

## 2018 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies: Worship and Spirituality

The Revd Canon Dr Jennifer Smith

*“...Then he got into the boat with them and they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” Mark 6.51, 52*



*Walking on water*, Maggi Hambling (Good Friday, 2006)<sup>1</sup>

### **To understand about the loaves: leaders formed for renewal**

*John Wesley, the means of grace, and contemporary pastoral leadership*

#### **Introduction**

What would be different for the disciples, these earliest leaders in Mark, if they had ‘understood about the loaves’? The text of the Gospel implies that it was this lack of

---

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of the trustees of the Methodist Modern Art Collection, United Kingdom. The image is painted in response to John 6.16-21, but I have taken liberty to represent its themes in relation to Mark 6.

understanding that made them fearful during the storm, fearful of Jesus on the water as a ghost, and then so ‘completely amazed’ as he changed direction to climb into the boat and still the wind. The 2006 painting *‘Good Friday: Walking on the Water,’* by Maggi Hambling (pictured above) gives a visual representation of what this fear might feel like, writ into Twenty-First century culture. A chaos of competing meaning and tumult almost eclipses Christ’s person and the work of the cross, coming across the waves. Viewers are prepared to interpret the scene in the context of existing anxiety and disorder. The picture references an excess of public speech and meaning, an overwhelming volume of information and counter information. Amidst this chaos, patterns form and re-form as we look at the picture. What will help Christian leaders to see meaning, to resist narratives that school us in anxious responses to the world around us, that is, to ‘understand about the loaves’ in changing times?

The disciples had been present at the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6.30-44) to see the twelve baskets left, and yet in some fundamental way had been unchanged in their ‘understanding.’ Somehow, however called and competent as leaders, once formed in a narrative of anxiety, or scarcity and danger, they showed no ability to interpret events (even conspicuous miracles) except in the context of this narrative: Jesus walking on the water could only be a ghost, the storm stilled could bring only bewildered astonishment. They lacked the resilience to continue in good heart, when challenged by the storm. Hambling has presented us with a hopeful image in ‘Walking on the water’, as an albeit indistinct pattern of the cross emanates from the steps of the figure approaching on the waves. Nonetheless the picture opens conversation in relation to the Gospel account in Mark, on the challenges to Christian leaders’ resilience and discernment in the contemporary marketplace of culture.

The scriptural text does not condemn the disciples’ anxiety, though few of us would choose anxiety over assurance. And yet it is clear in the narrative that the disciples’ anxiety inhibits their ministry. Jesus himself later in Mark expressed great frustration that they should still understand so little: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts still hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken baskets did you collect?’ (Mark 8.17b-19) There is a sense of the reader engaged not simply to condemn the disciples, but to identify with their anxiety and seek a better, more fruitful and more resilient way.

Using this scriptural metaphor as a foil, this paper will open a conversation about what practices might prepare Christian leaders (presbyters and other pastors) to ‘understand about the loaves’ in current contexts. The paper will reference moments in the writing, correspondence, and commentary of John Wesley, especially the sermon on the ‘Means of Grace,’ bringing them into critical conversation with contemporary thinking on leadership development, liturgical renewal, and congregational/kingdom revival.

A first section will give some introduction to themes in John Wesley's thinking about the formation and qualification for discipleship and for ministry, in relation to the sermon on the 'Means of Grace' and other correspondence and writing. Following on, subsequent sections will work from the eucharistic overtones of the passage in Mark 6 to examine how habits of fellowship, prayer and scripture study, public worship generally, and the Lord's Supper particularly might form and sustain pastoral leaders. That is, leaders for whom professional and vocational competence is not divided from the 'inner renewal of the heart,' who do indeed 'understand about the loaves.' The reflections will seek to understand contemporary threats to this unity of heart and hand, including the threat posed by a lack of attention to post-colonial, feminist, womanist, and Black British and American theological insight. The paper will treat this elusive unity of heart and hand ('understanding about the loaves') as one authentic mark of effective pastoral leadership for renewal of congregations and communities.

