

The article below will be published in other Methodist literature but it is suggested that I include it here. I am happy to discuss the contents or explain further.

### **A FUTURE FOR METHODISM**

Fundamental to our handling of this issue is whether we believe God has a future for Methodism. It is not necessarily pessimistic or negative to conclude that, in his plans, Methodism will die out in order for new movements of renewal to grow – In fact there is much evidence that this is already the case. However, if we assume, rightly or wrongly, that God has a future for Methodism we must be clear that very radical change is needed – much more radical than appears so far to be envisaged by those within or operating the system. (This is a typical trend in declining organizations – the power brokers within the organization actually are unable to see 'the wood for the trees' and therefore they offer no coherent strategies).

The discussion about the future of this or any denomination must be driven by missiology not ecclesiology – an intention to declare the Gospel not to promote the church. Practically speaking this means that any restructuring is not driven by the need to protect the employment of those currently engaged – ie keeping ministers and other officers in jobs. This is not a flippant point. There is a pastoral dilemma but there is an over-arching purpose. Our purpose is not to preserve the sacred cow of connexionalism. Our purpose is to declare the Gospel for all and to find the most effective way to do this. Some will say that connexionalism is fundamental to Methodism – No, the fundamentals are missional not ecclesial – see the founders of the movement: that is Jesus and Wesley. We will have to be prepared to sacrifice some sacred cows if we are to be church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Instead of approaching the problem of decline by restructuring, as most declining organizations do, we should re-visit the founding dream of the movement. This was to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. The defining features of the Methodist movement in its inception were scriptural (Bible based), Christ – centred and Holy Spirit driven, practical (aiming for personal transformation and social caring), missionary (all need to be and can be saved) and inclusive (the Gospel for all). These basics are not often affirmed in the pragmatics of re-structuring discussions. The question 'Has anyone asked God about all this? (i.e. called the whole church to prayer) is regarded by some intimately involved in the processes as impertinent – It is not intended in that way. Naïve questions require straight forward answers. We need an unequivocal call to prayer.

When these fundamental principles are affirmed organizational restructuring and creative approaches to mission follow. The Methodist revival was a movement – it became a denomination that became an institution. It needs to return to its roots and exhibit THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A MOVEMENT. This constitutes a paradigm shift away from a Christendom mind set where it assumed that people know the story and are sympathetic to the institution.

Characteristics of church, local and national, for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would therefore include:

Flexible, sometimes untidy, informal, diverse, strongly purpose driven, ever changing / developing, often unpredictable, always seeker sensitive.

Inspired leadership, four fold ministry – Ephesians 4 – Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors / teachers.

Natural evangelism through word and especially through service. Confidence to own and express the core values. Clarity about what the message is.

Lively inspired proclamation, faith sharing that is as natural as breathing.

Quality presentation, informal, visual, appropriate music, no pressure, earthed spirituality

Follow models that work, appropriate to culture and target group  
A minimal central structure supporting the multiplication of units (grass roots) of church in cells and congregations – dispersed, non-hierarchical structure but with charisma and charismata identifiable in leadership  
Seven day a week church - Mainly not Sunday, mainly dispersed, occasionally gathered.  
Alive not boring, more spiritual, less religious

Challenging the culture but connected to it, unashamed, recognizing that we play 'away from home'

Suitably accommodated for cell, congregation and celebration. Using buildings not venerating / preserving them.

Few paid staff

Relational, friendship based, inclusive, networks not defined geographically but by various social/cultural factors.

Nourishing nurture, open at the edges – committed at the core

Living off faith not reserves

Few blue prints – structures serving local needs

Non denominational more than ecumenical

Offering hope, meeting practical need, reflecting life in the present, not 'welcome to 1950'

Practically this means that the focus of current re-arrangements needs to be fundamentally committed to prayer, evidently Holy Spirit inspired and unashamedly Jesus focused.

Remember, some churches in the UK are growing. A shrinking church needs to learn from MODELS THAT WORK not simply adapt failed models. Growing churches exhibit the characteristics above.

We need to reduce connexionalism to a looser federation of circuits, de regulate and shed cumbersome structures, put stationing in the hands of viable vision-led circuits not chairs – abandon September moves and adopt an advertise, interview, appoint process – abandon the inertia of District and Synod organisation - these are too small units for purpose, the synod has ceased to make significant decisions or to debate substantial issues. If it is to be a day of workshops and celebration then let's call it that and de-regulate its membership. The current style simply describes the problem. A regional structure is not necessary for most functions, though some financial and training matters could be addressed regionally.

Identify and appoint prophetic leaders not managers as senior superintendents – not chairs. Enlarge circuits. 'Annual' Conference every three years. Stop appointing District and Connexional officers / enablers / facilitators, pouring money into wide ranging ministries, and invest in leaders who can lead locally. (Many circuits could employ more lay staff if they were not paying large sums to the District). Do not assume that all change must be gradual or delayed several years.

Robert Warren in 'Being human, being church' states that it is impossible to move a bus whilst you are sitting on it. First, admit the bus needs help – more radical help is needed than those on the bus can see or realize – their vested interests obscure their view.

Get off the bus (even temporarily) and ask:

'What would our church look like if we were to design it from scratch today?' How can it be fit for purpose? We do not have a blank sheet of paper and we have to start with where we are but the danger is that we simply modify a failing model. It would be better in that case to start with a blank sheet.

What would it look like then? One thing is certain, we would not be designing a four fold structure of congregation – circuit – district – connexion. We need a structure driven by mission not pastoral care. I suggest the classical cell church model which in fact has its origins in early Methodism:

**Cell – Congregation – Celebration:**

**Cell** – small primary units of Christian belonging which express:

- New Testament models of discipleship, church planting and evangelism
- designed for the multiplication of communities of Christ's Kingdom
- based on every member ministry

**Congregation** – viable groupings of cells

**Celebration** – occasional large gatherings with minimal central control.

This implies abandoning the inherited structural terminology and mindset of much of Methodism and returning to the lesser evangel-inspired, lay led network of our movements founding dream. Untidiness and diversity of models would be signs of life: being relevant, faithful and practical responses to local circumstances and prevailing cultural trends.

Phil Clarke

Superintendent Minister, Darlington Circuit

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[phil@elmridgemethodist.co.uk](mailto:phil@elmridgemethodist.co.uk)

[www.elmridgemethodist.co.uk](http://www.elmridgemethodist.co.uk)