

**How can a white minister**  
**“SERVE THE PRESENT AGE, OUR CALLING TO**  
**FULFILL”**  
**within a black Majority congregation?**

**Martin Tullett – Oxford – 2007**

It is my contention that ministry in the Methodist Church in Britain at the present moment would be served well in its task of, to borrow the title of one new initiative in British Methodism, “extending discipleship, exploring vocation” (EDEV) by the recovery of theologically “thick” or dense language, structured around biblical and personal narrative. By “thick” language I mean language which is intentionally traditioned, descriptive and evaluative<sup>1</sup>. This includes greater confidence in our distinctive Methodist heritage but is not limited to that. I’m not alone in this, of course. To take three very different examples, last connexional year (2005/6) saw the publication of a report which encouraged us to believe that it was “Time to talk of God<sup>2</sup>”, that intentional spiritual conversation was a transformative thing, part of a

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<sup>1</sup> The word is becoming commonly used as a contrast to morally neutral “thin” discourse. As a random example see, “talk of character is a “thick” discourse, intermingling evaluative and descriptive elements... it’s actually rather hard to think of character attributions that are readily understood as evaluatively neutral.” John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour* Cambridge: CUP 2002 p.5

<sup>2</sup> Time to Talk of God, published by the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2005

renewed pattern of discipleship. Secondly, Jonathan Green<sup>3</sup>, lay worker at Westminster Central Hall, said this on his blog, “I truly see the mission of the church as joining with God in the recreation of the world. Of helping to render a new world that displays the style of God. And our rhetoric has the power to shape and form communities in very significant ways.” Thirdly, a Roman Catholic, Gavin D’Costa makes this point with regard to a Christian institution of Higher Education. He argues that the theologian is captive to Modernity within the secular university and that “if theology needs to break free from its Babylonian captivity within the confines of the secular university, then theologians need to learn to pray, as part of their vocation as theologians.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to describe theology as primarily concerned with a communal love affair with God. For me this conviction is strengthened by my experiences as a white Methodist minister in a Black majority congregation.

My conviction on this matter has grown over several years out of an inarticulate feeling that somehow we had lost confidence and has acquired a little fumbling articulation through reading Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon from American Methodism and Walter Brueggemann from the Reformed tradition in America. There seems to be no British equivalent but I have drawn on the work of Anthony Reddie with regard to Caribbean peoples’ appreciation of personal and Biblical narratives. I remain unsure of the value of my fifth source<sup>5</sup> but I also want to look at recent pronouncements of former President of conference Tom Stuckey, who is predicting that a revived Methodist church is a possibility and that such a church will reflect the relative conservatism of the growing churches of the developing world.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.sanctuary-westminster.org](http://www.sanctuary-westminster.org)

<sup>4</sup> Theology in the Public Square Oxford: Blackwell 2005, p.113. Much of chapter four is arguing for what I have called here thick language.

<sup>5</sup> only because I have only recently become aware of what he is saying despite him being one of my

In the context of this Oxford institute, gathering together as it does many American Methodists and a significant number of developing world Methodists I would like to explore whether this is at all coherent.

Firstly let me explore how this inarticulate desire first grew. During my time as a minister I have, until recently, grown steadily more liberal via John Robinson, Jack Spong and Don Cupitt; interestingly these writers are Anglican, not Methodist; the key Methodist author I read at the same time as these mainly Anglican authors was John Vincent, of whom one minister to whom I spoke in the course of my PhD research<sup>6</sup> said, “he remained Christocentric and so retained much that secular, or death of God theology, lost. Indeed he’s a ‘Christocentric fundamentalist!’”. Discouragement in church work and a general tiredness and disillusionment had left me at times wondering if I have a faith at all. In that sense my personal journey mirrors the collapse reflected in the statistics of decline. The Methodist church is dying. People still bring babies for baptism, still desire marriage, still bring in their dead for funerals. People still ask profound questions, but in ever fewer numbers. The Methodist Church is not alone in this. Historian Callum Brown has said, “Britain is showing the world how religion as we know it can die<sup>7</sup>”.

On my best days I was very Methodist, very Arminianist, but I have had a contradictory hankering for both my charismatic and my high church past. Partly my desire for a charismatic or evangelical faith was heightened by a feeling that church people’s faith is

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college tutors when I trained for the ministry!

<sup>6</sup> Conversation. Further on in this paper I will rely on more formal interview material., in those parts fictional names are used.

