

CHRISTIAN CONFERRING: A WAY OF DISCERNING, WITNESSING AND MAKING TRUTH CLAIMS IN THE PRESENT AGE?

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Characterising and serving the present age

This paper is written from the particular context in which the Methodist Church in Britain finds itself, in other words from the British embodiment of the “present age” which it is the Church’s calling to serve. In broad brush-strokes that context can be portrayed as being predominately complex and confusing, and in need of a 21st century equivalent to Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed. Allowing for the fact that things happen at different speeds in different places, Britain can be characterised economically as becoming post-industrial; socially as moving beyond traditional understandings of community; politically as becoming post-ideological; ethically as becoming post-liberal; culturally as becoming post-modern; intellectually as becoming post-enlightenment; and religiously as becoming post-christian but also post-atheist. It is not just overseas that there are different faiths, world views, and ways of living, but also in Britain. Some of these are new to Britain, but the earlier ones are still represented here. In reaction to this there is a temptation to retreat from an imperialism of imposing Christianity on the whole world and adopt instead an attitude of complete laissez-faire; or to turn the Church into a ghetto that is increasingly defensive, authoritarian and dictatorial. As Clive Marsh puts it “*For too long, and in too many contexts, Christians have assumed it sufficient to carry on asserting their grasp of truth to each other, or from their bunkers to the wider world*”.¹

In such a context, when the Church is at its best it is profoundly counter-cultural. It shows a concern to seek for truth and for transcendent values and realities whilst at the same time engaging in dialogue with others in the swampy lowlands of messy human problems and the relative compromises they involve. It is other-seeking before it is self-seeking. It externalises faith as action as well as internalising it as thought and feeling. Life in it is communal and corporate before it is individualistic. At its best, the Church proclaims the gospel by showing what it is to hear and be shaped by the gospel.

The British Conference has been engaged in a process of struggling to discover how it might be at its best. That process began with the *Purpose of the Methodist Church* (adopted at the 1996 Conference) and led through the themes of the *Our Calling* programme (Conference 2000) to the *Priorities for the Methodist Church* (Conference 2004). It then led in 2007 to a programme entitled *Mapping the Way Forward: Re-grouping for Mission* to help and encourage local churches, circuits and districts to review their life, work and mission in order to enact the *Priorities*; and to a set of far-reaching proposals that were adopted by the 2007 Conference for reconfiguring the Connexional Team (i.e. the central services of the Church) to support them in that task. These most recent initiatives have flown from an attempt to identify the overriding challenge facing the Church as it seeks to embody *Our Calling* and enact the *Priorities*. That challenge is the need to for those of us who make up the Church to *discern* God’s loving actions in the midst of our personal experience and the life of the world; and to bear *witness* by what we say and do to what we have discerned in ways that make sense to ourselves and our contemporaries. In order to make sense to people we have to immerse ourselves in the many

¹ See further for the material in this paragraph Clive Marsh *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* SCM Press London 2002

cultures and sub-cultures that are around us and of which we are part. Rather than adopting the equivalent of the caricature of the English abroad of being unwilling or unable to converse with people in their own language but simply shouting louder at them in English, we need to learn how others articulate their experience and their understanding of the world and the purpose and meaning of life. In order to bear witness authentically, we also have to immerse ourselves in the world of the Bible, not so that we can shout quotations from it more loudly, but so that we digest it and let it nurture us (c/f Ezekiel 3: 1-4) and form the mind of Christ within us (Philippians 2: 5). The result is that we do not so much repeat the words of the Bible but speak biblically in the present age – and do so in the languages of the cultures that make up that age.²

Underlying this are some basic theological convictions that resonate throughout the work of the Wesleys and subsequent Methodist tradition.

God's infinite, faithful Love undergirds everything that exists. God is at work, pursuing the divine purpose of Love, in every part of the universe that God has brought into being. This holds true whether or not we or anyone anywhere believes it. Everywhere and consistently God longs to release into the life of the world the mystery of God's incomprehensible and holy energy. Included in that fundamental conviction is this truth: God's grace envelops, supports, guides and seeks to transfigure every Christian disciple, every Christian group, Church or Church-based project, anywhere and everywhere in the world.³

In other words, there is nowhere where God has to be taken. There is no person or situation that God's love cannot touch (although there may be some who knowingly or unknowingly do not allow themselves to be touched). The process by which Christians discern, allow and bear witness to God's love transfiguring them is part and parcel of discerning that love seeking to transfigure others and the whole creation, and of helping others to discern, allow and bear witness to it. It makes no difference whether one starts with personal experience, the experience of the Church, experience in human society or with the created order. The one should always lead to the others. Personal holiness and social holiness belong together. To separate them or play down one is to diminish both. Similarly, love of God belongs together with love of neighbour.

