

“Blessed are you, Holy God, for people of every language and culture and for the rich variety you give to life” (Methodist Worship Book, 1999: 44)

A Wesleyan approach to ‘difference’: A UK case-study

Introduction

I want to thank you for the privilege of sharing, at the OITMS 2018, some of the work that I’ve been doing. I’m a Methodist minister and throughout my teaching and then my ministry I’ve been fascinated by the complexities and richness of intercultural life. My doctorate, which I am now beginning to write up, is about the potentially cosmopolitan nature of theology and whether a cosmopolitan theology is possible in practice. My fieldwork has been 18 months of participant-observer research with one particular congregation, using ethnographic methods. This paper presents my current thinking about the potential, in British Methodism, for cosmopolitan practical theology.

Background

One significant change in British society over the last twenty years has been the growth in the ethnic diversity of the populations ‘on the doorstep’. In 1985, when Heather Walton produced her report, *A Tree God Planted*, about ethnic diversity in the British Methodist Church, I was teaching in a London secondary school which had 70 countries represented within its student body. This was a particular experience which was unknown in most parts of the country at that point. Over the last thirty years, due to the continuation of global migration, and also to the 3rd and 4th generations of many families, some experience of this rich diversity is much less an exception and much more the norm. Within British Methodism we do not collect data about people’s backgrounds and so there is no quantitative data about the ethnic diversity of the people called Methodists. Nevertheless, in many parts of the country the Methodist Church would almost certainly not exist without those who have migrated from other countries and their families. In 1985 there were only nine known fellowship groups of particular ethnic groups (Walton 1985, 46) whereas there are currently well over 100 ethnically specific fellowship groups¹, demonstrating considerable demographic change in thirty years. As the MCB has been joined by newer arrivals from other countries where Methodism is a vital part of their cultural life, these Methodists have often formed themselves into ‘Fellowships’ in order to enjoy worship in their own first language and to support one another in Christian life here in the UK. They have also contributed fully as members of the existing MCB congregations in most cases. Additionally, many Methodist Churches in other countries (among many others, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ghana and Fiji for example) “offer the time, gifts and support of senior ministers from their

churches to come and work in Britain. This 'loss' of key staff from their own local churches and conferences should not be underestimated as a real gift to the Methodist Church in Britain" (Atkins 2015). The report to Methodist Conference 2015, from which this quotation comes, emphasised the current importance of these fellowships, and of the contribution of other Methodist Churches, to the potential of church growth and mission today.

In this paper I am going to focus on the impact on the MCB of those Methodists from other countries and to consider what helps, and what hinders, the MCB in responding to what many would see as God at work in what is often called the 'Reverse Missionary Movement'.

In writing about this movement Olofinjana (2015: 39) says,

"Reverse mission... recognizes that mission is no longer the privilege of the Western church but is now carried out from everywhere to everywhere, and that those of us from the Majority World have something to contribute to mission theology and its practice. Therefore, both those intentionally sent and those migrating for other reasons (economic, educational and social factors) come to reach out through holistic mission (evangelism, healing and social action) to the different people (indigenes as well as other nationalities) of the Western world."

In my work as a district Mission Enabler, I argue that all Christians are missionaries when they are willing to be open to God's guidance in their lives and are committed to participation in the life of God in the worldⁱⁱ. So, also, I would argue that this, of course, includes those who have come from countries to which British missionaries travelled in previous centuries. For whatever reasons people have migrated to the UK, they often share their own faith in ways that are intended to introduce those living here to the Gospel todayⁱⁱⁱ. Undoubtedly many British Methodist churches have been kept open and dramatically transformed and renewed by the presence of Christians from other parts of the globe.

Wesleyan theological features

Bearing in mind that most Methodist theology is carried, experienced and expressed in Methodist practice (Marsh et al, 2004 and Shier-Jones, 2005) then I am asking, in this current context, what aspects of Wesleyan theology and British Methodist practice have contributed to Methodism being effective in cross-cultural ministry and mission, and what have been a hindrance?

