

## Nurturing the New Creation: Patterns of Discipleship in Twentieth Century British Methodism

At the mid-point and at the end of the twentieth century the British Methodist Conference issued a call to local churches urging them to undertake a review of their life and witness. The Liverpool Conference of 1949 endorsed and published 'A Conference Call to each Methodist Society' offering a four point programme of searching questions for local leaders, while the Huddersfield Conference of 2000 approved a vision statement entitled 'Our Calling', produced by a 'strategic goals planning group' following an extensive process of connexional consultation.<sup>1</sup>

The fifty-one years separating the Liverpool and Huddersfield Conferences witnessed dramatic changes in the context of British Christianity. The Conference of 1949 was encouraged by an increase in Methodist membership; by the late 1990s the talk in the press was of imminent 'meltdown' and in the academy of 'the death of Christian Britain'. With hindsight, the 'great opportunity' perceived in 1949 heralded the Indian summer of the 1950s, in which traditional patterns of Christian belief and practice continued to be remarkably successful. The cultural and theological cataclysm of the 1960s changed the landscape beyond recognition, and contextual change continued apace until the end of the century.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, however, the 1949 'Conference Call' and the 2000 statement of 'Our Calling' have much in common, both in structure (four headings, each expanded into a list of questions for discussion) and in subject-matter (concern for worship and spiritual life, deployment of resources, witness and evangelism, organising the Church for mission). There are differences, particularly in the relative importance of evangelism and an explicit endorsement of a broad understanding of mission. Much, however, remains the same. The fourth heading of 'Our Calling', affirming that 'the Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ', links to the third section of the 1949 'Conference Call', 'the Witness and Evangelism of your Church', urging 'the need for education in the meaning of the Faith, and the training in Christian citizenship'. Taking up this consistent emphasis, this paper seeks to explore the broad theme of discipleship in British Methodism since union in 1932, reflecting on

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conference 1949* (London, 1949), 2, 202-4; *Agenda of Conference* (Peterborough, 2000), 303-9. Both documents were subsequently issued as leaflets.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, M. Wellings, 'A time to be born and a time to die? A historian's perspective on the future of Methodism', in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (eds), *Methodism and the Future* (London, 1999). Debate in the academy has been fuelled especially by Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, 2001).

the theology underpinning the nurture of the new creation and the structures which embodied it and sought to give it effect.

The doctrinal clause of the 1932 Deed of Union states that the Methodist Church ‘ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.’ This commitment to make disciples, enshrined in the foundation documents of the Church, is also reflected in the Deed’s subsequent clauses on the privileges and duties of membership, which lay great emphasis on the fellowship and discipline of the class meeting.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen later, there was a significant divergence between rhetoric and reality in the maintenance of the structure of classes, but in theory Methodism was (and still is) pledged to a thorough-going system of nurture for its members.

A corresponding concern for discipleship may also be found in the language of the ordinals produced by the Connexion in the course of the twentieth century, although the vocabulary and emphasis changed with time. Three ordinals were authorised in this period: *The Book of Offices* (1936), *The Methodist Service Book* (1975) and *The Methodist Worship Book* (1999). Each makes use of the vocabulary of pastoral ministry, drawing heavily on the image of the shepherd tending the sheep.<sup>4</sup> Each speaks too of the presbyter’s responsibility for teaching and discipline.<sup>5</sup> The 1936 ordinal makes an explicit statement of the Christian calling to maturity in Christ, using Colossians 1:28 in the President’s charge to the candidates and in the examination prior to ordination. By 1975 this had been replaced by a less biblical paraphrase: ‘Never cease from your work of love until you have done all in your power to bring them [the members of Christ’s flock] to full obedience to Christ.’<sup>6</sup> No such exhortation appears in the 1999 service, which lacks any

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<sup>3</sup> The Deed may conveniently be found in the current edition of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Peterborough, 2001), ii, esp. 212-5.

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Offices* (London, 1936), 138-40, 144, 148, 150; *The Methodist Service Book* (London, 1975), 238, 242; *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough, 1999), 308-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Book of Offices*, 136, 139, 140, 142-3, 150; *Methodist Service Book*, 232, 234, 238, 242; *Methodist Worship Book*, 305-6, 308.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Offices*, 141, 145; *Methodist Service Book*, 238.



clear reference to Christian maturity or perfection, whether in relation to the calling and responsibility or to the character of the presbyter.