Amongst other things, there is a heady mixture of Arminianism and prevenient grace here. But it also raises a fundamental question of how God's love can be discerned to be at work. To identify something as being an example of God's love at work or as an experience of God (no matter how the experience of it has been previously interpreted, or the understanding of it articulated), is to make a truth claim. This paper seeks to suggest that not enough attention has been paid to the Methodist practice of Christian conferring (e.g. in conversation, class, band and Conference) as a means of discerning and bearing witness, and making the truth claims that are involved in doing both.

The empirical tradition

In his essay *Of Studies*⁴ Lord Francis Bacon stated that

Reading maketh a full man; Conference a ready man; and Writing an exact man⁵

² The material in this paragraph is drawn and extended from that in *The Minutes of Conference 2007* Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 2007 (author KGH)

³ David G Deeks *General Secretary's Report 2007 Conference Agenda* p.23 para 14-15, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough 2007.

⁴ *Essays 1601* (revised edition 1625)

⁵ The quotation is in the language of the 16th-17th Century which reads as sexist in the 21st. It is hard, though, to amend it without losing the rhythm that makes it memorable. The solution for contemporary use would have to be a complete dynamic-equivalent translation rather than a quotation.

That reads like pure Wesley but from over a century before Wesley. Although there is no evidence of Wesley using this actual quotation, he knew of Francis Bacon and valued him highly (as he did his 13th Century namesake Roger Bacon). Both Bacons were philosophers and scientists (and what today we might call philosophers of science) in an English empirical tradition. On Monday 5 November 1787 John Wesley wrote in his journal that on his way to Dorking he had read Mr Duff's *Essay on Genius*, which he consider to much superior to Dr. G's. Yet Wesley still does not think that it is adequate, and he sets out a few thoughts of his own which end in nominating Aristotle and Lord (Francis) Bacon as the supreme examples of universal genius. By Thursday November 8 1787 Wesley had turned these thoughts into a treatise entitled *Thoughts on Genius*. In that he states that

It is evident that genius, taken in this sense, is not invention; although that may possibly bear some relation to it. It is not imagination; although this may be allowed to be one ingredient of it. Much less is it an association of ideas: All these are essentially different from it. So is sensation, on the one hand; and so are memory and judgment, on the other: Unless by judgment we mean (as many do) strength of understanding. It seems to be an extraordinary capacity of mind; sometimes termed extraordinary talents. This may be more or less extensive; there may be a kind of general genius, or an extraordinary capacity for many things; or a particular genius, an extraordinary capacity for one particular thing; it may be, for one particular science, or one particular art. Thus Homer and Milton had a genius, an extraordinary capacity, for poetry. Thus Euclid and Archimedes had a genius, an extraordinary capacity, for geometry. So Cicero had a genius for oratory, and Sir Isaac Newton for natural philosophy. Thus Raphael and Michael Angelo had a genius, an extraordinary capacity, for painting. And so Purcell and Handel (to mention no more) had a genius, an extraordinary capacity, for music. Whereas, Aristotle, Lord Bacon, and a very few beside, seem to have had an universal genius, an extraordinary capacity to excel in whatever they took in hand.⁶

As well as an interest in epistemology that is implicit in the above, the linking of Bacon (often seen as a natural philosopher) and Aristotle (often seen as a scholastic philosopher) is interesting. In his treatise *On the Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy* Wesley implicitly recognises that Aristotle's concerns are much closer to Bacon's than normally thought, and that the problem that produces the polarisation between them is not so much Aristotle as Aristotelians (and it would be interesting to know whether he is thinking directly of Aquinas and his followers here).

4. In succeeding times, when the four Greek sects, the Platonic, Peripatetic, Epicurean, and Stoic, divided the western world between them, the Platonists almost confined themselves and their opinions to the subject of divinity; the Peripatetics regarded little but logic; the Stoics little but moral philosophy; and the Epicureans had small concern about any, being immersed in sensual pleasures: So that none of them made any considerable improvement in any branch of natural philosophy.