Some healthy attention but sadly, more toxic anxiety characterises contemporary discussion about leadership in churches, in the academy and councils of the church both. Scholars are shrill with advice and leaders hungry for it. This is especially true in churches that are living with numerical and status decline, and negotiating this reality through the lens of narratives dominated by scarcity and danger. I start from a context where the dominant liturgies (borrowing James K. A. Smith's language) of mall, marketplace, academy, office, and public media counsel self-protection, fear, and division from any who might make claims upon our resources.<sup>2</sup> By liturgies here I mean to use the term broadly to describe shared rituals that generate and affirm meaning. If the 'means of pseudo grace' in this dominant secular liturgical culture seems to be shopping and consumption, then by my power to buy and participate in brand communities I demonstrate my security and build identity. Without continued consumption, I lose my identity and place in society, in the liturgical world of the marketplace. It seems to me that 'understanding about the loaves' for the disciples in Mark, worked out in present pastoral contexts, is about resisting and replacing these means of pseudo-grace with the real thing. Here John Wesley's 'Means of Grace' finds its twenty-first century evangelical traction. And thus narratives of scarcity and fear give way to narratives of plenty, compassion, and assurance.

E. Byron Anderson has argued in his 2003 book, 'Worship and Christian Identity, Practising ourselves' for a re-understanding of the purpose of liturgy as the 'formation of a 'theonomous' self,' that is a self not characterised by thick-skinned resistance to the world around (autonomous) but in growing relationship with the Triune God and the multi-layered, lived context.<sup>3</sup> In ways that would easily parallel Wesley's absolute insistence on formation in groups, not as an individual practice, Anderson has argued that '...this

---

<sup>2</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) see for example p153-4, 209.

<sup>3</sup> E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practising Ourselves*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 144.

argument summons us beyond the concern for personal happiness and holiness as practices related to the private or solitary person.<sup>4</sup>

The reflections in this paper seek to tease out some marks of Methodist Christian liturgical life in the broadest sense that do more than adopt the motifs of the market and empire to compete successfully in those sectors, to develop that ‘theonomic self.’ I will argue that a critical conservation of John Wesley’s ‘Means of grace’ will equip presbyters and other pastors for leadership through the stormy times, and congregations for counter cultural resistance to these norms. Proposals abound for equipping pastoral leaders to be radical change agents in churches whose person and financial resource is stretched. What is sometimes less clear is how the practice of the means of grace might form leaders in an identity marked by ‘understanding about the loaves,’ soft hearted awareness of the faithfulness of God, assurance and gentleness with division: this paper aims to engage that question.

A caveat: this short paper is in no way an exhaustive nor especially systematic treatment of the questions, but aims to begin a conversation on the question of how liturgical and other discipleship practice can sustain or inhibit effective pastoral leadership for renewal of church life. I write from a United Kingdom urban Methodist context, and build on pastoral experience and previous scholarly work considering British West African, West Indian, and Pakistani-diaspora pastoral contexts, especially the role of honour ideology and kinship obligation in Christian identity formation.<sup>5</sup> The reflections here will make reference to contemporary thinking about pastoral leadership and aspects of the Wesleyan tradition, and contemporary liturgical and congregational studies. Of necessity, the conversation will integrate the concerns of black British and American, and post-colonial theological scholarship, anticipating a global context for these questions and noting how lack of awareness of these in liturgical life has hindered the formation of effective transformational pastoral leaders, especially in cross-cultural congregational settings.

Resilience, or the ability to spring back quickly from costly engagements, should be normal in our pastoral ministry, and in our congregations. A condition of assurance, or a calm in the face of risk and danger, should be normal in our congregations. In a situation where we seek renewal and revival of our mission as church, it is vital that we not implicitly lead churches in an ethic of self-protection, or the hoarding of the resources of belonging and service, in such a way as to materially prevent the very renewal they claim to seek. And we are not without resources to work from, as we seek ourselves to ‘understand about the

---

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> For example - Smith, Jennifer H. “‘Vex the Devil’: Scripture, God-talk, and Holiness at Villa Road.” *Holiness*, Volume 2 (2016) ISSUE 2, Holiness & Scripture, pp. 143-163. <https://www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/02-smith.pdf> ; “Buildings and Breaking: Holiness, Methodist Identity, and Interfaith Awareness in Contemporary Southall, London.” <https://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/2013-6-smith.pdf>

loaves,’ and to help others do so. From this understanding comes comfort, assurance, flexibility, compassion, and the willingness to take risks.

Through this series of open ended reflections, this paper will suggest a re-engagement with the means of grace as a habit of pastoral leadership to resist narratives of scarcity and danger, while acknowledging some contemporary challenges to them. What follows is by no means a systematic theology of pastoral leadership nor an exhaustive redefinition of the means of grace for today’s contexts. It is simply a conversation between experience, scholarship, and Wesleyan sources, about how present pastoral leaders might cultivate a counter narrative to that of the market and empire, to understand even if only in glimpses, ‘about the loaves.’ My sense is that this will lead to more assured and less anxious leadership, and enable us to have a bit more fun in church, by which I mean reclaiming an evangelical vision of the warmed heart alongside active action for material justice, good news for our local and global neighbourhoods.