Conference statements on ordination have less to say about discipleship in relation to presbyteral ministry. The statements, however, need to be seen as contextual and contingent documents. In the earlier part of the twentieth century their thrust was often to defend Methodist orders against external critique. From the 1970s the position of ordained presbyteral ministry was itself in question in the light of a renewed emphasis on the ministry of the whole people of God and of debates about itinerancy and the diaconate. Few attempts were made to offer a positive exposition of the calling of a presbyter according to Methodist teaching. The 1960 statement 'Ordination in the Methodist Church' quotes Ephesians 4:12, but without comment on what it might mean to 'build up the Body of Christ'. Discipleship is passed over in the 1974 statement, although it is picked up as a shared responsibility of the whole Church in a 1986 report on 'The Ministry of the People of God'. Only with the report 'What is a Presbyter?', adopted by the Conference of 2002, is a theology of presbyter-as-disciple and presbyter as maker of disciples brought to full articulation.<sup>7</sup>

Even if somewhat muted in the occasional statements of the Church, the assumption that Methodism was raised up to make disciples, with a concomitant commitment to evangelism and Christian nurture, informed both the rhetoric and the structures of the Church.<sup>8</sup> The remainder of this paper will look briefly at four strands of Christian nurture: Sunday Schools, membership preparation material, catechisms and class meetings (and their substitutes).

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<sup>7</sup> 'Ordination in the Methodist Church, 1960', in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order 1933-1983* (London, 1984), 130; 'The Report on the Ministry of the People of God', in *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, Volume 2, 1984-2000*, (Peterborough, 2000), Part One, 240; *Agenda of Conference 2002* (Peterborough, 2002), 446-454, esp. 448. It may be noted that the adoption of this report came three years after the approval of the 1999 ordinal!

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the enthusiastic reports of conversions in the central mission reports published in the *Agenda of Conference* in the 1930s.

## Sunday Schools

Both locally and nationally enormous resources were devoted to the Christian education of children and young people through Methodist Sunday Schools. The newly united Church in the 1930s claimed over one million pupils in Sunday Schools, supervised by an army of almost 200,000 teachers. Even in the lean years at the end of the twentieth century, there were still about 300,000 young people connected with the Church's children's and youth work, and the importance of this endeavour was indicated in the Conference's adoption of 'Charter 95' and in the creation of a Methodist Youth Conference.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the period under review the Church was active at connexional level in providing teaching material for Sunday Schools and in offering initial and further training for teachers. Local work, therefore, was supported by a vast apparatus of publishing, lesson preparation, summer schools, training courses and expert advisers funded by the Connexion. The Church's intention was to ensure that Sunday Schools were well-resourced and that 'best practice' was encouraged among teachers and leaders.

Since well before 1932 Sunday School lesson material had been produced ecumenically, in conjunction with the International Sunday School Lessons.<sup>10</sup> The British Lessons Council based its syllabus on the International Lessons, and Methodists were fully involved in the work of the BLC. The Revd Wilfrid Doidge, for example, one of the secretaries of the Methodist Youth Department, served as secretary of the BLC Senior Lessons Committee in the 1940s and 1950s, while E.H. Hayes was BLC secretary for 35 years.<sup>11</sup> The three-year syllabus set by the BLC was mediated to Methodist Sunday Schools through 'Methodist Notes' prepared by the Youth Department. This changed in the late 1960s when the BLC launched a new syllabus, 'Experience and Faith', supported by a new teaching resource, *Partners in Learning*, published jointly by

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<sup>9</sup> John Munsey Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1998* (Peterborough, 1998), 70.

<sup>10</sup> P.B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England 1780-1980* (Redhill, 1986), 210.

<sup>11</sup> Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester [hereafter MA/JRULM], Education and Youth papers, DDEY 14/1 and 2, Senior Lessons Committee Minutes, 1945-56, esp. 17 May 1951; 'Hayes, Ernest Henry', in John A. Vickers (ed.), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough, 2000), 153.



MYD, the National Christian Education Council and the Religious Education Press. MYD and its successors continued to resource and promote *Partners in Learning* until its replacement in 2002.