<sup>7</sup> The death of Christian Britain London: Routledge, 2001, p.198

both warmer and more conservative than mine. In white congregations the conservatism has been deeply unappealing but in my Caribbean majority context there are radical social attitudes held by members that mesh with this theological warmth and conservatism in very appealing ways. Members of my congregation demonstrate that a fervent prayer life, engaged with a loving saviour can inhabit the same soul as a radical critique of an unjust and racist society.

The first part of the title of our conference is also the only words we have in the architecture of the chapel I now serve. In a large rose window the purpose of Fernhead Road Methodist Church, Paddington, London, is proclaimed to be “to serve the present age”. Fernhead Road Methodist Church has approximately 140 members on paper, a regular attendance of a little below 100 including children. The congregation is mainly made up of people born in the Caribbean Islands, especially Barbados, Montserrat, Jamaica and also St.Kitts, St.Vincent, Dominica, and Grenada, as well as Guyana in South America. There are a small number of members and friends from Sri Lanka, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Australia, Ghana and South Africa, as well as a small number of white English and black people born in England (who tend to describe themselves as “British” or “Black British” or “Black of Caribbean origin” and not “English”). In the past the church has had members and visitors from USA, Korea, India, Ireland, Canada and Wales.

Being unsure how I should proceed in obedience to those words on the window I embarked on some reflection which will turn into a PhD thesis on models of good practice for white ministers in black majority contexts. In pursuit of the research for this

I used a qualitative ethnographic research model<sup>8</sup> and the pastoral cycle model<sup>9</sup> of reflection. One aspect of the ethnographic research was an attempt to discover if there were specifically Methodist resources to help white ministers pursue their calling in a multi ethnic context. In this connection I asked a number of white ministers who had positive experiences as white ministers in black majority congregations to share with me their thoughts on how they had reflected theologically on their contexts. In what follows the discussion revolves around how theology enables good practice for white ministers in black majority contexts but I include it here as part of my wider musings on the recovery of theological language in the practice of Methodism. Several ministers I talked to indicated that they felt that ministers are more liberal than their people, and that this was not specific to any racially defined context.

In terms of the lay people, the following table<sup>10</sup> shows how people identified themselves. This is based on the responses of 29,000 Methodists from 700 churches. On this question they were allowed to pick up to two labels to describe themselves. 93.7% of these respondents identified themselves as “White-British”. It is not possible to determine from the report if White-Other (2.4%), Caribbean (1%) or smaller minorities responded in significantly different ways to the majority. The list of options is open to criticism: where is “radical” for example! A survey conducted in the area covered by the new London District<sup>11</sup> described 47.3% of members as from “Ethnic Minorities” but there is no data on how people identify themselves theologically though a strong suggestion throughout of the importance of the Methodist label to Black members.

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<sup>8</sup> a method of study detailed and explored in Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, Ethnography London: Routledge, 1983 for example.

<sup>9</sup> As described by, for example, Laurie Green Let's Do Theology London: Continuum, 1990 and Emmanuel Larty In Living Color London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley publishers

<sup>10</sup> This is table 4.4 in Church Life Profile 2001, Denominational Results for The Methodist Church, Phillip Escott and Alison Gelder Published by *Churches Information for Mission* 2002

Approach	Methodist %	Other %
catholic	6	9
evangelical	18	30
reformed	8	5
charismatic	4	11
pentecostal	2	4
fundamentalist	1	1
conservative	8	8
moderate	17	9
liberal	8	5
post-modern	1	1
new age	1	1
don't identify	24	16
Total	100	100

The Methodist Church in Great Britain is less Evangelical or Charismatic than average but more moderate, liberal or “don’t identify” than average. Those who prepared the report commented that, “By far the largest number of responses came from people who said they did not identify with any of these terms to describe their approach to faith. This is a much higher rating than for other denominations and it may be important in itself as a description of how Methodists perceive themselves. It is also possible that the list of approaches failed to

reflect the essence of Methodism as perceived by those involved. The next largest group (though only just) consisted of those who saw themselves as evangelical. Since the Methodist Church is essentially the product of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Evangelical movement, it is interesting to recognise that this strand in the tradition remains important, if no longer dominant. However, the proportion who see themselves as evangelical is considerably lower than in other denominations, taken as a whole.<sup>12</sup>”

None of the white ministers I interviewed, regardless of sex or age, used much explicitly theological language. In terms of creating an inclusive church, Methodism’s “Four alls” means that there is inherent within Methodism a desire to include all people

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<sup>11</sup> The Methodist Church in the Global City Matthew Wood, Report for the Southlands Methodist Centre, 2002, p.26.

