancient and new pilgrim paths along walking routes there. Using the human body at its own walking pace, and putting ourselves literally on the paths of those who went before, can lead to deep conversations within and beyond the Christian community and be transformative in a range of ways.

In our continuing series on 'What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?', Frances Young considers Wesley's sermon on the Duty of Constant Communion. Beneath the difficulties the contemporary reader may find in eighteenth-century language and preoccupations, she detects surprisingly relevant advice for those who, for whatever reason, resist regularly putting ourselves in the way of receiving this sacramental means of grace.

Finally, the reviews section in this issue has been entirely given over to a longer review article of a book that has become a modern classic. Clive Marsh, in 'Knowing your right from your left: brain science and the future of Christian mission', gets to grips with Iain McGilchrist's book, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. As he concludes:

> The value of Christian story, attention to affectivity, a balanced approach to theology, and a recognition of limitations: all of these, then, flow from attention to the brain. Who would have thought it?

Janet Morley, Commissioning Editor
Lent 2016

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Moving into the neighbourhood: embodiment, sacrament and ritual in urban mission

Hannah Bucke

THE REVD HANNAH BUCKE is a Methodist presbyter pioneering a new ministry in a large town centre. She lives in Essex with her husband.

hannah.bucke@methodist.org.uk
Southend-on-Sea, UK

This article aims to explore the significance of embodiment, sacrament and ritual in urban pioneer ministry. Stemming from early experiences working within this context and from a particular experience of using installation art to help engage those outside the Church with its rituals and stories, I argue for the importance of the embodied experience within a particular place as a means of engagement. The literature surveyed makes the case for a broad understanding of the sacramental in which all material things have sacramental potential. The differing influences of theology and social anthropology upon the literature offer distinct perspectives on the drawing of boundaries in relation to sacrament and ritual, and on how meaning is made from experience in the light of prior knowledge and understanding of the Christian tradition.

EMBODIMENT • ENCOUNTER • MISSION • RITUAL • PIONEERING • SACRAMENT • URBAN

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 5–21
ISSN 2058-5969

Beginnings

What have I done? Will anybody come? The first hour is a very lonely hour, plenty of time to think about what I have done and about how I got here, because nobody does come. It is 10am on Palm Sunday and I am sitting alone in a unit of The Royals Shopping Centre, Southend-on-Sea.[1] Yesterday morning the unit was empty, one of several empty shops in town, a sign of the economic climate. Today it contains seven installations themed around the Easter story, a sign of something very different. They would be called 'prayer stations' if this was a church but 'installations' is far less threatening for a shopping centre.

'Easter Icons: a Pop-Up Installation' is an ecumenical project, a creative collaboration between Baptists and Methodists, others from various other local churches who are helping to staff it, but the rest of the team will be in their respective churches this morning. In a sense I am in mine. I am the town-centre minister, 'for all of us' a Baptist colleague says. I am the project leader for 'Easter Icons', the one who built the relationships, made the connections in the town, and brought the Christian story to the shopping centre for Holy Week. So I am the one sitting here, alone, feeling vulnerable, waiting for someone to come.

If they do come, what will they make of this attempt to tell the Easter story for today? Will it mean anything to them? Will they post a prayer in the Temple wall installation and reflect upon the fickle nature of celebrity at the Palm Sunday installation? Will they write down a beautiful act they would like to be remembered for and use the scented hand lotion at the anointing installation? Will they take bread and grape juice from the Last Supper installation, remember a betrayal at '30 Pieces of Silver'? And will the experience be anything more than a ten-minute distraction from their shopping trip?

People do come. A trickle on the first day but it seems to gain momentum over the course of the week and over 650 people have come by the time we close on Holy Saturday. Nearly 300 prayers have been posted in the wall. A second book has been bought to accommodate the beautiful acts people wanted to record. Around 70 glasses of grape juice are consumed.

Of course the numbers do not say much. I do not really know what people thought, what people experienced, whether it helped unchurched people connect with the Easter story, at least for the most part. But there are some glimpses as I sit and watch people come and go during the week. The churchgoing Christians are easy to spot. Some have come especially to see this new initiative. They walk in confidently, follow the numbered stations

confidently, write their prayers, their beautiful acts, and take the bread and grape juice confidently. They know what to do. Other people are less confident. They hang around the door looking in – this is not a normal shop, not what they are expecting in their shopping centre. Some never make it inside, some walk past several times before venturing in. They ask 'What is it?' 'What do I do?'

The woman from the coffee shop comes to bring me coffee. I encourage her to have a look around but she is already visibly moved by the atmosphere created by the music, lighting and the more striking sculptural installations. She is not religious, she has told me. One of the Street Rangers who patrols the High Street comes in to have a look. She writes a prayer. She is not religious. An elderly man takes his time at all the stations and then comes back to me on his way out, one of the few who offers feedback: he enjoyed it very much, very interesting, very thought-provoking. He tells me he is an atheist. I am glad these people have come – this is for them.

By the end of the week I have become very attuned to body language. I am particularly intrigued by the response to the sacrament-like[2] installation, which invites people to eat bread and drink grape juice. Three of the seven installations ask people to actively participate and many do. Yet it appears that people feel more comfortable writing a prayer, adding to the book of beautiful acts and using the hand lotion, than taking bread and wine. Even though the instruction for the installation explicitly invites people to eat and drink from the table as a symbol of Jesus' last meal with his friends, most do not and some of those who do ask permission first from one of the staff. There are undoubtedly various reasons for this but it appears to me that this particular act of eating and drinking has some kind of special significance, whether positive or negative, such that most people do not perceive this act in the same way as the other acts, and so do not participate. For some the act of taking something into their bodies may be too intimate, for others there may be hang-ups about food or questions about the consequences of where this act might lead, for others still a sense that they might not be 'allowed', and a few seek further permission from me or one of the volunteers to partake, from another perceived to be 'in authority' perhaps.

We have created these installations, making space for prayer and something sacrament-like, for encounter with the Christian story in a shopping centre, because most people do not come to church. Mainstream denominations in the UK have experienced a significant decline in attendance since the beginning of the twentieth century.[3] The 2011 Census reported a decline in

those who identify themselves as Christian, down from 71.1 per cent in 2001 to 59.3 per cent in 2011.[4] Church membership is much lower at only 11.2 per cent in 2010.[5] This issue is particularly pertinent for The Methodist Church in Britain, which has thus far failed to stem a period of significant decline, losing 32 per cent of its members in the past 10 years.[6]

Perhaps none of this is surprising. These are times characterised by a distrust of institutions and authority, of metanarratives and claims to universal truth, times in which the individual takes precedence over the corporate. Professor of sociology Zygmunt Bauman describes what is often named 'postmodernity' as 'liquid modernity' in his book of the same title.[7] This liquid modernity is a fast-moving, shape-shifting society of 'continuous change',[8] an 'individualized, privatized version of modernity'.[9] These are not the characteristics of the Church. There is a disconnect between church and society in Western society, a loss of shared language that runs deeper than people not knowing their Bible stories. The need to rediscover a common language seems a vital endeavour if church and society are to reconnect.

This need for church and society to reconnect is where I perceive the focus of my ministry to be. I am a Methodist presbyter pioneering a ministry of word and sacrament in the town centre. The Methodist Church has been absent from the town for over 20 years: the circuit closed its last town-centre church in the 1990s, leaving the area of densest population and highest deprivation in favour of a largely suburban presence. As I begin my ministry there is no Methodist congregation who gathers to worship here, no building to invite people to. I am stripped of conventional ministerial or ecclesial context. There is only one way for me to be 'in the neighbourhood':[10] incarnationally, in the flesh. Sitting in the shop on the first morning of 'Easter Icons' was not the first time I have felt vulnerable.

On my first day as the town-centre minister I sit on a bench at the top of the High Street. I have put on my clerical collar with jeans and a parka – the uniform of my vocation worn with the uniform of the street, of everyone from rough sleeper to student to shopper. I wonder what I have done, what I am doing here, but mostly I wonder what I should do now. How on earth do I build a ministry here? Where do I start? What is my common ground with these people, who do not necessarily share my faith commitments? The answer seemed to be small and insignificant: I am *here*.

Interpretations

'Being here' is perhaps an obvious starting point for a Methodist minister. The Methodist Church has its roots in the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century and in reaching unchurched people by finding new ways of communicating with them effectively, John Wesley himself preaching in the open air.[11] However, I understand my 'being here' to be more than an outreach tool, used to encounter people so that they might be persuaded into church. It has become a defining principle as I seek to offer sustained presbyteral ministry in the world. Being here in the flesh, walking, listening, talking, praying on the street means that face-to-face encounters happen, conversations occur, relationships are built. It is how 'Easter Icons' came to be. This incarnational ministry of 'being here' has brought exciting possibilities and feels instinctively counter-cultural, not just in the church here in Southend-on-Sea, in its mainly attractional form, but in society too.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that technology has made global travel and communication faster than ever so that 'time and space are shrinking'.[12] The result of this 'unsettles and terrifies' because we are no longer 'earthed', our ability to be anywhere effectively meaning that we connect with nowhere.[13] Anglican bishop John Inge cites Heidegger's concept of *dasein* in *A Christian Theology of Place*,[14] in which a person being in a particular place is significant: 'Throughout Heidegger's characterisation of person-in-world is a sense of immersion and inextricable togetherness rooted in time and space.'[15] *Dasein* therefore has both an ontological and geographical dimension. In recognising the importance of our placed-ness in the world to our sense of self and our experience of the world, Heidegger rejects the Aristotelian notion of place as an 'inert container' in which any geographical location can be the location for bodies and things; rather our surroundings resonate with ourselves and are intrinsic to the embodied experience.[16]

My experience of 'being' a minister of word and sacrament in Southend-on-Sea, with nothing more than my embodied self as a point of connection with others, is worthy of significant exploration and reflection. From my own experience of *dasein* I have encountered and related to the grieving woman who cries in front of me, the heroin addict whose broken body sleeps where I park my car, the woman who smiles and serves me coffee through her untreated depression. They are all here too, experiencing this place as embodied selves. This common experience of being embodied has a central place in the Christian faith, which stands in opposition to notions of spirituality

divorced from the body and the material world, notions rooted in the dualism of Platonic thought. The importance of embodiment to the Christian faith also challenges the contemporary phenomenon of 'excarnation',[17] in which technology in particular appears to make the virtual experience a substitute for embodied experience.

In recognising the value of the experience and particularly embodied experience, it is appropriate that I consider my own faith journey as a text worthy of reflection and influential to my ministerial practice. Significant to my understanding of God and of the human/divine relationship is a personal divine encounter of my own with both physical and emotional dimensions. I trace from this moment, which I would identify as an experience of the Holy Spirit, a dramatic shift in the way in which I relate to God. Prior to this event, my understating of God was grounded largely in an intellectual appreciation of the teachings of Jesus as those most conducive to a just society and of Jesus' life as a model for right living. The shift was from a commitment of the mind outworked through behaviour in the world to a sense of relationship with God in which my whole self could know God intimately. As significant as the moment of encounter itself, which I can pinpoint in time and place, has been its ongoing effects within daily life: I am now conscious of the potential to encounter God in every moment and of the divine presence in the everyday.

Seeking to understand my experience further, the concept of *poiēsis* offers a useful insight. Academic practical theologian Heather Walton, drawing on the work of Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre and Jesuit theologian Michel de Certeau, describes *poiēsis* as 'the supreme, restless, transformative capacity of human beings to reshape their world and create meaning out of the mundane'.[18] As well as making the ordinary and everyday the location for the extraordinary, this meaning-making on the part of the individual implies an active, participatory role in interpreting experience. We are not 'passive consumers' indoctrinated into understanding lived experience in particular ways. Rather we are the makers of meaning in our own lives: 'our world making is not a dreary matter of programmed instrumental action in pursuit of clear goals. It is integral to our being in the world and involves "love, sensuality and the body".'[20] This latter point gives validity to the richness of embodied experience over the narrowness of an exclusively intellectual approach to the meaning-making process.

In the light of my experience of faith and of my context for ministry, the remainder of this article will explore embodiment, the material and the

sacramental as a means for encountering the divine. Much of the literature I have drawn upon takes a broad view of the sacramental, regarding the whole universe as a potentially sacramental place.

A world of potential

Baptist professor of systematic theology Paul Fiddes offers a useful overview of issues relating to embodiment, the material and sacramentality in his seeking to create a pastoral doctrine of the Trinity.[21] Through dialogue between the doctrine of the Trinity and pastoral theology, Fiddes argues that all encounter must be bodily encounter, even in a world of virtual communication and relationships, because experiences in the mind cannot be separated from the reality of living an embodied existence.[22] This leads Fiddes to the premise that if 'encounter' and 'body' are indivisible, and personal encounter with God is possible, then we must be able to speak of God as having a body. Such a view ensures that we avoid imagining the God in whose image we are created and with whom we may enter relationship, as something entirely 'other' than ourselves. Reinforcing this understanding of God as in intimate relationship with humanity is the Incarnation, the divine and human made inseparable in the person of Jesus, through which human bodies may become part of the body of Christ. It is the Christian understanding of God as having assumed human form that provides the mechanism for other embodied selves to participate in the divine.

Citing professor of theology and eco-feminist Sallie McFague's argument that the universe itself may be regarded as the 'body of God',[23] Fiddes explores the idea of the world as a sacramental place in which all creation is a potential meeting place between God and humanity. Fiddes is clear that this concept of the sacramental is not centred on the nature or substance of any one thing but rather on the dynamic relationship which flows between them: the 'earthly stuff' becomes 'doors into the dance of perichoresis in God'.[24] This view avoids associating God with actually being or becoming any particular matter in favour of an emphasis on the encounter and relationship that can occur through the material world, in which God's work as creator and sustainer may be revealed to those open to perceive it.

Fiddes explores McFague's argument for a sacramental theology that begins in the universal presence of God in the whole created order and moves to an understanding of the particular presence of God in Christ. This understanding

reflects McFague's eco-feminist theology in which the denigration of non-male and non-human bodies in both historical and contemporary Christianity is problematic. However, while acknowledging the validity of this, Fiddes favours a view of the Incarnation as the paradigm for a sacramental world because of the 'unique depth of participation' of the Father and the Son in which the 'divine and human "yes" to the Father were one voice'.[25] According to Fiddes it is only from the direction of the particular of Christ to the universal of the whole created order that all matter holds the potential to become sacramental.

Ultimately, in spite of the differing directions from which they approach the sacramental, Fiddes and McFague concur that God must be understood as being in some way embodied and that this opens up possibilities for the sacramental in all of life. It is from this context that Fiddes moves to explore the intriguing possibility, put forward by Austin Farrer, that the Christian minister might be regarded as 'a walking sacrament'.[26] Emphasising the particular nature of ministry as a blurring of 'person and function … being and doing',[27] ministers embody a way of living and a set of values, and so can be understood as symbols of the ministry and person of Christ. Fiddes recognises the associated concerns, pointing out resistance to such an understanding because of the risk of elevating the status of the minister, leading him to emphasise the very ordinariness in which sacrament is rooted. Here Fiddes begins to tease out the distinction between the embodiment of something other than the self, and the nature of the self, reminding us again of the importance of the dynamic and relational aspects of the divine: the meeting rather than the place of meeting is significant.

Fiddes' linking of the embodied, the material and the sacramental offers a fruitful starting point as I explore a ministry with a sacramental dimension, focused in my 'being here'. The questions 'Where is my body?' and 'What is my body doing?' are a constant as I reflect upon my role in the town centre. I recognise, though not entirely comfortably, the sacramental nature of myself-as-minister, in which simply 'being' in the town is a deliberate representation of Christ's ministry in the world. The wearing of a clerical collar in this context has the potential to act as a reminder and a sign of the divine. By, for example, choosing to sit on the pavement with rough sleepers I understand myself to be engaged in an act in which the representative role I embody enables me to become a potential place of encounter with the divine.

Taking Fiddes' argument that it is the particular person of Christ from whom all things may derive their sacramentality, it follows that some understanding

of the Christian story, particularly of the Incarnation and the Passion narrative, are an essential precursor to any perception of the world as a sacramental place and any experience of the divine through it. This question of how God is perceived and who may perceive God is explored further by Anglican bishop John Inge.

Writing in *A Christian Theology of Place*,[28] Inge explores many of the same concepts as Fiddes in relation to the world as a potentially sacramental place and places the person of Christ as the locus for this. Inge identifies *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* by Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillibeeckx as a key text in the twentieth-century development of sacramental thinking.[29] From it stems the idea of the Incarnation as the foundation for understanding the sacramental as well as ideas of extending the sacramental out from particular sacramental rites to a much wider understanding.[30] Inge also quotes professor of divinity and feminist theologian Ann Loades on the nature of the sacrament as about the 'saving union' rather than the substance of the elements themselves,[31] an interpretation that resonates with Fiddes' relational and participatory understanding of sacrament.

In common with Fiddes, Inge points to the world, particularly the natural world, as a place of revelation with sacramental potential. Here Inge also highlights the concept of the world as God's body, though through a much earlier example than McFague's work: that of seventeenth-century Anglican theologian Thomas Traherne.[32] Having laid the ground-work for a broad understanding of what is potentially sacramental, Inge goes on to ask a fundamental question: 'How are we to decide which things are behaving sacramentally, and when?'[33] While Inge regards the world as full of possibilities for the sacramental, he argues for defining qualities that limit this to particular 'events', events which are 'rents in the opacity of history where God's concrete engagement to change the world becomes visible'.[34] This means that sacramentality can be seen as having not only a material dimension but spatial and temporal dimensions also; it is an event in time and space.

In conceiving of sacrament as 'event', Inge then goes on to cite a number of pieces of research into such possible sacramental events which suggest that they are not unusual, tracing the work of William James in the late nineteenth century, through Alister Hardy in the mid-twentieth century and up to the work of David Hay, whose national survey in Britain in the 1990s found over a half of adults believed they had experienced a sacramental encounter of some kind.[35] Significant in this research is not simply the numbers of people reporting such

encounters but the importance of their locating such encounters in time and place, and not necessarily in 'holy places' such as churches: one of the descriptions Inge quotes is of an experience at Sea World, Florida.[36]

However, despite this concession to the 'artificial' as opposed to the 'natural' world as a possible meeting place with God, it would be fair to conclude that Inge, along with other writers with a broad understanding of the sacramental, places particular emphasis on the 'natural' and the 'holy' locations as most conducive to divine encounter. This is particularly clear in the writing of Roman Catholic eco-feminist theologian Mary C. Grey in *Beyond the Dark Night*.[37] Grey expresses her concern at the 'sinister' way in which the shopping centres of the Western world are 'mimicking the architecture of the emptying cathedrals in a kind of demonic parody'.[38] Here nothing is authentic or profound but all is hollow and shallow, including what she describes in terms of a parody of the sacrament: the encounter at the cash till.[39] While Grey has a point about the potential emotional emptiness of such places, there is a danger that such places are written off as irredeemably worldly, places where it would be unlikely if not impossible to encounter God.

Reinforcing this bias towards the natural, Grey's position as an eco-theologian becomes particularly evident in her discussion of the sacramental, located for her in encounters of the earthy Jesus among fishermen and in stories about sparrows, vineyards and bread-making.[40] In her list of sacramental substances she names 'bread, wine, oil, salt, water, soil, trees, flowers, fruits of the earth'.[41] Grey does discuss the urban origins of Christianity and contemporary urban contexts as places for mission. However, such contexts are for Grey intrinsically problematic, speaking most loudly of injustice, ecological exploitation and poverty, places which threaten to separate us further from rather than draw us closer to God. Yes, God may be found here, Grey argues, but in the guise of the Christ of social justice and suffering, not in possibilities for beauty and transcendence.

While my own love of nature makes me sympathetic towards the idea of the divine encountered through the natural world, I find Grey's view of the city troubling, as one who walks among the concrete, steel and glass of a post-war High Street, among high instances of addiction, rough sleeping and poverty. According to Grey, such a context could well demand a ministry dedicated only to social justice. While there are Christians engaged in such work in Southend-on-Sea, the focus of my ministry is less upon the transformation of people's material circumstances and more about enabling moments of transcendence,

resourcing *poiēsis*, and pointing to God *in* urban places rather than in spite of them. My identity as a presbyter, a minister of word and sacrament, is significant to the way in which my ministry has developed and is distinct from that of a deacon or Christian outreach worker.

Drawing the lines

What is clear from the work of Fiddes, Inge and Grey is that while understanding of the sacramental may be broad, there is a need to set some boundaries. Inge in particular recognises the potential problems that may follow from identifying all things as potentially sacramental and highlights the importance of relationship and response in order to offer a further criterion for sacrament. Quoting Macquarrie, 'For anything to become sacrament, something has to be contributed from both sides,'[42] Inge conceives sacrament as an action that must be initiated by God's grace and completed by the acceptance of that grace in the believer. In particular Inge emphasises the importance of the tradition of believers as the only context in which such encounters might be meaningful.

Taking the research of Hay and Morisy already cited, in which over half the respondents claim some kind of 'religious experience', it seems that Inge is limiting sacramental experience that leads somewhere to those with an understanding of the Christian tradition. He argues that churchgoing Christians may experience a sacramental encounter with God both inside and outside the church and its building; people outside the church community who do not have such a background or understanding cannot experience such sacramental encounter. Although he argues for 'a two-way interaction between what is experienced in church and what is experienced in the world', this is reserved for Christians with an understanding of Scripture and tradition.[43]

On this crucial issue of the relationship between experience, meaning and revelation, the influence of post-liberal Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck is worthy of exploration. Of particular interest are two of the models of belief Lindbeck examines in *The Nature of Doctrine*.[44] The experiential-expressivist model places a 'common core experience'[45] at the heart of religion, and regardless of whether such experience is fully understood, all humans experience it. In this model, experience is the source of faith. However, Lindbeck ultimately argues in favour of a cultural-linguistic model in which the narratives and rituals of religion provide the framework for religious experience

and are the only means through which such experience can be expressed.[46] Without the context of the Christian story, provided by the Church through Scripture and its traditions, people cannot experience God because they cannot *know* that they have experienced God. Such arguments must prompt serious soul-searching for the Church in the light of a largely unchurched and dechurched population. The cultural-linguistic model gives the Church a unique mediating position in the relationship between God and humanity and places a significant burden of responsibility upon it to communicate effectively.

For an alternative view, which emphasises the value of bodily experience, I turn to Anglican professor of religious studies Douglas Davies, who draws on social anthropology in his work. In common with Fiddes, Inge and Grey, Davies cites the doctrine of the Incarnation as the foundation of a world-view in which all earthy matter is 'a potential vehicle for the divine'.[47] Understanding this as rooted in Catholic rather than Protestant theology, Davies argues that such sacramental understanding 'relates the sacred and the profane' such that nothing lies beyond the reach of the sacred.[48] This he contrasts with the Protestant Lutheran understanding of two kingdoms divided and the consequent concept of conversion as the transition from the worldly kingdom to the heavenly. It is possible to see already that the exclusivist understandings of sacrament can be considered a construct of a particular way of thinking about God's relationship with the material world, dividing those who can and cannot experience the sacramental along the lines of those who are inside and outside the Church.

Davies goes on to explore the writing of influential Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who he regards as dismissing ideas of two separate realms of existence in the ideal but accepting that religion often sets itself apart, creating notions of the sacred and secular.[49] Davies describes Tillich's theology as 'existential', focused on human experience and being, from which stems a 'method of theology' that engages with 'life and experience … in a way that sees involvement as a participation in God'.[50] It is possible to see something of the roots of Davies' central tenet in the work of Tillich, namely the importance of embodiment to both anthropology and theology. For Davies, embodiment is not simply another aspect of humanity which must be 'theologized'. In taking seriously the everyday embodied experiences of life, Davies is seeking to validate what he calls 'non-systematic faith', which he argues should not be considered subsidiary to systematic theology and which he understands as normal for most: 'ordinary believers are seldom guided and informed by systematic doctrines … because ordinary life does not work in that way.'[51]

A central theme of Davies' book is the relationship between embodiment and religion, and the way in which behaviour both expresses and consolidates our beliefs and values. 'Embodiment theory', he argues, prevents the 'over-systematizing' approach of traditional theology to religious belief.[52] This is significant not only because it means that what we think and believe is intrinsically linked to what we do, but also because it suggests we do not simply decide with our minds and perform with our bodies. Rather the flow is two-way: behaviour has the power to both 'enshrine and express belief at one and the same time'.[53] Returning to Inge's assertion that only those with prior knowledge of Christian tradition will further their relationship with God through a divine encounter,[54] Davies' thought challenges this: 'embodiment questions the primacy of profile for formal doctrine when considering Christian spirituality and practice. In reality, spirituality is a behavioural endeavour, and people "become" Christian by behaving Christianly.'[55] While it may be going too far to suggest that those with no formal religious understanding can experience something explicitly sacramental through a religious experience, it is also going too far to suggest that a clear line can be drawn between those who will and those who will not be able to experience God.

Davies' ideas about ritual have an impact not only upon the question of who may experience the sacramental but also on the question of what form this experience may take. Ritual is of particular importance to the Christian religion, argues Davies, because it has a particular ritual at its heart: the Eucharist. However, Davies goes on to express doubts about the role of the Church and its representatives in effectively mediating and controlling what is understood by Christians engaging in religious ritual. He acknowledges the theological tradition in which ritual is viewed as expression of doctrine yet he favours recent developments in ritual theory which regard it as a discrete phenomenon.[56] In exploring the notion of ritual as either a language to be decoded or 'non-language phenomena',[57] Davies opts for the latter, regarding ritual as 'an end in itself' rather than a language.[58] This has implications for the relationship between ritual and meaning, with a distinction being made between propositional meaning – relating ritual to language and the expression of ideas, and meaning as emotion – satisfaction from actions *as* meaning. Davies thus expresses caution at the over-intellectualising of ritual in favour of its ordinariness. His conclusion is important in relation to those who experienced and participated in the 'Easter Icons' installation as it becomes possible to understand their participation in a ritual act as a possible means to experiencing the divine for those with no prior knowledge of the rite itself.

Ewan Kelly, a pastoral theologian who also draws upon social anthropology, concurs with this view that part of the power and importance of ritual, for people of faith and no faith, is found both in its rootedness in the ordinary and its enabling of a whole-body experience as an end in itself.[59] Writing about constructing funeral rites for newborn babies in the context of hospital chaplaincy, Kelly understands ritual as a way of relating to self, others and God that engages every part of us: 'there may be physical action, stimulation of our imagination and feelings, a stirring of our spirit, senses and sexuality as well as intellectual engagement.'[60] In common with Davies, Kelly understands ritual as more than an outward expression of intellectual understanding, beliefs and values; he conceives human existence as a complex intertwining of the physical and the intellectual, the material and the abstract. Also in common with Davies, Kelly regards ritual as both expressing and creating meaning, exploring the way in which ritual is a part of and gives meaning to everyday experiences, from the deliberately ordered rituals of religion to the ordinary rituals of a family meal.[61] It is possible to draw parallels between this understanding of ritual and Fiddes' understanding of sacrament in what might be described as a paradox of the ordinary and the extraordinary in both phenomena. Indeed, just as the question is asked, 'When does something potentially sacramental become sacrament?' Kelly asks, 'When does ritual-like activity actually become ritual?' [62]

Conclusion

This conceptualisation of ritual as relating to the ordinary and mundane aspects of life is significant to my sense of needing to 'demystify' the ritual of the Eucharist among the people for whom I am a minister of word and sacrament. Here I return to the installation with which I began. The invitation to all to share in bread and grape juice at the shopping centre was a means of enabling people to participate in a sacrament-like ritual and to share in the story of Jesus, an opportunity for me to minister word and sacrament beyond the 'language barrier' between the traditions of my faith and the people among whom I minister. Reflecting on the last meal Jesus shared with his friends, it is the locus for much of what has been explored in this article: the sacramental, the importance of embodiment, the material and the everyday as a means of experiencing the divine, and the role of ritual in faith and life.

