HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Editorial

Andrew Stobart

I

The Wesleyan Methodist Conference, meeting in Liverpool in 1820, was faced with the (then) unprecedented situation that Methodist membership was in sharp decline. The previous year had recorded a net loss of 4,688 members. What was to be done? Enshrined in the Minutes of that 1820 Conference was a set of resolutions on pastoral work, by which the Methodists present sought 'to cultivate more fully the spirit of Christian pastors'.[1] Among the range of measures adopted, 'increased pastoral intercourse' with Methodist people 'at their own homes' was recognised as an 'absolute obligation'.[2] It was clear to the Conference of 1820 that a renewal of pastoral relationships was vital for the health and holiness of the Church.

Holiness, indeed, was of paramount importance in the pastoral renewal the Conference envisioned. Concerned as they were with 'the perilous exposure of our Members to the manifold fascinations of worldliness', the Conference expected its ministers to show 'unremitting diligence' in conducting pastoral visitation, which included 'giving seasonable counsel', 'exhorting them to a faithful and loving observance of all the duties of personal and family religion', and, perhaps the most happy phrase of all, 'kindly inquiry into their Christian experience'. No one was exempt from this careful pastoral exertion: 'the aged, the infirm, the sick, and the poor; let us keep watch over the lukewarm and the careless; and let us pay special attention to backsliders'.[3] Pastoral visitation was for the whole Church, and for the wholeness of the Church.

The term 'kindly inquiry' presents possibilities for our conception of pastoral relationships today. 'Inquiry' draws attention to what is obscure. Pastoral inquiry

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 3 (2017) Issue 1 (Holiness & Pastoral Relationships): pp. 1–4
ISSN 2058-5969

seeks to acknowledge and cultivate identity in Christ, which otherwise may be choked by 'the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things' (Mk 4:19), withered by difficulty (4:17), or snatched away by God's Enemy (4:15). The mystery of our Christian identity is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3), yet pastoral inquiry seeks to bring this hidden root of life to our waking attention. Such inquiry is 'kindly', not merely in its manner – and, indeed, not always in its manner, since the Liverpool Conference certainly envisioned a robust edge to pastoral visitation not normally associated with 'tea with the vicar' – but also in its fruit. The kindly outcome of pastoral inquiry is maturity in faith, a wholeness of the spirit, and faithfulness in discipleship.

But whence does this kindly outcome originate? The Liverpool resolutions commend 'the reading of a suitable portion of Holy Scripture, and prayer', but neither these activities themselves nor the person who introduces them into the pastoral visitation are ultimately responsible for growth in Christian identity. The reading of Scripture and prayer are means of grace that connect the pastoral encounter with the originating source of all kindly outcomes: the kindness of God. God's kindness, according to Scripture, is not a vague divine quality, for God's kindness has 'appeared' in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Titus 3:4). God's kindness takes bodily form – both then in Jesus and now in us, through the Spirit whose intent is to renew us into the image of Christ (Gal 5:22). In the kindly inquiry of pastoral work, the kindness of God appears in daily life. Heaven intersects earth; the fear of death is swallowed up by the hope of resurrection; the excluded come to know they are graciously included; and God's kindness redraws the boundaries of our lives.

II

'Boundaries' are a significant motif in this issue. It is striking that having set out to compile an issue on 'Holiness & Pastoral Relationships', the articles that have independently arrived share an unintentional preoccupation with what we might call boundary issues. Bill Mullally's excellent reflections in 'The effect of presence and power in the pastoral supervisory relationship' draw our attention to the various boundaries which must be navigated for pastoral supervision in the Church to be effective. As he puts it, 'Whenever one is in the presence of another, power dynamics exist, and establishing and upholding mutually respectful boundaries is core to creating meaningful presence' (p. 22). Mullally's reflections help to emphasise the importance of the supervisory covenant,

which happily forms part of the new supervision practices currently being implemented throughout the Methodist Church in Great Britain.

Pastoral work is most acute along boundaries: between health and illness; life and death; hope and despair. A number of shorter articles explore how embodying God's kindness at these boundaries often means crossing, blurring or even transgressing them. Christopher Collins invites us to reconceive our relationship with the dementia-diagnosed, no longer seeing dementia as a boundary-limiting pastoral engagement. Paul Gismondi and Catherine Minor walk us along the boundary of death, from the perspective of parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy respectively. Elizabeth Dunning reflects on the all-too-familiar boundary reached when a Methodist society decides to cease to meet. In God's kindness, through the kindly inquiry modelled in these articles, the boundaries of existence in each of these cases are redrawn. The dementia-diagnosed are understood to be angelic missionaries; the fear of death becomes an invitation to faith; the horror of human suffering is the holy ground where resurrection is encountered; and the closure of a chapel is viewed as 'a good death'.

Jane Leach's contribution to our series on John Wesley's sermons, reflecting on his 1786 sermon 'On Visiting the Sick', offers pointers that enable us to navigate across the boundary from merely social conversation to truly pastoral conversation. Utilising the ability of art to prompt us across boundaries of perspective and see the world through the eyes of others, two devotional pieces in this issue offer opportunities for reflection on intercessory prayer (based on John Reilly's *Healing of the lunatic boy*) and on the identity of those for whom we care (based on Eddy Aigbe's *Self Portrait*).

Jimmy Dunn's Fernley-Hartley Lecture, 'Why four Gospels? Why only four?', considers why the boundaries of the canon were drawn as they were around the Gospels as we have them. This striking study by an internationally renowned biblical scholar has important implications for pastoral work. As he puts it in his conclusion: 'This is the wisdom and strength of our New Testament with its four Gospels, providing both an example of how diversely the same gospel could be told, and a challenge to us to retell the good news of Jesus today with equal or equivalent effect' (p. 54). Telling the gospel all over again with equivalent effect in terms that resonate in each context is the true art of pastoral conversation.

III

A final section of this issue offers reviews of some recently published books and booklets, which may be of interest to our readers. It is the intention of this journal not simply to be yet another outlet for theological wordsmiths, but rather to be a stimulant that more of God's people will develop a love for focused and sustained theological reflection. Another resolution from the Liverpool Conference of 1820 exhorts us: 'Let us meanwhile "stir up the gift of God which is in us", and improve our talents by close study and diligent cultivation.'[4] For all the learning of the past two centuries, this is as necessary an exhortation for us now as it was then. If this journal prompts you to dig still deeper into our rich theological resources, and to apply yourself with greater energy to speak of and to and for God with care and liveliness, then it will have served a worthwhile purpose.

Andrew Stobart
Commissioning Editor
February 2017

Notes

1. Liverpool Minutes 1820, 'Resolutions on Pastoral Work', I, found in *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Volume 1, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988.
2. Liverpool Minutes 1820, VII.
3. Liverpool Minutes 1820, VII.
4. Liverpool Minutes 1820, II.