### **John Wesley, The Means of Grace, and Habits of Leadership**

Writing to dissuade a student who was considering leaving Lincoln College in 1756, John Wesley spoke of the ‘...qualifications of a gospel minister.’ ‘...Grace is necessary; learning is expedient. Grace and supernatural gifts are ninety-nine parts in a hundred. Acquired learning may then have its place.’<sup>6</sup> He was horrified that anything he had said or written would have made the student think formation in scholarship was less than a good thing for a pastoral minister. But could you train for ministry, or did God simply deliver vocation to whom, and for whom God chose? Could disciples in the Gospel have made a study of the skills and competencies required to open eyes and soften hearts, and by implication, get more comfort and assurance in difficult situations? And if so, can pastoral leaders today acquire skills or a mindset that would more likely make it possible for us to ‘understand about the loaves,’ to have a sense of security for our emotional and material provision, to resist anxiety and burn out, and to inspire weary congregations to do likewise? Wesley’s answer was an emphatic yes. While preserving a sense that vocation was necessarily a gift of grace, from God, he taught that we could and should use the means of grace, along with other ‘expedients’ to form and feed our vocation.

This is an important starting point for these reflections, to establish that in Wesleyan context, intentional formation in pastoral life is both possible and necessary. The question then, is what practices and means are available to us, and what pitfalls and possibilities do they present?

Wesley had in February 1756 published an ‘*Address to the Clergy*,’ in which he defended and demanded clerical scholarship. Many had criticised him for the seeming inconsistency of his

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘John Wesley to Samuel Furlong, Dublin, Good Friday, April 16 1756.’ *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, John Telford, Editor, Vol. III, (London: The Epworth Press, 1931) p. 175.

position, considering how many of his own preachers had little formal learning or qualification. Wesley defended himself, not least by reminding his readers that ‘...none of them [these preachers] undertakes *single* the care of an whole flock, but ten, twenty, or thirty, one following and helping another; and all, under the direction of my brother and me, undertake jointly what (as I judge) no man in England is equal to alone.’<sup>7</sup> Whatever else, the practice of ministry Wesley considered to be inherently collaborative, and inherently held by teams of people. He had no expectation that a single pastor or preacher (lay or ordained) would work alone in isolation.

As significantly, Wesley taught that the first way of formation lay in the use of the ordinances of the church, especially those ‘ordinary’ means of grace, the study of scripture, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and fasting.<sup>8</sup> This ‘work of piety’ in his vision went hand in hand in the ‘work of mercy’ (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, healing the afflicted) for formation in Christian discipleship. And as crucially, Wesley expected and intended that these means of Christian life would be undertaken in the context of mutual oversight in a class meeting, governed by a leader who would report to the minister. He admitted freely that the class meeting had evolved as an expedient when individual visits to society members became impossible or over burdensome for class leaders:

“... At first they visited each person at his own house; but this was soon found not so expedient. And that on many accounts: ...it was agreed that those of each class should meet all together. And by this means a more full inquiry was made into the behaviour of every person. Those who could not be visited at home or otherwise than in company had the same advantage with others. Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, misunderstandings removed; and after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.”<sup>9</sup>

The unintended expedient of the class meeting notwithstanding, the theme of formation in community, and intimate community of persons from different stations and callings at that, formed a theme in Wesleyan thinking. Wesleyan Methodists, (ministers, leaders, and society members alike) worked out their vocations and their salvation in liturgies of fellowship and examination that were entirely contextual, with the shape of the fellowship meeting and its place and approach entirely responsive to the real conditions (service, indenture, domestic responsibilities) of the believers. This method of formation was entirely contextual and deeply personal, but never private.

This Wesleyan approach resonates with the equally pragmatic, justice-oriented account of formation as praxis offered by a variety of contemporary African feminist scholars, among

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘John Wesley to Robert Marsden, Bristol, August 31, 1756.’ *Letters*, Vol. III, p. 184. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, John. ‘Sermon XII, The Means of Grace’, *John Wesley’s Forty Four Sermons*, (Peterborough: The Epworth Press, 1944) pp.134-151.