Taking the shared experience of embodiment seen through the lens of the Incarnation as a starting point, this article has explored approaches which value

the sacramental and do not confine it to Christians attending eucharistic services. Rather, they allow for sacramental encounters in all of life and in all places. However, even within this broad understanding of what is sacramental there remains a desire to set boundaries and limitations among those writing from a primarily theological perspective. These boundaries are formed by the prioritisation of church tradition over human experience and based upon assumptions about the relationship between understanding and behaviour. Alternative interpretations from a social anthropology perspective do not subordinate experience to understanding but rather recognise the dynamic flow between the two and thus do not seek to limit experience of God to prior knowledge. Further dialogue between theology and anthropology on the nature of meaning-making and religious experience may bear much fruit for a Church seeking the common ground to communicate with those we have yet to reach.

Notes

1. Southend-on-Sea is a large seaside town on the south-east coast of England.
2. While the bread and grape juice used for the installation were not consecrated, they were used as a deliberate reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Methodist Church recognises two dominical sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist, though the term 'sacramental' may be understood much more broadly.
3. Brierley Consultancy 2014.
4. Office for National Statistics 2012.
5. Brierley Consultancy 2014.
6. The Methodist Church 2014.
7. Bauman 2000, p. 10.
8. Bauman 2000, p. 1.
9. Bauman 2000, p. 7.
10. *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible renders the description of the Incarnation in John 1.14 as 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood.'
11. Wesley 1967, p. 139.
12. Heidegger 1975, cited in Inge 2003, p. 13.
13. Inge 2003, p. 13.
14. Inge 2003.
15. Inge 2003, p. 18.
16. Inge 2003, p. 5.
17. Frost 2014, p. 11.
18. Walton 2014, p. 13.
19. Walton 2014, p. 15.
20. Walton 2014, p. 13.
21. Fiddes 2000.

22. Fiddes 2000, pp. 278–279.
23. Fiddes 2000, p. 280.
24. Fiddes 2000, p. 281.
25. Fiddes 2000, p. 289.
26. Fiddes 2000, p. 294.
27. Fiddes 2000, p.294.
28. Inge 2003.
29. Schillibeeckx 1963, cited in Inge 2003, p. 60.
30. Inge 2003, p. 60.
31. Inge 2003, p. 60.
32. Inge 2003, p. 63.
33. Inge 2003, p. 67.
34. Gorringe 1989, cited in Inge 2003, p. 67.
35. Inge 2003, p. 70–71.
36. Inge 2003, p. 72.
37. Grey 1997.
38. Grey 1997, p. 24.
39. Grey 1997, p. 25.
40. Grey 1997, p. 66.
41. Grey 1997, p. 65.
42. Macquarrie 1997, cited in Inge 2003, p. 80.
43. Inge 2003, p. 80.
44. Lindbeck 1984.
45. Lindbeck 1984, p. 31.
46. Lindbeck 1984, p. 37.
47. Davies 2002, p. 11.
48. Davies 2002, p. 11.
49. Davies 2002, p. 11.
50. Davies 2002, p. 14.
51. Davies 2002, p. 21.
52. Davies 2002, p. 41.
53. Davies 2002, p. 41.
54. Inge 2003, p. 81.
55. Davies 2002, p. 42.
56. Davies 2002, p. 112.
57. Davies 2002, p. 112.
58. Davies 2002, p. 113.
59. Kelly 2002.
60. Kelly 2002, p. 4.
61. Kelly 2002, p. 5.
62. Kelly 2002, p. 6.

Bibliography

Bauman, D. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Davies, D. 2002. *Anthropology and Theology*. Oxford: Berg.
Fiddes, P. 2000. *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
Frost, M. 2014. *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
Grey, M. 1997. *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church?* London: Cassell.
Hodgson, P. and King, R. 2008. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*. London: SPCK.
Inge, J. 2003. *A Christian Theology of Place*. Farnham: Ashgate.
Kelly, E. 2002. 'Marking Life and Death', *Contact* 12: 3–39.
Lindbeck, G. 1984. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press.
Pattison, S. and Lynch, G. 'Pastoral and Practical Theology' in Ford, D. (ed.). 1997. *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Peterson, E. 2003. *The Message: Remix 2.0*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
Walton, H. 2014. 'Seeking Wisdom in Practical Theology: *Phronesis*, Poetics and Everyday Life', *Practical Theology* 7(1) (March): 5–18.
Wesley, J. 1967. *Journal*. London: Epworth Press.

Websites

Brierley Consultancy Survey. 2014. UK *Christianity 2005–2015*. Available at http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/images/csintro.pdf (accessed 19 April 2015).
The Methodist Church. 2014. *Statistics for Mission*, Conference report. Available at http://www.methodistconference.org.uk/media/228157/conf-2014-37-statistics-for-mission.pdf (accessed 19 April 2015).
Office for National Statistics. 2012. *2011 Census*. Available at http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html (accessed 19 April 2015).

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Towards an ethnically diverse British Methodist Church

Jill Marsh

THE REVD JILL MARSH served as a Methodist presbyter in Rotherham and Leicester, UK, and is currently Director of Mission (Northampton District), undertaking part-time doctoral studies at the University of Chester.

jill.marsh51@gmail.com
Leicester, UK

Using a qualitative study of interviews with ministers who work in ethnically diverse British Methodist congregations, I explore the practices that encourage a sense of belonging together as one body in Christ and how these influence a congregation's ethos. Analysing how the respondents see their own role in this work I argue that the key challenge is the enabling of power-sharing, to which ministers contribute but which they cannot determine alone. I conclude that the decisive factor is the willingness of the members to allow the whole body to be changed by those who are 'other' and 'different'.

BRITISH METHODISM • DIVERSITY • ECCLESIAL PRACTICES • ETHNICITY • POWER-SHARING

ISSN 2058-5969

Introduction

Methodists in Britain have experienced significant change in their local populations in recent decades.[1] Due to global migration it is much more likely than in previous generations that the Methodist churches in our cities, towns and, increasingly, our villages, will have visitors, members, and often leaders, who have moved to the UK from countries in other parts of the worldwide Methodist community.[2] This experience of globalisation has provided opportunities for change, growth and renewal within The Methodist Church in Britain (MCB).[3]

My own research is responding to these changes within the UK and explores how British Methodist congregations are engaging with this wider spread and variety of ethnic diversity. My research interest comes from my commitment to the Methodist Church, which I argue has always had a particular theological and missional interest in the global relevance of the gospel across potential boundaries. In this article I use primary research to see what can be learned from those ministers working with ethnically diverse congregations (EDCs). I draw on data collected from a questionnaire (completed by 25 Methodist ministers) and from a qualitative study of interviews (with 7 presbyters) about what helps and what hinders ethnically diverse congregations in their development in this British context.[4]

Having established the sociological and theological context in which I am asking my research questions I first report that the theme to which the data most frequently refers is that of sharing power between people from different backgrounds. I highlight that my respondents aim to facilitate the kind of power-sharing which helps diverse members of the church to participate fully in the development of the church's life. Second, I consider the process by which the ethos of a congregation is changed to be more inclusive and participative. In particular I look at the cycle of how a church's practices change the congregation's ethos, which in turn changes the church's practices. Third, I explore the way these ministers understand the relationship between their own leadership and the ethos and practices of the churches with which they work. I argue that ministers contribute to the enabling of power-sharing, but cannot facilitate it alone.

After considering the implications of my research for the policy and practice of the Methodist Church I then conclude that the crucial factor in the healthy development of ethnically diverse congregations is the willingness to share

power and, thus, to allow the whole body to be changed by the members who are seen as 'other' and 'different'.[5]

What is an ethnically diverse congregation (EDC)?

It is complex to try and define EDCs because of the variety of combinations of people in the widely diverse contexts within which churches work across Britain. This huge diversity was evident in the descriptions the interviewees gave of the congregations with which they work. Sometimes the differences within a congregation derive from the cultural diversity of the countries from which members have arrived, often including different cultures of Methodism.[6] Sometimes the members may all have been born in Britain but the diversity between them relates to people's home culture and the ethnic background from which their family has come. In this article I use the term EDC not simply in a descriptive sense but rather in an aspirational sense. I do not use EDC to mean a group of people who happen to be different from one another but more to describe those congregations whose communal intention is to reflect the ethnic diversity of their local community and to develop into churches that celebrate difference and enable equal and full participation of all members.

Sociological background

Globalisation is a phenomenon which has received enormous attention from geographers and sociologists and is now attracting increasing attention from theologians.[7] While there is not yet any statistical analysis of the changing patterns of ethnic diversity in British Methodist congregations, recent research into the ethnic diversity of those who self-identified as Christian in the last two censuses finds that 'among people of black, Asian, white European and mixed ethnicity, the number of Christians is dramatically increasing. The Global Church has now well and truly taken root in England.' The other change noted is the proportion of Christians from the non-white or white (other) categories in various regions of the country: 'All regions now have significant ethnic diversity in the Christian population, which already is having an impact on the diversity of congregations of historic denominations … and also on the priorities for ecumenical relations, evangelism and pastoral care.'[8]

The research that I have carried out is a contribution to the academic conversation about the effects of globalisation, recognising that, in human geographical and sociological studies, there is a particular interest in the super-diversity and hybridity that can result from transnationalism.[9] As society changes, people interact more and more naturally with each other, in some communities at least. In a globalised world, as the generations claim broader and broader heritage, the term 'ethnic' is perhaps becoming less helpful. Some scholars argue that the use of 'race' and 'multi-racial' in earlier academic work was fundamentally flawed.[10] More recently, according to Stephen Jivraj,

> The 'Other' ethnic group categories – 'White Other', 'Other Black', 'Other Asian', 'Other Mixed', and 'Other' have all increased, in total by over 2 million in the last 10 years. The existing ethnic group categories are, perhaps, becoming increasingly less meaningful for many people.[11]

Despite these reservations it is clear from my data that, in practice, the differences between people, and the groupings which can form within congregations according to linguistic or cultural bonds of commonality, can often cause or perpetuate divisions within a church community.[12] It is important, therefore, to discover how to encourage proper mutual respect and to enable full participation of different people within the same congregation's life. In a Methodist context this is particularly significant because of the heritage of wanting to witness to the ability of the Holy Spirit to reach out to all people with the gospel, and to unite different people within the one body of the Church.

Theological background

The development of good practice within EDCs is important to me personally because as a lifelong Methodist I have grown up with the conviction that the gospel is for everybody and I understand this to have clear implications for mission and ministry within the Methodist Church. There are elements within Methodist history that demonstrate an expectation of openness to difference and much within Methodist theology to commend inclusiveness as an essential commitment. The celebrated 'Four Alls' of Methodism are a later way of describing a collection of emphases that had been crucial, from the beginning of the movement, in proclaiming that the gospel is for all people. For example,

this was put into practice, in early Methodism, by the inclusion of African-American slaves among its group of preachers and, where the law refused this possibility, these preachers continued to preach while using the title 'exhorters'. Wesley's sermon 'The Catholic Spirit' (1755) is another illustration of his own determination to encompass all people, and Richard Clutterbuck describes a theology of interdependence as a hallmark of British Methodism. Methodist reliance on the concept and practice of 'fellowship' and an ethos of belonging locally as well as to a bigger whole are also important factors in the way that Methodism encourages participation from newly arrived members whatever their background.[13]

The history of the Methodist Missionary Movement is one that has developed a range of transnational relationships across many different cultures and countries. Although this missionary movement was, inevitably, affected by its colonial context, the legacy of this history is a worldwide network of Connexions.[14] Over recent decades Methodists have migrated from countries to which the British Methodist Church (among others) sent missionaries. My data suggests that the challenge now is whether Methodist congregations are willing to receive from people who are arriving in this country and to be changed by their presence and participation. This challenge has to be set within the context of post-colonial theology, which always seeks to redress power dynamics and to challenge attitudes of racism or paternalism from a theological basis of respect for the equality of all people.[15] This challenge is one that many churches seem reluctant to take up: in reality the opportunities that globalisation brings have not always been grasped. I hope within the current study to highlight the processes by which congregations can move towards a deeper willingness to change and to be changed.

The scope of this study

The empirical research which I undertook for this article is set within a wider piece of research which is studying in more detail theological perspectives on what geographers have termed our 'super-diverse' society.[16] Due to the complete lack of ethnic monitoring for church members in the Methodist Church it is impossible to say where EDCs are distributed across the country, or to say from which ethnic background or home country church members come. The last thorough study was carried out in 1985,[17] and there is no doubt that the picture has changed significantly since then. Studies of population growth show, for example, that 'the African ethnic group' has grown faster than

any other minority group since 1991, and this includes, for example, Zimbabwe and Ghana, where Methodism has a strong presence.[18] In particular, the variety of countries from which Methodist members have arrived has widened. While there have been British Methodists from Caribbean Methodist churches since the 1950s and 1960s, arrivals over the last two decades, from Fiji, Ghana, South Korea, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe (for example), among many other countries, have added to the variety of Methodist cultures represented among British Methodism. The arrival of these Methodists, and their ability to attract people from other cultures who have not previously been Methodist or Christian at all, has added to the diversity of many local Methodist church congregations.

Within the more recent arrivals to Britain from other countries that have their own Methodist Connexion, there are some ethnic groupings that have formed their own Fellowships within the MCB. One example is the Methodist Church Zimbabwean Fellowship, which has 43 Fellowship groups across the country. The models of networking vary from one Fellowship to another but they generally seek to operate within the MCB and to encourage their members to participate as fully as possible within it. This year's Methodist Conference received the Report of the Working Group on Fellowships, which made recommendations designed to 'bring about deeper relationships, mutual partnerships and genuine integration of Fellowship Groups within the Connexion of which they are part'.[19]

While the life and influence of these Fellowships are fascinating and crucial to the wider picture of ethnic diversity within British Methodism, it is, in particular, individual local ethnically diverse congregations that I have chosen to study here. I am conscious also that there are many other forms of cultural diversity, not least economic, within the British Methodist Church. However, in this piece of research I focus on EDCs. Having explained the relevance and focus of my research, and considered the context within which this research was undertaken, let me now describe the scope of this study.

Methodology

With the context of globalisation as the background, and with the questions of how to help churches diversify in the foreground, I undertook some primary qualitative research over a six-month period (from October 2014 to March 2015).

When I designed my research I wanted to use the recognisable language of the connexional Belonging Together strategy, as it was a recent Methodist project which had reported to the British Methodist Conference. I specifically wanted to know which practices build up the sense of 'belonging together' within these congregations, and which factors make it difficult for people to feel that they 'belong together'. In wanting to reach an understanding of the experience of EDCs I am especially influenced by the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who argues for a 'the primacy of practice' in his study of cosmopolitan ethics, and, in theological terms, I am especially influenced by Mary McClintock Fulkerson who writes about the lived practices of a congregation and uses the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in her study of an ethnically diverse American Methodist Church. She writes: 'It is crucial to pay attention to the role of practices that are primarily incorporative … remembering that it is the full-bodied social practices, not simply the beliefs and convictions from Methodism that make place.'[20]

Considering the lack of research into the phenomenon of EDCs within British Methodism I began with a concern to identify the range and variety of experiences of EDCs. I chose, as a pilot study, to carry out a survey of Methodist ministers (lay or ordained) involved in leading EDCs across the Connexion. I chose a questionnaire as my methodology because I knew the target audience would have a high level of concern and engagement.[21] I designed a self-completion questionnaire and as a convenience sample decided to ask for participation from the members of the Methodist City Centre Network (MCCN).[22] I knew, from my involvement with MCCN over ten years, that there is a wide range of experience represented and that the majority of participating churches have experience of ethnic diversity of some kind within the congregations. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was given to the ministers who attended the MCCN conference of November 2014, where I was afforded the opportunity to introduce my research. It was subsequently sent to all the members of MCCN electronically, inviting them to respond. One unplanned snowballing effect of the electronic mailing was that the questionnaire was also sent to all the ministers within the London District. While this was not initiated by me the benefit was that it did elicit more responses from relevant ministers. By the deadline, 25 Methodist ministers (4 lay and 21 ordained, just over half female) had returned the questionnaire. The respondents represented 6 districts (Birmingham, East Anglia, London, Manchester, Northampton and Southampton) and 20 circuits of The Methodist Church in Britain. These respondents represented a good range of EDCs, from single congregations

including more than 20 'nationalities', to 'all-white' congregations with a large proportion of South African members, and included EDCs where a small minority of the members were from Eastern European countries. The churches' histories varied from those which have been EDCs for more than 50 years to some which have diversified much more recently.

The initial questionnaire gave me some useful data, including the lists of practices which built up and which hindered the development of EDCs (see Appendix B). Once I analysed the data, using a coding method, the responses provided relevant themes that I wanted to explore further, and so I decided to follow up from the results with a qualitative study by interviewing some of the participants.[23] Those I interviewed were self-selecting because I arranged to interview each respondent who indicated a willingness to talk further. These seven ministers were all women presbyters: two are not British-born and one other is Black British.[24] While there was ethnic diversity among the respondents it was not a representative view that I was aiming for, rather a selection of ministers' responses from a range of EDCs. I was satisfied that the interviewees represented a range of experience with EDCs. They represented three districts (London, Northampton and Birmingham) and seven circuits. There is undoubtedly more research to be done about the experience of ethnically diverse ministers within the British Methodist Church.[25] While I consider that to be outside the scope of this current study I am glad that the Methodist Church has been undertaking such research and look forward to seeing the results**.**

In order to deepen my understanding I chose to use semi-structured interviews, which I based upon the same open questions from the survey. This method was appropriate to this early stage of my research as it allowed the respondents to control the direction and content of their responses. I began the interviews with questions about the geography, history, demography and circumstances of the congregation and its context. My chosen method then allowed me to develop the themes that had become evident during the initial, wider survey.[26]

In this qualitative research I was able to probe a little further about how the ministers saw their experience of working within EDCs. The current data reflects the views of church leaders but not of other church members and this points to the need for further research into the views and experiences of other members of EDCs later. Nevertheless the focus on ministers' experience, perceptions and practice potentially enables good practice to be shared. I hope to facilitate these processes through the writing of this article.

The findings

(a) The need for power-sharing

The open questions in my survey of ministers working with EDCs were designed so that people could express whatever they wanted about what helps and what hinders the development of such congregations. In analysing the data it became clear that the theme most mentioned by respondents was the need for 'power-sharing' within a church.[27]

To take a straightforward example, one interviewee described the dynamics of making decisions about the style of fundraising within the church:

> There was a fundraising event going on at the church … they needed desperately to do some renovations. The Brits wanted to do a series of fundraising events but the Koreans considered that individual events were a bit insulting. They would rather give substantially, the Koreans. For them members of the church have this responsibility and members should be asked to give. They were being disenfranchised by not being invited to give in the way that they saw as their responsibility. (Bryony)

The description here is of two different church cultures within the one congregation. The decisions on how to raise funds were made by one particular group ('the Brits'), This caused a sense of disempowerment for those from the other group ('the Koreans') who would, in their home country, approach the financial need quite differently. There has been no real consultation or joint planning and one model has been assumed by those making the decisions within the church. The 'other' group has ideas, and strong preferences, and a clear model which works elsewhere but they are not given the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas. This leaves them less than enthusiastic for the task in hand and means that one group is 'disenfranchised'.

All of the interviewees expressed belief that a diverse decision-making body is the ideal model within an EDC. Nevertheless, many of the respondents commented on the difficulties that can arise from trying to make joint decisions with diverse teams, from different cultures, within the same church council or committee. As Jean said:

> Having a diverse team makes for much stronger decisions … but it is hard because you get a lot more conflict, things take a lot longer,

> and I think it's a much more frustrating experience for the people involved. (Jean)

Or as Bryony asked:

> Does 'Integration' too often mean 'assimilation'? Or do the newcomers have an opportunity to offer their gifts as well (and have their gifts accepted and used)? (Bryony)

Indeed there was a common understanding between all seven ministers interviewed that it is important to find ways of building up diverse church councils and church stewards' teams[28] in order to develop a sense of common purpose and vision within the Body of Christ. In seeking this diversity the ministers aim to share the responsibility of planning and decision-making.

There were some respondents to the survey who considered that the style of worship is what puts some people off from staying at a Methodist church when that style is very different from the worship they are used to in their home countries. On the other hand some ministers felt that the worship style was not as important as the experience of power-sharing in retaining new members as part of the congregation.

> I believe that the style of worship has less to do with making people feel they belong, than the way people are invited and included in the activities and events that happen in a church. People need to be encouraged to take part. They are happy to worship, even if the worship is not their style, as long as they're made to feel as though they are valued. (Vanessa)

This theme of valuing people and of showing that people are valued by encouraging them to be fully participating members in the life of the church was echoed by Elizabeth:

> I'm conscious that I came to a church where there was already a diverse stewardship team within the context of that particular congregation and we try and encourage people to participate even when they're new. As one person of the congregation has remarked we are a church which recognises and values people's gifts. (Elizabeth)

The data recognises that welcoming people is a good start but does not go far towards the building up of ethnically diverse congregations. Whereas all congregations believe they are friendly and many state that 'Everybody is welcome', the reality is different. The data shows that although churches usually want new members, not least to help the church continue, they do not necessarily want the new arrivals to change anything.

Linbert Spencer comments:

> Although most organizations say that they want individuals to bring different and innovative approaches, in practice they operate on the basis that difference is of little or no value and similarity is of great importance. This is usually not conscious or deliberate, but unless deliberate and positive action is taken to recognize, acknowledge and promote the value of diversity, then the old order will prevail.[29]

The interviewees described some resistance to change and the high occurrence of references to the need for power-sharing among congregational life reflects that it is not always a reality. Furthermore, the ministers see this challenge as key to the change and transformation of churches so that they develop in a properly participative way to become EDCs rather than remaining as churches that include some people from different ethnic backgrounds.[30]

(b) A process of change

I have first described that the strongest theme from the data is that of power-sharing. I now want to consider the process of change which the respondents describe as enabling this power-sharing to happen.

Within the data there is clear recognition that this process of changing from being a mono-cultural church, or a church which has some members from different ethnic backgrounds, to becoming a truly ethnically diverse congregation, is not an easy or quick one. My questions in the questionnaire produced, collectively, a list of the practices (customs, activities, events and ways of doing things) that contribute to the building up, or not, of EDCs. These answers were in response to practical questions but also reflect the activist and practical nature of Methodist life and theology which means that theology is often developed pragmatically rather than systematically.[31] My data shows that there are many regular ecclesial practices which help with the building up of meaningful interaction and a sense of belonging together in an ethnically

diverse congregation, but also many which have the opposite effect. There was a clear recognition among the ministers that the things churches actually do together influence and form the ethos of the congregational life.[32] For example:

> We organise quizzes. A group of people (or even one person) help make up the quiz about their country. This helps everybody to get more informed about a place and also makes the person who is from another country the expert, when often they are disadvantaged in some ways in other contexts, both in and outside the church. (Bryony)

Bryony was acknowledging here that the seemingly straightforwardly social practice of holding quizzes can, even if temporarily, change the power-balance within the church relationships. Her understanding was that this experience, however transitory, actually contributes to longer-term change in the way that people see themselves and others. It means that people who have been ignorant about each other's home countries become more informed and have more of a basis for conversation consequently. Additionally those who are often treated as not knowing or understanding become the ones who have the knowledge in this setting.

In relation to the pastoral care of the church Bryony also described a practice she had introduced personally to share knowledge of different customs from different Methodist cultures. When asked about what strategies she had used to encourage people to work together as effectively as possible when they are from diverse ethnic backgrounds, she answered:

> Having discussions in Pastoral Committee about different styles/ expectations with regards to rites of passage; essential to have selected diverse voices in advance to present views – discussion will follow – and perhaps even some new Good practice learned and developed across the bounds of ethnicity. (Bryony)

This careful preparation for a meeting changes what happens within that meeting, to include, effectively, some informal training and to deepen understanding and relationship.[33] For many respondents there was a pastoral recognition that making conversation and getting to know each other is not an easy task:

> The hardest thing is that people often don't know what to ask about with other people's lives without worrying about showing themselves up as ignorant or whatever. (Ruth)

Ministers saw it as part of their responsibility to find ways of both enabling conversation and also modelling conversation across cultures. There was a common perception among the respondents that the practices which help ethnically diverse congregations were ones which encouraged a more nuanced level of understanding of one another and provided, therefore, more opportunity for honesty of encounter and dialogue. There was an understanding that the Methodist concept of fellowship is key in relation to this aim.[34] Elizabeth referred to the link between Methodist understanding of church belonging and the practice of getting to know one another well:

> … our understanding of the church is that the local church should be pastorally responsible for its members and so therefore some people beyond the minister have to have some knowledge of the people. And from the small group beginnings of Methodism we have to know each other in order to assist each other in our growing discipleship. There's something in the Methodist understanding of church and being together. (Elizabeth)

I found a clear link in the interviewees' answers between helping people to get to know one another better and the belief that this will lead to more equally participative approaches within the congregation. One respondent, Bryony, described a very deliberate strategy for appointments which included using a nominations committee whose job was to get to know the congregational members well, thus enabling discernment about what strengths and gifts the most appropriate people had, regardless of their background. In other words, it was not good enough to appoint people just from within the group that you already know.

> We have been on a journey of appointing people of diverse ethnicity to leadership positions. We have a nominations committee that meets between Jan–April, ready for General Church Meeting. We look at what are the talents of people, what do we need, how can we best encourage and use the gifts and graces of people. I'm gentle but insistent about this. It took 5 years to have a black steward but we have now. We have just under 200 members … but I've done it the same way in other churches with 50 or 60 members. (Bryony)

The use of the word 'journey' here is typical of the way in which respondents saw the participation of a bigger variety of people as a process that develops

over time. In its simplest form, what my data shows is the process whereby church practices influence congregational ethos, including the attitudes of the people, and this ethos then gradually influences the practices (Figure 1). This process is ongoing, as described by the respondents, and can build up positively (in terms of helping people to participate more fully) or negatively (in terms of leaving people unable to participate).[35]

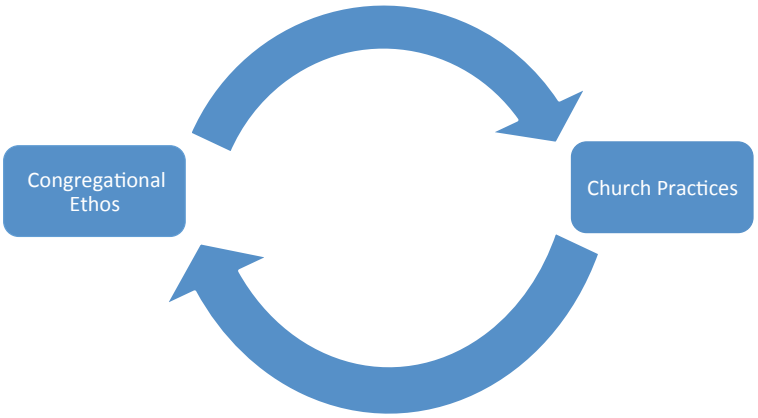

Figure 1

One regular question for ministers in an EDC appears to concern how explicit and intentional to be about these processes which are taking place continuously. This brings me to the third aspect of the data that I would like to consider, namely how ministers particularly see their own role in relation to the developing of EDCs.

(c) The minister's role in the development of ethnically diverse congregations

Interviewees all acknowledged that their role in helping to develop EDCs is one role among many roles and that, within the Methodist circuit system,[36] there is an obvious need for others to be involved in this ministry of building up EDCs:

> You need people, even if only one or two individuals, who are friendly and approachable and will go and do the work of engaging with the congregation including those who are new … The leader or minister does have a role obviously, but especially in Methodism when the minister often isn't there it's the congregation which

> counts and having some people who are able to make those conversations happen over coffee. (Ruth)

Given that Methodist understanding of ministry is that of the ministry of all God's people[37] and that in practice the minister cannot be present as often as the rest of the congregation then it is good that this collaborative venture, of building up EDCs, is recognised as a joint responsibility.

