

THE PURPOSE OF SUNDAY WORSHIP IN BRITISH METHODIST CHURCHES

Introduction

John F. Boldovin¹, in Chapter 7 of Liturgy and Music: Lifelong Learning², asks the question “*Must Eucharist Do Everything?*” His answer is ‘No’ yet goes on to state: *[S]unday Eucharist is central for the life of the Church.*

*Pragmatically speaking the same holds true, for Sunday is obviously the time when the vast majority of church-going Christians assemble. In fact, given the frenetic pace in post-industrial society, Sunday will most likely be the only time that most Christians come into formal contact with the church as Church.*³

In the largest of the churches that I serve as a presbyter, in this my first year as a probationary minister, I estimate that, out of a formal membership of 96 people, with another 15 or so who could be regarded as regular adherents, only about 25% are in regular attendance of other ‘spiritual’ church-based activity. It is further the case that I estimate that only 50-60% of the ‘congregation’ can be said to be regular Sunday worshippers (based on attendance of 3 out of 4 Sundays). One cannot, of course, tell what level of personal devotion(s) individuals maintain in their living; yet such statistics raise the question of what Sunday worship means to those who attend and what difference it makes to their religious affections⁴.

¹ There are many other liturgical theologians that I could have chosen to have as a conversation partner in this essay – Boldovin is not one who is that easy to engage with as he writes from a Roman Catholic perspective – yet the title of his essay proved attractive to me.

² Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Editors). *Liturgy and Music: Lifelong Learning* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Training Press 1998) Chapter 7, pg 117-127

³ John F. Boldovin, ‘Must Eucharist Do Everything’ pg 118

⁴ In using the term religious affections I am borrowing from the work(s) of Don Saliers and more recently Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Mathews who define religious affection as ‘a deep, abiding feature of human personality that grounds and orientates us in all we know, do, and feel. The religious affections form our fundamental dispositions and attunement to the world around us’. Hotz and Mathews *Shaping the Christian Life – Worship and the Religious Affections* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press 2006) pg 9

It is also the case that worshippers in the British Methodist context are not coming to a Eucharist every week that they attend. As is the case in (nearly) all British Methodist churches the Eucharist is celebrated once a month as a morning service. For Boldovin the assumption of his article is that whilst it cannot do everything, the Eucharist is still central to corporate worship and personal spirituality. For those of us in British Methodist worship we must operate from asking the question 'what role does our Sunday worship, particularly a service of the Word, play in the lives of and in the shaping of religious affection of the congregations we serve?

Our conference is charged with examining '*[t]he Wesleyan tradition that participation in God's redemptive mission in the world is central to both our personal Christian vocation and to the nature and mission of the church*'. The focus of this paper then is on the main Sunday service of British Methodist churches – almost always the morning service. My contention is that as a minister I have to try to provide most of most people's 'spiritual nurture' through a one hour worship service once a week, and in doing so come to some understanding of how worship relates to mission.

In seeking to address this task this conference paper addresses three issues that have become significant for me. The first is focused around the issue of whether we can or should identify a purpose for worship⁵. The second is whether a worship service requires a form, style and content that matches the purpose. The third is that it seems to me the first two questions cannot be

⁵ I am aware that I am moving along completely different lines here to the Orthodox tradition as set out by Alexander Schmemmann in, for example, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1973). Here is presented an almost completely different perspective on worship and is deeply critical of 'western' formulations, within which we are operating. Schmemmann would understand the church at worship as part of the redemption of the world. I am not in any way dismissing this thought but also asking how worship links to and inspires mission.

answered in the abstract – they must take account of pastoral concerns, in particular the historical and current context of the worshipping community.

Approaching Liturgical Theology⁶ through Practical Theology – Purpose of Worship

Returning to Boldovin's premise that the Eucharist cannot do everything, we will accept that the morning worship service in a British Methodist church cannot do everything – everything that is that might encourage, inspire and enable people to learn the faith; develop a strong personal spirituality; shape a specific community; bring new people to faith; enable us to participate in God's redemptive mission; and other 'reasons' or 'hopes' we might have for public worship, including the mundane like advertising the other activities of the church during the week.