<sup>9</sup> ‘John Wesley to Vincent Perronet, 1748.’ *Letters*, Vol. II, p. 297.

others. By way of simplest example, theological knowledge, as part of the account of the conditions of praxis as theology, ‘...is born in dialogue with other and is contingent on the difference it makes to our lives and to others.’<sup>10</sup> And these schools of theological voice are not alone: that Christian formation requires actual contact and conflict with other people, in the context of real lives and real economies, domestic and political, is a strong theme in the sermon on the means of grace, the corpus of Wesleyan diaspora teaching.

This emphasis on intentional and real community in Wesleyan thinking was always counter cultural, and always resisted both by its participants and their economic and socio-political overseers. Wesley himself acknowledged that ‘...notwithstanding all these [discipleship] advantages, many were at first extremely adverse to meeting thus.’<sup>11</sup> Not least because of the commitment of time and attention, in addition to a sense of shame or resistance to the intimacy of the attention to personal lives and choices, Wesley reported his early society members were not keen for the class meetings he came to require. And yet, the ‘class meeting’ continued and continues to be a strong part of the Methodist diaspora offering into Christian discipleship and formation. The kind of intentional collaboration in the project of nurturing Christian ‘practices’ envisaged by the contributors to the much used and re-published volume, ‘Practising our Faith: a way of Life for a Searching People,’ (Dorothy Bass, Editor, 1997, 2010) relies on there being a forum in which fellowship and worship occur. In relation to the disciples in Mark 6.45-52, the assumption is that there is a boat and the disciples are in it, together, being formed in their faith as they reflect on context and events.

This assumed actual fellowship is under challenge, and certainly much redefined by the reality of virtual community as part of contemporary life in western developed nations. ‘Real life’ and real fellowship take place for many in the dis-embodied world of social media, online commerce, study, and other forms of community and leisure. While this fellowship is certainly real, it as certainly marks a change in terms and context from the actual proximity of persons Wesley assumed in his ‘class meetings.’ Many Methodist churches and others are engaged in theological and pastoral responses to the changing shape of fellowship, liturgy, and discipleship posed by these changes in the way we live our lives as twenty-first century disciples, and Christian leaders. Some have adopted uncritically the new media for use in all manner of fellowship and liturgical practice. Others have shown reservation, not always being able to articulate why they are resistant. The Methodist Church of Great Britain is, for example, engaged in an ongoing consultation precipitated by a request to authorise Holy Communion as celebrated in virtual media, without the physical presence of presider, elements, and worshipping congregation together in one place, or potentially, one time. Some supporters of this request have defended it as a contemporary version of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, ‘From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance: Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis,’ Chapter 12 in Phiri, Isabel Apawo and Nadar, Sarojini (eds.), *African Women, Religion, And Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Eduwziwa Oduyoye*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 227.

<sup>11</sup> ‘John Wesley to Vincent Peronnet,’ 1748, *Letters*, Vol. II, p. 298.

‘field preaching’ which John Wesley himself found initially ‘so vile,’ and lauded it as a natural progression of Methodist diaspora liturgical fellowship and practice. Opponents, while keen for the use of new media and appreciative of the potential, see threats to the fundamental nature of the gathering of people for worship. The measure has been rejected by the Methodist Conference of 2017 and 2018, and sent for further study by the Faith and Order Committee of the British connexion, for report and recommendation in 2019.

The reality of this change to the way of being together, for good and ill, also carries a justice dimension only beginning to find response among liberation and post colonial theologians. People indifferent parts of the world are accessing virtual life and fellowship to different degrees, and in different ways. Access depends on wealth, and education, and infrastructure development. The flow of information is controlled by remote, often opaque powers. Certainly, the availability of cheap, immediate, global communication makes the volume of information and formative factors present overwhelming, if they are not intentionally mediated. That intentional mediation increases the probability of existing in bunkers of agreement and like opinion, to the detriment of being formed in the skills of conflict and disagreement, the very ‘small quarrels resolved’ that John Wesley identified as such a strength of the class meeting.

Further, the immediate proximity and participation of listeners to an event of worship around the globe with very different patterns of culture and habits of ‘hearing’ adds to the necessity for careful reflection. Livestreamed worship, for example, multiplies exponentially the possibility of global fellowship and support. It also multiplies exponentially the possibility of global misunderstanding and conflict. Wesley emphasised intentional study and close companionship for the preparation of Christian leaders. How will the themes of Wesleyan fellowship, the habits of leadership formation and the means of grace, evolve and respond in this new reality of global communication?

