



The Methodist Church In Ireland

**The Methodist Church in Ireland
Faith & Order Committee
'A Fresh Expression of Our Mission'
A Discussion Paper**

"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out."

John Wesley, Thoughts Upon Methodism, London, August, 1786.



Introduction

In preparation for the special Annual Conference, 2013: 'A People Invited to Follow,' the Faith and Order Committee has prepared this relatively short statement. The Committee hopes that it will aid the Connexion-wide process of reflection concerning the future of the Methodist Church in Ireland and, in particular, our effectiveness in relation to the mission which God has entrusted to us.

Our Wesleyan heritage provides a number of distinctive features that make it particularly relevant for 21st century Ireland. In this document, we articulate *five key contributions* that we believe our inherited Methodist theology can make to our reflection on contemporary mission, and offer a number of questions for further discussion.

Throughout this document, we have aimed to embrace the important Methodist principle of holding competing strands of thought together in a productive tension. This productive tension is evident both in the topics themselves, and in the questions we have provided that grow from them. We hope that you- as a Special Conference participant- will take some time to reflect on these questions in preparation for the Special Conference and that our combined thinking might aim to draw productively from multiple and competing streams of thought.

1. An Articulated Framework for Theological Thinking

Irish culture is full of competing claims about right theology and right church practice. In this context, effective mission will require us to be clear about why we take the decisions that we do, and will involve drawing people into our process of theological thinking. Our Wesleyan heritage offers us a framework for thinking through issues from a theological perspective. One way of describing this framework is attributed to the late Albert Outler and is widely referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The model implies that theology in the Wesleyan tradition will always involve Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience.

Scripture: All good Christian theology is related to the Bible and Methodism shares with other churches the conviction that Scripture contains 'all things necessary for salvation'.

Tradition: Methodism shares its deepest theological convictions with other Christians, that Great Tradition that is embodied in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. It also bears its own tradition which has particular emphases on- for example- the understanding of grace.

Reason: John Wesley has been described as a ‘reasonable enthusiast’ and Wesleyan theology has had a place for human reason in its many forms.

Experience: Experience is the element that Wesleyan tradition adds to what Anglicanism has sometimes called ‘the three-legged stool’. John Wesley called his an ‘experimental divinity’ and called on people to look for evidence, in the world around them as well as within themselves, of the things they are saying about God, the universe and humanity.

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we read Scripture in the present? How do we allow God to speak to us through the stories and wisdom of this book?
2. How do we live creatively with tradition, so that we are both faithful and dynamic?
3. How does our theological thinking relate to the challenges and possibilities of contemporary science, psychology, philosophy and the arts?
4. How do we reflect on our experience in contemporary Ireland so that our theology is rooted and leads to appropriate action?
5. What strategies do we have for inviting people to join in discussion shaped around these sources for theological thinking?

2. Acceptance with Accountability

The need to strike a balance between acceptance and accountability was one of the ongoing aspects of our discussion as a Faith and Order Committee, and one that seems intensely pertinent to the task of articulating a vision for mission in 21st century Ireland. Both of these emphases are deeply embedded in Wesleyan theology.

Wesleyans believe that God's grace is available to all people and that it is active in people's lives long before they become aware of it. Wesleyan theology proposes that it is God's grace that restores in us the ability to respond in faith, and that God's grace is what enables us to grow in faith throughout our lives. We also believe that it is God's grace that gives us assurance of our salvation. Because of the emphasis on the life of faith being pervaded by grace that comes, not from us, but from God, Methodists are inclined to be accepting and open, bearing in mind the potential of God's grace to work in everyone in varying ways.

On the other hand, Methodism has rightly been called "a discipleship movement."¹ Donald English commented that it was important to remember that the Methodist people want to be better than they are – better disciples of Jesus Christ than they are.² John Wesley put great emphasis not only on conversion, but also on the necessity for maturing and equipping believers.

Wesley had 4 basic convictions for discipleship:

1. The necessity of discipleship: *"I am more convinced that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place (any church) should be half-awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again."*³
2. The necessity of small groups for discipleship: his 3-strand process: the Crowd, the Cell, the Core. (www.CoreDiscipleship.com)
3. The necessity of leadership in discipleship: Wesley trained and mobilized a massive army of leaders, putting as many as 1-10 of his members into leadership roles- people of all walks of life.
4. Holiness and Service as the goals of discipleship. We are told that the people produced through Wesley's system reformed both the church and the society in which they lived.

