



# **What's so special about Methodism?**

**By Pete Brazier**

An exploration of what it is to be a 21st  
Century Methodist & what  
Methodism brings to the ecumenical table.

# What's so special about Methodism?

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1. The structures of Methodism.
2. Some roles & other vital features of Methodism.
3. The theology & books of Methodism.
4. Methodism; past, present & future.

This is a course for those seeking membership, for those already in membership, for those deliberately avoiding membership and for those thoroughly confused by Methodism in general. It is for those seeking to be serious and relevant disciples of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.

***'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.'***

John Wesley (1786)

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**The PowerPoint presentations for this course are available at;**

<http://thornburymethodist.org.uk/storage/wssam/wssam01.pptx>

<http://thornburymethodist.org.uk/storage/wssam/wssam02.pptx>

<http://thornburymethodist.org.uk/storage/wssam/wssam03.pptx>


<http://thornburymethodist.org.uk/storage/wssam/wssam04.pptx>

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Thanks to my wife, Debs Brazier, for her various contributions to the text of this course.

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## How to use this course

- This course is designed to be done over four weekly sessions with the introduction included as part of the first session. Each session should take about an hour and a half with time for a 15 minute break in the middle of each session. However, feel free to adjust this to your needs.
-  (slide number) This symbol indicates that you should move to the next slide on the PowerPoint presentation. All the information needed to follow the course is here in the book, but if you are studying this as a group the PowerPoint or some handouts will be important for some of the visuals. There are four separate .pptx files so the numbers return to one for each session.

• **Comments in green like this are there to invite interaction and conversation**

- It should also be noted that this course is designed for use in the *British* Methodist Church. Feel free to use it elsewhere, but who knows what the consequences of that might be?

That's all, enjoy the journey...

"We bring the tea and biscuits to the ecumenical table"

- Elizabeth 'Betty' Evans





# Session 1: Introduction & Structure

## Introduction

**Invite people to fill in question sheets with any questions they may have about Methodism<sup>1</sup>**

We should begin by saying what this course is about. And it may be best to do this in part by means of saying what this course is not about;


 (2.1) 1. This course is not about learning the basics and the fundamentals of the Christian faith, if there is anyone following this course who has never been to church or knows little of the Christian faith, this may not be the course for you - that said, hopefully the essence of the Christian faith will be present in all that we talk about. And also, if you entered this course with no knowledge of Christianity, and attended each of the four sessions, hopefully you would be able to give a reasonable description of what a Christian is, and what Church is by the end of the course

 (2.2) 2. This is not a course about how Methodism is better than the other denominations. We will confront some of the flaws in Methodism, and there will also be many good things about other denominations that we will not cover here. We won't cover those things partly because there wouldn't be enough time to look at all the denominations in proper detail; partly because there are other people who would be better at

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix


talking about the nuances of those denominations. But more importantly, because this is a course about what Methodism brings to the ecumenical table. And this may be a new way of thinking for many people.


 (2.3) 3. This is not a course that is advocating denominationalism, nor is it saying we are done with denominations. There are those people who see their particular church tradition as the be all and end all of Christian experience and are therefore far too entrenched to think about genuinely working together with other denominations. There are also those who see the denominations that we live with today as nothing more than an unfortunate hangover from a history of divisions, that we should simply forget about and move on. The thinking is that surely if we are all following the same God, we should all be part of the same church. After all, what do any of these details matter, as long as we all love God and love our neighbour?

In many ways this course sits more comfortably with the second way of thinking than the first. We should instinctively be more for working together than working separately, but neither viewpoint fully confronts the reality of where we are. There were reasons for the divides in the denominations and though some of those reasons have been resolved over time, others still remain. Some differences are trivial or simply about personal preference, others are significant and important. Some differences are ancient history and others are current and raw. When negotiating the

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world of ecumenical relations, it is all the more important to have a good understanding of the essence of our differences. Not so that we can remain separate but so that we know what is at stake; so we know when to treat each other with gentle grace and when to be firm, when to say our differences are of no significance and when it is time for us to learn from the wisdom of our fellow Christians. If we are truly to work in unity then we need to be honest about our differences and if we are to learn from each other then we need to know ourselves. If we don't know what we have as Methodists then we will be unable to share it with our neighbours of other denominations.

 (3) So who is this course for? It is for those seeking membership, for those already in membership, for those deliberately avoiding membership and for those thoroughly confused by Methodism in general. Most of all it is for those seeking to be serious and relevant disciples of Jesus Christ in the 21st century and who happen to be seeking it through the Methodist Church.

 (4) This course is very much rooted in a statement made by John Wesley back in 1786. He said 'I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.'<sup>2</sup> This

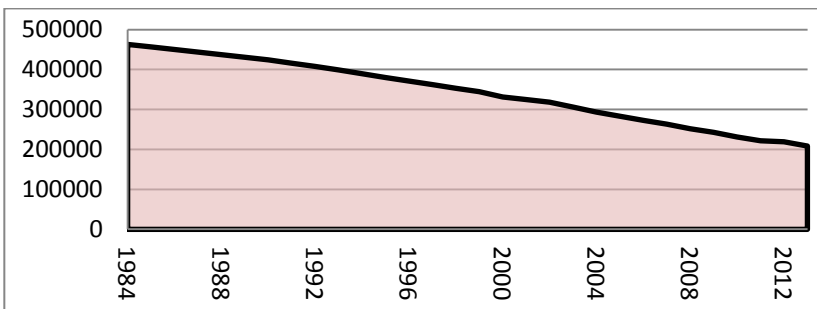
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<sup>2</sup> Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley, Vol 9, The Methodist Societies: History, Nature and Design* (Abingdon Press, 1989) 547

statement is a vitally important one because it shows that John Wesley himself understood the complexity of the ecumenical landscape. Denominations are necessary because they carry particular religious identities, they allow us to experiment with what it is to be Church; what it is to be God's people; to explore the nature of the Kingdom that is coming, but denominationalism can never be our ultimate goal. John Wesley's statement is also important because it is brought painfully into focus by the continued decline of the Methodist Church over recent years.

In March 2014, Rev David Flavell posted an article on the internet called 'Year Zero'<sup>3</sup>, which shows statistically how, without change, the membership of the Methodist Church will hit zero in the year 2033, that's just 19 years away.

 (5) 30 year decline in Methodism



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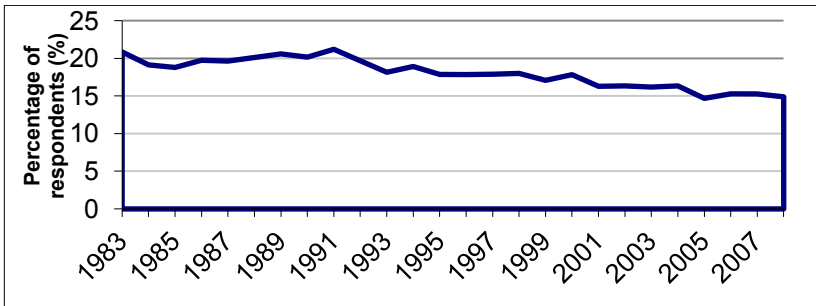
<sup>3</sup> David Flavell, Year Zero  
<http://davidflavell.wordpress.com/2014/03/25/year-zero/> Posted on March 25, 2014

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This is the graph of membership statistics that David included in his article which shows the fall in figures from 1984 to 2013. And whilst this is a major issue for Methodists, let us not imagine that this is a Methodist only issue.



### (6) Respondents attending church at least monthly, 1983-2008 (%)<sup>4</sup>



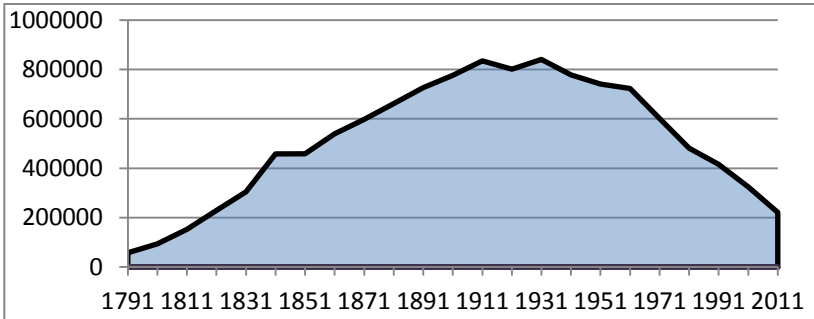
This graph, from the organisation British Religion in Numbers shows a drop in monthly attendance figures across all denominations from 20.9% in 1983 to 14.9% in 2008. On the basis of that graph, year zero for the Church as a whole in England and Wales is 2068.

Here are two graphs showing the change in Methodist Church membership since the end of 18th Century.