John Wesley perhaps believed that a primary purpose of worship was to inspire Scriptural Holiness among people. We are all well aware that Wesley encouraged early Methodists to attend both 'preaching' services and services of Holy Communion at the parish church.⁷ And Norman Wallwork indicates Wesley offered much more to achieve his aim. *Outside the forms for the Sunday and occasional services which Wesley included in the Sunday Service, his other legacy to the Methodists was a series of supplementary acts of worship designed, like the whole movement, to spread scriptural holiness.*⁸

⁶ I am using the term liturgical theology in its widest sense as set out by Dwight Vogel in *Primary Sources of Theology – A Reader* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Training Press – A Pueblo Book 2000)

⁷ In relation to the 'preaching service Wesley says 'If it were designed to be instead of Church Service, it would be essentially defective. For it seldom has the four grand parts of public prayer: deprecation, petition, intercession and thanksgiving. Neither is it, even on the Lord's day, concluded with the Lord's Supper'. *Minutes of the Methodist Conference*, vol 1 (London: The Conference Office 1812) 58

⁸ John Stacey (Editor). *John Wesley – Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Epworth Press 1988) C. Norman R. Wallwork. Wesley's Legacy in Worship Chapter 7 pg. 86

If we assume, as Wallwork indicates, that Scriptural Holiness was Wesley's purpose, and this is what he understood to be God's redemptive purpose we need to ask, in this day and age, if this still our primary purpose; and we will need to do the best we can in the limited time people give us their attention to achieve this aim. Or if our aim is otherwise defined we still have to struggle with the one hour a week problem.

However, we will be aware that we are pursuing a route that many liturgical theologians warn us against – that of making worship an instrumental tool to achieve a specific purpose. Boldovin states: *[o]nce the liturgy becomes instrumental for other ends (i.e., cannot be appreciated in and of itself), then it loses its fundamental raison d'être. This is the case because liturgy is by definition ritual activity, and the ritual nature of celebration suffers when we force the Eucharist to become something it isn't.*

Boldovin, whose argument that the liturgy should not be regarded as instrumental, does however, believe that the liturgy achieves things through ritual action, in particular, for him, initiation of the individual into the Christian community⁹, community-building¹⁰ and for 'the welfare of the world'¹¹. Along with many other liturgical theologians Boldovin acknowledges that '*the Eucharist is both formative and transformative*'¹².

How can we imagine a liturgy that is of and for itself only (or at least only for God), but that is by its very nature transformative? Even as Boldovin suggests that the liturgy should not be instrumental he is stating transformation is achieved through the ritual action of a specific type of liturgy. Boldovin states: *The ritual does its work, I would submit, by means of two basic ritual*

⁹ Boldovin. *Must Eucharist Do Everything* pg 119

¹⁰ Boldovin. *Must Eucharist Do Everything* pg 124

¹¹ Boldovin. *Must Eucharist Do Everything* pg. 127

¹² Boldovin. *Must Eucharist Do Everything* pg. 127

*structures: the interplay of proclamation and action, and the four-fold shape of the Eucharistic action itself.[t]he ongoing repetition of this ritual is essential to the gradual transformation of individuals and communities into the body of Christ.*¹³

We are all aware that all worship contains ritual action (and should include the study of non-verbal actions as well as those of spoken word). In British Methodist 'preaching' services, however, as most commonly practiced, the ritual described by Boldovin is not apparent. My own research is suggesting that week by week variations in service orders and ways of presentation are reducing ritual action, in the sense of repetition at least.

Boldovin also stresses that 'entry into the Pascal Mystery' is the main purpose of the Eucharist, and this is what causes the 'gradual transformation of individuals and communities'. In British Methodism with most services being services of the word, it is not entry to the Pascal Mystery that is paramount and indeed many, many services, against Boldovin's argument follow specific themes/ideas. The proliferation of 'Special Sundays' adds to the pressure to treat each week as a separate act of worship with its own theme and agenda.