### **Formed by Prayer, Scripture, and Fellowship**

John Wesley was ever pragmatic, ‘plain’ if you will, in his recommendations for spiritual disciplines: prayer and scriptural formation are properly treated together as a means not only of individual formation, but of the building up of companionable fellowship. The first means of grace he considered in his *‘Sermon XII,’* published in 1746, was the ‘way of prayer.’ His proofs for the necessity and efficacy of prayer are all and entirely scriptural, and it is clear that the life of prayer is a conversation between the person praying, the scripture, God, and their companions.

His specific teaching about prayer in the sermon has a theme worth noting in relation to the conversation of this paper. This is that prayer as a means of grace is not only a response to God, but an anticipation of God. The nature of prayer included, for Wesley, a recognition of ‘now and not yet’, anticipated assurance yet unrealised by the one who prayed. His

scriptural references are not just quotations of commands nor assurances of the efficacy of prayer, but they show a specific formative, converting purpose. In the second paragraph of the relevant section of the sermon, Wesley offered prayer as a discipline not just for those who felt already a claim to faith, but for those who desired it. His understanding of prayer was that it would build the greater capacity for itself in the person who prayed, as it continued. Quoting Luke 11.13 ('How much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?') Wesley observed that, '...the person directed to ask had not then received the Holy Spirit: nevertheless our Lord directs them to use this means, and promises that it should be effectual; that upon asking they should receive the Holy Spirit, for Him whose mercy is over all his works.'<sup>12</sup> Developing this theme further in the sixth paragraph of the section on prayer, Wesley was specific to condemn those who read scripture to say that someone without faith could not offer prayer and anticipate response as 'a gross, blasphemous absurdity.'<sup>13</sup>

The problem with speaking about leaders who 'understand about the loaves' is that this kind of wisdom is not a fixed object or possession, but is by its nature in Wesleyan context about sustaining a dialogic relationship with God and companions both, in light of the reality that the world presents: in this case, a storm. To understand any differently would be to simply punish anxious leaders further than the world/storm already punishes. In Mark, Jesus changes path and comes to the disciples. Wesley's emphasis of prayer as a means of grace which creates its own capacity anticipates leaders using it who live in the midst of a creative tension with God and companions, in light of the reality of the world. The purpose of prayer as a means of grace in this sense is not then, to collapse that creative tension, but to soften the heart, to build understanding or wisdom 'about the loaves' so that those who pray are flexible, curious, unafraid though truly confounded by the reality they see. Assurance that 'as I have been fed, so I will be fed in future,' does not mean that in the moment of hunger the awareness of appetite is any less acute.

This approach, a re-imagination of Wesleyan understanding of prayer in the sermon on the means of grace, responds to the critique of both prayer and scriptural hermeneutics offered by Black British and other post-colonial theologians. As Anthony Reddie, in particular, has shown, the relative 'voicelessness' of black Christians in the spaces where the authority of scripture is negotiated for our institutions of church and academy produces a situation where those in the pew develop a dual reality. This Reddie calls the '...multi-dimensional nature of Black religious and cultural expression.'<sup>14</sup> The relevant point is that people are adept at creating meaning for themselves in spaces where a dominant 'reading' or teaching, on prayer or scripture does not adequately resource or respond to the reality they

---

<sup>12</sup> Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Reddie, 'An Interactive Methodology for doing Black Theology,' Chapter 1 in Reddie, Anthony; Jagessar, Michael; Editors, *Postcolonial Black British Theology: New Textures and Themes*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2007), p. 11.

experience.<sup>15</sup> Christian leaders, presbyters and other pastors alike, are in general well used to the notion that we should somehow be inoculated against anxiety. So when we are crippled by anxiety, do we then have nothing with which to respond? Are we then simply left behind by our brave traditions of pastoral preparation? When we are with the disciples, hardened of heart and ‘lacking understanding of the loaves,’ we may borrow this perspective to achieve a more fruitful use of prayer as a means of grace, as intended by John Wesley. Prayer is not something we do to avoid anxiety, but in the midst of anxiety. Before understanding. Here the post colonial methodological approach may create welcome space for pressed pastors, in line with Wesleyan hopes for prayer and scripture both.