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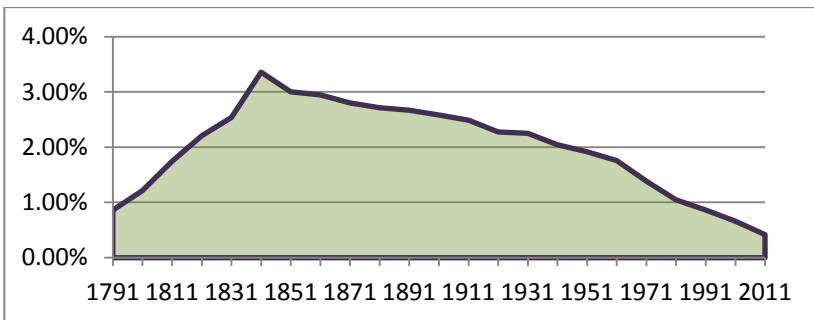
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/#AffiliationAttendance>

 (7) Members of Methodism from 1791 - 2011<sup>5</sup>



The first shows the membership from 1791 to 2011 in ten year gaps. It shows our numerical peak in the 1940s-50s, and whilst it shows that we are in a fairly desperate down trend, there are still significantly more of us than when Wesley died in 1791. However if we plot our membership as a percentage of the ever increasing population we get a very different picture.

 (8) Members of Methodism as % of Population of England



<sup>5</sup> Both of these graphs are based on stats provided by David Flavell  
<http://www.flavell.vispa.com/methodist%20membership.xls>






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In this graph we see that, relative to the whole population our peak was way back in the 1840's and we now have around half the cultural influence we had when Wesley died. Why is this relevant as an introduction to a course on Methodism? Because whatever we do, the face of Christianity has changed and will continue to change significantly in the near future, it will change either with us or without us. These numbers are relevant because how we go about being Church is important and over the next 50 years we could all but disappear if we fail to pay attention to how God is calling us to be Church. And we begin this by looking at what is good and worth keeping in our current way of being Church.


**Invite people to get into groups and talk about how they feel about the statistics.**

## Session 1 - The Structures of Methodism

**Invite people to remain in their groups and draw a diagram of how they think Methodist structure works.**

 (9) As of 2012 there were  (9.1) 4,886 Methodist Church Communities in the British Methodist Church,  (9.2) 397 Circuits,  (9.3) 31 Districts but we are all part of  (9.4) one Connexion.<sup>6</sup> That is the structure that we will be exploring in this session.

 (10) There is a book called the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church. This book will be explained in a little more depth later in the course, but for now it will be sufficient to know that it will generally be referred to as 'CPD', and it basically contains the rules of Methodism. The preface to CPD volume 1 contains this handy little statement about the structure of Methodism;


 (11) "Each local church is a member of a larger body, subject to a common discipline and pattern of government, sharing in a wider life. The authority of Conference, legally given by Act of Parliament, has its theological basis in this understanding of the church as a 'connexion' of local

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<sup>6</sup> Based on data from <http://www.methodist.org.uk/mission/statistics-for-mission>

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churches, circuits and districts, expressing their fellowship in the Body of Christ by their constitutional ties."<sup>7</sup>

It carries on to say;  (12) "The fact that most aspects of constitutional practice and discipline can be amended, and that such amendments occur so frequently is also significant. Changes reflect not only the need for administrative adjustment, but the conviction that the church must not stand still, but must move forward as the Spirit leads, and is always in need of reform." The ability to change is written into our constitution, and that is something to bear in mind as we carry on. So let's look at the parts of the Methodist structure beginning with the connexion;


## Connexion & Conference

Connexional thinking is one of the key features of Methodism. We are not isolated congregations just doing our own thing, nor are we subject to some overarching hierarchy of leaders that tell us what to do, rather we attempt govern ourselves collectively and share our ideas and experiences, our hopes and fears, our troubles and our lessons learnt with the whole connexion so that we might do better at being Church together.

The Methodist Church website has this to say on the subject;

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<sup>7</sup> The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 1 (Werrington: MPH, 2005) iii

 (13) "Methodists belong to local churches or ecumenical partnerships, but also feel part of a larger connected community, the Connexion.

This sense of being connected makes a difference to how the Methodist Church as a whole is structured. At its heart is an understanding of the Christian community as the 'body of Christ'. Just as a human body contains different limbs and organs that depend on each other, so we should be close and caring enough to feel each other's pain and delight. We should put the good of the whole body before our own individual needs.

The promise of mutual support is a strength of Methodism. If you become a member of the Methodist Church, a pastoral visitor is responsible for visiting you and offering spiritual support, encouragement and challenge.

In the Methodist Church decisions are made as openly as possible, giving opportunities for all to contribute. It is important for all views to be heard and taken seriously, especially where Christians disagree."<sup>8</sup>

 (14) The Connexion web page on the Methodist Church website includes this quote from John Wesley 'Do not

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/structure/the-connexion>

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allow yourself one thought of separating from your brothers and sisters, whether their opinions agree with yours or not.'<sup>9</sup>

But this collective governance needs a mechanism by which to work. A primary part of that mechanism is Conference, the annual meeting which makes decisions about how we do things and what things ought to change. 🌐 (15) The conference is made up of 306 people two of whom are the President and Vice President who change each year. There are representatives from various committees that sort stuff out for us, some world church representatives, and the chair persons from each of the districts. The rest is made up of lay and clergy representatives sent from the District Synods. This collection of 306 people changes significantly each year, and that is an important part of what makes Methodism different.


This meeting, which is made up primarily from people sent by the Districts, makes decisions on questions and suggestions put to it mainly from the District Synods. This is how Methodism remains united as one Church but constantly in a state of reform. It is not a perfect system, there are times when it seems to some people that we have moved too quickly on a particular issues, there are times when it seems to some that we are moving too slowly and there are times when some feel that the wrong decisions have been made.


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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/the-connexion>

But this system has kept us at the forefront of social justice and ethical issues; it has helped ensure that the voices of local church members could be heard at the national level since the beginning of the Methodist movement in the 18th century. It has helped us to move relatively quickly with minimal divisions on several key issues over the years; on subjects like racial justice, women's rights, ordination of women, the environment and human sexuality. These issues are for the most part brought to the conference from the District so let's look briefly at the Districts now;

## District & Synod

 (16) The District serves the Local Churches and Circuits and the Conference by acting as a kind of bridge between the local and the national concerns. Its primary purpose is to advance the mission of the Methodist Church in a region by providing opportunities for Circuits to work together and support each other, offering them resources of finance, personnel, expertise and training opportunities which may not be available locally.

One of the particular ways in which we see the importance of the District is in the Synod which happens twice a year with the addition of a Ministerial Synod.  (17) The two normal (representative) Synod meetings are made up primarily of the ministers from the District and lay representatives from each circuit. The synod elects the

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representatives that will go to conference and chooses the bulk of the questions that go to conference.


 (18)


### 15 Minute Break


**After the break might be a good time to make some response to the question sheets**


And so we move on to the circuits.


## Circuit


 (19) In the early days of Methodism preachers would travel from town to town, to preach the Gospel in the street or to preach to the Methodist societies that were springing up all around the country. Local class leaders, who were not ordained clergy, would have pastoral care of the societies and lay people would be trained to be local preachers. The Clergy were appointed to travel around these towns in a 'circuit' and they were appointed each year by the conference to a particular circuit. Now on the surface many things have changed since those early days, but the same basic mechanisms underpin the circuit system. There are a number of things to point out about this system;

 (19.1) Circuits are primarily about furthering the mission of God, and offering support to the local societies or churches.

 (19.2) Ministers are appointed by conference to circuits not to individual churches; that was true then and is still true now.


 (19.3) The pastoral responsibility, the responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the members is shared by both lay people and clergy.

 (19.4) Local lay preachers have been a vital part of the circuit system since these early days and are still just as important today. Methodism neither restricts preaching to ordained clergy, nor does it simply allow anyone to preach without training and assessment. This is a really important.

 (19.5) There is no circuit without the local churches and there is no local church without the circuit.

 (20) **Show video - "The World is my Parish"<sup>10</sup>**

## Congregation

 (21) There are many variations in what Methodist worship looks like around the country. There are an increasing number of congregations that are experimenting with new

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehL4g6b4bT0>

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forms of worship and fresh expressions of Church, but underneath all of these is the same Methodist engine; of pastoral care through lay and ordained people, of church councils who make decisions about the running of the Church and stewards who, with the minister look after the leadership of the church. In the next session we will cover in greater detail a number of the key features and roles within the Local Church, but let us dwell just for a moment with the flavour of Methodism

Many people will recognise the regular pattern of Sunday worship in a lot of Methodist churches with hymns and prayers, with readings and sermons. Often the hymns are accompanied by an organ and occasionally with a choir; though in many churches nowadays the organ and choir have been replaced by a band with guitars and drums. What we now think of as a traditional Methodist congregation looks fairly similar to many denominations on the surface, but the origins were somewhat different.

We grew out of small home groups that were dedicated to discipleship, to mutual accountability and holiness, to sharing the gospel and reforming the church in this country. We grew from groups that had been inspired by street preachers to see that being a Christian was not something that happens simply by behaving within the acceptable norms of society, it was not about the outward image of respectability but rather the seeking inner holiness that transforms your whole being.