While thinking about the balance between acceptance and accountability, the Faith and Order Committee found that its discussion was helped by a case study. We wondered how we would engage with the following situation: An elderly man begins attending worship in a Methodist Society because his grandson is involved in the Boys' Brigade service. He continues attending, but sits always in the back

pew and seems happy to just ‘come along’ and is unwilling to become involved any further. How should the congregation engage with him bearing in mind the balance between affirming God’s grace already at work in his life, and the church’s responsibility to encourage him in his journey of discipleship?

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we urge people to mature in their Christian lives while maintaining a spirit of openness?
2. What do our people understand to be a disciple? Can (and should) this definition be consistent across the Connexion?
3. What would it look like to shape our church structures for fostering discipleship? What does the importance of acceptance contribute to our reflections on these structures?
4. How do we develop discipleship and avoid the pitfalls of division within the church?
5. When we consider our ministries, programmes and activities, how would we answer the question ‘How will this make disciples?’

3. Personal and Social Holiness

Wesleyan theology helpfully holds together two emphases that often compete for our attention when we consider the goals of mission: the personal and the social. Talk about mission can lead us to think of preaching personal salvation, but this is only one of the important emphases that merit consideration. It is indeed good news that when we die we will be resurrected. However, the undercurrent of God’s activity is far more encompassing and is rooted in God’s determination to set things right. To truly share in the good news means living in God’s Kingdom now, allowing God’s rule and reign now.

Within Wesleyan theology our embrace of the good news incorporates us into the journey toward holiness. Our emphasis upon perfect love of God and neighbour as the goal of the Christian life gives an indication of the essentially bi-focal nature of Christian holiness and participation in God’s good news. Thus we are invited to “live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27a) and to “do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”⁴

Personal piety and compassionate social action depend upon and feed one another. Works of mercy are among the means of grace of which every believer is urged to avail in the journey toward holiness. And faith working through love, is the natural and necessary response to God's grace experienced in the believer's life.

John Wesley had a passion for the needs of the whole person, and stated that there was no holiness that was not social holiness.⁵ He frequently described holiness as 'renewal of the whole image of God' and he did not understand this in a purely individualistic way. For Wesley the spreading of scriptural holiness entailed changing the economic and political order of his time, it involved fighting for the abolition of slavery and justice for the poor.

The emphases of the personal and social are enmeshed and intertwined, relying one upon the other for the glory of the Kingdom. Surely the greater love we have in heart and soul and mind, the less the world sees in us our human frailty and the more it will see God in all His glory.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we hold the balance between personal piety and compassionate social action?
2. Why do we not embrace the doctrine of Perfect Love? Why do we not aspire to it, speak of it, teach it? Are we fearful of setting the bar of personal holiness too high?
3. In what ways is the doctrine of Perfect Love relevant today? How is the pressing need to share the gospel with those who have not heard it informed and aided by compassionate social action?
4. How do we maintain an explicit focus on the role of God's grace in our journey towards holiness? How should we relate to the idea of activism in our preaching, teaching and thinking about personal and social holiness?
5. How important is compassionate social action in our communities today? How well is the Methodist church meeting the social needs of our society?
6. How important is personal piety in our communities today? How is the Methodist church urging people to live lives of personal holiness?

4. Importance of Community

Our Wesleyan heritage offers us some distinctive points of emphasis for considering how a missional church reflects on its own structure. *The Missional Nature of the Circuit* - developed by the Methodist Church in Britain - helpfully states that Methodist ecclesiology, whilst having much in common with that of other Christian Churches, has some distinctive emphases:

These are essentially threefold: first, an emphasis on ‘relatedness’ as essential to the concept of ‘church’, finding expression in ‘the connexional principle’; second, an emphasis, stemming from Methodism’s societal past, on fellowship and shared discipline, exercised through small groups, and third, the conviction that the Church should be structured for mission, and able to respond pragmatically, when new needs or opportunities arise.⁶

Methodist local churches subsist only in circuits: our local churches have the task of sharing in the whole ministry of Christ – in their neighbourhoods through worship, fellowship, pastoral care, teaching, mission and service as well as in the wider world by prayers, gifts and outreach. The grouping of local churches in circuits reflects the Methodist belief that no local church is an autonomous unit complete in itself. Each local church is linked essentially and structurally to the wider Church. Circuit structures represent interdependence, relatedness, mutual responsibility, and submission to mutual jurisdiction. The Circuit system makes it possible to deploy resources in an area wider than that of the local church. Our ordained ministers often have responsibility for more than one local church. This structure involves a partnership between lay people and ordained ministers. Districts make possible what cannot be achieved by Circuits, because they are too small, or by the Connexion, because it is too large.