> They are naturally a friendly group of people and I have sought to encourage and uphold that openness. Those people who have a sense of responsibility for it within the church try hard to make the best relationships they can within what's possible. There's just this willingness to embrace or to recognise that 'what I like is not the only perspective'. (Elizabeth)

Methodism sees ordained ministry as, partly, a ministry of focus and representation. My data shows that ministers recognised the need to enable others to make honest cross-cultural relationships. A significant theme in the data was an understanding that part of the minister's role is to speak out loud the tensions that others were experiencing. Jean described in detail an incident around the time of Harvest Festival in which two women came into conflict about the style of the Harvest flower display. Her response was to be explicit with them about what was occurring:

> Guys, this is a cultural conflict. This is Africa meets the Caribbean. What are we going to do about this? How are we going to work it out? (Jean)

This response is assertive in making the responsibility to find a solution a *joint* responsibility. She is drawing attention to the nature of what is happening, naming it in a way which does not leave it unspoken and ignored, and is also challenging the women to find a way forward while counting herself along with them, rather than taking over.[38] Ruth saw rites of passage as an opportunity for greater awareness of different cultural patterns and pastoral involvement from the wider congregation with that particular family. She comments:

> As a minister I find that the pastoral offices for people … are about meeting people's needs, creating holy moments, and they allow you

> into people's homes and lives. One lovely moment was when on the Harvest Sanjay was asking for something and I didn't know what it was … and then it turned out to be a blessing for a weaning of their second baby who was going to have rice and beans for the first time. So I made up a blessing over coffee time and it was a lovely family moment. (Ruth)

She goes on, also, to show a sophisticated thinking through of the opportunity given by a baptism ceremony, which she conducted with the child's father (a Zimbabwean local preacher) in both Shona and English. She made a conscious choice not to have all the Shona translated:

> I felt it gave an extra significance to the Shona language (for some of it to stand alone without translation) and also it put people into the position of thinking what it would be like for the others not to understand … and it meant we had to trust each other that 'we don't know what else is going on but we believe holy things are going on here'. That was good for everybody. (Ruth)

This explicit use of the liturgy to involve the whole congregation in the bi-lingual lives of the family echoes some of the other respondents' narratives about creating opportunities for people to empathise more easily with the experiences of others in the congregation.

The data gives examples of respondents finding that their own views and assumptions are challenged along with other people's, by the presence of ethnic diversity within the congregation. Ruby, for example, was clearly including herself in the number of people who found time-keeping differences difficult.

> I find it refreshing but it can cause tensions … the time thing, for example … one couple rarely come on time, but that is just how it is. It's just we recognise that this is what happens and they accept it. People recognise that it's part of their culture and if they want to embrace them … then they need to be valued as part of their community. (Ruby)

Ministers recognised that they were there to work with a congregation and that this congregation had a life of its own, which they could influence but not determine alone. There was also recognition that their particular role gives

them a specific responsibility to influence congregational practice and ethos, and also that it gives them the possibility of doing this. This dynamic could be shown in the diagram by adding the influence of the ministers through their input to the church practices and also, therefore, to congregational ethos (Figure 2).

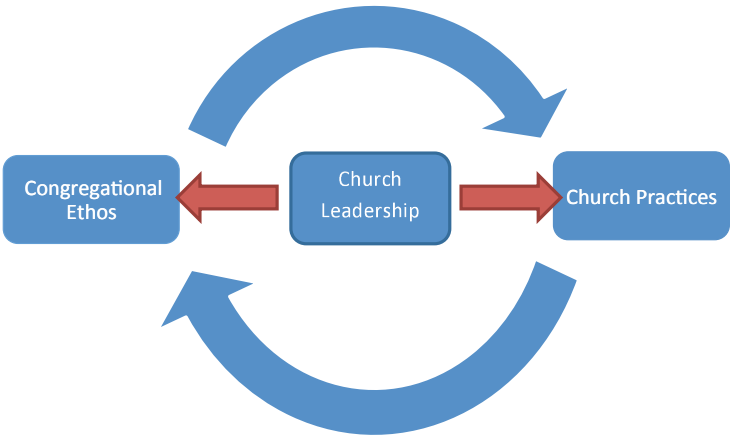

Figure 2

The ministers interviewed see their role as one of modelling positive relationships, which includes willingness to be changed through the encounter with different people. Included within this role is the sharing of power with others, which illustrates Methodist theology of collaborative leadership and ministry.[39] So what are the implications of this research for Methodist policy and practice?

Implications for Methodist policy and practice

The Belonging Together project of The Methodist Church in Britain (2010–2013) had two aims:

- The affirmation of culturally diverse churches, groups and individuals within the Connexion, and creating an environment in which they can be themselves, enjoy meaningful interactions, and take full advantage of Connexional structures and resources; and
- The creative interaction within the Connexion of groups and individuals of culturally different backgrounds, whereby they can contribute positively to the ministry of the whole people of God, locally and connexionally, and receive gifts and experiences from each other.

At the end of this three-year project, in the final report of this project to Methodist Council (2013), there was a conclusion:

> What Belonging Together has demonstrated is that ethnic inclusion cannot be left to chance or choice, nor indeed be reduced to quotas or compliance. This agenda will need to be owned and championed at all levels of Church governance and leadership, and of fellowship and meaningful interaction across the Connexion.

My research shows that the decisive factor in the development of ethnically diverse congregations is the willingness of all those involved to allow the whole body to be changed by those who are 'other' and 'different'. Despite a commitment for the whole Church to aim for 'affirmation' of cultural diversity, and to value 'meaningful' and 'creative interaction', this will not happen unless the MCB is willing to be changed by the diversity that it now experiences. The MCB's previous history of positive racism awareness training will continue to be crucial and the Belonging Together strategy needs to be set alongside post-colonial theology with its challenge to redress power dynamics.[40] The end of the project report for Belonging Together stated:

> Valuing all means enabling all to participate in the whole spectrum of activities and roles found in our Church. This may mean that in some areas the status quo will need to be challenged and that positive action may need to be taken to ensure the outcomes that give due respect to all in our communities.[41]

My research suggests that such positive action is possible through changes to current lived practices within local congregations. Although this study focuses on local congregations I suggest that the same dynamics could be present at connexional level and the suggestion to include representatives of the ethnically or linguistically specific Fellowship Groups at District Synod and at the British Methodist Conference would be one small but significant way of working towards redressing the current power inbalance.[42] Continued commitment to making positive changes and to challenging the status quo in some areas within the MCB is welcome. Some measure of checking the current power dynamics and the direction of change needs to be built into the Church at every level.

Conclusion

Spencer comments, 'The difficulty institutions have is one of failing to understand the difference between allowing people to participate, and actively seeking the participation of those who are not already participating.'[43]

The interviewees showed that they were aware of the need for power to be shared equitably, to involve all those who have a part to play, however small their part may be. They demonstrated sometimes quite sophisticated understanding and skill in facilitating learning and empathy within the congregation so that different people could understand each other more deeply. The data showed an awareness of the need to name and challenge any negative dynamics within EDCs that resisted change or equality, and threatened the holiness of the church:

> It has been important to be outspoken about issues of racism and justice and to pick up any issues between people within the congregation so that they didn't 'fester'. I felt as though my role as minister was partly to enable this to happen. (Julie)

In examining the data carefully it was clear that some of the positive practices existed before the minister in question arrived at the church concerned, and some were deliberately introduced by the minister. The respondents recognised that the congregation had a life and ethos of its own. The data showed not only that the minister was influencing the development of the congregation by what they challenged or what they encouraged, but also that they were being changed themselves, and in their leadership, by their engagement with the life of the congregation.

My earlier diagram can, therefore, be adapted in order to show that the ministers' influence upon the development of EDCs comes through their modelling, suggesting, challenging and encouraging of different practices, but also, significantly, by their willingness to be changed by others in the process (Figure 3).

The willingness, or lack of willingness, of the congregation to be changed by those who are from outside extends to the willingness, or lack of willingness, to be changed by the contributions of a minister, who in an itinerant system has arrived from beyond the congregation. Therefore the power to resist or to embrace the minister's influence lies with the congregation. Similarly the

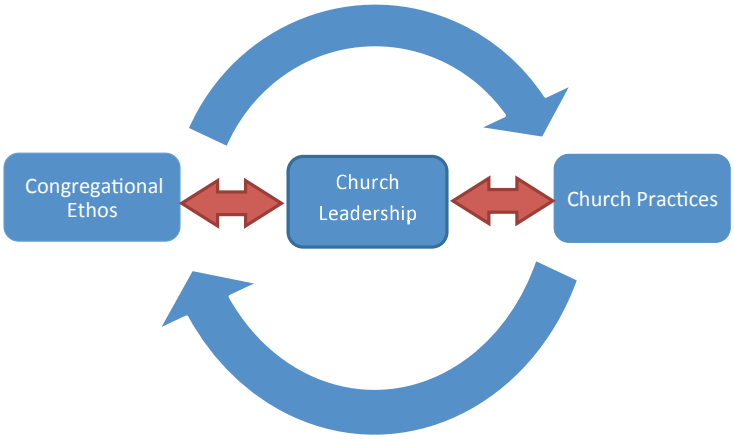

Figure 3

minister's willingness to be changed by the life of the church influences his or her ability to influence the congregation.

In order to raise awareness of the dynamics that are at play across the MCB my research suggests that it would benefit the Church to develop a way of measuring the participation of a variety of people within congregations, circuits, districts and connexionally. More detailed ethnic monitoring would go some way towards this but a scale for measuring the sharing of power would also help British Methodists to become aware of the distance which still needs to be travelled.[44] For The Methodist Church in Britain to become a genuinely ethnically diverse church I suggest that the Methodist Conference needs to aim for each and every level and grouping of Methodists to become intentionally an ethnically diverse community of people, in order to reflect the glory of God and the possibility of the gospel being proclaimed to all people.

Appendix A

Survey questions

Please answer this set of questions for each ethnically diverse church that you work with.

1. Thinking of the ethnically diverse church that you are working with… What have you noticed that contributes positively to helping people feel as though they 'belong together'?

2. Thinking of the ethnically diverse church that you are working with… What have you noticed that makes it hard for people to have a sense that they 'belong together'?

3. Thinking as broadly as possible, what strategies (if any) have you used to encourage people within the church to get to know each other better when they are from diverse ethnic backgrounds?

4. Thinking as broadly as possible, what strategies (if any) have you used to encourage people within the church to work together as effectively as possible when they are from diverse ethnic backgrounds?

5. Please describe to me any other concerns or comments that you have about these issues, in as much, or as little, detail as you would like.

Appendix B

1. Practices which help development of ethnically diverse congregations

Quizzes on one particular country where the 'experts' from that country set the questions, often to include questions about Methodism in that country.

Food evenings … it was felt that this was often better for one country's cuisine.

Preaching and prayers to include an emphasis on inclusiveness, and the theme of being one body in Christ.

Learning new songs from other countries.

Including diversity in leadership teams and decision-making bodies.

'Knowing me, knowing you' sessions.

Conversation in worship as part of the sharing with one another.

Modelling the possibility of chatting to different 'groups', eg at meals or coffee times.

Including different voices and accents in worship.

Trying different styles of worship or different customs, eg one church which asked the African members to arrange Harvest, and all the customs that go with it, from their home country.

Using other languages in worship: in prayer, Bible readings, rites of passage.

Phonetic spelling of names when first told them … to make remembering easier.

Photo gallery with names underneath so people can 'go back' and check.

Extending the 'sharing of the peace' to a conversation about a particular topic.

Sermon illustrations from different cultures and places.

Using the General Church Meeting for conversation on a Sunday, after or during worship.

Welcomers who are trained in the greeting of new people and in checking out whether they expect to be given opportunity to introduce themselves (as in many other countries).

Newcomers' lunches held regularly for any new people to develop friendships.

Encouraging home hospitality from the members.

Being explicit and outspoken in challenging any discrimination or 'oversight' of people who are not naturally part of the current 'circle' of the church's life.

Challenging differences of opinion in a relaxed way.

Examining different clashes of opinion or approach and encouraging others to see this as acceptable and helpful in getting to know and understand one another better.

Going to social things together, eg football matches, the pub, or outings.

Making sure that planning groups or task groups are jointly held with people of different backgrounds working together on things.

Art and crafts together.

Having fun!

Prayer groups which encourage everybody to be involved and to care for one another in this way, sometimes within the worship.

Pooling of costs for events so that people can afford to come irrespective of their economic situation.

Name badges to help people get to know one another's names.

Making policies and procedures clear and transparent so that they are equally accessible by everybody.

'All congregation' meetings where issues and decisions are discussed with everybody who is at worship.

Interactive services where people's opinions are shared, heard and valued.

Careful use of language.

Use of image as well as of words.

Shared leadership and common goals and vision for the church.

Inclusive retreats.

Seminars on inclusivity.

Racial Justice Sundays where ethnically different people participate.

Common tasks and responsibilities in the church, eg kitchen duties, inclusive church comittees where individual gifts and graces are embraced, affirmed, utilised and celebrated.

Games ensuring each team is drawn from a diverse ethnic mix, eg volley ball.

Conscientising members to be as inclusive as possible in electing people to church leadership.

2. Practices which hinder development of ethnically diverse congregations

Making assumptions, rather than asking, checking things, or getting to know one another.

'Niceness': not wanting to offend people.

'Mother tongue' use creating 'groups' or cliques in coffee time and at social events.

Trying to stick to the same customs and practices as previously despite new opinions and contributions.

Getting names wrong and not making the effort to remember where people are from.

Not recording decisions properly.

Not being clear about processes and policies so that there is lack of transparency.

Giving grants to those who have the confidence to speak up in Circuit Meetings.

Domineering attitudes and behaviour of certain groups or individuals over others.

Notes

1. See Jivraj 2012, or Rees and Butt 2004, for helpful summaries of the changes in the diversity of British population 1991–2011, and Rees et al. 2012 for population projections into the future.
2. The Methodist Church does not have ethnic monitoring data for Methodists arriving in Britain from other countries where Methodism is strong. However, studies of population growth (see Kyambi 2005 and Jivraj 2012) show, for example, that what they call 'the African ethnic group' has grown faster than any other minority group since 1991, and this includes Zimbabwe and Ghana, where Methodism has a strong presence.
3. There is currently ethnic monitoring data within the Methodist Church for ministers and for delegates to Conference but not for church membership or attendance, nor for trustees' meetings. There is therefore a need for this research to be done and the Methodist Church is working on how to put this into practice. See also Walton 1985, Davey 1988, and Frost and Jordan 2006, for literature about the experience and impact of ethnic diversity within The Methodist Church in Britain.
4. I am using the term ministers here to refer to church leaders, either ordained or lay. EDC is a shorthand for ethnically diverse congregations. It is my own abbreviation and is defined later in the article. Presbyter is the name used for those who have traditionally been known as 'ministers' within The Methodist Church in Britain. They are ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament. Some ordained deacons (the other order of ordination within the MCB) were also invited to take part in the survey, as well as lay people, but did not choose to respond. An inquiry about the reasons for this lies outside my current research but could be rectified at a later date.
5. For an exposition of practical theology in relation to the experience of 'Otherness', see Veling 2005, pp. 98–114.
6. Membership of a Methodist church has a technical meaning according to whether or not people are confirmed and committed members willing to be on a membership list. At this point, however, I simply mean people who are part of the congregations, either as members or attenders.
7. Baker 2007, Nausner 2004, and very recently Brazal and Guzman 2015, are examples of this field of study.

8. Council for Christian Unity 2014, pp. 1 and 24.
9. See, for example, Cohen and Toninato 2010 on creolisation, Vertovec and Cohen 1999 on diaspora and transnationalism, Ghorashi 2004 on the effects of diaspora and transnationalism on identity formation, and Nowicka and Rovisco 2009 on cosmopolitanism.
10. Bayart 2005 and Leech 2005 both make this case well in different academic fields.
11. Jivraj 2012, p. 1.
12. There is excellent work by Day and Rogaly 2012 (p. 77) about the various uses of the word 'community' which can sometimes be used to mask conflict and diversity.
13. The set of 'Four Alls' (all need to be saved, all can be saved, all can be saved to the uttermost, and all can know they are saved) is a crucial set of statements, used as the basis of Methodist theology and mission. They were named the 'Four Alls' from the early twentieth century (see Turner 2002, pp. 75–76). Weems Jr 1999, p. 64, describes the work of 'exhorters' as a phenomenon of Methodist history. On the Catholic spirit, see Waller 1988, pp. 145–156. For an exploration of Methodism's theology of interdependence, see Clutterbuck 2004, pp. 59–69; for Methodism's concept of membership and connectedness see Drake 2004, pp. 131–142.
14. Connexion is the word which Wesley used for the national organisation linking Methodists to one another, and is also used now in each country's organisation of Methodists: see Clutterbuck 2004, pp. 59–69. See Davey 1988, or Frost and Jordan 2006, or Plant 1999, pp. 119–130, for a history of the inter-linking between Methodism's missionary history and its current global presence in Britain.
15. For post-colonial theology, see Keller, Nausner and Rivera 2004, or Joy and Duggan 2012, or, in the context of congregational work, Sharp 2013. For an overwhelmingly convincing account of the need for intercultural pastoral theology based on post-colonial principles, see Lartey 2006.
16. See for example Wessendorf 2013, or Valentine and Sadgrove 2013, for literature around the lived experience of the phenomenon of super-diversity from a geographical perspective.
17. Walton 1985.
18. For the latest thorough literature surveying ethnic diversity in British Methodism, see Walton 1985. For figures on the more recent population trends, see Kyambi 2005, and Jivraj 2012.
19. For more information on where these Fellowships are within Britain, see www.methodist.org.uk/links/church-webmap-advanced-version
20. See Appiah 2006, pp. 69–86, and McClintock Fulkerson 2007, p. 85.
21. Gilbert 2008, p. 186.
22. This is a nationwide organisation which attracts ministers from a variety of cities and large towns.
23. I coded my themes using methodology as described by Mason 2008, ch. 8.
24. This fascinating fact is not one that I have been able to investigate in my current study. There are certainly male presbyters working with EDCs and in fact nearly

half of the ministers who replied to the survey were male. It could be that the seven women presbyters responded in some positive way to my covering letter, perhaps wanting to encourage a woman student. On the other hand it could be that there is a gender dynamic here that means that women are more likely to investigate the relationships and processes involved in EDCs. This statistic (though obviously from a very small sample) could be related to the feminist interest in post-colonial theology and would benefit from further research. See Pui-Lan 2005 for an exposition of the relationship between post-colonialism and feminist theology.

25. As acknowledged during the Belonging Together process.
26. Gilbert 2008, p. 193, and Bryman 2012, p. 472.
27. My current research did not allow time for following this up with questions about the significance of the theological training received by these ministers. The seven interviewees were all trained within a 15-year period from 1990 to 2005 and those respondents to the survey were trained over a 36-year period from 1973 to 2009. Nevertheless I would be interested to know whether the seven interviewees were particularly influenced by post-colonial or liberation theology which would put the emphasis on liberation from domination or from colonial bias. This strand of theology has, in my view rightly, been a significant emphasis within some ministerial training over the last 30 years. There has also, as mentioned already, been a strong emphasis within the Methodist Church on racism awareness, racial justice and anti-racism training as part of its commitment to the equality of all people. See Reddie 2009, pp. 37–52.
28. In The Methodist Church in Britain the church council members are the trustees and the church stewards effectively act as an executive team between Church Council meetings, often forming a leadership team with the minister and sometimes other officers (for example the treasurer).
29. Spencer 2007, p. 92.
30. Sheffield includes a practical diagram to help ministers assess how far their churches are along this continuum of transformation (2005, p. 85).
31. For an exploration of this, see Glasson in Marsh et al. 2004, and also Shier-Jones 2005.
32. Forty-one different practices were listed as having a positive effect (ranging from quiz evenings, to pooling the cost of events, to conversation challenging differences of opinion, to including different languages and accents in worship-leading). Nine different practices were listed as having a negative effect (ranging from failure to insist on legally required procedures, to getting names wrong, to using 'mother tongue' to create cliques, to discrimination in the way grants are awarded).
33. Reddie argues for this kind of informal theological training to challenge racism (2009, p. xviii).
34. For an exploration of the experience of fellowship within Methodist tradition, see Clive Marsh, in Craske and Marsh 1999, pp. 100–114.
35. This relates to the work of Baker 2007 and 2011, and Marti 2010, about the actual

ways in which people belong to churches and then gradually become part of those churches by participation in their activities.

36. The circuit preaching system means that some ministers will only be present in each church once a month.
37. As set out in the Methodist Church report, *Called to Love and Praise*.
38. This narrative is a good example of what McClintock Fulkerson calls 'a frame for appearing' in postmodern place theory (2007, pp. 24–48, 231–254).
39. A dynamic which it could be argued happens anyway with any congregation in an itinerant system. This feature of Methodist ecclesiology would benefit from further study of this aspect of practical theology in relation to the development of congregations in super-diverse and super-mobile areas.
40. For one example of the racial justice strategy documents produced by the MCB, see The Methodist Church 2005.
41. The Methodist Church's Belonging Together project ran from 2010 to 2013.
42. A strategy suggested by the Report of the Working Group on Fellowship Groups to the British Methodist Conference 2015.
43. Spencer 2007, p. 11.
44. While statistical monitoring will have a part to play here I am thinking more of a measuring tool that churches could use as a way of checking out with each other whether all people feel recognised, known and empowered within the church or not. This tool could perhaps then be used annually in the same way that property and safeguarding reports are required to be done annually. Leaving the responsibility of this to 'everybody' risks the possibility that 'nobody' will take the responsibility seriously and so the appointment of a circuit 'Diversity Officer', just as circuit 'Safeguarding Officers' are appointed for the same reason, might be another possible measure to take. The challenge will still need to come from outside congregations and training for this will continue to be important. However, the desire to change is what needs encouragement and I hope that the understanding of the processes of change (based on practical theology and the recognition of the importance of practice) from this article will help to encourage churches along the road to becoming EDCs.

Bibliography

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin.

Baker, Chris. 2007. *The Hybrid Church in the City – Third Space Thinking*. 2nd edn, London: SCM Press.

Baker, C. 2011. Introducing 'Spiritual Progression in Economic Recession' Conference, 17th March. William Temple Foundation (retrieved from iTunes, 4 January 2014).

Bayart, Jean-François. 2005. *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*. 2nd edn, London: C. Hurst & Co.

Brazal, Agnes M. and De Guzman, Emmanuel S. 2015. *Intercultural Church: Bridge of Solidarity in the Migration Context*. Borderless Press.

Bryman, A. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clutterbuck, Richard. 'Theology as Interaction: Ecumenism and the World Church', in Marsh, Clive, Beck, Brian, Shier-Jones, Angela and Wareing, Helen (eds). 2004. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 59–69.

Cohen, Robin and Toninato, Paola. 2010. *The Creolization Reader: Studies in Mixed Identities and Cultures*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Council for Christian Unity. 2014. *Changes in the Ethnic Diversity of the Christian Population in England between 2001 and 2011*. London: The Church of England.

Craske, Jane and Marsh, Clive. 1999. *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge*. London: Cassell.

Davey, Cyril. 1988. *Changing Places: Methodist Mission Then and Now*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering.

Day, Abby and Rogaly, Ben. 2014. 'Sacred Communities: Contestations and Connections', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(1): 75–88. DOI: 10.1080/13537903.2014.864806 (retrieved 25 June 2014).

Drake, Philip. 'Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness', in Marsh, Clive, Beck, Brian, Shier-Jones, Angela and Wareing, Helen (eds). 2004. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 131–142.

Frost, Brian and Jordan, Stuart. 2006. *Pioneers of Social Passion: London's Cosmopolitan Methodism*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

Fumanti, Mattia. 2010. '"Virtuous Citizenship": Ethnicity and Encapsulation among Akan-Speaking Ghanaian Methodists in London', *African Diaspora* 3(1): 13–42.

Ghorashi, Halleh. 2004. 'How Dual is Transnational Identity? A Debate on Dual Positioning of Diaspora Organizations', *Culture and Organization* 10(4) (December): 329–340.

Gilbert, Nigel. 2008. *Researching Social Life*. London: Sage Publications.

Glasson, Barbara. 'Stories and Story-telling: The Use of Narrative within Methodism', in Marsh, C., Beck, B., Shier-Jones, A. and Wareing, H. (eds). 2004. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. London and New York: Continuum.

Jivraj, Stephen. 2012. 'How has Ethnic Diversity Grown 1991–2001–2011?' Economic and Social Research Council. www.ethnicity.ac.uk (retrieved 14 June 2015).

Joy, David and Duggan, Joseph F. (eds). 2012. *De-colonizing the Body of Christ: Theology and Theory after Empire.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Keller, Catherine, Nausner, Michael and Rivera, Mayra (eds). 2004. *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

Kyambi, Sarah. 2005. *Beyond Black and White: Mapping New Immigrant Communities*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

Lartey, Emmanuel Y. 2006. *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

Leech, Kenneth. 2005. *Race: Changing Society and the Churches*. London: SPCK.

Marsh, Clive, Beck, Brian, Shier-Jones, Angela and Wareing, Helen (eds). 2004. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*. London and New York: Continuum.

Marti, G. 2010. 'The Religious Racial Integration of African Americans into Diverse Churches', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49(2): 201–217.

Mason, Jennifer. 2002. *Qualitative Researching*. 2nd edn, London: Sage Publications.

McClintock Fulkerson, Mary. 2007. *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Methodist Church. 1999. *Called to Love and Praise*. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House.

The Methodist Church. 2005. *Building a Racially Inclusive Methodist Church: A Training Strategy*. London: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes.

The Methodist Church. 2013. *Belonging Together – Leaving a Legacy, Embedding the Ethos*. Report to Methodist Council: MC/13/43.

Nausner, Michael. 'Homeland as Borderland', in Keller, C., Nausner, M. and Rivera, M. (eds). 2004. *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, pp. 118–132.

Nowicka, Magdalena and Rovisco, Maria. 'Making Sense of Cosmopolitanism', in Nowicka, M. and Rovisco, M. (eds). 2009. *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Plant, Stephen. 'Love the most distant': The Future of British Methodism in a World Church Perspective', in Craske, Jane and Marsh, Clive (eds). 1999. *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge*. London: Cassell.

Pui-Lan, Kwok. 2005. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Reddie, Anthony. 2009. *Is God Colour-blind? Insights from Black Theology for Christian Ministry*. London: SPCK.

Rees, Phil and Butt, Faisal. 2004. 'Ethnic Change and Diversity in England, 1981–2001, *Area* 36(2): 174–186.

Rees, Phil, Wohland, Pia, Norman, Paul, Boden, Peter. 2012. 'Ethnic Population Projections for the UK, 2001–2051', *Journal of Population Research* 29(1): 45–89. Published online 4 January 2012: Springer Science & Business Media B.V. 2012.

Sharp, Melinda A. McGarrah. 2013. *Misunderstanding Stories: Towards a Post-colonial Pastoral Theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

Sheffield, Daniel. 2005. *The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality*. Toronto: Clements Publishing.

Shier-Jones, Angela. 2005. *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

Spencer, Linbert. 2007. *Building a Multi-ethnic Church*. London: SPCK.

Turner, John Munsey. 2002. *John Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England*. Peterborough: Epworth Press.

Valentine, Gill and Sadgrove, Joanna. 2013. 'Biographical Narratives of Encounter: The Significance of Mobility and Emplacement in Shaping Attitudes towards Difference', *Urban Studies* 51(9): 1979–1994.

Veling, Terry A. 2005. *Practical Theology: 'On Earth as It Is in Heaven'*. New York: Orbis Books.

Vertovec, Steven and Cohen, Robin. 1999. *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Cheltenham: An Elgar Reference Collection.

Waller, Ralph. 'The Catholic Spirit: The Need of our Time', in Jones, Ivor H. and Wilson, Kenneth B. (eds). 1988. *Freedom and Grace*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, pp. 145–156.