5. When the utter barbarism which followed was a little dispelled, Aristotle began to reign. His followers (the Schoolmen, as they were called) might have improved natural philosophy, if (like their master) they had diligently cultivated the knowledge of nature, and searched out the properties of particular things. But it was their misfortune to neglect what was commendable in him, and to follow only what was blameworthy; so as to obscure and pollute all philosophy with abstract, idle, vain speculations. Yet some of them, after the Arabians had introduced the knowledge of chemistry into Europe, were wise above the age they lived in, and penetrated so far into the secret recesses of nature, as scarce to escape the suspicion of magic. Such were Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus.

⁶ John Wesley *Thoughts on Genius* November 8 1787

6. After the revival of learning, as all other branches of philosophy, so this in particular, received new light. And none was more serviceable herein than Lord (sc. Francis) Bacon; who, well understanding the defects of the school philosophy, incited all lovers of natural philosophy to a diligent search into natural history. And he himself led them the way, by many experiments and observations.⁷

Wesley appears to be recognising that Aristotle moves beyond a deductive abstract metaphysic such as Plato's (although Plato too recognised that the Forms could be apprehended inductively from the particulars which reflect them) and develops a concern for the natural world. It is a move from a deductive systematic approach to an empirical systematising approach. Wesley saw Bacon as a paramount example of a recovery of this approach. Thus when he is discussing what is essentially philosophical theology in Sermon LIV *On Eternity* he is willing to adduce a particular experiment of Bacon's as evidence that helps to make his case.

It is very possible any portion of matter may be resolved into the atoms of which it was originally composed: but what reason have we to believe that one of these atoms ever was, or ever will be, annihilated? It never can, unless by the uncontrollable power of its almighty Creator. And is it probable that ever He will exert this power in unmaking any of the things that he hath made? In this also, God is not "a son of man that he should repent." Indeed, every creature under heaven does, and must, continually change its form, which we can now easily account for; as it clearly appears, from late discoveries, that ethereal fire enters into the composition of every part of the creation. Now, this is essentially edax rerum: It is the universal menstruum, the discohere of all things under the sun. By the force of this, even the strongest, the firmest bodies are dissolved. It appears from the experiment repeatedly made by the great Lord Bacon, that even diamonds, by a high degree of heat, may be turned into dust; and that, in a still higher degree, (strange as it may seem,) they will totally flame away. Yea, by this the heavens themselves will be dissolved; "the elements shall melt with fervent heat." But they will be only dissolved, not destroyed; they will melt, but they will not perish. Though they lose their present form, yet not a particle of them will ever lose its existence; but every atom of them will remain, under one form or other, to all eternity.⁸

Wesley was himself a person of great intellectual curiosity and a great experimenter, as his interest in electricity and *Primitive Physick* show. In *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* 1748 he claimed that *For six or seven and twenty years, I had made anatomy and physick the diversion of my leisure hours.* In 1777 he published *A Compendium of Natural Philosophy* for the sake of his preachers. He was inclined towards the practical, averse to metaphysical speculation, and liked to emphasise facts before theory. This did not, however, mean that he was anti-intellectual, because he reflected constantly, thought rigorously and methodically systematised what he observed. He studied and commented on such people as Rene Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, John Norris, Isaac Newton and Peter Browne.⁹ He followed other Anglican theologians in following Locke and affirming the need for empirical verification even of matters of religious truth and faith.

To this end Wesley postulated a sixth sense which apprehends God directly. This is what he terms 'faith' which he defines dynamically as 'a supernatural inward sense or sight'¹⁰ analogous to the operation of natural sight in the natural world. In 1743 he described this in terms of "a new

⁷ John Wesley *On the Gradual Improvement of Natural Philosophy* 1784

⁸ John Wesley Sermon LIV *On Eternity* 1786

⁹ See further J. W. Haas, Jr. *John Wesley's Vision of Science in the Service of Christ* in *Prospectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47 (December 1995): 234

¹⁰ Minutes of Conference June 25 1744

class of senses opened in the soul”¹¹. In a series of Sermons from 1788 to 1791 summarising his life-long convictions he elaborated the concept. So far as natural sense was concerned, sight was the noblest because it gave discernment of the most extensive range of objects, and could therefore stand for all of the senses. Hearing came second because it related to a narrower range of objects. Taste, smell and touch were inferior, because they could only take cognisance of objects brought into direct contact with them.¹² All of these together formed the natural sense, which provided the necessary data for reflection, memory, imagination and the consequent power to move or act.¹³ Yet this natural sense could not supply data about the invisible, eternal or spiritual worlds, and so “Faith” supplies the defect.¹⁴ This “Faith” was the supernatural “new class of senses”. The most important and extensive member of this class was ‘spiritual’ sight, followed by ‘spiritual’ hearing, and then by ‘spiritual’ taste and touch.¹⁵ These members of the new class of senses provide data on which the reason could reflect.¹⁶