<sup>12</sup> p.12

and to not to distinguish by race. Sam<sup>13</sup>, like John and Dennis referred to below, is an experienced inner city minister. He says, “I am firmly of the opinion that Methodist liturgy, with the theology behind it, gives every opportunity for introducing black members into the church. The minister has a privileged position – preparing people for baptism, confirmation, and marriage and then being involved in funeral arrangements. Even those who are attracted by charismatic churches and their theology will often come back to Methodism for these rites of passage and even those who have left the church altogether will still view the Methodist Minister as ‘their minister’ at these times.” Methodist hymns were mentioned by others as having a powerful role in the church and present theology in an unrivalled way.

John says, “In as much as Methodism has distinctive theology, we genuinely believed as an iron discipline that we had to go to those who needed us most and therefore got involved in fighting slum landlords, high rents, ugly and sometimes violent racial prejudice. The unexpected benefit of this was the amazing way the African and Caribbean workers and their families flooded into the (location) Methodist Church.” Methodism however has not always operated like that of course, history is much more ambiguous but the “four alls” and the imperative to mission to those who need us most are there to challenge our practice, to remind us to be an inclusive and to be a church where power and access to decision making is not based on racial distinctions. Examples from London in the 1950’s and 1960’s exist to challenge the stereotype of a Church that completely failed to welcome migrants from the Caribbean. Pauline Webb says that, “To ensure that this should not be so locally, outside the church of which he was minister in Railton Road, Brixton, my father had a large notice board erected

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<sup>13</sup> As part of that research I interviewed a number of ministers. In what follows single Christian names indicate someone who was interviewed. The names are false

stating ‘West Indians very welcome here!’<sup>14</sup>” In North Paddington, Methodist members have told me of Rev. George Lockett and his bike, visiting groups of Caribbean Christians and encouraging them to join Fernhead Road.

Older ministers mentioned ecumenical resources and themes to guide and inspire their work whereas younger ministers were more likely to be focused on Methodism. For example Dennis referred to “People like Pauline Webb who lived on a kind of world map... who always brought back perceptions of the World Church.” He also referred to going as a theological student to the 4<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Church in Uppsala in Sweden in 1968, when Kenneth Kaunda as President of Zambia and James Baldwin, the Black American Author spoke and the World Council “really shifted a gear into the whole perception of race and development as issues of global injustice.... It was the event which led to the setting up of the programme to combat racism at the World Council of Churches which started at Notting Hill in 1969 in which Pauline Webb was a part and that whole process I think was as much a process and a prophetic witness by the World Church that kind of shifted my thinking during that period as much as individuals.” He also referred to a black activist who interrupted a major conference and “challenged people there to make reparations, financial reparations for what they’d done in the past in terms of slavery and colonialism... it shook people up to face the fact that there was real emotion and real anger from the black community in terms of the way they have been and still were being treated.” It is known that this WCC focus coming into the British Council of Churches had a major impact in North Paddington, stimulating the development of community work at Trinity Methodist Church.

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<sup>14</sup> World Wide Webb Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006, p.10

Stories from Methodist history, especially where Methodism was a force for social change, were a help to reflection for some of the Ministers I interviewed. Examples quoted by those I interviewed included Wesley writing one of his last letters to William Wilberforce to support him in his campaign against the slave trade, Methodism’s role in enabling the Labour Movement in the nineteenth century, and Primitive Methodism’s support of agricultural labourers. These examples show that Methodism was an agent not only of charity but also of social justice. All the examples were of social radicalism, not of racial inclusivity.

A number of books influenced older Ministers I talked to, including *News from Notting Hill*, a book emerging from the team ministry there<sup>15</sup> and Bruce Kenrick’s *Coming out of the Wilderness*<sup>16</sup>. Kenrick’s book includes a preface by Trevor Huddleston. The language of both Huddleston and Kenrick is, by contrast to the ministers I interviewed, thickly theological. Huddleston stresses the incarnational nature of the story Kenrick goes on to tell, exploring notions of identification and, Kenrick’s preferred word rather than incarnation, participation. Kenrick himself in beginning to tell the story of Dom Benedict explores the meaning of “Go ye into all the world...” for the young seminarian, and how he begins to explore mission on his doorstep. What struck me was that while this was named as an influence none of the respondents used such densely theological language themselves.

