

YOUTH EVANGELISM IN VILLAGE ETHNOS

(A contextual case study of the practice of Youth Evangelism centred upon the Manse Ministry in North-East England from 1980 - 85)

INTRODUCTION

This study is borne out of my observations of and sharing in the Youth Ministry which my wife (Pamela Spencer) and I carried out at the Manse in Sherburn Village, County Durham during our time there. I had pastoral charge of three village chapels in what were once coal mining villages. After 12 months I was given pastoral charge of one more village chapel. Each village had its own separate life and each chapel had its own loyal but aged congregation. Our daunting task was to revive these flagging causes and to quickly incorporate new Christians into the chapels before time ran out for the older members and no one was left to carry on the Methodist witness.

Soon after our arrival at least one member shared with me that she thought I would be the last Minister in Sherburn! With this salutary comment within weeks of our arrival I found myself reluctantly agreeing to begin a Youth Fellowship (herein after designated Y.F.) in the Manse on Sunday evenings. Young people were personally invited to the Manse from the village chapels under my pastoral charge and the work began. It was decided to meet the following week and from thereon on a weekly basis.

From the very beginning a varied program of meetings were planned and the Epilogue was an integral part of the meeting. The young people themselves were made responsible for refreshments and presenting the program and Epilogue on a rota basis. The age group catered for was from 13 upwards. The meetings always took place in the Manse, except when circumstances or activities dictated otherwise. The Fellowship grew in numbers and seemed to respond to firm leadership and regular meetings, including from time to time events between weekly meetings. The young people were almost exclusively drawn from families who were not regular Church attenders. Their parents' age group were a 'missing generation' in the life of the chapels. The young people were for the most part infrequent attenders at worship, though some of the younger members still attended Sunday School. They did, however, respond to a monthly appeal for 'group attendance' at evening worship prior to youth fellowship meetings.

With this briefest of outlines of the structure of the work which was done we will examine the work in detail under separate headings and seek relate each area to Methodist teaching and practice.

LEADERSHIP

The leadership style adopted was firm but friendly. The Young People seemed to respond to this style and appreciated knowing what was expected of them and what their responsibilities were. Some did not stay with the group for long but these were relatively few. Some left the group for a time and then returned. The Y.P. accepted discipline and responded to commitments which were set before them. They were teachable Y.P., although for the most part not academic or scholarly. They were on the surface rebellious and against the values of their elders, but underneath they were looking for authority and guidance from leadership they could trust and turn to. They hadn't written of the Church or its leadership though for many their attendance was infrequent.

In many cases one got the impression that they used the Manse/Church as a way of rebelling against the non-Church affiliation of their parents. It was a place they could be free because it was a place, like the youth club or disco which their parents didn't frequent. It was a safe place and they had their parents approval to be there, if not their active interest in and support of what went on. Nevertheless we experienced no parental hostility to what was done or taught and some support.

This style of leadership is firmly rooted in John Wesley himself who did not wince his words or leave anyone in doubt about what God required of them. These days we rightly drop some of his authoritarianism; there could be no ignoring that times have changed, authoritative leadership has a place, but authoritarianism is out. This style of leadership may be unfashionable today within the Methodist Church in Britain but is, I would argue, a part of our Methodist heritage and vitally important in the field of Youth Evangelism.

PASTORAL WORK

It soon became apparent that there was a pastoral need to be met as well as an evangelistic task to be done. Y.P. found reason to come to the Manse for a variety of needs once having become used to meeting there on a weekly basis. The Manse became a 'bridge' between the Church and the Y.P. and too a bridge between their parents and the chapel. The need for friendship, advice and a listening ear was apparent. Christian values in the Y.P. were lacking but sought after as a guide and standard to aim at. This pastoral work became a stage along the way to Church Membership for some and a valued bonus to fellowship for others. Our availability to the Y.P. at any time and the feeling that they could 'drop in' as they had need opened up doors and built up their confidence in the credibility of the Church as well as their own self-esteem and self-worth. This, put the logically, was helping the Y.P. to feel accepted by God, that He had received them into His company, that He was their friend. The Y.P. knew little of

the Bible doctrines of Sin and Grace and Redemption. However from S.S. days they knew the stories from the Bible. I believe it was the friendship of the group, the fully life that of Jesus for Zaccheus and others, which was attractive and led into deeper friendship and friendship with Jesus himself.