1. The four 'Alls' of Methodism

Firstly the 'Four Alls of Methodism', although these were coined later in Methodist history, are widely held to summarize John Wesley's own thinking^{iv}. The set of ideas that "All need to be saved, all may be saved, all may know themselves saved, and all may be saved to the uttermost" are known and important to many Methodists and still keenly influence British Methodist culture. The tradition of holding an 'open table' at communion is one expression of this approach. With regard to the idea that 'all' can be saved, what happens to this same

sense of equality, when people become part of the church, and want to contribute equally to the church's life? In terms of ethnic diversity, Weems (1999: 64) explains that in the earliest Methodist days African Americans, who felt God calling them in this way, were licenced as local preachers and as travelling preachers. Although the local law sometimes forbade them from being preachers they showed great courage in finding a way round this, calling themselves 'exhorters' but functioning as preachers. Jagessar (2007) reminds us, too, of the way in which slaves responded to Wesleyan preaching and then became an early part of the spreading of the Methodist message of salvation for all. While this acceptance of all as having equal calling in response to the Gospel sadly quickly changed, we need to be reminded that it was part of our earliest heritage.

2. The Catholic Spirit

Secondly, Wesley's sermon 'The Catholic Spirit' (Sermon 39) has been very influential in Wesleyan traditions and it was also a clear factor in the thinking of many Methodists at my study church. It was not known by all of them by name, and for many it merged with the Biblical command to 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Nevertheless, the kindness and open-heartedness which I saw between people in the congregation, coupled with the comments that people made, helped me to see that the spirit of this sermon was a factor in the practical theology by which people lived. It is very difficult, of course, to discover the exact route by which Wesleyan theology impacts on a congregation, whether it be through hearing sermons, singing Wesleyan hymns, or study in small groups. Like most of the rest of British Methodism my participants were not readily able to articulate where their theology had developed from or what it is, but during my participant-observer time with them I saw people live out, despite differences, misunderstandings and conflicts, the sermon's exhortation: "If your heart is right with my heart then give me your hand."

3. Small group experience

Thirdly, from the beginning Wesley urged the early Methodists to meet together in small groups for fellowship. This practice enabled learning, accountability and also a deeper understanding and mutual support for each other. While this is no longer practised in every Methodist Church in Britain there is, still, within Methodist culture, an emphasis on being in fellowship with one another, which expects a level of knowing and being known to one another. In my own study church there were several 'home groups' and through these groups some of the deepest inter-cultural friendships have developed. They provide opportunities for people to share more deeply about their day-to-day life and to express to one another differences of opinion and challenges which can help relationships to deepen. (C. Marsh 1999). It was in these contexts that I saw church members growing through what McGarrah Sharp (2013) calls 'misunderstanding stories' into a deeper mutual understanding of each other's life and faith.

4. The connexional principle

A fourth relevant element of Wesleyan theology and practice is that of connexionism: the way in which different local churches and Methodists are seen as intrinsically interconnected to one another. Clutterbuck (2004: 59) comments, "A hallmark of British Methodism is its commitment to a theology of interdependence." He adds, "While the phrase attributed to Wesley, 'the world is my parish', may have become a cliché, it points to an important theological affirmation: there are no geographical limits either to the gracious action of God or to the missionary calling of the Church." (2004: 64). The concept of Methodist membership across world Methodism enables a sense of 'belonging' when people move between countries and regions^v, and membership itself holds within it the discipline of fellowship in meeting with others. This was very important to some of my participants which reminded me of the work of Fumanti (2010) who argues that for many Ghanaian Methodists worshipping in London their belonging to the Methodist Church in Britain functions by giving an affirming sense of being citizens of Britain itself.