Stuckey<sup>17</sup>, who I mentioned earlier, says that we, the Methodist Church, “are standing

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<sup>15</sup> *News from Notting Hill: The Formation of a Group Ministry*, David Mason, Geoffrey Ainger, Norwyn Denny, (London, Epworth Press, 1967)

<sup>16</sup> London: Fontana Books 1962

<sup>17</sup> From an article on the Methodist Evangelical Together website ([www.headway.org](http://www.headway.org))

on the edge of Pentecost. The Church in Britain is being graciously given a “kairos moment”. We have a brief window of opportunity... to turn the church around, or to be more accurate, 'to repent and believe'...” It is not entirely clear what he basis this on besides inner conviction. He has said, “Because the centre of Christianity has shifted from the rich North to the poor South the World church will be more spiritually vibrant, evangelical and probably more theologically conservative” implying by this that the Church in Britain will reflect this. He also indicates that he believes there will be a rainbow variety of Churches<sup>18</sup>, each representing some aspect of the multiplicity of languages, peoples and cultures.

Within British Methodism, Anthony Reddie has reflected theologically on the experiences of Black people in and around the church. According to Reddie<sup>19</sup> “The wisdom and experience of Black Elders... provide a hugely important resource for the spiritual development and general nurturing of faith amongst a younger generation of potential believers.” He goes on to say that “a largely God-fearing community (*i.e. the Windrush generation*) in Britain at that time reminded a so-called Christian country that we are called to love God with all we possess and to love our neighbour as ourselves.” The thesis of his book (of which these quoted words are part of the conclusion) is that Afro-Caribbean elders in Britain are people shaped by faith and still predominantly theistic in their approach to life and who express that faith orally and in narrative, making constant connections between Biblical narratives and personal narratives. He

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<sup>18</sup> This image is explored in much more detail in [Into the Far Country](#) Peterborough: Epworth 2003 pp.33ff. His stress on “rainbow” variety saves his prediction of revival from the narrowness of fundamentalist pronouncements of the same. The kind of klocal theologues advocated by Reddie would seem quite possible within this visiuon of the church.

<sup>19</sup> [Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders](#) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001, pp.119&120

draws on the work of various writers including Cone, Fowler and Wimberley<sup>20</sup>. That white ministers are somewhat reluctant to use thickly theological or scriptural language puts them at a disadvantage in communicating effectively with Church members.

But the issue may be wider than this, and wider than that with which my PhD is concerned. Reddie’s account of the spiritual orientation of the Windrush generation and its oral and narrative expression with its potential for passing faith to another generation has much in common, in a more specific location, with the scheme of Hauerwas and Willimon.

Hauerwas and Willimon<sup>21</sup> argue that liberalism is bankrupt. State sponsored wars and the moral failure of the atomic bombs are just an example of this failure. The Jesus who transcends his Jewishness is just one step short of the Nazi superman and the annihilation of the Jews. In contrast to liberalism they say that “The Bible is fundamentally a story of a people’s journey with God.”<sup>22</sup> They go on to explore how narrative gives coherence to life, and Biblical stories specifically help us to see life as gift. “The little story I call my life is given cosmic, eternal significance as it is caught up within God’s larger account of history.” An aspect of this is the replacement of ethics as something universally applicable with a notion of virtue arising out of story. They emphasise the encounter with the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the community and eschatological context of Christian ethics, the high demand this places on the believer and the example of the saints.

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<sup>20</sup> The works of Cone and Fowler are fairly well known. Less well known is the work of Edward P. Wimberley who explores the connection between personal narrative and Biblical narrative in pastoral practice in an African-American context. See Prayer in Pastoral Counselling Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press 1990; African American Pastoral Care Nashville: Abingdon Press 1991; Moving from Shame to Self-Worth Nashville: Abingdon Press 1999 for example.

<sup>21</sup> Resident Aliens Nashville: Abingdon Press 1989

Walter Brueggemann<sup>23</sup> similarly describes a collapse of liberalism, linking our loss of confidence to “the collapse of the white, male, Western world of colonialism” (a sentence that reads very differently to me in my present context than when I read it first as a university chaplain!) and continuing, “As we experience the loss of the universal, something happens to our capacity to make large, grand claims for God’s sovereignty...” In place of this “our articulation of God will need to begin again in local, contextual ways...” He asserts that “human agents are in the process of constituting reality, and that formative work is done through rhetoric.” In his work he stresses drama and narrative, for example on evangelism stressing the drama of conflict and victory<sup>24</sup>.

This approach is criticised by John Cobb<sup>25</sup>, “Post-liberalism believes that by giving up the attempt to formulate universal truths we become free to affirm our own distinctive Christian vision. This consists in an ordering of symbols and meanings that constitute the Christian faith... If it is a Wesleyan community, then it will be faithful to this Wesleyan heritage. There is a high price to be paid, however, for this move. Wesley’s evangelical zeal stemmed from his conviction that God is a reality for all people, that grace works in all, and that all are called to love God and neighbor and can be empowered to do so by grace. To think that this is one way of organizing thought, life, and feeling alongside other ways, that it is true for those who live by it but not for

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid pp.53ff

<sup>23</sup> The Bible and Post-modern Imagination London: SCM 1993. Quotes that follow are from pp.11 and 12.

