

'Vexing the devil' at Villa Road: Recovering the Language of Holiness in Christian Formation

The Revd Dr. Jennifer H. Smith

Abstract:

*The Methodist Church '...ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.'*¹

This paper seeks to recast the language of 'holiness' as a critical guide to Christian formation within Methodist UK Churches.

The paper presents research into holiness and Christian formation done in community at Villa Road Methodist Church, Handsworth, Birmingham (UK) during 2004 and 2005. Sections explore Christology and position of the Bible among the congregation, along with reflection about distinctive Methodist identity, and some ways in which this have been negotiated and represented in 'holy living'. Using tools of US and British black and womanist theology and congregational studies, the research at Villa Road describes holiness as an alternative identity in Christ, negotiated to 'vex the devil' by resisting racial and sexual discrimination, class bias and poverty, among other dominant themes in the lives of the congregation.²

As an antidote to holiness based in 'getting the moral issues right and leveraging others to think and act the right way, as do we,' (whomever 'we' are) this paper seeks to consider the problems and possibilities of recovering ontology in one contemporary account of holiness.³ The broader goal is to provoke questions about the ethics of a distinctive identity in Christ, or how church should seek to represent itself in relation to that which is outside it. How peculiar should our 'belonging to Christ' make us, in the world?

This discussion puts Christian formation at the heart of questions about mission, as it does the work of remembering the 'divinely appointed mission' to spread scriptural holiness described in the Deed of Union.

¹ Paragraph 4, 'Doctrine,' 'Deed of Union of the Methodist Church.' Adopted by uniting conference in 1932, '...extensively rearranged and revised in form, though not in substance,' in 1990. *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume II*, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2004), p. 213. Emphasis added.

² ED, 2 May 2005, un-taped comment. All references to specific quotes from taped interviews or group work at Villa Road will be referenced with the speaker's initials, date of recording, and time tag on .wav file. Where a quote comes from an un-taped interview, it will be referenced by initials of speaker and date, with indication of whether it is an exact quote or paraphrase.

³ Walter Brueggemann, 'The Good News of Regime Change,' sermon preached at United Methodist Consultation on Worship, Christ United Methodist Church, NY, 8 May 2005. From *Mandate to Difference: an Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, (Louisville, KY, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). pp.1-7. Quote from p. 1.

I. Recovering the Language of Holiness in Christian Formation: Hopes and Fears



I begin with one of those gorgeous pictures of 'Our Lord' Jesus, white robed and be-sandaled, about to knock at the door of an ivy-covered English cottage. He stands poised to enter, and the caption reads, 'Jesus is coming: Look Busy.' The postcard with its caption is sold as a flippant joke: Jesus is coming, look busy. But what do I really hear?

"Careful, he's coming: hide the instant Nescafe and your sweatshop sewn clothing! Put the gin away! Get out the fair trade tea and arrange the Christian Aid envelopes (in a subtle way) by the door and the church notices on the coffee table. Hide the long-haul holiday brochures under the solar energy pamphlet and for heavens' SAKE put your wedding ring back on: Jesus is coming, look busy!"

I hope that the day-to-day life of our churches, with their sacraments and preaching, fellowship and spirituality, would nurture people towards something more than a fear that the risen Christ is coming to check up on our metaphorical recycling bins. This hope I find expressed in the first paragraphs of the UK Methodist Deed of Union, assuring us that the church '...ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.'⁴ Fine words, but I fear that all too easily the formation for 'holy living' that I offer in church expresses only as the encouragement to adopt a few culturally-specific ethical markers in our lives, or conversely, to get an emotional rush off some good preaching and heavy music. I fear that the holiness in which I form people can be more like a series of little churchy identity tags by which members recognise each other and keep the 'non-Christian' safely away.

The purpose of this paper is to recast the language of holiness, negotiated in local context as a critical guide for Christian formation, to engage some of these hopes and fears. The paper gives a partial record of my mutual theological enquiry into holiness and Christian formation with the members of the Villa Road Methodist Church in Handsworth, Birmingham, UK, during 2004-2005.⁵ Included in the account are three interwoven, but distinct sections concerning the nature of God, the nature and use of Scripture, and the nature of denominational identity, or what it means to be a Methodist. Holiness as negotiated at Villa Road addresses themes of displacement from home, loneliness and loss of identity, exclusion because of race, class, and gender, and alienation from the powers of the church: these themes transect the three sections.

As these themes weave together across different areas of concern, they account for a distinctive way of talking about what it means to be God's holy people at Villa Road. Holiness is evolved to protect and defend from the particular slings and arrows in these individuals' lives. However, the accounts of holiness here told only have power in the lives of these individuals as they make universal claims. People appropriate the whole covenantal history of God's people to be their own

⁴ Op. Cit., *the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Vol. II, p. 213.

⁵ Jennifer H. Smith, *Mary in the Kitchen, Martha in the Pew: Patterns of Holiness in a Methodist Church*, Thesis for the Master of Philosophy (Theology), University of Birmingham, UK: 2006.

history: holiness is about formation not just in any identity, but in the identity of God's covenanted people as read and told in this place. This identity can and does protect and resource people at Villa Road particularly because it subverts a present reality which at best neglects its subjects, at worst abuses and degrades them.

My purpose in offering the experience of this one church is not to offer the definitive substance of a 'new holiness' for the future of Methodists in Great Britain. It is rather to catalogue a healthy process of conscious reflection in a community with some diverse and contradictory conclusions. This living congregation has to sort out every day how to remain different enough in distinctively Christian ways from its surroundings to resource and protect its members, yet grounded in the reality of their lives and open to newcomers. To aid the project of Christian formation more generally, I offer the category of holiness as a process of identity-making in local context, around evolving understanding of what it means to belong to Christ. Clive Marsh has recently written of Christ as a 'community of practice,' in which people preserve and adapt their traditions of Christian community, and this phrase is appropriate to describe the process of formation at Villa Road.⁶

Some provisos: I do not pretend for a moment to think that motives behind the markers of holy living we display are as simple as I suggested at the outset, nor certainly that the line between doing and being is ever clear in Christian practice. With limited space, I have not included full consideration here on the ethics of my role in 'telling' the conclusions from Villa Road: I write not only from the perspective of a confessing Christian, but as one of 'Mr. Wesley's preachers. I am a white, US citizen ordained and working as a presbyter in the British Methodist Church, with much formal education behind me. These things matter to the theology I have done with the community of Villa Road, and nuanced reflection may be found in the larger work from which the extract comes. Any writing about Christian formation must be done with the discipline of the question, 'Formation for what?' in view: I acknowledge my focus in this paper on individuals and personal formation for the making of just and reconciling civil society, but do not denigrate approaches proceed from other directions toward the same goal. For the bounded purposes of this paper, I echo Miroslav Volf's stance: 'Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, I will explore what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with others.'⁷ It is in this context that I speak of 'recovering ontology' in an account of holiness.

