

**NEW CREATION AND THE LEARNING ORGANISATION:
THE PROCESS OF SANCTIFICATION**

Theological emphases develop with the challenges of context. I was one of those at the WMC in Brighton last summer listening to the key-note address being delivered by an astro-physicist and Methodist minister, Dr David Wilkinson ,and one of his points struck me with some force. We do not know, he said, what took place in the cosmos during the first fraction of a second of its existence. Going back to that point was fairly well understood but beyond 10 to 43m places of a second was impenetrable. Now David Wilkinson was not trying to defend a God of the gaps notion – indeed he vigorously rejected it. My mind, however, took a sideways step and began to make connection with an idea of Wesley's developed very tellingly by Professor Theodore Runyon at the beginning of his book, *The New Creation* (Nashville, 1998).

Wesley maintained, said Runyon, that the very heart of Christianity is the renewal in humanity of the image of God in which we were first created . But what is this image of God like? We cannot tell what it is directly nor by reason, “ There is no way to reason back from what humanity is now to what we were originally created to be. The Fall stands between us and our original condition” (1998:9). But from the biblical records of the first creation, biblical accounts of restoration and renewal and biblical prophesies anticipating the age to come, Wesley says that we can perceive God's purpose for us as to, “renew us in the spirit of our mind and create us anew in the image of God wherein we were first created” (Works: 416). This new creation takes place when we conform by faith to the Son of God and to the work of the Spirit of God renewing His image in our hearts .

Several points must be made here. First , Wesley insists, the image of God is not innate; it is not a ‘thing’. It is an agent that images or reflects its maker as a mirror and it does this in three ways - in the Natural image, the Political image and the Moral image. All are necessary for agency, for the ability to initiate and pursue objectives and ,together, all this is what Randy Maddox has defined as responsible grace (Nashville, 1994). These are divine gifts but they are not neutral; they may flourish or become distorted according to the use made of them and to our receiving from the Source what we seek to reflect.

Second, the restoration of the image of God is not instantaneous, coming like some bolt out of the blue; it is the process of sanctification and believers will be at various stages of the process. Wesley faced considerable difficulty throughout his ministry as he defended the notion that the pursuit of sanctification was possible, indeed a duty, for all Christians. He had even greater problems concerning the goal of absolute Perfection, the complete absence of sin this side of death, but he never wavered about the aim and the process of sanctification. His understanding here is in the tradition of the Eastern Fathers – a much

more therapeutic emphasis than the juridical position prevalent in the west and which is also to be found in parts of Wesley's writing and preaching.

Third, sanctification can not be confined to individual holiness. Individual experience of God's perfect love is but a foretaste of the fulfilment of creation when, "the loving knowledge of Godshall cover the earth" (Works: 279). Wesley was not being impossibly naïve in assessing the need for a universal renewal of the image of God in human affairs. He had many examples from his own experience, and that of the Methodist people, of the plight of the poor, crime and degradation, war, slavery and the exploitative nature of colonial expansion . These were to him clear evidence of the existence of human sin. He had no doubt that a new birth, a new creation, was the will of God for His children. Preaching on the Lord's Prayer he asserted that the phrase, " Thy Kingdom come on earth," really does look to the time when, "all the inhabitants of the earth, even the whole race of mankind may do the will of their Fatherwillingly...continuallyand perfectly , " (Works; 337).

For Wesley this new birth was the beginning of sanctification. The restoration of the image of God in us and in creation is the *process* of sanctification as individual men and women receive and reflect the perfect love of God back to God in love and worship and share it perfectly with their neighbours in loving service.

For most of his long life Wesley could see this increasing in the lives of people who took God's promise seriously. The Societies grew. The Class system established a pattern of mutual care between the members that provided for the needy, cared for the sick and supported those who were suffering while the Bands, small single sex groups of the totally committed, provided an intimate environment for sharing spiritual experiences and growth – hot-houses promoting the process of sanctification.