Counter to the grain of most liturgical theology, which wants to disclaim instrumentalism, I want to acknowledge that all forms of worship lead to outcomes in the way they shape, form and transform (or mis-form) individuals and communities and to adopt the approach of practical theology that assumes, indeed revels in the task of instrumentalism, to explore if there are connections between forms of worship and outcomes.

¹³ Boldovin *Must Eucharist Do Everything* pg. 120

Stephen Pattison states that practical theology *[a]sks from a standpoint of faith commitment – What do people do? Why do they do it? What do they think and believe about what they are doing? How does the way in which people act affect what they think and believe, and vice versa? Should they change their way of acting, thinking or believing?*¹⁴

I want to ask Pattison's questions in relation to worship? I want to ask how the way we worship affects what we think and believe – and perhaps the way we actually act.

Does this not open up a space for us to pick up the other 'practical' questions that Pattison asks, in particular, 'should they change their way of acting, thinking or believing?' I want to assume, at this point, that worship should have as a minimum an aim of formation and transformation (leaving aside for the moment formation and transformation toward what?). If we believe that worship is to 'transform us' is it not right to ask what we should do in and about worship – how we should shape and conduct it; and, in the context of this conference – How can our worship meet the needs of the present age? These are matters where practical theology intersect with liturgical theology – behind service orders, the regularity of the celebration of the eucharist, the nature and content of the hymns and songs sung, the choice of scripture reading, the use of technology, the participation of the assembly, the authority of the 'priest' and so on; behind all of these are practical implications of how worship impacts on people and shapes their religious affections.

My questions and the challenge posed in this paper then relate to the ways in which the choices we (leaders of worship) make as to the style and

¹⁴ Stephen Pattison. *Lecture 1 – Ordinary Blindness Gifford Lectures*. www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/texts.shtml

content of worship, based upon (often unthought-of) assumptions about the meaning and purpose of worship. Whilst bearing in mind the warnings of 'professional' liturgical theologians that liturgy is in and for its own sake, or for God's sake, I take an unapologetic practical approach asking - what is it that we do and how does this shape the 'church'? I believe that such an approach opens up to us the opportunity, through seeing and studying what we do, to examine closely and clearly our agendas.

In taking such an approach I am not denying the various historical forms of worship that have been part of the Church's life for centuries. I am not advocating that we spend an hour each week in behavioural therapy to change our beliefs and attitudes. Change to religious affections is generated and sustained by participation in the worship of the triune God. But I am asking us to examine if the approaches and form we take to worship now are enabling us to be formed and transformed as Christian people and communities in this present age? And I am seeking to show how form and content are intrinsically linked to purpose and outcome. I will do this by examining different models/modes of worship that are in the practice of British Methodism today.

Methodist Worship – Methodist Agendas – Purpose and Form

James White, critic of some of the orthodoxy that has emerged in much liturgical theology around the idea of *ordo*, notes that many different church traditions and spiritualities have proved enduring over a period of time. Two of the criterion he suggests that make worship authentic are if worship produces saints, and worship expects encounter with God.¹⁵ He also

¹⁵ James White. 'How do they know it is us?' *Liturgy and the Moral Self – Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Training Press 1998) pg. 64

recognises that some forms of public worship have achieved these outcomes over an historical period.

The 'preaching' service is, at least within the British Methodist tradition, in that it is a non-Eucharistic service, around 270 years old, so it seems to meet one of White's criteria. The problem is, as I shall show below, that it has changed almost beyond recognition, and we may therefore question whether it actually still exists. Its purpose was, Burdon states: *When the service took place in public the intention was evangelistic, to awaken the sleeping sinner to the need for inner holiness. When the service was an event on the timetable of the Methodist society, added to this intention was that of encouraging those already awakened.*¹⁶

Historical accounts of people's responses to these services suggest that encounters with God did indeed take place and that 'saints' were produced and souls saved.

