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What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?
'On Visiting the Sick': the art of pastoral conversation

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This article is a transcript of a lecture delivered as part of the first series of Wesley Memorial Lectures given at Wesley Memorial Church in Oxford in July 2016. Originally entitled 'Speaking of God in Private', this lecture was followed by a second, 'Speaking of God in Public'. It is included here as part of the ongoing journal series exploring what the sermons of John Wesley have done for us, and it stands largely unchanged from its first delivery in order to retain its texture and tone. This article addresses the questions of why in Western culture it is a problem to speak of God in personal conversation; why this is true even within some churches; and whether there are any pointers towards how intentional conversation about God might be recovered in the contemporary Western context in the sermon of John Wesley's of 1786, 'On Visiting the Sick'.

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Introduction

I am grateful for this invitation to explore the theme, 'What language shall I borrow – speaking of God in private?' This article engages in conversation with a sermon of John Wesley's from a contemporary point of view, addressing the urgent question of how we speak of God in today's world in ways that make sense to all concerned.

At least two questions are begged by this topic. First, what is the urgency in speaking of God? Second, why consult John Wesley?

What is the urgency?

We are living in turbulent times in which many cry out for direction and for leadership as the bankruptcy of our political system and elite is exposed. Rising numbers of migrants, rising sea levels and the rise of popular nationalism with its xenophobic and racist overtones are all causes of serious concern for anyone who believes in God's commitment to the whole inhabited earth. Yet speaking of God produces deeply ambivalent reactions both in public discourse and in personal conversation. Many people are suspicious of the motives of Christians; many people are disengaged from and disillusioned with institutions of all kinds; religious expressions of terrorism and of oppression are demonstrably part of the problem that the world faces. In this context, whether in public or in private, those who are serious about witnessing to a God of justice and love have to face the question, 'What language can I borrow, with which to communicate effectively the deep things of God?'

The first urgency, I believe, is that God's is the wisdom that the world desperately needs to inform public life. The second urgency is of course bound up with the first but focuses our attention on the lives of individuals as people for whom God deeply cares because their hearts will be restless till they find their rest in him. A third urgency might be cited, and this concerns the figures on church decline. If we cannot speak of God in ways that make sense to people within and beyond our churches, then our churches will not grow. 'Evangelise or perish' was a slogan of Billy Graham's in the 1960s. 'Evangelism is the main thing' is the way that Martyn Atkins put it to the Methodist Conference of 2011. Yet there is a danger in such pragmatic logic, as he noted in the General Secretary's written report that year, that we fall into instrumental thinking – that we come to see the perpetuation of the Church as we know it as an end in itself and those we seek to evangelise as a means to our end, rather than

understanding ourselves as people called to love those whom God loves and to share with them what we have come to know of God, because they, too, are God's creatures and they too are beloved.[1]

Why converse on this subject with John Wesley?

The second preliminary question is 'Why converse with John Wesley?' Of course, I am a Methodist and this article was first delivered as a lecture in Wesley's Oxford, but the reasons run deeper than that. As someone who began their academic life as an undergraduate historian, my instinct is often to ask whether there is anything to be learned from other times and places that might help us to reframe the demands of our own context and reform our own practices. This is a way of paying explicit attention in our theological reflection not only to the Bible and to our experience but also to the tradition of the Church in which we stand so that we can reason in relation to all three.

A further reason for consulting Mr Wesley on these subjects is because he was both an evangelist concerned to reach those who did not know Christ and someone who knew that the life of faith needs nurture and care if it is to be sustained – he was a committed practitioner who both spoke of God in public and in private in an age in which it was not always considered polite to do so.

The art of pastoral conversation

Pastoral visiting is perhaps the most obvious context in which many of us might expect to consider the question of how to conduct pastoral conversation, but there are lots of contexts that I would like us to hold in mind as we explore what speaking of God in private might entail:

> *You might imagine yourself by a hospital bed visiting a fellow member of the Church, or in your living room explaining to a stranger in a dog collar what your parent or partner or child believed or did not believe and how you want the funeral to be. You might imagine yourself writing an email or responding to a social media post about the events of someone's life that have left you lost for words. You might imagine yourself confronted by someone who is street homeless and who is asking you for money. Or that you are wearing a street pastor uniform and sitting with a young woman, rather the worse for wear, who has lost her handbag; you might be sitting in the church coffee lounge after the Sunday service or on a weekday, or you might even be in a church fellowship group.*