Walton, Heather. 1985. *A Tree God Planted: Black People in British Methodism*. Nottingham: Ethnic Minorities in Methodism Working Group.

Weems Jr, Lovett H. 1999. *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Wessendorf, Suzanne. 2013. '"Being open, but sometimes closed". Conviviality in a Super-diverse London Neighbourhood', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(4): 392–405.

Websites

www.methodist.org.uk/links/church-webmap-advanced-version (retrieved 24 September 2015).

www.methodist.org.uk/media/1682917/conf-2015-39-Report-of-the-Working-Group-on-Fellowships-Groups.pdf (retrieved 25 September 2015).

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Confessions of a Methodist foodie: how tradition can feed our (good) habits and nourish our souls

Charles Wallace

THE REVD DR CHARLES WALLACE recently retired as chaplain and professor of religious studies at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. He has written articles on various members of the Wesley family, and published the complete writings of Susanna Wesley.

cwallace@willamette.edu
Salem, USA

This essay suggests that an examination of Methodist history from the perspective of its 'foodways' can both enliven our understanding of the movement and perhaps reinvigorate its tradition. With the recent emphasis on food studies (and food in general in our culture) this overlooked element calls for examination. My research in this area is alluded to briefly with examples from the lives and work of Susanna, John and Charles Wesley, and Wesleyan followers Samuel Bradburn, Charles Atmore, and John and Mary Fletcher. I argue that this perspective can contribute positively to a living twenty-first century Methodist tradition.

METHODISM AND FOOD • RELIGION AND FOOD • WESLEYAN TRADITION • SAMUEL BRADBURN • CHARLES ATMORE • JOHN WILLIAM FLETCHER • MARY BOSANQUET FLETCHER • JOHN WESLEY • CHARLES WESLEY • SUSANNA WESLEY

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 53–63

ISSN 2058-5969

A foodie, a Methodist and a historian walk into a bar … Wait a minute: this is not a joke; this is a bit close to home! I am neither a chef nor a gourmet, but I count myself privileged to help produce and enjoy three meals daily, and I am interested in the cultural and religious implications of what and how people eat and drink. I am also an ordained United Methodist elder (a retired university chaplain) – and I have taught religious history in colleges and theological seminaries. It's no joke, but this funny conflation of identities might still pack a theological and ethical punch line with implications for readers of this journal. Let me make my case by briefly examining each of the categories and then reflecting on some research I have been doing.

Foodies (intense and more laid back) are all around us – many of them, broadly defined, *are* us. Dedicated sections of bookstores, magazines, cable channels, websites, upscale markets and restaurants of all sorts cater to them/us. The topic's popularity, of course, raises all sorts of questions: Who gets to eat and what and where? What is a healthy diet? Who grows and prepares our food (and does or does not profit from it) and at what cost? How can we make sure that all people eat well and that our ecosystem is sustainable?

Methodism, the Christian tradition represented in this journal, actually lends itself more than some others to answer such questions. We are not just about orthodoxy, after all, but also ortho*pathy* and maybe most of all ortho*praxy* – not just right belief, but right feeling, and right behavior. As John Wesley's seal indicates, we *believe* and *love* and also *obey* – all based on his (and our own) blending of scriptural, traditional, experiential and rational ingredients. Though our numbers continue to fade (along with those of other 'mainline' denominations – at least in the UK and North America), many Methodists faithfully and passionately still strive to '*do* the right thing.' Even if we fail, David Hempton has reminded us that our 'Holiness offspring' Pentecostalism is 'poised to sweep the world.' But perhaps there's some faithful, heartfelt, practical energy still left among the current 'people called Methodists.'

History. My invocation of Dean Hempton reminds us that the study of history (even when conducted according to the critical canons of the Enlightenment) has consequences, and not always negative ones, for tradition. Clearly, what we choose to study and highlight in the area of religious history (or in any other sort of history) depends in part on our own context – what we believe, feel, and do because of who we are, and where, and how we view the world. Historians are not free to make things up, but depending on our life settings we certainly will engage in different sorts of conversations with the past: notice

new features there, find new partners to question there, and re-interrogate familiar ones. The result will be 'new' history, and when read appreciatively and critically by a community of faithful people, renewed and reinvigorated tradition.

What would early Methodism look like if we privileged the Wesleys' and their followers' use of food and drink – both in their daily routine and in their rhetorical and liturgical practice – as our hermeneutical principle? And what would the 'takeaway' be for Methodist 'traditioning' in the early twenty-first century?

I have been toiling in this field for over a decade, creating and teaching an undergraduate course called 'Soul Food: Eating and Drinking in Western Religion.' I have also signed on with the 'Religion and Food Group,' a lively program unit of the American Academy of Religion, whose purpose is to provide 'an opportunity for scholars to engage in the intersection of religion and food, foodways, and food ethics …' This collegial interest in 'examining these topics across broad geographical areas, religious traditions, and historical eras' encouraged me to investigate my own tradition from this same perspective.

As an American 'preacher's kid' raised in the 1950s and 60s I was aware that we Methodists 'didn't drink' (though by the time I reached seminary I had heard a counter story: 'Methodists are people who don't recognize each other in a liquor store'). That was about the same time my mother started spooning crème de menthe on her ice cream in hopes that someone would report her to the Women's Christian Temperence Union and her membership would be revoked. I also observed during my boyhood that most preachers I knew may have abstained from beverage alcohol, but compensated with prodigious appetites at the dinner table. And many of their rural Maryland churches raised money putting on annual Oyster and Ham Dinners or Pancake Breakfasts – 'All you can eat $3.75, children under 5 free!' Such experiences predisposed me to look for the untold story that might lurk in our tradition – and indeed I have found lots to chew on (if you'll forgive the sort of expression that is an occupational hazard to those of us in this line of work).

It's not that scholars and Methodists haven't been vaguely aware of the subject matter for years. For instance, food and drink figure prominently in each of Wesley's three major categories in his 'General Rules' of 1739. Under 'do no harm' we find the prohibition of 'Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.' The initial

injunction in the 'doing good' list calls for attention to people's bodily needs, specifically 'by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.' And two of the six 'ordinances of God' Wesley prescribed are food-related: 'The Supper of the Lord' and 'Fasting or abstinence.' It turns out, though, that such an official menu is only part of the story. From my research over the past decade I have detailed the various formal and informal rules, practices and experiences that make up early Methodist foodways and therefore contribute to our history. I offer a chronological listing of some of these details in hopes that readers might find them useful in handing on our tradition. My inner historian apologizes for the lack of fuller quotations and citations, but my inner Methodist believes parts of my list might well 'preach' these days – and my inner foodie is just happy to see this crucial part of human life being brought into the conversation.

Susanna: Disciplined nurture, 'food insecurity,' addiction, kitchen as sacred space

Methodist matriarch (if not Methodist Madonna) Susanna Wesley is the source for my story's 'prequel.' Well before the conventional dating of the Evangelical Revival, she combined in her person elements of both dissent and High-Church Anglicanism that would later influence her sons' work. Her writings attest to the 'methodical' ways that food and drink figured in her faithful practice. She worked hard to supply her large rectory family with sustenance and thus demanded an early dining-room discipline even from her young children, as readers of her childrearing letter to her son John well know.

She also deserves our scrutiny and sympathy as one who experienced the 'food insecurity' (if not the starvation) that continues to plague our planet to this day. In a conversation with the Archbishop of York when her husband was languishing in debtors' prison, she recalls saying:

> I will freely own to your grace, that strictly speaking, I never did want bread. But then I have had so much care to get it before 'twas eat, and to pay for it after, as has often made it very unpleasant to me. And I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all.

Overseeing her children's appetites, she also struggled with her own. Early letters to her son Samuel away at school demonstrate her parental concern with the intoxicating beverages he might be tempted to misuse in London. Further, it turns out, she recognized herself as potentially too dependent on social drinking: she found George Herbert's aphorism, 'stay at the third glass', a useful guideline both for Samuel Jr's situation and her own.

It is also not beside the point that the Epworth *kitchen* became a controversial sacred space when Susanna invited neighbors in for Sunday evening prayer against the wishes of her rector husband. What would a wider recognition of Susanna Wesley's experiences around food and drink contribute to our self-understanding today?

John: reclaiming tradition, exploring the latest 'research,' practicing the messianic banquet

Of Susanna's two most famous 'home-schooled' pupils, John gets more credit for founding and nourishing Methodism: we know him as preacher, organizer, 'folk' theologian, writer and publisher. But focusing on food and drink favors our understanding of his approach in new ways.

The product of High-Church piety, John readily took to a disciplined traditional regimen at Oxford and soon thereafter in Georgia. That meant not only frequent Holy Communion, but also Wednesday, Friday and seasonal fasting and a predisposition toward the agape meal, the Love Feast that he was soon to experience under the tutelage of his Moravian friends. That last practice, of course, became a key innovation, a kind of sacrament of community and identity for early Methodism. Bread (or cake) and water substituted for communion elements, and free-flowing testimonies by all present took the place of the Prayer Book liturgy, making the gathering almost equivalent to the Eucharist, but much more accessible to its lay-led people in the days before the movement evolved into a full-fledged church.

But clearly John was not just a traditionalist; he also found practical application for the medical and dietary 'science' of his own day. He turned, for instance, to Dr George Cheyne, Scottish physician to the rich and overweight in Bath, who convinced him to try a vegetable diet and who provided him with rules for eating and drinking that later found their way into his own *Primitive Physic: Or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*.

Another element in *Primitive Physic* also witnesses to the experimental/experiential side of Wesley's world-view. By its twenty-fourth edition dozens of his cures and recipes were affirmed as 'tried' – by Wesley himself. And he certainly recommended vegetarianism to others on the basis of his own experience. Similarly, he also advised abstaining from tea – it made him too jittery to write, and he discovered that the money he and other Methodists thereby saved could aid those who were poor and hungry.

Similarly, surprising as it might be to real ale advocates in the UK or craft brewers in North America (not to mention the Women's Christian Temperance Union), John's 1789 letter to the *Bristol Gazette* argued against the use of hops in ale recipes, but in the process it also revealed him to be at least an occasional home brewer.

A last example of Wesley's own practice comes from the Foundery, his early London headquarters with its ever-changing community, where he describes a typical meal time in 1748:

> we have now nine widows, one blind woman, two poor children, two upperservants, a maid and a man. I might add, four or five Preachers; for I myself, as well as the other Preachers who are in town, diet with the poor, on the same food, and at the same table; and we rejoice herein, as a comfortable earnest of our eating bread together in our Father's kingdom.

Charles: hymns for the Lord's Supper, poetry for the tea table, a middle-class food budget

Charles Wesley's own 1738 'conversion hymn' ('Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?') celebrates the evangelical believer's central experience in gastronomic terms:

> O how shall I the goodness tell,
> Father, which thou to me hast showed?
> That I, a child of wrath and hell,
> I should be called a child of God!
> Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
> Blest with this antepast of heaven!

That the assurance of salvation should be styled an *antepast*, a foretaste, the 'antipasto' of the meal, should further pique our appetite for more of Charles's 'foodways.'

Most obviously, we might dip into *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), or those intended for the Love Feast, or those that functioned as grace at meals. But even his most avid fans are likely unaware of another genre. In his collection *Hymns for the use of Families* (1767), Charles Wesley even wrote a hymn 'To Be Sung at the Tea-Table.' While there is no direct reference to the oriental beverage once criticized and abandoned by his older brother John, there is strong allusion to the happy gathering occasioned by it. I quote only a few verses:

1. How happy are we
   Who in Jesus agree
   To expect His return from above!
   We sit under our Vine,
   And delightfully join
   In the praise of His excellent love.

2. How pleasant and sweet
   (In His name when we meet)
   Is His fruit to our spiritual taste!
   We are banqueting here
   On angelical cheer,
   And the joys that eternally last.

3. Invited by Him,
   We drink of the stream
   Ever-flowing in bliss from the throne;
   Who in Jesus believe
   We the Spirit receive
   That proceeds from the Father and Son.

The 'cup that cheers, but does not inebriate,' indeed! No occasion too familiar or familial (or worldly!) that it cannot be improved. In fairness, though, this particular lyric made it into the canon of the important 1780 hymnal as the first entry under 'The Society … Giving Thanks.'

Interestingly, this more acculturated, settled Wesley also left records of his actual eating habits, evidencing a comfortable upper-middle-class London existence. The family's budget in 1775 amounted to over £405, of which over

one-quarter was spent on food and drink. Under the latter category tea was the largest annual expense at £13, but wine, beer, ale, and milk followed respectively at £8, £6, £4, and £3.

The (other) People Called Methodists: abstemious, appreciative, healthy and political eating and drinking

The Wesley family modeled (as well as preached) varying lifestyles involving food and drink: giving thanks for it in prayer and hymn; sharing it with others; fasting from time to time; employing it in sacrament and Love Feast; searching for the best diet to follow and recommend. However, the lay people and itinerant preachers of the wider Methodist family played an increasing part in developing the movement's ethos, especially as the founding generation faded from the scene in the late eighteenth century. How did these non-Wesleys receive, reinvigorate and pass on the heritage?

The Swiss immigrant, Anglican clergyman and Methodist theologian John William Fletcher and his wife Mary, née Bosanquet, were two good examples of the more abstemious side of the young Methodist tradition. Fletcher's fasting, some thought, was ruining his health. One supporter, a wealthy Bristol sugar merchant, rebuked him, sending him a food (and wine) basket to encourage him toward better nourishment. Mary Fletcher, whose holiness credentials also are still held in high esteem, had spent the majority of her life in women-centered communities in Essex and Yorkshire. At one point she traveled an even more adventurous route, reading and commenting positively on the dietary work of the famous seventeenth-century vegetarian (and heretic) Thomas Tryon.

Charles Atmore, on the other hand, followed the more relaxed, sophisticated view of food and drink represented by Charles Wesley and other Methodists who by century's end were improving socially and economically. One of the inner circle of preachers at the time of John's death, Atmore worked for the ecclesiastical independence of Methodism and served as President of the Conference in 1811. A characteristic little noticed in the tradition, though, was his appreciation of good food. Contemporaries knew him as one who was liable to show up just at dinner time and avail himself of the best cuts of meat. His friend John Pawson recognized this issue and saw it as well among the

preachers, who were embarrassingly (and expensively) eating and drinking between meals at the 1796 Conference. Fortunately, such indulgence was not always the rule (though it seems to have persisted in the Maryland Methodism of my childhood!).

Samuel Bradburn, the rhetorically effective but somewhat erratic preacher known as the 'Methodist Demosthenes', discovered a much different approach. His socially progressive ministry in Manchester included the founding of a Strangers' Friend Society to provide for those who were poor in the wider community. When Parliament voted down the slave trade bill in 1791, the abolitionists took a more activist approach. One influential pamphlet urged a national boycott of sugar and rum – items tainted not by their empty calories or alcohol content, but by the massive role of slavery in their production. In it the author challenged the Methodists to join the campaign already begun by Quakers, other Dissenters and Anglicans. Bradburn took up the challenge, published a strong Methodist-focused pamphlet of his own, and thus supported a socially progressive use of food that gave people (even those without the franchise in those pre-Reform days) a way to make their political point.

Takeaway?

Fast forward from this sampling of early Methodist anecdotes to the present where spirited food-related conversation and activities typify not just religious communities, but also the wider cultures we inhabit. Think of the conditions we face and the responses we offer: famines, food deserts, food banks, and community gardens; 'soul food' and other identity-based foodways; justice for agricultural and food workers and radical hospitality for all who are hungry and homeless; healthy diets, vegetarianism, and 'slow food'; environmental sustainability, legislative campaigns, food aid, and food boycotts; yes, and coffee hours, fellowship suppers, agape feasts and the Eucharist. Why do we participate in these matters? For one thing these embodied worldly concerns are neither obscure nor abstract. For another they intersect with the Christian story at many points – and with a varied set of Wesleyan practices in particular! Emphasizing a 'gospel' of food we might even discover in such activity a foretaste of the messianic banquet, the coming commonwealth of God, a 'welcome table' around which believers of all stripes and those with little spiritual pretension may gather.

Serving on a university campus in the Pacific Northwest has connected me with just such a crowd, 'people of all faiths and of none,' as my job description put it. They are not 'cultured despisers' of religion, just indifferent and disengaged to belief and practice as they understand it. It can be discouraging trying to re-present Christianity to a population predisposed not to believe or practice. But the food connection helps me (and maybe them) get back to basics: the real incarnated hungers and injustices suffered by the planet and its peoples, the equally authentic (albeit often fleeting) tastes and fulfillment found in welcoming community.

The traditional nourishment is all there. We may need to revise some of the recipes, more carefully cultivating the ingredients, adding new flavors, updating preparation, and upgrading the way nourishment gets distributed to all who need it. But we who are predisposed to believe, love, and obey in a Wesleyan Christian sort of way are being called to take some responsibility.

Jaroslav Pelikan's oft-quoted aphorism applies: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.' If it were even possible, handing on an unchanged orthodoxy (or orthopraxy or orthopathy) from the first century or the eighteenth would at best illustrate moribund traditionalism in the twenty-first. The 'living faith of the dead,' the bounty that we *have* received from the past always requires of us the same critical selection and application it has already demanded of our forebears in the faith. There will be continuity, a family DNA in our believing, feeling, and practice, but it's our job to find and reapply those ancestral strands that will prove lively and faithful when woven into our own context.

Just as today's foodies might recommend a traditional core (for example, 'heirloom' vegetables, 'artisanal' recipes, and, in general, ingredients that our great-grandmothers would recognize), we Wesleyan Christians might unpack 'holiness of heart and life' in both its personal and social dimensions, as the center of our spiritual and religious tradition. And just as contemporary foodways will also adapt a time-honored national or regional cuisine to contemporary scientific, environmental and multicultural realities, shouldn't current varieties of Wesleyanism emphasize a version of their inheritance that feeds the particular contemporary hungers ('real' and metaphorical) of the same world? Jesus' comment on every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven applies here as well: she is 'like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' Not a bad recipe for tradition.

One way 'to serve the present age our calling to fulfill' is to share meals (and other intimate behavior like laughter and important work) with all sorts and conditions. Living tradition might even be discovered in the lively table talk of a foodie, a Methodist, and a historian – over Wesley-approved (healthy) pub-grub and pints of a *very* lightly hopped Lincolnshire Mild.

Bibliography

Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1984. *The Vindication of Tradition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Wallace, Charles. 'Eating and Drinking with John Wesley: The Logic of his Practice,' in Jeremy Gregory (ed.). 2003. *John Wesley: Tercentenary Essays*, in *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 85(2 and 3) (Summer and Autumn): 137–155.

Wesley, John and Wesley, Charles. 1745. *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*. Bristol: Felix Farley. Facsimile reprint, 1995, Wainwright, Geoffrey (intro.). Madison, NJ: The Charles Wesley Society.

Wesley, Charles. 1767. *Hymns for the Use of Families*. Bristol: Pine. Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, http://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/66_Family_Hymns_%281767%29.pdf>

Wesley, Susanna. 1997. *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, Wallace, Charles (ed.). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Dying to live: a personal reflection on the spiritual discipline of fasting

Greg Obong-Oshotse

THE REVD GREG OBONG-OSHOTSE, a former journalist, is a student presbyter with the North Hertfordshire Circuit and has degrees in theology from the Universities of Cambridge and Wales.

gregobongoshotse@yahoo.com
Luton, UK

Fasting would seem a very severe thing for anyone to do, let alone engage in regularly. Yet it continues to be a well-respected spiritual practice, in concert with prayer, among many Christian denominations. At its heart is a call to die for the Lord whom we have chosen to love, a dying to our carnal nature that Christ may live more fully in us. And when he does, we are transformed into agencies through whom mighty deeds may be wrought: national disasters averted, thrones secured and destinies preserved. And these are in addition to a slew of personal blessings.

DYING • LIVING • LOVE • DELIVERANCE • HOLINESS • DEVOTION • PRAYER • DISCIPLINE • INTIMACY • REVELATION • COURAGE • WARFARE

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 65–74

ISSN 2058-5969

The challenge of a Lenten fast

I well remember the moment. The minister moved his finger down and across my forehead as he made the sign of the cross, imposing the ash of remembrance. He called me by name and said: '*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*.'

At the end of the service to mark Ash Wednesday students of the Cambridge Theological Federation who had come together to celebrate poured out of the Emmanuel United Reformed Church building onto the busy Trumpington Street, everyone making their way, on bicycles or on foot, to their next engagement for the day.

It was morning, and yet my stomach churned and let out gurgling noises. I went everywhere that day with a blackened forehead, including pastoral visits to church members in far-away London, as I tried to fathom the depth of the commitment I had made. Challenged by a fellow ordinand, I had agreed to the traditional 40-day Lenten fast. I could drink water if I wished. Other than that I was to keep away from food and drinks until 6.00pm. Now as my stomach protested loudly, the idea itself seemed rather daunting, and I wondered whether I had been wise to make the commitment.

The challenge was not the fast. I have always gone without food, mostly compelled before I met the Lord Christ, but by choice ever since. Being without food is something you quickly learn to accept as normal when you have been in a civil war, and have had to go to school and university as an indigent student. It was therefore not at all strange to find that fasting was part of my faith when I began to follow Jesus in 1991. And far from being unique, my experience would be standard fare for many an African disciple of Jesus Christ. My peculiar difficulty on this occasion was that it was my first Lenten fast, and the thought of keeping it up for 40 days was not an easy one.

Should I even fast?

So, does my discipleship require me to fast? Some would say 'Yes, it does', while others would say 'No, it doesn't'. It is not, however, my purpose in this personal reflection to put the Church to rights on this debate. I take it for granted that as a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is a matter of *when*, not *if*, I fast. And as someone who came to a living faith in a Pentecostal tradition in Nigeria, fasting as a spiritual discipline was something I had become very involved in before I was

called away to discipleship in British Methodism. The fact that the Church had been founded by someone who took John Wesley for his mentor meant that I had been fed a diet deeply marinated in the Wesleyan tradition long before I became a Methodist.

Fasting and some of its forms

It is already obvious from the foregoing that fasting has a lot to do with food, lots of food and appetites! Specifically, fasting is a deliberate abstinence from food, water and, sometimes, sex for a limited time for spiritual reasons. Such abstinence may be limited to just food so that you may drink water or even juices if you wish. It may also be a restriction of the kind of food one eats. Daniel, who lived through three mostly hostile and ungodly empires, for instance, employed this kind of fast when he sought understanding regarding a vision from God. 'At that time I, Daniel, had been mourning for three weeks. I had eaten no rich food, no meat or wine had entered my mouth' (Daniel 10:2–3a).

Three forms

Fasting can take the form of a *regular* discipline as part of one's devotional life. The Pharisees in the time of Christ fasted regularly, often twice a week, like the one in the parable Christ told about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). Many people in the evangelical and Pentecostal traditions observe a regular fast as part of their spiritual discipline. John Wesley expected Methodists to fast twice a week.

It can also be undertaken as a *seasonal* discipline in the Church calendar, the most widely known of this kind being the 40-day Lenten fast. Many Christians add many seasonal fasts to the regular type. Typically, they would usher in the New Year with a fast that lasts for 30 days, beginning from somewhere around the fifth day of January. That may be followed up with another fast just before or after Easter, coinciding with Lent, anticipating an outpouring of power during Pentecost. There would be similar fasts the rest of the year, usually lasting from 3 to 30 days. I have known of a 100-day fast called to usher in the New Year. Many of these fasts would typically be tagged with beautiful, inspiring themes to motivate people to undertake the exercise, and with great expectations. Many of these themes are typically built around material prosperity and physical healing, the staple of Word of Faith churches and Seeker-Friendly fellowships.

A fast can also simply be an occasional practice in times of *emergency*. This is the kind of fast that Queen Esther called when she learned that a decree had been issued by Haman to exterminate Jews. For three days and nights they ate no food and drank no water. The effect was that when she appeared before the King without being invited, which was contrary to custom and the penalty for which was death, the King was moved to suspend protocol. She subsequently obtained deliverance for herself and her fellow Jewish people.

A fast may be as short as a day and as long as 40 days. Most people set the time aside to concentrate on the core spiritual exercises of reading and studying the Bible, meditation, prayer and singing. It is to cease *doing* for a while, and emphasise *being*. It is to gather all the faculties of body, spirit and soul together and focus their collective attention on God. It is a coming away from the regular rhythm of life to free up more time, space, energy and attention to seek God. It's a kind of girding up of the loins.

Fasting is a subtle recognition that the believer is both a pilgrim and an exile, and that the spiritual life is one that is lived in a hostile world (from *aiōn*, Greek for *age*). This flows from the biblical understanding that earthly life is cut off from God in rebellion and sin and therefore hostile to the rule of God. God's paradoxically loving response to that ugliness is the redemption offered in Christ. Fasting therefore becomes a means of grace, the empowerment we need to be in the world, but not of the world; to live in exile without losing the love of home; to travel as pilgrims and arrive successfully at our destination, without being distracted by, and diverted into, the byways of corruption and apostasy.

Three calls

So in general terms fasting could also be understood more theologically as a call to choose, a call to love what or whom you have chosen, and a call to die for your choice.

First, in biblical teaching, disciples of Christ are called to *choose* Christ, which they do by following him, exclusive of all others. In making that choice, they also take on the incarnational nature of Christ's ministry, to deny self to the point of death if need be. In the Incarnation Christ carried out the greatest, severest and costliest ever possible fast. His choice to be a human, to live a human life and, though sinless, to suffer and die the most scandalous death known to humanity models an incomparable fast. In Marxian terms, this would be class suicide. Fasting mirrors this self-denial.

Second, disciples are also called to *love* their Lord exclusive of all other lords. Having made their choice, they must love as their Master loves. 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done', Jesus tells God as he wrestles in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42). Loving the Lord we have chosen will sometimes call us to the Gethsemane of self-denial in fasting. In other words, our love for God would lead us up the path of a fast now and again, simply because the irresistible passion of such love *compels* (controls) us to do so; for Christ has died 'so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:15). Tucked away at the bottom of a long catalogue of Paul's agonies, in the same second letter to the Corinthians, is this shining diadem, '… *often without food*' (11:27), evincing a sense of Paul having to fast as well as other things he did because of his exclusive love for his Lord and Master.

Third, loving our choice also means a willingness to *die* to other things in order that we may live exclusively for our choice. This is the sense in which Paul talks about the crucifixion of the disciple of Christ in Galatians 2:19–20. The disciple henceforth has no life but the life of Christ lived through him or her by the Holy Spirit. This dying or forsaking all others, to employ a metaphor from the marital vows, is really to rid ourselves of all useless baggage that would otherwise be a hindrance. We walk faster without them, and our pilgrimage is that much more hospitable.

When we fast

So when do we fast?

We fast when we are *hungry*. A hunger for God, and more of God, is the baseline for every fast. Scripture consistently calls God's people to a pursuit of God with a warm-hearted ardour. The life of a disciple of Christ is to be marked by such ardour as he or she learns to love God with all their mind, soul, spirit and strength. The disciple displays this ardour as he or she learns, where necessary, to 'hate' mother, father, brother, sister and even wife or husband in order to follow Christ.

In one of his many sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley notes that fasting helps this ardour by de-sensualising the soul. He argues that 'fullness of bread' fosters 'carelessness and levity of spirit', and notes, 'Here is another perpetual reason for fasting; to remove the food of lust and sensuality.'

Holy people of old often fasted when seeking *guidance* from the Lord; in other words, when hungry to know God's mind. The church in Antioch was on a fast when the Holy Spirit gave them instructions to send Barnabas and Paul away as missionaries (Acts 13:2–3)

National emergencies have also been the occasions for fasting. In ancient Israel, the King of Judah was confronted by three powerful neighbours. What would he do? 'Then Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the LORD' (2 Chronicles 20:3–4).

While they were praying, 'the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel … He said … "Thus says the LORD to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God's'"' (20:14–15). The people didn't have to lift a bow. Their enemies had fought and completely routed one another!