There is an increasing call in these changing times for us to return to some of those early principles. Not to simply go back to the past, to copy and paste the activities of the early Methodist Church on to the present day landscape. Rather to take the intentions of those early days and reinterpret them for our current situation. Martyn Atkins, the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, has framed this desire in his aspirational description of the Methodist Church as a  (22) "discipleship movement shaped for mission."<sup>11</sup> We will explore later in the course what that phrase means in a little more depth, but the idea of the Methodist Church as a whole as a movement brings us neatly back from the local church to the big picture.  (23)

## Structure recap

**Invite people to share how they might change the diagrams they produced at the beginning of the session.**

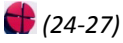
**Show 2 diagrams of the Methodist Church Structure and encourage a discussion on them both;**

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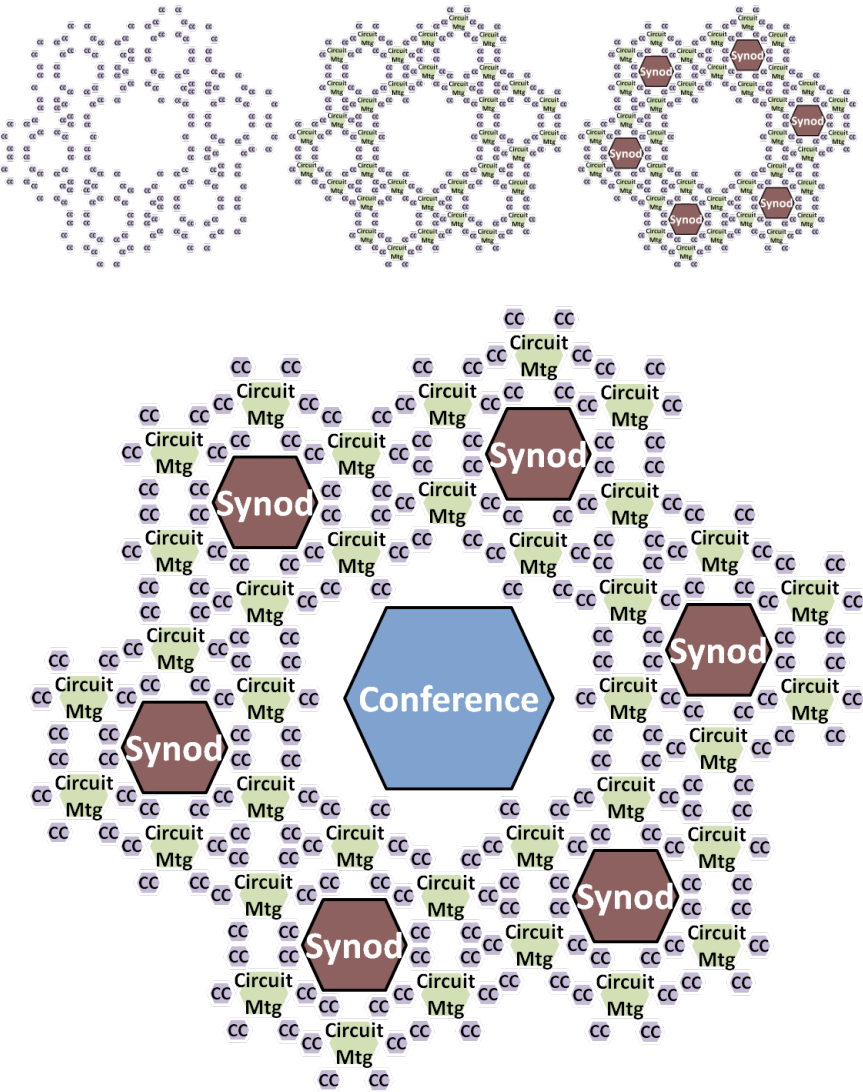
<sup>11</sup> Martyn Atkins, *Contemporary Methodism: A discipleship movement shaped for mission* (A summary of the General Secretary's Report to the Methodist Conference, 2011)

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/intra-contemporary-methodism-280611.pdf>

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## Meetings Diagram

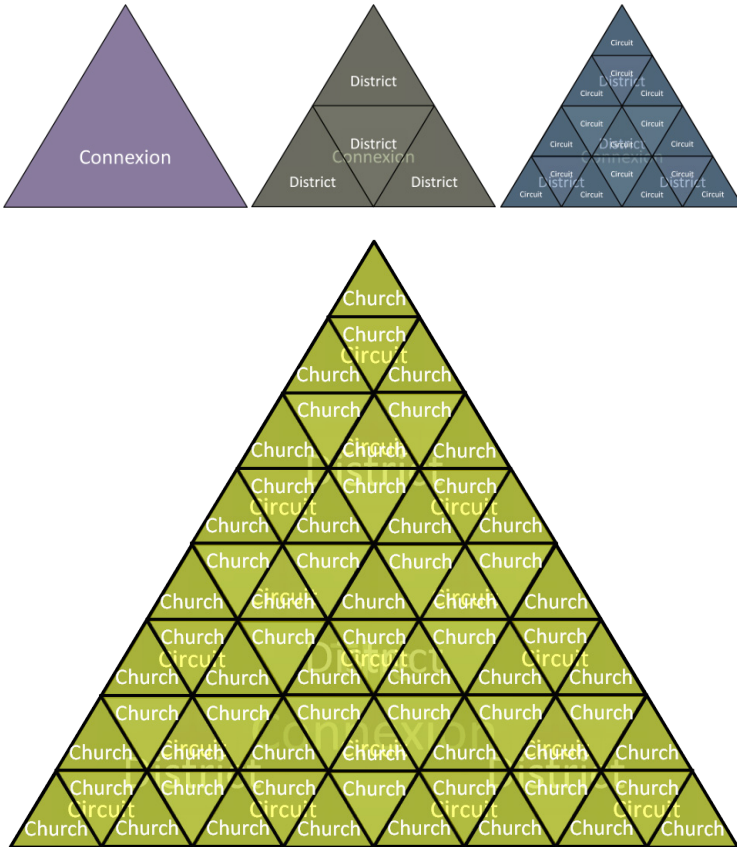


- a. From a meetings structure viewpoint
- b. Church Council bound together by the Circuit meeting, Circuit meetings bound together by synod and synod bound together by conference
- c. Organic/fractal pattern of growth (Like a plant... 'I am the vine you are the branches')
- d. There is no top level or bottom level
- e. Begins with church and moves to conference - but could be done in the other direction

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 (28-31)

## Connexional Diagram



- a. From a Connexional view point
- b. The parts do not occupy any separate spaces from the whole - each level is made up entirely of its parts.
- c. It is an organic/fractal pattern of growth (like cell divisions or the breaking of bread; 'remain in me as I remain in you', 'we are all part of the one body')
- d. There is no top level or bottom level
- e. Begins with Connexion and moves to church - but could be done in the other direction



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# Session 2:





# Roles & Features

## Session 2 - Some roles & other vital features of Methodism



**Invite people to fill in question sheets & respond to questions from the previous week.**

In session 1, we looked at the structures of Methodism, the churches, circuits and districts that all come together to make the Methodist Connexion, and how, whenever we can, we try to make the structure level rather than a vertical hierarchy. In this session we will be looking at some of the roles that people take on in the Methodist Church and how leadership functions in this kind of structure.

The roles;

-  (2.1) Ministers
-  (2.2) Local Preachers
-  (2.3) Stewards
-  (2.4) Pastoral Visitors






Features


-  (3.1) Membership
-  (3.2) Communion


Invite people to gather into groups and see if they can come up with one sentence that describes what leadership is; ...then invite them to write another sentence that describes what management is.


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## Ministers

 (4) Methodist ministers come in two flavours,  (4.1) presbyter and  (4.2) deacon. In the Methodist Church Presbyters and Deacons have equal standing as ministers, but they exercise their ministries in slightly different ways. With a presbyter the primary focus is on the  (4.3) Church and with a Deacon the primary focus is on the  (4.4) community, although there is obviously much scope for crossover between those two areas. Nevertheless, this difference in focus can lead to significantly different kinds of ministries. Presbyters are called to a ministry of;


 (4.5) Word - as in preaching and Biblical teaching;


 (4.6) Sacrament, The Presbyter is the primary person responsible for Holy Communion and Baptism but we'll come back to that a bit later because sacraments are not just about the Presbyter.


 (4.7) Pastoral Responsibility - note that it says responsibility; we'll come back to that both in comparison to the Diaconal role and with some lay or non ministerial roles.


By comparison, Deacons are called to a ministry of


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 (4.8) Service,

 (4.9) Witness,

 (4.10) Pastoral care, - note the distinction here that Deacons are not normally expected to have pastoral oversight within the church but pastoral care is very much part of their ministry.


 (4.11) Outreach


 (4.12) Worship. There is an important distinction here between worship and preaching. Deacons are not required to be preachers, and do not normally have dispensation to preside over Holy Communion. Service witness outreach and worship are obviously part of the Presbyter's work but are more of a primary emphasis for Deacons.

Whilst there seems to be a rather loosely defined difference between the two roles on paper, the difference of emphasis can be enormously significant in practice. Notably in this time of decline, the emphasis that Presbyters have towards maintaining the structures of the Church as they exist today means that Deacons are essential for ensuring that the eyes of the Church are not always focussed inwards and back towards the past but also outwards and towards the future. It should also be noted that the Methodist Diaconate is a religious order.