In asking you to think like this I am deliberately wanting to blur the distinction between pastoral care and evangelism. Pastoral care might in recent generations have been primarily problem-focused and resourced by psychological theory. In some contexts, such as schools, pastoral care no longer has any explicit link with the care that God offers as the Good Shepherd. Yet in earlier generations pastoral care meant 'care of God's flock' – whether narrowly understood as the sheep who hear the Shepherd's voice, or more broadly understood as all for whom God cares. Reversing the trends of the second half of the twentieth century, in more recent revisionist times, pastoral theologians have been keen to re-root the one-to-one care offered by representatives of the Church more explicitly in the resources of the Christian tradition, seeing the role of pastoral care as helping people to grow in faith or even come to faith through the challenges that life brings and helping them to engage directly with the God who cares for them, through prayer, the Bible and the sacramental life of the wider Body of Christ. This is not to deny the wisdom of psychological insights (there is still much for us to learn), but it is to claim, with Walter Brueggemann, that pastoral care is essentially a liturgical enterprise in which the voice of God must be allowed to speak: 'The theological ground for such a practice is that health [emerges] out of the memory of the tradition that has long mediated life and health to this community.'[2]

Meanwhile, it might be argued that evangelism in the twentieth century was primarily conceived as the presentation of the Christian faith to those unfamiliar with it or unconvinced by it, in the hope of introducing them to saving faith in Christ. In this way, evangelism has often been explicit in its use of the resources and language of the Christian tradition. A frequent criticism of evangelism so conceived, however, has been that even in one-to-one conversation it has often been in broadcast mode.

The thinking and practice of evangelism, like pastoral care, has also moved on. It speaks increasingly of accompanying others on their journeys rather than imposing our own. It uses passages of Scripture like the Emmaus Road narrative of Luke 24, suggesting that we need to listen to where people are at before we start to unpack the Scriptures with them; suggesting that we need to make a journey too, not staying on the comfortable territory that we know well, but opening ourselves up to being the guest in other people's language forms, other people's homes, other people's worlds, and finding what God is doing there.[3]

In the twentieth century, pastoral care and evangelism may have been on separate tracks and often sponsored by very different parts of the Church

(perhaps you know with which track you identify) but our twenty-first-century Western culture is demanding something different from us in which pastoral care is relearning something about how to speak of God in private; and evangelism is learning something about how to listen to and accompany people on the journeys they are on. The demand that we address this is urgent because of the impoverishment of the life of the Church when we have lost a credible language in which we can speak about God to one another in private and so put one another in touch with the holding and the healing of God in our daily lives; and because if it is true that we cannot effectively hold one another in faith, then surely we cannot expect to offer the life of faith credibly to those who wouldn't think of looking to Christianity or to Christ for what they or the world needs.

In order to make progress in understanding how we might speak of God in private in ways that make sense to us and to others I want us to spend some time thinking about three things:

1 the Western cultural context and why speaking of God is a problem

2 the culture of our churches and why speaking about God is sometimes a problem even there

3 what we can learn from John Wesley's sermon, 'On Visiting the Sick', about how we might conduct one-to-one conversations in a variety of settings in which we might be able to put one another in touch with God.

Why is speaking of God a problem in Western culture?

Alan Billings, lifelong theological educator and sometime tutor at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, near Oxford, speaks in a book of 2010 of the need for contemporary Christians to 'make God possible' or to make even the 'idea' of God possible and the person of God 'findable' because he believes that it is no longer obvious to many people how to do this. He points out that although for the last 1,500 years most people have associated with organised religion, this is increasingly not the case.[4]

Why is this? First of all he names the various processes of secularisation as being to blame. Since the nineteenth century there has been a steady decline in the visibility of the Church in public life and a steady decline in the numbers of

people engaged in Christian practice, and so Billings argues that belief in the world-view represented by Christianity has declined. People no longer turn to the Church to mediate the boundary between the mundane and the sacred because, he proposes, many people have come to believe that 'this is all there is'. Under these conditions, there is no such boundary any longer to be negotiated.

Of course, it is equally possible to argue that it is the decline in Christian belief that has led to the decline in Christian practice. And in this case the rise of scientific-rational modes of reasoning that require evidence-based thinking rather than faith-based testimony, the problems of suffering raised by the First World War, and an increasing awareness of pluralism through the processes of globalisation are often cited as contributory factors.

For our purposes, perhaps it is enough to note that a decline in Christian practice and a decline in Christian belief are mutually reinforcing factors in the creation of a culture in which there is no longer a shared language for speaking about existential things:

> *Imagine a funeral at which the minister's role is to create a shared sense of the 'we' who are gathered, but without a shared sense of what it is that 'we' are gathered here to do … perhaps we are not even gathered around a person's body such that our common purpose can be described as the reverent disposal of their earthly remains. 'We' are probably not here to declare our faith in the resurrection of the body; 'we' are probably not here to take comfort and draw hope from the familiar words of Scripture; 'we' are probably not here to commend the person to God's eternal care (let alone God's judgement). Even if we are, we lack a shared language in which to do it, for the words are no longer familiar and the beliefs referenced have lost their anchor in the lives and stories from which they arose.*

This does not, of course, mean that there is no interest in the spiritual journey. Hay and Hunt, for example, in a survey of 2000, found that 76 per cent of respondents admitted to having had a spiritual experience:

> We know from the research we have done that most people's spirituality is a long way from institutional religion. This spirituality has little doctrinal content, and few people have more than the vaguest remnants of religious language to express their experience of God.[5]

This lack of shared language makes communication between Christians and others about things that matter a tricky business. I don't know how many *Star Trek* fans there are reading this but I have often used a particular episode starring Jon-Luc Picard in order to illustrate this problem. On board the *Enterprise* there is a universal translator (hopefully rather better than Google translate). This enables the crew to converse with the new cultures they encounter. On one occasion a culture is encountered that speaks only in proper nouns. Picard can work out that these are a shorthand for stories, and that the stories have foundational meanings for those initiated, and yet because he does not know the stories behind the words, he cannot communicate … it's as if they are saying to him, 'Joshua at Jericho' or 'Jesus at Emmaus' or 'Paul at Athens'.

