

Conference Colloquim 'Reshaping the mission of Methodism'¹

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Throughout its history, Methodism has always manifested the ability to adapt its life and work to pursue forms of mission appropriate to the needs and issues of the times.

Reshaping the mission of Methodism past

Some have regarded the 'fragmentation' of Methodism soon after Wesley's death in 1791 as a sign of Methodism's inherent volatility. However, the rapid emergence of breakaway movements, such as the Methodist New Connexion and Primitive Methodism, has also been interpreted as Methodism's ability to remain true to its roots as a church 'of the people and for the people'.

In the 1880s, when the nation was witnessing the growth of great cities and the poverty and squalor that came with them, Methodism reshaped itself for mission through the Forward Movement, based on a hundred 'central halls', and by setting up the Wesley Deaconess Order to minister to the needs of the destitute.

Methodist Union, in 1932, was in part an attempt to reshape Methodism for mission in response to a new and challenging economic, social and world order. In a period of major reconstruction after World War Two, reshaping focused on young people, the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs soon boasting a million members, and MethSocs flourishing in many universities. At the end of the 1960s, in response to the ecumenical vision of 'one church renewed for mission', Methodism committed itself to the most comprehensive reshaping it has ever attempted by offering its hand in marriage to the Church of England. Its abandonment at the altar was a body-blow to its self-worth and confidence from which it is still recovering.

Reshaping the mission of Methodism present

Spurred on by the challenges of a new millennium, as well as concern about its declining human and financial resources, Methodism is once again addressing the task of reshaping itself for mission. *Our Calling*,³ *Priorities for the Methodist Church*,⁴ 'fresh expressions of church', *Mapping*

*a Way Forward*⁵ and the reaffirmation of the importance of ‘discipleship’ are some examples of this endeavour.

However, my own conclusions, set out in the final chapter of *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism*, are that these recent initiatives are nothing like radical, coherent or comprehensive enough to enable British Methodism to make a new and distinctive contribution to the daunting challenges currently facing world and church. I am convinced that for such a contribution to be achieved, Methodism must first and foremost hammer out a new and relevant theology of mission. Based on that theology, a new strategy for mission, ‘a new way of being circuit’⁶ and new forms of leadership need to be formulated and implemented. These four aspects of mission are explored below, in each case critiquing where Methodism currently stands and offering an alternative way forward.

1. A new theology of mission for Methodism – beyond ‘discipleship’

Over recent years numerous books and articles have sought to identify a distinctively Methodist theology of mission.⁷ Of late, this endeavour has focused particularly on the importance of Methodism as ‘a discipleship movement’.⁸ It is true that Methodism has always regarded the making of Christian disciples as central to its purposes. However, as the basis for a theology of mission, the concept of ‘discipleship’ has some serious weaknesses.

A theology of mission founded primarily on ‘discipleship’ runs the risk of promoting the ascendancy of individualism and the privatization of religious experience. It can encourage mission to be seen as about church growth rather than the transformation of society. Above all, a theology of mission which takes discipleship as its dominant theme is neither holistic nor inclusive enough to challenge those forces that currently divide and fragment our world, not least an economic system whereby the rich get ever richer and the poor ever poorer.

In *Reshaping the mission of Methodism*, I argue that Methodism should build on its rich legacy of ‘scriptural holiness’ and ‘social holiness’ in order to develop a new and essentially counter-cultural theology of mission founded on a gospel of ‘communal holiness’ or, as I define the latter, ‘communal wholeness’. I contend that the latter is a trinitarian theology of mission which embraces four core communal gifts – life, liberation, love and learning. It is a ‘big’ theology of mission concerned with the building of communally whole families, neighbourhoods, cities, nations and one world, as well as with honouring ‘the integrity of creation’. A theology of

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communal holiness is kingdom-focused not church-centred, ‘connexional’ not congregational, collective not individualistic. It certainly embraces the faith commitment of the person (discipleship), but as one facet of a much bigger picture.

