

THIS MONTH: AUGUST 2009



RIDGEWAY METHODIST CHURCH

Dear Friends

Last month I said that I might tell you something about my paper, 'The Essence of Methodism', which was the title I chose for my address to the AGM of the Voice of Methodism Association that was held at Mount Zion Methodist Church (a very historic venue, www.mountzionhalifax.org.uk), just outside of Halifax, not far from Haworth, made famous as being the home of Emily Brontë (author of *Wuthering Heights*), and Oakworth Station (featured in the 1972 film *The Railway Children*).

The essence of Methodism

In 1997, under the auspices of the University of Wales, by means of the distribution of a questionnaire, I set out to discover what ordinary circuit ministers thought about British Methodism. The findings of this survey were published in a book published in 2006 (J. M. Haley and L. J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think*, Peterborough, Epworth Press). More recently, in 2008, the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit has repeated the survey and our next project is to compare and contrast the responses of 1997 and 2008 in the hope of analysing the changes in contemporary Methodism. Ministers who were under 46 years old in 1997 (36- to 57-year-old ministers now) are now likely to be influential in the Methodist Church as connexional officers, district chairmen (not 'chairs' as I find it hard to replace the potentially gender exclusive with the inanimate), superintendents and ministers of some of the larger churches.

Sunday services

The most controversial finding of the 1997 survey was that even the circuit ministers thought that Methodist Sunday services were often dull. The younger the minister, the more likely the minister was to agree. Each local church has to rise to that challenge. We are responding by using a blend of traditional hymns and modern worship songs, inclining these days more to the songs than to the hymns despite my being something of a traditionalist at heart. Part of the problem with the older hymns is undoubtedly some of the tunes (which we might take for granted but which are totally alien to people outside the church, especially younger people) and the Methodist dependence on the organ. We use some new tunes to old hymns but good ones seem to be few and far between. In order to maintain a good balance, using a computer spreadsheet we diligently keep records of the hymns and songs chosen and make suggestions to visiting preachers. In our circuit, we have the opportunity to request our own Sunday preachers and I think this has given us some welcome consistency.

Doctrinal diversity

The Methodist Church clearly displays the capacity to embrace broad diversity but I think it is a mistake to think that every local congregation has to be equally diverse. Our church is very much in the 'conservative-evangelical' tradition as we emphasise the place of the Bible in the life of the church and the individual believer, the centrality of the cross and the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, sacrifice and substitute (I feel a three point sermon coming on!) and the importance of personal faith and holiness. In 1997, a new generation of younger ministers were much more likely to have a 'conservative-evangelical' profile compared with their older colleagues. Many of the 'conservative-evangelical' ministers (like me) are much more open to the practice of believer's baptism and I think that trend is likely to continue.

Circuit appointments and itinerancy

Since the beginning of the movement, Methodist preachers have travelled on an itinerant system, though today there is an undoubted trend for ministers to stay longer in appointments. Today's ministers are much more likely to have spouses working and seem to be rather more choosy about the type of appointment (e.g. rural or city centre). A considerable proportion of ministers are also looking for some kind of specialist role that particularly suits their gifts, while those who are in a settled appointment are as reluctant to leave as congregations and circuits are to lose them. While it is always necessary to guard against complacency, a more settled pattern of ministry probably facilitates ministers introducing vital change into the local churches and enables ministers and local leaders to see beyond short-term planning.

