

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON METHODIST INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL EDUCATION AFTER WESLEY

The Rev. Jabez Bunting, seen by many as Wesley's natural successor, was equally committed to the importance of promoting Christian-based education:

‘Education.... Without religion is not education. I think that an education which looks only at the secular interests of an individual, which looks only at his condition as a member of civil society; and does not look upon him as a man having an immortal soul.... is not education’.

At first most effort was placed in creating Sunday Schools but in 1836 the Methodist Conference gave its blessing to the creation of ‘Weekday schools’, saying:

‘What we wish for is not merely schools but Church schools.... Not merely education, but education which may begin in an infant school and end in Heaven’.

In 1837 a newly created Wesleyan Education Committee emphasized that these schools should provide young people with ‘the influences, instructions, and restraints of a well regulated and happy Christian family’.

In 1841 Conference set up a General Committee of Education to encourage the creation of schools across the Connexion and to create places to train teachers. The earliest teachers in Wesleyan schools had been trained by David Stow in Glasgow who did not use the ‘monitorial system’ used by the National Society and the British and Foreign School Society. Connexional money went on training teachers, not on building schools – leaving school building to local churches. In the words of one church steward, local congregations should either ‘Build and Pay’ or, if funds were unavailable, ‘Wait and Work and Pray’. One of the first schools created in the wake of this was the West of England Wesleyan Proprietary Grammar School that is now Queen’s College, Taunton.

The Wesleyan Education Committee recommended in 1841 ‘that the principal Day Schools be placed upon the Circuit Plans, for regular periodical visitation and religious catechizing, or other instruction, by one of the Ministers of the Circuit’. It is noteworthy that a memorial was presented to Conference in 2010 making the equivalent suggestion! John Scott, a President of Conference, told trainee teachers at Westminster College, which opened in 1851:

The children.... are not machines..... We wish you to have a thorough sympathy with their human feelings.... Is a child less rational, less capable of intellectual and moral improvement, of living an orderly, creditable, and useful life in society, of serving God and ensuring blissful immortality, because his parents are poor?’

Over a million pounds was raised to fund new schools, mostly catering for primary aged children. Eventually there were about 600 Methodist schools (comprising 900 departments) scattered across the country, alongside an estimated 150 opened by the

United Free Churches, Primitive Methodist Connexion, Methodist New Connexion, etc. These other branches of Methodism shared the same enthusiasm for education. The Bible Christians, for example, had created the school that later developed into Shebbear College as early as 1832.

A strong Methodist input into teacher training was maintained up until the early 1990s largely through Westminster College and Southlands College, which was created in 1872. However, this important contribution to education was then largely allowed to disappear because the colleges were increasingly subsumed into larger organizations. Southlands College was one of four colleges that merged to form the Roehampton Institute in 1975 and in 2004 this became Roehampton University. What was Southlands now largely houses the University's School of Business and Social Sciences together with the Music section of the School of Arts. Westminster College entered into an academic partnership with the University of Oxford in 1992, allowing its students to read for degrees of the University, and then, in 1999, it was controversially handed over to Oxford Brookes University, who now run it as the Westminster Institute of Education.

The decade 1858 to 1868 saw three Royal Commissions into education that resulted in a move towards creating a national education system. The 1864 Clarendon Commission into the nine great public schools and the 1868 Commission into endowed schools both concluded that secondary (then called higher) education might benefit by looking at the style of education offered in the best independent schools. The Methodist Conference decided to respond in two ways. First, it improved the quality of education offered to the sons of its ministers by making reforms at Kingswood and Woodhouse Grove (which had been opened in 1812) and, at the same time, it opened three new schools for the daughters of ministers (Five Elms, Beechholme and Trinity Hall). Secondly, following the government's decision in 1871 to end the ban on Nonconformists attending Oxford and Cambridge, it created the Leys School in Cambridge in 1877 as Methodism's answer to Rugby, Marlborough and the other great Anglican boarding schools because:

‘The future of our Church lies with its youth; and if the more intelligent and better educated of these should be gradually drafted off into other [religious] communities the usefulness, if not the existence of Methodism, would be seriously imperiled’.

A significant number of other secondary boarding schools were created in the wake of this, including Truro College, Rydal and Penrhos, Wycliffe College, the East Anglian school (now Culford), Edgehill, Queenswood, and the two Kent Colleges in Canterbury and Pembury. Similarly, the United Methodist Connexion opened Ashville College in 1877. This period also saw the creation of Cliff College in 1883 as a training place for lay preachers and evangelists.

James Harrison Rigg, the first leading Principal of Westminster College, encouraged Methodism to think that the state education system that was being created after 1870 would not offer an entire answer to meeting the religious needs of children. He argued that the state's interest was essentially utilitarian whereas the Methodist interest was more concerned about ‘moral and religious standards’ and in generating ‘wisdom’ rather than just knowledge. At the Conference of 1885, he pointed out to the

members that if they could not afford to keep up day schools, then they could not afford to keep up Methodism.