The Vicar of Sherburn, the Rev. John Scorer, commented from his briefest of observations that, "a large part was played by the welcome given. They obviously felt they were wanted."

This kind of pastoral concern has always been an important part of Methodist chapel life. However, unfortunately it is often restricted to the membership of the chapel and therefore does not have an evangelistic potential. Adherents are not given the same attention as are members. The result is that through our pastoral caring we do not lose many folk from membership, but neither do we gain many either.

The evangelistic potential of increasing our pastoral caring must be phenomenal, though, of course, this is rarely the motive for pastoral care, nor should it be.

SUPPORT

We were fortunate in the area in which we lived that there were other Y.P.'s groups and regular youth activities in the Circuit in which the Y.P. could participate. The Circuit activities in themselves without the local group meetings would have been inadequate to sustain a Y.P.'s ministry, but, coupled to the Y.F. program they gave a wider perspective to the group and supported its activities. The Circuit also linked the group through MAYC (Methodist Association of Youth Clubs) London Weekends with a national and international perspective.

At District level links were tenuous and provided another tier of activities which could not be entered into due to local commitments. And, from our point of view, except on a very occasional basis Y.P.'s work at District level proved inconsequential to the work. (I understand now, due to the group growing older and having their own transport District events are playing more of a part in Y.F. activities). Support too through a Christian Endeavour holiday in Wales has proved useful, though not all doctrines and practices have been complimentary to Methodist teaching; i.e. believers baptism being offered to those already baptised. This was not thought to be conflicting with Methodist practice by most of the Y.P. as it is by leaders of the Church.

Evangelism by Circuit youth weekends and a Circuit musical for Y.P. were moderately effective. A 'low key' approach by people known to the Y.P. themselves was found to be more effective in the long term than the seemingly ^{greater} ~~large~~ response of the large evangelistic rally. I think this backs up the Methodist traditional emphasis of Local Preachers and lay leaders, backed up by the clergy, often being the most effective evangelists. ^{Though} ~~At~~ they themselves may feel that their achievements are small compared with the numbers they hope to influence.

One is forced to consider the support offered at various levels and ask,

Is support offered at three different levels to local Church work the most effective way to help? It would seem from our experience that what the District had to offer was in competition with other support from Circuit and connection and did not prove helpful for that reason. How many District Youth Officers, I wonder, feel frustrated at having their services unused? Could not their services be better channelled through Circuit and Connexional channels? At the doctrinal level one is left wondering too if strictures concerning 'second baptism' as CPD Standing Orders have been framed in the most helpful way to help Y.P. (who are the ones often in mind) make sense of the Christian experience? Rather than strictures about what is strictly doctrinally incorrect, more positive guidance would be more helpful.

MASS EVANGELISM & CONVERSION

The Y.P. were encouraged and keen to go and hear Dr. Billy Graham at one of his ~~gatherings~~ ^{gatherings} in Sunderland (10 miles away) in 1984. Evangelicalism was not the ethos of any of my chapels but they supported the meetings by attendance. The Y.P. responded to the evangelistic appeal made at the rally, but, for most of them, in spite of ~~good~~ follow-up, their response was a piece in the jig-saw of commitment rather than THE conversion/commitment experience at the beginning of a new life. In one case, however, the response to the appeal at the rally DID issue in a change of direction, regular attendance at chapel and subsequently, church membership.

It seems that the teaching of the doctrines of sin, repentance, conversion and new life in Christ were NOT the language the Y.P. found it easy to assimilate into their experience in spite of visual teaching methods and thorough preparation. The Y.P. were, I think, looking for something more immediate; the love of Christ being experienced through friendship and caring and a sense of belonging to a group. Echoes here perhaps of a similar experience of early Methodist^s in their class meeting. In only two of the eight Y.P. who became church members did I identify a 'conversion experience' and commitment to Christ. In the other cases the conversions were quieter, less noticeable and took place over a long period of time. I am here using the 'loaded' ~~word~~ conversion here in the sense of 'a turning from sin to Christ and a commitment to working faith out in the Church.'