The seriousness of this problem becomes clear when we try to speak of God, because when Christians speak of God we speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; we speak of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; we speak of God in three Persons, weaving together the whole creation. In so doing we speak of a God with a defined character and track record – a God with whom we have a history. While those of us who are part of that community might dispute the meaning of our shared history or its implications for our understanding of the enduring character of God, we nevertheless have a great deal in common to draw on in which the referent of the word 'God' remains relatively stable. But bringing God or Jesus into conversation with someone who does not have that hinterland is like introducing an unstable compound into an experiment.

Most people are not encountering the word 'God' as a neutral category; rather, they are bringing their own notions to it. For example, the throwing off of institutional forms of religion as part of a postmodern turn towards the individual, and the postcolonial sense that Christianity was a tool of oppression, means that God and God's ambassadors, for many people, are suspect. Rowan Williams may have argued in a recent book[6] that the structure of our language, even as we curse, makes room for God in a way that cannot be substituted, yet the existential longing for meaning and security that Williams associates with the word 'God', for those not so steeped in the Christian tradition, will be mixed up with a whole range of confused, negative and oppressive meanings that our culture is carrying.

To these factors, Billings adds the disproportionate representation in the media of a humanist perspective that he believes is pervasive. This is a narrative in which we simply drop the troublesome and redundant references to God.

Billings summarises this media 'creed' by using the 2009 literature of the British humanist society for enquirers:

- Humanism is a philosophy or way of life that puts human beings at the centre.
- The only authority human beings can appeal to is human reason.
- Beliefs should be proportionate to the evidence and an open critical mind should be kept if the evidence is inconclusive.
- There are universal values shared across human societies that arise out of human needs and the needs of societies.
- All human beings have the capacity to think for themselves about morality.
- We should act in the interests of social harmony and the common good.
- Where there are conflicting values we should decide between them on the basis of the likely consequences.
- This world is all there is.
- The idea of life after death is incoherent.
- Our only survival is in the memories of others and in what we each achieve and leave behind.
- Life has no ultimate or transcendent meaning but only the meanings we each give to it.[7]

Billings concludes that the temptation for many is to see humanism as Christianity without supernaturalism and (crucially) without church. In such a context, Billings argues, the challenge for the Church is not so much to get people over the threshold of our buildings (lots of people will come if we don't mention God), but to make God possible within people's mindsets and habits of thinking and experiencing.

Disappointingly, Billings does not spend much time in his book discussing how we might actually do this, but he does offer some hints that come from his experiences of conducting interviews with churchgoers as part of his academic research. He observes that within many churches belief is not discussed. Social activities predominate, but these often leave people isolated with their questions and without contexts in which to challenge these pervasive humanist values.

Why is speaking of God a problem even in some church circles?

Further reasons why traditional churches find it difficult to speak about God in personal conversation are discussed in the Report to the Methodist Conference of 2005, *Time to Talk of God* (hereafter, the Report).

The Report draws a sharp distinction between the kind of conversation that people had with the Jesus of the Gospels and the kinds of conversation people have in churches:

> Jesus converses with his disciples who are often shown as slow-witted, selfish and flawed. He converses with those who approach him for help – often women who remain nameless such as the Samaritan woman at the well or the Syro-Phoenician woman or outsiders such as the Roman centurion or Zacchaeus the collaborator … There is humour and anger; irony and passion. There is room for individual response. There is room for mutual learning. We do not always get told what happened next – so we need to go away and talk about it ourselves.[8]

What we might observe from these stories about Jesus' communication is not only that his conversation partners are treated as living, thinking subjects who have genuine questions to be answered, nor even that the Bible is written in such a way as to invite us to wrestle with our own questions, but we might also notice that in conversation about the things of God people are being led into encounter with God. Healing happens. Forgiveness is received. Self-righteousness melts away. Money is redistributed. Community is recreated. Conversation about God with Jesus is not only an intellectual exercise – it is an invitation into a changed way of living. What is needed, the Report argues, are contexts in which questions about God and about life can be addressed. Yet this is not only about contexts in which intellectual questions can be debated such that God can be made credible within contemporary patterns of thinking, it is also about contexts in which people of faith can put each other in touch with the God who heals and forgives, who challenges our self-righteousness and selfishness, who leads us into different ways of relating to others politically, economically and socially.