The Wesleyans were very divided about whether to keep their day schools, as was evident from the heated debates in 1889 and 1890. Those who followed Rigg thought that retaining Methodist schools was the only reliable way of ensuring non-denominational Bible teaching. They were a protective barrier for Methodists against Anglican supremacy in school provision. While most school boards did provide religious instruction, it was not obligatory, and, in the villages that were dominated by Anglican interests, teaching could not be guaranteed to be undenominational when the teachers were appointed by the board. Another group followed the thinking of Hugh Price Hughes, who argued that the competition against the Church of England could not be won and so it was better to end the denominational system. The universal provision of unsectarian board schools offered the best protection of Methodist interests.

In 1891 the Methodist Church decided its policy would be to support school boards everywhere, but, at the same time, to maintain its existing schools and training colleges as long as there were other denominational schools. The next year circuits were warned against transferring their schools to their school board. Not all circuits followed this advice but by the time of the 1902 Education Act there were still about 350 Wesleyan schools and nearly 50 non-Wesleyan. In 1903 the Methodist Church created the Board of Management for its boarding schools. Many felt it was important to maintain these schools because of their potential to offer an education that was more distinctively Christian in nature. In 1928 the Wesleyan Education Committee voiced this:

‘Secondary day schools under the Local Education Authorities cannot provide to the same extent for that development based on religious teaching, personal contact, and influence such as, in the opinion of the Churches generally, is possible in a boarding school.’

Even at this stage new Methodist schools were still being occasionally created. What is now Farringtons, for example, was opened in 1911 to replace Laleham Lodge, which had been created in the 1850s by Hannah Pipe, a pioneer of female education.

The 1902 Education Act empowered the newly created local education authorities to start providing secondary schools either by paying for places at existing independent grammar schools or by creating new schools. At the same time the finances of the elementary schools were set on a firmer footing as all their running costs were covered by the LEA, leaving the managers to look after the building. Unfortunately, as expectations of elementary education increased, so demands for larger and better buildings were raised. This meant that increasing numbers of circuits took the view that either their elementary schools could not be brought up to the new standards or they lacked the finance to fund the necessary changes. This led to a further decline in the number of Methodist schools over the next thirty years so that by the time of Methodist Union there were only 118 Wesleyan, 7 United Methodist and 4 Primitive day schools remaining.

In preparation for Methodist Union in 1932, the church’s education policy was spelt

out: universal publicly provided and controlled Christian unsectarian schools within a reasonable distance of every family was the goal. Until then it was vital to maintain existing Methodist day schools in places where it was not possible to establish Christian unsectarian schools. No Methodist school could be closed or transferred without the consent of the Connexion. The focus was primarily at retaining schools at elementary level so the last Methodist secondary day school was closed in 1936, leaving only the boarding schools to offer Methodist education at that level.

The slow but inexorable decline in the number of Methodist day schools in the first part of the twentieth century was offset by greater attention to Sunday Schools. In 1907 Westhill College was created to train Sunday School teachers and youth leaders. It diversified into other educational and theological courses and in 1922 became the founder member of the Selly Oak Federation of Colleges, which combined Methodist educational efforts with those of the Baptists, Quakers, and United Reformed Church. Its main focus for a considerable time became, like Westminster and Southlands, training for school teachers. In 1999 it became part of Birmingham University and its distinctive Methodist ethos has since been largely lost. Since 2001 Westhill has been merged with Birmingham's School of Education.

Most Christian denominations assumed that the teaching of Christianity would automatically be part of the curriculum in the new state schools. In 1941 the Methodist Church joined with the other Free Churches and the Church of England in endorsing that the state should provide for all children to be given a Christian education, that all schools should start the day with an act of Christian worship, and that religious instruction should be timetabled within every school's curriculum and inspected by HMI. They also agreed that religious instruction should be an optional subject in all teacher training colleges. Backed by the Christian Education Movement, the churches successfully lobbied government and, as a result, religious instruction and religious worship both featured strongly in the 1944 Education Act. The Methodist Church welcomed this:

‘We have always believed that the great simplicities of the Christian religion should form the basis of English education and have long hoped that in this field denominational differences might be forgotten’.

After the Second World War the Methodist Church strongly supported the development of Agreed Syllabuses for the use of county and voluntary controlled schools. Co-operation between Church and State meant that the Methodist Church also welcomed its boarding schools participating in the Direct Grant system and the later Assisted Places scheme. In 1965 the Headmaster of Kingswood told the Public Schools Commission:

‘[Many Methodist independent schools would] willingly accept some form of integration into the state system provided they could preserve that independence and freedom which are so valuable and precious in education’.