This connexionism has within it a necessary element of diversity as well as unity, which is not without its challenges but which, I would argue, is a significant contribution to wider understanding of how diversity can be celebrated. Weems Jr (1999: 85), building on the work of Outler, discusses the attitudes which enabled Wesley to work well with tension caused by diversity. In particular, Wesley's refusal to accept compromise but his ability to find a 'third alternative' when faced with two people or groups of differing convictions or outlooks. "Where Christ is the centre differences exist but they are in perspective... Where there is a vacuum at the centre the differences will be drawn towards the centre... a power vacuum and tensions arise. Where there's a central unity in Christ differences become a richness from which to draw." (1999: 92) Weems considers this to be a key part of the Wesleyan 'Spirit of Leadership' saying, "For John Wesley vital religious community required the richness of different people and different understandings of God's wisdom" (1999: 94). Today, in the light of growing diversity within British Methodist Churches, including a diversity of theological understanding, the Methodist Conference report 'Living with Contradictory Convictions' (2006) spells out the importance given to valuing and respecting diversity.

The networking of ethnically or linguistically specific Fellowship Groups with the MCB is, I would argue, one particular example of connexionism in practice. People from different cultural backgrounds are able to find, within a larger congregation, the kind of 'safe havens' which Marti describes (2010) but still to belong together with the Methodist Church in Britain. Similarly, some circuits, within a Connexional framework, contain congregations which speak a particular language, but which operate alongside others in the same circuit - for wider celebration and mutual support (Oborski 2013)

5. 'Orthopathy' and 'Orthokardia'

Lastly, I want to consider the concept of 'orthopathy' which Runyon (1998) develops from Wesley's writings. Knight III (2003) describes orthopathy as meaning that "Christians have a character which consists of holy tempers such as love for God and neighbour, faith, hope, peace, humility". While Wesley preached and taught about orthodoxy ('right belief') and

orthopraxy ('right practice'), he also put emphasis on the need for orthopathy ('right experience' of God). Clapper (1989) also argued for a Wesleyan understanding of orthokardia ('right heart' towards others). In 1872 Wesley wrote, "Let love not visit you as a transient guest, but be the constant temper of your soul. See that your heart be filled at all times, and on all occasions... not only to those that love you, but to every soul of man... Be not strained or limited in your affection but let it embrace every child of man... because every child of man has a claim to your good-will. You owe this, not to some, but to all." (On Pleasing All Men: 144). While it would be very difficult to measure orthopathy or orthokardia I suggest that willingness to live out the theological idea that all are made in the image of God, and readiness to learn more about God from others, is vital to what Jagessar (2015b) calls 'an intercultural habit', saying, "It is difficult to imagine that God desires homogeneity or uniformity for individuals or groups. The many-one-ness of humanity underscores God's preference for multiplicity in togetherness. It also reflects the manifoldness of God's infinity: variety offers us a glimpse of the Divine, with each part mirroring an aspect of the beauty/majesty of the 'holy other'."

Runyon (1998: 161) says that for Wesley, "experience [of God] is valid only insofar as it comes from a relation with a source that transcends the subject, and it is valid only insofar as it is consistent with a community of experience that transcends the individual." I argue that where Methodists have taken this 'to heart' they develop an empathy and orthokardia which comes from a 'right experience' not just of neighbour but of God, met with in the neighbour. This is important for mission because as Jagessar (2015) says, "The witness of churches... carries integrity and credibility when the world sees Christians growing and deepening relationships regardless of ethnicity and culture."

British Methodism in practice

So, what about British Methodist practice in 2018? While all of the above influences are present and often actively contribute to the ethos and culture of Methodist Churches in Britain there are other factors which hinder the ability of the MCB to benefit open-heartedly from the Reverse Missionary Movement.

a) Culture'

I use, here, Lartey's definition of culture as "the particular and distinctive 'way of life' of the group" (1997:9). While most congregations are, in fact, multi-cultural and it will help us to recognise this, for many congregations there is 'one way' of doing things and other approaches are only tolerated, or perhaps welcomed, where they do not clash with the dominant culture. Many congregations are reluctant to change the patterns of decision-making which have, for very many generations in some cases, served the purposes of those already within the churches. As Spencer puts it (2007: 92)

"Although most organizations say that they want individuals to bring different and innovative approaches, in practice they operate on the basis that difference is of

little or no value and similarity is of great importance. This is usually not conscious or deliberate, but unless deliberate and positive action is taken to recognize, acknowledge and promote the value of diversity, then the old order will prevail.”