By contrast, the Report characterises many of the traditional churches' practices as blocks to this kind of conversation:

> The exercise of seeking God and learning how to love and serve God in our lives is deeply attractive, but also perhaps quite frightening. So it is that the Church, which exists to support that search, that love and that service, somehow manages to frustrate its own ends by providing a culture where conversation around this most important of topics is effectively, if unconsciously, blocked in a variety of ways.
>
> - Identifying taking a church role with being a disciple
> - Church 'business' that crowds out all other types of conversation
> - Socialising that actually only welcomes particular kinds of people
> - The culture of niceness
> - Avoiding difficult subjects
> - Not expecting faith to be discussed
> - Fellowship groups that have no purpose but do not die
> - Fellowship groups where it is not safe to disagree
> - Failing to understand that people have different needs at different times of life.[9]

Methodist theologian Clive Marsh is quoted in the Report saying, 'Fellowship is about openness … rather than … a context within which answers to questions are assumed, party lines must be adopted and people's actual issues, questions, doubts and affirmations are not taken seriously.'[10] One minister is quoted anonymously as saying, 'I read out to my pastoral visitors the bits from Standing Orders that entail talking with people about fulfilling the commitments of membership, and they were frankly horrified.'[11]

The Report concludes that if churches are to become again places where people are able to speak about God, then this requires time and intentionality.

- We need to free up spaces in the diary when we are not doing church business.
- We need to practise speaking to God and to each other in contexts that are purposeful and intentional otherwise social conversation will take over.
- We need preaching that opens us to transformation and raises the

expectation that we should be discussing our faith and our lives and being accountable to one another for our growth in discipleship.

- We need to free up ministers, deacons and lay workers for more in-depth conversations.

Changing a culture takes time and perhaps it is not surprising that 11 years on from *Time to Talk of God* many of the same issues persist. For those well steeped in Methodist ways of thinking it will already be possible to detect the influence of Mr Wesley on this Report's conclusions, for, according to American Methodist scholar Tom Albin, John Wesley not only introduced people to the possibility of a relationship with God, he provided a structure within which it could be sustained.[12] For these reasons the Report bears rereading and its conclusions being used as a way of auditing the life of our churches so that we might make structural changes that would support a change of culture that would enable the sustaining of a dynamic faith in a world dominated by the humanistic assumptions of the political and media elites.

What can we learn from a conversation with John Wesley?

Beyond this general point about the structures of church life, in this article I want to focus upon an activity that Wesley considered to be part of the fabric of Christian living: visiting the sick. The text of Wesley's that I have chosen for us to consult is his sermon 'On Visiting the Sick', preached on 23 May 1786 on the text Matthew 25:36, 'I was sick and ye visited me.'[13] It challenges us to think about four questions:

1 Who should visit?

2 Why should we visit?

3 How should we visit?

4 Whom should we visit?

Who should visit?

Beginning with the question, 'By whom is this duty to be performed?' Mr Wesley's answer is ready: by all that desire to 'inherit the kingdom' of their

Father. For him the visiting of others in need is not a specialist ministry which belongs only to the few but a basic Christian duty that, like reading the Bible and prayer and regular receiving of Holy Communion, forms part of the framework of the Christian life.

He spells this out in talking about the gifts that different kinds of people bring to visiting others – the rich, their resources; the poor, their prayers; the old, their wisdom; the young, their energy. There follows a rather purple passage on the contribution of women:

> You as well as men are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time to 'do good unto all men'.[14]

Ironically I suspect if we were able to analyse Methodist statistics for those who undertake pastoral visiting now, the burden of the argument would need to be different: 'You [men] as well as women are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time to "do good unto all men". '

It is not that Mr Wesley does not recognise that particular people might be appointed to visit on behalf of a congregation. As part of his support of women's ministry he cites the biblical evidence about the role of deacons like Phoebe (Rom 16:1); but his primary rationale for Christian people to visit the sick is drawn from Matthew 25: 'For thus saith the Lord, '"Come ye blessed; inherit the kingdom; for I was sick and ye visited me". '

Implicit in this injunction to all Christians to visit the sick is the answer to Wesley's next question: why visit?

Why visit?

For Wesley the rationale for visiting at a basic level is that it is a command of Jesus (in Matthew 25:36) and a way of meeting with him in the person of those in need.

The verb 'to visit' comes up a lot in the Bible and most often it is God doing the visiting. In the Old Testament, when God visits, it is about a specific experience of God's grace or God's judgement. Modern translations often change the wording to make the contextual meaning clearer but in the Authorised Version the language of visitation is clear. So, for example, in the book of the Exodus the Lord's visit is in the form of his promise to deliver Israel from Egypt: 'And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord

had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped' (Ex 4:31); while in Jeremiah's account the Lord's visit brings judgement on a people who have grown fat and sleek at the expense of the poor and needy: 'Shall I not visit for these *things*? saith the Lord: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?' (Jer 5:29).