John Wesley tells the story of a national fast in 1756 under George II. Afraid of a French invasion, King George, the last British monarch to lead troops into battle, called for prayer and fasting. In his journal, Wesley says:

> The fast day was a glorious day, such as London has scarce seen since the Restoration. Every church in the city was more than full, and a solemn seriousness sat on every face. Surely, God heareth prayer, and there will yet be a lengthening of our tranquillity. Humility was turned into national rejoicing for the threatened invasion by the French was averted.

That would not be the last time a British monarch would seek such help from God. King George VI called a National Day of Prayer for 26 May 1940, asking people everywhere (including the Commonwealth) to plead for divine intervention when the Second World War seemed all but lost. The King, cabinet ministers and government officials went to Westminster Abbey to pray. People across the British Empire thronged their local churches. What historians now call 'the miracle of Dunkirk' is largely credited to this national supplication. Such was the depth of appreciation that a Day of National Thanksgiving was called for 9 June to the thankful words of Psalm 124, 'If it had not been the LORD who was on our side …'.

A chest of treasures

Are there other real benefits to fasting, and for whom? To start with, Christ promises a reward when we fast: 'your Father … will reward you' (Matthew 6:18b). The rewards are as varied as the reasons we fast, covering the entire spectrum of human needs. Apart from dramatic stories of national deliverance and corporate guidance, those who fast gain many a spiritual blessing.

Intimacy

In the 40-day fasts by Moses and Christ we see the forging of a special spiritual intimacy with God, as they aligned themselves with God's sovereign purposes preceding the commencement of an epochal work. Twice, for 40 days on each occasion, Moses went up the mountain to be alone with God. Moses would wield a special authority unique in the Jewish nation, a position he continues to have within Judaism. Before he began his ministry, Christ went into the wilderness for 40 days. Not surprisingly, many church leaders have been called to follow this example, observing some period of fasting before commencing their ministries.

Revelation

Fasting is an aid to spiritual alertness, clarity and revelation. By drawing us away from a 'fullness of bread' and de-sensualising our souls, fasting enhances sensitivity to clues and nuances of insight given by the Holy Spirit. Specific direction may be given through just a word or phrase of Scripture, and understanding secured as a previously dull text is suddenly illumined by the 'quickening' power of the Holy Spirit.

This makes fasting a great help to holiness (being set wholly apart for God). By denying the appetites you deny the flesh (carnal nature), thus improving your separation from the world unto God. A life of ease and comfort feeds the senses but dulls the spirit, a fact that Moses repeatedly highlights as he reminds the second generation of Israelites about to enter the Promised Land to not forget God when they have settled into a good life in Canaan (Deuteronomy 6:10–15; 8:11–20). This is why a regular discipline of fasting is particularly helpful, like fuel for a long journey which needs topping up now and again.

Courage

Sometimes we are appointed to extraordinary deeds for which we must find extraordinary doses of courage. Some might lean towards the easy Dutch kind and reach for a pint too many. But an Esther would lock herself away. 'If I perish, I perish', she famously remarked. Injustice is better fought on an empty stomach, with parched lips and throats. Then God sends his armies to the battle. Watch Esther as she leads a charge against Haman's plans for ethnic cleansing.

Similarly when the prophet Ezra led the second of three waves of returning exiles from Babylon in 458 BC, he secured their safe passage through a fast.

> For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that 'the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him.' So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty. (Ezra 8:22–23)

It is the kind of courage that focuses on the true treasure of discipleship: our ultimate home. The here and now are not as important as the hereafter. Even in adversity, we can plod on. The great faster, Paul, says, 'though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day', and that our present 'affliction' is a 'momentary' thing which yields 'an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure' (2 Corinthians 4:16–17). It teaches us to see delayed gratification in a new light, just like the patriarch Jacob waiting seven years for Rachel, and 'they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her' (Genesis 29:20).

Spiritual warfare

In a sense fasting is only necessary because we live in a world often dominated by evil. In fasting, we draw near to God and find intimacy, revelation and courage, all of which help us to 'fight the good fight' as we are enabled to live victorious Christian lives. Fasting therefore helps us to better appreciate the reality of spiritual warfare, one in which every disciple is called to take part. The temptation of Christ in the wilderness is a striking picture of this warfare. So, too, is Daniel's 21-day fast during which the angel Gabriel, sent to give Daniel the answers he seeks, is halted in a protracted mid-air battle with the satanic prince of Persia.

Stamina

Fasting enables us to cultivate perseverance in prayer. Its use ultimately is to give us the stamina we require to spend time with God. Fasting would otherwise not be a spiritual exercise. This provision of stamina offers a well-worn motivation to fast. To gain strength to go on, we fast, denying ourselves the legitimate things that hinder us. In this sense, fasting recalls the biblical 'girding up the loins'. Without fasting we would feel faint in the place of prayer, and become very likely to stumble in our journey.

Worship

True worship is greatly helped when we have fasted because the humbling of our souls and the genuine repentance we express before God clears the way for us to properly sense the *worthiness* of God and to convey the same to him through worship and the obedient lives we go on to live as a result. Heathen Nineveh was given one last chance to make its ways right with God, as Jonah stormed the great city. 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' Jonah gloated. A national fast, in which both 'man and beast' were 'covered with sackcloth' was proclaimed. They were delivered by the Almighty God to whom they had 'mightily' prayed.

Health

Not the least benefit of fasting is the well-attested physical health that it brings to its many practitioners. There is the well-toned complexion that follows weight loss. There is also the mental alertness that produces resolution, as well as the strength and determination to maintain it. All of that brings an unyielding bounce to our mental gait, supported by a vigour that is sworn to the long haul. Daniel and his three Hebrew colleagues would not eat the 'King's meat' yet were physically lovelier! It is not surprising that many smart fitness practitioners have included fasting (usually without the praying) in their beauty regimen.

Conclusion

My first Lenten fast proved to be very useful to the point of prescience. I came under a barrage of difficulties not long after, for which I needed extra spiritual strength, the kind that only fasting could supply. Disciples of Christ are warned that they will face many a tribulation in this world, tribulations whose only goal is to push them away from the Lordship of Christ.

In my personal walk with Christ, I have found fasting an indispensable aid to victory over the many tribulations that come my way; a constant reminder that all of our 'here and now' (however long and harsh the trouble may be) is but for a moment; and an incredibly small inconvenience compared to the glory that shall be revealed on that Last Day towards which all of human history is rushing.

Ash Wednesday has come to hold a special place in my pilgrimage since that challenging Cambridge encounter in 2011. Each Ash Wednesday, when I feel afresh the press of the ashen cross on my forehead, I am reminded not only of my mortality but, more importantly, I am also reassured again of that most precious of all gifts: the hope of eternal paradise, a hope that is based on the certainty of the Resurrection of Christ, for whom I *die* each time I fast that I may *live* more abundantly in him here and hereafter.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

When bodies 'fail': illness and incarnation

Charity Hamilton

THE REVD CHARITY HAMILTON is a presbyter in the Methodist Church who currently works in learning and development. She is a PhD student at Leeds University researching embodiment and incarnation.

charity.hamilton@yahoo.co.uk
Yorkshire, UK

To suggest that a body has failed or 'let you down' is a common phrase of the onlooker or even the person who is ill, and the feeling is understandable in terms of vulnerability, sadness and being at a loss for other words. However, it comes from two assumptions which I explore and redress: the assumption that the body is somehow separable from the self; the assumption that the body can fail and that illness is such a failure. Beyond the assumptions, I want also to suggest that there is in bodily illness the potential for transformative incarnational narratives.

EMBODIMENT • BODIES • ILLNESS • INCARNATION • MEDICINE • NARRATIVE

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 75–84

ISSN 2058-5969

Bodies: success or failure?

I can remember clearly the first time someone pointed out that my body had 'let me down' or failed. I remember because I was at the time marvelling at the way in which my body had responded to the demands of medical treatment. I was frustrated by the observation in a way that lingers sometime later. My body had not let me down; it was neither faulty nor defective. In fact my body was ill, I was ill, and the body being referred to was indistinguishable from the whole of me, so the inference that I had let myself down seemed to me to be an odd attempt at shaming me as a presumed failure.

To suggest that a body has failed or 'let you down' is a common phrase of the onlooker or even the person who is ill, and the feeling is understandable in terms of vulnerability, sadness and being at a loss for other words. However, it comes from two assumptions which I want to explore and redress: the assumption that the body is somehow separable from the self; the assumption that the body can fail and that illness is such a failure. Beyond the assumptions, I want also to suggest that there is in bodily illness the potential for transformative incarnational narratives.

Into popular culture has leaked a polluting duality surrounding the nature of the body and the spirit/soul/self, a process as old as Plato and one that seeped into modernity through the dualism of Descartes, in which one part is often set up against the other; the body is a cage or a prison which can be overcome by the self, the body hinders the self, the body is to be tamed. While such duality is a common feature of twenty-first-century culture, and a feature which the Church has in part written the narrative of, it is time to reclaim and redeem the holistic self as embodied, incorporated and incarnational without demonisation of any aspect in the salvific effort of another aspect. It is time to reclaim the body as liberative and not as a cage imprisoning a separate self.

Historically, the Western Church has had a troubled dualistic approach to the body; it has persistently attempted to separate the body from the 'soul' or spirit. Tara M. Owens sums up some of the troubled approach towards the body in the life and doctrine of the Church when she writes of the dualistic inhabitation of corporeal reality:

> In our silence, we damn our bodies as peripheral to life with God at best and an impediment to redemption at worst. In our silence, we refuse to live in the corporeal reality of humanity, we pretend as if we can be human without being incarnate.[1]

The early Church Fathers espoused a message that emphasised the need to 'overcome' the body. The Christian Church reproduced Greek theology and biology in its biased and therefore flawed form, whether related to the gendered body, the sexual body, the black body, the disabled body; the problem was inherently and indistinguishably the body and its relationship to the 'soul'. Set into that context is the pejorative fear of bodies, which is embedded in a culture that seeks to tame, to shape, to manicure and conform the human body to a set of ever-changing prescriptions of physicality and success. Alongside this runs the latterly adopted taboo surrounding death and the related fear of illness of the body as a harbinger of mortality.

It is not in spite of but rather in light of this background that Christian theology finds its physical feet embodied, because the fear of embodiment in Christian history is juxtaposed with the centrality of the body in the Incarnation. Tertullian wrote that 'the flesh is the hinge of salvation';[2] it is in the Incarnation that we understand the body as redemptive, healing and salvific of humankind through the nature of a God who makes a choice to be fully human (embodied) and fully divine. It is in the Incarnation that we understand the body as 'mattering' in God's story and most importantly we understand the body as overcoming death, both incarnational and soteriological. It is the centrality of the body that has an echoing significance throughout Christian history. The body is not an external meaningless diversion from the spiritual path; rather it is an incredibly important recurring theme both biblically and in Christian tradition and history.

The ill body has a particular nuance in any theological discourse of embodiment and incarnation because of the false notion of failure as a bodily and embodied state.

The *good news* is that 'God has no fear of bodies. This is the truth at the heart of the incarnated God. The idea of God emptying him- or herself into fragile flesh is one of the great shocks of Christian theology.'[3] However, the good news of the body is also bound up in the body's ability to point us all towards death in its degeneration and change over time, and importantly in its illness. The societal fear of death leads to a fear of illness as the mortifier, which in turns suggests that everything can be easier to cope with if only we separate the body from the self or soul; that way we can package up the difficult stuff in the flesh and call it a failure, which we may try to overcome or at least partition off. The nature of our embodiment, however, is such that despite these strategies to ameliorate the body's significance, it is impossible to disentangle ourselves

from our bodies. Stanley Hauerwas expresses the anxiety around such somatic experience:

> We are our bodies and, as such, we are creatures destined to die. The trick is to learn to love the great good things our bodies make possible without hating our bodies, if for no other reason than that the death of our bodies is our own death.[4]

The problem is that such a fearful approach towards the body incapacitates us as fully embodied and integrated people, and allows the body and therefore the whole self to be first perceived and then experienced as the very cage that is the kindle to this incarnational liberative struggle. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel declares that 'I am my body',[5] a declaration of both the inseparability of the body from the self and of the intrinsic self-identity found in the embodied state. Moltmann-Wendel interprets some of the fear around bodily illness, which reinforces our personhood reporting as embodied, by reminding us that ill bodies make those around us insecure because we are our bodies. The direction that Moltmann-Wendel's idea that we *are* bodies, inseparable and situated, takes is one that must raise a number of questions about how identity that is not perceived as failing is created, particularly if we *are* ill bodies.

Illness: embodied identity

Rather than approaching the body in ill health as a body that is somehow failing or outside of that which is acceptably normative, perhaps theologically we can begin to understand illness as a form of embodiment that enables the Church to more fully embrace incarnation, even perhaps as a place of incarnational dialogue. Illness is not a metanarrative to the story of the body, but rather is the refining of the value of that story and therefore of identity, both ours and God's. Recognised as one of the leading figures in a movement of narrative medicine, Rita Charon writes:

> Although illness might trigger dissociation from life, it can also distil the life, concentrate all its deepest meanings, heighten its organising principles, expose its underlying unity. This is not to say illness is a gift … rather that, as it takes away, illness also gives searing clarity about the life being lived around it.[6]

It has been my experience that illness is the tumult into which you never imagined yourself being thrown, the sense of being repeatedly pulled under the waters, a lonely walk in which the road often sharply turns. For some of us, illness is frightening, isolating and confusing. Illness is not a blessing, nor a gift, it is not a good road which any of us would choose to trudge. Physical illness has the potential to diminish us, to accentuate our psychological wounds, and it often alters the map by which we have so far navigated. Rachel Mann, in her autobiographical writing about her gender, sexuality, Crohn's disease and faith, explores what it means to be a person of hope while highlighting the importance of recognising reality: 'Only a fool would deny that chronic illness is corrosive and vile … my life has generally been a slow erosion of strength and often a feast of pain.'[7] There is nothing good about illness, and attempts to create a dialogue between illness and faith should never result in erasing the story of suffering in favour of a more palatable retelling; rather, an incarnational story expresses such suffering in the light of love. As earlier discussed, the body and the self are fully incorporated. Thus, despite recognising the reality of illness, illness is not a failure of the body for it is not and can never be a failure of the person. There are circumstances in which clinicians may use the word failure – heart failure, kidney failure, intestinal failure. Something in your body isn't working in the most effective way, it is ill and you are ill; the failure of a part of your mechanism is no failure of the whole self. Your body has not failed nor let you down, for you have not failed nor let yourself down. However, the illness you experience is important in clarifying and articulating something of your identity and personhood. Charon suggests illness relates to more than the physical experience – it relates to the whole experience of life, it offers a particular lens through which to view and narrate the experience of the world; in essence it clarifies and enables an identification of personhood in creation. Charon goes on to describe it thus: 'Illness intensifies the routine drives to recognize the self. It is when one is ill that one has to decide how valuable life is.'[8]

While in pastoral practice, I have often heard people state very clearly that they wish not to be defined by their illness or trauma. They express a strong desire that I hear and understand that there is more to them than the very immediate and present condition. I have some sympathy for such a view, for who of us wants to be defined or identified by a single experiential strand of our lives, particularly if that strand indicts us as vulnerable. The desire not to be defined solely by illness is part of the struggle to integrate difficult experiences with a previous identity, and it is important for pastoral practitioners to hear this

struggle in an attempt to help the person who is ill to construct an emerging reconstructed reality of being. The difficulty arises if we begin to deny the experience of illness as part of clarifying and shaping that changed identity. Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel attempts to highlight something of that struggle:

> In a variety of situations we can distance ourselves from our bodies, but at some point they get hold of us and will not let go. 'I am my body.' … A dark world shapes us, whereas normally we allow ourselves to be shaped by so many more welcome events. It is not only my body that is sick; I am sick. I am my body. I have no other identity.[9]

Incarnation: the clinician–patient relationship

From the relationship between embodiment and illness come a number of potential incarnational stories. The one example of such a narrative that I want to explore further is that of the clinician–patient relationship, for it is in this relationship that I understand the bearing forth of the story.

In the Incarnation we recognise that God chooses to dwell among humankind as both fully human and fully divine in the person of God. We understand that this act is continual in the living and breathing of all creation and in the resurrection of the body; we understand that incarnation reveals love. The Incarnation is an act of the compassion of God born out of God's desire for humankind, in which God is revealed in the perceived weakest and most frail, turning all assumption of power and authority on its head. In the same way the Incarnation is daily experienced as God's breaking through in the most unlikely and yet powerful places, spaces, peoples and ways.

Imagining illness as a place of incarnational story is one of the ways in which we can understand the body not to have failed but to have experienced the darkness into which light dawns. That imagining is important if we are to enable the telling of the story as liberative praxis. To align illness with the Incarnation is not to make illness into either a victorious event nor a candyfloss-coated, easy-to-navigate journey. In liberation there is always great cost and never an attempt to deny the truth of experiences of suffering, but rather to interpret those experiences for the whole people of God.

One of the incarnational narratives of illness is found in a good clinician–patient relationship. This is not to suggest the oft-quoted medic's God-complex, nor is

it a simplistic and clichéd notion of healing or redemption, that a medic comes like a shining knight in a fairy tale and rescues the situation. There are bad clinician–patient relationships in which patients feel unheard and clinicians feel unvalued. There are unhealthy clinician–patient relationships in which there are attachment issues poorly dealt with or too much professional distance. There are clinician–patient relationships in which physical healing cannot be the aim. In the good clinician–patient relationship the incarnational narrative of illness is represented and based in a dynamic of mutuality. Carter Heyward, the radical theologian, writes about *mutuality* as being in right relations with others beyond the confines of heterosexist normative boundaries; *mutuality* brings about justice while taking into account power.[10] In his recent work exploring mental health and mutuality, Simon Mainwaring summates Heyward's *mutuality* thus: 'This notion of connectedness has profound implications for her doctrine of God such that "God" is "the movement that connects us all"; God is not only in the "relationality" between us, God is our power in mutual relation.'[11] The virtues of the good clinician lie in their ability to be with the patient even at those times when 'cure' is not an option, but care becomes part of the healing (and incarnational) dynamic. The dynamic is reliant, however, upon a mutuality, in the same way that the Incarnation is made possible in the cohabitation or mutuality of divinity and humanity, not as dualistically juxtaposed identities but as integrated into the *Logos*. The patient–clinician relationship is a two-way one in which the predicators of assumed power can shift according to the coherence of mutual relation. Good clinical care echoes a theological nuance of theotokos, a God-bearing in the midst of suffering and incompleteness in which the body is central in that bearing, both in the body of the patient and that of the clinician. The natural focus on embodiment in the setting of illness lends itself to an a posteriori understanding of the centrality of the body in God's love drama. Rita Charon writes:

> When patients try to tell their doctors about their illness, they are attempting to represent something personal, frightening, meaningful, death-related[12] … If the professional listens stereophonically for what the person says and also what the body says, he or she has the rare opportunity not only to hear the body out but also to translate the body's news to the person who lives in it.

The clinician's role as listener and translator of the body echoes very clearly the role of the whole people of God in disseminating and interpreting the

testimony of any person of faith and incorporating it into the whole people of God – or the God story. Such a form of accompaniment between the clinician and the patient will enable the patient *and* the clinician to inhabit fully an embodied state as incarnational. Tara Owens describes what a lack of habitation looks like when she writes that 'alienation from our bodies is a form of alienation from God, one that we … seem to accept as simply normal, the way it is'.[13] This alienation simply cannot occur in a state of illness, for either the patient or for the clinician. However, the clinician clearly has a role in eschewing such alienation. In my early twenties, when working in university chaplaincy, it was the custom of the chaplains to accompany first-year medical students as they encountered their first human dissection through to the end of the year when we held a service of thanksgiving for those who had donated their bodies for this purpose. It always struck me as a profoundly privileged position to be accompanying invariably young medics as they began to shun such alienation and absorb the importance of the human body as the locus of personhood in medical practice and in life more generally. The recognition of the importance of the human body as the 'self' effects change in the clinician as equally as in the patient. Charon describes the shift in emphasis for clinicians as bodies as places of 'self' and therefore of more than mechanics: 'Accepting the power and privilege of touching another's body, interfering with it, hurting it, perhaps healing it incurs in health professionals profound duties to acknowledge the inviolability of the patient's body as a locus of the person's self.'[14] There can be no space for bodily alienation in a clinical setting; bodies matter, and through such a focused and sharpened lens it becomes clear that the body intensely experienced is both experienced as and experiencing of something of an incarnational narrative. It is in the reading of the body and the listening to the body that clinicians are able to enable a mapping forward of a journey for the patient.

> The nature of the body is such that patients cannot ordinarily just *tell* in words what needs to be heard about it. Instead, patients convey through all sorts of ways what a good clinical listener should be able to cohere into corporeal truth.[15]

The story is not told simply through verbal or written articulation but through the cues of the body; it tells a story, and it is in the recognising, the telling, the hearing and the standing with that the incarnational narrative unfolds. Such a narrative cannot unfold in isolation; the ability to shun alienation of the body requires koinonia or community. The transformative narrative is birthed in the

opportunity to be interpreted, reinterpreted, it is born in the trust proffered through vulnerability and the permission to be both weak and strong, the willingness to express and to hear self; the narrative comes alive in shared decision-making about the body and ergo the self. There is privilege, power and responsibility for a patient who experiences a good clinician–patient relationship as equally as for the clinician. The mutuality of a good clinician–patient relationship in which co-interpretation of the body as the ground of identity allows for shared decision-making and shared health care is thus one of the communal places in which the incarnational narrative exists, for such mutuality is the heart of Christian understandings of the divine/human coalescence.

Despite the ease with which the phrase rolls off the tongue of seemingly well-meaning acquaintances, my body has not failed. I am my body. I have not failed. Illness is not a symptom of my body's failure but rather it is story of a God who chooses to break through and dwell among a suffering people, not in a glib or clichéd way but in the dynamic of co-authoring, relationship, mutuality. One of the ways such a breaking through is experienced is in the good patient–clinician relationship, which reveals the inseparability of the body and the self.

Notes

1. Owens 2015
2. Tertullian, *De resurrection carnis* 8.
3. Mann 2012.
4. Hauerwas and Pinches 1996.
5. Moltmann-Wendel 1995.
6. Charon 2006.
7. Mann 2012.
8. Charon 2006.
9. Moltmann-Wendel 1995.
10. Heyward 1982.
11. Mainwaring 2014.
12. Charon 2006.
13. Owens 2015.
14. Charon 2006.
15. Charon 2006.

Bibliography

Charon, R. 2006. *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness.* New York. Oxford University Press.

Hauerwas, S. and Pinches, C. 1996. 'Practising Patience: How Christians should be Sick', *Christian Bioethics* 2(2).

Heyward, C. 1982. *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Owens, T. M. 2015. *Embracing the Body: Finding God in our Flesh and Bone.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Mainwaring, S. 2014. *Mark, Mutuality and Mental Health: Encounters with Jesus*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Publishing.

Mann, R. 2012. *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God*. Glasgow: Wildgoose Publishing.

Moltmann-Wendel, E. 1995. *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*. New York: Continuum.

Tertullian. *De resurrection carnis* 8.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Divine defragmentation

Heather Noel-Smith

THE REVD HEATHER NOEL-SMITH is a Methodist presbyter who was in circuit for more than 25 years. She was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2000, and in 2013 became a supernumerary minister living in the Bristol area.

heather.noel-smith@sky.com
Bristol, UK

The article explores the author's experience of living with Parkinson's disease and engaging in theological reflection from that perspective. It is structured around meditations on three different passages of Scripture: Paul's metaphor of the Christian community as a body where no part can disclaim the need for any other, and how her experience of intermittent or disordered connections between brain and foot (dyskinesia) affects her reading of this passage; Isaiah's depiction of the suffering servant, and contemporary stereotypes the author and others experience, based on how they look or how they move; and the gospel passage about Martha and Mary, and the importance of presence rather than activity.

ACQUIRED DISABILITY • PARKINSON'S • BODY METAPHOR • INTERDEPENDENCE • DYSKINESIA • VISUAL STEREOTYPES • DISABLED GOD • SUFFERING SERVANT • MARTHA AND MARY • PRESENCE

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 85–91
ISSN 2058-5969

Introduction

This piece of writing is in several ways not what I intended to produce when I was first asked to contribute to *Holiness* in an edition on holiness and the body. It is, however, a reflection, theological and otherwise, of my present life experience in several ways. I am not able to access my library as my books are in store so there is not the more scholarly practice of citation and reference, or at least very little. It is also – at least partly intentionally – fragmented, in that I have tried to place alongside each other themes that are interrelated though initiated by reflecting on very diverse experiences. Marshalling thoughts and ideas under the influence of certain neurotrophic medication after some years can be more scattershot than one would ideally like and I thought I would not try to iron that out in editing. At least that is my excuse, though those who taught me years ago might well say that they do not really notice any difference …

The head cannot say to the feet …

Sooner or later, as a person with an acquired disability which results in a severe movement disorder who is involved in Christian theological thinking, one must make something of the Pauline body metaphor. Indeed in my case I feel I have revisited what significance it has for me more than once in the last 15 years. The second half of 1 Corinthians 12: 21 has: 'The head cannot say to the feet "I do not need you"', and reading this, or hearing it read aloud in recent times, I find I automatically stop before 'I do not need you'.

If the 'head' can stand in for the brain, then I can certainly say that in my case the head is frequently not on speaking terms with the foot. In fact it does not say anything at all to the foot, and in effect behaves as if the foot is not needed, since the required chemical signals to do foot-like things, like move up and down and stay balanced and cross thresholds, do not come. To push the image a little further, when medication intervenes and provides the required reaction, it is almost as if the offended brain exacts revenge, since then foot and knee and indeed the whole leg go into a crazy dyskinetic movement that is of no use in practical terms but makes for an exhausting few hours. Yet as in Paul's image these limbs, however wayward or recalcitrant, 'belong to the body nonetheless'.

It is in playing with, or meditating on, that passage about belonging to the body despite the efforts of part of the body to deny that belonging is its proper role that I find a way to understand what for me is one of the most strange aspects of my condition, which is a kind of fierce physical/mental dualism that it is hard to articulate. It happens this way: to go back to the Pauline body parts in mutinous revolt. When I am stalled in walking or 'freeze' on a threshold it is not that I do not know what to do to take another step or to cross a doorway and go into a room. Indeed I can stand there and cognitively assess and instruct myself, saying something like, 'Pick your right foot up and move it forward a little and put it down.' I can even say it aloud, but still nothing will happen for minutes, perhaps for longer still. In practice, of course, one does something to distract the brain such as starting a song. (For some reason the song that sometimes works to unstick me is the Toreador's song from *Carmen*, an opera I don't even like!) But the very physical reality of not being in control of the body makes me turn to this image of interdependence, both to assert my awareness of the wholeness of the body both in the very literal sense and to ponder further possible parallels in the body of the Church, the Body of Christ. Viewing Methodism as I now do more from the sidelines than used to be the case, I see the unpreparedness of the church culture in which I was raised for the vast and very threatening changes that the latter half of the twentieth century and onwards have brought. We have been afraid to walk further across new territory and we have had liminal anxiety over many and various thresholds which claimed to be places of potential.

In some important ways many are breaking new ground now and encouraging others to go forward, and maybe the hesitant will emerge singing – though I shall not tempt fate by suggesting what the song that reinvigorates may be, as whatever I choose will be anathema to some. I just repeat that the song that works for me is, after all, one I would not choose if left to myself!

This part of the reflection illustrates something that is a growing part of my experience – that reading the Bible and preaching the good news have become for me a much more connected experience physically and mentally. Living with the somewhat surreal 'conflict' between a brain which on the one hand knows exactly how to walk across a room, and open and step through a door, and on the other hand has no idea how to do that, is sometimes the most difficult challenge, and brings to mind Paul's outburst in Romans 7:21 and onwards, lamenting the two parts of himself engaged in a fight: 'In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive a different law, fighting against the law that my mind approves and making me a prisoner' (REB).