Future planning

Most Methodist ministers agree that Christian mission is hindered by disunity between the denominations. However, there are some indications that denominational structures are becoming less important and that other theological groupings were bringing churches and ministers of a similar ethos closer together. In 1997, the younger ministers, who now represent experienced ministers in positions of leadership, were less enthusiastic than their older colleagues about organisational unity. While our relationships with the Church of England and the United Reformed Church (URC) continue to develop at a national and local level, Methodist ministers remain unenthusiastic about the Anglican three-fold order of ministry (i.e. bishops, priests, deacons). Though 'bishop' is a New Testament word it is unlikely that bishops in the hierarchical sense existed before the second century. The adoption of a theology of episcopacy that sees certain things (e.g. ordination and confirmation) as being the prerogative of the bishop alone and the imposition of a hierarchical structure where the bishop is head of the diocese would be alien to Methodism. While the Methodist District Chairman might cover the same area as a bishop, many Methodist ministers would welcome a renewed emphasis in the Chairman's role as district pastor and evangelist.

Christ dying for us, Christ reigning in us

While all the items mentioned above are important for the Methodist Church, I maintain that none of these is really 'the essence of Methodism'. The matters that we have considered are subordinate to proclaiming in word and deed the true essence of Methodism, the two doctrines of justification and sanctification, limitless love and limitless grace - Christ dying for us, Christ reigning in us.

Birthday congratulations

We extend birthday greetings to Mrs Myra Harris who reaches the 100 year milestone on 18 August. Myra is not our oldest member. That distinction has, for some years, belonged to Mrs Vera Giles who is in her 103rd year. I am privileged to visit these and other older friends regularly and I know that through me they would like to send their prayerful greetings and good wishes to you all.

Pastoral care and home visits

August is the time of year when there are fewer meetings and other burdens. If you would like me to call on you at home (especially if I have not visited you at home before) please let me know through the office (348178) and I will be pleased to arrange a time to visit. If you know of someone who is not able to attend services regularly who would like me to call then, again, please let me know through the office.

Yours sincerely

John Haley

METHODIST PRAYER HANDBOOK

The 2009-2010 edition entitled "*Each Returning Day*" will be available during August at a cost of £3.00 per copy; this little book of prayer is a very helpful tool to use day by day throughout the year - £3.00 well spent!. If you would like to acquire a copy of this book, please speak to Revd John Haley, Beth Saunders or one of the stewards.

A WEEKEND TO MARK IN YOUR DIARY: 25-27 SEPTEMBER

We had already planned a visit from the previous director of *Eurovangelism* when the financial crisis hit the world. We must give as much support as we can, as charitable donations have decreased and the poorest people in the world are suffering most. Our harvest weekend coincides with the national *Back to Church Sunday* campaign and the local mission group has planned the following events: Friday 25 (evening) Barn Dance; Saturday 26 (morning) Oasis Coffee Bar; Sunday 27 (morning) all-age service followed by lunch and a fuller presentation by Gary Cox. Further details nearer the time - but please book these dates now! A great opportunity to invite others to share the celebration and fellowship, and share our blessings with people in great poverty and need.

Carol Sharman

August Diary

Saturday 1:

8.30 am Monthly Prayer Meeting
10.00-12.00 Oasis Coffee Bar: Local Outreach (Pat and others)

Sunday 2:

10.30 am Revd John Haley (Holy Communion)
7.00 pm Mrs Kate Konrad

Saturday 8:

10.00-12.00 Oasis Coffee Bar: Youth Outreach (Miriam, Kim & Steve)

Sunday 9:

10.30 am Revd John Haley
7.00 pm Revd John Haley

Saturday 15:

10.00-12.00 Oasis Coffee Bar: Local Outreach (Pat and others)

Sunday 16:

10.30 am Dr Philip Walsh
7.00 pm Revd John Haley (Holy Communion)

Saturday 22:

10.00-12.00 Oasis Coffee Bar: Church Funds (Avril and others)

Sunday 23:

10.30 am Revd John Haley
7.00 pm Mr Colston Swift

Saturday 29:

10.00-12.00 Oasis Coffee Bar: Guatemala (Jo and Matt)

Sunday 30:

10.30 am Mrs Brenda Youngs
7.00 pm Revd John Haley

Church office hours: Tuesday-Friday 9.30 am - 12.30 pm
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Information for September *This Month* to the office by 27 August please.