In the New Testament, when God visits, it is most usually a way of talking about God's presence in human flesh in the person of Jesus. This is not a fleeting visit, but a decision by God to dwell with his people: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people' (Lk 1:68); 'Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us' (Lk 1:78). This 'visit' by God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth thus sheds light. It sheds the light of God's grace upon all who dare look at the light, but also reveals the parts of ourselves that are in darkness and need bringing to light for forgiveness and healing.

When God visits, that visit is not incidental; it is not superficial; it is about truth; and it is about our lasting good. This pattern is revealed in the actual visits that Jesus of Nazareth made, such as the one to the home of Martha (and Mary and Lazarus): 'Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home' (Lk 10:38).

Here, Jesus visits Martha and Mary. If you remember the story, these are people he loved. Yet, this is a visit that involves truth-telling that is difficult, concerning the relationship between the sisters and their relationship with him. While Jesus cares for the lasting interest of both of them, his visit delivers not only comforting words but challenging words. Martha tells him what is the matter: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.' But Jesus is coming from a different place, and offers to Martha a different way of approaching things.

None of this biblical material features in John Wesley's sermon on visiting the sick. Nevertheless, he believed pastoral visiting to be a means by which God's presence might be mediated, not only to the person visited, but also to the person visiting:

> It is generally supposed that the means of grace and the ordinances of God are equivalent terms. We commonly mean by that expression, those that are usually termed 'works of piety' – hearing and reading the scriptures, receiving the Lord's supper, public and private prayer, and fasting. And it is certain, these are the ordinary

> channels which convey the grace of God to the souls of men. But are they the only means of grace? Are there no other means than these, whereby God is pleased, frequently, yea, ordinarily, to convey his grace to them that either love or fear him? Surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace.[15]

To undertake a pastoral visit, then, is not to go in the place of God to sit in judgement over others or to bless them; rather it is to seek to make an occasion during which God's presence and power might be experienced. In this way, a pastoral visit might be understood as a means of grace which, if approached in the spirit of seeking to meet with God, will reliably lead us and others, together, into God's presence.

How might we understand that to happen? As one person puts themselves at the disposal of another for their deep good, God becomes tangible. God is revealed. God visits. When this happens it touches both people. Paul Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford, puts it like this: 'God happens in an interweaving flow of relationships like those between a father and a son, opened up and deepened by currents of the Spirit. Grace is God's dwelling with us … in ecstatic moments of love.'[16] This is something that I learnt about as a probationer minister when visiting an elderly woman in hospital. Struggling myself with depression at the time, I used to visit her at home. Having listened for a long time on one occasion, I ventured, 'Sometimes you just want to curl up in a ball,' and she stared at me as if the world had changed colour: 'You know', she said. Weeks afterwards I visited her in hospital. It was now afternoon but the staff had been busy and she had not been washed. Having once recognised our common humanity I could not leave the washing undone. And as I soaped and rinsed and dried her face she looked at me and I at her, both of us knowing ourselves beloved, knowing that God was visiting with us.

To me, this story is an illustration of what Wesley has to say about the importance of actually being present in person and not relying on just sending money for the relief of material needs.

For Paul Fiddes, this is the stuff of sacramental life. For him, 'The whole point of a sacrament is that it is made of weak and fallible stuff in itself, but is a doorway into the life of the triune God.'[17] And it happens through the willingness of those involved to be present to each other and to the love at the heart of existence that transcends them both.

How should we visit?

If we are engaged in pastoral visiting in order to make an occasion for God's presence and power to be experienced, as Mr Wesley puts it, 'How may we do this most to the glory of God, and to the benefit of our neighbour?'

First, it is instructive to note that John Wesley recommends a structure for a visit:

1 Seek God's help in prayer.

2 Inquire of the person's outward condition (and respond as you can).

3 Inquire of the person's soul.

4 Offer any help you can 'if any of them begin to fear God'.

5 Conclude with prayer.

While no interpersonal encounter should be conducted according to such a rigid formula so that there is no room for the conversation to flow or for the Holy Spirit to move, if a conversation is to be intentionally focused on the things of God then some notion of the elements it might involve and the order in which they might come can be very useful.

This point has already been made in a general way in the *Time to Talk of God* Report, which recognised John Wesley's emphasis on the need for structures that sustain the culture you want to develop. This is particularly important when explicit conversation about God involves swimming against the cultural tide. As Alan Billings points out, the claims of secular humanism are not only affecting those outside the Churches but also the mindsets of many of us within the Churches. If we do not have opportunities within the structures of church life to learn how to put each other in touch with God, then we too are likely to drift with the tide away from a sense of God's power and presence.

The need for some kind of structure to be in place in order to promote intentional pastoral and spiritual conversation is something that I learned in the practice of hospital chaplaincy. For the purposes of teaching volunteers and student ministers in this context, we have used in this matrix.