Flexibility is itself an important principle, rooted in Scripture, theology and experience. Methodists, therefore, should not feel the need to defend their existing structures resolutely. What we must treasure and preserve are the underlying principles, of interdependence and relatedness, of small group fellowship and discipline, and of a flexibility which enables the Church to be ever more effectively structured for mission. Our Methodist history encourages experimentation, diversity and attention to missional context. John Wesley emphasised that spiritual efficacy has priority over outward patterns of ecclesiastical organisation. Therefore, the nature of the 21st century circuit should not depend on cherished traditions but on God’s call to engage with His changing world. Our circuit development is only limited by our ability and willingness to respond to God’s call to engage in mission and ministry for God’s Kingdom.

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. Could our Districts become the focus for widespread adult education and leadership development programmes?
2. Do we need a more collaborative understanding of ministry? What would that look like?
3. How might Local Preachers and the future development of a Diaconal Order for Christian service be used for mission in 21st century Ireland?
4. How do we assess how we are using the gifts of both ordained and lay leaders? Are such being used where the needs are greatest?
5. How do we breathe new life into what may have become semi-redundant structures?

5. Missional Focus

As reflected throughout this document, the Methodist church is, in its very roots a missional movement. We are committed to outreach and are reflecting on what makes for effective mission in our current context. As never before on this island, Christians of all persuasions are encountering those of other major world faiths and those militantly of no faith at all. In each case, the proponents are frequently much more articulate about their position than are Christians. It must no longer be assumed that it is sufficient- if it ever was so- to have the heart in the right place; the mind must also be engaged.

The Methodist Church has to be intentional about training its members to speak of the things of the faith. Courses and workshops in faith-sharing will need to be developed to help our people to overcome what may be a natural reticence in speaking clearly and intelligently about matters which have tended to become consigned to the realm of the personal or only spoken of in church and fellowship circles.

Along with this must be an acute awareness of the context in which Christians in Ireland witness. There are representatives of many world faiths among us: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, to name but some; there are those who are disillusioned and cynical. It is incumbent on those who would name the name of Christ that they are in a position to speak with gentleness and respect to those they encounter- and this can only come through a measure of understanding of where others are at in terms of faith. It is clearly good teaching practice to start where the listener is and bring him/her to another place. To say, as some do, that learning about other faiths is unnecessary, even wrong, is naïve. The Methodist Church needs to be intentional in providing appropriate material to enable its members to relate to persons on other faiths and of none.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does our emphasis on discipleship inform our reflection on courageous evangelism?
2. What would programmes of apologetics training look like in our current context?

Conclusion

This document has not aimed at a comprehensive account of the Methodist theological heritage. It focuses, rather, on aspects of that heritage that the Faith and Order Committee thinks might helpfully spark further conversation about effective mission in our current context. We hope that you will find it a useful resource as you prepare to engage in the discussions of the Special Conference and that Districts, Circuits and local congregations will build upon this document and the discussions of the Conference as they seek to express mission in their own context. We will value very much receiving reactions and responses. Following the Special Conference the Faith and Order Committee will reflect whether it might prepare a draft Statement on Mission for consideration and approval by Conference in 2014 to guide the Church in meeting the challenges ahead.

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(Endnotes)

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2 Cited in Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship ... and the people called Methodists*. Online <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pubs-intra-discipleship-120710.pdf>. Accessed 15 February, 2013. Page 6.

3 "The Journal of John Wesley" in *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.* (John Emory, Ed.; Vol. 3; New York: Emory and Waugh, 1831), Page 282. Online http://books.google.ie/books?id=qy_AAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false. Accessed 15 February, 2013.

4 This last quotation, though widely attributed to Wesley, should probably be considered a piece of Methodist folk wisdom rather than a direct quote of the movement's founder according to Dr. Ted Campbell cited in Mary Jacobs, "Wesley, misquoted – Methodism's founder gets a little too much credit." *The United Methodist Reporter*. 16 September 2011. Online <http://umportal.org/article.asp?id=8201>. Accessed 15 February 2013.

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