

WHAT IS THE SPIRIT SAYING TO THE METHODISM?

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

Repairing the Altars of Sacrifice

The theme of this year's Methodist Prayer Handbook is *Partners in Sacrifice*. It is well chosen reminding us that we as members of the Church are called to share in Christ's sacrifice. Although we are servants of the Church, the Church is not our master. Should we therefore sacrifice ourselves to save Methodism?

I have argued that Methodism's future is uncertain not because of a loss of numbers but because of loss of memory and loss of theology. In 1 Kings 18-19, which has been the basis of these reflections, Elijah does not sacrifice himself, he 'repairs the altar of sacrifice'. This action was a prophetic challenge to the ministerial madness of those who lacked theological insight and who in frenetic activity sacrificed themselves up to the spirit of the age. In this last article I wish to highlight Methodism's third loss; namely loss of Spirit.

How can Methodism's congregations recover their spiritual confidence and begin, in Richard Vautrey's words, to party again? Instead of focusing on John Wesley's organisational and managerial legacy we should return to singing his brother's hymns. The Elijah story is full of Holy Spirit symbolism. We can recapture an Elijah experience when we sing and pray 'Kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart.' And how about:

'Saw ye not the cloud arise,
Little as a human hand?
Now it spreads along the skies,
Hangs o'er all the thirsty land:
Lo, the promise of a shower
Drops already from above;
But the Lord will shortly pour
All the Spirit of his love!'

The coming of a Pentecost in rain, wind and fire is not the whole story. The Spirit was quietly at work in a remnant who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah ignored them. Are our Methodist leaders doing the same in not pastorally listening to what the Spirit is saying at grass roots?

In January 2015 the former Presidents and Vice Presidents of the Methodism Church are invited by Kenneth Howcroft and Gill Dascombe to a Forum. Such a consultation happened once before. On that occasion we were 'talked at' even 'talked down to' but not consulted. At this more critical time will we finally be listened to?

In 1965 the President Gordon Rupp, spoke to the Ministerial Session of Conference, stating that Methodism was facing one of those 'turning points in the history of our Church'. He was addressing a decade when secularism was starting to make inroads into the Methodist Church. The subject of his address was the 'Pastoral Office'. He suggested that the survival of God's people depended on the effectiveness of the pastor. 'The thought of Christ as Shepherd is not marginal to the New Testament view of ministry but it goes pretty near the heart of the matter.' The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Sacrifice is at the heart of the pastoral office. Without 'caring to the point of sacrifice...all our training and our equipment, old or new, become gadgets and gimmicks.' We must think of people rather than geography.

What would he now say as our numbers plummet and as presbyters, deacons and lay-folk rush about to preserve the Methodist Institution? He argued in 1965 that the 'vain prophecy' which was beguiling so many needed 'the correct of history'. We need that today.

The most moving part of his address was his quotations from the obituaries of four ministers, one who died in 1777, one in 1802, one in 1873 and the fourth in 1953. These were invoked to show that although contexts and patterns changed, the exercise of the ministry of Christ the Shepherd gave these ministers a spirit of joy, fulfilment and radiance. They made the sacrifice complete.

I am arguing that the life-giving spirit of Methodism is being destroyed rather than renewed because of our obsession with structures and reshaping initiatives. When I listen to the experiences of the older members in our local congregation and hear the stories of former Methodists who inspired them, led them to Christ, fed them and cared for them it is painfully obvious to me why we have become a failing Church. Those at grass roots have broken memories just like the stones of the sacrificial altar which Elijah repaired. He did not technically rebuild the altar, neither did he repair it. It was not the sort of building activity which Methodists love. The root of both Hebrew verbs is the same. The word *rapha* translates 'heal'. He lovingly took up these stones and cherished them. When I expound the Scriptures with members in our local churches I am filled with sorrow because so many in our congregations are not cherished and most are spiritually starved. They are like sheep without a shepherd. We are not getting it right. The Spirit is telling us to repent.

Richmond College was founded in 1842 as a Methodism Missionary College. Fixed to the walls of its lofty entrance hall were memorial boards listing the names of those who served the church in other lands and died in the field. The list of those who served in West Africa and the former Gold Coast is particularly poignant. Missionary after missionary died about three weeks after landing. If they survived 'seasoning fever' they might live for a year or so. The tradition of my college was that on hearing the news of another death a student would offer to fill the gap.

These boards now hang of the walls of Church House in Marylebone Road. We need to look at them again and we repent. 'Only memory allows possibility' says Brueggemann.