Feminist theologian Ann Morisy writes about the inhibiting effects of chronic anxiety among pastoral leaders. Among these inhibiting effects, she identifies the tendency to look for scapegoats and for the making of neo-tribal alliances that lead to division and destruction of community. This can produce the kind of leaders whose habit of prayer and inhabitation of scripture actually works against the renewal and revival they and their communities so want. In her words, ‘Unacknowledged anxiety doesn’t just lead to graced actions drying up; it also inhibits the ability to see the world, the Creation, as a whole, with an intricate and mysterious interconnectedness.’<sup>16</sup>

In my thinking, her observation of the need for prayer, steeping in scripture, and fellowship with others exactly inhabit the space John Wesley hoped for in his sermon on the means of grace, and her guidance thus becomes a contemporary pattern alongside his. Morisy offered four related formative habits I consider to be appropriately set alongside Wesley’s offer of prayer and scripture as means of grace: 1. To become aware of ones on reactive buttons, 2. To discipline both our heads and hearts that problems have multiple and inter-related causes, 3. To resist picking up other people’s anxieties, and 4. To develop the capacity to be a ‘non-anxious presence.’<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the discipline of set part conscious time for self awareness, supervision, study of scripture and the daily habit of prayer is part of her scheme. But what kind of discipline will liberate contemporary leaders, versus inhibiting us further and disempowering us in and for our communities to a greater extent than is already the case?

### **Formed by and for the Lord’s Supper: memory and hope**

---

<sup>15</sup> For a specific example see Smith, ‘*Vex the Devil*,’ example relating to interpretation of 2 Kings 10.18-32. pp. 152-154.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Morisy, *Bothered and Bewildered: Enacting Hope in Troubled Times*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Morisy, p. 76.

*“...Then he got into the boat with them and they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”* Mark 6.51, 52.

If prayer, the study and use of scripture, and fellowship as part of both of these might engage to fight an ethic of anxiety among pastoral leaders, then the practice of the Lord’s Supper should also aid in the formation of people who ‘understand about the loaves.’ That is, this means of grace Wesley spoke of can be re-imagined to work to form leaders among congregations who are neither autonomous (thick skinned to resist the world) nor heteronomous (admissive of all influences and losing self to domination and oppressive forces).<sup>18</sup>

We have a deep Methodist theological heritage in understanding the formative effect of the Lord’s Supper, coming from the pragmatic pastoral theology of the sacrament Wesley himself suggested. In the sermon on the ‘means of grace,’ Wesley at first seemed to set a high bar for worthy participation in the sacrament: ‘Only let a man first examine himself, whether he understand the nature and design of this holy institution, and whether he really desire to be himself made conformable to the death of Christ...’<sup>19</sup> And yet, he intended the desire to be one shared – this was less a bar to communication (he would be specific in criticism of those who abstained against the direct instruction of Jesus to ‘do this’) than a warning of its effect. Wesley clearly expected that whatever else, participation in the liturgy of the sacrament would change someone. And that change would be specific: to be conformed to the death of Christ. That is, to be taken up into the salvation history of God as Trinity, and to participate in the memory, as well as the hope, of the kingdom of God.

Wesley should not perhaps be criticised for lack of attention to the forms of Eucharistic prayers and liturgy as a specific formative grammar: his purpose was different than those who more recently shape liturgical language to form folk in a drip fed habit of community. E. Byron Anderson has demonstrated, among others, how different liturgies of the church for the Lord’s Supper can wean us off individual piety and build us towards an identification with the redemption of all creation.<sup>20</sup>

In this, both liturgy which is universal (ie, not extempore) and liturgy which is repeated can be defended. Where our society often values innovation and the new, Anderson’s awareness would defend a practice of the Lord’s Supper, even if modified as appropriate to context, not entirely given over to a local culture. The discipline of ‘set liturgy,’ the use of a Worship Book, and the authorised prayers of the Methodist Church of Great Britain are in the decline. They are thought to be a barrier, and are deeply unfashionable both in theological academy and pastoral work of the circuits. Certainly, they could be better, have more beautiful poetic language, and simpler diction. But such is the anxious liturgical

---

<sup>18</sup> The language references the categories suggested by E. Byron Anderson, *Practising Ourselves*, p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *The Means of Grace*, p. 144.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, p. 164.

culture of some of our churches that a minister who reverts to use the texts may be criticised for ‘not preparing,’ because she has not generated her own liturgy, nor sourced one to provide for one off use in a particular place and time. Repetition is to be defended. Beauty and accessibility are to be defended. Proper, kind and generous catechesis to open the structure and history of the liturgy is an absolute necessity, and without it the use of the liturgy may be a cruel starving of people who have no orientation to its history. Wesley thought the liturgy shaped us, contemporary theologians are certain the liturgy shapes us, post colonial, liberation, and feminist/womanist thinkers struggle for liturgies that are inclusive of the real imagery of their contexts, because they know the liturgy shapes us. And yet, we often dispose of it in an attempt to get out of the admittedly difficult task catechesis presents.