A strong ‘inter-cultural habit’ (Jagessar 2015) and a de-colonialising approach is going to be necessary for many churches to benefit from the Reverse Missionary Movement. In particular, British Methodism has such a clear and established culture for decision-making, within its Constitution, Practice and Discipline, that the flexibility within this is not always recognized or valued and there can be a general and unquestioning belief that there is only one acceptable way of making decisions. Atkins (2015) brought to the Conference a report from the working party meeting with the Fellowship Groups which said, “A greater ‘permissiveness’ was discerned to be needed, and, rightly or wrongly, the group heard how rules and process in the MCB sometimes appear inflexible and unduly restrictive in relation to the experience of Methodism in other parts of the world.”

While British Methodism still espouses the ‘Four Alls’, some of my own earlier work (J. Marsh 2016) shows how necessary it is for congregations to share power with each other, across differences of approach, for the Methodist Church to benefit from those who I would argue God has brought here to help in mission. As early as 1974, Colin Morris, then General Secretary of the newly-formed Overseas Division asked,

“The question is not ‘Have we the resources to teach others what we know of Christ?’ but, ‘Have we the grace to receive what he wishes to teach us through Christians who, in many languages and a bewildering variety of churchmanship, proclaim him as Lord’” (Agenda 1974:50) (66).

This is a real challenge to our connexionalism. However, where there is opportunity for discussion and learning about other Methodist experience, as well as openness to change then new Methodist culture can develop.

b) Attitudes

There is in much of British Methodism a clear, though invisible and unspoken, White privilege which is often unchallenged. It is worth saying that, due to the complex intersectionalities of diversity, privilege and prejudice, this White privilege is often specifically White middle-class privilege.

The history of the Methodist Missionary movements is often the specific reason that Methodists are arriving back to support British Methodist Churches, within the Reverse Missionary Movement. Ironically, while the history of supporting Methodist missionary activity abroad in the past has led many Methodists to be kindly disposed towards people from other countries, this same history is colonial and has left many Methodists with unexamined paternalistic, even colonial, and sometimes racist views and practices. Writing from personal experience Dedji (2004: 211) comments, in relation to British Methodism,

“I must confess that deep within me there is a creative tension between what it means to remain truly African as well as being Christian. Being Methodist does not

solve but epitomizes this dilemma... The challenge which faces the future of British Methodism is how to retain the integrity of its indigenous component as well as its 'world church' dimension in the newness to which it aspires."

There is a legacy of paternalism which has lingered among the attitudes of Methodists who have, for generations, been encouraged to feel sorry for, and have pity on, those living with other cultural norms in far-flung places, as part of the encouragement to Methodists to give generously to missionary work being done in other places. While many elderly White Methodists are happy to welcome Methodists from other countries there is often an expectation that 'we'^{vi} really know about Methodism, that 'we' are the ones who can 'host' and 'include' others, but that we are the ones who should be sharing with, rather than receiving from, 'others'. This dynamic makes it hard for people from different Methodist countries to participate fully as equals in the Methodist Churches to which they now belong. The recent re-thinking of mission as 'One Mission' has a much more inter-cultural emphasis on mutual support and learning across World Methodism, in many different directions. Nevertheless, when I was recently at the 'Methodists for World Mission' conference I was told often, in conversation, "I've never been in the mission field" making clear that for many older Methodists other parts of the world are a 'mission field' but the UK is not. It is a complex picture because very many of those who have arrived from countries where Methodism was strong, were educated in Methodist schools, out from which their faith and Methodist identity were born. However, the shock of arriving in the UK to discover that they are not being encouraged as equal members with others, is often too great to overcome and certainly many have left the Methodist Church. It is sad that thirty years after Walton's study, *A Tree God Planted: Black People in British Methodism*, some of my participants still described their life in the MCB as 'doing in Rome what the Romans do'.^{vii}