While this has always been a text with all kinds of powerful resonance for me in personal life and as a preacher, it has come together with my bodily experience and inner reflection on that. It is at the point of honesty, which comes from not really having any other option – to deal with increasing physical decline, or to deal with the unforgiven and unforgotten, if often misremembered, wrongs we have committed or been party to – that there is, despite everything, a possible realisation about rescue.

'Who but God?'

'in the beauty of holiness …'

Two members of one of my former congregations once were describing a friend of theirs who lived in the USA and attended the church they also went to when over in the States. Their friend had been blind from birth and was well known in his local community for his thoughts and comments on living with blindness, one of which was that his condition meant that he had 'no definition of ugliness'.

It was an attractive comment, and it is clear why it was a saying worth sharing, but of course it begged any number of questions, such as can one not hear ugliness or feel it. Certainly, though, in a culture so dominated by visual imagery, to have no reason to judge someone by their looks or clothes or any other mere visual impression might well be considered a gift. Many people find, despite the best intentions, that their opinion of a stranger seems to have been formed before conversation or introductions have begun. I have had cause to consider this from both sides of the issue in recent times. I help in a voluntary capacity at several archives, and, together with a colleague, was staffing an information and bookstall at an open day, when we spotted what seemed to be some odd and potentially 'shifty' behaviour on the part of a young couple who were appearing and disappearing, and later reappearing in the cloakroom area where coats, bags and other potentially stealable items were stored. In Britain, archives are changing but still tend to be places of predominantly white, middle-class, middle-aged culture, and my reaction and my colleague's was to question each other about what we were seeing. Both of us started a sentence with something like, 'This is going to sound bad but …', and packed into the next three minutes was a whole run through our potential capacity for judging by deeply ingrained, childhood-acquired racist assumptions, overlaid by conscious adult training at racism awareness courses

and indeed simply living in a broader, richer world. Would we call security, or go over and greet the visitors and ask if we could help? Were we seeing what we thought we were seeing?

I am not going to continue the story beyond there on purpose – your thoughts on what happened next may well reflect your own inbuilt filters. It remains a telling incident to me in company with, in particular, other experiences which involved other people's visual impressions of me and the inference drawn from them. One of the features of medicating someone for Parkinson's is, in the medium to longer term, that a person develops a dyskinesia in arms or legs, which in my case means a quite severely over-active and twitching foot. Observing me with leg tapping not in time to the Christmas carols in Sainsbury's a fellow customer asked if I wanted to dance but reminded me to keep to the beat. On an unrelated day, when the lack of control of the leg was making me list (or 'weave', as my current consultant prefers) I gained a sympathetic word from one of our local drinkers out in the precinct: 'I know how it is, love.'

I am not so well adjusted by far as to be able to say I am able to absorb incidents of this kind with instant and equable composure, but reflection later does suggest that the 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' can be worked out alongside some of the familiar biblical texts which have as a focus physical appearance or disfigurement: 'He grew up … like a young plant whose roots are in parched ground; he had no beauty, no majesty to draw our eyes, no grace to attract us to him' (Isaiah 53:2, REB). This well-known biblical account, with its image of people turning away from the stricken figure of the Servant, invites exploration of what it is that causes people to find difficulty in dealing with certain forms of mental and physical disability. However, it is also one of the results of visible awkwardness and lack of control of the limbs that is the opposite of being one from whom people turn away. As in my encounters with the street sleeper and his cider and with the misled fellow Sainsbury's shopper, it can actually mean that more attention is paid rather than less, because as an object of curiosity and/or confusion or charity, you have become stare-worthy. In the scheme of things, being able to meet the street-dweller's 'understanding' with thanks, still more to give him attention as his own person, would be 'the more excellent way'. To have invited the shopper to dance slightly lopsided dances in the aisles of the supermarket seems similarly to have a 'kingdom' feel about it. There is nothing grand in this as a theology or a strategy, just the working out of some themes in life and ministry now as opposed to once upon a time. Theological theories of disability have been developing at quite a rate

since the 1990s, An early writer, Nancy Eiesland, still one of the best known, developed a liberation-based theology of the Disabled God, focusing on the figure of the wounded Christ, with pierced hands and feet. Her work is based on a social model where what matters is God's ability to be with the disabled, to be among them and in union with those who are oppressed. She is also responsible for applying the term 'temporarily able bodied', arguing that everyone will, sooner or later, have some problem which will render life more arduous and possibly amount to a 'disability'. For me, reflecting on her work some years ago and also again more recently, it is helpful when she describes how disabled people are more aware of their bodies, and goes on to argue that their contribution to reflection on embodiment is invaluable. For me, as I hope this article goes some way to show, the practical living out of the day-to-day is (yes, a challenge and all those synonyms as well) a slowly emerging vocation, or perhaps more accurately a discipline of waiting and trying to get right the small things.

> A liberatory theology sustains our difficult but ordinary lives, empowers and collaborates with individuals and groups of people with disabilities who struggle for justice in concrete situations … creates new ways of resisting the theological symbols that exclude and devalue us and reclaims our hidden history in the presence of God on earth.[1]

Choosing the better part?

The transmission of the story of the two sisters Martha and Mary has changed radically during my lifetime, and in a way that has been noticeable not just to preachers and biblical commentators but to those who have sat in churches and many times overheard children's and all-age talks and sermons on the subject of Mary, whose sitting listening to Jesus is (in)famously praised. Not so much driven by, as trailing somewhere in the wake of, feminism's effect on all disciplines and theoretical traditions and on everyday life, the general emphasis has leaned various ways.

One can quite legitimately choose to emphasise the defence of Mary as having the right to sit as a disciple, or one can take the view now more openly and critically of standing in Martha's shoes and feeling genuine irritation or anger. I like to imagine generations of, for instance, our Victorian and Edwardian

grandmothers in hundreds of chapels spending their morning listening to admonitions of what a privilege Mary had as a woman and how good it is to choose like her to sit and learn, and all of them with an inward wry smile because they well knew what would be the effect on the midday meal should they decide to immerse themselves in learning when everyone got home.

The image of the bustling Martha and the contemplative Mary has been another passage to come home to me differently in recent years, because of my gradual inability to do some of the tasks involved with the domestic running of a home, and because I not infrequently find myself invited to sit still or rest while my hosts rush about and prepare supper or come in from digging the garden and picking up fallen apples and much more. I have been an observer so often now that at least I have begun to see that there really is too sharp a dualism thrown up in many interpretations of the story, and for me there has to be something of a path between them. While there are tasks that I know are beyond me, there are a number of things I can still do as a gesture of thanks to the host. And there is a further element to this and that is presence. It has become a habit of mine in several friends' houses to find a stool to sit on and put it in the least obtrusive corner of the kitchen, and sometimes to chop onions or shell beans, but mostly just to accept that I can best contribute by 'being' – and that is again in several ways. One is by being able to offer the host a time for them to do the talking even while busy. Another is the sometimes pastorally important emphasis that I am alongside them – not taking advantage of my being let off cooking to be absorbed on laptop or with a book. Such times can become a gift and they are a way of committing time to God and one another which derives from the insights of disabled people in the most basic arena, around the table where the people of God are gathered in one place.

Note

1. Eiesland 1994, p. 86.

Bibliography

Eiesland, Nancy. 1994. *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

'And a sword will pierce your soul also': reflections on the holy mother and the holy child

Heather Walton

HEATHER WALTON is Professor of Theology and Creative Practice and Co-director of the Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. She is editor of the OUP journal *Literature and Theology*.

Heather.Walton@glasgow.ac.uk
Glasgow, Scotland

This article explores themes of maternal purification and the separation of mother and child through close attention to the presentation narratives in Luke 2. It draws upon cultural theory, artistic representations of the narratives and theological reflection upon experience to address the ambiguities of the maternal relation. It suggests that a recovery of this ambiguity is a necessary not only for understanding this particular biblical event but also our relations with the divine.

MATERNAL DIVINE • PURITY CODES • PRESENTATION NARRATIVES • BODY THEOLOGY • SIMEON • ANNA IN TEMPLE • MOTHERHOOD AND GOD

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 93–103

ISSN 2058-5969

Purification and presentation

> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'.[1]

When 40 days were over Mary went with Joseph and the baby to the Temple for her purification after childbirth. Here, being poor, she offered what was required of the poor. Two young birds to be sacrificed. And in her arms another offering, her firstborn son to be dedicated to God and redeemed as the law required. Anna and Simeon were witnesses. Simeon offered an ecstatic blessing, but it was a bitter blessing also.

> 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel … and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'[2]

Anna too prophesied as the blood ran and smoke rose; as the blade fell, separating mother and child.

Sacrifice and separation

The purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus at the Temple are joined together in our imaginings and our devotions into one event of beating wings and fateful words. We celebrate it as Candlemas,[3] which sounds both bright and simple. When I was younger I thought, in my innocence, that Mary's doves fluttered free that day – the sacrificial gesture of this important moment being their kind release. I know now that this was not the case. What was happening was older and darker and more dangerous than that. In what follows I will reflect upon this particularly 'bodily' narrative using insights from cultural theory, artistic representations of the scene and, most particularly, my own experiences of maternal bindings and separations.

Mary Douglas has helped us to understand the primeval roots of purity rituals and how they establish holy order in chaotic circumstances through the enforcing of proper boundaries. To be pure is to be entire, whole and separate.[4]

What is impure is that which is out of place, adulterated or overspills its proper limits and contaminates the discreteness of another. Blood flowing from the place of birth is dangerous. Do not mix life and death. Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk. This is an abomination. Regulate the body and the society will also maintain coherence. Julia Kristeva goes further.[5] Our horror of impurity is tied to the need to become separate from the mother. This has to happen if the most archaic and awful flooding of the self by the other is to be avoided. Religion is elaborated around the necessity of a cutting apart. It sanctions it and makes it sacred. What begins in the body becomes the cultural order.

So Mary stands in the Temple with her child. She has reached the end of the period of deep intermingling. A time apart when the blood of childbirth still seeps and the birthing separation is not yet complete. It is a longed-for and dreaded moment.

In Aert de Gelder's famous image,[6] Simeon, with all the tender gestures of a midwife, takes the babe in his arms and raises up to God a child wrapped all in white. But a red cloth around the babe's middle still bleeds into the picture the sign of an umbilical wound. Mary, praying, recedes into the darkness as a new sacred order is established.

In a contemporary image by Andrey Mironov,[7] Simeon assumes maternal gestures. Upon his shoulder is draped the familiar white cloth of a nursing mother and this extends to wrap around the child. Mary is pictured here as a figure in deepest red. Once again she moves into the background, her face profoundly sad and yet accepting of her necessary 'purification' and her loss.

Rending and sewing

This matter of the separation of the mother and the child is not a simple one. It takes both a bodily and a historical form, and for the majority of women in the world there are few options in the social regulation of this process. Cultural and economic forces dictate the forms of intimate relations. However, *some* women have been confronted with *some* choices. In the roistering tales of Empire days, stalwart colonial wives often separated from their children to be with their husbands. These husbands were explorers or governors, soldiers or missionaries, civil servants and engineers. The children were left in cold schools or in the attics of their aunties. They waited in April rain to hear news from the far places where their mothers lay dreaming, in fine conjugal mosquito nets. A bit too hot perhaps but apparently not desolate for their babies.

A hundred years on and women left *both* children *and* lovers because they had to follow their own selves. I was sat on the train opposite such a nice woman and she said that he was actually the most maternal one and so it had been the obvious decision that Merlin, it was a girl Merlin not a boy one, should stay with him. And she said that it was a choice that she had never regretted making. Although sometimes she did feel sad about it. Particularly when she was in a shoe shop and she found herself picking up the little shoes. I did not ask her how she stopped picturing the soft pads of tiny feet and how they arch into new moons when you stroke them.

The times have changed again now. By the time I came to give birth the intense and intimate binding of mother and child had been revalued. It had become commonplace to perform a small, routine procedure before the delivery of the placenta. It is virtually painless. They sew the babies into our souls using two inches of the umbilical cord.

The stitches hold as tight as ever even after all these years. But this is not entirely a healthy suturing.

Too tightly bound

It was a late Saturday afternoon. I was lying in bed because I had an ear infection and I was exhausted and it was February and I was being bullied at work. I had the radio on beside me and I did register that it was telling an appalling story of instances of Nazi violence – murders that occurred on the streets rather than out of sight in a wood or at the end of a rail track. I thought I should turn it off because I was not attending carefully enough. But that seemed disrespectful so I kept it on. I thought I ought to listen but a sleepy warmth was beginning to lull me. Then I was wrenched wide-awake again. I was forced to hear how in one small town a mother and her days-old baby were rolled in the carpet from their own living room floor and burned to death in the road. I could imagine the patterned carpet with grainy dust in its fibres and cords showing in the places where it had worn and frayed. I could smell the choking smoke before the flames took hold.

I cried and cried and could not stop crying. It was the brutal horror of it of course. But mixed up with this another strong feeling. A sense of the appropriateness of their being bundled and bound together at the end. If they came for me I knew I would want to take her with me. If they came for her I would want to go as well. The separation would be more awful. And then I was

wondering at what stage should these feelings become less intense? At what point would I not choose the burning embrace? There must come a time at which you are able to say to the little child, 'Run! Now! Get Out' and you turn to face them while she makes her escape. I expected there must come that time but I had not reached it. I knew I would have plucked the baby from the cradle as they knocked on the door. Held her close to me while they smashed the furniture and tore the carpet from the floor. And I had to admit that in the midst of my fear, as they made a pyre of my home, that I would be glad my baby was in my arms. What a terrible feeling is this?

Gladly letting go

So strange also to have such dark thoughts about the utter impossibility of separation when in actual fact at that moment she was not with me. I had waved her goodbye quite cheerfully more than an hour before. My friend had borrowed our car seat and sat her next to her own child in the back of her car. The two of them were eating apple slices as she drove away and I was so glad to see them go. So glad. Also I had never had problems about taking her to the nursery when I went back to work. In fact I loved the nursery.

I had taken a lot of time to choose the right one. Visiting nurseries was a good thing to do in the days when she was very little and I was still really the only thing she needed. I had a list. The first place I visited was run by the council and had a very high reputation. The woman I spoke to on the phone was a little reserved, my accent I think, but said I could come and look around. It was wonderful. A little world. There was a small kitchen, stocked with miniature plates and dishes. The main room was set out with tiny tables and chairs. There were small easels for baby artists, clay bins and a book corner. I saw the children eat their lunch and watched as little mattresses and soft striped blankets were brought out and the babies fell asleep in neat rows. Bob Marley, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X looked down from the walls in dignified blessing. I felt like oversized Alice in a wonderland with attitude.

'So how long would my daughter have to wait before a place might be available at the Marcus Garvey Nursery?'

'We have a waiting list and a points system.'

'So how old do you think she would be before something came up.'

'About 37.'

I tried the other end of the spectrum. The Princess Royal Nursery and Academy. A place where young women with streaked blond hair, brown uniforms and posh voices were trained to look after children. I felt the babies here were mainly employed for educational purposes. They could have been replaced by those life-like rubber dolls. And it was not the colourful little toy town I had seen and set my heart on. If a baby was tired or fell asleep it would just be removed by a uniformed teenager into one of a line of anonymous white cots at the side of the room. This is one of the things I disliked the most. The idea that she would just be put in any old cot not snuggled into her own little nest or planted in a neat flowerbed of babies.

I rejected the Montessori nursery because it was headed by a mad woman dressed in yards of beige knitting who talked about over-stimulating our children with colours and encouraged me to paint our living room green and get rid of all the plastic toys. It was already green but I did not tell her. I also crossed off the list the nursery next to the station for the opposite reason. Little Chuffers looked exactly like a branch of MacDonald's. The staff wore similar nylon uniforms with little hats and name badges with stars. The thought of dropping off your child and catching the train five minutes later, briefcase in hand and unencumbered, seemed just that bit too convenient.

In the end I chose the university nursery. In this place I was glad to see that each baby had her own neatly labelled little bed in a dim anteroom hung with moons and planets and shooting stars. Although clearly reserved for the cultural elite the nursery also had an atmosphere of progressive internationalism. Despite being located in some dodgy backstreets, once inside you could imagine yourself transported into an era and environment in which collective childcare was (rightly) viewed as a means to create a better world. On the walls were posters about respecting diversity and the rights of the child. All the festivals were kept. Each one with feasting and flimsy cards home covered in glitter and baby finger marks. I still have most of the cards:

> 'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today we celebrate Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death. We contemplate our own deaths, karma and rebirth and the nature of suffering and desire.'

> 'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today is World Aids Day and we celebrate the courage of children all over the world who are HIV positive.'

> 'Dear Mummy and Daddy, Today is International Women's Day and we must all remember the struggle of women to achieve equality, dignity and human rights' [… and decent nurseries].

Yes baby! Take your own tiny steps now into this bright and challenging world. Little sweetheart pioneer.

The precious gift

The delegation I was on travelled in our delegation minibus to visit a nursery just outside Hang Zhou. I was enjoying this part of the trip. The tea museum in Two Peaks Park with its tall trees and flowing streams, the giant pagoda, the Buddhist Temple where I saw a single white camellia in the courtyard – it was perfection; a sight that I will never forget. And now the compulsory lectures on the virtues of communism and the showcasing of this jewel of collective childcare. I was entranced. In love. It wasn't the impressive monuments and it certainly was not the propaganda. It was something in the air, in the mist around the hills, steaming dumplings on the breakfast stalls, the melancholy night horns of boats upon the long river. The others in my party seemed immune to such infatuations. They thought that it would be much better if our guides abandoned the official tour schedule and let us meet more Christians, visit more churches, talk more about theological education.

I could see where they were coming from of course. Obviously. We had travelled a long way to do just that. But this was my point also – we had come a very long way and this was not only to enable us to meet theological educators but to begin to appreciate the compelling fascination, the violence and the beauty of this overwhelming place. So, although I knew that what we were being shown was the model nursery picked out for such visits, I was also very glad just to sit there with the children. To see the little clouds their warm breath made as they shouted to each other across the playground. To watch them in their knitted woollen pixie hoods and little padded cotton jackets playing in the garden. To hold the cold little hands placed in mine and communicate with them in the babbling tongues of mutual incomprehension.

'These are the precious children,' said the guide, wistfully I thought, 'all the children at this nursery are from one-child families.'

I know, I knew, what this meant. I knew that this enforced policy meant frustrated longings and loss and even worse. I was aware of the abortions and

the sacrifices that so often happened in secret when the firstborn child carried the misfortune of being a girl.

But there is another story that I should also tell at this point. One of the pastors who acted as guide to our party carried a picture of her little daughter everywhere and talked about her all the time. But she was fiercely unsentimental about the fact that procreation was now behind her. As we sat together on the backseat of the minibus travelling back from a country church late one night she said:

> I am glad that she has been born and I am glad that I am her mother and I am glad that she is the one and only and, even more, I am glad that I can be a minister. There is not room for this love I have for God and for any more babies.

What is mothering?

I have often reflected upon what mothering is really about. As a matter of simple observation it could be understood as the bodily labour of carrying large, heavy objects from one place to another. A sleeping toddler. A bag of shopping: fruit, milk, nappies, orange juice. Armfuls of toys, a bicycle, baskets of washing. But although it helps if you are reasonably fit, all that lifting and carrying is really only the crudest performance of maternal gathering and putting asunder.

To remain for a while at the level of objects. If all the toys, all the clothes, all the pictures brought home were saved then the child would be smothered under the weight of them. But of course they would never consent to part with an old comic book, a lilac pony with a lime green mane, a witch's cloak. So it is the mother who has to pass sentence on these sacred objects still infused with the life the child has given them. The child has to grow and so they have to die. It is very hard when what is past is precious and what is to come is unknown. But you have to do it and in secret. It is a model massacre of innocents.

We can go deeper and beyond this level to the place where real sacrifice takes place. The child will not stay still. It draws from the mother ever new bindings and new lettings go. Every stage both a new birth and a bereavement. It is almost too much to bear. Hélène Cixous describes the maternal as a womb/tomb. Motherloving links life and death together inextricably and from

the very beginning: 'as soon as I love, death is there, it camps out right in the middle of my body … getting mixed up with my food.'[8]

In another exploration of this same theme, Sylvia Plath takes us to a hospital ward and introduces us to three women. One is giving birth to a beloved child and is being swept away by a full tide of joy and pain: 'There is no miracle more cruel … It milks my life.'[9] Another is losing a longed-for baby and describes this bleeding loss, 'I am a garden of black and red agonies.'[10] The third woman is putting up a baby for adoption. She has decided to tear herself away from this small life that clings to her, 'I am a wound walking out … I leave someone who would adhere to me.'[11] As the poem unfolds and the voices intertwine we realise that all of them are speaking together about the intense ambiguities of mothering. We live with its intolerable flooding of our boundaries. It is no wonder that part of us longs for purification and an end to the turmoil and the chaos.

Anna in the Temple

Where this reflection began was at Candlemas – the event of purification and presentation, which, in art and devotion, is predominantly represented in a manner that moves both the holy child and the holy mother away from the chaos of the carnal. Simeon takes the child into his own arms. The Mary who receives him back knows that she is not the same mother who entered the Temple, having now been purified. The child is not the same child, having been offered, as required. So has a painful but necessary transaction been made whereby the child is now on a trajectory away from the bodily, amorphous, underwater love-world of the mother and is entering the definite and defined and 'pure' world of God and father and the father's law?

I think it is more complicated than that.

I am interested that in the two art works I described Simeon seems to be fittingly represented with a feminine aspect. To have the baby entirely removed from the maternal is neither artistically nor spiritually tolerable to us. Art has long been able to represent what until very recently theology could not articulate. That the maternal is ineradicable in the divine economy. Despite our desires. Despite our rituals. Despite our cleansings and our mechanisms of sacrifice.

To stay with art a little longer … and also to bring Anna back into the frame.

There is a picture that fascinates me, titled *The Prophetess Anna in the Temple*. It has been attributed to Rembrandt but there may be reasons to doubt this attribution – although its off-centre religious perspective certainly joins it to other challenging works by the same artist. In the picture, unusually, Anna dominates the foreground. She is surrounded by the tablets of the law and we can glimpse the figures of cherubim that place her in the Temple. To confirm this location but to the side (and very far to the side) we can glimpse the presentation drama taking place. Simeon holds and blesses the baby. Mary is there. Joseph too and some other shadowy figures. But Anna takes centre stage and, leaning very close into her lap, is the figure of a lovely child. A child who is in prayer. The two figures are interjoined and portrayed in a peaceful and intimate reverie while other things take place – elsewhere.

There has been speculation as to why this image of a woman and an unknown child should figure as a representation of Anna. Interestingly the picture was 'misidentified' early in its artistic journey as representation of Hannah dedicating her firstborn son Samuel to God. A 'slip' that is not entirely erroneous as the presentation narrative in Luke recalls this older story. It has also been viewed as an image of the painter and his own mother. And this relationship may have served as inspiration although the child is very young and the mother is very old. None of these interpretations overrides the radical impact of a deep bond between woman and child that is solemn and holy and central to this unconventional marking of the presentation narrative.

I think this image stands as a challenge to theology. A challenge that we recognise two interrelated truths.

The first is that just as in human/bodily relations so in our relation with the divine there is an overwhelming and chaotic element that calls forth rituals of both separation and purification but is intensified rather than appeased by their performance. They are salves that keep the wound open. Second, that we mediate desires for theological 'innocence' by recognising that purification processes themselves contain forms of sacrificial violence that require mediation by the reinscription of the feminine. In the case of the presentation narratives this saves them from the overwhelming terror we experience as Abraham stands over Isaac – although we are aware the stories are not unrelated. Rembrandt's image of Anna the prophetess places the presentation in the dark, chaotic and unregulated edges of the picture while its peaceful centre is held by a holy image of a woman and child. In this matter of the mother and the child, the body and the mystery – and God – there will always

be pain, excess and danger but also a heart of ineffable bliss. Cixous describes this so well. Such loving, she writes, 'is dreadful. As dreadful and desirable as God.'[12]

Notes

1. Luke 2:22–24.
2. Luke 2:34–35.
3. Traditionally the end of the nativity season. This last 'epiphany' is also the occasion for the blessing of candles to be used in the coming year's services.
4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, 1966.
5. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
6. *Simeon's Song of Praise* was painted *c.* 1700. De Gelder was a pupil of Rembrandt and his work owes much to the influence of his teacher.
7. *St Simeon and the Christ Child*.
8. Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts,* London: Routledge, 1998, p. 86.
9. Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in S. Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, London: Faber and Faber, 1981, pp. 176–187, p.180.
10. 'Three Women', p. 180.
11. 'Three Women', p. 184.
12. Hélène Cixous, in Hélène Cixous and Mirielle Gruber, *Hélène Cixous Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing,* London: Routledge, 1997, p. 113.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Falling over and walking anyway

Barbara Glasson

THE REVD DR BARBARA GLASSON is a Methodist minister, currently the Team Leader at Touchstone, an interfaith project in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Barbara is a practical theologian with particular interests in living with diversity and the challenge of difference.

teamleader@touchstone-bradford.org.uk
Bradford, UK

In this article, which was first delivered as a presentation to the Retreat Association in June 2015, the author interrogates our contemporary aspiration towards a 'balanced' life.

She argues that human beings are created with a natural eccentricity (as in the asymmetrical structure of the brain hemispheres), and that life is simply more messy than the ideal of balance allows for. Drawing on the range of innovative community projects she has worked with, she proposes that integrity is more important than balance, and needs to be sought by immersion in attentive conversations, between diverse people and between different aspects of ourselves.

INTEGRITY • ECCENTRICITY • SPIRITUALITY • CHRISTIAN • BALANCE • THEOLOGY • RESILIENCE • EMBODIMENT • LISTENING • SOCIAL COHESION • DIVERSITY

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 105–113

ISSN 2058-5969

Funny how you recall the strange things your parents told you years after they've died. My Father was full of quirky sayings like, 'Drive a car as if you're wearing it', but one that I remember more than any other is, 'Walking is just a matter of falling over and putting a foot out to save yourself!'

The particular circumstances that caused this remark to be a recurring theme of my childhood are hazy. I was in the habit of falling over my own feet and my mother's advice to 'look where you're going' and 'watch your feet' was an act of multi-tasking that often escaped me. However, I suspect my father was not referring to my clumsiness, but rather to a deeper truth about life in general. He, after all, had been diagnosed with TB as a young man and although the new invention of streptomycin had saved him from the fate of many, he lived the subsequent 86 years of his life as if the next day was a rare and unexpected gift.

I compare my father's advice about walking with a competition I was watching recently on iPlayer in which superbly honed and toned dancers performed intricate ballet routines with seemingly effortless energy. If they were just falling over and catching themselves they were doing it with exquisite grace. And I reflect on our human quest for balance, the beauty of imbalance and the fragility of holding things together.

What is balance exactly? If we looked the word up in a dictionary we would probably start with a concept of weight, mass or density. The idea that if we put some stuff on one side of a set of scales then it would be possible to prevent it from tipping out by adding a similar amount of stuff to the other side. The nature of the stuff doesn't really matter, we could balance a couple of books with a bag of sugar or a pair of shoes with a rock, the effect would be an equilibrium where the two sides of the scales were supporting each other, suspended in a similar horizontal plane. Being 'balanced' is seen as a steady state, a point of tranquility and stillness.

This is an image that we can transfer to the inner workings of our mind. Someone with a balanced point of view can see pros and cons of arguments, can empathise with both sides of a dispute, can find the common ground between diverse people, is not disorientated by opposing thoughts. We imagine a 'balanced' person to be wise, still, reflective and gentle, bringing wisdom and due consideration to whatever presents itself to them.

I suspect that this is probably an illusion and, although we may aspire to such a zen form of existence, most of us will use a different language to describe the

complex, diverse and confusing experience that we call life. Mostly, things don't present themselves as a set of rational arguments, or straightforward decisions where we can choose one thing over another. We are much more likely to talk about 'spinning plates' or 'being stressed out'. Or, to go back to the first analogy, to feel that we are continually falling over and putting a foot out to catch ourselves – and not even managing to do that all the time.