I do fear that in a post-liberal, post-evangelical time, the tension between ethics and ontology that has been part of holiness teaching has collapsed in pastoral reality. I fear that holiness has reduced on post-liberal sides to 'live a good life, write for Amnesty international and reduce your carbon footprint,' and on post-evangelical sides to 'feel your heart strangely warmed, raise your hands in the last chorus of the song, and escape the reality of your life.' Neither account of holiness seems to me an adequate directive for the public mission of our churches, nor the personal Christian

⁶ Clive Marsh, *Christ in Practice: a Christology of Everyday Life*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd, 2006), p. 68ff. Marsh borrows the phrase 'community of practice' from E. Wenger, R. McDermott and W.M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), who argue that it is explicitly linked to formation, '...the ideal social structure for stewarding knowledge.' (p. 12). 'Communities of practice,' as defined here, are not just about cataloguing data and procedure, but formation in knowledge: 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion on a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.' (p. 4)

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 20, 21.

formation we hope to offer. This paper is thus a call for congregations to become self-conscious in the work of holiness: whatever the cultural markers that signal holy living, (and they will be as hotly contested in our congregations as in our doctrinal committees) I fear that they reduce to being signs of our membership in a Methodist club and do not serve either as 'works of piety,' or 'works of mercy,' as John Wesley might have expressed it.⁸ Thus I hope for more from an account of holiness than a spiritual least common denominator expressed as 'Jesus is coming, look busy.'

II. 'Vexing the devil:' Holiness and Identity at Villa Road

Douglas J. Davies has written of holiness as '*...the value attributed to a focal source of identity that furnishes the moral meaning of life for members of a social group in a process that transcends ordinary levels of experience.*'⁹ Unpacking this rather technical definition, I recognise his argument that in terms of its sociological function, holiness is about establishing identity, creating a people bounded by their common understanding of particular symbols, language, and ritual. In the diversity and even conflict about its expression at Villa Road, I found holiness to be about formation in faith. This might be expressed in my first theological language as 'growth in grace,' in anthropological as 'enculturation.' Or as one woman, a member since 1964 who had left another Methodist church because of discrimination put it, 'I feel awkward to go to another church now, I feel like a stranger there. Villa Road is become like my home!' '...When we was not accepted in the church, we stray, innit we stray because we haven't got a church to go to. But God send somebody to talk to and bring you to it and there I am!'¹⁰ Holiness here was about coming to belong to a very distinctive group united by common history and position in the community, marked by particular patterns of speech, behaviour, and ritual, and designed to draw in the 'stray.'

If operative accounts of holiness are linked to a congregation's sense of identity, they are also implicated in setting the bounds of that community and forming people within it. Whether this is described in theological terms as 'growth in grace' or in anthropological as 'enculturation,' I am suggesting that accounts of holiness among people at Villa Road serve to reinforce an individual sense of belonging to God in the community, and a distinct 'congregational culture.' Using Nancy Ammerman's language, congregational culture '*...consists of physical artifacts, patterns of activity, and the language and story that embellish those objects and activities with meaning.*'¹¹ Here the meanings of holiness developed are linked to specific purposes or effects in the stories people tell: it is appropriate to talk about

⁸ John Wesley, 'Sermon 21: Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount,' (appears as sermon 26 in editions of 53 sermons) *John Wesley's Forty-four Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1944), p. 271, 2 and ff. Wesley was keen that the motives behind 'works of mercy' (visiting the sick and prisoner, etc.) and 'works of piety' (private prayer, attendance at the Lord's Supper, etc.) be Godly: 'But it is not only the having an eye to the praise of men, which... leaves us no room to expect the blessing of God upon our works, whether of piety or mercy. ...If we repeat our prayers, if we attend the public worship of God, if we relieve the poor, with a view to gain or interest, it is not a whit more acceptable to God, than if it were done with a view to praise.' paragraph II.2, p. 273.

⁹ Douglas J. Davies, 'The Sociology of Holiness: the power of being good,' Chapter 3 in Barton, Ed., *Holiness Past and Present*, (London and New York: T&T Clark, Continuum, 2003) p. 50. Emphasis is author's own.

¹⁰ VC 26 January 2005, 2.40ff, 24.00ff.

¹¹ Nancy Ammerman has argued that any congregation's life consists of three broad 'dimensions:' resources, structures of authority, and congregational culture. Nancy Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, (New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 1997) p. 47.

what holiness has and does mean as being interwoven with the purposes or effect people talk about God having in their lives.¹² Holiness is the condition of belonging to God in particular ways that resist evil as it has presented to these men and women, that 'vex the devil' right where they are. As told at Villa Road, holiness doesn't just 'be,' it 'does.'

In recording here the way people talk about holiness, I have been very conscious that the audience, the hearer, is part of the constructed meaning of people's language and story. As relates to me with my particular agenda for theological reflection, (embedded for better and worse in my own intellectual, spiritual, cultural, racial, and ethnic contexts) this means that I am aware of a variety of meanings coming from stories, negotiated between myself and the other people present. This is not simply to say that my position determines the meanings I am able to receive (though it does) nor that my position in relationship with them determines what people say to me or to each other in my presence (though it also does). Rather, it is to recognise that language and story are told not into a vacuum, but into relationships: relationships to God, to self, to others long gone, and to present listeners.

Many layers of meaning may be drawn from any story or talk about ourselves and God, scripture, or the church: all may be valid, if honestly negotiated amidst and mediated by the historic power inequalities we inherit. To paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, 'How long O Lord will your people listen but not comprehend, look but not understand?'¹³ This lament describes to me my own limitations in hearing the breadth and depth of meaning in the spoken reflection at Villa Road. What follows is my own representation of the theological meanings in people's prayers, talk, and story about holiness to and with me: the network of meaning that emerges is my own mediated and negotiated response as I have tried to develop more chastened eyes and ears.

II.a Holiness and Talk of God

Language and stories about who God is play an important formative role with people at Villa Road. Stories about who God is, and how God acts, function as catechetical texts, eclipsing almost entirely any systematic or abstract theologizing.¹⁴ Consider the following exchange from the first group meeting, in which I had asked if there were times in life when people had been especially aware of God's presence:

When my mother was dying I can remember this.
She called me by her bedside, and she said...
'I am going home to Jesus [aw, ain't that nice],
and 'Take care me Jesus now.'
But the most important and the most shocking thing to me...
'Lord Jesus, my name is Viola Rice!

