

Methodist participation in the modern liturgical movement and  
in sacramental renewal

I write from a British point of view; there are important parallel developments in other countries, but apart from a few references, mostly to books, I had better not describe with imperfect knowledge what others know at first hand.

1. The revival of interest in liturgy and in the sacraments which began in Roman Catholic circles early this century and reached the Church of England in the 1930s has influenced Methodism increasingly in recent years. Methodist scholars have read books by scholars of other denominations and through the ecumenical movement have had personal contact with them. Methodists have increasingly shared on ecumenical occasions in the worship of other denominations.

2. A generation ago J.E. Rattenbury did pioneering work with his Vital Elements of Public Worship, 1936, and The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley, 1948. (Books are Epworth unless otherwise stated.) Subsequent writers have investigated the origins of our own tradition, e.g. J.C. Bowmer, The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism, Dacre, 1951; B.G. Holland, Baptism in Early Methodism, 1970; O.E. Borgen, John Wesley on the Sacraments, Publishing House of the U.M.C., Zurich, 1972. The story is continued in J.C. Bowmer, The Lord's Supper in Methodism 1791-1960, 1961. It moves on in R.J. Billington, The Liturgical Movement and Methodism, 1969, though that is now somewhat out of date. J. Bishop, Methodist Worship in Relation to Free Church Worship, Scholars Studies Press, 1975, is more recent. A major contribution was made by a Methodist to eucharistic theology by G. Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology, 1971; cf. the relevant portions of his Doxology, 1980. One of the best introductions to the whole subject of worship is by a Methodist, J.F. White, Introduction to Christian Worship, Abingdon, 1980 (cf. his earlier works). On Christian initiation there is G. Wainwright, Christian Initiation, Lutterworth, 1969, and N. Dixon, Troubled Waters, 1979. Mention may also be made of various chapters in R. Davies and G. Rupp (edd.), A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume 1, and in R. Davies, A.R. George, and G. Rupp (edd.), Volume 2, 1965 and 1978 respectively. There are also chapters in D. Kirkpatrick (ed.), The Doctrine of the Church, Abingdon, 1964, the product of an earlier Oxford Institute.

3. Methodists have participated in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and in the World Methodist Council's bilateral dialogues, which have dealt extensively with sacramental questions. They have conferred together in the Consultations on Worship held after the World Methodist Conferences. The observer for the W.C.C. at the Roman Catholic Consilium ad exsequendam constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia was a Methodist. There was a Methodist member of the International Consultation on English Texts, and the texts in their Prayers we have in Common, Second edition revised, Fortress Press and S.P.C.K., 1975, except for the Lord's Prayer, have been generally accepted in England. There are two Methodist members of Joint Liturgical Group, an ecumenical body of English and Scottish members, whose productions, offered as a service to the churches, have been very influential. The Methodist Sacramental Fellowship exists to promote sacramental observance, but is a fairly small body, whose aims are shared by many who do not belong to it.

3. After years of preparation and the production of experimental liturgies, the Methodist Conference of Great Britain authorized The Methodist Service Book, Methodist Publishing House, 1975. Some account of its production may be found in an article by A.R. George in Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, XLI. 65-72 (October 1977). This superseded The Book of Offices, Methodist Publishing House, 1936, though the first order of Holy Communion, 1936, is reproduced in the 1975 Book in addition to the new order. The 1975 Book is in fairly widespread use. The Methodist Hymn-Book, Methodist Conference Office, 1933, and Hymns and Songs, Methodist Publishing House, 1969, are to be replaced shortly.

4. Generally speaking, the Holy Communion is observed more frequently and is better attended than a generation ago. It contains the sentence 'The worship of the Church is the offering of praise and prayer in which God's Word is read and preached, and in its fullness it includes the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion' (p. B 1). The service with the Lord's Supper is thus treated as the norm for the Sunday Service, and 'The Sunday Service without the Lord's Supper' is derived from it. (For a defence of this and an account of the underlying theory of the dry anaphora, see article 'The Sunday Service of the Methodists' by A.R. George in Communio Sanctorum, Melanges offerts a Jean-Jacques von Allmen, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1982.) On the average most churches have the Lord's Supper about once a month. The theological colleges, however, which used to have it only every two or three weeks, now make it their main service each week, and some of them have it more than once a week. The churches once had the custom of having a break after the preaching-service in which large numbers of people who did not wish to stay to the Lord's Supper departed; this custom is dying out, and the service is a unified whole, resembling the Parish Communion of the Anglican Parish and People movement, though with more emphasis often on the preaching. The Peace is coming into use, but the offertory procession is not widely practised; some doubt is felt about the theology which often goes with it. On the non-Communion Sundays the service is often of a eucharistic shape, culminating after the sermon in intercessions, thanksgiving, and dedication. Whether or not there is communion, the main emphasis is on joyful celebration of the presence of the risen Christ. There is a greater observance of the Christian year and use of the lectionary. There is more participation by members of the congregation, and a certain amount of 'experimental' or 'innovative' worship. The charismatic movement has had some influence. The Sunday morning services are now often better attended than the Sunday evening services, which are now in some decline, but there are problems about the shape of Sunday morning, which might perhaps be solved if the American two-session system were adopted. Family services, usually monthly, are increasingly popular, but sometimes become in effect children's services. On most Sundays the children and their teachers are usually present in the church only for a short time and then leave for their own session. The question is frequently raised whether unconfirmed children may receive communion or should simply receive a blessing.

5. British Methodism shares the discussions about baptism and confirmation which are now widespread. The Conference insists that its ministers must be willing to baptize infants in appropriate circumstances; a few take a rigorist view, but probably more take the view sometimes described as 'indiscriminate'; this they do out of sincere conviction, and it was the view contained in a report adopted in 1952. Some people, baptized as infants, experience renewal, often in charismatic circles, and then seek, as they sometimes say, to go through the waters, regardless of what this implies as to the validity of infant baptism. The Conference of 1981 resolved 'It is contrary to the principles and usage of the Methodist Church to confer what purports to be baptism on any person known to have been already baptised at any time'. The service once known as 'Public Reception of New Members' is now called 'Public Reception into Full Membership, or Confirmation', and has a more traditional shape, but various theories are held as to its significance and relation to first communion.