With this in mind it was reassuring recently to be reading Iain McGilchrist's book about the brain, *The Master and his Emissary* [see Clive Marsh's review in this journal, p. 133, Ed.], in which it is revealed that we are complex organisms always endeavouring to find a balance between our left and right brains, inherently favouring one side over the other and learning to negotiate between our two hemispheres. And if that wasn't reassurance enough, McGilchrist also points out that the brain is, by design, asymmetric, with the frontal lobes overlapping beneath our foreheads. Praise God that we are created as unbalanced beings, inherently eccentric!

While this knowledge might be a liberation in understanding our own quirkiness, it is also a challenge to the paradigm of rationality that we have set as a human aspiration for Western cultures in which we have given ourselves the ideals of logic, clarity and clear choice. To understand ourselves as, by design, eccentric, as a people who are always falling over and putting out a foot to save ourselves, is to inject a note of grace into the way we view not only ourselves but society. There is a profound beauty in the fragility of eccentricity, of the creative design that has an asymmetry at its heart. It reflects the vulnerability of an eccentric Creator who has designed us in his or her own image. It is not simply that ordinary, rational people can succeed in the system and others are 'on the edge', but rather that we must expect life to spiral, and that the concept of absolute polarities, good/bad, light/dark, right/wrong, are probably an illusion. We live with messiness, confusion, complexity and controversy, both as individuals and as communities, and it is from within this very confusing soup of existence that we need to learn to walk. It seems that life is more of a balancing process than a balancing ideal.

Despite my adolescent rebellions, I have come to believe that my father was a wise man and known both at work and at home as a person of profound integrity. Maybe it was his own particular way of living, one day at a time, each day as a gift, one foot in front of the other, falling over and putting a foot out, that enabled such wisdom to flourish. But he wasn't a saint either, he definitely 'had his moments' and certainly in his youth the world had been a broken,

fragile and crumbling place in which illness could undermine every aspiration. How did he keep his nerve and hold things together?

For a number of years now, my work as a Methodist minister has brought me into contact with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, through a project in which I work alongside a professional counsellor. The project is called Women Breaking Free (WBF). WBF offers a safe space for day retreats at the Touchstone house in Bradford and in particular it works alongside people who have a dissociative condition known as DID. I am neither a counsellor nor a medic, but the way DID has been explained to me is in relation to traumatic experiences in early childhood when the brain seals memories away so that 'normal' life can proceed. It is only when these memories 'leak' into ordinary existence that flashbacks, absences or further trauma occurs. In extreme circumstances this separation of memories can also lead to the experience of separate 'others', and a person's sense of self and identity can become fragmented. It is not my intention in this article to discuss diagnosis or treatment of DID but rather to reflect on what people with this condition can teach us about integrity.

In my understanding, the role of the therapist or counsellor is to enable the various 'parts' of the person with DID to emerge, tell their story and then to converse or negotiate with the other 'parts'. That is, it is the intention of the therapist to encourage the various 'others', not to become 'one unit' but rather to be in healthy conversation together. With such help and given time, the inner parts of the self can begin to talk together and negotiate a way of being that is both safer and healthier. In other words, what is achieved is not a sense of self as an autonomous unit, but rather a way of being self as community. Not so much integration as integrity.

To give another example. For ten years of my ministry I worked with the Somewhere Else community in Liverpool, a church that gathers around the making and sharing of bread. Twice a week, a group of people would congregate around a large kitchen table to mix salt, yeast, water, flour and oil in sticky lumps of dough. The bread would be baked during the course of the morning and each participant would leave with at least two loaves, some for themselves and some to give away. This gathering of people who just turned up around the creative process was as varied as it was wonderful. Typically the bakers would include people with learning disabilities, carers, children, office workers, *Big Issue* vendors and others who were living on the street. Within this human mix, as in any such gathering, were members of the LGBT community, abuse survivors and people with various addictions, some visible others

hidden. The Somewhere Else community was always different, wonderfully mixed and usually chaotic; nevertheless we never failed to make bread.

There are many theories about the mission of the Church, strategies for growth and sustainability. Many came to Somewhere Else to ask for advice or even to find a blueprint that they could transfer to their own church. If their quest was to find a transferable pattern for church success, they would have been disappointed. What this bread-making community embodied more than anything was an ability to keep its nerve within the chaos, to allow people to remain themselves within relationship with others, to hold diversity creatively. The Somewhere Else community had for its mission statement 'We will stay in Liverpool city centre and make bread', and within the deceptive simplicity of its purpose it was a place that enabled sufficient focus to allow for true community to flourish – on a good day!

In its life around the bread table, Somewhere Else continues to embody a way of being prophetic community that inspires the wider Church but those who think it is simply about making bread will have missed the point. What this eclectic and ever-changing gathering of humanity is doing is maintaining its own integrity within difference. It is not being something that is fixed and others can join and conform. It is rather a fluid, organic, changing, struggling and honest engagement with what it means to be a human community, with integrity. A group of people who collectively keep falling over and putting a foot out to save themselves and in doing so moving together towards a new understanding of life and grace.

For me, this developing understanding of what it means to be a person of integrity is a source of increasing hope, both for myself and for the Church. It means that the discourse of 'inclusion' is no longer big enough to transform us as human beings called into Christian communities. It is not that the inclusion agenda is wrong per se but rather that it is not big enough. It does not shift the power from those who are already 'in' to the 'us' who together struggle within the imperative to love ourselves, God and neighbour.

As an individual it has changed the inner discourse with which I live. I am well acquainted with my inner 7-year-old who pops out from time to time to sulk or be subversive. I am also aware of my evangelical 14-year-old who believed in certainties and solutions. Often I have tried to suppress these voices, believing that the current me has moved on and is now wiser and more knowledgeable than the previous me. But, of course, to be a person of integrity means that I need to get to know and love these parts of me again and to allow

an inner conversation that enables these parts to speak with each other in ways in which each is heard and honoured.

In community, this sense of integrity calls us to keep our nerve among people who are different from ourselves and to open up safe enough spaces for us to listen lovingly and disagree well. This is particularly true in my current appointment as Team Leader at Touchstone, an inter-faith project based in the centre of Bradford, West Yorkshire. In a city where many are of Pakistani heritage, and in a culture in which there is overt fear of others and the perceived threat of extremism, terrorism and radicalisation, the need to maintain both personal and community integrity is increasingly important. Touchstone's mission is to live this inter-faith engagement creatively and with creativity. This is all about making safe spaces for honest dialogue, but this does not necessarily need to be head to head, but rather around some creative activity. As at Somewhere Else, the connection between people is best made side by side and difficult issues will then emerge into the middle of a room where they can be shared in a non-confrontational way.

The political discourse for such engagement is often described as 'social cohesion' but I am increasingly convinced that this language, like that of inclusion, does not take us far enough. Social cohesion may be about keeping the peace but it is not about making peace in the first place. For peace to happen, we need to get to difficulties and challenges and move beyond toleration.

If I return to the idea that we are inherently eccentric, that we are made 'off balance' and that the notion that there is a point of equilibrium and stability is probably a myth, then we can begin to see that the integrity of the city is probably more possible than the discourse of social cohesion might imply. It seems to me that, like the language of inclusion, the social cohesion agenda is too small to take into account the shifts of balance that we experience as individuals and communities in multicultural contexts. Social cohesion has at its heart the notion that we can somehow glue a city together to form an integrated whole, but my increasing conviction is that what enables cities as well as individuals to be healthy is the ability to converse with various 'parts' with honesty and relative safety. This discourse of difference is an intentional process in which it is necessary to open up safe enough spaces to talk of tensions as well as joys. It is only when such discourse is enabled that we will be able to live in creative tension within communities of integrity.

One example of how this might be possible has been experienced recently at

Touchstone with the Weaving Women's Wisdom project. Twenty groups of women of different faiths, ages and outlooks, both in the UK and Pakistan, have been discussing three questions: Who are the wisest women that have influenced me? What is the wisest piece of advice I have ever been given? Who are the wise women in my religious texts? Where do I access my own wisdom? In the light of these discussions, each group has been asked to design and create a rug and the subsequent pieces have been collated into The Carpet of Wisdom Exhibition that is currently touring the UK. Each of these groups has had to negotiate a range of convictions and beliefs, assumptions and prejudices, but through this creative process have produced something that is both beautiful and profound.

The Somewhere Else community and the Weaving Women's Wisdom project are both indicative of how intentional processes can enable both individual integrity and resilience. The notion of enabling personal and community resilience is a response to fears that are often below the surface. In inter-faith contexts these fears include fear of being thought racist, fear of being overwhelmed, fear of appearing stupid and so on. To be resilient human beings and people of faith means that we need to face fears, name them together and find the strategies to be confident enough to engage with people different from ourselves. These fears are not just issues 'out there' but part of our emotional response to difference.

In this endeavour to be resilient there is much to be learned from studies in how to increase the resilience of cared-for young people. It seems that a young person's resilience is greatly enhanced by a number of factors, in particular a community of trustworthy 'others', the ability to name and tell their own story and crucially a place that is safe enough to talk through issues and struggles. Through these insights, it seems possible to begin to see what would enable people of faith and faith communities to embody a faith resilience that would both strengthen individuals and church experience.

Recently a Touchstone colleague and I spent a week with a women's conference in Cornwall, teaching listening skills. Most of the women had been members of the Methodist Church for most of their lives. We did some basic exercises in which small groups of women gave each other their full attention for five minutes and while one member of the group was encouraged to tell a story. Most of the participants were reluctant at first, thinking that they could probably not talk for a full five minutes. In fact this did not present itself as a problem! What was remarkable, however, was the number of women who said

afterwards that they could not remember ever having been given someone's full attention for a whole five minutes before!

Not only is it sad that we are not giving each other time to listen to life-stories during our regular gatherings, but also that we are not, on the whole, enabling people to have the creative inner discourse in which their full integrity can be realised. Faith resilience relies on our ability to articulate our own life journeys and to locate them within the wider story of God. This does not happen by itself, but rather from focused opportunities to engage with the contradictory voices that form 'us' in the community of the self.

And this is not simply a mental exercise either. The 'us' to which I am referring are embodied human beings whose integrity and resilience require us to listen to and learn from our physical as well as our emotional selves. Maybe it is pertinent to remind ourselves that one of the distinguishing hallmarks of Christianity is that it believes in a God who became incarnate, embodied, suffering and loving, not as a remote being but as the creator among the created. This is why the communities of Somewhere Else and Touchstone are most effective when making bread or weaving rugs. It is in this very process of embodied activity that stories emerge and contradictory parts of ourselves and our life together are held in creative tension.

And so to some wondering.

I wonder how it would be possible for church communities to become more resilient?

Recently I had a lively conversation with somebody I bumped into at Islamabad airport. He was a taxi driver from Dewsbury who had been visiting his family and was on the same flight back to Manchester as myself and my colleague. Having helped us with some practical matters, he then felt it important to explain to us why it was crucial that we became Muslim. After a lengthy and somewhat convoluted explanation I began to lose patience and asked him to give me a summary in three sentences. He said he would if I would! I confess that I was not really listening to his three sentences but rather rummaging around in my brain to find three sentences which would best encapsulate why I am a Christian. Considering my sleep deprivation I don't think I did too badly: I believe in a God who is and continues to be present in the world; I believe that Jesus showed us how to live as God wants us to live; Christianity is the only religion that calls us to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us – and peace won't come any other way!

I wonder what your response would have been? I don't think the taxi driver was particularly impressed, but it was good to have been put on the spot (afterwards!). If we are called to put our bodies where our faith is, then how do we give account of who we are and why we are doing it, in a way that is robust enough to maintain our sense of integrity?

In the light of the world's seemingly increasing desire to make us conform, I wonder how we can reclaim our delight in being inherently eccentric? I wonder what strategies we need to enable us to be resilient to live 'off balance'. I particularly wonder about how we Methodists can reclaim confidence in our non-conformity, not in the sense of giving up alcohol or dancing, but rather to be people that are resilient enough to question and challenge the dominant powers. I wonder how we can change the story that tells us that life is a rational, straight-line sort of a journey and to deviate is to fail?

And I wonder how we can make safe enough spaces to listen above, beyond and within ourselves with an intentional thrust towards transformation? How can we, with day-to-day grace, continue falling over and putting a foot out to save ourselves?

Bibliography

McGilchrist, Iain. 2009. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. New Have and London: Yale University Press.

Glasson, Barbara. 2009. *A Spirituality of Survival*. London: Continuum.

Glasson, Barbara. 2011. *The Exuberant Church*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Modern pilgrimage in the west of Ireland

Rosemary Power

ROSEMARY POWER has worked in ecumenical congregational and sector ministries and retreat work for over 30 years. She publishes books and articles on aspects of contemporary spirituality and social justice. She led a pioneer ministry in County Clare.

rosemarypower@live.co.uk
Derby, UK

This paper considers pilgrim walking along routes in County Clare, developed in an ecumenical setting under the auspices of the Methodist Church. It relates to the experience in terms of 'pioneer ministry' and its effectiveness; to recovering possible medieval practice; to contemporary practices by local people; and to international interest in routes to Compostela. It suggests the reasons why people may walk in search of spiritual growth; the resources they may wish for, the ways in which the contemporary search functions in a largely post-Catholic manner, and the position of those from other Christian or religious traditions.

PIONEER MINISTRY • PILGRIM • PILGRIMAGE • VERNACULAR • SPIRITUALITY • SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA • SCATTERY ISLAND • CELTIC SPIRITUALITY • INIS CEALTRA (HOLY ISLAND) • KILFENORA • COUNTY CLARE

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 115–126

ISSN 2058-5969

> Shall I go, O King of the Mysteries, after my fill of cushions and music, to turn my face on the shore and my back on my native land? … Shall I take my little black curragh over the broad-breasted, glorious ocean? O King of the bright kingdom, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

The questions are asked in a poem attributed to the scholarly bishop-king of Cashel, Cormac Mac Cuileannáin, who was killed in AD 903.[1] The speaker goes on to question the costs of journeying for the love of God, the sacrifices he will make of lifestyle and comfort, the dangers of the journey, and, given the society he came from, the cost of exile, of being unknown among strangers, without the status and family support that were integral to his time and culture.

The poem was probably written over two centuries later. In it we see the dilemma of the rich young man of the Gospels. Versions of the poem have been simplified, set to music or formed the basis of extended contemporary reflections.[2] In whatever form it is known, it touches the widespread current desire among certain Christians to be a pilgrim.

While the king of the poem was concerned with the danger of the journey across the sea, it is never mentioned that he might walk part of the route, though many pilgrims then and since have done so, out of poverty in the days when they could not afford a horse, and more recently by choice for the activity it brings to the limbs; for the effects on the blood, muscle and general well-being; for the relaxation reported by those who become accustomed to walking each day; for the unexpected company of like-minded people; and for most people the minor but surmountable difficulties this most ancient method of transport brings.

This paper reflects on the concept of modern pilgrimage in the culturally Catholic society of County Clare in the west of Ireland. Drawing on the experience of the author as an organiser and historical interpreter as well as a participant-observer, it considers the expectations of those who journey, in groups or alone; how and when they journey; the impact on the local population and their interpretations of ancient sites which may be in use as devotional centres and burial grounds; the resources they need to interpret what they encounter; and, specifically, what it means to Christians as a new way of expressing their faith with other walkers, some of them of uncertain faith commitment, and some who are practising Pagans.

The word 'pilgrim' is taken here in its full, traditional, sense, in which the religious context is crucial. A pilgrim is a wanderer, a searcher for whom the explicit, religious, destination is the given purpose, but the journey among strangers and the learning to know oneself on the way are essential to the experience. However, this interpretation is not shared by all who write on the subject. While many are familiar, at least at a distance, with the contemporary communal experience of the Muslim Hajj, there is currently no communal, physically demanding, Christian equivalent.

Most people who consider themselves pilgrims in the spiritual sense will undertake some part of their route on foot, or at least on bicycle, for the purpose of walking, of using the body and stretching its resources. This 'stretching' is also achieved through some kind of sacrifice of comfort, in order to travel light and rest cheaply in suitable hostels, which give opportunities for conversation. Yet 'spiritual' and 'pilgrim' are terms that people may take to themselves, and to some people this 'experience' can be undertaken by coach.

There are other tensions, some creative, concerning the understanding of spirituality and who decides its nature and content; the relations between the formal historical interpretation of ancient sites; local usage and popular understanding, perhaps promoted by non-locals; access over privately owned land or to buildings not in public control, such as churches; and the roles of the heritage sector and of the tourism industry. Many routes are presented and maintained by public bodies, with their own interpretations of ancient sites.

There is also the social background. Before the world recession, the 'gap year' journey had become a significant rite of transition for young westerners who could afford it, similar to the European Grand Tour of earlier generations. Within religious traditions, the desire for a similar rite of transition through pilgrimage is regaining its strength. In some Catholic parishes, people restore their own holy well, sometimes with the support of public funding. Some traditional local places of veneration are now signed, and thus also made accessible to casual visitors. An example is Maméan, a traditional site in the Conamara Maamturk Mountains, which is visited communally during Holy Week. Most undertake the steep pilgrim walk on foot though occasionally a quad-biker joins them.

From within Christian practice, there are certain ecclesiological considerations. Many of the expectations of church life are breaking down, in all denominations, and people are increasingly making their own, explicitly individualistic, spiritual searches. Side by side with this trend, church-organised 'pilgrimages' may be basically congregational outings, bus tours with a

religious tinge, designed as communal activities for an older age group. This we can expect to continue, for much of modern communal Christian practice appears increasingly focused on events, on cultural matters that are engaged in by people of similar interests. Pilgrimage is one way in which the modern capacity for spiritual choice can be expressed.

The longer pilgrimage of medieval times has been drawn on in recent decades across Europe. The journey to Compostela through northern Spain has been supplemented by the opening, or reopening, of subsidiary routes. Significant numbers, many of them people more robust than the average churchgoer, are taking their search for the spiritual seriously enough to walk strenuously. The activity brings the blood to the forefront of the brain, to the reflective, creative parts, a matter that helps to explain the experience of deep conversations and appreciation of the landscape which pilgrim walkers report. This is a holiday activity or one for youthful pensioners, as Europeans with jobs work too long hours with too limited breaks to engage in the traditional manner; and those without work cannot afford the outlay nor the time away from the demands of their benefits' systems. Modern transport means that sections can be walked by people in different years rather than necessarily as a continuum. There is no current equivalent in preparation to the medieval settling of one's affairs and taking time to leave the normal pattern of life in favour of a lengthy and probably hazardous journey, undertaken for the good of one's soul and of the souls of those who cannot make the journey themselves.

It is relatively new in Ireland that people of the Protestant traditions engage in pilgrimage in any numbers, for the word 'pilgrimage' has Catholic overtones, in particular in the North. This not only makes many Protestants uneasy, but their presence may be considered, for historical as well as theological and devotional reasons, as jarring to traditional Catholics. Further, although many of the sites that are still used for regular religious worship are in Church of Ireland hands, the engagement of Nonconformists is new. Finally, both the practice and understanding of traditional religious activities are decreasing rapidly in contemporary Ireland, so there are increasing numbers of people who may be attracted to pilgrimage sites without being aware of how to act there.

Of the underlying reasons that led to the pilgrim walks, one is that people are walking anyway as a leisure activity and many walkers consciously connect the act of walking, and what they encounter, with the spiritual. There are hill-walkers, many of whom belong to groups, and groups with an interest in plant

life, historical sites, or stargazing. Pilgrimage seeks to incorporate some of these interests but to do so by drawing on the specifically spiritual impact, to make it central to the experience. This can be compared to many so-called 'fresh expressions' of contemporary Protestant church life which seek to make faith accessible through providing an activity familiar to what people do already, seeking to articulate the link with the spiritual through the activity.

In a largely post-agricultural society, sites and routes are shared with other groups, some of them interested in spirituality but not necessarily Christian spirituality. From the perspective of 'pioneer ministry' this may be significant in opening discussion on the spiritual dimension of such walks, with other groups and with public officials, not because the latter are necessarily unaware of them but because their role gives them no way to address them unless matters are raised by users. Discussion can lead to the development that in turn leads to new ways of celebrating the Christian life.

The experience in County Clare was the vision of the then Home Missions Secretary, the Revd Des Bain, who conceived of pilgrim walks in terms of the increased fascination with all things Celtic, as a means to reconnect with the spirituality of people in this country. This vision occurred during the 'Tiger Years' when Ireland was briefly a wealthy country with in-migration. It was also a country of increased formal secularisation, which appeared, together with anger at the child abuse scandals surrounding the Catholic Church, to diminish its previously accepted self-understanding as having 'spiritual capital'.

Des Bain's vision led to a series of walks, and then a book, which explored the pilgrimage theme while providing both routes and interpretations of sites, for visitors and the local community. In practice we walked together on certain days, with stopping places for historical input, prayers and singing.

While this was the model in Clare, there is a wider pattern of rural prayer walks, and a variety of approaches. The vision of each is influenced by local or individual factors, though there appear to be some common threads. This requires us to consider the spiral of experience, reflection and adaptation, but also the need to communicate with other groups doing things differently. Pilgrim routes were at the same time opening in south-west Ireland, while in Donegal to the north a Columcille route is developing to link with similar work in Scotland that will terminate on Iona. These routes require a deal of local input on access and maintenance issues, together with the work in which the churches might assist but are unlikely to be lead players, as the Methodist Church was for a short time in Clare.

Clare is a well-walked county. The northern part comprises the Burren, a landscape of exposed karst limestone with fertile valleys. This unusual landscape has proved very attractive for walking across the 'pavement', bare rock broken by long natural furrows, remarkably pleasant underfoot, and up stepped limestone to the highest points. There is a warm microclimate; there are unusual rock formations, underground caves and 'turloughs' (temporary lakes). There is also evidence of human activity on the light soils from the earliest times, while farmers continue to winter their cattle on the Burren, and there is a population of feral goats. Most significantly, there are a number of small early Christian hermitages, some very remote, ruined medieval churches and the remains of a Cistercian monastery. Buddhist and New Age meditation centres are a modern feature, as is a traditional music school. Local activism some years ago ensured that for the present the Burren is favoured for small-scale and ecologically viable tourism. This area is set up for the pilgrim walker.

Clare also boasts a dramatic coastline, now part of the national 'Wild Atlantic Way', on which may be found Loop Head, which projects to the north of the Shannon estuary, and long beaches, some of them used by surfers, and the major tourist attraction of the 700-foot-high Cliffs of Moher. Less walked is the southern part of the coastline along the Shannon estuary. East Clare has mountains of granite and Lough Derg, through which the River Shannon flows. While this article was being completed, two major sites received substantial attention from public bodies. Scattery Island in the Shannon estuary was one, while Holy Island (Inis Cealtra) in Lough Derg, the site of a significant early Christian monastery, passed from private hands to the County Council.

The Clare experience over four years developed as prayer-walking rather than pilgrimage. The walks were advertised as explicitly and ecumenically Christian, and appealed to some of these walkers but not all. Through local contacts, the media and the internet, people were invited to take part along some or all of a designated route over a number of days. As with church services, there were no bookings or charges, but the different stages of the walk were timed in order to enable others to join at specific points. Pauses were built in, which allow for the inclusion of relevant stories, Scripture, historical narration, poems from ancient times, hymns, and prayers relating to contemporary concerns today, and, where possible, input concerning the geology, plants and other wildlife of the locality. The walks were presented through their Christian source while suggesting that they may be of interest to others, including those who may not participate in traditional church life. They were undertaken in a context

where there are numerous other walks taking place that are also identified as spiritual.

People who joined walks were invited to contribute their knowledge or otherwise take part. The intention was to recognise what people experience as the presence of the divine in the natural world, and what they encounter through the physical reminders in ruins or buildings of the faith practices of the past. Some of the routes and stopping places are traditional, while others have a more recent significance. Not all stopping places were beautiful, and included views of power stations or half-built houses. These served as the focus concerning contemporary society and concerns, including the international as well as the local.

After a slow start the events attracted people of all backgrounds and levels of religious interest, and included both local residents and people from further afield. Some church leaders, including the local bishops, attended, drawing their own following, while others brought in people with no declared faith position. Unexpectedly, no hostility was evinced to the approach taken: the only hostile comments were ones on the internet, apparently emanating from the United States and objecting to Protestant presence on 'Catholic' sites. Even the expected embarrassment of singing together, in a society where singing in church is not a majority activity, was not in evidence, perhaps because of the experience of walking together first.

In this, the model adopted in the rural west of Ireland differs substantially from what is being considered in contemporary urban prayer walks. In a city context, part of the experience is likely to be walking with nowhere obvious to shelter from the weather and no money to pay for food. This is aimed at experience with a view to action for social justice. If the walkers are out on the same day, they may walk at best in twos or threes, perhaps taking the same route in a different order. Apart from the deliberate experience of isolation, a group of strangers would appear intimidating in poorer residential areas. In an urban pilgrimage, sharing is likely to occur at the end of the day.

In contrast, a rural walk can have the features of a traditional pilgrimage, of sharing experiences and knowledge, and food, along the way, in the company of people with some similar interests. The process provides the communality, the doing things together that is central to Christian practice. Undertaking something physical together and with some common pattern seems to allow people to share their personal stories. Meanwhile, local rural residents are used to seeing groups of people walking and to some extent contributing to the

local economy, even if they do not themselves take part. It was possible to assure them that we were doing something understandable rather than imposing our own interpretation, spiritual or otherwise, on the area, and the provision of brief local histories was welcomed in those areas where none already existed.

While some walkers were attached to no Christian tradition, the majority came from one of them. Prayer-walking allowed the engagement with those aspects of history that jar with the contemporary social and religious ethos. For example, in West Clare, there is the nineteenth-century Little Ark of Kilbaha, a wooden altar on a cart which was wheeled below the tideline because the parish priest was prevented from saying Mass on land. The Corofin Heritage Centre in mid-Clare preserves the Bible pierced by a bullet aimed at a local Protestant evangelist, whose servant was killed in the same attack. The communal Famine grave at Kildysert in South Clare has a memorial stone commemorating those who died rather than 'pervert' (become Protestant). The fact that many of the historical ruins are so old that they can be regarded as part of the common heritage – and cost of their preservation is certainly the common responsibility – makes interpretation at these sites theoretically easier. From the Protestant perspective, some effort was made to avoid evangelical terms like 'claiming Clare for Christ', which, if they had become known to the local residents, would have caused much offence.

Another attraction to prayer-walking is that it is perceived as being light on the natural environment. The taking of a holiday in one's own country, or a nearby one, may be an ecological decision. The cost of accommodation and meals means that a holiday of this kind may not be financially cheaper than one abroad, but might be regarded as more desirable, as well as a healthy option. Further, bringing modest amounts of money to a rural locality enables the residents to remain and manage the local resources, and this is seen as benefiting the wider society. Thus, the history of pilgrimage as holiday, something to be undertaken on one or more holy days, days of relaxation from the normal round of work, is present. Socially expected relaxation becomes relaxation with God, a perceived means of enjoying life in a way that does not cost the earth.

Living more lightly brings us to the final attraction of the walks. The environmental is one of the themes of a movement that fascinates many who come, the celebration of the 'Celtic' heritage. The current form of Celtic spirituality has been around for a generation, and has redefined and developed

popular understanding of how heritage, real or perceived, can be valued and gives a sense of continuity and refreshment. While there is often a very loose relationship between the modern movement with its suppositions and what we know of early Irish religious practice, or indeed recent folk tradition, modern Celtic spirituality has proved remarkably resilient. In its Irish form there is a recognition of the ancient prayers and poetry of Ireland, of the significance to local people of the historical religious sites, most of which have been reused down the centuries for burials, and acknowledgement of the ongoing folk tradition. Interest was greatly increased through the writings of the County Clare native John O'Donohue (1956–2008), whose *Anam Cara* (1997) and subsequent books became internationally known.