While British Methodism has had a strong tradition of anti-racist training in living memory (The Methodist Church 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005), this training has not been taken up by all Methodists and the generally exclusionary culture of some British politics and media in many parts of the UK is sometimes proving stronger than the Wesleyan influences outlined above. The Black British communities of the Windrush generation have recently been in the UK news, because of the disgraceful ways they have been treated in terms of their legal status, and also at the 25th anniversary of Stephen Lawrence's murder. This has highlighted, again, that while they have often seen themselves as both Black and British, and while legally they often are both Black and British, there are still some people, even today, who do not actually believe this. This attitude is also present in the churches^{viii}. Nevertheless, I also saw, among my own participants, attitudes which showed that people had empathy and respect for other people which scaled potential boundaries of 'us' and 'them'.

c) Opportunities for encounter and engagement

The Methodist emphasis on small group fellowship has not always worked in practice, even in the early days. This year's Methodist Conference has called for a re-introduction of a Methodist Way of Life which would include commitment to meeting for deeper fellowship in small groups. Currently, however, most Methodists are not used to this practice and certainly in my study church the opportunities for deep encounter between those who are different from each other were limited. There is a critical need, as the diversity of people within congregations increases (not just ethnically but in terms of age, income, culture and previous religious experience) for people to have opportunity to learn from one another if they are to discover more of God through one another.

The project of the MCB, Belonging Together, which ran from 2010 – 2013 concluded that:

“ethnic inclusion cannot be left to chance or choice, nor indeed be reduced to quotas or compliance. This agenda will need to be owned and championed at all levels of Church governance and leadership, and of fellowship and meaningful interaction across the Connexion. The core questions that remain are: how can the Methodist Church do this meaningfully and intentionally? And what would meaningful/intentional inclusion look like.”

I agree with Jagessar's comments (2015b) that for the Reverse Missionary Movement to be able to thrive we need to go “beyond ‘Belonging Together’”. Where people are to reach a deeper experience of God there needs to be opportunity for intercultural conversation. McGarrah Sharp argues (2013) that it is through ‘mis-understandings’ that understanding deepens. In my own research I discovered that there were more ‘non-understanding stories’ than ‘mis-understanding’ stories, mainly because the opportunities for honest encounter were very limited. Our mission can be transformed in appropriate ways for this society but for this to happen, and for the MCB to be truly cosmopolitan in nature, we need to learn from one another so that our vision of God is fuller in its richness and breadth.

From my fieldwork I would argue that there is still a Methodist conviction that it is right and appropriate to know each other well, to care about the detail of life, and to get to know one another as deeply as possible, rather than simply worshipping alongside one another. On the other hand, the changes in social patterns, and the diversity of life in many congregations, have made it hard for people to get to know each other, lessening their opportunities for mutual understanding.

Cosmopolitan Theology in conclusion

In my own ethnographic study, I discovered some similarities and some differences with the work of Fulkerson (2007) who studied an ethnically diverse American Methodist congregation. One major difference in my own study church was the variety of languages spoken and the way that this contributed to people spending more time with people of their own linguistic background. In Fulkerson's study there was also an original intention to be a congregation which celebrated diversity whereas this intention had evolved in mine and