**It may be useful at this stage to engage in a conversation about the nature of these two ministries**

Having looked briefly at these differences, let's now have a quick look at some of the more general things about ministers in the Methodist Church;

In the Deed of Union which is included in early pages of Volume 2 of CPD it says that  (5) "Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this occupation as presbyters or deacons."<sup>12</sup> This statement emphasises that everyone in the church is at least to some extent a minister. The ordained ministry is not different because those ministers are special people, they are different because their calling has been tested, their knowledge and understanding has been stretched and deepened through training and experience, and because they have entered into a relationship with the Methodist Church whereby they have agreed to come under its discipline and to give themselves to the work of God's Church.

That section in CPD goes on to say  (6) "Presbyters have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive



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<sup>12</sup> The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2 (London: Methodist Publishing, 2013) 213

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title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as he wills."

This is what we call "the priesthood of all believers and consequently we believe that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship, special qualifications for particular duties are required and so the principle of representative selection is recognised."

 (7) It might seem an odd thing to include here, but it is also useful to think about why ministers are paid a stipend not a wage. Stipends are in no way unique to the Methodist Church, but there are some variations on how the principle is applied, but here we will explore the Methodist viewpoint. With normal employment there is an employer and a contract, a defined number of hours and employees are paid on the basis of those hours  (7.1) There is usually a line manager who sets out the parameters of the work, and if the work is done well there may be some opportunities for promotion, and therefore a higher pay grade.

By contrast, the payment of a stipend is to allow a minister to live and has no other connection with their work. If you become a minister, you are a minister every hour of every day regardless of whether you are preaching, praying, sleeping or having a bath. There are no specific hours of ministerial work; neither is there, as such, a boss who tells you what to

do. Methodist Ministers are responsible to the Methodist Church as a whole and the Methodist Church has a responsibility to the Ministers. Crucially that means that whilst a minister hopefully always wants to do what is best for their community, they are not making decisions primarily on how to become more popular as a minister. They aren't seeking promotion and greater pay on the basis of having a big and wealthy congregation.

Jesus said  (8) “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>13</sup> And perhaps the most important part of that is the last bit, for where your treasure is there your heart will be also. A large and popular church is not necessarily a holy place full of committed disciples. There will always be that flawed part of our humanity which seeks the glory for ourselves, but at our best, the treasure of Methodist ministry is in discipleship and in the building of God's Kingdom, not our own.

One last thing to point out about ministers is that just as Deacons and Presbyters are of equal standing, so all Methodist ministers are just ministers. While we have superintendants looking after the circuits and District chairs

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 6:19-21 (NIV)

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looking after the districts, they have no higher or secondary ordination, they don't become a different kind of minister there are no Bishops, they are still just ministers.

**Invite the groups to discuss which kind of minister is most useful in the current environment - Presbyters or Deacons**

### Local preachers



 (9) As was mentioned in the previous session, local preachers are a vital part of the Methodist Church. Like the Presbyters and Deacons, local preachers essentially make a life-long commitment to preaching in the Methodist Church, that is, as long as they remain members of the Methodist Church. When local preachers are accredited there is a circuit service and at that service they make several promises that go beyond making themselves available to preach and continuing their learning. The final promise they make in that service is to 'seek to fashion their lives according to the way of Christ and in all things seek to promote not their own glory, but the glory of the Lord.' This is illustrative of how, throughout the Methodist Church there is an emphasis on discipleship. Most of the roles we take on are not simply about getting a set of tasks done, they are about how we go about '*being*' in the body of Christ. That is to say we don't just  (9.1) do work for the body of the church we are called to  (9.2) be the body, to dwell within it in anticipation of our dwelling in the Kingdom of God.

Local preachers are trained in the circuit and preach within the circuit but it's important to note that all Methodist local preachers are trained through nationally agreed courses and if they move to a different part of the country they are still local preachers in that new place.

There are also Worship leaders who perhaps ought to be to the local preachers, what Deacons are to Presbyters - We have worked hard to remove any sense of inequality between Presbyters and Deacons over the last few years and we are doing pretty well with that, but we have a long way to go before we are in the same situation with worship leaders.



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## Stewards

 (10) There are essentially two sides to the role of the stewards. On the one side it is the role of the stewards to implement decisions made by the Church council, and to  (10.1) make sure we are prepared for the meetings, activities and services of worship we have planned to do. In short, when the Methodist Church decides to do something it is our stewards who are responsible for making sure it happens, that is not to say that they have to do all of the work themselves, or indeed any of it if they are really good at delegating.

On the other side, they act as partners with the Minister in the leadership of the local church. Now leadership is one of those wonderful words, which has a lot of interpretations as we have already explored at the beginning of this session. There are many styles of leadership, but


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perhaps the important distinction that should be made here is that the implementing of decisions made by the church council is primarily a matter of  (10.2) management, but being a steward is also about  (10.3) leadership.

Like all appointed roles of the Methodist Church, stewards are appointed yearly, even if they are the same stewards from last year. This is also true of the stationing of ministers, although a minister is a minister for life, they are appointed by Conference to a particular circuit each year, and although most appointments are initially for five years - each of those appointments need to be confirmed by Conference every year.

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### **Pastoral visitors & class leaders**

 (11) Every Methodist Church is meant to have a Pastoral Committee, because every member of the Methodist Church is meant have someone, other than the minister who can offer them pastoral care, encouragement in their spiritual life, and to help keep the minister as well as the pastoral committee up to date with any concerns or prayer needs. Every member should have this, but in most churches those non members who are connected in any significant way with the life of the church are also appointed a pastoral visitor. This system means that we are not looking to ministers to solve all the problems, and it helps to build a community where we look to each other as the Church rather than coming as clients to receive from a service provider.

Most Methodist Churches these days have pastoral visitors rather than class leaders, but there are still a few class leaders around. They are essentially the same except that class leaders also meet in a group or a class with the people under their pastoral care. There has been some encouragement in recent years to start using the class system again, because although the pastoral visiting system has proved excellent in providing care, particularly but by no means exclusively to the elderly, it has not always proved to be the best mode for encouraging discipleship. In the final session we may have some time to look at a group within the Methodist Church called Inspire who are working on this idea.



### 15 Minute Break

**During the break, invite the groups to discuss how they would feel about being part of a class where they share their pastoral and spiritual concerns. Perhaps talk about the kind of place they would feel comfortable having such a meeting.**

## Membership

(13) Why do we need membership particularly in one denomination? Why can't we just call ourselves Christians and not have to define ourselves as a member of one denomination or another? Surely in this day and age it is too prescriptive, too exclusive, tying people down to one option. Well, at one level membership is simply about saying I want to

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be part of this, I want to make a commitment to this community, I want to stand up and be counted as one of God's people and I like the way that Methodists go about being Church. But there is something about Membership that runs far deeper in Methodism.

When you enter into the Methodist church there is no definitive statement of faith that you have to sign, that covers all the details and nuances of what it is to be a Christian in the Methodist Church. And there is a very good reason for that. We don't have one, because whilst there are many things that most Methodists agree on, there is also room for discussion and disagreement. There are certain things that we must agree to in the confirmation service, but much of the rest is up for grabs. We are not encouraged as Methodists to unplug our brains as we enter, and replace them with a pre set list of religious statements, but rather to embark on a life long journey of learning about God, through exploration of the Bible through the traditions of our own and of other denominations.

We are encouraged to encounter the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit and we are encouraged to reason for ourselves how to respond to what we have learned. Therefore membership becomes all the more important in this environment because we need to set limits to who can say and do things in a leadership capacity, within a church with such a diverse expression of what it is to be Church. If you want to be a minister, if you want to be a steward, if you want

to be a local preacher then you need to be prepared to accept the discipline of the Methodist church.

The relatively flat structure and the amount of lay leadership, along with the freedom of worship and the encouragement to learn for yourself what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, comes with a cost in terms of how we maintain integrity as a church. Teachers and parents alike will be familiar with that constant need to balance the prescriptive 'because I say so' kind of teaching with the 'go and find out for yourself kind'. 'Because I say so' is easier, especially to start with, but it's not the best way of training children to understand what they are learning and to take it to heart - not just copying like parrots. The same is true of church and the way we learn about God.




Membership is a way of saying to each other, we agree that we are in this together; we are free to explore and to consider many responses to the scriptures, to question the status quo and to suggest new ways of moving forward. What we don't do is to go off into our small corner and try to build a separate part of the Methodist church that only thinks the way we do. Sometimes people come up with ideas that are not consistent with the Christian faith as seen through the eyes of the Methodist Connexion, sometimes people want to speak about God, but are not prepared to put in the effort of learning that is required. Sometimes people want to take a congregation in a direction that perhaps it should not be


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going. We collectively hold the responsibility of discipline as through the roles and structures of the Methodist Church.

But even if you have no interest in any kind of leadership, or have no intention of moving the congregation in any direction either good or bad, membership is a useful way of saying 'my faith in God is not just about me, it is about how we function together as the body of Christ.' This is reflected in the way that whilst a person's membership is held in the local church, so that we know who it is we are caring for in this place, each member is a member of the whole Methodist Connexion - not the local church.