The Sunday School syllabus reflected the changing theology of the twentieth century, both in didactic contents and in pedagogic method. As late as 1959 the BLC stated that 'The aim of all the courses is to bring those we teach into personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, to that growth in Christian character, conduct and service which are the fruits of His Spirit, and into the worship and fellowship of His Church.' A decade later *Partners in Learning* was emphasising the need to draw out the experience already present in children and young people, and setting its face against 'indoctrination'.<sup>12</sup> The shift of nomenclature from Sunday School to Junior Church perhaps indicated a change from a model of nurture which sought to bring young people to a point of decision (reflected in the annual 'Decision Day' promoted by the Connexion to encourage young people to make an explicit Christian commitment) to one which emphasised their status as already part of the Church.

An assessment of the effectiveness of Sunday School and Junior Church teaching in forming disciples is difficult to make without an extensive exercise in empirical research. Several points, however, may be made. First, the principles strenuously advocated as connexional good practice were often disregarded at local level. The Sunday School Department and MYD and their successors consistently urged the adoption of graded Sunday Schools, where different age groups were taught in different classes. Material was carefully provided in the 'Methodist Notes' and in *Partners in Learning* for a variety of groups and as early as 1936 a MSSD manual, quoting Froebel, set out six stages of child development to guide teachers.<sup>13</sup> In practice, graded Sunday Schools were by no means universal. More than half of the Connexion's Sunday Schools in 1934, for example, had just one department. A survey of the East Anglia District in 1973 showed 62%

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<sup>12</sup> MA/JRULM, DDEY 14/3, Senior Lessons Committee Minutes 1956-59, 8 September 1959; Fred. W. Evans, 'Why a New Syllabus?', in *Partners in Learning 1968-69* (London, 1968), 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Content of Our Teaching', in R.H.B. Shapland, H.J. Watts and Others, *The Young Disciple and His Faith* (London, 1936), 1-10.

of schools operating a system of departments. A shortage of appropriately qualified teachers, or the presence of a small group of children differing widely in age, made the model difficult to implement.<sup>14</sup> Second, the take-up of connexional teacher training was variable. Syllabi were devised, including biblical studies and child psychology. Courses were organised and promoted. Examinations were set. The proportion of teachers undertaking such studies, however, remained disappointingly small: a few hundred each year in the 1930s, for instance. The project-based courses introduced in the 1980s and 1990s (*Spectrum* for youth leaders in 1989 and *Kaleidoscope* for Junior Church teachers in 1993) were not noticeably more successful. Third, there was resistance to connexional material, particularly to *Partners in Learning*, which was criticised for being insufficiently biblical. A 1973 survey showed about a third of Sunday Schools using *Partners in Learning*. Other resources ranged from Scripture Union lesson material to *One Hundred Bible Stories*, ‘Collins’ Quiz Book’, ‘Rita Snowden’s book’ and *The Children’s Life of Christ* by Enid Blyton.<sup>15</sup> Fourth, the failure to retain children past adolescence spoke for itself. A leaflet on ‘Evangelism in the Sunday School’ noting that ‘One in every seven scholars in the Sunday Schools of Methodism is received into the Church,’ asked: ‘What happens to the other six?’<sup>16</sup> In its determination to stem this haemorrhage of young people from the Church, the leaflet forms a bridge between the Sunday School and Christian nurture through membership preparation, to which attention may now be turned.

## Membership Preparation

In examining membership preparation material produced between the 1930s and the 1990s three striking points emerge. First, the sheer quantity of manuals on offer in the earlier years is worthy of note. When John Lawson published his *Who joins the glorious host?* in 1950, the comment on

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<sup>14</sup> *Agenda of Conference 1934* (London, 1934), 379; ‘The Methodist Church East Anglia District. District Children’s Committee. Survey of Lesson Material used in Sunday School/Junior Church’, MA/JRULM, DDEY/40.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth M. Ross, ‘A Survey of Methodist Youth Work in 1973’, MA/JRULM, DDEY/40, 18 and Appendix.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Evangelism in the Sunday School’ (n.d.), 1. The leaflet is part of a loose-leaf MYD handbook, with some dated material from the 1940s and 1950s. I am grateful to Mr Graham Kirby for drawing this to my attention.



