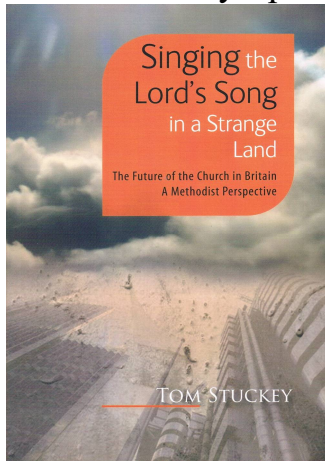


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## Where are we?

TOM STUCKEY

My 2005 Presidential address to the Methodist Conference contained a call to repent. Repentance is necessary because we have domesticated God and substituted Church for Holy Spirit. Reflecting on Ezekiel chapter 37 - the story of the valley of dry bones - I argued that if the Methodist Church is to be renewed we must give priority to Word and Spirit. Throughout my Presidential year I interpreted Word as preaching the Bible, doing theology and helping every member to speak meaningfully about God. Taking the third person of the Trinity seriously means recognising and identifying with the work of the Spirit beyond the borders of the Church, developing fresh ways of being church and praying for the anointing of the Spirit in worship. To that end I gave numerous “appeals” and “altar calls”. When addressing the Ministerial Session of Conference in 2006 I declared “Methodism is approaching a KAIROS moment; a brief window of opportunity, possibly only about five years, in which to turn our church around, or to be more theological - to repent and believe.”



Twelve years have passed. Methodism’s situation is even more precarious with its collapsing membership and dramatic fall in the number of candidates. Even though there are some signs of renewal our Connexional responses to the Spirit remain slow and sluggish. Martin Percy hits the nail on the head when he says “our bureaucracy is stifling our democracy and democracy has triumphed over theocracy”. With regard to theology and “every member speaking about God” Gareth Powell, Secretary of the Conference, has said “there is no shortage of interest and enthusiasm for Methodists to talk about God but whether we know how to do it is a different matter”.

Although we as Methodists carry some responsibility for our own demise, dramatic changes have been taking place within Western society which are affecting all churches. There is the relentless advance of secularization, the unstoppable influence of the internet and the pressure to buy and consume. Have these accelerated the collapse of community, advanced the growth of individualism and the increased wealth gap between those who have and those who have not?

Furthermore the civil wars in Syria, the Yemen and elsewhere have led to vast movements of people fleeing the destruction of their homelands. The stream of migrants into Europe has become an unstoppable flood. In addition, within the West

there is a growing lack of confidence in those who head up our institutions and an increasing exasperation with the political class. This has led to the rise of populism and post-truth propaganda. Professor Martin Conway of Oxford has



suggested that 2016 may well prove to be a liminal year of significance like 1914 and 1945 when familiar ways of doing things came to an end. What does this shift mean for the Church?

All this prompted me to write **Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land. The future of the Church in Britain: A Methodist Perspective**. I argue that the Church in the Western World exists in a Babylon which “snaps, snarls and beguiles the people of God.” The money god is worshipped. The spectacular and sensual are prized. Mammon rules. Memory and the wisdom of the past is maligned. Targets and counting within institutions (like the NHS and the Church) have become more important than relationship building. Has managerialism triumphed over care? In my 150 page book I contend that we have to confront the destructive “principalities and powers” by recovering the Ephesian vision of the riches of God’s grace and holding fast to the traditional hope of our calling. The Methodist Church is now a church without prophetic potency.

Moirra Sleight, editor of the Methodist Recorder has asked me to invite seven contributors to comment on my book. Although I have asked each to focus on a particular chapter I have given them free rein to write in any way they want.

The Revd. Ermal Kirby, Superintendent minister and a former Chair of the London District, will kick off with an article on Babylon.

Ms. Gillian Kingston, Vice President of the World Methodist Council and former Lay Leader of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland, will be asking “Has Methodism lost its way?”

Then we have articles from the Revd. Canon Dr. Jennifer Smith, Minister of Wesley’s Chapel, City Road and the Revd. John Walker, a former Chair of the Chester and Stoke District.

Next comes The Revd. Ruth Gee, Connexional Ecumenical Officer and a former President of the Methodist Conference. She is followed by Prof. Clive Marsh of the University of Leicester who is the current Vice-President Designate of the Methodist Conference.

The penultimate article comes from a recently ordained Methodist Minister, the Revd. Ruth Fry, who is serving in her first circuit. Different insights here I suspect!

Since publication I have addressed several synods, spoken in the New Room Bristol, Sarum College Salisbury and Queen's College Birmingham. The book was also introduced to the Nottingham and Derby synod, explored with the superintendents of the London District and again in Oxford with personnel from the Northampton District. I have been challenged over my rather negative interpretation of Babylon and captivity, taken to task over my criticisms of management and structure, charged with pessimism and praised for inspiration. Such mixed responses are to be expected when you write a polemical book. While some disagreed with my call for repentance most affirmed my comments about the "spiritual emptiness" found in many of our churches. I wonder if the contributors above will make similar comments.

The book has been described by Paul Wilson of Methodist Evangelicals Together as "A prophetic wake-up call to British Methodism based on a clear, prayerful analysis of the problems we face." Dudley Coates, a Past Vice-President of the Methodist Conference writes "Even when I disagree with him, Tom Stuckey has interesting things to say. This book offers many challenges to 21st century Christians located (as Tom argues) in a modern Babylonian captivity where we seek to tame God and fail to grasp that the cross exposes the darker side of human progress."

Peter Hancock, Bishop of Bath and Wells, tells us that the book "brings a new perspective to our thinking about ecumenism and mission" while Bruce Thompson, Chair of the Lincolnshire District, describes the book as a "timely *cri de coeur* on the plight of today's Church" yet a book that "gives us hope as we seek to survive and grow in our very own Babylonian exile."

The Recorder is giving me an opportunity to respond at the end of the series. I shall reflect on John Wesley's dictum "Know your disease! Know your cure!" Although reason and practical activity were important for Wesley, he believed that "only the transcendent power of God's grace could produce the cure." Will that be my conclusion? How are we to sing a new song in Babylon? What will that song be?