From the website;


 (13.1) The Service of Confirmation and Reception into Membership includes two questions asked as an Affirmation of Faith:  (13.2) 'Do you turn away from evil and all that denies God?' and  (13.3) 'Do you turn to God, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as Helper and Guide?' The answer to both questions is 'By the grace of God I do.'<sup>14</sup>

 (14) Everyone present is then asked to affirm their belief and trust in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, as members of the universal Church which has expressed its faith in the one God through such as the Apostles' Creed over the centuries.





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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/membership>


 (14.1) After confirmation and the reception, the newly-confirmed are asked to make three promises:  (14.2) 'Will you commit yourself to the Christian life of worship and service, and be open to the renewing power of God?',  (14.3) 'Will you seek the strength of God's Spirit as you accept the cost of following Jesus Christ in your daily life?' and  (14.4) 'Will you witness, by word and deed, to the good news of God in Christ, and so bring glory to God?'. The response to each of these is 'With God's help I will.'

 (15) From the membership card or ticket;

 (15.1) As a member of the Methodist Church I am called to:

-  (15.2) **worship** within the local church, including regular sharing in Holy Communion, and through personal prayer
-  (15.3) **learning and caring**, through Bible study and meeting for fellowship, so that I may grow in faith and support others in their discipleship
-  (15.4) **service**, by being a good neighbour in the community, challenging injustice and using my resources to support the Church in its mission in the world
-  (15.5) **evangelism**, through working out my faith in daily life and sharing Christ with others.

## Communion & Communion Stewards

 (16) Communion is one of those tricky subjects that even in this age of renewed ecumenical relations, is still a cause of division and pain. There are disagreements across the whole of the Christian Church about the nature, content and meaning of communion. Disagreements range from whether or not each act of communion connects across all space and time with the moment of crucifixion, to what kind of cups to use. Some of the disagreements are amicable and just a matter of choice, others are felt deeply and painfully by significant numbers of people. There are a wide range of theologies and feelings towards communion even within the Methodist Church but there are some key points to our collective Methodist theology. It is an area that we could spend several hours talking about, but perhaps here we might pick up on just a few points that are significant in terms of how Methodist theology affects how we think about communion.

We have already mentioned the priesthood of all believers. It is interesting that the Methodist Church doesn't let everyone preside over or lead communion, even though the 'priesthood of all believers' idea might suggest that we ought to. Normally it is the minister who presides over communion, but if there are not enough ministers to offer sufficient communion services in a circuit then Conference can give permission for specific people to lead communion. This happens quite often and includes many probationer ministers.

The permission to preside over communion is not given because ministers are special people with special powers, there are other denominations that hold the belief that ministers are 'priests' and only they have the right to call the Holy Spirit into the elements of the bread and wine.

In the Methodist Church the limited permission to preside over communion is about keeping church order. It links with the issue of membership and also with the ideas of training and discernment for ministers. Communion is a big deal for many people and there are serious issues to consider. When you receive communion it is unlikely that you are thinking about all the theological, ecclesiological, political and historical issues that connect with communion; you will have your own reason for receiving. Though it is good to be challenged and it's good to explore other people's viewpoints, it's probably best that you are not distracted by all those questions as you receive the elements. However, it is useful to know that the person offering the elements to you and presiding over this act of worship has at least done some reflection on these issues and is not approaching this sacrament lightly.

One of the really subtle but powerful symbols of Methodist Communion services is the role of the communion steward. In a way they are in management, they have a set of tasks to do to physically help the minister, to ensure the bread and wine are prepared and to help with the distribution of the bread and wine. But they are also in a role of leadership, and it

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is the kind of role that is both the easiest and the hardest to perform because it is simply about being, being present, being representative. The communion Steward is representative of the lay involvement in communion, the priesthood of all believers, the minister and the communion steward stand side by side as the bread and wine are shared.

**Invite people as they go home to consider if they can think of a sentence that describes how leadership works in the Methodist Church**

There are many roles within the Methodist Church that we haven't covered in this session, but the ones we have covered will hopefully give you a sense of how things work.







# Session 3:


# Theology & Books

## Session 3 - The theology & books of Methodism


**Invite people to get into groups and see if they can think of one sentence to describe how they think of God**

 (2) Today we're going to be looking at the theology of Methodism, and then we're going to explore how some of this theology is shared through the books and other documents of Methodism. But first of all we should note three important things about theology. The first is this, many people will speak as if theology is only for academics and theologians; that it is about theoreticians and not for those who are doing the practical work; that it is not for those who sit in the congregation and simply wish to worship God and love their neighbour without all these intellectual distractions.


If there is even the slightest sense in your mind, that that's how things are, then it is probably time to rethink what we mean by theology.  (2.1) Theology at its most basic level is the act of speaking about God. We all have our own 'theology' our own thoughts and feelings about who God is and how God acts, even if we never stop to question what those thoughts and feelings are. We are all engaged in the act of doing theology.

The second thing we should note is that we have already covered a fair amount of Methodist theology in the first two sessions,  (2.2) because our theology doesn't exist





separately from what we do and what we do, does not exist separately from our theology. So today we will cover some distinctive theological points we may not have covered or may not have been obvious at the time

The third thing we should note is that  (2.3) theology matters. One of the most common questions that occur when people are talking about theology in the context of ecumenical relationships is, 'Does it really matter? As long as we believe in the same God, do these details matter?' In many ways it doesn't matter if we sing old songs or new. It is not important if we have pews or chairs, video projectors or books, ancient liturgy or completely improvised services. We each of us have our preferences and our reasons for those preferences, but preference may not be driven by theological differences. It is important however, if the theology of one congregation condemns to hell the loved ones of another denomination. It is important if the if the consequence of one person's theology is preventing someone else being able to receive God's love. It is important if the church we build misrepresents God, particularly if that misrepresentation is the difference between someone finding faith and not finding faith.

## The Methodist Quadrilateral


 (3) The first bit of theology we're going to look at is a concept called the Methodist Quadrilateral. It wasn't exactly invented by John Wesley, rather it was an observation made by Albert Outler back in the 1960's, about the way that

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Wesley's theology was gathered from four different sources;  (3.1) scripture,  (3.2) tradition,  (3.3) reason and  (3.4) Experience.


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### **Scripture**

 (4) When we say scripture, we are of course talking about the Bible. Wesley was very much of the mind that we gain our primary understanding of God from the Bible. However, it is important not to mistake Wesley's passion for the Bible for fundamentalism as we see it in our culture today. Fundamentalism didn't really exist in the eighteenth century. Wesley's passion for the Bible was tempered by the other three parts of the quadrilateral; nevertheless he encouraged the early Methodists to take studying the Bible very seriously.


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### **Tradition**

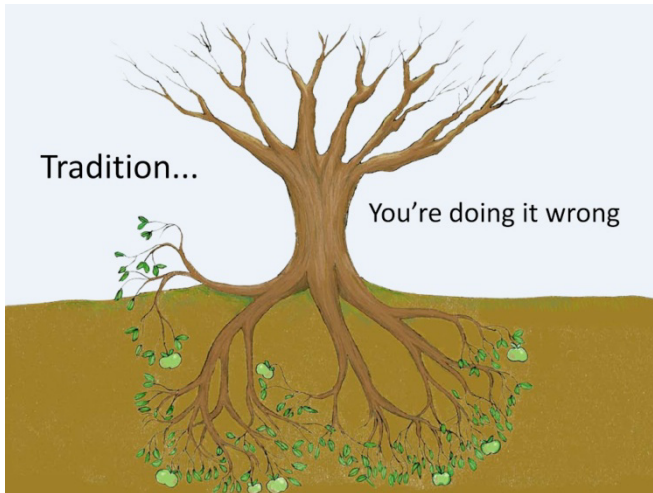
 (5) Those who look to the future and embrace change often struggle with tradition, but even the most committed modernist can learn to love tradition if they stop thinking of it as the thing that keeps us in the past and begin to see it as the box of tools that resources us for the future. This however is also a lesson that the traditionalists ought to learn. Tradition should not be about nostalgia, it should be about us learning from our mistakes as well as from our successes and then doing something with this information. It is about us learning from the evidence of our collective historical experiences of God. Our tradition informs our


theology. But our theology also informs our tradition. So for example as we were talking about in session 2, part of our understanding is the idea of the priesthood of all believers which translates into our flatter structure that has no bishops. The theology informs the tradition. And there are many other examples of this.

We learn about how our theology works out in practice through our traditions. From the very beginning of Methodism we have happily borrowed from the traditions of others. Wesley was an Anglican priest, but was influenced by many church traditions, like the Moravians, the Eastern Orthodox Church and Catholicism as well as more ancient traditions like the early Church fathers. Tradition only becomes a problem when we start doing it wrong. The dangers of traditionalism come perhaps from two errors;

 (6) 1. We often attempt to plant the church like an inverted tree, with our traditions, our roots on full display, and the fruit of those traditions buried deep in the ground, trees won't grow like that and neither will Churches. What people see when they come into a church is the sitting in rows, the 5 hymn sandwich, our traditions. But do they see the fruit? Do people see our lives transformed by the spirit? We tend to repeat our actions in the church, perhaps leading us to think that the repetition is the point, when actually the repetition is how we learn what the tradition has to teach us. Once we have learned something, we should change on the basis of what we've learned.