A belief in retaining schools that had sufficient independence to be strongly Christian in their ethos explains not only the Methodist Church's retention of its boarding schools but also the decision to continue supporting the few remaining Methodist

primary schools (mostly in the north-west) that had not been handed over entirely to the local authorities. In 1955 it was agreed to open a Church of England and Methodist voluntary controlled school in Caistor to replace the two small village church schools. It opened in 1957 and was followed ten years later by the first voluntary aided school at Brinscall in Lancashire which replaced five small village schools. Other new ecumenical schools followed, including Christ the Sower in Milton Keynes which was a joint venture by four churches. As a consequence there are now 65 Methodist maintained primary schools, many in areas of social deprivation, and these are located in fifteen districts across the Connexion. Most (but sadly not all) are supported by local churches and circuits. Ministers exercise pastoral care and lead worship, volunteers assist in the classroom and act as governors, and congregations help fund-raise.

In 1971 the Board of Management of Methodist Residential Schools commissioned the Laybourne Report into the future of its independent schools because of concerns raised at their fee-paying nature. The Report accepted that some children had a boarding need that could not be met by day schools and described the Methodist schools as 'friendly, humane institutions in which there is a real and largely successful attempt to translate Christian values into everyday living'. It concluded:

'It is vitally important to retain schools in which the Church can demonstrate what is meant by a Christian education'.

Such a statement arose because it was becoming obvious by then that the state system was becoming far less committed to retaining a Christian emphasis within its schools, partly because of the increasingly secular nature of society and partly because immigration was creating a situation in which some schools contained many children from other faiths. As a consequence many denominations were recognizing that it was becoming essential to preserve those schools that still had a truly Christian foundation and ethos.

In 1977, following the abolition of the Direct Grant system, the Methodist Conference staged a major debate on whether it should allow its boarding schools to move to full independence or whether it should close them. The decision was to retain them because they were a means of offering an education that was distinctively Christian and their presence gave the Church a continued voice in any national debate on school education. This decision was reinforced in 1988 when Conference stated:

'The use of the educational system for political ends is widespread throughout the world, and a future government might not only remove religious education from the special position it now enjoys in the schools under its control; it might also forbid the direct teaching of a specifically Christian theology... or infuse the teaching of a non-Christian theology. Against this possibility an effective Christian witness able to resist pressure from the State needs to be maintained in the field of education; without it the Christian case for belief in God and Christ, for freedom of thought, speech and religion, and for individual human rights, will be gravely weakened.'

By this stage, of course, it was obvious that the state was no longer prepared to give

any priority to Christianity within what were now being called 'community schools'. The religious curriculum at both primary and secondary level had long ceased to focus just on Christianity and it was prohibited for teachers to promote belonging to a particular faith. Only those schools that had been linked to a Christian denomination were free to give greater emphasis to Christianity. Not surprisingly, in 1998 the *Essence of Education* report said the state should not be permitted a 'monopoly on education' and, as far as its boarding schools were concerned, the Church 'should not surrender the foothold which we have in the independent sector' as long as the schools remained 'viable, self-supporting institutions' (i.e. expected no financial input from the Church). To make clear that Methodist schools were not divisive, the Board of Management committed itself to offering 'a significant contribution to building a society in which knowledge, understanding and tolerance predominate over ignorance, prejudice and discrimination.'

Support for the independent schools was matched by a growing recognition in some quarters that the Methodist Church should more fully endorse the work of its remaining Methodist primary schools. These are, of course, very few in number compared to the large number of schools run by the Church of England (which contain 18.6% of all primary pupils and 5.8% of all secondary pupils) or the Catholic Church. However, they are part of a Christian involvement in education whose collective impact has not gone unnoticed. It is generally accepted that they often (though not always) offer a superior education to the more secular community schools. Chris Woodhead, ex-Chief Inspector of Schools 1994-2000, attributed this to 'their commitment to a common core of values' that made them have a deeper understanding of what ultimately matters and therefore less likely to respond to the latest politically driven educational fad. As Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett expressed a wish to 'bottle their ethos'.

In 2006 'Every Child Matters – All Precious in God's Sight' was produced to support Methodist church schools deliver education 'from a Christian perspective' in which each child is valued, has access to learning excellence, and enjoys holistic education in a socially cohesive and integrated Christian community'. It stated that supporting the church schools was 'an integral part of the mission of the church':

'The school accepts and promotes a set of values and beliefs based on Christian authority. In obeying Jesus' command 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself' the school offers a way of life that acknowledges the integrity of the person, who may or may not accept these values and beliefs.'

Many within Methodism recognize the Church should not confine its educational input to church schools, whether independent or state, and that, for that reason, every church should be involved with the community schools in its area. This harks back to the principle announced by Conference in 1847 it was the duty of every chapel to 'have in connection with it an efficient day school' but within a twenty-first century context. Christians need to make links with state schools that have no Christian foundation. This was notably expressed in the 2001 'Way Ahead' report produced by the Church of England. Its premise was simple: if the young are not going to church, the church needs to go to where the young are. In 2004 the Methodist Conference listed as one of its priorities a wide-ranging understanding of mission that included

‘sharing in the task of education and social and spiritual development’ and called for ‘a radical rethink of the Church’s mission and strategies for engaging effectively with students in schools, FE and HE, and with younger people at work’.

It is in the light of the above that the Methodist Church set up an Education Commission in 2010 to report to Conference in 2012.

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