2. A new strategy for the mission of Methodism – beyond *Our Calling* and *The Priorities for the Methodist Church*

Neither *Our Calling* nor *The Priorities for the Methodist Church* offer Methodism a clear or coherent strategy for mission. *Our Calling* was never more than an all-embracing check-list. And in inexplicably bracketing together ‘learning’ and ‘caring’, *Our Calling* has always risked devaluing two of its key components. *The Priorities for the Methodist Church*, though offering a number of worthy aims and objectives, is not grounded in any comprehensive or distinctive theology of mission. Furthermore, because ‘the priorities’ themselves are not ‘prioritized’ in any obvious way, they offer no clear and coherent mission strategy.

In *Reshaping the mission of Methodism*, I contend that a theology of mission rooted in communal holiness points towards a new and dynamic strategy for mission. The primary task of the latter is to build communities transformed by the gifts of life, liberation, love and learning as a divine imperative. However, I argue that this strategy will only be effective if Methodism commits itself to active involvement in three essential ‘strands’ of mission.

The first of these mission strands concerns Methodism as a *gathered* community. This strand relates to the way in which Methodism has traditionally operated but which now necessitates it responding to radically new opportunities that are coming on stream, not least in relation to the often mind-blowing world of information technology. A second mission strand, fundamentally important yet fatally neglected by all denominations, requires Methodism to act as a *dispersed* community; that is as individual Christians actively pursuing what a long-forgotten Conference report calls *The Ministry of the People of God in the World* (our underlining),⁹ in particular within the world of work. A third essential mission strand would see Methodism operating as a *human* community; that is as a redeemed and redemptive ‘human’ institution working in partnership with any other institution committed, explicitly or implicitly, to building communities that manifest the four core communal gifts of life, liberation, love and learning.

3. A new way of being circuit – beyond ‘fresh expressions of church’ and *Mapping a Way Forward*

‘Fresh expressions of church’ and *Mapping a Way Forward* have considerable potential. However, both currently face major problems.

In 2005, Methodism and the Church of England joined together to promote ‘fresh expressions of church’. A second five-year programme was launched at a large national conference in March 2010. However, there remain a number of inherent weaknesses with this initiative. Despite recent attempts to set up ‘fresh expressions area strategy teams’, the programme lacks an overall mission strategy grounded in a theology of mission of relevance to the daunting challenges of our day and age. Thus fresh expressions of church proliferate but, as yet, fail to connect and cohere. A closely related problem is how the many very diverse fresh expressions of church could develop into any form of holistic renewal movement which might radically reshape the Methodist Church for mission at connexional, district, but particularly at circuit level.

In 2007, alongside the fresh expressions programme, Methodism inaugurated a connexion-wide programme of renewal entitled *Mapping a Way Forward*. In response to this programme, circuits across the Connexion are seeking to reassess their mission potential and adapt their boundaries and resources in an attempt to fulfil that potential. A major problem with this programme is that those engaged in *Mapping a Way Forward* have been offered no theology of mission, and mission strategy flowing from that, which can inform and guide them in making what are often extremely difficult decisions. Secondly, and in part as a consequence of this theological and strategic vacuum, *Mapping a Way Forward* is frequently driven by financial and staff crises rather than a new and imaginative approach to mission.

Reshaping the mission of Methodism addresses some of the difficulties that fresh expressions of church and *Mapping a Way Forward* are facing by suggesting ‘a new way of being circuit’. I argue in the concluding chapter that ‘a new way of being circuit’ must be founded on a theology of communal holiness and embrace a mission strategy shaped by that theology. If the three key strands of mission identified above, which lie at the heart of such a strategy, are to be effectively pursued, any new way of being circuit needs to be one where boundaries are aligned with identifiable economic, social, political and administrative areas, or *zones humaines* as these are sometimes called.

In the book, and as a test-case, I explore the nature and organization of a circuit seeking to engage in mission to a particularly vital *zone humaine*,

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the city. However, I also contend that this new way of being circuit can reap great benefits if applied to areas of urban sprawl, housing estates or to rural areas.

This new way of being circuit would help to integrate the work of many of the more free-floating fresh expressions of church into a coherent mission endeavour. At the same time, reshaping circuits so they could more easily pursue all three stands of mission identified above would open up opportunities for innovative forms of ministry and give fresh impetus to *Mapping a Way Forward*. Such circuits would also give a sense of common purpose to the kind of initiatives represented by the 16 case studies included in the first part of *Reshaping the mission of Methodism*.