¹² While recognising the special position of language and spoken story, I am here resisting an artificially rigid divide between language and action. As Jeff Astley has suggested, when it comes to theological reflection, 'Language may be thought of as a form of action, a way in which people do things.' Jeff Astley, *Exploring God-Talk: Using Language in Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), p. 89.

¹³ Paraphrase of Isaiah 6:9-11.

¹⁴ This is not to imply an equivalence between 'systematic' and 'abstract' theology. Thomas Long has emphasised the central role of ordinary speech and story in community as a precedent for systematic faith: he urges leaders to cultivate spaces for 'authentic God-Talk' in and out of worship. Thomas Long, *Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, (Practices of Faith Series) (San Francisco, CA: Jessey-Bass, 2004).

I am coming home Lord Jesus.'

It was the most sincere thing I ever heard, it was so touching to me.

And then she saying,

'Yes Lord, Yes Lord here am I Lord,

I am coming I am coming.'

And she says to me...

'Jesus is coming, He is coming,'

and she says 'My name Lord is Viola Rice!

My name is Viola Rice, I am coming,'

and touch me, and up to now,

And I'm saying, 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?'

And that lived with me for the rest of my life.

[That's a good thing for your book, that's a good verse, good thing for your writing, that is nice, very nice...]¹⁵

The comments in brackets were interjections made directly to me by another woman; her spoken approval recommended the story highly, over others, as one she wanted to exemplify God's activity and their individual and group response. I was not to miss the point that this story was owned as a family jewel among them! The group had heard this story before, and joined in to say the repeated phrases together by way of affirmation. Viola's daughter told the story with poetic cadence and emphasis, a recitation in what was almost a singing voice.

God was intimately present in the day to day conversations and banter among the research group, but this story stood out as an illustration of that usual reference spilling over into a profound sense of the numinous presence, Jesus' coming at the moment of death. In the telling and hearing of this story are a variety of layered meanings, but its point was explicitly catechetical: 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?' Viola's daughter made her mother's experience of the numinous into a lesson to instruct not only about who God is, but about how we should all hope to respond. Treating this not only as a personal anecdote but as a group-owned text, (a 'verse,' as the other woman described it) what lessons do I draw from the story about who God is, in the lives of the women present? I have suggested that holiness is about identifying oneself with God in ways to protect, comfort and defend in practical matters of the day. This story constructs and affirms a community account of holiness as it schools all of us in the truths of faith as the teller has received it.

The first thing that can be said about this anecdotal lesson is that God is most important in the person and name of Jesus. Here Jesus is not an abstract Christ, or saviour, but an intimate co-sufferer who has triumphed over all the things which trouble people in this place and life. Prayer talk is an immediate link to Jesus, who waits close by. In the deathbed story and in the way many spoke about Jesus, he represents home or homecoming. With the notion of home in Jesus comes a reciprocal acknowledgement of being feeling like a stranger in a strange land for much of day-to-day life. Telling the story to emphasise naming oneself before Jesus seemed to me an antidote to public anonymity or 'nobodyness' in much of ordinary life. Jacquelyn Grant, writing about the differences in black and white women's

¹⁵ MP, Group Exercise 22 November 2005, 8.22ff. Bracketed asides, VC.

understanding of Jesus, talked of black women's Christology emerging from the reality of the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism to '...convey to their children that in spite of the world's denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you.' This she called a 'theology of somebodiness.'¹⁶ Viola Rice's naming herself to Jesus and her daughter teaching others that they can, should name themselves to Jesus at the moment of death seems to me to fit with Grant's suggestion. Jesus is the person who knows you, when the world does not. If holiness is about being set apart and belonging first to God, this account of Jesus adds the ability to be self-naming and to resist prejudicial assumptions to the account.

Feeling rejected in a foreign culture and keeping a secret sense of home alive were themes which recurred in our conversations. One woman explicitly linked her sense of cultural alienation with this secret spiritual home. Talking about 'the things you cannot do in England,' she explained that she had had to learn not to sing hymns in public after getting odd looks in the street, and how different this was from the Jamaica of her girlhood. 'Now I keeps the song behind the teeth,' she said, laughing.¹⁷ In a day-to-day existence in which fitting in to avoid hostility meant developing a secret self, home in Jesus here serves as a present alternative reality as much as the promise of an afterlife.

Just as important as Jesus as home, is Jesus as a co-suffering servant in life and death. Who Jesus is, is linked intrinsically to what he does as a poor servant in the world and suffering innocent on the cross. Hardship and suffering from ill health, poverty, loneliness, or other ills people talked about as drawing them closer to Jesus. One woman spoke of her dislocation in British society as a spiritual help:

'...coming over here has helped me a lot. Because I always say, if I had still been there, I would have been doing what people do and I would just go to church on Sundays and would come home until the following Sunday.... but living on my own has made me think and re-think about things and see the love of God. I'll come in from outside and on the doormat I say thank you God because it's not everybody who has gone out that has come back home...somebody has been knocked down but through your grace I have come back.'¹⁸

She spoke here of Jesus not just an alternative reality, but a protection from neglect and violence. Another echoed this, talking of God as helping her to resist loneliness: 'I think I see the goodness of God because I live on my own,... God keeps me! He keeps me! Because I ain't got no strength no power on my own, it the power of God that moves in you, that keeps you going, innit.'¹⁹ Language about God makes a virtue out of unchanging difficulties in life, emphasising dependence on God's intimate presence as man and spirit, the 'power that moves in you.' Predictably, the chorus which elicited most engaged singing and response in any worship I participated in at Villa Road began with the line '*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow...*'²⁰ Another woman's comment shows this theme in high relief: '...one of the things that those years of racism in the church did for me was to get on with what me and God can put

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars' Press, American Academy of Religion, 1989), p. ix.

¹⁷ LW, un-taped comment 22 November 2005.

¹⁸ GT, 17 November 2005, 32.21ff.

¹⁹ VC, 26 January 2005, 32.34ff.

²⁰ Morning Worship, 17 April 2005, led by HS.

together.’²¹ An account of holiness that includes belonging to this Jesus identifies suffering with both the abuse that Jesus received during his ministry, and his death on the cross: being loved by this kind of God allows people to re-orient themselves toward unchanging patterns of suffering in their own lives, and the life of their community. On the basis that Jesus’ resurrection carries a model for overcoming sin and death, in this holiness there is a source of material liberation from the burdens of everyday life.²² This is how language about God serves not only as testimony, but as instruction and reassurance for the listener in her or his own struggles.

