

6

The Future Shape of the Methodist Church in Britain

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I have been surprised by God too often to feel that I am on anything approaching firm ground when asked to reflect on the future shape of the Methodist Church in Britain. This was Tom Stuckey's invitation to me which I accepted in the summer, shortly before moving from the north-east of England to London and from the role of Chair of District to that of Connexional Ecumenical Officer. The move reminded me again of the diversity of Methodism and of the very different local contexts in which Christians seek to understand and respond to their calling. Tom challenges us to get this larger perspective and to relinquish our obsession with centralising.



For those who live on the fringes the language of centralisation is threatening at worst and challenging at best. Centralisation is perceived as a drain on scarce resources and removal of independence and worth. Those who don't understand or know us are trying to control us for their own benefit. There may be some truth in this, but those on the fringes are limited in their vision if they see only their own context and fail to grasp the wider picture.

In whatever context they find themselves Christians expect to encounter Christ and be challenged, comforted, inspired or discomfited by the meeting. Whatever the future shape of the Methodist Church it must be Christocentric! The Methodist people must be followers of Jesus Christ and witnesses to him and to the hope that can be found in him. In an increasingly fragmented society, both nationally and world-wide, hope is a rare commodity. By hope I mean that joyful expectation based on and grounded in experience and not that grasping for ephemeral possessions or experience which is laden with expectations that cannot be met. There is an assurance and certainty in hope in Christ which is not found in the hopeful expectation of those buying tickets in the National Lottery.

We are called to witness to Christ in this place and at this time and to believe that here there is hope and opportunity for creativity, fresh expression and a deepening faith and understanding. We are not called to live as people set apart from the world but as people in and inevitably of the world. In Tom's book we are compared with exiles. I think we are better described as settlers in our community.

At the end of a service of Holy Communion we are dismissed with the words “Go in peace in the power of the Spirit to live and work to God’s praise and glory” (MWB 197).

We are sent to engage with those around us and to join in the work for the establishment of God’s ways in the world. In order to do this the Church of the present and the future must engage with politicians, economists, social scientists, scientists, leaders in commerce and industry and many others. We must learn to talk about Jesus and to share the Christian message in ways that can really be heard. We must learn to listen well.

The Church must challenge injustice and listen to the voices that are often unheard. Tom is right to identify this as the acid test and to say, “If a church is not engaged in liberating action on behalf of the weak, the destitute and the powerless then in spite of whatever else might be going on, it has lost its integrity” (p.23). Such engagement is so much a part of our Methodist DNA that to fail to continue would be a denial of our roots and identity and, more importantly, a denial of the gospel.

The future of the Methodist Church is contextual. This means that the places and ways in which Christians gather for worship and engage in mission will be varied and always changing and developing. Tom predicts that our focus in the future will shift from the gathered church to the dispersed church which he defines as diverse communities held in a common system of oversight. This, of course is what we mean by connexion. Connexion is described on the Methodist Church website: “Methodists belong to local churches or ecumenical partnerships, but also feel part of a larger connected community, the Connexion.” At its best this means that there is mutual support and encouragement which includes the provision of those services which enable the circuits and local churches to flourish.

The role of the Connexional Team is to serve the circuits and churches as they seek to fulfil their calling in their context and to support the implementation of the decisions of the Conference. I would dare to suggest that our model of connexionalism is one that could serve the world well in the current political, social and economic context. Properly understood, connexionalism is not about self-seeking and self-perpetuating centralisation. It is about a relationship with one another that is grounded and participates in the dynamic relationship of the creative, redeeming and sustaining God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How does this work out in practice? One example is the reaffirmation of **Our Calling** by the 2018 Methodist Conference. The Conference has resisted the temptation to look for a new initiative in order to respond to the imperative of evangelism, the challenges of declining membership, the need for a fair distribution of resources, and the encouragement to personal commitment to spiritual development. We have remembered the wisdom of the past and recommitted

ourselves to it in order to respond faithfully and appropriately today. “The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.” Our primary calling is to respond to God’s grace, to enter into that relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and then to be changed by it to live as disciples. Having made this reaffirmation the Connexional Team has been shaped in such a way as to be better able to support districts and circuits especially (but not exclusively) in evangelism and worship (two of the four identified means through which we respond to **Our Calling**).

The future Methodist Church in Britain needs to be centred on Christ, to engage contextually in God’s mission and to be Connexional. It must also be ecumenical. We are called to be one. This is a gospel imperative and not an optional extra. It does not mean that we cannot be different from one another; it does not mean that we have to agree on everything but it does mean that we have to be willing to be challenged and enriched by other Christians. We also have to realise that the Methodist Church is not a British institution but a world-wide fellowship; this is something about which Tom has reminded us on many occasions. As we develop our relationship with Methodists from Europe and the rest of the world we can model a different way; a way of fellowship and respect and a way that acknowledges our common humanity and interdependence.

If we are to fulfil our calling then the Methodist Church in Britain has to be Christocentric, contextual and ecumenical. We have a gospel to proclaim!

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