The Methodist heritage of the Evangelical conversion of John and Charles Wesley and field preaching and mass conversions under the ministry of Wesley present today's Methodist church with expectations which are not always helpful. Methodists often expect a similar move of the Spirit through great preachers to bring people to Christ in these days. By God's grace this sometimes happens. However, we should not be blinded to different ways in which God may work in these days, mass evangelism should neither be debunked as a thing of the past nor seen as the only way in which people can be brought to Christ, or indeed as the chief way. An openness together with an unprejudiced attitude towards different methods and understandings of evangelism and conversion is the only safe way to approach the subject and at the same time to be faithful to our heritage and our current experience.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH & GROWTH OF FAITH

In all three different membership groups we were helped in the five year period using a different study scheme each time. For some the group was mainly an educational exercise in trying to understand what their experience of Christ amounted to. For others, it was the means by which they came into a relationship with Christ. In most cases, as far as I am able to ascertain, the link with the Church has continued, but the Y.F. remains an essential support as the Y.F. grow into regular worshippers. There remained a resistance in some of the group to membership though loyalty to the Y.F. was strong. The reasons for this were not clear, but, one hopes and suspects that the reasons were not entirely negative, but rather a healthy thoughtfulness and reticence.

Membership classes were taken very seriously by the Y.F. and the change in lifestyle and the obligation to stand up and be counted was accepted. It was difficult, however to convey the life-long commitment being accepted by teenagers who normally thought only a little way ahead. The support of the Chapels for the new members was not always as wholehearted as it might have been. There was resistance in some quarters and, from different folk, overwhelming support and encouragement.

The membership preparation was the most detailed piece of theological thinking done by the Y.F. and revealed a great ignorance. This theological ignorance was found also with adult membership groups; the basic apostolic faith and doctrines were not understood and was found difficult to communicate. One was left wondering, as Rev. David Stacey has put it, if theology was in danger of going out of the church. Present members of the Church were often just as ignorant having thought little about their faith, perhaps for decades. It was difficult for the Y.F. to apply their faith to life situations which they encountered because they did not understand it sufficiently to apply it as situations arose.

The social and political dimensions of the gospel were not able to be tackled in any depth and were not seen as of great importance by the Y.F. The general lack of a 'social conscience' among young people growing up in the Methodist Church perhaps shows a reduction of the importance of the social dimensions of the gospel at local Church level. Our heritage of concern for the poor and the underdog was seemingly being overridden by the current philosophy of people helping themselves rather than being part of a community. There was also within the chapels a narrow view of the Methodist faith being purely about the religious side of life and personal morality (i.e. total abstinence) which did not very often spill over into social concern and commitment to political change.

The 'Theology for All' program of the Division of Ministries is clearly much needed and can do nothing but good if its importance can be conveyed to the Church as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

These conclusions will take the form of responses to certain questions which arise out of the work which was done and our conference there.

Firstly, it is natural to ask how successful the youth evangelism was in passing on Methodist teaching which ~~is~~ true to the apostolic faith. At the same time it is not inappropriate to ask why it is we expect the evangelistic process to pass on a denominational brand of teaching together with the kerygma which is the essential element of Christian evangelism? Rather the denominational slant of evangelism is the 'context' in which it takes place rather than an ~~an~~ essential element of teaching at the evangelistic stage. Denominational emphases are, I suspect, 'picked up' rather than deliberately taught, further catechesis on Methodist doctrine is then better reserved for a later stage as part of a process of incorporation of new Christians into the fuller life of the Church.

It needs to be noted, I believe, that we cannot take for granted that conversion to Christ and membership of the Church then leads young Christians onto full participation in the life of the Church. Before young Christians are fully accepted there perhaps needs to be a stage of coming together in fellowship groups of existing and new members. This kind of fellowship and Bible study between older and young members has been put forward by former youth officer Graham Young who lived adjacent to us in Durham and has published a book for this purpose entitled, 'Body Building exercises.'

At these post-membership fellowship groups of older and younger Christians there could be a three-fold purpose. Teaching of Methodist doctrine, a taking in of the wider social and political implications of Christianity and a relating this to the apostolic faith which we share with other Christians. I would argue that this exercise is better left until later and is not the evangelists main task. He it is who has the job of pressing home the personal relevance of the gospel and to point to its wider implications which must be explored later. It could be argued that this is to deny the full content of the gospel at the early stage, but I would argue for the personal approach as the essential prerequisite, for if the gospel is not firstly personal it rarely ~~is~~ felt as social and political.