The ‘liberation potential’ in this Christology notwithstanding, I heard a tension in the way the women in the research group spoke about Jesus in relation to their gender. Despite occasional maternal imagery or behaviours attributed to God (‘God say, ‘My Peace I leave with you, my peace I expect to find when I get back!’ Accompanied by finger shaking, mock vehemence, laughter) the personal language that people used about God was entirely male.²³ Names for God in prayer and chat were first ‘Jesus,’ second ‘God,’ ‘Father,’ or ‘Lord.’ An argument broke out after one research group meeting to do with the legitimacy of touching Jesus, of expecting intimacy from him, and more generally with what obedient submission from women would look like in church. One woman illustrated her warning not to put oneself forward by singing a chorus from childhood: ‘Woman no touch me, woman no touch me. Woman no touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father...’ Waiting somewhat impatiently for the chorus to finish, another responded in heated tones that ‘...woman been worthy enough to see the resurrection!’ and by implication, should be worthy enough to lead the church.²⁴ They agreed that ‘man is the head,’ but in a metaphor offered by a third woman by way of reconciling the divide, ‘...woman the ground, the earth...the source of everything.’²⁵ Thus I heard a mixing of language about gender and God with the negotiated gender balance in their own lives, and an intense theological reflection about how much support any one of them might expect from Jesus in challenging traditional patterns of privilege for men.

Although addressing a North American context, Jacquelyn Grant has written about the lived tension between an oppressive and liberative Christology in black women’s religious experience. Where stories about Jesus’ person and ministry were geared to ‘...keep Blacks, (and women) in their place,’ she observed that black women often articulated their own liberative Christologies.²⁶ These largely narrative accounts emerge from their experience of the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism, she argues. This was exactly the kind of internal tension between received and emerging Christology that I heard among the women at Villa Road. People talked to and about Jesus with purpose: to ask for help, to reassure and encourage, also to reinforce a sense of identity that resisted the denigrations of their daily lives. Yet there was a present tension in the corporate account of who Jesus was, mirrored in a tension between how much present patterns of gender and race power structures should be challenged and changed. The tension about where a woman (or any other

²¹ SM, 31 January 2005, 5.38ff.

²² This theme is well developed elsewhere: see for example, F. Douglas Powe, Jr., ‘A Tragic-Liberation Model: Hurston’s Perspective on Life and Systematic Evil,’ *Black Theology: an international journal*, Volume 5, No. 1, January 2007, pp. 81-93.

²³ VC, un-taped banter 22 November 2004.

²⁴ LW, ED 7 February 2004, .45ff.

²⁵ MP, 7 February 2004, un-taped.

²⁶ Grant, *Op. Cit.*, p. x.

‘moaning sinner’) sat in relation to Jesus was not resolved.²⁷ The heat in the argument showed that more than a few of these women were unwilling to give up the Jesus who defended them in all ways, but especially as women in a world where men had more choices, domestic and economic privilege.

As talked and laughed about at Villa Road, God was more than a co-suffering Jesus, however liberative. God was full of tricks, often operating by getting one over on the powerful or dismissive. They spoke of God as acting with humour, for moral purposes. Two examples illustrate this quality of God as I heard it: first, a block of flats immediately across the street from the old church building had been demolished to build a new wing on the imposing Soho Road Gurdwara. Local talk was that there had been a church or chapel on the site, torn down long ago. The ladies in the research group, talking about the construction on their way out of our first meeting, spoke of God getting one over on the people who had built the flats to make profit from the place. ‘Holy ground is holy ground. Once God get hold of a place him no let go!’ Laughed one woman.²⁸ It did not seem to matter to them that the building going up on the site was Sikh: holy ground was holy ground and God had been biding God’s time before taking it back, thank you very much. Another time, a visitor to worship for a christening was taken with a conversion experience during the liturgy, much to the surprise of the minister. Talking about it later, the women all laughed about ‘Spirit got him good,’ and ‘He wasn’t expecting that!’ In both cases, they spoke of God acting not to attack things directly but biding time and striking when someone powerful or privileged was exposed.

I reflected that this model of Godly power incorporated many of the women’s own experiences of not being able to challenge people in authority or decisions directly. For me, the trickful quality of God implicit from their stories added to a sense of holiness as alternative reality where they would have power and notice, where the reality of ordinary life worked by God’s rules and not those of the world. With its own talismans, particularly talk about the ‘precious blood’ and name of Jesus, this alternative reality made a virtue out of a present hardship: present neglect because of racism, sexism, and poverty or class bias had here a recognised place in the way God worked. These were the set-up for God’s tricks to turn the tables, and knowing this counselled patience and reliance on God’s eventual action.

The two women who had argued over closeness to Jesus agreed about the necessity of giving thanks in all circumstances, especially those of hardship and suffering. By their reasoning, give thanks and suffer cheerfully, and ‘...it vex the devil so, he hop around like Rumpelstiltsken!’²⁹ The conversation that culminated in this laughing statement happened at an ecumenical Bible study led by their minister: aware that their approach did not fit with the generally liberal model she favoured (they knew she preferred to talk about challenging suffering and injustice in immediate and tangible ways as opposed to giving thanks), they returned again and again to this point, teasing her with increasing humour. As these women talked about it, giving praise and thanks in the face of suffering was not a passive acceptance of the status quo but a mode of active resistance.³⁰ Where an official view did not equip

²⁷ LW, Group Exercise 31 January 2005, 15.22ff LW here was talking about the necessity of giving thanks and praise, arguing that ‘moaning’ in suffering demonstrated contempt for God.

²⁸ RT, 22 November 2004. un-taped comment.

²⁹ ED, 2 May 2005, un-taped comment.

³⁰ Those working from a liberation perspective might dismiss this as false consciousness; there is resonance between this kind of ‘resistance’ and the theory of atonement articulated by womanist

them adequately, they were theologically and socially adept at negotiating space for their own language and imagery about God. That said, a tension remained in talk about suffering: hesitantly, one woman admitted to me that ‘...those Tsunami countries, must have done something bad,’ struggling to make sense of hard events.³¹ Taken all together, narratives about God, as about the devil, incorporated the expectation that God was secretly already on side, working for these women. They had to respond by keeping the Way, as sin would be punished. God as they know and re-know him is an intimate comfort and friend, a home in present exile, a co-suffering saviour, and a trickful help for the less powerful.

II b. Scriptural Holiness: the Meanings and Use of the ‘Black book’

During the time I spent in the Villa Road church I was living in the community of my theological college with daily worship, work, and recreation together. The Bible was not only read daily in worship, but studied: a litter of different Bibles followed us, stacked high in carrying arms from Chapel to seminar room and back again. We argued back and forth about Scriptural authority, about metaphorical vs. factual truth, ‘texts of terror,’ ‘chastened historical-critical approaches,’ and the like. For all that Scriptural text was a present part of my working and devotional life, I did not anticipate the way in which language about and out of the Bible resourced personal and community identity among the people at Villa Road. Scriptural language appropriated, recast, used to explain, reassure, convict, and encourage I observed as a primary mechanism of enculturation into the community of holiness among the congregation.