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 (7) 2. We often allow our view of tradition to be too narrow and with too short a memory. Church tradition is the product of our collective experiences across the generations, not just 'my' experience in 'this' generation. Often when a member of a congregation or a group within a congregation says "we have always done it like this," the 'always' means less than five years, and the 'we' means that individual or group. Sometimes the 'always' means as much as fifty years or so, but rarely do congregations have a genuine sense of the traditions they carry. If we looked as widely and as far back as John Wesley did, perhaps our sense of tradition might be greatly enriched by it.

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### Reason


 (8) As we have suggested earlier in the course, in Methodism we are encouraged to think, to reason, to ask

questions and to approach, life, scripture and theology with a reasoning mind.

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## Experience

 (9) At the inception of Methodism there was a desire to move away from the second hand religion that had become common in the Church of England. One of the key moves in Methodism was the intention that we should engage in a relationship with God as individuals; that we should seek to be transformed by God both spiritually and morally. This is also reflected in the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Across many Protestant denominations there is a tendency to intellectualise our faith at the expense of experiencing God. sadly this has also become true of a lot of Methodism.

Outler emphasised that whilst each of the four parts of the quadrilateral were necessary, John Wesley placed a higher importance on Scripture than on any of the others. Many people like to describe it in the form of a child's mobile that hangs over a cot,  (10) with scripture as the central strand from which the other three hang. However it might also be reasonable to suggest that the emphasis depends somewhat on the circumstances. John Wesley was a man who very much responded to the issues and circumstances of his time and if he were around today he might well argue for different emphases in these circumstances than the ones he chose for his time. For example, in many of the arguments between fundamentalists and new atheists, an emphasis on reason and

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experience is needed. This shifting emphasis could be thought of as the 'Methodist Quad Bike' 🏍️ (11) with each of those four things representing one of the wheels with its own suspension rods. We need all four at all times, but it depends what corner we are turning as to which part of the suspension we are leaning on the most at any one moment. At this point in time, the Methodist Church, like many denominations, is turning a lot of corners very quickly. So it might be wise to make sure that we are keeping all four suspension rods in good condition.



🏍️ (12)

## Arminian (not Calvinist)

🇬🇧 (13) Back in the 18th Century a really important theological argument was going on in the protestant world. On the one side were the Calvinists and on the other side were the Arminians. John Calvin and Jakob Arminius were both theologians from the 16th Century, but in the 18th Century the argument was central to some of the changes that were occurring.









Let's have a quick look at the five points of 🇬🇧 (13.1) Calvinism and find out what all the fuss is about,<sup>15</sup>

- 🇬🇧 (13.2) **Total depravity** the idea that we are inherently completely sinful and totally without the capacity to lift ourselves out of sin or to choose for ourselves to follow God
- 🇬🇧 (13.3) **Unconditional election** God has chosen from the beginning of time those whom he will call to him, as well as those who he will reject
- 🇬🇧 (13.4) **Limited atonement** Christ died on the cross to atone only for the sins of those whom God has chosen.
- 🇬🇧 (13.5) **Irresistible grace** those who have been chosen are unable to resist God's gift of grace
- 🇬🇧 (13.6) **Perseverance of the saints** Salvation or true faith can never be lost. If you lose your faith then it was not genuine to start with.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.theopedia.com/Calvinism>


Arminianism offered a rebuttal to that theology;<sup>16</sup>





-  (13.7) **Universal prevenient grace:** This is God's grace which goes before our submission to his will and gives us the freedom to turn to God before we have the will to do so.
  -  (13.8) **Conditional election:** The choice of following God and of seeking salvation lies ultimately with human beings.
  -  (13.9) **Unlimited (or universal) atonement:** The crucifixion was to atone for the sins of all people for all time
  -  (13.10) **Resistible grace:** People can resist God's grace because God does not take our free will from us.
  -  (13.11) **Uncertainty of perseverance:** For the same reason people can lose their salvation and lose their faith.
-  (14) Arminian theology also offers these three beliefs;
-  (14.1) **Libertarian free will:** Our choices are free from the limitations of our human nature.
  -  (14.2) **Equal, impartial, and undifferentiated love:** God loves everyone equally.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.theopedia.com/Arminianism>

-  (14.3) **The universal call of salvation:** God calls all people; whether they respond is down to the individual.

 (15) William Fitzgerald, the founder of the Wesley Guild gave us this popular summary of Arminian Methodism in 1903, which he called ‘the four-Alls of Methodism.’ It was later incorporated into the Catechism of the Methodist Church and is often mistakenly attributed to John Wesley;

-  (15.1) All need to be saved
-  (15.2) All can be saved
-  (15.3) All can know they are saved
-  (15.4) All can be saved to the uttermost

It may come as little surprise to you at this point that Arminian theology forms the basis for much of the theology of Methodism. Whilst the argument has somewhat died down since the 18th Century, there are still Calvinist influences in some of the main stream denominations in Britain. But perhaps more important for us here in this session, is how Arminianism has helped shape the Methodist Church as we see it today.


That sense of God's love for all people, and the idea that all people have the potential to find salvation through Christ, has led to a deep passion within Methodism for equality, social justice and a care for the poor.

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John Wesley himself was active in speaking out against slavery and he included women as lay preachers. The Methodist Church over the years has been involved in setting up the Sunday schools which offered an education to street children long before education was free to all, as well as NCH Action for Children. We offered solidarity in working to reduce the influence of cheap alcohol on the poorer parts of society with our support for the temperance movement, Alcoholics Anonymous and in the use of non alcoholic wine in our communion. We supported the suffragette movement, Fairtrade, the Drop the Debt campaign, and issues of the environment and many other issues that reflect our concern for all of God's creation.

This theology can also be seen at work in our desire to be as inclusive as possible, particularly in our communion services.

## Holiness

 (16) We have already looked a little at the role of holiness in Methodism in connection to the class meetings as part of the second session, but It would be good to pick up just a few points here. There was often an argument made against Wesley in the way that he placed a high importance on holiness and doing good works. This was not because people thought that doing good was in some way a bad thing, rather they thought that Wesley was suggesting that salvation was in some way dependant on our ability to be good people. I don't

think that this was what Wesley was aiming at as he was very much an advocate of salvation through faith alone. Rather I think his theology of holiness was rooted in a sense that we do good because God was first good to us. As he says in his Explanatory Bible notes for John 4:19;

 (16.1) John 4:19 We love (him), because he first loved us.


"This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more: why should anyone say less, or less intelligibly?"

But also I sense that Wesley saw our good works as the one of the ways in which we can be witnesses to each other of God's love. People know that God loves us because we express it in the way we share that love with others.



 (17)

## Break



## The books and documents of Methodism

 (18) There are a number of ways in which this theology is expressed in the life of the Church, and one of those is in our books and other documents.

Such as;

-  (18.1) The Bible
-  (18.2) CPD


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-  (18.3) Wesley's 44 Sermons
-  (18.4) The Plan


We only have time really to look at a couple of these in this session...

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## **CPD**

 (19) We have already mentioned CPD a number of times in this course so far, so we won't spend a lot of time talking about it, but we should take note of a few things about it. This is a book of regulations along with some historical and legal documents. But the regulations are not just a set of rules; they have been written and honed by Methodists over many years. They are the product of a great deal of theological and practical exploration, CPD probably holds a far more genuine account of our collective tradition than most of those people who will say, "we've always done it like this". The decisions that are recounted in this book come from financial, legal, practical, theological and pastoral reasoning. They range from dull, through useful and interesting, to inspiring and challenging. They speak of our denomination's passion for equality and social justice, they speak of our passion for the Gospel, they speak of our passion to work together as a Connexion. But it is a book that is worth looking at from time to time. Don't try to start from page one and work through, rather perhaps begin with a question; like, I wonder what it says about...

## The Hymn Book

 (20) We shall now spend a little time looking at the importance of the Hymn book. One of the things that make Methodists Methodist is the passion for singing. Now let's be clear, there is no rule that says you have to sing or that every service needs to contain at least one Charles Wesley hymn, or even that you need to enjoy singing. The important thing is the extent to which the theology of the Methodist Church has always been expressed through its hymns. One of the reasons we still have a hymn book rather than just an electronic collection is that it offers us a certain amount of guidance as to what constitutes a reasonable hymn for us to be singing.


John and Charles Wesley took the art of hymn writing very seriously. And though John was the man who is best known as the founder of the Methodist Church it is hard to imagine the early Methodist Church having anything like the success it had without Charles at his side producing the soundtrack to this movement. John delivered some very well written sermons, although people writing at the time suggested that his delivery was less than dynamic. However Charles's hymns reached the parts of people's hearts that even the best sermons failed to go. People would no doubt have gone home with the often familiar tunes and the inspiring new poetry playing over again in their minds.

Song writing is a complex art and one problem for this generation of Church goers is that while there are a great

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many modern hymn writers there are few who are both great poets and also grasp the weight of the theological task that is in their hands. There are a number of modern writers who are quite good at the praise element of hymn writing but a lack of those who have successfully gone beyond that initial aspect of worship to explore the full diversity of what can be said through a hymn. Different hymns do different things and we should take a few moments to look at a few of the key ways in which Methodism has displayed its theology through its own and other hymn writers.