Moreover, for Wesley, just as knowledge of God (or of other things) is not innate, so this faculty of “Faith” is not natural but a supernatural gift of God. Yet because God gives the faculty, God can indeed be directly experienced. God can therefore be known to be present for and to act upon human beings. This is the “Witness of God’s Spirit”.¹⁷ Wesley believed that this Witness could be experienced secondarily (at least) through the body, emotions, feelings or mind. In the former two categories it could produce effects comparable to some of those that are termed ‘charismatic experiences’ today. In Wesley’s time they were described by opponents as ‘Enthusiasm’. Wesley himself wanted to affirm these physical and emotional ecstasies but only if they were integrated with rational feelings and with the mind, and provided that they did not dominate and drive the personality. This is an important aspect of Wesley’s understanding of his own spiritual experience. Wesley’s own emotional or psychological make-up seems to have been such that he craved for ‘sensible assurance’, that is to say an awareness of the presence and love of God that could be felt physically and emotionally and not just believed in or taken on blind trust. Yet one of the strongest consequences of his experience at Aldersgate Street – not always noticed by commentators – was a release from that craving. For as soon as Wesley experiences a sense of love and forgiveness the question is raised within him “But where is thy joy?”, and he comes to realise that a feeling of joy is not of the essence to what he is experiencing, and that the desire for feelings did not need to dominate and drive him.

Wesley was therefore concerned to show that if people were to experience directly the ‘Witness of God’s Spirit’ the best way that they could guard themselves against delusion and destructive excess in it all would be by the exercise of what we might term ‘feeling’ and by rational reflection about their experience. These produced what he termed the “Witness of Our Spirit”. However, this Spirit is not sufficient on its own. It is the witness of the two Spirits working together and confirming one another that Wesley saw as being of enormous importance. Although driven by Enlightenment rationality, he opened up the possibility of integrating conscious and unconscious, mind and heart. As a major biographer of him, Henry Rack, has described him, he was a “Reasonable Enthusiast”.

The English tradition

Wesley doubtless develops in this way because he was a person of his time, but also because the empirical tradition has a long history in the English tradition. It still has an effect today.

¹¹ John Wesley *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* para 32-25

¹² Sermon 117 *Discoveries of Faith* 1788; Sermon 119 *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith* 1788]

¹³ Sermon 130 *On Living Without God* 1790

¹⁴ Sermon 117

¹⁵ Sermon 120

¹⁶ *Earnest Appeal*

¹⁷ See further Richard Heitzenrater *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodist* Kingswood Books Nashville 1989 chapter 6

Indeed, there have recently been a number of attempts to identify and describe this phenomenon¹⁸. Peter Ackroyd has conducted a major (inductive!) survey of English intellectual, cultural and social history from Anglo-Saxon times onwards to attempt to define it (which he terms the “English imagination”). His conclusion is that the English mind-set is essentially self-deprecating, empirical, inductive and pragmatic. Similarly, the academic social anthropologist Kate Fox has identified the core condition underlying “Englishness” as being that of a mild to moderate social dis-ease. This results in reflex behaviours of humour, moderation and hypocrisy; high value being given to fair play, courtesy and modesty; and outlooks of a mock-moaning that is incessant and ineffectual (“Eeyorishness”), class consciousness, and empiricism. These behaviours, values and outlooks constantly interact.

Although the terms they use might reflect different valuations of the characteristics, there are great similarities between the pictures that Ackroyd and Fox present. Although it is dangerous to assume that there is any thing such as a single English mind-set, and even worse to assume that it is superior to other ways of thinking and doing, a tendency to approach things empirically still has an effect in English culture. It places an emphasis on experience, on reflecting about it individually and with others, and, as in the case of Wesley, on systematising it intellectually.