We should not be surprised that, although Wesley identified and preached against serious social and economic ills and made a number of proposals to deal with them, his remedies did not include attacks on the political and social structures of his day. His experiences of unruly mobs made him suspicious of democracy and his own authoritarian predisposition probably also played a part in persuading him to uphold the sovereignty of the king under parliament. Philosophical and political emphases on the rights of the individual were only slowly percolating into the thinking of even thoughtful people and Wesley's overriding concern was anyway not political but religious.

However in retrospect historians have been able to identify the revolutionary character of the Wesleyan movement. Historians like Bernard Semmel (New York 1973) have noted the "levelling" aspect of Methodism which while pressing for social change encouraged sobriety and industry in its members - quite unlike similar movements in France. Theologically this can be seen to arise from the divine discontent felt by those who became agents of the perfect love of God which enabled them to see the poverty, need, suffering of neighbours as their own.

During the 19thC as Methodism became bureaucratised we can now identify a number of perversions (or at least deviations) from Wesley's teaching. Perhaps most importantly the idea of Perfection reverted to its generally understood Western notion of an Ideal state

never realised in this life, so sanctification took on a more pietistic character that even leaned towards prudery, losing much of its original and healthy ‘grounding’. Scientific and economic expansion evoked a sense of pride in human achievement and a belief in the inevitability of human progress. Most of Methodism became respectable, responding to perceived attacks on biblical and doctrinal propositions with intransigence. We can see at work here the difficulties that Norman Young puts so clearly . Not only are we reluctant to allow renewal to take place in some so called lower part of our being but , in the perversity of our best self,.....which seeks to elevate human creativity so that we become like God we hold on to our so called autonomy, (Philadelphia:54).

At the same time the Spirit did continue to work both through the church and in spite of it. Many Methodists were at the forefront of movements for social change like the Trade Union movement, pressures for democratic reform and the protection of the poor. City missions became lighthouses among the ‘dark satanic mills’ and Methodist involvement in the Sunday School movement extended educational opportunities to many thousands who would otherwise have remained illiterate. In spite of the difficulties they faced – the theological questions, scientific challenges and rising scepticism – most ordinary Christians continued to believe at least in the possibility of a new birth in the individual and a new creation at some end time.

This picture was radically altered by the two world wars that dominated the first half of the 20thC and brought to an end what some have called the Enlightenment Project and others the period of Modernity. Post-modernism is well documented, (eg by Walter Brueggemann 1993 and by Middleton & Walsh1995). All institutions have suffered from fiercely iconoclastic attacks - – the legal system, politics and medicine as well as the church – which have eroded confidence in most institutions in present society. The decline in church membership that had been taking place since the beginning of the century became a haemorrhage. Over-arching claims to truth no longer seem plausible and as a result many people, including many Christians, feel confused and powerless.

In the light of these developments how can Wesley’s insights and initiatives be harnessed as means of renewal for our own time? In order to address this question, we will first consider a contemporary analysis of learning and change.

The Learning Organisation

Learning is a basic human need. Infants do not have to be taught how to learn, it is a dynamic within them. It is also now widely acknowledged that it is not just something ‘done to children’ and finished in adolescence but a process that continues throughout life, (Jarvis 2000). However from the enormously wide research into how people learn, (eg by Piaget, Fowler, Ericson etc.), it is possible to see this innate activity as an integrative process which brings together the emotional/affective influences on cognition and enables cognitive powers to be brought to bear on non-cognitive areas of development.

From this process of learning some recognisable individual emerges. The long philosophical problems associated with attempting to define and locate a separate 'self' cannot be dealt with here but theology must assert that a person is more than a physical, biological entity. Jarvis suggests that the 'self' is itself the integrative process, a process that is never finished and which may be affected by the physical body (by age, illness, tiredness) but transcends it,(1995:44). So a person, a self, has traits and characteristics that are formed but not unchanging. If this definition of a learner is accepted then the learning organisation must be thought of as both subject and object. The organisation will learn only as the individuals of which it is composed learn but the learning organisation will also be an agent in the learning processes of the individuals within it.