Let's just glance at a little Arminian Theology as expressed through one of the hymns of Charles Wesley;

 (21) Hymns and Psalms 46 v2 "what shall I do, My God to love?"



*Thy sovereign grace to all extends  
Immense and unconfined  
From age to age it never ends  
It reaches all mankind*

There are many areas of theology we could explore but what I want to do first is look at how different hymns have different functions. For example;


-  (22) Some hymns act as testimony H&P180/StF287<sup>17</sup>  
"When I survey the wondrous cross"

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<sup>17</sup> H&P = Hymns and Psalms, StF = Singing the Faith

-  (23) Some act as Prayer - H&P 378 "Be Thou My vision, O Lord of my heart"
-  (24) Some Preach - H&P 804/StF415 "The Church of Christ"

Let's just have a look at some things that can go wrong with song writing, let's compare Steve McEwan's, 'Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise' with Charles Wesley's, 'Great is our Redeeming Lord';


 (25) "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise"

*Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise  
The city of our God the holy place,  
The Joy of the whole earth  
Great is the Lord in whom we have the victory  
He aids us against the enemy  
We bow down on our knees  
And Lord we want to lift your name on high  
And Lord we want to thank you for the works you've done in our lives  
And lord we trust in your unfailing love for you alone are God eternal  
Throughout earth and heaven above"*

Now, it should be said that this in many ways is not a bad hymn, it's got a good tune and, and it did make it into the most recent Methodist Hymn book Singing the Faith. But there are problems with it;

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Let's look at where the words are taken from;

 (26) Psalm 48 A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah.

<i>1 Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain.</i>	<i>4 When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together, 5 they saw her and were astounded; they fled in terror.</i>
<i>2 Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King.</i>	<i>6 Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labour. 7 You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind...</i>
<i>3 God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.</i>	

The Old Testament piece of theology that is happening here is about the Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem; which has never physically been the highest mountain, even in that area of the Near East. It is being thought of as having a spiritually high importance. In particular, Zion was thought to be a point at which God physically interacts with our world, and the Temple therefore acts like a cap on a spiritual oil well. In addition to this, the favour that Jerusalem apparently holds with all the nations is an aspirational one, one that has never happened to the full promised extent in the physical Jerusalem.

In Christ, we see the New Jerusalem is the Kingdom of God which dwells to a certain extent within each of us as the Body of Christ, the Church. But this Kingdom will never be fully

complete until the end of the age, when there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth. And so we need to tread lightly with the theology of Psalm 48. If we interpret it brashly and without care, then the "city of God" is none other than Jerusalem, which in this age, is far from being "the joy of the whole earth". In addition, when we speak of the enemies we are speaking of the evil that is within us, the devil, or perhaps the political enemies of current day Israel. No doubt this was not McEwan's, intention, but it would be no massive leap to see this hymn as a direct declaration of violent reaction against Palestine and a celebration of its imminent demise. By contrast this is what Charles does with Psalm 48.

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(27) H&P438/StF683 Great is our redeeming Lord

*1. GREAT is our redeeming Lord,  
In power, and truth, and grace  
Him, by highest heaven adored,  
His church on earth doth praise:  
In the city of our God,  
In his holy mount below,  
Publish, spread his name abroad,  
And all his greatness show.*

*2. For thy loving-kindness, Lord,  
We in thy temple stay;  
Here thy faithful love record,  
Thy saving power display:  
With thy name thy praise is  
known,  
Glorious thy perfections shine;  
Earth's remotest bounds shall own  
Thy works are all divine.*

*3. See the gospel church secure,  
And founded on a rock;  
All her promises are sure;  
Her bulwarks who can shock?  
Count her every precious shrine;  
Tell, to after-ages tell,  
Fortified by power divine,  
The church can never fail.*

*4. Zion's God is all our own,  
Who on his love rely;  
We his pardoning love have  
known,  
And live to Christ, and die:  
To the new Jerusalem  
He our faithful guide shall be:  
Him we claim, and rest in him,  
Through all eternity.*

**Invite people to engage in a brief discussion on the theological connections made by Charles Wesley in this hymn**



(28)




# Session 4:

# Methodism; past, present & future

## Session 4 - Methodism; past, present and future


This is the last of our sessions looking at the question, 'What's so special about Methodism?' And in this session we are going to be looking at the past, present and future of Methodism. We will begin in the past and move forward from there;

### Past

 (2) In our first session we looked at the Methodist structure and in the second we looked at roles, and so we have made a brief mention of Societies and classes. Here we will unpack that early Methodist structure a little and add in the further level called bands.

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### Societies

 (3) At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, a number of religious societies began to appear. These were not denominations; rather they were groups of people who came together for the purpose of promoting one or other theological viewpoint or aspect of Christian living. One of those was the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, or SPCK, which was set up to promote Christian education. It still exists as a publishing company today.

The early Methodist congregations used this language of societies, at least in part because John did not intend these to be part of a separate denomination, rather a movement for reform within the Church of England. Occasionally you may still hear that word being used even today to describe a Methodist Congregation.


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## Classes



 (4) Methodist societies were divided, by their leaders, into groups of up to about 12 people, called classes. Each class would have a class leader who would teach and offer pastoral care. Being part of a class was not an option at that time for those who chose to be part of a Methodist society. Today it is not compulsory but that aspect remains in the way that each member is appointed a pastoral visitor.

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## Bands


 (5) Those who chose to would enter into smaller groups of between four and ten people, and these groups, called bands had had a deeper sense of mutual accountability and confession. In the bands they were;

“Guided by lists of questions for self-examination that were arranged according to the virtues for each day of the week:

-  (5.1) love of God,
-  (5.2) love of neighbour,


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-  (5.3) humility,
-  (5.4) mortification and self-denial,
-  (5.5) resignation, and
-  (5.6) meekness, and
-  (5.7) thanksgiving.

 (5.8) The 'one thing needful' was a soul renewed in the image of God."<sup>18</sup>

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## **Failure & reform**

 (6) It could be argued that the Methodist Church was born out of two key factors in the Life of John Wesley.

1.  (6.1) His desire to reform the Church of England, and
2.  (6.2) His failures, both real and perceived.

Wesley's desire to reform the Anglican Church is apparent in many of the things we have looked at in this course, but the extent to which a sense of failure was part of the inspiration for the Methodist Movement may not be so apparent.

Wesley often thought that he was not a proper Christian because he had either not acted in a correct moral way or more importantly he had not felt internally entirely secure in his trust of God, or not felt the personal connection

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<sup>18</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 47

with God that he thought he ought to. This is why the 24th May 1738 is so important to Methodists. 🇺🇸 (7) It is the moment when John Wesley described his heart as being strangely warmed in a society meeting at Aldersgate Street. In his journal he said of the experience, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death"<sup>19</sup> This was not the last time he felt doubt or remorse, but it was perhaps the first time that he felt complete assurance in his faith; which is significant when you think that his ordination as an Anglican Priest happened ten years earlier in September 1728.

Wesley's sense of failure was notable in his journey to look after a new community of settlers in Georgia back in 1735. The first sense of failure came as part of the journey, on the ship to the New World. 🇺🇸 (8) John met some Moravians from Germany and was inspired by their faith, particularly when a storm threatened to sink the ship and the Moravians faced the storm with calm assurance and John had nothing but fear.

🇺🇸 (9) John, his brother Charles and a group of others travelled out to America, in part to care for the souls of the English settlers there but also to help bring Christianity to the

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<sup>19</sup> W. Reginald Ward & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol 18, *Journal and Diaries I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738

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Native Americans. John's attempt to convert the locals was a complete failure. He resigned to working with the English and the German Moravians, from whom he learned a lot.

It went well for a while and Wesley nearly found himself in a relationship with a young woman by the name of Sophy Hopkey, unfortunately he failed to do anything about his feelings until it was too late and she married another man. John didn't take this news well and didn't respond as graciously as perhaps a minister ought to. Long story short, it seemed the right time to come back to England. In England, John found himself without a parish. 🇺🇸 (10) He hated the idea of preaching in the streets but was asked to preach by George Whitfield so he gave it a go. There were complaints about him preaching on another priest's patch, and so he coined the phrase 'The world is my parish'. It was often failure or the personal feeling of failure that drove John Wesley to rethink and rearrange his plans, and it was often failure that drove him into more adventurous and more dangerous waters in terms of his exploration of what it meant to be church in the 18th Century.

**Invite people to discuss how congregations respond to failure and whether there are better ways of responding.**


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### **No new ideas**

🇺🇸 (11) One of the strange and interesting things to note about John Wesley and the beginnings of the Methodist


Church is that whilst John was an innovator of sorts, he never really came up with any new ideas. Over his life he observed and listened to many people, from many Christian traditions and he absorbed a great deal of information from both within and beyond the Church. He chose things he agreed with, discarded aspects that seemed wrong to him, but also he changed his mind on many things as the years went by. What he did was to gather together ideas that were already present in the world around him and to form them into what we now call the Methodist Church.