While social conversation may be important in order to establish some kind of trust and relationship, in the time-limited context of a 20-minute visit in which there may be urgent needs to address, it is important to help pastoral carers identify how and when to move the conversation to a different plane:

- 'How are you?' is a social question.
- 'How are you today?' is a more pastoral question.
- 'How are you coping?' implies a willingness to go deeper.
- 'What gives you strength to help you cope?' sharpens the focus towards the spiritual.
- 'Might I pray with you?' is a ritual question.

To draw on another tool that might operate as a structure for deeper than social conversation, we might draw on the basic patterns that underlie worship. In worship the basic structure might be articulated as follows:

- welcome into God's presence together
- listening to God's word in the light of God's world
- responding to God's word in God's world
- being sent into God's world.

In a pastoral conversation a basic structure might in fact look rather similar:

- welcome into God's presence together
- listening to God's world (an individual's needs) in the light of God's word
- responding to God's world (an individual's needs) in the light of God's word
- commending (the individual) to God as they face what is before them.

Having noticed that Mr Wesley commends a structure for pastoral visiting, I now want to pay some attention to the different elements of that structure and to think about what these elements might suggest to us about pastoral conversation in our own contexts.

First, before and during any visit Wesley begins by recommending that we pray:

> Before and through the work, from the beginning to the end, let your heart wait upon him with a continual supply of meekness and gentleness, of patience and long-suffering, that you may never be angry or discouraged at whatever treatment, rough or smooth, kind or unkind, you may meet with.[18]

This is about preparation – becoming alert ourselves to God's presence that we might be a channel of his grace. But it is also about confidence. What is it that will give us confidence to hold whatever it is with which we are to be entrusted, but a confidence that God can hold it even if we can't? Another way to put this is to think about Christ's role in creation as explained in Paul's letter to the Colossians: in Christ, all things hold together.[19] When we go on a pastoral visit, it is not we who need to hold the person together, even if they are disintegrating before our eyes. It is ours to hold them in prayer before God in Christ, in whom we can have confidence that both we and they are held.

How, in practice, do we do this? A friend of mine who is a minister has an icon of the Resurrection above the chair in which people sit who come to see him. It reminds him that however dark and difficult the circumstances the person is in, his job is to hold that person in the light of Christ's Resurrection. It is this that gives him courage to go into dark and difficult places with people without fearing that he will get lost. If you are visiting someone in hospital or in their own home, you can't take a great icon with you, but you can perhaps wear a cross, or put a text in your pocket, or carry your Bible as a way of helping yourself remember that this is not about your ability to fix something or someone, but about helping the person you visit to become aware of God's presence and healing power.

Second, Wesley recommends that we pray for and with the person: 'Above all give them your prayers. Pray with them; pray for them; and who knows but you may save their souls alive?'[20]

Perhaps we no longer share a confidence in the framework of this last statement: what do we think our souls are in need of saving from? Perhaps we believe in life before death, but not really life after death any more? Perhaps prayer too is an unstable substance, for many people not the warp and weft of a lifetime's relationship with the ground of their being, but a last resort form of cosmic ordering that rarely gets results. Yet articulating what needs to be said to God is so important if we are not only to communicate *about* God but potentially put people in touch *with* God. In my ministry it has so often been

at the point of prayer that release for people has finally come. Yet this is not something I was ever trained to do: I arrived at my first funeral interview in my probationer appointment knowing that I needed to pray and found that I did not have the words. The practice of pastoral prayer took time to develop.

In some contexts, of course, prayer is best done silently. But often it can be important to offer words aloud with someone, simply placing their troubles and concerns directly into God's hands. It can be done using our own words, or it can be helpful to learn some of the prayers of others which can sometimes capture what in the moment we might struggle to say and which well-worn path might help us both to find our way into an awareness of God's presence.[21]

Third, Wesley makes it clear that it is important to be present to the actual person in front of you and their real needs, which may be material or emotional or spiritual. This can be costly as we realise that some needs are great and need urgent attention. As Wesley points out, 'One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them.'[22] But at the emotional level also, the needs of others can be disturbing because they remind us of our frailty, of our mortality, of the impermanence of the things that we take for granted. This can be frightening and, if we are honest, most of us avoid that which frightens us. We tell ourselves that it is better to leave people in peace when they are bereaved or have been made redundant or are depressed because they need the space or because our visit will make them feel worse. Of course, this is not to deny that sometimes people in difficult circumstances do need space or a break from thinking about it all; yet more often people need to talk and to try to make sense of it all, and, in truth, our unwillingness to go can be more about our own self-protection than about their needs.

One of my favourite verbs in the New Testament is the Greek verb *splancthnizomai* – which means, literally, 'I am churned up in the guts'. Jesus in all sorts of encounters[23] was willing to be disturbed, to change direction, to act, to use the power he had to make a difference. Wesley's injunction to go and be physically present, to go out of our way to find out what people's real needs are and to do what we can to alleviate distress, is a clear reflection of Jesus' mode of being with people.