The learning organisation is a definition first coined, I believe, in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and most work on it has been carried out in the United States by people like Peter Senge,(1992). Senge's basic premise is that, contrary to the integrative process of the development of the self, people are taught to break apart problems and complex tasks into smaller component parts because these are seen to be more manageable. But problems usually are complex and the result of this fragmentation is that we tend to lose the connectedness of the wider whole, we no longer see the wider picture. Indeed other writers have seen that some of the most worrying features of post modern society exactly reflect this fragmentation and exacerbate its effects, (Brueggeman 1992, Middleton & Walsh 1995).

Senge set out to destroy the illusion that the world (or an organisation) is created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up that illusion we can then build learning organisations, " organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire And where people are continually learning how to learn together"(1992:3). Senge's work, though aimed at the world of commerce, recognised that many people in developed countries have now moved beyond the instrumental view of work as simply a means to an end and seek its intrinsic value in personal fulfilment and ethical outreach to redress injustices.

Learning organisations do not just happen. Certain components are critical to the success of the others and they must all be present. For a learning organisation to function successfully Senge identified the following five such components, though for an innovation in human behaviour he preferred the word 'disciplines'. A discipline is a developmental path, a process that is never complete but must always be practised, (1992).

Systems thinking : the ability to make full patterns clearer and help us to see how to change them effectively.

Personal mastery : the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision of what really matters to us, of focussing our energies – the learning organisation's spiritual foundation.

Mental models : primarily turning the mirror inwards and learning to unearth and rigorously scrutinise our internal pictures of the world and other people - to make our thinking open to the thinking of others.

Building shared vision : translating individual vision into shared pictures of the future that foster real commitment rather than mere compliance.

Team learning : how can a team of committed individuals with IQ's above 120 have a collective IQ of 63 ? When team learning takes place the results *exceed* those of individuals and the process begins with dialogue – the capacity to suspend judgements and enter into genuine thinking together (1992: 10).

At the heart of a learning organisation, says Senge , (and Wesley would have agreed with him wholeheartedly), is a shift of mind – metanoia, (1992: 13) – through which we reperceive the world and our relationship to it and extend our capacity to be part of the generative process of life.

The Church as Learning Organisation

It can be seen even from this brief sketch that the church Wesley established fulfilled almost all the criteria of a modern learning organisation. A radically new change of mind and heart (metanoia) was at its centre, members learned continually to clarify and deepen their personal vision, to open this to scrutiny from themselves and others and together translate that vision and commitment into shared action. The only criterion that is perhaps less represented is that of systems thinking, though even here Wesley was ahead of his period in seeing beyond the empiricists' atomising tendency to the connections between, for example, poverty and crime, imperialism and war, wealth and greed. The word discipline is a very fitting description of what characterised the early Methodist church.

For modern writers like Senge the aim is to promote effective commercial organisations ; for Wesley the purpose was entirely the nurture of the new birth awakened by preaching and the grace of God and the developing processes of sanctification at work in the members. Theology (and ecclesiology), however, develops within the challenge of particular contexts. We can not return to the 18thC ,nor should we try, but it may be that the churches of the 21stC – our church – can leapfrog over some of the mistakes of the intervening years to find in Wesley's Methodism some encouragement to become this kind of learning organisation. With a clarity denied to Wesley in his cultural environment we can also use the skills of systems analysis to help us make the full global pattern clearer and identify effective means of change.

Because of the geographical and historical ‘givens’ the situations and needs of individual churches will vary but the tools provided by this model of a learning organisation can be applied to all. Because we are all Methodists, however, the aim of all will be that of Wesley – to bring individuals to experience a new birth, to nurture the process of sanctification so that the image of God in them is restored and to spread this kind of scriptural holiness throughout the world until all is created anew. If the church is truly a

learning organisation it will recognise with even greater impact after September 11 that this kind of thinking can not be done in isolation, nor can it be protected by academia or pulpit. So what does, what can, sanctification mean now?