<sup>24</sup> Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism Nashville: Abingdon 1993 pp.16ff

<sup>25</sup> from a series of five lectures delivered at Point Loma University, San Diego, February 2000 published on Religion-online

others, undercuts the zeal to explain to others the situation in which they objectively exist whether or not they have previously recognized it. The Wesleyan movement would never have come into existence if Wesley had thought in this way. It can be a form of renewal for those who half-heartedly commit themselves now to Wesleyan communities. It cannot motivate a new evangelism.”

Returning to my PhD topic on good practice for white ministers in black majority contexts I note that none of the respondents indicated any precedents for mixed race work before the 1950s, perhaps because few precedents exist in the UK though plenty exist in early US Methodist history. For example Russell E. Richey quotes the journal of William Colbert from 1798. “...preached at Bethel in Philadelphia at night from Matt. 11<sup>th</sup> 28 to a large company of black people and some white.” He quotes also John Kobler in 1791, “We held our Quarter Meeting in the Earleys Chappell. Many people attended both days... Black people and white, rich and poor felt the arrows of the Almighty.” Richey comments that “New creation business... did not respect the lines that the world drew, lines of language, class and race.<sup>26</sup>” He discusses the efforts to create racial inclusivity in pre civil war southern society.

Theodore Jennings<sup>27</sup> explores Wesley’s attitude to the slaves<sup>28</sup>. He points out that Wesley never refers to black people as slaves but as “negroes”. To Jennings this means Wesley saw them not as persons essentially determined by their social position. His primary concern is their evangelization, a move, Jennings points out, opposed by slave holders. Wesley was passionate in his denunciation of the slave trade, “that execrable

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<sup>26</sup> Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation, M. Douglas Meeks (ed) Kingswood Books: Nashville, Tennessee, 2004

<sup>27</sup> Good News to the Poor Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, pp.82ff

<sup>28</sup> Particularly interesting in this 200<sup>th</sup> year since the abolition of the British trade in slaves.

sum of all villainies<sup>29</sup>”. He cries out regarding the millions who died on the middle passage “O Earth, O sea, cover not their blood!<sup>30</sup>” He uses the language of rights, asserting that “the Angolan has the same natural right (*to freedom*) as an Englishman<sup>31</sup>” Jennings links this to three factors in Wesley’s thought: the demystification of wealth, solidarity with the poor and a stress on natural human rights, and in pursuing these principles was able to work in coalition with others to abolish the slave trade. Jennings does not stress this but the quotes he uses are full of scriptural and theological quotations and allusions. For example referring to expected opposition Wesley says, “But our comfort is, He that dwelleth on high is mightier”.

These two examples, records of mixed race meetings in early American Methodist history and John Wesley’s reflections on slavery, show a much more thickly scriptural and theological language at work, one in which scriptural narrative and personal, ecclesial and contemporary social narratives are intertwined.

United Methodist Bishop William Willimon quotes Stanley Hauerwas as saying, “...the most important thing pastors do today is language instruction. It is their duty to teach people a new way of naming the world, to teach them a vocabulary that is Christian<sup>32</sup>.” Willimon continues, “One of our duties as pastors is to renarrate people’s lives in the light of the story of Jesus. This rescripting shows us how our ordinary lives are caught up in the great drama of salvation. We have become victims of narratives inadequate for the truthful living of our lives--narratives derived from psychology, economics, sociology and other secular means of defining ourselves and what happens to us. But

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Jennings 1990 p.82

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p.83

<sup>31</sup> Ibid p.84

<sup>32</sup> *Christian Century* article August 2001

through teaching us a new way of seeing and naming, through new words, pastors can create new worlds for us. Through words we enable people to fit their lives into the plot of God's story, and thus to turn those lives into pilgrimages.” Elsewhere he quotes Brueggemann as saying to preachers: “You preachers are world-makers. In your words, you make a new world. And if you won’t let God use you to render a new world, then all you can do is to service the old one and that’s no fun.<sup>33</sup>”

In conclusion I believe, at least partly as a result of my encounter with a majority Black congregation, that the British Methodist Church must rediscover a “thick” discourse centred on scriptural narrative, personal narrative and Methodist tradition if it is to rediscover any vitality.

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<sup>33</sup> In Copenhaver, Robinson, Willimon *Good News in Exile* p.113 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998)