Fourth, implicit in this way of being is a deep listening if we are to engage in successful communication of any kind. Notice that Wesley points this out with his repeated use of the word 'inquire'. This is no mere precursor to the delivery of a set piece about God, but rather is to be a genuine enquiry as to the person's

health and well-being, an enquiry that implies a genuine and compassionate paying attention to body, mind and soul.

Fifth, while listening is important, so too, however, is speaking. John Wesley expresses this in pastoral conversation as the need to bear witness: 'May you not begin with asking, "Have you ever considered, that God governs the world; that his providence is over all, and over you in particular?"'[24] In this way Wesley recommends pastoral visiting as an opportunity for opening up questions of God's presence and activity, and this is important not only among those who already believe and are already part of the fellowship, but also for those who most need to sense God's presence in their lives. Notice, though, his sensitivity to the person concerned. We are not to persist in offering people our own experience of God if they are not 'beginning to fear God'.[25] In other words, the purposes of pastoral care are deeply vitiated if we are not attentive to the actual needs and receptiveness of the person in front of us.

Sometimes, though, as we have observed already, the problem is not that the person is not wanting to talk about existential things, but rather that the traditional language won't work. In our cultural context, Wesley's doctrinal opening would sit very oddly in a pastoral conversation or even in a mission encounter, and yet because the search for meaning is real, and because God's holding of the human race is real, we need to try to find ways of communicating that allow for what the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called the 'fusion of the horizons of meaning'.[26]

Drawing on this concept, the American pastoral theologian Charles Gerkin argued that those offering pastoral conversation are 'more than anything else, listeners to and interpreters of stories'.[27] However, he noted that pastoral care involves more than listening to stories because the person offering pastoral conversation does not come empty-handed to the conversation but brings their own life experience. The person who offers pastoral care as a Christian is someone whose experience is being shaped by the story of the Christian community and its tradition. The task of such a person in conversation is to bring their experience and that wealth of tradition into conversation with the particularity of the life story of the person with whom they are engaging. While in more *modern* (as opposed to postmodern) and doctrinaire times, this might result in a question such as that asked by Wesley, 'Have you ever considered, that God governs the world; that his providence is over all, and over you in particular?', in our own age, the language that can bear God needs rather to be co-created and arise from a fusion of horizons rather than the dominance of

one horizon over another. This is precisely the point being made by Male and Weston in their work about third-space evangelism, referenced earlier, in which both the care-seeker and the care-giver need to go on a journey to a new space into which God is calling them.

By way of example, in his book *Stronger than Death*, Anglican priest Roland Riem retells a story told by hospital chaplain Anne Townsend. She tells the story of her relationship with Jean, a woman of no particular religious practice with whom at first Anne struggled to communicate at depth. Over the weeks, as Jean's cancer progressed, they discovered a mutual connection with Southend. For Anne this had been a place of new beginnings, where her children had been born. For Jean it was the place of childhood holidays. As Jean grew weaker they would go in memory together to Southend and walk along the pier and eat candy floss, until one day Jean said, 'We keep on talking about Southend … Am I ever going to get there in the end … or will I get lost on the way?' Anne swallowed back the tears and responded, 'You'll be there very soon, Jean … that other Southend is quite close now … not too far to go.' Whereupon Anne reports that Jean relaxed, closed her eyes and within a couple of hours had died. Anne comments:

> Jean and I learned to love one another, and our differences made this a kind of miracle. But the legacy she left me is even more precious: she taught me that eternity can be spoken of in a language I would never have thought of using.[28]

Sometimes our language about God needs to be freshly minted and is not transferable. At others, it is a question of making space for the reinvestment of traditional language with fresh meaning. In my first appointment I visited a family whose adult son had committed suicide. At first they avoided referencing the manner of his death for fear that I would pronounce judgement, and instead concentrated on the funeral in which they said they wanted no religious content. Once I'd put down my notebook and invited them to tell me what had happened, instead of worrying about the details of the funeral, they explained their own terrible sense of guilt, and when I was not judgemental either of them or of their son, they expressed their confusion at why the Church 'had changed its mind about burying suicides in consecrated ground'. At the second meeting they wanted to talk about heaven and hell: what did this language mean? And as I struggled with them to express something of what that largely metaphorical language is about, using instead

the metaphor of God's remembering of us (in the sense of recalling our life, but also in the sense of putting back together that which has been shattered), the dead man's brother became very angry. 'I can't believe I've been left to live all my life with these Sunday school ideas about heaven and hell.' When it came to planning the service, they chose in the end the most traditional form. And afterwards the brother came to shake my hand: 'I see how powerful the language can be now,' he said.

Whom should we visit?

We have already rehearsed the way in which, during the twentieth century, pastoral care and evangelism had become separated and the way in which during the twenty-first century they are coming back together. For Wesley, they were one and the same; indeed, for him pastoral visiting was not primarily a matter of visiting people who were signed-up members of the Methodist societies. Rather he advocated visiting people according to their need, whether they were Christian or not. Neither did he restrict visiting to those who were physically ill, but those who had any kind of needs of mind or body.