Talk about the Bible in a variety of contexts was not so much focussed on questions of belief, whether the text was ‘true’ or not, but on how what a person brought with them to the text fitted with the history of God’s people and God’s plans for their future. In one woman’s words, ‘The Bible is the start of everything. I read to get the understanding.’³² People also referenced the Bible as a verbal symbol of righteousness, convicting either individual or group misdeeds. Speaking about her hope that a Christian community would somehow be more just than other parts of life, one said: ‘Sometimes I think that it was unfair of us to think that racism wouldn’t be in the church, because we live in a racist society. But then when you turn it over to the Black Book, in the church is where I can’t deal with the racists.’³³ Her reference carried the sense that the ‘Black Book’ was both guard and goad in ethical action. The language people used about and from Scripture made a bridge for what they brought with them (experiences, challenges, cultural values, etc.) to be woven into a common story. Thus in our mutual enquiry into holiness, where the Bible served me as a beloved but bounded resource it served others as the primary text by which they negotiated the meaning of their lives in relation to God, to each other, and to the powers of the world.

i. Scriptural Authority, or 'How to read the Bible'

theologian Delores Williams, who equates salvation with survival. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk*, (USA: Orbis Books, 1996).

³¹ LW, 26 January 2005, un-taped comment.

³² VC, Group Exercise 31 January 2005, 42.50.

³³ SM, 31 January 2005, 15.44ff.

The training material for local lay preachers in the Methodist Church UK includes a section on becoming self-conscious in one's own Scriptural hermeneutic. The prospective preacher is asked to rank for herself four sources of authority: reason, Scripture, tradition, and experience. Later in the course, she is asked to identify herself with one or more of seven distinct camps of Scriptural authority. With some subtlety of overlap, these camps range from a position of assumed literal inerrancy of the text and absolute authority for Christian living to an approach saying that the Bible is an interesting anthology we may dip into along with other resources, without significant ethical authority.³⁴ I planned to ask the five women in attendance that day to do both exercises, leading to a discussion about extent to which their 'holiness' was or was not scriptural. In what became one of the most memorable and instructive sessions of theological reflection with that group, (sadly unrecorded, happening before my 'exercise') another woman pre-empted my exercise asking if we could study a passage that had been troubling her: 2 Kings 10: 18-32. The discussion that followed gave me a clear lesson on how to read the Bible with absolute authority, but against the recommended culture of present day leaders in and out of church and in support of those without power.

In the passage, the King Jehu affects a conversion to Baal worship, then rounds up (on pain of death) all the Baal worshippers in the land, declares a festival of sacrifice and worship and packs them into Baal's temple. After professing his fealty to Baal, he asks if there are any followers of the Lord there. No one comes forward. As the worship begins, he has his guards rush in and massacre the whole congregation; afterwards God expresses pleasure that Jehu has done 'what was right in my eyes' by eradicating Baal worship from the land. Despite his own idolatry, Jehu is rewarded with the throne of Israel for four generations of his descendents.

There was silence in the group, broken by the angry declaration of our leader: 'It a trick! ...the point is he trick them... So I say, those might have turn up who you know, scared.'³⁵ I pointed out that the text clearly stated that there were no 'followers of the lord' in the temple: we might argue with the premise of killing them, but the text said that all who had died had been Baal worshippers. She was unconvinced: 'I have my doubts. ...According to the threatening that he done to them, I don't know, maybe I would have been caught up in the massacre as well, through no fault of my own. You know... those poor people, they were scared, you see. They have to be a martyr.' I asked what she would say to God about blessing of Jehu's actions. The vehement response, after considered pause, 'I say, "Are you sure?"'

In relation to the seven categories of Scriptural authority that Methodism identifies, this woman measured far at the conservative end, close to claiming the literal inerrancy of the Bible.³⁶ The scale does not measure her kind of reading and appropriation of the text to her life: she described the commonplace of needing to look carefully that those in leadership were not setting out to trick folks lower down the power stakes, using them for their own ends. Lively discussion followed about whether other members of the group would have gone to the temple or not: the lesson finally agreed was that 'if you hold fast to your faith no matter what, and don't be afraid, God will protect you.' One who said she would not under any circumstances deny her faith was more explicitly challenged: '...You say, if Jen axe you - [turning to

³⁴ Unit 5, *Faith and Worship*, (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003).

³⁵ ED, Group Exercise 31 January 2005, un-taped.

³⁶ '...The Bible is the Word of God, and is therefore free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records, and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour.' Unit 5, *Faith and Worship*. Op Cit.

me] No offence - if Liz [their minister] axe you, you still wouldn't go?'³⁷ It was a hard lesson, building in an assumption that those in authority would put out snares and obstacles.

The women here worked from their experience to 'read between the lines' (the leader's phrase) of the text to get at its 'true' meaning. Holiness is defined in womanist or black liberation context as beginning with a process of conscientization: people can only grow in grace if they learn to name their oppression and oppressor. One way this happens is through a re-reading of Scripture on behalf of oneself and one's own cultural experience: part of what holiness does as an acquired identity is to resource for the resisting of representation by others with their own agendas.³⁸ Certainly there was some of this gently present in our study of Jehu. However, I saw real conflict between the women in the research group play out around the counter-claims of non-resistance to (if not respect for) present leaders, laid against others' assumption that God would favour the less powerful. That this conflict played out in the context of talk about Scripture shows how important such talk is as part of the continuing re-formation of community identity. I would describe my own reading of Scripture as showing a 'chastened historical critical approach,' I would represent that I saw operating in talk about the text at Villa Road as 'wary obedience.'³⁹ The study of the Jehu story is not the only example I could use to represent the out-working of Scriptural authority in this place, but it shows the variety, conflict, and commitment to arriving at consensus in talk about the Bible. Scripture used in many defensive and nurturing ways pervades the holiness that members at Villa Road practice and re-create for and with each other.

ii. Hermeneutics for Scriptural Holiness

George Mulrain has written of a distinctive 'Hermeneutics within a Caribbean context.' He suggests that a specifically Caribbean scriptural hermeneutics is characterised firstly by a world view that takes seriously the presence of an unknown but populated spirit world, secondly by the expectation that God understands the oppression of the readers' forebears and sides with them in suffering. Thirdly, by his account this Caribbean hermeneutics acknowledges a multi-faith context in the way it reads texts. Finally, he identifies a '...preference for texts that deal with liberation from forms of oppression.'⁴⁰ I am interested to expand this account of Biblical interpretation with the particular insights about the culture of black elders (especially women) removed in Britain for the better part of their adult lives, that Anthony Reddie offers in his account 'Singing the Song in a Strange Land.'⁴¹ I saw several

³⁷ ED to LW, Group Exercise 31 January 2005, un-taped.

