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## Has Methodism lost it way?

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“Where do you think the church is going?” One day recently, I was asked this searching question by two different people in different places – one was a man, a former mission partner and an ex-President of the Church, living in Northern Ireland; the other was a woman, an experienced teacher and a trainee Local Preacher, living the Republic of Ireland. In neither case was I sure how to respond.

The Constitution of the Methodist Church in Ireland (of which church I am a life-long and committed member) notes that “under the guidance of God’s Spirit the Methodist Societies gradually developed into a distinct and strongly featured church.” Today, some wonder whether we have lost something of our distinctiveness and have become so engaged with being all things to all people that we are in danger of becoming nothing much to anyone.



During a thought-provoking conference on mission in 2012, the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, Ken Good, pleaded (his word) that ‘the people called Methodist’ remind the rest of the Christian Church of the genius of Methodism. He spoke of the DNA of Methodism, outlining it in terms of “personal holiness, courageous evangelism and compassionate social action”. “Methodism,” he opined, “blends these three things in an edgy kind of way.”

However, are we losing this edginess? Do we turn to “programmes” of various kinds, hoping that among them we may find the panacea for falling numbers and waning enthusiasm? Do we look for experts from afar to diagnose our malaise and prescribe the cure? A Roman Catholic friend defined an expert as “a priest from the next parish carrying a brief case.” We have explored the contents of a number of brief cases!

John Wesley urged, “Know your sin! Know your cure!” Less often quoted is the preceding sentence – “Keep to the plain old faith, once delivered to the saints and delivered by the Spirit of God to our hearts”. (Sermon 44, ‘Original Sin’).

So what might it look like to remember the rock from which we are hewn (Isaiah 51:1) or to repent and do the things (we) did at first (Revelation 2:5)? And would this rule out change? No, of course not! John Henry Newman

observed that “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Change is necessary to life and well-being, but it should not be “born of desperation” as Martyn Atkins suggests, nor merely change for the sake of change.

Change has been most evident in worship. Worship is of the essence in the development of PERSONAL HOLINESS\_and how we “do” worship is of fundamental importance. Screens, chairs and music groups instead of hymnbooks, pews and organs is cosmetic change which does not necessarily contribute to the quality of worship. Tom Stuckey notes that such “mechanical solutions are readily embraced without recourse to theological reflection”. Whatever the relative merits of pews and chairs, much might well be argued with regard to hymnbooks and organs/pianos rather than screens and some music groups. Performance is not a substitute for worship!

William Temple (1881-1944) wrote: “Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of will to his purpose and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

We have to be deeply challenged by this.

In an unexpected conversation about faith and worship which I had with a young man called “James” as we flew over Europe, he said that he liked to sing his Christian faith. “Hymns should be theologically sound. I like to sing; I don’t like to be sung at and I want what I sing to make sense.” (or words to that effect).

“Methodism was born in song” declares the Preface to the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book. In 1738 and since, Methodists have learned their faith and theology through hymns, as Charles Wesley intended they should. Geoffrey Wainwright, Methodist theologian and ecumenist, has said that “by this means, the deep patterns of the Christian faith are entering the memory and shaping the mind.” Can this be said of much of what we sing nowadays?

And what of COURAGEOUS EVANGELISM? Gareth Powell, Secretary of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Britain, has asked pertinently if we can still do God-talk, commenting that there is little evidence of verbal witness.

Peter, writing to the early church, urged his readers to “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1Peter 3.15). Ten years of university chaplaincy has revealed that those of other faiths are generally more articulate about what they believe than Christians who seem overly coy in this respect. It is critical that twenty-first century Christians are tutored in how to do God-talk, how to “gossip the Gospel”, and that in ways which attract rather than repel. Workshops on this are precisely what we need. At prayer gatherings and Bible studies, we often major on feeling rather than on thinking, on emotion rather than on thought. However, if we are to love the Lord our God with our minds as well as with our hearts, souls and strength, we have to work at it and become theologically literate. Our prayer should be that Jesus confirm our hearts’ desire to work and speak and think for him. (cf. StF 564).

So to the matter of COMPASSIONATE SOCIAL ACTION. Here is where we do quite well. It is good news – and for many people. In Ireland, our city missions in Dublin, Derry and the greater Belfast area are beacons of hope for marginalised and underprivileged individuals and families. Furthermore, the compassion of the “people called Methodist” stretches beyond church channels to support of Christian Aid (Ireland), the Peter McVerry Trust (working with the homeless) and similar organisations; through the Barnabas Trust and Church in Chains, Methodists show their concern for persecuted Christians. The list is extensive. We do strive to love the Lord our God – and our neighbour as ourselves.

There is good news and there is less-good news. Have we lost our way? No, but we have meandered off the path somewhat and it is time to get back before we do get lost.

We should be encouraged by the smaller churches in World Methodism, not least those in continental Europe where many Methodist churches are smaller than those on the offshore islands; encouraged too by those who witness to the faith in difficult circumstances. Theirs is not the luxury of shifting church furnishings and changing ecclesial structures; their task, as they see it, is to witness to the Gospel and to proclaim it even when that is challenging– and they get out and do it!

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