The danger to avoid by the evangelist is in making his message appear complete and so misrepresent the later implications of the gospel's challenge. ~~There~~ ^{There} is a difficulty which surfaces in the kind of evangelistic sense ministry above described which has to do with the minister's role as evangelist and ~~pastor~~. There is a sense in which the evangelists' thrust and call for commitment does not always make for open and close pastoral relationships in which listening is as important as preaching, if not more important. There is a sense in which the minister is also an evangelist but he is more than that. He is also teacher of the faith, a guardian of its truth in terms of the faith delivered to the apostles, a link with the wider Church across denominational boundaries and an opener of doors to the wider implications of the gospel. However, he must never forget that the issues which are alive for the mature Christian are often not the ones which help in presenting the dynamism of the

faith to young people. A faith which is not one which 'gets hold of' young people and enables them to grow in faith within the Church will not survive no ever closely we might think it ~~definitely~~ ^{accurately} represents the apostolic faith. Methodists must always look in two ways at the same time to check on the truth of their faith as it measure up to the apostolic faith and their heritage, and also its relevance and appeal to contemporary people; is our presentation worthy and effective?

With these thoughts in mind we tried to present a gospel which was Christ-centred, with an emphasis on the personal response of faith in Christ. A change in life-style and behaviour was expected and looked for chiefly in the practice of regular worship within the local church. The Christian faith was taught in terms of the prodigal son Jesus the friend of sinners, God expecting a moral life and honesty. The welcome of Jesus at the communion table to 'all who loved Him' evoked a serious and thoughtful response. We did not specifically teach the Methodist doctrines of Holiness, Assurance, or New Birth as such, however, we did teach that it was possible to know whether one was a Christian or not.

It was difficult, and also perhaps inadvisable, to put the teaching in doctrinal form. We found that the presentation of Christ had to have immediate relevance and impact in personal terms in order to capture young people's imagination and interest. We were very much aware too that teaching was by example and lifestyle and for this reason the house was opened up to Y.P. in order that they might learn of Christ's openness and welcome for them, whoever they were. This openness, I believe, reflected the Methodist emphasis upon the gospel being 'for all'; in the words of Wesley "For all my Lord was crucified, For all, for all my Saviour died." (HP 226). In this openness I hope that Methodist doctrine was taught by word and example, as well as by expecting the response of faith.

In encouraging the Y.P. to do their own program and give expression to their belief and experience at their own stage of the Christian journey we were employing a 'learning by doing' method of teaching the faith. This I believe reflects Wesley's own emphasis upon the practical outworking of faith in Christian fellowship and personal responsibility. We also sought to elicit from the Y.P. something of the sharing of faith of the early Methodist class meetings where believers were encouraged to speak what was in their hearts from their own personal experience. It was significant that without prompting a prayer cell grew out of the Y.P. and this gave further opportunity for sharing of ~~faith~~ ^{faith} and hope.

On reflecting upon the work which was done and how our Methodist teaching and practice in youth evangelism might reflect more ~~accurately~~ ^{accurately} the apostolic faith, I am of the opinion that the way to do this is to make our work more Ecumenical. In this way, rather than teaching doctrines, questions of doctrine would arise as different religious practices of other young people's groups were encountered. This may mean a loss of some of the strengths of our denominational youth work but it would be a way in to exploration of the faith we hold in common and our different

traditions. Without the checks upon each other, which interdenominational youth work forces us to make, we too easily become blinkered within our own traditions and fail to measure ourselves against the apostolic faith. Incidentally too we continue to bring our young people up with denominational handicaps as well as the strength which having deep denominational roots provides.

With hindsight we could have all done our work a little better and avoided some of the pitfalls along the way. This paper has been written in order that we all might reflect more upon the way in which we carry out our youth evangelism and the inherent teaching which is given in all that we do and say. No mention has been made of the cost in time and effort of the ministry which was sustained throughout the five years each Sunday evening. However, in this work as in much of our ministry for Christ, we were blessed with seeing the fruits of our labours and receiving back again in different ways more than we had given, which was not inconsiderable.