Fortunately, as a means of grace, Wesley and others glory in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper as again, creating the capacity for its own understanding. As Anderson expresses it:

The reality of eucharistic practice is that all of this happens now as we are gathered about the Lord’s table, Sunday after Sunday. The ideal, the moral vision, is that while all creation is invited to the feast, we are in ministry to the world until that is made to happen. Eucharistic practice, then, ‘sharpens our vision,’ ‘shapes our will and action,’ and forms us in the life of Christ. More than this, it provides the practice of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling the divine presence. As such a tangible practice, it shapes our will and action, molds us into the image and likeness of Christ and prepares us for the life of glory. These eucharistic prayers, as prayer texts, enable us to proclaim our faith.<sup>21</sup>

So in pastoral terms, the message to anxious pastors would be ‘trust the text,’ while being as acutely aware as ever of the gap between its language, imagery, and shape and that of the real experience of our congregations. ‘Understanding about the loaves’ may mean developing new, community specific liturgies or changing patterns of movement, distribution, and experience of the communion. But defended by Wesley and defended by contemporary theologians, it does not mean throwing the ordinance out as a dead letter.

John S McClure has written of the ‘communicative ethics’ of liturgical language, movement, and practice at the eucharist. He is acutely concerned to repent of the power dynamics created by priestly worship.<sup>22</sup> What contemporary Methodist practitioners in the United Kingdom may not focus on is that these ‘priestly power plays’ may be as present in informal liturgies as in the full use of the texts of the Methodist Worship Book. A presider who writes the liturgy, presents it, and takes it away again has much more hegemonic power than one

---

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> John S McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics*, (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018). McClure is concerned to identify power dynamics in each aspect of the liturgy.

who guides the people as a waitress at a restaurant guides the diners in their meal. Of course, that same power dynamic can easily be adopted by a traditional liturgical use of the text: architecture, gesture, and patterns of preaching and catechesis can deprive people of their work in the liturgy as much as the full extempore rendition adopts authority to the presider.

Wesley acknowledged the good intentions of those who sought in his own time to ‘condemn all outward means’ and to do away with the liturgy, including the awareness of the ways in which the ordinances of God had been abused by ill use. However he was at pains to defend the continued necessity of outward means of grace, the liturgy of the Lord’s supper among them, even if he cautioned that they be treated as means, not ends.

The interesting thing is that anecdotally, many ministers today report a pressure for innovation, and a pressure to perform new prayers to entertain the people, rather than relying on the authorised texts to carry the sacrament. This forms congregations and pastors in a situation of continued anxiety, as they can collude with one another to make greater and greater eucharistic innovation in an effort to be ‘relevant’ or to be ‘user friendly’ to newcomers. This can be a subtle, well intentioned, utterly unconscious and kindly motivated mistake. Pastors who ‘understand about the loaves’ will have less need to prove themselves in their congregations, and will be more trusting to model engagement with the texts of the tradition. Of course, and by necessity this will include innovation, including local innovation. But we can relax into what the tradition offers, we do not need to try to emulate the marketplace around us in our liturgical life.

### **Formed by Public Worship: Possibilities and problems**

In the final section of the sermon on the means of grace, John Wesley considered the meaning and undertaking of the ordinances, including public worship full stop. He counselled humility in thinking that God could or would not use whatever means (ordinary or not) to communicate grace. For worship itself, he wrote:

...we find no command in holy writ for any particular order to be observed herein, so neither do the providence and Spirit of God adhere to any without variation; but the means into which different men are led, and in which they find the blessing of God, are varied, transposed, and combined together, a thousand different ways.<sup>23</sup>

An Igbo proverb asks an apt question: Why should a man who lives by a river wash his hands in spittle? If we are to adopt liturgical habits that form and sustain leaders who will ‘understand about the loaves,’ we have a rich river of liturgical heritage in which to bathe.

---

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, *Means of Grace*, p. 149.