the fly-leaf admitted that ‘manuals for church-membership preparation-classes are already legion’, and another could only be justified on the grounds of an innovative approach to a well-worn task.<sup>17</sup> Throughout this period Herbert Watts’ *Joining the Church: A Manual for Church Membership Preparation Classes* (fifth edition, 1933) was promoted by the MYD, and it was incorporated wholesale into Shapland and Watts’ *The Young Disciple and His Faith* (1936). E.C. Tanton wrote *The Covenant Divine* for the Wesley Guild in 1934, ‘setting forth the minimum which should be known and accepted by young people seeking membership in the Methodist Church.’<sup>18</sup> The call for a new and authoritative manual, voiced by a Conference committee in 1938 and echoed by the Commission on Rural Methodism after the Second World War, led to the production of *The Pattern of Methodism* (1948) by Stanley Frost, with a companion volume *Tutors unto Christ* (1949) edited by the Frost brothers.<sup>19</sup> John Lawson’s book joined this glorious host of substantial books a year later. By contrast, the last third of the century saw far fewer resources being published. The booklet *Joining the Church. A Manual of Membership for Methodists* appeared in 1968 and *A Guide to Church Membership* in 1975. A new course, set out in leaflet form and entitled *Exploring, Deciding, Joining* was approved in 1986 and *A Guide to Church Membership* was revised ten years later. The Conference of 2002 endorsed a completely new and substantial course, *Called by Name*, perhaps reflecting a recovery of confidence in membership as an expression of committed Christian discipleship after several decades of anxiety about the value of making members at all.

The second striking point concerns the target audience of the material on offer. The earlier manuals were designed without exception for young people proceeding from Sunday School into adult membership of the Church, and thus as part of the response to the perceived loss of adolescents identified by the MYD in ‘Evangelism in the Sunday School’. Although this limited readership is not readily apparent from the titles of the books, it soon becomes obvious from the

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<sup>17</sup> John Lawson, *Who joins the glorious host?* (London, 1950), fly-leaf. Lawson’s unique approach was to base his course on the Apostles’ Creed in conjunction with the Communion Service in the *Book of Offices*.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest C. Tanton, *The Covenant Divine* (London, 1934), 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Agenda of Conference 1938* (London, 1938), 359; Stanley Brice Frost and Eric G. Frost (eds), *Tutors unto Christ* (London, 1949), vi.

prefaces and style of writing. By the 1960s the audience had broadened to include mature adults, and this continued through the 1980s and 1990s. Arguably the 1996 version of *A Guide to Church Membership* leans towards an adult, rather than a teenage readership. It may be suggested that the pattern of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, assuming that children in Methodist Sunday Schools would (or should) progress to Church membership, had given way to the realisation that teenagers were likely to leave the Church, but that adults might return to half-remembered Christian roots.

The third point to be made relates to the contents of the courses. Three elements feature in most. There is a didactic strand, offering information about Christian faith, doctrine, spirituality and lifestyle, and about Methodism. There is an element of apologetic, relating the claims of Christ and Christianity to competing world-views. Finally there is an exploration of Christian experience and a challenge to make a commitment to Christ. These strands blend in different combinations in the various manuals. Although it includes some information about Methodist history and polity, Watts' *Joining the Church* is heavily weighted towards attaining Christian experience: 'Real fitness for church membership consists in the possession of this experience. We must know Jesus for ourselves.'<sup>20</sup> Stanley and Eric Frost are equally clear about the vital question at the end of their course: 'Have the class discussions and studies led them, each one, to a personal dedication of his life to the service of the Lord Jesus? Has He become *his* Saviour?'<sup>21</sup> In *Tutors unto Christ*, however, this point of decision is reached after a very thorough grounding in Christian doctrine and Methodist polity and ethics, as well as a frank examination of the options of 'pleasant paganism', 'scientific humanism' and 'practical humanism', and of the challenges posed by science and Communism.<sup>22</sup> The later courses are generally briefer and less didactic, although the call to commitment is still clearly present, if expressed in more reticent terms.<sup>23</sup>

What conclusions may be drawn about Christian nurture from these materials? First, most of the

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<sup>20</sup> Herbert J. Watts, *Joining the Church* (London, 1933 [fifth edition]), 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Tutors unto Christ*, 103-4.

<sup>22</sup> *Tutors unto Christ*, esp. 10-24. The specialist contributors to this handbook included Rupert Davies, Raymond George, Percy Scott, C. Ryder Smith and Philip Watson.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the leaflet 'Jesus is Lord' in *Exploring, Deciding, Joining* (London, 1986).



compilers were keen to encourage people to experience the New Birth (however they chose to articulate this aim). Second, they recognised the need for instruction in Christian faith and practice, and in the distinctive emphases and polity of Methodism. Third, the thoroughness of the exploration and instruction varied considerably, from the frankly sketchy to the solidly didactic. Fourth, only the Frosts, in *Tutors unto Christ*, underlined the importance of maintaining the group as a continuing vehicle for Christian nurture.<sup>24</sup> Other books nodded in the direction of groups (usually in order to extol the Methodist genius for ‘fellowship’), but had little to say about the corporate structures of discipleship.

