

FUTURE MOVEMENT

The term movement suggests life, newness, innovation, activity, vitality, passion, risk, variety, vision, excitement, growth, vulnerability, fluidity and responsiveness to change. It has often been a descriptor of rebirth or new beginnings in politics, economics, technology and religion. As part of the life cycle of a programme or organisation, movement forms part of the early developmental stage.

The early years of the Methodist movement follow the normative pattern of many groupings emergent from an old established institution – a revival activity which, whilst having the possibility and desire to restore the parent body to its original vibrancy, purpose and fruitfulness, ultimately cannot be contained within it and breaks forth independently – new wine spilling from old wine skins – Luke 5 v. 37 – 9. The fact that this process invariably happens suggests that it is probably unavoidable. Whilst this appears to be a painful fracturing to enable growth, it actually embraces the diversity which the parent body often purports (often sincerely) to embrace. It generally does so according to the wrong parameters – i.e. not those which were part of its founding dream but a sanitised and rationalised attempt to re-connect with a host culture which has already moved away too far from the ethos of the parent body to make a bridge buildable with either the nation or the people next door. Strangely, it may be that only a new movement which reverts to belief, methodology and action (praxis) which is nearer the founding dream, though historically further from it, is capable of connecting effectively with the host society. Some (but by no means all) new or emerging churches evidence this.

My earlier paper 'A Future for Methodism', published in Methodist Evangelicals Together (Spring 2008) and in some regional publications, highlighted the need to return as a denomination to the characteristics of a movement. The implication of this is to remove some classic features common to organisations in terminal decline:

- * shedding the alternately comforting and frustrating features of institutionalism, freeing up structures which are bureaucratic and unable to accomplish sufficient change within defined time scales,
- * prioritising mission over maintenance – not just in word but in action,
- * primarily investing resources locally, not regionally and nationally,
- * developing specifically targeted ministries, targets being set by where and how God is evidently at work, not simply spreading the jam more thinly.
- * creating indigenous leadership through apprenticeship models of nurture and discipleship, rather than importing from outside,
- * dispensing with redundant structures which cannot even define their own policy or mission strategy and who continue to promote managers over prophets. (All these are classic features of organisations in terminal decline).

Many warm to such seeming iconoclasm whilst others doubt the possibility of the parent body surviving such radical surgery since too many practices and people depend on maintaining or down-sizing current structures. This attempt to 'travel light' recognises

that some basic central functions in oversight, finance, property, safeguarding and global mission strategy need to be retained or strengthened.

Leaders of a vibrant movement do not focus primarily on dealing with weaknesses but rather play to their strengths and turn challenges into opportunities. We are often guilty of being quicker to identify our weaknesses than our strengths. Here are some of these strengths: a nationwide network of churches and fellowships planted in thousands of local communities, a missionary heritage, trained leadership, ethos of grass roots lay ministry, inclusive ethos, a good reputation for pastoral care/social involvement / youth and children work.....

Like the Apostle Paul and the Wesleys, our theology and ecclesiology must be essentially pragmatic – subservient to the overall aim of making the Gospel known to all. It will be necessary to define what this Gospel is clearly: A return to Wesley's 'Four Alls' will be as helpful a unifying approach as any: All need to be saved, all can be saved, all can know they are saved, all can be saved to the uttermost.

The defining purpose of the Methodist movement was to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land' and in this cause its fundamentals were: to be Biblically based, Christ centred, Holy Spirit inspired, aiming for personal transformation (holiness), and to be practical (social caring), prophetic (challenging, against the flow), missionary (outward facing, all need to be saved), inclusive (all can be saved by faith through grace). We need to actively re-affirm our commitment to these and to fuel all with prayer. They must inspire hope and drive our actions.

The question is: 'Is this return possible?' The force of history suggests that it is not: God has never revived drastically declining institutional religion, but he does raise the dead. Faith says that, within God's purposes, there is re-birth. History, including Old Testament history, tells us that this is never simply a restoration of the previous halcyon days but resurrection to a new beginning. This raises the second question, to which we cannot give an answer, though some may claim to: 'Is it God's purpose to do this with Methodism (or any denomination)? Is renewal and transformation in fact resurrection? – Is it all semantics? '

Most people within the institution would like it to continue and see some signs of hope that it may do so without too drastic change. Once severed from the institution – attending a different church, no longer in its employ etc – many people tend to take a different view. We need more than either hopefulness or pessimism. I would suggest we need a little more desperation – realising that we cannot fix the sinking ship and should stop trying to do so. Then there may be time and energy to find a different solution.

