

Trends among Younger Ministers

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Introduction

As part of a larger project on Methodism and churches in Britain, a survey was made of all Methodist circuit ministers in Britain, using a comprehensive 24-page questionnaire prepared in the University of Wales by Revd Professor Leslie J. Francis and Revd Dr William K. Kay (Welsh National Centre for Religious Education) and Revd Dr John M. Haley (Methodist circuit minister). A response rate of 74% of the ministers surveyed means that the analysis can be treated with confidence. Leslie Francis and John Haley later published many of the findings of the questionnaire in a book *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* and further information about the topic considered here and a further 22 topics is included in the book. In the tables, because percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number, the total percentage might be 101% or 99% as well as 100%. Cross-tabulations use the chi-square test to check the statistical significance of the differences in the responses of the two groups. If the differences between the three groups are so small that they could have occurred by mere chance this is indicated by the letters 'NS' (not significant). If the test reveals a variation that is statistically significant, the probability level has been expressed in terms of the three standard levels of .05, .01, and .001. The probability level of .05, for example, indicates the differences between the three groups could have arisen by chance less than five times in a hundred, while the level of .001 reduces the probability of chance to less than once in a thousand. Using a statistical test of this nature safeguards against the mistake of looking at figures and thinking there may be a difference when in fact there is none.

Trends among younger ministers

The topic under consideration in this article is 'doctrinal orthodoxy' with particular reference to *generational differences*. The responses of three different age groups of ministers are compared: the 409 ministers who were under 46 years of age, the 413 ministers who were aged between 46 and 55, and the 447 ministers who were over 55 years of age. The assumption made in this section is that these three cohorts will reflect not only age differences, but also very different experiences of life and of the Methodist Church. It is not assumed that age necessarily reflects the number of years' experience in ministry since, as data from this survey confirms, individuals have entered ministry at a variety of different stages in their individual lives.

Doctrinal orthodoxy

The Methodist Church regards itself as a 'broad church', in the sense in which 'broad church' has been used to describe the Church of England. Since the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church state that the Church 'accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds', ministers were asked to indicate their views on particular statements from the creeds, including phrases about the Holy Trinity, the person and work of Christ and the after-life.

Table 1: Doctrinal orthodoxy

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. I believe in the Holy Trinity	95%	4%	1%
2. Jesus is fully God and fully human	95%	3%	2%
3. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary	75%	14%	11%
4. Jesus physically rose from the dead on the first Easter Day	75%	13%	12%
5. I believe in the personal and visible return of Jesus Christ	50%	26%	25%
6. I believe in life after death	95%	5%	1%
7. I believe in heaven	90%	7%	2%
6. I believe in hell	57%	23%	20%

Table 1 shows that the overwhelming majority of ministers (95%) affirmed that they believed in the Holy Trinity (statement 1). Nevertheless, it should be noted that one in twenty Methodist ministers (5%) cannot stand and personally affirm this key doctrine of the Christian Church.

The person and work of Christ is explored through four statements (statements 2-5). The overwhelming majority of ministers (95%) agreed with the statement 'Jesus is fully God and fully human' but, as with the statement about belief in the Holy Trinity, one in twenty Methodist ministers (5%) are not able to express their belief in this doctrine. Three-quarters of the ministers (75%) agreed with the statement 'Jesus was

conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary' but one in nine of the ministers (11%) disagreed and a further 14% of the ministers were uncertain. One in four Methodist ministers (25%) could not express agreement with the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus Christ. Similarly, three-quarters of the ministers (75%) expressed their belief that Jesus physically rose from the dead on the first Easter Day but one in eight ministers (12%) disagreed and a further one in eight ministers (13%) were uncertain. Therefore, one in four Methodist ministers (25%) could not express agreement with the traditional interpretation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The traditional understanding of the doctrine of the Lord's future coming in glory (the parousia) is summarised in the statement 'I believe in the personal and visible return of Jesus Christ' (statement 5). While half the ministers (50%) agreed with this statement, one-quarter of the ministers (25%) disagreed with it and the other quarter (26%) were not certain. It seems as if the idea that 'Christ will come again' (a familiar statement from Methodist and ecumenical liturgies) was not something to which half of the ministers (51%) could commit themselves in a literal way.