Many of the membership manuals allude to the Methodist catechism, and some offer alternative catechisms of their own.<sup>25</sup> A brief comment may be in order at this point about catechisms and catechesis in twentieth century British Methodism.

### **Catechisms and Catechesis**

It is not clear how extensively catechesis was used in the various branches of Methodism in the years preceding the union of 1932. The Wesleyan catechism was half a century old by this time, and it is open to question how many Superintendents obeyed the recommendation of the 1882 Conference to arrange for an annual public examination in the catechism of the children in Methodist Sunday Schools.<sup>26</sup> The Conference of 1934 received a suggestion from the London South East Synod that a new catechism should be produced, but apparently nothing was done, because a similar suggestion was made by the North Lancashire Synod four years later. This resulted in the appointment of a committee, charged with the responsibility of drafting new senior and junior catechisms. The draft, delayed by the Second World War, was authorised for experimental use in 1944, but two years later the committee was discharged and substantially

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<sup>24</sup> *Tutors unto Christ*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> Shapland and Watts, *The Young Disciple and His Faith*, 138-48.

<sup>26</sup> *Minutes of Conference 1882* (London, 1882), 224-5, and compare J.S. Simon, *A Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline* (London, 1923 [fifth edition]), 570. This catechism occasioned a dispute between W.B. Pope and George Osborn concerning the Fatherhood of God: J.Scott Lidgett, *My Guided Life* (London, 1936), 86-7.

remodelled. New drafts appeared in 1951 and the final versions were adopted in 1952.<sup>27</sup>

The *Agenda of Conference* is reticent about the reasons for the changes in the catechism committee. Clearly the committee's work had been seriously impeded by the Second World War and the members had perhaps lost enthusiasm for their task. More significantly, lessons learned about youth work and methods of adult education were incorporated via the members of the reconstituted committee, which was almost twice the size of its predecessor, with a younger generation of ministers well represented.<sup>28</sup>

The theology of the catechisms lies outside the scope of this paper, but it may be noted that a comparison of the 1952 Senior Catechism with the draft presented in 1944 shows the former to be more precise in its definitions and less archaic in its vocabulary than the latter. The compilers made use of the Apostles' Creed as a framework for a substantial opening doctrinal section, of the Lord's Prayer for a section on 'Prayer' and of the Ten Commandments for a section on 'The New Life of Righteousness', all changes from the 1944 draft.

The catechism, like its 1986 successor, established a benchmark for Methodist theology. What is not clear, however, is how widely either were used - or even known - in the Church as a whole, and therefore how effective they were as tools for Christian nurture. In his foreword to Shapland and Watts' *The Young Disciple and His Faith* (1936), W.F. Lofthouse, a member of the 1938 committee not included on the reconstituted body in 1946, commented sadly that 'catechisms are at present rather out of fashion.'<sup>29</sup> It may be suspected that this remained true right through the period and that catechesis did not play a major part in shaping Methodist discipleship.

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<sup>27</sup> *Agenda of Conference 1934* (London, 1934), 16; *Agenda of Conference 1938* (London, 1938), 11; *Agenda of Conference 1946* (London, 1946), 75; *Agenda of Conference 1951* (London, 1951), 255-66; *Agenda of Conference 1952* (London, 1952), 231-41.

<sup>28</sup> The 1939 list included only two ministers who had entered the ministry since the First World War; those added in 1946 included twelve who had entered in the 1930s, among them Rupert Davies, Kenneth Grayston, Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson.

<sup>29</sup> *The Young Disciple and His Faith*, viii.



## Class Meetings

Students of the Wesleys' Methodism are well aware of the development and importance of the class meeting. Classes offered a forum for testimony, evangelism and pastoral care, places where the experience of Christianity in the Methodist tradition could be nurtured and handed on. They were, moreover, key building blocks of the polity of Methodism through the role of the Leaders' Meeting in each Society.<sup>30</sup> Historians of nineteenth century Methodism know that the discipline of the class came under increasing pressure as the movement evolved from something akin to a holiness sect into a more conventional church. In the middle of the century, and again in the 1880s and early 1900s, the place and value of the class and the link between class attendance and Methodist membership came under attack. Traditionalists like Benjamin Gregory and J.H. Rigg defended the class system, but the discipline was gradually attenuated.<sup>31</sup> Given this background, it perhaps comes as a surprise to realise that traditional expectations about classes are still deeply embedded in the standing orders of twenty-first century Methodism. Members are still required to have their names entered on a class-book. Class-leaders appear first in the list of 'principal officers' to be appointed in each Society. Ministers are expected to visit the classes at least once in each quarter.<sup>32</sup> Does this reflect a living tradition? Or is it an alluvial deposit left in *CPD* by the folk memory of former glories?