³⁸ I extrapolate from bell hooks and others: see hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), also Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (translated from the French by Robert R. Barr) (New York: Maryknoll, 1986) and Musimbi Kanyoro, 'Cultural Hermeneutics: an African Contribution,' Chapter 6 in Musa Dube, (ed.) *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2001), pp. 101-113.

³⁹ I borrow the first phrase from John Muddiman and John Barton's description of their editorial approach in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In relation to my own approach to Scripture, I take 'chastened historical critical' to mean that I read the Bible as edited faithfully into one book and expect the Word of God to become present in the words of text, with historical critical methods as one but not the only aid.

⁴⁰ George Mulrain, 'Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context,' in R.S. Sugiratharajah, (ed.) *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, (Sheffield: Continuum, 1999), pp. 116-132. Quote from pp. 123,4.

⁴¹ Anthony Reddie, *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders: Singing the Song in a Strange Land* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001).

layers of hermeneutical emphasis operating among the women at Villa Road: certainly, the expectation that Scripture would reveal a God involved on their side against racism, poverty, illness, displacement, neglect, and other forms of suffering was present in the treatment of King Jehu. Certainly I observed a 'preference' for texts associated with liberation, like Psalm 27. And certainly I saw models of talking about and interpreting the Bible that expected it to make the world a better place for the impoverished and underprivileged.

However, there was not universal agreement about the lessons of Scripture or the way it should be used among the people at Villa Road and I am wary of representing the way their fellowship positioned and spoke of the Bible in such a tidy package as Mulrain's scheme suggests. Present in their conflicts about the meaning of texts, I heard conflicts about how to respond to the present and past legacy of racism within the church and without. I heard conflict about what place race, and their particular culture in Handsworth should play as part of Christian identity: should the church be challenged? And if so, in what way and to what degree? Or was race less important than baptism as part of Christian identity, racism an embarrassment for victim as much as perpetrator and thus best forgiven and forgotten? I would hope that the Bible and talk about Scripture might be part of an identity I might call holiness, serving to resist oppressive denigration on the basis of race, sex, illness, age, or other category. As told at Villa Road, the Bible and use of Scripture does become this means. However, it is also the ground over which these women were negotiating the conflict between a more or less useful, more or less oppressive identity for God and self, church and world. Biblical language resourced people's everyday speech, more formal theological talk, and prayer: in language appropriated from the Bible and in the way in which the texts themselves were read, this book in all its conflicts is central to the telling of holiness at Villa Road.

IIc. Holiness, being black and being Methodist

Sometimes in a church you have people upsetting in the church as well, but you have to forgive....You forget about it and you carry on. I could leave it because I know I get hurt there. But I don't give it up, I don't give it up, I hold on.⁴²

My first question to people was some version of 'Why did you come to this church?' Given that people told me so many stories about the racism they suffered inside the congregation of Villa Road church, my second question in any interview was inevitably some version of 'Why did you stay?' It almost always provoked laughter. Except in the case of the one white couple (the most recent additions to the congregation among the research group, having joined in 1987) who said they had come to Villa Road for reasons of proximity and convenience, in answer to the first question every single person I spoke with emphasised the importance of being a Methodist from back home, from their earliest attendance in a Methodist Sunday school in Jamaica, St. Kitts, or Handsworth.

In answer to the second, 'Why did you stay,' they all spoke of the material support of others within the congregation, of bearing each others' burdens almost like an extended family. Said one woman, 'We got very close to the people who worshipped there...we've got very high regard for how people support one another at

⁴² VC, 26 January 2005, 37.40ff.

Villa Road.’⁴³ Her husband continued that it was ‘...the straightforward, no-frills affection and fellowship... When you have that selfishly you want to hang onto that sort of fellowship.’⁴⁴ He told of the time when he had briefly been in hospital, how an elderly woman took three buses to visit and bring him food. People also spoke, sometimes ruefully, of having struggled to belong and make this their home and now refusing to give up their goal. They spoke of particular elements that they identified as part of their Methodist spirituality, sometimes pursued in opposition to the mood of the circuit and wider church: traditional hymn singing and the real presence of the Holy Spirit in worship numbered among these. Thus the ‘character of a Methodist’ (to borrow John Wesley’s phrase) at Villa Road includes specific qualities responding to the particular experience and circumstances of the congregation.

Despite a sense that ‘Tradition is to follow experience,’ the ‘tradition’ of Methodism seems very important to me as part of a bounded identity in Handsworth, among this group at this time.⁴⁵ Here were people following a pattern of denominational activity most had learned from English-trained white ministers in Jamaica of the 1930s and 40s, transported into an existing congregation in the 50s and 60s. The numbers diminish; it seems to me that the pattern of denominational identity at Villa Road has not. Where many left to join black-led congregations once in Britain, these people had not. ‘There be the wide way, and the narrow. I took the narrow,’ explained one woman, speaking of her decision to keep membership at Villa Road despite attending other black-led worship as well.⁴⁶ Denominational identity as described often included a sense of what it was not in addition to what it is. Arguing that Methodists ‘...should keep their own thing,’ their own pattern of worship and church structures, one woman put it in plain words: ‘...We don’t clap hands a lot, ...we like to sing the hymns and feel them going through. I just like to stand and sing and enjoy, and feel the words going through your body. (laughing) That’s why I’m a Methodist!’⁴⁷ Not for this woman the pop-style praise choruses of ‘contemporary’ worship. What part did being Methodist play in the way people talked about their identity as Christians in this place? Knowing that my patterns of answer would be very different theirs, I wanted to learn to hear what people took this tradition to be made up of, and what role it played in resourcing or inhibiting their holiness.

Writing thirty-some years ago of missionary church-planting during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kosuke Koyama made a powerful theological critique of denominational culture in church institutions. In his view, denominational identities and were ‘sociological concepts,’ church structures indistinguishable from other human corporations. Cultivating a denominational identity in his view must ‘...directly militate against the biblical image of the church,’ which should always be known first as the church of Christ.⁴⁸ Extrapolating from this, denominational identity in post-colonial cultures would perpetuate not only church divisions, but also continue to privilege certain church communities by association with the colonial culture. Certainly, the fact that Villa Road was a Methodist church attracted migrants and kept them there when the fellowship was

⁴³ JL, 11 January 2005, 6.30ff

⁴⁴ AL, 11 January 2005, 9.57ff.