How, though, can this empirical verification of experience take place? The answer is through adducing and comparing a number of examples of experience and of interpretations of that experience. Any experience or interpretation of that experience must be open to being repeated, to scrutiny, to criticism, and to refutation. That is best done through conversation, albeit structured conversation. It is not surprising therefore to discover that this outworking of the English mind-set characterises the English Higher Education system and related patterns of intellectual enquiry. It is not uninterested in theory, and does not ignore it, but adduces theory as something against which an articulation of experience can be checked and by which it might be enriched. At the same time it recognises that the articulation of experience might in turn cause the theory to be further developed or amended. What it eschews is discourse which is purely driven by theory, in the sense that it is dogmatically deductive and ends up by forcing evidence and the situations which that evidence represents to bear out the theory, rather than allowing the theory to enrich the experience. It is therefore similarly unhappy with a dialectical method of discourse which moves formally through thesis and antithesis to synthesis.

In this, intellectual discourse in England differs from that in continental Europe and, to some extent from that in North America (which is in some ways a hybrid of both the English and the Continental models). The Oxford Institute itself sometimes reflects these tensions in its ways of working! Moreover, this outworking of the English mind-set explains why the English are suspicious of both dogmatic Protestant and dogmatic Catholic discourse in continental Europe; why dialectical materialism and other theory-driven socio-political systems and methodologies have never managed to become dominant; and why contemporary politicians are held in such contempt because the parliamentary process and related practices are seen to be the antagonistic “spinning” out of pre-formulated theory without any attempt to listen to the experience of others.

Christian Conversing and Conferring

Wesley’s emphasis on the empirical verification of Christian experience and truth claims about it through a process of conferring therefore flows naturally out of the English mind-set, and is latent in the collective British Methodist psyche waiting to be rediscovered and re-expressed.

¹⁸ e.g Peter Ackroyd *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* Vintage London 2004; Kate Fox *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* Hodder and Stoughton London 2004; Jeremy Paxman *The English: A Portrait of a People* Michael Joseph London 1998.

Wesley placed great emphasis on each person engaging in what he calls “holy conversation”. He saw this as intentional conversation on matters of religious faith and practice. At times he identified this process as one of the basic means of grace instituted in the scriptures. In the *Large Minutes* he identified these as:

1. *Prayer; private, family, public ...;*
2. *Searching the Scriptures...;*
3. *The Lord’s Supper...;*
4. *Fasting...;*
5. *Christian conference....:*

Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to “order your conversation right? “ Is it “always in grace? seasoned with salt? meet to minister grace to the hearers?”

The purpose of this holy conversation is to share and sift experience and understanding, and for those who see through a glass darkly to share what partial insights they have so that in bringing them together they might see more clearly and discover the Holy Spirit’s insight amongst them. Wesley then systematised the process further in gathering people together regularly in a Class Meeting or Band to help each other in their Christian experience and to support each other in their discipleship. In the Class Meeting and Band the basic questions for this Christian Conferring can be expressed in modern terms as “Where is God in our experience? What is God doing? What is God calling or prompting us to do?” He systematised it further and the same basic questions took on a particular form when Wesley or one of his Travelling Preachers visited and met with the Class Leaders to oversee and support them in their task. The process and questions then appeared again in the series of meetings or Conferences which John Wesley held with his Preachers, Helpers and Assistants as the movement developed. In these meetings they sought to discern the movements of the Spirit and the promptings of grace, and to shape and regulate ways of responding to them in worship and mission. In the first such Conference in 1744 this type of question was applied to the task of the Preachers and so took the form “What to teach? How to teach? What to do?”, or, in other words, the content, methodology and strategic organisation of mission.

As a result, the Conference primarily exists to exercise oversight in the broadest sense of the term. It seeks to focus, renew and nurture the whole connexion’s worship of God and participation in God’s mission. In doing so it seeks to ensure that the whole Connexion remains true to its calling and to its experience and place in an apostolic succession of faithful response and witness to the Gospel. In this its teaching role is still of paramount importance, both in formulating what is to be taught and ensuring that it is shared with all the Methodist people. The Conference therefore stands at the heart of the Connexion, connecting it with its past and its future, linking it with external bodies and joining together its constituent parts.

As noted above, one way in which the Conference exercises that general oversight is in formulating and overseeing strategies for responding to God’s will throughout the whole Connexion.... Much of the activity of the Conference consists of the exercise of governance or formal authority. The Conference does this directly through adopting formal policies and legislation. It also does it indirectly by setting the parameters and structures of accountability and support for other bodies to exercise authority in its name in particular places or areas of work. Similarly with regard to management, the role of the Conference is to set a framework of clear policies and purposes, authorising and permitting others to exercise management directly, and seeking to ensure that they do so under the guidance of the Spirit and in an attitude of stewardship. The direct exercise of management is the duty of those other individuals and groups. It is their responsibility to formulate specific and detailed strategies for enacting the Conference’s policies and fulfilling its

purposes; for setting particular objectives concerning the implementation of those strategies; for deploying human, material and technological resources to achieve those objectives; and for monitoring and assessing the performance of individuals and groups in meeting the objectives.