It is certainly possible to find contemporary churches which have maintained a structure of classes and class-meetings. It is also possible to find positive accounts of classes operating in particular churches at intervals during the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> Overall, however, the language of official reports and other publications suggests that the structure has not functioned well since union. The

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<sup>30</sup> Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People* (London, 1949 [second edition]), 149-81.

<sup>31</sup> Henry D. Rack, 'The decline of the class-meeting and the problem of church membership in nineteenth century Wesleyanism', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (Chester), xxxix (1973-4), 12-21.

<sup>32</sup> Deed of Union, clause 9; Standing orders, section 63 and 526(1) in the current edition of *CPD*.

<sup>33</sup> *Agenda of Conference 1934* (London, 1934), 215 (Bolton Mission). A contemporary church where the system still operates is Upper Tooting Methodist Church, in south London.

Conference of 1934, for example, heard that ‘a real revival’ of classes was under weigh, but just four years later the returns from the Districts revealed a ‘very serious’ decline in the number of classes meeting. The special committee on the conditions of membership reporting in the same year noted ‘the continued decline of the class-meeting on the one hand and the increase of Groups and other manifestations of fellowship on the other’.<sup>34</sup> This identified the twentieth century pattern: a breakdown in the once-universal disciplined structure of classes coupled with a flourishing of voluntary fellowship meetings of various kinds.

Three types of voluntary group may be mentioned here. First, the period has seen the gradual evolution of the Wesley Guild from an agency designed to attract young people to a body offering a blend of spiritual and social activities to long-established church members. In many churches where classes no longer function, the Guild provides (or has provided) a source of fellowship and spiritual support. Second, the promotion of house groups for Bible study, discussion and fellowship, a growing feature of Church life across the denominations in Britain since the 1960s, has affected Methodism and found eloquent advocates within the Connexion.<sup>35</sup> Third, various study courses organised on a group basis have commended themselves to Methodist people. Particular mention may be made of the DISCIPLE programme, promoted by the Methodist Publishing House in the 1990s. Some 4000 people have taken part in this United Methodist programme of structured Bible reading and group study.<sup>36</sup>

It is possible to see twentieth century changes as developments of nineteenth century trends. Critics of the classes in the 1880s complained about inadequate leadership; this was still a problem in the 1950s.<sup>37</sup> Reticence about sharing personal Christian experience continued; other structures offered less threatening patterns, whether of information-based monologues by a speaker, semi-academic group discussion or the conviviality of ‘fellowship’ without spiritual content. Increasing

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<sup>34</sup> *Agenda of Conference 1934* (London, 1934), 471; *Agenda of Conference 1938* (London, 1938), 355, 363.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Skinner, *House Groups* (London, 1969).

<sup>36</sup> *Agenda of Conference 2002* (Peterborough, 2002), 618.

<sup>37</sup> Rack, ‘Decline of the class-meeting’, 13; Harry Hindle, *Wanted: Class Leaders* (London, 1951).



diversity of theology and experience in a frankly pluralist church encouraged the voluntary association of the like-minded in place of a common structure for all. Opting out altogether remained a preference for many.

Several questions remain about the pattern of Christian nurture in twentieth century British Methodism. Inevitably there is room to debate the quality and appropriateness of what was (and is) provided: issues around the material used and the training offered to leaders and teachers. More fundamentally, however, the question must be asked about the existence of an agreed intention, objective or expectation in Christian nurture. The 1936 ordinal was explicit in its exhortation to ministers: their task was to 'present everyone mature in Christ' (Col. 1:28 [NRSV]). Even in the 1930s a gap existed between rhetoric and reality, between the articulated ideal, the structures designed to deliver it and the ownership of both by the Church at large. Those gaps have widened with the years. Working with confused expectations and optional participation in diffuse programmes delivered by voluntary structures makes the aim hard to keep in view and well-nigh impossible to realise.

Martin Wellings.

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