Statements 6-8 consider life after death. The overwhelming majority of ministers (95%) agreed that they believe in life after death (statement 6), though 5% were not certain and a small minority (1%) disagreed with this general statement about the afterlife. This means, in effect, that 6% of the ministers were not confident about the continuation of life after death. The statement, 'I believe in heaven' (statement 7), secured the ministers' overwhelming agreement (90%), though 7% were not certain and 2% disagreed, meaning that one in eleven Methodist ministers (9%) were unable to say they believe in heaven. Ministers did not so readily agree with the statement 'I believe in hell' (statement 8). Eleven out of twenty ministers (57%) expressed belief in hell, but a considerable proportion, one in every four ministers (23%), were not certain and one in every five ministers (20%) disagreed that they believed in hell. Therefore, nine out of twenty ministers (43%) were unable to say that they believe in hell.

Generational differences

The statistics presented in table 2 reveal some important and interesting ways in which younger ministers are significantly more orthodox than their older colleagues in the beliefs that they hold concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ and concerning hell. In other ways, however, there are no statistically significant differences in the levels of orthodoxy espoused by the three age groups of ministers examined in the study.

Table 2: Doctrinal orthodoxy by age

Statement	Under 46	46-55	Over 55	X ²	P<
1. I believe in the Holy Trinity	95%	94%	95%	0.4	NS
2. Jesus is fully God and fully human	95%	93%	96%	4.1	NS
3. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary	80%	72%	72%	7.9	.05
4. Jesus physically rose from the dead on the first Easter Day	80%	73%	72%	7.9	.05
5. I believe in the personal and visible return of Jesus Christ	57%	49%	44%	14.3	.001
6. I believe in life after death	95%	94%	95%	1.2	NS
7. I believe in heaven	91%	90%	90%	0.4	NS
6. I believe in hell	62%	58%	52%	9.1	.05

There are four statements (3, 4, 5 and 8) where the variation of responses between the three groups indicates statistical significance. Regarding the person of Jesus, 72% of the older ministers (over the age of 55) and 72% of the 46- to 55-year-old ministers believed that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Among the young ministers (under the age of 46) the proportion that held this orthodox position rose to 80%. Similarly 72% of the older ministers (over the age of 55) and 73% of the 46- to 55-year-old ministers believed that Jesus physically rose from the dead on the first Easter Day. Among the young ministers (under the age of 46) the proportion that held this orthodox position rose to 80%. The proportions of ministers who believed in the personal and visible return of Jesus Christ rose from 44% among the over 55 age group to 49% among the 46 to 55 age group and then further to 57% among the under 46 age group. Regarding hell, 52% of the older ministers (over the age of 55) expressed belief in hell. The proportions then rose to 58% among the 46- to 55-year-old ministers and to 62% among the younger ministers (under the age of 46).

Doctrinal orthodoxy: trends among younger ministers

In terms of broadly-based classic doctrines (like God as Trinity, Jesus as both fully human and fully divine and life after death) the vast majority of Methodist ministers remain highly orthodox. As a broad Church, however, Methodism allows room for diversity of belief among ministers on doctrines like the virginal birth of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus, and the existence of hell. Given the constraints and opportunities of the circuit model of itinerancy, it is likely that individual congregations may

be exposed at different times both to rigid doctrinal orthodoxy and to more liberal interpretations of the Christian tradition. While the theory is that this may challenge and strengthen some congregations the reality is that it may well discomfort and weaken others. The original study, conducted in 1997, anticipated that there would be a move toward greater doctrinal orthodoxy among the younger cohort of ministers. A repeat study will show whether that is the case. However, if this trend among younger ministers persists, the Methodist Church may be on course for developing a more conservative or orthodox doctrinal profile in the future.

British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think by Leslie J. Francis and John M. Haley was published in June 2006 by Epworth Press at £16.99.