was, therefore, less widely accepted and affirmed. Despite these significant differences my own study church was developing, from the experience of everyday ‘chapel cosmopolitanism’ a cosmopolitan practical theology in response to the challenges which this variety of Christian cultural experience presented. There was evidence of a belief in preventient grace which gave people a kindness leading to some of the same theological intercultural understandings as perhaps Fulkerson’s study church gained through the biblical insights which first made them aim to be an intercultural church. I would conclude that where there are deliberately constructed opportunities for people to get to know each other across a diversity of backgrounds understanding deepens and faith is challenged and encouraged. The process is not always smooth, due to the attitudes outlined above, and orthopathy and orthokardia are needed if White Methodists are to recognize where our own culture is dominant. I am challenged personally by Reddie’s call to me (2009: 50) as a White theologian to recognise the ‘whiteness’ of my starting point, and I see that this call also needs to be heard by the MCB as a dominantly White institution. The need to respond to this challenge will, I contend, be of vital relevance to how open the Methodist Church in Britain will be to engage with Britain’s multiple cultures, including the cultures of younger generations of Britons whatever their family background.

My study has led me to ask what a Methodist contribution might be to the development of an appropriately cosmopolitan practical theology. By ‘cosmopolitan’ I am taking here the definition of Nowicka and Rovisco (2009: 2): “A practice which is apparent in things that people do and say to positively engage with the ‘otherness of the other’”. I will conclude, here, by suggesting some essential components of a cosmopolitan practical theology to enable the future mission of British Methodism. From my own data and in response to the everyday cosmopolitan context of British society today, my working suggestions are that MCB congregations need:

- ❖ A decision to celebrate diversity as God-given, whether this is an initial or an evolved intention
- ❖ Confidence about cultural identity in the light of, and growing through, experience of intercultural congregational life
- ❖ Willingness to face and address the spatial, cultural and theological differences which threaten to keep separate, or to divide congregational members or groupings. I would include in this a willingness to address structural racism within the church itself
- ❖ Commitment to speak honestly through ‘misunderstanding stories’ and to create opportunities for exploration of mutual understanding
- ❖ Active care, across potential cultural barriers, which is honest about each other’s needs, yet outweighs concern for own preferences.

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/statistics-for-mission/methodist-church-advanced-map/> Accessed 31st July 2018

ⁱⁱ Life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission, the core of why we do what we do and how we live our lives. Spirituality gives the deepest meaning to our lives and motivates our actions. It is a sacred gift from the Creator, the energy for affirming and caring for life. This mission spirituality has a dynamic of transformation which, through the spiritual commitment of people, is capable of transforming the world in God's grace. (Together Towards Life, WCC, 201:4)

ⁱⁱⁱ In my own experience as a minister one very evident way in which this has happened has been the encouragement of enthusiastic Methodists who expect that God will be at work and who ask questions, from their different perspective, which British Methodists have not been asking. In particular I remember one Zimbabwean Methodist who, on observing the very small numbers of Methodists present on her first attendance at a church, asked me, "Where are they all/ Is everyone out on mission this week?" This question helped me to challenge the church about what our mission was!

^{iv} While the 'four alls' are usually acknowledged to be a helpful summary of some of Wesley's theology, they come, as a summary from Fitzgerald as late as 1903.

^v It is common practice for Methodists from other countries to arrive at a British Methodist Church with a membership ticket from their home country, or a preaching plan (if they have been accredited as a local preacher), and sometimes also with a 'letter of introduction' from their home minister.

^{vi} I have been working on what it means to be a White theologian and, as I am White, count myself among the 'we' that I describe here because I need to acknowledge that, while I am aware as I can be, I am also privileged by my Whiteness,

^{vii} It is also ironic that the same participants described how they had been taught this in Methodist missionary schools where they grew up (in Ghana) even though the missionaries themselves were living a very 'British' lifestyle and not living in Ghana as the Ghanaians did!

^{viii} On the way back from a Methodist church service in one of our cities only a few weeks ago an elderly, deaf and much-loved friend stopped in the street and said to me, very loudly, "I hate to say this but there are far more foreigners than English people here." In fact, many of the people she was referring to as they passed by, were certainly both Black and British, and many would have been second or third generation British, as were some of those Methodists in the service with her less than an hour earlier. This comment reflects, though, the approach of many Methodists who have yet to embrace the opportunities for a cosmopolitan theology.

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