Sanctification as Process – Individual, Social, Global

I think we need first to assert again Wesley's view of sanctification as a process. It is not just a state of existence devoutly to be hoped for in the future but a process of renewal to which we are called in the present. Process theology reminds us that process is not synonymous with progress. God can bring out of failure, discord and pain new creative opportunities. Calvary, of course, is the supreme example but we could all cite lesser ones. Bernhard Anderson reminds us that both order and chaos belong together in creation, that God subdued chaos but did not eliminate it. So the process of sanctification may not bring peace; it can bring upheaval and dis-ease in both individuals and communities as the image of God replaces other gods. The church is not immune from this kind of upheaval and Senge's five disciplines can provide useful tools in assessing the functioning of a church as well as of a commercial organisation.

We also need to recognise that the church can only be called a learning organisation when it is a community of grace, that is when it is a community of those awakened by the grace of God to a new life. It is people in the process of sanctification, agents of God's renewing love, who make of the church a learning organisation and not vice-versa. Within any learning organisation, learning is a two way process and one task of those in leadership is to learn from the members to identify the points of frustration or renewal and 'fund the imagination' of those in their care (Brueggemann 1993).

Another task is to deal with the language problem – not just the politically correct way of referring to other people but the far more important difficulty of expressing theological 'truths' in contemporary terms. Because we think in language it is only by opening our cherished cliches to often painful scrutiny that our vision may be clarified, so that it becomes possible to share it with others. This kind of scrutiny is exactly what Wesley established in early Methodism. We saw above (p5) that of Senge's five disciplines the one he considered most important, systems analysis, is a modern tool that would not have been available to Wesley. Its value to us is in helping us to appreciate the complexities of any situation including that of the church at the beginning of the 21stC.

First , the complexity of our own society and church community – longing for spirituality but reluctant to be committed to anything; wanting to understand but prone to an anti-intellectual dependence on short term gratification and entertainment, even in worship; hard pressed in work and family life with demands that drive out long term concern for wider issues in an obsession with self.

In his Sermon 83, On Patience, Wesley said that perfection is 'as high a degree of holiness as is consistent with (one's) present state of pilgrimage', (Works: 492), and Runyon reminds us that for Wesley right living and not precision in formulation is the real test (1998:232). However , the call to clarify in ourselves the reality of the new birth we have already confessed at our Confirmation and the process of sanctification on which

we then embarked is, perhaps, a consciousness raising discipline the church needs to pursue more rigorously and more regularly.

The problems of language and definition are made clearer because we believe that we have in Jesus Christ the one in whom the new creation has become a reality, a life on which we can pattern our own. At the same time the problem becomes more pressing because, as Moltmann reminds us, 'Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is but, beginning to suffer under it, move to contradict it' (London, 1967:21). And this not only in our own communities ; the immediacy of global communication networks bring our neighbours daily into our living rooms.

This brings us to the second complexity with which we must grapple. We cannot escape the inter-relatedness of all earth's populations and cultures. Whether melting pot or segregated no nation can any longer remain a homogenised and separate group. If we want to say, with Wesley, that the fulfilment of creation will be the time when , 'the loving knowledge of Godshall cover the earth ' ,(Works: 279) must we not also say that we are still in the process of understanding the full meaning of sanctification for us today?

Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Wales, was in a meeting two blocks away from the World Trade Centre on September 11. Within hours of its collapse he wrote a meditation in which he speaks of the frightening contrast between the 'murderously spiritual and the compassionately secular.' In Northern Ireland, South Africa and The Philippines we have recent examples of the 'murderously spiritual' in Christian as well as in Islamic traditions. The place of righteous pagans and those of other faiths in God's economy troubled Wesley and elicited from him a forthright acknowledgement that all were part of God's good creation and all were endowed by God with the gift of prevenient grace. Maddox sees the possibility in the mature Wesley that 'some who have not heard of Christ may enter into a saving relationship with God' ,(1994:34).