Of course, in any contemporary town or village or city, there are many needs, but Wesley's approach raises for us a question of priorities. In his 12 Rules of a Helper of 1753, he said, 'Go always, not only to those who want you but to those who want you most.'[29] Perhaps if we were more intentional about some of the other structures of church life (like band meetings) in which the first Wesleyan Christians were nurtured in faith through explicit conversation about the ups and downs of their lives, then there would be more of us practised in the art of pastoral conversation who might be confident to engage in the kind of encounter in which God's presence might be welcomed in the contexts where such encounters are most needed – on the street, at the food bank, at the job club, wherever they may be.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to help us address three overarching questions:

1 why speaking about God is a problem in Western culture

2 why speaking about God is a problem even within some of our churches

3 what we can learn from John Wesley's Sermon 'On Visiting the Sick' about speaking about God.

As I conclude, there are some key considerations that I would encourage us to take from this conversation with Wesley's sermon. First, pastoral conversation is a basic building block of the Christian life; not a specialist ministry for the few but the means by which we keep one another in faith and introduce others to that faith. Second, pastoral conversation has an almost liturgical structure that needs learning, but that can provide a robust container by which we are able to handle the deep things of God and of our lives. Third, pastoral conversation needs not to be considered an internal church practice, nor a practice that attends only to material or emotional needs, but rather a practice that puts people in touch with the God we meet in Jesus Christ. Fourth, pastoral conversation might be a context in which we can learn to build bridges between old language and new meanings, and between old meanings and new language as we seize the courage to search for a new horizon of meaning. Not every form of words we find will have resonance beyond the particularities of the conversation in which it is co-created; and yet, each new communication will give us confidence that God may yet speak and be spoken of in ways that make sense to us and to generations yet to come.

Notes

1. Atkins 2011, para 67: 'A feature of poorer evangelism is always to suppose that we are recruiting for the Church rather than inviting a person to experience God's supreme love which shapes, reshapes and fills their life, and so transforms the world for good. To be sure, Christian discipleship takes place in a community and we would contend necessarily so. But this simply reinforces the point that essentially our Christian communities (churches) do not exist to perpetuate their status quo but rather to provide a mutually fertile environment for growing in Christ, with permeable membranes that enable others to join and do likewise.'
2. Brueggemann 1991, p. 178.
3. Paul Weston, in Male and Weston 2013, commends something he calls third-space evangelism. First-space evangelism, he suggests, involves inviting people to come to us. Second-space evangelism involves going out to preach where others are. Third-space evangelism focuses on process rather than on the crisis of conversion and expects that movement will need to take place in both parties towards some new shared understanding of God's power and presence.
4. Billings 2010.
5. Hay and Hunt 2000.
6. Williams 2014 .
7. Billings 2010, pp. 142–143.
8. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 44.
9. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 67.
10. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 73.

11. *Time to Talk of God* 2005, p. 72.
12. Albin 2002, argues: 'All church historians agree that the small-group structures of early Methodism provided the practical support for the process of Christian formation and deepening discipleship. Each of the key Wesleyan theological understandings concerning God's gracious will and mission was supported by distinct small-group structures that could sustain people within a formative community that could help them understand and experience the truth of God in Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.' http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/christian-formation-and-mission-in-early-methodism (accessed 8 September 2016).
13. Text quoted in the Authorised Version as used by John Wesley.
14. Wesley 1786, para 3.7.
15. Wesley 1786, para 1.
16. Fiddes 2000, p. 281.
17. Fiddes 2000, p. 296.
18. Wesley 1786, para 2.3.
19. NRSV, Colossians 1:17, 'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'
20. Wesley 1786, para 3.4.
21. Wesley 1786, para 2.6: 'Be sure to conclude every meeting with prayer. If you cannot yet pray without a form, you may use some of those composed by Mr. Spinckes, or any other pious writer. But the sooner you break through this backwardness the better. Ask of God, and he will open your mouth.' Wesley himself clearly regarded set pastoral prayers as something that can be used but really should not be needed. It has to be said, however, that his own vocabulary had been deeply influenced by the prayers of the Church through daily attendance at Holy Communion and the saying of the daily office. He had plenty to draw on in the moment in order to pray extempore with others.
22. Wesley 1786, para 1.3.
23. For example, Matthew 9:46; 14:14; 15:32; Mark 1:41; 20:34; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 7:13.
24. Wesley 1786, para 2.4.
25. Wesley 1786, para 2.5.
26. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes about the limitations of human perspective using the concept of horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. This limitation cannot be overcome simply by seeking to understand a situation from another's point of view; rather Gadamer argues for a 'fusion of horizons' in which existing and potential horizons are not subordinate to nor separate from one another, but involve both rising to encompass a new shared horizon.
27. Gerkin 1984, p. 27.
28. Riem 1993, p. 48.
29. Wesley 1753, rule 11.

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