Today Angela Shier-Jones says: *Methodist preaching, like Methodist hymn singing should contribute to the transformation of the individual by God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.*¹⁷

And Burdon certainly wants to claim that nothing has really changed in relation to the goals of worship: *It is in John Wesley's motivation, then, that the distinctive character of Methodism and Methodist worship is to be found. That character is both soteriological and evangelical concerned to express the great truths of salvation and to bring men and women to an acceptance of them. A Methodism consistent with its historical origins must be concerned*

¹⁶ Adrian Burdon. *The Preaching Service- The Glory of The Methodists – A study of piety, ethos and the development of the Methodist Preaching Service* (Alcuin/GROW Liturgical Study 17. Bramcote: Grove Books 1991) pg. 25

¹⁷ Angela Shier-Jones. *A Work In Progress – Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth 2005) pg. 213

*with aspiring to heaven, attaining holiness, finding salvation. Methodist worship is to enable the expression of such aspirations and to facilitate the encounter and exchange between heaven and earth.*¹⁸

But the 'preaching' service has changed in style and content. It is true that in British Methodism the 'preaching' service, in that it is not a Eucharistic service, remains predominant; but as Burdon has said: *There is a wider appreciation to the different elements of worship and a greater expression of balance between preaching and other aspects of worship.*¹⁹

However, he continues this same paragraph with his assumption that these different ways are merely new ways to achieve the same goal of finding 'the way to heaven'²⁰ and with Shier-Jones keeps emphasis on the transformation of the individual.

Healey and Francis however state the general assumption of the purpose of worship has shifted in recent times, employing the word 'nurture', which has a different connotation to salvation. *[S]unday worship of the Methodist Church provides the main opportunity for nurturing the faithful and the main shop window through which to attract new members.....*²¹

The emphasis here is on recruitment of members into the church with all its members nurtured through worship - not that these two objectives necessarily sit comfortably together, and have in some places led to what have been described as the 'Worship Wars', with one 'camp' wanting to

¹⁸ Adrian Burdon. 'Forgiven, loved and free....: the distinctive character of Methodist Worship'. Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (Editors). *Methodism and the Future – Facing the Challenge* (London and New York: Continuum 1999) pg. 58

¹⁹ Burdon. 'Forgiven, loved and free' pg. 58

²⁰ Burdon. 'Forgiven, loved and free'. pg 62

²¹ John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis. *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth 2006) pg. 87

preserve tradition to keep the faithful, and the other 'camp' seeking to find new expressions of worship to attract new recruits.

In addition, our hymnody has changed, also to give us support towards new objectives and outcomes: *The focus of Hymns and Psalms is (thus) on the Church, not on salvation. The 'Christian Life' remains highly significant, but does not predominate. In 1983, the focus is on ecclesiology – what it means to be God's people.*²²

Indeed, Maizel-Long goes as far as to say that: *Methodist theology has become less centred on evangelism, and the pilgrimage of individual Christians, and more concerned with being church, a body of people exploring what it means to be the People of Christ in the world.*²³

I wonder then if David Chapman's analysis is too simplistic to be of much comfort to us: *In the past the preaching service proved eminently adaptable to changing circumstances. There is no reason to suppose that the preaching service will not continue to develop in order to meet the requirements of the present age.*²⁴

We are in a situation where both variables have to be considered together – can we even use the term 'preaching' services when we are emphasising other aspects of worship; and if present day needs have altered and we have different purposes for worship do we need new forms of services.

Indeed Chapman has seen this as he writes: *It is evident that the Methodist preaching service has changed considerably in the course of 250*

²² Judith Maizel-Long. 'Theology Sung and Celebrated'. Clive Marsh et al (Editors) *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (New York and London: Continuum 2004) pg 50

²³ Judith Maizel-Long. 'Theology Sung and Celebrated' pg 57

²⁴ David M. Chapman. *Born in Song – Methodist Worship in Britain* (Warrington: Church in the Market Place 2006) pg. 62

*years, transformed almost beyond recognition from a simple vehicle for the evangelical proclamation of the Gospel into a sophisticated act of public worship ordered on liturgical principles. There is nothing in the Methodist Worship Book to suggest the service has an evangelical purpose. Whilst the sermon retains a prominent place in the service, no longer is it the obvious denouement but just one element among others.*²⁵

It is this connection between worship designed to support preaching, for evangelical aims, or worship containing preaching to provide a 'sophisticated act of public worship' that lies at the heart of the discussion on purpose and form.