However we acknowledge the real formative role played by the liturgy (of whatever kind, week on week), we do well to remember that worship should never be an exercise in pastoral manipulation. As James McClure wrote in the preface to his recent work on liturgical ethics, ‘Liturgical communication does not see others as a means to an end, but as companions involved in shared learning and commitment apart from any instrumental significance to strategic goals.’<sup>24</sup> Those who are leaders who ‘understand about the loaves’ will not have need to manipulate, but will open their liturgical thinking with congregations to reduce everyone’s anxiety. A spirit of experimentation and willingness to take risks will communicate itself as confidence to newcomers, and stand against the ethics of the marketplace, in which failure or success is a binary immediate reality.

This paper presumes much, and asks more questions than it answers. The hope is that these reflections will start critical conversation about the real work of the means of grace in our churches. We want to form leaders who are equipped to lead renewal and revival, beginning with their own attention to living well and living in a narrative of abundant love. If the disciples in Mark 6 were bewildered, we are certainly bewildered by the world as it presents to us. And we too fall prey to the narratives of scarcity and fear, which make even the occurrence of conspicuous miracles into episodes of dread – phew, we got away with it last time, how will we feed the folk next week? How will we eat ourselves, in this little boat, when we have forgotten to bring the right provision? Hope will replace dread, love cast our fear. And bread will feed.

## Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom (et al). *Congregation and Community*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Anderson, E. Byron. *Worship and Christian Identity: Practising Ourselves*, The Virgil Michel Series, Don Saliers, editor, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003).

Atherton, John; Graham, Elaine; Steedman, Ian; Editors. *The Practice of Happiness: Political Economy, Religion, and Well Being*. (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, Frontiers of Political Economy) 2011.

---

<sup>24</sup> McClure, preface, p. xii.

Bass, Dorothy, Editor. *Practising our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, Second Edition*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Brueggemann, Walter. *Interrupting Silence: God's Command to Speak Out*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2018).

Brueggemann, Walter. *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

Burns, Stephen. *Liturgy, SCM study guide*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

Davies, Douglas. 'Priests, Parish and People: Reconceiving a Relationship' in Guest, Matthew, et al (editors). *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian World*, (Aldershot, Hants. and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2004).

Earey, Mark. *Liturgical Worship, a fresh look: how it works, why it matters*, (London, Church House Publishing, 2002).

Hopewell, James. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, (London: SCM, 1988).

Jones, Cheslyn; Wainright, Geoffrey; Yarnold SJ, Edward, Editors. *The Study of Liturgy*, (London: SPCK, 1978).

McClure, John S. *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018)

Morisy, Ann. *Bothered and Bewildered: Enacting Hope in Troubled Times*, (London, New York: Continuum Press, 2009).

Phiri, Isabel Apawo; Nadar, Sarojini; Editors. *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

Pui-Lan, Kwok; Burns, Stephen, Editors. *Post Colonial practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*. (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2016).

Ramshaw, Gail. *Words Around the Table*, (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).

Reddie, Anthony. 'Another Way of doing Black God-Talk,' *Theology*, Vol. 109, No. 850, July/August 2006, pp. 252-261.

Reddie, Anthony; Jagessar, Michael; Editors, *Postcolonial Black British Theology: New Textures and Themes*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2007).

Reddie, Anthony. 'Re-imagining Black Biblical Hermeneutics in Britain: A Participative Approach,' *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2008, pp. 158-177.

Reddie, Anthony. 'Re-imagining Jesus: Jesus as one of us,' *The Epworth Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3, July 2007, pp. 42-50.

Saliers, Don. *Worship and Spirituality*, (Akron, OH: Order of St. Luke Publications, 1996).

Slee, Nicola; Burns, Stephen. *Presiding like a Woman*, (London: SPCK, 2010).

Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

Smith, Jennifer H. 'Vex the Devil: scripture, God talk, and holiness at Villa Road,' *Holiness* Volume II (2016), issue 2, pp. 143-163. <https://www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/02-smith.pdf>

Telford, John, Editor. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. sometime fellow of Lincoln College, Volumes I-VII*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1931).

Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. *The Methodist Worship Book*, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999).

Tribble, Sr., Jeffery L. *Transformative Pastoral Leadership in the Black Church*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2005).

Wainwright, Geoffrey. *Doxology: the Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Wesley, John. *Sermons on Several Occasions*, (Peterborough: The Epworth Press, 1944 edition).

White, James F., *Introduction to Christian Worship* (revised edition), (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Wimberly, Anne E. Streaty; Parker, Evelyn, Editors. *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).