⁴⁵ VC, Group Exercise 22 November 2004, 43.15. This comment was made during an exercise ranking tradition, reason, Bible and experience in order of spiritual authority.

⁴⁶ MP, 23 February 2005, un-taped.

⁴⁷ ED, 20 January 2005, 39.29ff.

⁴⁸ Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (25th anniversary edition, revised and expanded) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 142.

actively hostile to black faces. People I spoke with came there because they expected to belong, as if being 'Methodist' from back home would be enough to obviate their skin colour. Said one, 'We had the same Methodist hymns, same book even.'⁴⁹ Already displaced in an unfamiliar culture, people looked for a sense of belonging as a Methodist to help ground and support them in the new country.

For some, as they re-tell their experience now, this hope was at least partly realised. One man in particular, already a local preacher 'on trial' when he arrived as the first black person at Villa Road in 1955, spoke in elegiac terms of the warmth of his reception in rural Methodist circuits and elsewhere as a preacher. 'Being the only black one, the invitations came from everywhere, you know, and because my ministry was straight up straight down evangelical, nothing else.'⁵⁰ He spoke not only of interest, but of warm hospitality in the many churches where he preached during the first years. I noted that he said less in the interview about his and his wife's reception in the Villa Road congregation where they were not feted visitors going away after the evening service, but expecting fellowship and welcome on a more permanent basis. I take him at his word about the welcome he received, but wonder if the 'nothing else' he did not explicitly address in preaching included questions about race. When I asked him about his church he said only that it had been dying, and that with the arrival of a 'broad-minded' minister, '...the advent of coloured people in Handsworth brought Villa Road to life!'⁵¹ This man was alone among the black members at Villa Road with whom I spoke in feeling welcomed in any way as a fellow Christian by Methodist congregations. And even he was open about the criticism he has received for being 'too pentecostal' to preach in other places in the circuit, and discouragement from candidating for ordained ministry.

Others told similar stories, noting how lighter-skinned or more professional blacks were let into the choir while others were kept out. One woman, a nurse, told me that she hid her profession in disgust at the preferential treatment she observed another woman receive when white members of the congregation realised she was a nurse and not a cleaner, as they had thought.⁵² A woman who is now chief steward told me of being ignored and asked to move back from pews regularly occupied by white members. Even as the church began to balance racially '...we weren't let to be leaders or none of that,' she remembered.⁵³ There was only one long-time white member who was well enough to speak with me, a woman whom someone else had told me was accused by other whites as 'turning brown' because of her friendship with blacks. When we were alone, that woman told me with genuine pride that she had considered herself a 'missionary' among the new black Methodist arrivals. I never heard her use this language in mixed racial company. I have struggled with how to represent her self-categorisation, knowing that she meant to express her commitment to hospitality, a commitment which cost her many white friends. Yet I still hear in her words an explicit racism alive and well today in the assumption that these blacks (most resident for better than forty years now) would require a missionary to introduce them to their own tradition.

Worked out in talk about what it means to be a Methodist, race continues to be the most tender issue in the collective story of the Villa Road church as I received it. The absence of explicit racial conflict in what is now by default a black-majority

⁴⁹ ED, 20 January 2005, .56ff.

⁵⁰ HS, 22 April 2005, 6.39.

⁵¹ HS, 22 April 2005, 9.40ff.

⁵² SM, 31 January 2005, 3.35ff.

⁵³ MP, 23 February 2005, un-taped interview.

congregation belies this tenderness. From these and other stories, I might easily build on Koyama's comments about the evil effects of denomination in post-colonial context. I might easily conclude that denominational identity had not only hindered, but actively harmed people's chances to build the kind of spiritual identity that resisted the damage done by racial and other prejudice in their lives in Britain. And yet, this was not the way that people at Villa Road talked about Methodism as part of their Christian identity: those who had migrated from the Caribbean were unequivocal in the warmth with which they spoke of their tradition. Indeed, the research group actively softened my language when I asked if church should be an active defence against the evil of racism. After a considerable pause, one woman offered me a less aggressive metaphor: 'It a bridge, it bridge the gap.'⁵⁴

I heard no reticence or denial when it came to talking about racist treatment within the church, yet there were emphases within the lived spirituality of members of the group that they claimed as valuable, and as particularly Methodist. As one woman told it, where others had left the white denominations to form their own all-black churches in Britain, they had stayed because there were elements of nurture too important to give up.⁵⁵ From her story of baptism and confirmation in the Methodist church in Jamaica, I took the implicit message that she had been a Methodist from the first and was not about to be beaten out of her own church whatever the provocation. Methodism was a connection with home. Of course, there was disagreement or at least qualification of this point: another woman (not present in the discussion) stated explicitly that she thought people had stayed at Villa Road because it was a 'whiter' church than some others, hoping for a social cache because of it.⁵⁶ Of her own choice to remain, she said 'It's just that most of us, especially me are so tired of fighting.'⁵⁷

These voices notwithstanding, people spoke of the real presence of the Spirit in worship, especially prayer and singing, and the centrality of the sermon as particularly Methodist emphases they would not want to give up. Of course, the substance of these that people identified as being important to their lived holiness were often the very qualities that had made white leaders and churches within the circuit uncomfortable. 'We were used to LIVELY, singing worship, not this dull stuffed nose... a longer sermon, and more singing.'⁵⁸ The male lay preacher told me he had had to defend his more emotive rhetorical style and half hour sermons from complaints more than once. From a mixture of intentional and accidental motives, these people had stayed within the structures of a Methodist church that not welcomed them.

A complicated picture of the place of denominational identity as part of their lived holiness emerges from the way people talked about Methodist tradition: while acknowledging the failure of the Villa Road church to offer welcome to black migrants, being Methodist remains very important to the way people talk about being set apart in the community Handsworth as it is today. It ties to home, to personal and corporate history, and in the way they claim it, resources the spirituality of the congregation. Were it not for the black folk here, Methodism would have disappeared from the community. One woman in particular described her church first and foremost as Methodist as opposed to 'black,' or 'black-majority.' For me her

⁵⁴ MP, Group Exercise, 22 November 2004, .06ff.

⁵⁵ MP, Group Exercise, 22 November 2004, 3.20ff.

⁵⁶ SM, 31 January 2005, 11.50ff.

⁵⁷ SM, 31 January 2005, 7.48ff.