## Present

 (12) And so we turn to the present day;

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### Comfortable institutionalisation


What started as a radical movement for holiness and mission has become static and at many levels indistinguishable from other denominations. Whilst the theology and the passion for social justice has remained largely the same, the culture of the Methodist Church has become established, comfortable and safe.  (13) The movement that brought the Church back into the hands of the poor and the working class has over time become significantly more middle class.

Except that now this safety seems to have given way to rapid decline. When people say, "we would try this new idea, but most people prefer it the traditional way", we must take

that in the light of the fact that most people don't have anything to do with the Methodist Church and therefore most people haven't expressed an opinion on the subject.

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## **Decline**

 (14) This is a time of decline for the Methodist Church. In the introduction to this course we looked at some of the cold statistics. It is important to look beyond those statistics to the nuances of the situation and to look at where there is growth. There are areas of growth in the mainstream Churches - particularly in the Fresh Expressions Movement - which we will look at a bit later in this session. We should note that a big church is not necessarily a healthy church and a small church is not necessarily a dying one, and for that matter a growing church is not always growing for the right reasons. At the same time we shouldn't allow the nuances to become a smoke screen for the larger reality, decline is happening and it is happening fast.

This decline leaves us with a lot of questions to be asked and a lot of decisions about how to move forward. Do we try to sustain things as they are, do we go back to how we started, do we move on to new ways of doing things, should we attempt to become part of the Church of England once again, or do we shut down the shop and go home? At the moment the process we are going through includes a little of all of those except perhaps the last option.

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## Transition

 (14) And so, as a result of the decline in attendance and also as a result of the considerable changes in the wider culture, the Methodist Church finds itself in a time of significant transition. One of the areas of transition is the Reshaping for Mission also known as 'Mapping a way Forward: Regrouping for Mission', This primarily involves the amalgamating of circuits to make larger circuits that therefore have a less costly administration and are able to move resources more easily and quickly to the place where they are most useful. This is in part about practicalities and coping with decline, but it is also about preparing ourselves for the changes that will need to be made in order to think more missionally and to think less in terms of maintenance of our current situation.

There are many other areas of transition we are looking at including Fresh Expressions, Fruitful Fields and the redesigning of our training for ministry, as well as the increased interest in Diaconal ministry that we looked at in some depth in the second session.

 (15)

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**Break**

**Future**

 (16)


## **Discipleship movement shaped for mission<sup>20</sup>**





We mentioned briefly in the first session the General Secretary of the Methodist Church, Martyn Atkins and his vision of the Methodist Church as a discipleship movement shaped for mission. In some ways this is less a description of where we are and more a description of the direction in which we want and need to be heading. This idea is to a great extent, looking back at the time before the Methodist Church was an institutionalised church and asking what things can we take from that time and appropriately apply to this time and this situation. One of the things that is distinctive about the Methodist Church is the emphasis on discipleship. Particularly the idea that you aren't simply converted to Christianity and that's it, God's work upon you is done. Rather the work of internal transformation is a lifelong process of becoming more Christ-like, becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.


The other aspect is the idea that we, quite accurately describe ourselves as the Methodist 'Church,' and we tend to use the word Church in terms of being an institution and in terms of buildings. But once we were Church in the far more fluid and less institutional sense, far more like how Paul meant Church or Ecclesia as the gathered people, as the Body of Christ, more like a movement. We need to be mobile again if we are going to survive this time and be a relevant part of the ecumenical landscape.





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<sup>20</sup> Atkins, *Contemporary Methodism*

 (18) As part of the response to this idea the Methodist church developed the idea of not just reshaping our circuits and districts on a structural basis but also on a theological basis, so that we move to structure our actions around our callings, these have been categorised as;<sup>21</sup>

-  (18.1) Worship
-  (18.2) Learning and Caring
-  (18.3) Service
-  (18.4) Evangelism

There has also been a move to bring back the bands. Not simply to copy the practices of the past into the 21st century, but to rethink them for this age. A group within the Methodist Church called the  (19) Inspire network, are working to develop bands and similar groupings around the country.<sup>22</sup> They have rethought the questions that John Wesley used. These are the headings of the questions that they explore in the bands;

-  (19.1) How is my life with God?
-  (19.2) How is my life in training?
-  (19.3) How is my life with others?
-  (19.4) How is my life in the world?

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## Fresh expressions

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<sup>21</sup> Vision & Values, <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/vision-values#worship>



<sup>22</sup> Inspire, <http://inspiremovement.org/network/>

## *What's So Special About Methodism?*




 (20) Fresh Expressions of Church are a vital part of what is happening with the future of the Church of England, Methodism and other denominations. It is not a new denomination in itself; rather it is a new way of thinking about how to be church. Although like Methodism - none of it is really new.

Here is the definition of a Fresh expression of Church from the Freshexpressions.org website;

 (20.1) *"A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.*

-  (21.1) *It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples;*
-  (21.2) *It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context."<sup>23</sup>*


The website carries on to say, Fresh expressions:


-  (22.1) *serve those outside church;*
-  (22.2) *listen to people and enter their culture;*
-  (22.3) *make discipleship a priority;*



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<sup>23</sup> What is a fresh expression?

<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis>

-  (22.4) form church.

The phrase 'Fresh Expressions of Church' is often used in a rather vague way so the website sets out the difference between those things that are, and are not Fresh Expressions of Church and it emphasises that the important distinction lies in the intentions of setting up the Fresh Expression.  (23) It says;

-  (23.1) *"If it is to work towards establishing a new community or congregation especially for those who have never been involved in church (un-churched) or once were, but left for whatever reason (de-churched), then it is a fresh expression of church in the making. A fresh expression of church like this may look very different to traditional church."*
-  (23.2) *'If the intention is to do mission better or more imaginatively in order to attract people to an existing church, it isn't a fresh expression (although doing that is always an excellent idea). The aim of a fresh expression is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form a new church in its own right. So it is important to decide the direction you are heading in, before you begin the journey.'*

Often, when we do Christian outreach, we plan an event or activity that is specifically designed to be of interest to the people whom we are trying to reach; a coffee morning for shoppers in the town, a disco for young people, motorbike

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clubs, sports groups, embroidery groups etc. And then when these new people have grown to like us, to trust us, and to accept the message we are bringing, we encourage them into church and teach them how to live as Christians within our culture.

This may have been a useful way of working in the past, but you may have noticed how this has not really brought new people into the churches over recent years. There are a number of reasons why our outreach doesn't work the way it used to, and one of those reasons is a lack of clarity in the purposes of each group or activity. But another reason is that the culture around the church has fundamentally changed and the church has not changed with it. Some of our Church culture is essential to being Christian, other parts are hangovers from past ages, whether it be Mediaeval England, the Culture that surrounded the Wesleys, the culture that surrounded the Methodist Church at its numerically strongest time in the 1940's, or just things that were appropriate to a specific group of people at a specific point in time. All of those cultural influences can be seen in our churches today and we often expect newcomers to accept them without question.





By contrast, with Fresh Expressions, the intention is to build a new church congregation there in the place where we have begun the outreach, and to allow it to grow, with the support of the parent church, but in the culture and style of the situation into which it has been planted.

But before a Fresh Expression of Church gets anywhere near the stage it needs a time of listening, where those involved in setting up the Fresh expression of Church take time, plenty of time, to listen to the community and to listen to what God is already doing in that community. It is usually recommended that six months is taken, praying in that place, learning about the culture and getting to know the people before any attempt is made to begin a Fresh Expression of Church.

**At this point it may be useful to watch a video that illustrates some of what Fresh Expressions are in practice either from the Fresh Expressions website or from one of the Fresh Expressions DVDs<sup>24</sup>**

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## Fractal Theology

 (24) One possibility to consider for the future that is currently under development is the exploration of Fractal Theology. Geometry is basically the study of shapes, and shapes are a way of describing the world around us. For thousands of years mathematicians have presumed that the world can be described in terms of shapes like circles and squares and triangles.  (25) But most of the world is made up of wiggly shapes and complex and seemingly chaotic patterns. Benoit B Mandelbrot discovered a way of describing the world in terms of simple patterns, repeated many times at different scales.  (26) He discovered that you could describe much of the complexity of the world and not just in a static way; you could also describe the way that things change and grow in the world through simple equations. These fractals are reflected all through nature, and are even reflected in human organisational structures.  (27) He found that fractal geometry could allow us to emulate highly complex systems. If fractals reflect something of creation and creation reflects something of God, then surely fractals reflect something of God.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/shop/listing/dvds>

The point of this work is to look at how we should use our theology across all the different scales of our organisation to promote healthy growth of new churches and to help retain the radical transformative edge of the Gospel, even when the institutions become large.

It takes concepts like; 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first', 'I am the vine you are the branches', 'we are the body of Christ', 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God', 'love the lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and love your neighbour as yourself' and uses them like formulas to help us see what kind of missional geometry, or missional shape a discipleship movement might take; and how to carry the true spirit of our faith into Fresh Expressions of Church without losing too much of what we need to keep or keeping too much of what we need to lose.

**Invite people to discuss what they have learned during the course and what things they may view differently as a result of what they have learned.**

**Appendix - Question sheet**

What do you like most about going to a Methodist Church?

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What do you like least about going to a Methodist Church?

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Is there anything about Methodism that you would like to understand better?

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