I can offer examples of local churches that came to a crisis moment of either closing their ruinous building or handing over management responsibility of their church council to a more visionary and energetic circuit team and then finding that their extremis was God's opportunity, that instead of trying to sustain an unsustainable 1960s model of church they became free to be church in a different way and in doing so finally reconnected with their neighbourhoods, even becoming for the first time in a generation or more an all age indigenous community of the Kingdom.

The Connexional structure of Methodism is in melt down but this is not perceived to be so by enough people and therefore we continue most of the inherited functions of the institution but with fewer resources, human and material. Weak organisations have

difficulty closing down – either through denial (keep on going and pretend that everything is OK) or despair (no one can save us so we will just keep winding down gently). Unfortunately, available reserves, though depleting, mean that some things of questionable current or future value can be sustained in the short term so that we run on the faith and generosity of past generations to prolong the life of a dinosaur. Let the dead things die – then be ready for resurrection.

Assuming that the leaders of the church locally and nationally grasp and communicate these realities, and that God has a future for Methodism; here is the possible shape and charisms of a future Methodist movement. (It is of course not unique to Methodism but has features in common with other historic denominations needing resurrection):

- 1. THEOLOGY: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour at the centre – strategic goals are worthless without Christ being our explicit focus – a recovery of classical Christian doctrine enlivened by the Holy Spirit.
- 2. PRAXIS: Creative flexibility – an ability, under God, to find plan B, C & D – to think ‘outside the box’, be less predictable. Frequently changing and adapting to circumstances and therefore informal, less concerned with the rotas and quotas, driven by a need to look to the horizon, asking God for a 2020 (20:20) vision – to project 12 years ahead and plan towards that.
- 3. LEADERSHIP: Recognised, appropriately trained, anointed and gifted leaders who own and hone this over time. Not merely well meaning or interested volunteers, nor an intellectual elite, but a fivefold team based on an Ephesians 4 model of ministry: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. They equip others for ministry, expressing and sharing faith, following Jesus in varied and creative ways that take account of postmodernity (without obsessing about it).
- 4. WORKING MODELS: There are many growing churches in the UK. We can learn from them – ask why and how they grow. What are their underlying assumptions and practice about the Gospel, evangelism, church, ministry, buildings, giving, worship? We need to learn from models that work and not keep on with models which clearly do not.

Growing churches display these features:

- a. Quality presentation, continuity of teaching, lively Christ- centred worship.
- b. relational small groups, informal / unpressured atmosphere.
- c. seven day week church incorporating relevant social outreach, open at the edges – committed at the core.
- d. indigenous leadership, apprenticeship training models, team working.
- e. minimal bureaucracy/ functional structures, leaders who lead.
- f. evangelism based on authentic relationships.
- g. non or cross denominational rather than ecumenical.

- h. cell as the primary unit of church - groupings defined by network more than neighbourhood (relational not geographical), connecting with the spiritual inquisitiveness of the age.

These are the key features of church as a future movement.

Finally, some practical actions that will make a difference and from which the essence of a movement emerge:

- 1. TRAINING MISSIONARY LEADERS: look for people with gifts in pioneering new work but also for stamina to hang in there when discouragements come – people with a wide screen view on God’s plans for your locality: prophets, evangelists, risk takers, motivators, initiators, ideas people. (Not just shepherds, managers and teachers). Home grown leadership (not necessarily highly trained and ‘parachuted in’ by the system) may often work best – tried and tested, integrated into the context.
- 2. INVEST IN THE NEW: Do not attempt to radically change existing entrenched activities – they will not change sufficiently or quickly enough to connect with unchurched people today. It is not worthwhile to expend much energy and create conflict with entrenched positions in order to minimally modifying practices. Instead create new or parallel activities which will be suitable for your target groups (and do the traditional stuff – which doesn’t usually take much mental energy – giving quality palliative care for those who love God but cannot change).
- 3. WORK AS TEAM: Create a strong supportive team – have more prayer than business. Meet frequently, bounce ideas, share the pain and the joy, use varied gifts. Some team members will be inexperienced – they especially need guidance from the team leader(s) / senior staff. Be accountable to each other. The team will include varied ages and skills, some employed by the church, others not, only a few ordained. A strong team committed to Christ and each other can cope with many challenges. It also encourages new perspectives and the sharing of ideas and a safety net for taking risks.
- 4. FOCUS ON PEOPLE: the project/programme is only the framework, the building is the shell – people count. Christian workers must develop people skills, relating well outside church circles and across a spectrum of age and personality types. Changed people change their surroundings. Transformation is at the heart of the Gospel.

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