The presentation on the walks of translations of actual early Irish (and later) poems, prayers and stories, including the 'King of Mysteries' poem, was part of the means by which it was intended to enrich the understanding of the 'Celtic' by linking what is known from the academic world to contemporary spiritual interest. As well as respect for the environment, the natural world and its intrinsic beauty, other 'Celtic' themes resonate with modern pilgrimage. There is the emphasis on the early saints, who are seen as people who lived close to the world of birds and land animals. Interpretations made of their 'Lives', later hagiographical accounts, encourage an appreciation of place, in particular places that have been deemed sanctified by continuing pilgrimage. Another aspect is that the saints who left their own land to travel become models for the modern walker.

The responses have identified something significant in the understanding of local group pilgrimage – a question of ownership. This is not only about sites in public care, access and local traditions of use, for example for burials. It is about interpretations and who has the right to provide them. Not all the interpretations of sites may agree with the views of local historians or with those of academic historians and archaeologists. Modern understandings of what constitutes Celtic spirituality are not automatically open to debate, and while vernacular pilgrimage may continue alongside without reference to any such considerations, questions of 'ownership' needed consideration.

The people who were walking came mainly from beyond the immediate area and tradition. There were also locally resident people who settled in Ireland in recent years. To African walkers, stopping at sites of interest that contained graves, including recently opened ones, was considered unusual, and pausing to eat there was culturally unacceptable. At another level, landmarks whose

background and function were taken as understood were not immediately comprehensible to people whose origins lay in landlocked countries. When a Zimbabwean on Loop Head asked 'What is that tower?' there was a positive if layered response as people struggled to explain both the practical function of the lighthouse to warn and guide shipping with its unique signal, and the uses made of its imagery in historical, emotional and specifically Christian discourse. The process of developing group pilgrimage also led to the development of alternative 'inter-faith' (predominantly former Catholic and modern Pagan) pilgrimage routes. Some of these were even staged as rival events, leading to confusion over publicity.

Another intriguing aspect was that the pilgrimages were organised by a person with a physical disability, which prevented the walking of the routes personally, but allowed the plotting of them, consulting on the local history and undertaking that peculiar but essential experience of entering into them with a view to helping to transmit the knowledge gained to others in a way that would be of assistance for prayer.

What happened afterwards? The Methodist Church in Ireland ran out of money for this project. However, visiting the area showed that although little appeared to have occurred in the time frame, community groups developed in some of the historic centres used, and these have thrived, if in ways that do not necessarily connect to the churches. In some areas, relations between churches were strengthened, though this may not yet have led to common action. The publication of a book on one of the three-day routes reawakened interest and may ensure continuity, at least in some areas and for lone walkers. In terms of growing church communities, the stopping places, particularly those on ancient sites, are the focus, but the experience of walking and of having had a free offering of the walks laid the basis for future good will and future worship.

One man consulted during the process declared that it took four years for his boating business to settle and develop when he moved to the area. The need for pioneer ministry to have a seven-year start-up period, and a recognition that the slowness of the start is an essential ingredient if it is to thrive, was reiterated in this project. More specifically, the use of pilgrimage as a form of pioneer ministry, with the causes and consequences, may produce a fertile training ground for current and future ministers in how a church of the future may function.

Like the 'King of Mysteries' poem quoted earlier, many of the sites were built and have survived for a variety of reasons, and there are layers of interpretation

associated with them already. Historical guides add to the interest and understanding of the complexity of heritage, but there are questions of who decides the routes and who decides the interpretations, and whether the churches have any contribution. There is too a genuine 'Celtic' spirituality that can be drawn on as a source, for walking, interpretation of the sites and other prayerful activities, providing that we consider some of the original works, with all their power and capacity to be accepted as genuine by the local population, something that is not always the case with modern interpretations of the 'Celtic'.

The great European pilgrim ways developed over centuries and had the force of the universal Western Church to maintain them and their hostelries. Starting from a different point, modern attempts to recreate such an experience need consideration of many practical aspects. If the churches are part of the process, it may be possible to ensure that the need of the person who walks for spiritual reasons may be taken into consideration as these packages develop.

The practical aside, the common purpose of pilgrimage is to follow the ancient tradition of walking together, to a destination, for the love of God, or at least in quest of God. The journey is as important as the arriving. It provides time to use the body for the purpose of prayer and relaxation, and a chance to share knowledge and skills with the stranger on the road. In the places where such walks are developing, there are a variety of models and motivations. As a way of expressing current spiritual desires through the sacred sites and prayers of the past, the organisers may be offering something that enables others on their own quest, or may be offering their own interpretations, which may satisfy, or irritate.

Many questions remain on how to develop pilgrimage well, with local acceptance of the routes and interpretations. Pilgrimage in its various guises will continue, and it would be missing a major opportunity for spreading the gospel if the churches were not part of this movement.

Notes

1. Greene and O'Connor [1967] 1990, pp. 151–153.
2. For example, Adam 2000; see Power 2010.

Bibliography

Adam, David. 2000. *A Desert in the Ocean*. London: Triangle.

Carey, Olive and Lynch, Clodagh. 2007. *Rian na Manach: A Guided Tour of Ecclesiastical Treasures in Co. Clare*. Ennis: Clare County Council.

Davey, Shaun. 1992. *The Pilgrim*. Re-release, Dublin: Tara Music.

Greene, David and O'Connor, Frank. [1967] 1990. *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry AD 600–1200*. Edition with translations, Dingle: Brandon.

Griffin, Kevin Anthony. 2003. 'Continuity of settlement in counties Limerick and Clare: the role of "ecclesiastical sites" in the formation of settlement'. Doctoral, Paper 11, Dublin Institute of Technology, http://arrow.dit.ie/tourdoc/11/. See Section 4.

Harbison, Peter. 1995. *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and the People*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Harbison, Peter. 2000. 'The Church of Rath Blathmach – A Photo-essay', *The Other Clare* 24: 23–31.

Harbison, Peter. 2000. 'An Ancient Pilgrimage Relic Road in North Clare?', *The Other Clare* 24: 55–59.

Harbison, Peter. 2012. 'Twelfth-Century Pilgrims: The Burren's First Tourists? Part 2. High Crosses and a "T" or Tau-Shaped Crozier Reliquary', *Burren Insight* 4: 16–17.

O'Donohue, John. 1997. *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. London: Bantam Press.

Ó Riain, Pádraig. 2012. *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Power, Rosemary. 2010. *The Celtic Quest: A Contemporary Spirituality*. Dublin: Columba Press.

Power, Rosemary. 2013. *The Story of Iona*. London: Canterbury Press.

Power, Rosemary. 2015. *Kilfenora, Killinaboy and Scattery Island: A Guide for Pilgrims in County Clare*. Killaloe: Keeper Press. www.feedaread.com.

Power, Rosemary. 2015. 'Walking the Spiritual Ways – West of Ireland Experience of Modern Pilgrimage', *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 3(i): 46–54.

The Other Clare. 1977–. Shannon: Shannon Archaeological and Historical Society.

Van de Weyer, Robert. 1990. *Celtic Fire*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Westropp, Thomas Johnson. 1900. *The Churches of County Clare*, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Third Series VI(1), October: 100–176.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? The Duty of Constant Communion

Frances Young

THE REVD DR FRANCES YOUNG retired from the University of Birmingham in 2005, having taught Theology since 1971, specialising in Early Christian Studies. She was ordained as a Methodist minister in 1984.

francesmyoung@googlemail.com
Birmingham, UK

In this article the difficulties of using Wesley's sermon 'The Duty of Constant Communion' in our contemporary context are first sketched. His context is then outlined, and his answers to those objecting to constant communion are found surprisingly relevant to those who now, for one reason or another, prefer not to receive. His reasons for encouraging constant communion are then noted: (1) the appeal to duty is grounded in love; (2) communion is food for body and soul; (3) the sacrament is divine gift; (4) it is confirmation of God's grace. Wesley's approach is fundamentally practical.

BODY AND SOUL • COMMUNION • DUTY • FEELINGS • FOOD AND DRINK • GRACE • HOLINESS • MERCY • OBEDIENCE • WORTHINESS

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 127–132
ISSN 2058-5969

What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? You might well ask that question when it comes to the sermon on 'The Duty of Constant Communion', not least because the main argument focuses on *obedience* to the Lord's *commandment*. In a culture so suspicious of authorities and a society where everyone wants to 'do their own thing' this would hardly seem to have much attraction. Even if we become a bit more historically sophisticated and take account of the age when John Wesley composed this piece, we might find ourselves wondering whether such an appeal to obedience and duty fits with Wesley's own emphasis on justification by faith and God's grace, as indeed some readers did in his own day. A second reason for possible scepticism lies in its emphasis on the individual – it is largely about 'my soul', the question of its unworthiness, the matter of its eternal salvation, rather than the communion and fellowship of believers with Christ and each other. This seems unhelpful at a time when many of us feel we need to confront the excessive individualism of our day, as well as surprising given the way in which John and Charles Wesley themselves focused on fellowship. Nor do we find most people terribly concerned about their 'souls' these days – ours is a time for the 'whole person'. Before we dismiss this sermon completely, however, let's have another look.

The remarkable thing with this sermon is that it was published as late as 1787 but, to quote Wesley's own preface, it 'was written about five-and-fifty years ago for the use of my pupils at Oxford'. Wesley states that he has cut it, since 'I then used more words than I do now', but affirms that 'I have not seen case to alter my sentiments in any point which is there delivered.' Now, it is hardly surprising that obedience to commandments was the main focus in the Oxford days, the time of the Holy Club, when the tag 'Methodist' was applied to the Wesleys because of their intense works of mercy and piety. What is significant is Wesley's revival of this text so many years later. It is a reminder that in his eyes the point of 'conversion', the point of coming to faith, the point of responding to the gospel was precisely so that obedience to God's commandments might become possible, not as works done in one's own strength, but as marks of the transformation of lives by increasing conformity to Christ through the power of the indwelling Spirit. So this sermon bears witness to the continuity in John Wesley's thought and concerns, a continuity which significantly attests the fundamental balance in his theology. This is not the first time that I've observed the way in which John Wesley holds together aspects of Christianity which have in the past pulled the Church apart, the most notable being the tension between 'faith and works'. The great Wesley scholar Albert Outler notes that for Wesley 'the Lord's Supper is the paradigm of *all* "the means of grace" – the chief

actual means of actual grace and, as such, literally indispensable in the Christian life'.[1]

In the years of the revival, however, Wesley faced many who insisted that faith was enough and that they got more out of Methodist preaching services than dull liturgies in the parish church. Others thought it was dangerous to receive communion unworthily. Much of the sermon deals with such objections. The older Wesley calls up the young Wesley to confront imbalance among followers fervent for 'the Word rightly preached' and careless of 'the sacraments duly administered'.[2]

So this sermon belongs to its time, and like all Wesley's sermons its language and argumentative structure hardly appeal to the modern reader. But look harder and maybe we do need to hear some of what he says even now. Let's begin with some of his answers to 'common objections against constantly receiving the Lord's supper'.

1. There are people in congregations today who think they are not good enough to receive communion. In Wesley's day the most common excuse was

   > I am 'unworthy'; and 'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself' (I Cor. 11.27–29). Therefore I dare not communicate, lest I should eat and drink my own damnation.

   So, asks Wesley, are you unworthy to receive any of God's mercies, whether pardon for sins, or deliverance from death? And what do you mean by the idea of suggesting you're unworthy to obey God? Typically Wesley takes us back to the text: it doesn't say anything about '*being unworthy* to eat and drink'; it speaks of 'eating and drinking *unworthily*', which is quite different. Furthermore, the context in 1 Corinthians tells us that what that means is 'taking the holy sacrament in such a rude and disorderly way that one was "hungry and another drunken"'. He shames the reader into admitting they're not likely to do that, not least because it's not about '*you*' as such – 'you may as well say, "I dare not communicate *for fear the church should fall*", as "for fear I should eat and drink unworthily".' In other words, the unworthy conduct of the holy sacrament is the responsibility of the whole community, not just the individual but the whole Body of Christ. At least at this point the predominant focus on the individual noted earlier has shifted. In fact, Wesley insists, you are more likely to bring damnation on yourself by not eating and drinking at

all than by doing it unworthily: 'What advice is this: "Commit a new act of disobedience and God will more easily forgive the past?"' Wesley has a good line in irony!

2. Wesley next confronts those who are afraid of not being able to live up to the commitment implied in sharing in communion – again that is not just an eighteenth-century excuse. He begins by pointing out that that is not an objection to constant communion but to taking communion at all – it makes no difference to the question whether to take communion once a year or once a day. 'If we are not to receive the Lord's Supper till we are worthy of it, it is certain we ought never to receive it,' to quote a sentence from the earlier version of this sermon; in other words, this excuse is effectively the equivalent of renouncing Christianity. Nor does he have much sympathy for those who plead they're too busy to prepare themselves properly. It's good to examine yourself and repent, he says, but if you're committed to following Christ, you are already prepared to obey his command and approach the Lord's table. Behind these arguments is Wesley's fundamental point that God's grace is all-sufficient, but ineffective if we do not respond to the command of God and receive communion as a mercy.

3. Wesley then turns to another still pertinent point: if you make communion a humdrum habit, 'it abates our reverence for the sacrament'. In other words, it's better to make it a rare, special occasion, and then we might appreciate it more. Wesley soon dismisses the idea that novelty is better than proper religious reverence.

4. As for those who say they've tried constant communion and received no benefit, he admits their point deserves particular consideration, as many well-meaning persons feel this. For us his comments are especially relevant, since so much of our culture is about 'felt need' and 'choice' – feelings rather than discipline. In reply, he begins with a return to God's command, 'Do this in remembrance of me': 'This, therefore, we are to do because he commands, whether we find present benefit thereby or not.' I guess that may not cut much ice with people today who want 'felt' religious experience, but we might take note of the way he then develops the idea of hidden benefit, benefit sooner or later, as we are insensibly strengthened and made more fit for the service of God. He then urges proper preparation and trust in God, and 'the oftener you come to the Lord's table, the greater benefit you will find there'.

So the way John Wesley tackles objections to constant communion could still have something to say to the many today with rather vague attachment to the faith, a sense of their own inadequacy, or shyness to join in for a variety of reasons. What about his positive arguments, offered in Part I of this sermon? We may pick out four key themes, all of which might potentially stir us.

1. Let's begin with that problematic emphasis on obedience and duty. Wesley begins by insisting that it is 'a plain command of Christ' and adds, 'They are … his dying words to all his followers.' That last statement surely puts the emphasis on command in a different light: it is an appeal to love – to respond and do what the one who so loved us as to die for us asked of us as he went to the Cross.

2. It is food for body and soul: 'As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty, and leads on to perfection.' I guess that is still what many of us seek and find. We might want to explore rather further than does Wesley the significance of the fact that this spiritual food is embodied in the material form of the very necessities of our bodily existence, namely ordinary food and drink; and we might want to reflect on the social and physical nature of the life within which we seek holiness and perfection – in other words we might seek to be more explicit than Wesley about the integration of soul and body, and the sacramental feeding of the whole person for living the everyday life of earthy creatures in the way God intends and enables. But Wesley does provide the initial impetus for that kind of development.

3. So the sacrament is a divine gift – for partaking does have benefits – indeed, the benefits 'are so great … namely, the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls'. Wesley emphasises this again in his responses to objections: it is 'a mercy from God to man [humankind]', for God

> knew there was but one way for man to be happy like himself, namely by being like him in holiness. As he knew we could do nothing towards this of ourselves, he has given us certain means of obtaining help. One of these is the Lord's Supper, which, of his infinite mercy, he hath given for this every end: that through this means we may be assisted to attain those blessings which he hath prepared for us; that we may obtain holiness on earth and everlasting glory in heaven.

4. Emphasis on God's grace and mercy is recurrent throughout, and surely remains crucial for us: 'The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins, and enables us to leave them.' Not that we are ever free from temptation. So if we are conscious of failure, 'what surer way have we of procuring pardon from him than the "showing forth the Lord's death" (I Cor. 11.16), and beseeching him, for the sake of his Son's suffering, to blot out all our sins?' Facing the objectors, John Wesley rubs this point home:

> why do you not accept of his mercy as often as ever you can? … considering this as a command of God, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no piety; considering it as a mercy, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no wisdom.

So despite Wesley's wordiness, old-fashioned language and predominant focus on obedience and duty, there are emphases in this sermon that we would do well to capture and rephrase in the idiom of our own time. We may also be encouraged by Wesley's thoroughly practical approach. Not for him, or for us, controversies about what is really going on in communion, whether the bread and wine literally become Christ's body and blood or are 'only symbolic'. Here we find a simple assumption that Christ is present, that God's mercy and grace is freely available, that the sacrament is effective when the Church obeys Christ's command, so that participants receive the benefits of Christ's salvation through the remembrance of his death, share together communion in his life and holiness, and find their everyday, concrete, bodily lives gradually brought more and more into conformity with Christ.

Notes

1. Albert C. Outler, Introduction to 'The Duty of Constant Communion' in his compendium, *John Wesley*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 333.
2. Outler, Introduction, p. 334.

HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Knowing your right from your left: brain science and the future of Christian mission

A review of *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,* Iain McGilchrist (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, [2009] 2012), 544 pp, £12.99 pbk

I note that there are a number of very large books from the past ten years that have found their way onto my shelves, among them Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007, 874 pp), Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (2009, 1161 pp), Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (2012, 574 pp), Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011, 746 pp), and Chad Meister and James Beilby (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought* (2013, 867 pp). Most of these remain only partly read, sadly. But all were well reviewed, some glowingly so, and my intentions remain good: they *will* be read in their entirety at some point (!). Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* was not there, though I knew it should have been. Many scholars in a range of academic disciplines made me feel bad for not having read it ('you really should'). It, too, is a big book (544 pp in the rather small-print paperback edition of 2012 before me, and I am estimating there are about 265,000 words of main text here). I approached it with relish, though feeling a mixture of guilt and responsibility too (I really *ought* to have wrestled with it earlier). I can confirm that it is not likely to work as light end-of-day pleasure reading. But it is spectacularly illuminating and mind-stretching, and raises profound questions. It will be especially appreciated by anyone who thinks that religion has a major, positive role to play in the next phase of Western culture, even though it is not 'about' religion at all.

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 133–138
ISSN 2058-5969

First things first: I am neither a neuroscientist nor a neuroscientist's son. Hence, my capacity to do justice, as a reviewer, to the first half of the work is limited. As an arts and humanities-trained theologian, I can, though, at least do something with the second half. For even if I take much of the first half on trust, I am able to assess the use made by McGilchrist himself of his own exploration of brain science with respect to the past and projected future of Western culture. And I can then suggest whether, and if so in what way, the book's findings might have anything fresh to say to contemporary theology and mission.

So to the book itself. Across its first six chapters (Part One), its author maps out what the brain is like. Taking on oversimplistic accounts of more popular 'left brain/right brain' accounts of human consciousness and activity, McGilchrist is at pains to point out that we would do better to talk of hemispheres within the brain, recognising that both sides are vital and have different functions, though always working together. Even if we talk of respective emphases or tendencies for each hemisphere, it is vital that we talk primarily about how they relate to each other. If the left hemisphere can be said to be the more scientific, the more calculating, the more bureaucratic, the more linear, its contribution is vital to overall perception and understanding of the world. It works best when steered by what the right hemisphere does, and gets above its station if it tries to measure everything and pretend that it can stand outside of the observation process. For we are implicated in, affecting and being affected by, the very world we are trying to perceive and understand – something the right hemisphere grasps more clearly. If the right hemisphere is more global, looking for the big picture, lives more happily with metaphor, and fosters arts, culture and religion, it needs the focused attention of the left to take up its sketchy or daring insights, or its visions, and see if they can be turned into anything, even something practical and useful.

That, in general, is what the first 230 pages or so spell out in some detail – mostly in accessible ways, though still stretching nevertheless. Perhaps the starkest summary of the first part of the book is the following statement: 'There is no such thing as the brain, only the brain according to the right hemisphere and the brain according to the left hemisphere …' (p. 175).

But what are some specific insights from the book's first part which are worth noting? Here are some which prove decisive for the book's second part. First, it is important to distinguish reason and reasoning from rationality. It is not true to say that the left hemisphere is the 'rational bit' of the brain, while the

right side deals with emotions. Both sides enable us to reason. They simply enable us to do this in different ways, the left hemisphere making more of scientific problem-solving. Second, 'betweenness' and relationality are especially significant in human meaning-making and are more the preoccupation of the right hemisphere. This leads McGilchrist to conclude that 'the essential difference between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere is that the right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation' (p. 93). (That said, McGilchrist has already noted that there 'is not likely to be "a God spot" in the brain', p. 92.) Third, the body is so very important, and yet Western culture has too easily privileged the abstract, the disembodied, the thought, rather than physicality or emotion. Fourth, though there is no single truth about anything, this does not mean there is no truth worth seeking or working with, especially given that 'None of us actually lives as though there were no truth' (p. 151).

The book's second part then tests out the insights gained from the physiological and neuroscientific first part with respect to the history of Western culture. 'What if', McGilchrist is asking, 'the different hemispheres have been in the ascendancy at different times in cultural history?' How might a right- or left-hemisphere emphasis have taken shape at different points in history, within cultural movements? Again, even though there are some sweeping suggestions being made, McGilchrist still does not want to oversimplify, as if either hemisphere can disappear off the scene altogether. Both hemispheres always work in tandem. That said, we are currently, says McGilchrist, in a situation where the left hemisphere has been trying to take control of the way we think, and it is dangerous for Western culture: 'all the available sources of intuitive life – cultural tradition, the natural world, the body, religion and art – have been so conceptualised, devitalised and "deconstructed" … by the world of words, mechanistic systems and theories constituted by the left hemisphere that their power to help us see beyond the hermetic world that it has set up has been largely drained from them' (p. 244).

The remainder of the book is a creative exploration of Western cultural history from the perspective of the fluctuating dominance of one hemisphere or the other. From Plato's left-hemisphere dominance, a view of the world put forward 'so strongly that it has taken two thousand years to shake it off' (p. 288), through to postmodernism, McGilchrist offers us some intriguing interpretations of different phases of cultural history. The Reformation was a search for certainty and authenticity, yet – sometimes despite the Reformers themselves – was a heavily left-hemisphere movement. It would inevitably feed the Enlightenment

in due course, over against which Romanticism was an important right-hemisphere corrective. 'Romanticism … demonstrates, in a multitude of ways, its affinity for everything we know from the neuropsychological literature about the workings of the right hemisphere' (p. 379).

But Romanticism has not been allowed to prosper because of the attempt in the modern world 'by the left hemisphere to take control of everything it knows so that it is the giver to itself of what it sees' (p. 402). The problem we are faced with, in short, is that left-hemisphere dominance is in danger of preventing our seeing fully what is 'there', or encountering what may be beyond us, or imagining creatively what might yet be. The desire for control of what we can test and measure leads us to be too self-enclosed.

Where, then, does this lead? If McGilchrist is basically right, even if experts may be able to take him to task on finer points here and there, what is a Christian today to make of all of this? Intriguing as the physiology and neuroscience is, and vital though it is for those engaged in medical care and related research, what else can we learn or conclude from all this about how we think, believe and live?

McGilchrist accepts that his is largely an argument applied to Western culture. Neuroscientifically speaking, though, much should be applicable to other cultural settings. (He does venture into some non-Western examples, but not very far.) But even with respect to the West there are some important lessons to be drawn out.

First, we are reminded that 'we need metaphor and *mythos* in order to understand the world. Such myths or metaphors are not dispensable luxuries, or "optional extras", still less the means of obfuscation: they are fundamental and essential to the process' (p. 441). At its simplest for Christians this means the need, I suggest, to keep on 'telling the Christian story', whether or not we know which bits are historically true or not, even if we cannot all agree on the details, and accepting that Christianity exists in multiple versions, and jostles alongside other faith traditions telling their own stories. The telling of the story is an essential aspect of mission, as it is presented in a form which humanity needs, even if the left-hemisphere-dominant times in which we live are likely to be flippant about why we keep on doing it. How the Christian story will prove useful we perhaps cannot even predict, as it will achieve things in and for humanity which we may not be able to anticipate. But working with Christianity's 'metaphor and *mythos*' is vital for human well-being. It is as simple as that.

Second, if 'affect comes first, the thinking later' (p. 184), then there are important things to be learned about worship and mission. But before the charismatically inclined – or those who sit loose to structure in worship and are keen to 'move' those in the congregation first and foremost – declare 'I told you so!', McGilchrist is quick to remind us that 'the immediate pre-conceptual sense of awe can evolve into religion only with the help of the left hemisphere' (p. 199). Theologians of a more cognitive bent do, then, have a job to do after all. In the same way, though, that so much of popular culture, and so many (all?) of the arts, also work affectively first, this is a very important and salutary reminder of how so much of our life actually 'works'. If, however, we live in left-hemisphere-dominant times, and if we happen to be in employment which is highly bureaucratised and not very creative, then worship (and arts and creative media and culture) are clearly counter-cultural, functioning in sharp contrast to much of what we are doing lots of the time. Mission and worship will inevitably have to take note of this, building on, and fostering further, the imaginative areas of life, ever mindful of the left-hemisphere desire (including the work of the theologians!) to measure, control and even stifle what the right hemisphere is doing.

Third, it is worth putting in a good word for right-hemisphere theologians. Even accepting that much theology (systematic theology especially) will have a tendency to 'box', to contain, to regularise, we have to recall McGilchrist's reminder that both hemispheres are always involved together in whatever is under scrutiny. We know that there can be no theology without right-hemisphere activity. The only issue is whether the right-hemisphere activity is paid sufficient attention to as the (important and necessary) left-hemisphere work is done. In other words, are the systematic theologians listening enough to the practical and pastoral theologians? Are the biblical scholars – when doing their detailed textual and historical (left-hemisphere) stuff – paying sufficient attention to what ordinary readers, and artists and musicians and liturgists, are doing with texts? 'Good theologians', we might say, are obviously going to be 'both-hemisphere' people. But we all have our emphases (and systematicians will, I assume, veer to the left). I am, though, left wondering how, say, considerations about the balance of staff in theological institutions, or in circuit ministerial teams (or in national church offices?) might need to bear the brain hemispheres in mind.

Fourth, and finally, there is a major health and well-being issue here. I have been struck recently by how often I have heard reference to the dangers of 'perfectionism'. I am not talking here about church life specifically – though

churches cannot be unaffected by what is going on in society. I mean people I meet in everyday life who resist the call to 'be perfect', to 'work towards a perfect body', or to make no mistakes at work, or to try and fashion the perfect organisational structure. Now this sets a significant theological hare running to which, in one sense, there is a simple answer: because none is perfect save God alone, and humanity will always go on wrestling with sinfulness (and fragility, and imperfection), then it is clear what the task is. We have to find a way of living with imperfection – knowing it to be true of all, and therefore of ourselves – and God (and even theology) will be able to help here, whatever the New Atheists might say. The challenge, of course, is how even to get a hearing in public, cultural life when theology's contribution is not always made welcome. McGilchrist's book, though, provides an opening here. Two quotes from the final chapter of the book stand out:

> People in the West characteristically over-estimate their abilities, exaggerate their capacity to control essentially uncontrollable events, and hold over-optimistic views of the future … so much does our happiness depend on such illusions, that, in the West, lacking them is even correlated with psychiatric problems. (p. 456)

And, further:

> The espousal of unrealistic expectations in the absence of a readiness to make sacrifices may be one of the most significant factors in the escalating rates of depression in developed, and developing, countries … (p .457)

These are sobering claims. If McGilchrist is anywhere near right then religion has a vital role to play, alongside other forms of cultural activity admittedly, in helping to foster a more human humanity than the forms of humanity which are often being recommended and promoted in the West at present.

The value of the Christian story, attention to affectivity, a balanced approach to theology, and a recognition of limitations: all of these flow, then, from attention to the brain. Who would have thought it? Readers who turn to McGilchrist's book will surely receive from it much more than I have been able to summarise and suggest here. But I trust my engagement with it will have proved useful to readers who only read this review. After all, not all read large books fondly.

Clive Marsh