4. New forms of ordained leadership – beyond *What is a presbyter? . . . a deacon? . . . a Superintendent . . . a Chair of District?*

Between 2002 and 2006, the Methodist Conference commissioned a series of reports in an attempt to clarify the roles and responsibilities of church leaders.¹⁰ Unfortunately, because these reports focus mainly on past and present leadership roles and responsibilities they offer little guidance as to the kind of leadership required in future to equip Methodism for a new approach to mission.

In *Reshaping the mission of Methodism* I argue that if Methodism is to implement a strategy for mission committed to building communities transformed by the core communal gifts of life, liberation, love and learning, it will require radically new forms of ordained leadership. The primary responsibility of such leadership would be to equip lay people, wherever they live, learn, work, serve or play, to become builders of communities which manifest those gifts.

Leadership of this kind would focus primarily on the roles of enabler, educator and intermediary. It would necessitate Methodism embracing ways of working that are far more collaborative than at present. A division of labour related to the specific needs of the area served, and to the resources offered by denominational partners, would also be essential. Such leadership would be circuit-wide not section-bound. Chaplains and sector ministers, at the moment struggling to find a clear identity, would become an integral part of the circuit team and embrace a similar kind of leadership role.

Reshaping the mission of Methodism – seizing the day?

If Methodism is to reshape itself for mission in response to today's world, as it has so successfully done in the past, it is high time to grasp the nettle

of the fundamental changes now required. The last decade has seen a raft of initiatives – many referred to above – which have come to be treated with a political correctness that now needs to be challenged. I have argued that none of these initiatives has proved to be big or radical enough to ‘break the mould’ and enable British Methodism to identify a dynamic and distinctive mission of relevance to the needs of a rapidly changing world and to the nature of the church to come.

The contributors to *Reshaping the mission of Methodism* would be the first to admit that they do not have all the answers. However, the symposium is an attempt to offer a holistic theology of mission and a clearly related strategic context which would help to give greater coherence and impetus to some of the most creative initiatives currently going on within Methodism. Such a reshaping of its mission could yet enable Methodism to make a highly significant contribution to world and church and, in the process, gain a new sense of its own purpose, identity and self-worth.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on the concluding chapter of *Reshaping the mission of Methodism* (Church in the Market Place, 2010), a symposium edited by David Clark. Unless stated otherwise, all page numbers refer to this book. [Available from David Clark, Hill View, Burton Close Drive, Bakewell DE45 1BG. £10 (post paid – cheques made out to ‘David Clark’).]
- 2 David Clark is a member of the Methodist Diaconal Order. He is course leader for the Mission in the World of Work Programme at Cliff College and Convenor of the Diaconal Faith and Work Group. He is author of *Breaking the Mould of Christendom* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005)
- 3 *Our Calling*, Methodist Conference (2000).
- 4 *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, Methodist Conference (2004).
- 5 David Deeks, (General Secretary of the Methodist Conference (15/10/06), *Mapping a Way Forward: Re-grouping for Mission. Mapping a Way Forward: re-grouping for mission*. Section B of the General Secretary’s Report (2007) Methodist Conference.
- 6 See Shier-Jones, A. ‘Pioneering Circuit Ministry’ in *Epworth Review* Vol. 36. No.3. (London: Methodist Publishing, July 2009).
- 7 See for example: Craske, J. and Marsh, C. (eds.) *Methodism and the Future* (London: Cassell, 1999); Carter, D. *Love Bade Me Welcome. A British Methodist Perspective on the Church* (London: Epworth Press, 2002); Marsh, C., Beck, B., Shier-Jones, A. and Wareing, H. (eds.) *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004); Curran, L. and Shier-Jones, A. (eds.) *Methodist Present Potential* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2009).
- 8 *A pastoral letter to the Methodist people* (Methodist Church House, March 2010).
- 9 *The Ministry of the People of God in the World*, Methodist Conference (1990).
- 10 *What is a Presbyter?* Methodist Conference (2002). *What is a Deacon?* Methodist Conference (2004). *What is a Circuit Superintendent?* Methodist Conference (2005). *What is a Chair of District?* Methodist Conference? (2006).