Today we recognise, as Wesley could not, that we are all culturally imprisoned and only with difficulty and great effort can we see beyond our own ideological boundaries, in religious traditions as in many others. Yet ease of communication also means that we are more knowledgeable about other faiths and more experienced in living alongside them than was possible in the 18thC. It is not necessary for us to sacrifice Christian claims about the uniqueness of Christ in order to acknowledge in devout members of the other monotheistic faiths evidences of new creation; indeed first hand acquaintance with individual Muslims and Jews can make it impossible for us to deny the presence of God in their lives. They too should be recognised as part of the universal renewal we are seeking. Their final sanctification, holiness, in the sense of their final salvation Wesley was able to leave to, " divine favour and indulgence" , (Notes on the NT, Acts 10:4), and so, I believe, should we. Too often our God has been too small and our boundaries too narrow. To continue to insist , stridently at times, that there is only one channel, the Christian dispensation, through which the infinite God can work to renew humankind is a particularity we should, in our finiteness, now relinquish.

This question has been closely linked to another pressing and complex issue; economic globalisation. Christian missionary movements have frequently been accompanied by

economic expansion and domination. It would be possible today for the globalisation of trade to work for the benefit of the less powerful and to play an important role in the renewal of vast numbers of people but so often it results in their greater oppression. Douglas Meeks made a powerful contribution to this debate when he suggested that we should go back to the root meaning of both economy and ecology as 'oikos', home or household, (Minneapolis, 1989).

'The question of economy is, will everyone in the household have access to what it takes to live and live abundantly? The question of ecology is, will nature have a home in its own living space? The question of oikoumene is, will the peoples of the earth be able to inhabit the earth in peace? Taken together they constitute oikoumene as the most comprehensive horizon for the church's service in God's redemption of the world', (in Ritchey, ed. UMC 1992:6).

As we attempt to address some of the complex systems at work in any process of renewal we surely need to recognise that economic forces are some of the most powerful and also some of those most resistant to change. The New Testament principalities and powers are still with us under different names and even beneficent ones like democracy and economic aid can become demonic. Simply because democratic governments depend on a popular vote, unpopular (expensive?) decisions may be short-changed. The percentage of GNP given in development aid has not, in any western country, yet reached the amount that was promised and even this is often given with strings attached.

Could / should not a church that is a learning organisation and grappling with these intransigent problems, inspire and energise some of those called to Christian ministry to exchange pastoral ministry and preaching for politics and economics – a less comfortable career but one where renewal is so badly needed ? Or could we not inspire others to join the scientific search to find an alternative to oil , the root of so much conflict, or the development of affordable medication to combat curable diseases ?

The process of sanctification, of holiness, of the fullness of the love of God throughout the world is, as we see, fraught with uncertainty. But so was creation . As Young reminds us, 'To say that God creates out of nothing is to relinquish any guarantee of certainty or security in past or present,' (1975:149). But in every situation God is confronting what is actual in the world with what is possible.

In spite of, at times, almost overwhelming indications to the contrary there are signs of hope and renewal is seen to be possible in ecclesial and political communities. Liberation theology has empowered 'little' people to achieve a new autonomy, the collapse of apartheid in South Africa and the widespread rejection today of attempts at coercion by terror or tyranny point to the hope, if no more than that, of new creative possibilities in the future. The Green movement to redeem the environment and the campaign to break the chains of debt that imprison poor countries have involved people of several faiths and none, and they have effected real change and renewal.

But such renewal does not simply happen. It comes about when men and women, 'show the signs of the new creation in (their) own lives, not just by waiting to be transformed

but by living as those who are transformed', and not just by waiting for some signs of a transformed society to appear but by taking action so that they will, (Young 1975:181). At the beginning of *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann stated his aim as being, 'to Nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the perception of the dominant culture around us,'(Philadelphia,1978). Is not this the task of those who, in the process of sanctification and renewal, make of the church a learning organisation which is an ever new creation ?

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