

## WHAT IS THE SPIRIT SAYING TO METHODISM?

The first of a series of three articles by Rev Tom Stuckey former President of the Conference

### Methodism's Amnesia

As a passenger on the good ship *Methodist Connexion* I view with some concern the activities of the officers and crew. I realize that even as a supernumerary minister in the Southampton District I am not meant to be relaxing on a luxury cruise liner heading for sunny shores. Neither do I believe that I am on the Titanic as it ploughs relentlessly through dangerous waters. Why my concern for officers and crew? It is because many are vastly overworked and often struggle to perform tasks which have little direct bearing on what they had signed up for. I am concerned too about the passengers themselves. Increasing numbers are no longer enjoying the trip while quite a few have abandoned ship.

For most of my ministry Methodism has agonised over falling numbers. Such statistics when projected forward predict our inevitable demise. This series of three articles is a reflection on the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18-19). Numbers in that contest do not appear to be the test of effectiveness. Elijah alone achieves what 850 others could not.

The Universal Church over the centuries has always ebbed and flowed, increasing and decreasing in numbers according to the judgement and grace of God and to the movement of the Holy Spirit. I also think any attempt to anticipate Methodism's future from ecclesiastical statistics is extremely problematic. Professor Grace Davie has said 'I have considerable misgivings about projections which examine past and current attendance or membership and use them to predict the future. This kind of forecast depends on the notion that all other things are equal. Never in my professional life have I known a time when this is less likely to be the case.'

I am suggesting that falling numbers do not have the significance we assign to them. The Quakers, for example, have never sought numerical strength yet have had a social impact far in excess of their size. If Methodism in Britain disappears it will do so not because of falling numbers.

Although the historic Church is a Spirit movement of people called to live by faith (The Body of Christ), it is also an organisation (A Holy Temple in the Lord) which as an institution has to be managed. Unfortunately the institutional Church, like all other contemporary organisations in Britain, is being reshaped by powerful forces from outside. Some of this reshaping is a consequence of increased legislation regarding risk, safeguarding, finance, employment, health and safety, human rights etc. etc. Some of it arises because in a post-modern culture leadership has passed to technocrats, image makers and financiers who are thought to have the appropriate skills to manage our institutions. The Church is no exception. Is the Spirit in the Body of Christ being stifled by an ecclesiastical institution which has itself become captive to secular powers? Jesus' comment about new wine and old wineskins is not easily applicable today.

In this series of three articles I shall highlight three key issues which unless addressed will without doubt sink the good ship *Methodist Connexion*. The first of these is loss of memory. Methodism has succumbed to a creeping amnesia through the effects of secularism, top-down managerial ways of working and the loss of the very people within our Church who, because of their rich experience of the past, were able to effectively confront the pragmatic decision-making of the present.

The American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes memory as a magnet which in drawing the people of God back to the past gives a proper stimulus to prophetic imagination in the present. He sets out the principle that 'Only memory allows possibility'. A church suffering from amnesia has no future. If memory is the key to possibility, where is memory to be found?

In the Elijah story, memory is to be found in ‘the seven thousand in Israel’ who have not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19.18). Elijah does not appear to have recognised their significance or sought to listen to what they might have to say or contribute. He operates a ‘top down’ rather than a ‘bottom up’ model of ministry. Our Methodist organisation, due to the secular pressures described above, now operates a similar Elijah ‘top-down’ model. Churches with grey headed congregations have things ‘done to them’ from above and become increasingly passive and demoralized. Even in our so called ‘consultations’ are they really being listened to? These at the local level are the very people who prayerfully and sacrificially uphold the ‘organism’ of Methodism and furthermore carry Methodist memory in their blood. As Methodism continues to panic over loss of numbers this managerial rationalization of our Church will only get worse – UNLESS!

Brueggemann commenting on the people of God living in a secular Babylon says ‘When we have completely forgotten our past, we absolutize the present and we will be like contented cows in Bashan who want nothing more than the best of today.’ Those who lead Methodism must put their ears to the ground and listen to our neglected remnant community. Maybe those who lead should have conversations with those experienced superannuated Ministers and retired lay persons who still wish to make a reflective contribution to the future shaping of the church they love rather than simply be sought out to fill the gaps which keep opening up at circuit level. The key to our future lies at the grass roots rather than with a stage managed Methodist Conference or synod. ‘Only memory allows possibility!’

*Next time ‘Ministerial Madness’*