⁵⁸ MP, un-taped interview 23 February 2005.

comments represented a sad pride among members at Villa Road at having ‘...a black church now, innit?’ outlasting those who had so neglected hospitality.⁵⁹

I have tried to represent different strands in the language and stories people at Villa Road used to tell me what was important in their life together as a Christian community. I have in no way attempted an exhaustive or complete picture of their language and God-talk, but highlighted the themes which resonated with me and my experience, both as a fellow Christian and student of theology. In some senses then, this telling is rightly understood as being about the points of particular difference or resonance with my own spiritual tradition. Without either providing a full review of the theological literature pertaining to any of the strands highlighted, I have tried to test particular theological claims against the lived experience as described by people at Villa Road. Again, in bringing particular theologies or theologians into conversation with the on-going reflection among the congregation, I have only signalled particular difference or resonance, not imagined the outcomes of their full reflective engagement.

I heard particular clusters of concern in the way people talked about what it was to be set apart as belonging to God, transected by what I have suggested are generative themes including race, poverty, gender, displacement, and suffering. I am suggesting that holiness as negotiated by the catechetical talk at Villa Road defends against the evil of the day in practical ways, so constructed as to incorporate and respond to each of these themes. Norman Denzin has reflected that ‘...we become the stories we tell;’ I have suggested that holiness is ‘spread’ at Villa Road in talk about God, about Scripture and the Bible, and in reflection on the role of Methodist tradition.⁶⁰ As a listener, I was both challenged and resourced by these patterns of ‘telling’ holiness as they began to involve me too in the complicated process of belonging to God in this place.

III The Ethics of Identity: questions for discussion

A generation ago in the United Kingdom, the markers of holy living among Methodists might have been teetotalism, or Sabbath-keeping: the distinctiveness of Methodism in this country is still associated with these markers for many outside the church, and some inside it. And other markers have replaced these. It is true that stewards in my churches today will still giggle (before taking it) when I offer them a glass of wine, but they would challenge me directly if I were brazenly to mix up a mug of non-fairtrade coffee in their presence. Indeed, I know of one small church nearby me where the lady who organises a fair trade product stall, which she faithfully lays out for passers-by on Sundays, will not actually SELL on the Sabbath. A generational mixture of holy-living markers at odds with each other and provoking alternative mirth and frustration among those who would like to be her customers. Is this the holy living which will serve the present age, our calling to fulfill?

I am not suggesting that her commitments, contradictory as they are, are less than holy and genuine: may God save us from theology that stamps out 'sanctified eccentricity.'⁶¹ I am suggesting, from the account of negotiated holiness at Villa

⁵⁹ VC, 26 January 2005, 5.30ff.

⁶⁰ Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Biography* (Qualitative Research Methods Series, 17), (London: Sage Publications, 1989), p. 81.

⁶¹ I borrow this phrase (in slightly different context) from Douglas Strong, 'Sanctified Eccentricity: the continued Relevance of the Nineteenth Century Holiness Paradigm,' Wesleyan Theological Journal,

Road, that we must recover holiness as a process of identity formation, concerned with questions of ontology. This will serve as an antidote to Christian formation that confuses ethical markers as a means of self-discipline and witness with the end of growth in grace. If in my own role in Christian formation I have slipped too far along the road of holiness as ethics, perhaps it is because the internal arguments about things like alcohol and sex, gambling and interfaith issues have exaggerated the boundaries between 'camps' within the church toward which particular ethical tags point. Perhaps this has exaggerated the importance of the tags themselves in my thinking, as I seek to know who my friends are in this changing church and to defend my position.⁶² Thus I recognise in myself a tendency towards promoting holiness as '...getting the moral issues right and leveraging others to think and act the right way, as do we,' and I hope for something more.⁶³

I hope that in church, elsewhere as at Villa Road we do still form people in something called holiness, with an mature interplay of being and doing that is not too tidy to prevent challenge and change. I hope we still see spreading holiness, challenging the dehumanising aspects of our age as central to our sense of mission, and I hope fervently that holiness refers to more than the reactive, ethical twitch expressed as 'hide the Nescafe' or 'for heaven's sake, put your wedding ring back on.' However it might play out, that twitch is still only and ever 'Jesus is coming, look busy.' On bad days in real life, I fear that I either nurture people who come to Methodist churches in the 'look busy'-ness of broadly ethical living, or else in a privatised Christian-ish spirituality which first cuts us off from our communities by diverting our time and energy into churchy structures, and then authorises that withdrawal with a gentle dualism condemning the 'world out there.'

This points an ethical problem for those interested in Christian formation, one that is heightened rather than resolved by the account of holiness at Villa Road. How distinctive should we be? If spreading holiness is what we are about, where should church think of itself as being located, in relation to that which is outside it? The metaphors we use to consider 'our present age' and Christians forming within it carry ethical implications: should the activities of church form disciples in an account of holiness that counsels separation from wider society, implied in the use of metaphors like Stanley Hauerwas' 'resident alien'?⁶⁴ This has the attraction of clear resistance and distinctiveness, not to mention protection for disciples, but presents the problem of exaggerated alterity and rejection of the 'other.' The community at Villa Road is tightly bounded, but no more so (though expressed in different local vernacular) than most small rural chapel congregations. I acknowledge the clear benefits of strongly distinctive Christian community, but also the discipline of hospitality, which I hope would be central to any ethic of formation 'in Christ' that we offered.

(Wilmore, KY, USA: Wesleyan Theological Society, April 2000), pp. 9-21.

http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/31-35/WTJ%2035-1.pdf

⁶² I am here challenged by the approach of Miroslav Volf, as he considers with some vulnerability the responsible use of memory and grievance in the process of reconciliation. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

⁶³ Brueggemann, *Op. Cit.*, 2007, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Colony*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).

Should the churches nurture adherents in holiness built on 'unassuming engagement' with the ethics and being of the worlds in which we live?⁶⁵ This has the advantage of allowing openness and dialogue, but may lose the distinctiveness of Christian ethos and its prophetic critique of injustice. My goal has been to bring the experience of the congregation at Villa Road to this discussion, not to resolve the various metaphors into a correct one, but to explore the tensions and opportunities between them.

Moving beyond the experience at Villa Road, how church should locate itself in relation to, and engage with the norms of wider culture and its immediate setting? If a process of negotiating the substance of holiness is to serve as a guide for formation, how distinctive in its context should holiness seek to be? What does it mean to live a holy life, in the ethical marketplace of Christian identity? What if the markers of holy living become oppressive, or preserve patterns of power that exclude? Wittingly and unwittingly, how does the activity of church form people to re-member Methodist identity in holiness and to spread it, for 'the present age our calling to fulfil?' This paper has argued that the project of spreading scriptural holiness is still relevant to our church life, and that we can usefully recast the language of holiness to direct a process of mature formation as Christians in a complicated and diverse world.

⁶⁵ Walter Brueggemann, 'Vision for a New Church and a New Century: Holiness Becomes Generosity,' Chapter 10 in *The Word that Re-describes the World: the Bible and Discipleship*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p.186, 187.

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