Another way in which the Conference expresses oversight is in the collective exercise of leadership. This involves harvesting the insights of its members, inspiring them to be imaginative and empowering them to share their ideas and develop new vision. It then involves the Conference in providing a model for the rest of the Connexion of articulating vision, of initiating action and encouraging people to follow, and of exercising power (not least with regard to the management of resources) with authority, justice and love.

All of these aspects of oversight involve waiting on God. For this to happen there has to be space in the overall timetable for there to be times of spontaneous prayer, praise and contemplation as well as formal prayer and structured worship. But waiting on God also occurs through Christian Conferring. This involves people taking spiritual, theological and practical counsel together and engaging in processes of intentional, prayerful and thoughtful dialogue that lead to collective decision-making. Some of this occurs informally through people meeting each other over meals and at fringe and other events around the sessions of the Conference. Much of it occurs in the formal business of the Conference itself as people seek to discern the will and activity of God through paying attention to each other's insights and experience. The Conference should primarily be looking for the inspiration of the Spirit, and in the light of that to lift the spirits of its members and provide inspiration for the whole Connexion.

.... the primary purpose of the Conference is to engage in Christian Conferring in order to discern the will of God and then to formulate and oversee ways in which the whole Connexion can respond to that will. This purpose should inform and influence everything that the Conference does.¹⁹

Similar insights are to be found in the United Methodist Church through Bishop Kenneth Carder. He states that in a Conference that is a proper expression of Christian Conferring the following characteristics are to be found:

- 1. The conversation is formed and shaped by grace, which is the presence and power of God. Responding to and expressing God's grace is the motive, not winning an argument or advancing an agenda. The manner and spirit in which decisions are made has priority over the tally of the votes in authentic Christian conferencing.*
- 2. The conversation is purposeful and edifying. Being a channel grace to the hearers and building up the community is the goal*
- 3. The conversation (speech) is concise, thoughtful, and disciplined. Christian conference requires preparation, time consciousness, and sensitivity to those listening.*
- 4. Christian conversation begins, continues, and ends in prayer. Indeed, it is a form of prayer!²⁰*

In attempting to renew the purpose and practice of its Conference in this way, the British Conference is acknowledging the links between the dynamics of conversation in small groups and the dynamics of the Conference, and that all of them involve a sanctified form of empirical verification of our experience of the persons of the triune God both in themselves and

¹⁹ These paragraphs come from "The Purpose of the Conference", a section of a report entitled *The Review of the Conference* adopted by the British Conference in 2006 (author KGH).

²⁰ Kenneth L Carder *Conference That Is a Means of Grace* UM Nexus June 2007

collectively; of our discerning of God's will; and therefore of whether we are appropriately participating in God's mission.

What does Christian Conferring have to offer to serving the present age?

Christian Conferring is predicated on a distinctive understanding of the Church as a collective body in which all participate in discerning and bearing witness to "spiritual" truth. Its empirical methodology means that whereas there may be those within that body who are particularly gifted or expertly practised in interpreting that truth, this does not equate (as a theory-driven deductive method more easily does) to a power hierarchy in which a few are able to possess truth and the experience of God as a commodity and then give it or not to those who do not have it as they choose.

An incarnation or expression of the body of Christ that proceeds in this way will be better suited to engaging in mission in a 21st century post-Christian and post-atheist world. Christians who take God seriously and recognise that God is at work in love in those cultures and sub-cultures of people who have no history of contact with the Church will be better able to communicate with those people if their basic approach is already one of seeking to discern God through sharing insights with others.

The approach also has the potential to help us deal properly with scripture. Wesley often wavered towards seeing scripture as something that was to be experienced, interpreted and verified empirically like other things. Often, though, he swung in the opposite direction and spoke of scripture as something that was revealed and had to be taken as a *de facto* given. But scripture is already the product of interactions between some or all of the following factors: previous scriptures, tradition, reason, personal experience and social context. As such, as people gather round the scriptures and engage in conversation about them, it is as if the Bible enters the process of Conferring like another party to the conversation – a privileged party, of course. As it does that, the *ipsissima vox* of the Christ who is the Word of God starts to resound in the power of the Spirit through the Word that is scripture.

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