Is then our aim for worship simply to have a 'sophisticated act of public worship'? Or does the form 'ordered on liturgical principles' have a purpose? My suspicion is that Methodism, whilst officially adopting 'liturgical' forms through the Methodist Service Book and the Methodist Worship Book has simply not comprehended that the forms are given to enable outcomes to be achieved that are different from the evangelical outcomes of the 'preaching' service.

The liturgical movement has taken most explaining to Methodists. It might be better to call it the renewal of worship. The very word 'liturgy' suggests to many people something printed, fixed, and compulsory, rather than extemporaneous, spontaneous, and free. But, as its derivation from Greek words meaning 'the work of the people' implies, it stands for the conception of worship as a corporate act, not performed by an individual priest on behalf of – still less instead of – the people, nor yet performed for the edification of individuals, but as an act in which God in Christ speaks to and

²⁵ Chapman. *Born in Song* pg. 61

*listens to and indwells Christ's body, the Church. This runs counter to some of the ideas of pietistic individualism, but is congenial to the true heart of Methodism.*²⁶

The reality of the current situation is that the full adoption of service orders (along with other liturgical renewal ideas about use of lectionary, presidency, aesthetics, architecture etc) designed to enable different outcomes is still minimal. Very few 'preachers' use the Methodist Worship Book and its suggested order of service for non-Eucharistic worship. Sometimes this is through the resistance of individual 'preachers'. 25 years after the publication of the Methodist Service Book, Dr. Kellett wrote in 'Icthus', the Local Preachers' Magazine in 2004: *'How did this (the placing of the sermon in the middle of the service) happen? Did somebody (or some body) authorise it – and on what ground? The traditional structure meant that the preacher could round off and drive home his or her "message" with an appropriate hymn, giving the congregation something spiritual to take away with them. The fashion of having the intercessory prayers at this point diverts attention to different topics and minimises the impact of the sermon. I think it is a most unfortunate change and refuse to accept it. After 50 years of preaching I am not going along with trendies who want to tone down the sermon!'*²⁷

There are many reasons²⁸ why the new service orders have not been taken up fully and often²⁹. One is Methodism's own reluctance to fully endorse the changes. Officially the Methodist Worship Book, like its

²⁶ A. Raymond George. *The Changing Face of Methodism – The Methodist Service Book* (Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society – Volume XLI October 1977) pg. 65-66

²⁷ Dr. Arnold Kellett. *Icthus* (Local Preacher's Mutual Aid Society Spring 2004) p. 10

²⁸ Negative attitudes to the reforms may also be seen in an article entitled 'An audit of Worship at a Methodist Church, *Epworth Review* 30.4 (2003)

²⁹ My own as yet unfinished PhD concentrates to a large degree on the historical processes that have led to this situation.

predecessor the Methodist Service Book states: *These forms (of service orders) are not intended to curb creative freedom, but rather to provide norms for its guidance. Within our heritage, both fixed and freer expressions of worship have been, and should continue to be, valued.*³⁰

One notable outcome of the changes that have been widely adopted is the moving of prayers of intercession to after the sermon. But the aim of the reformers in Methodism, most notably Raymond George, was to get a 'long prayer' said after the sermon that included intercessions along with thanksgiving and dedication and the Lord's Prayer. This has simply not happened – the shape would lead to a reflection of the Eucharistic service and be a declaration of the 'Paschal Mystery' week-by week.

What has happened may be described as a hybrid service – somewhere between a sophisticated public act of worship and a preaching service. If worship is about encounter with God in order to nurture, the following evidence would suggest that worship is not achieving these aims. In the Church Life Profile³¹ published in 2002 Methodism was notable in its worship for ranking low in its worship giving worshippers experience of awe or mystery and inspiration. In an unpublished Masters dissertation Susan Johnson has written from her research that Methodists: *[C]oming to meet with God, to give and to receive from him in worship, did not seem to be part of the package of worship. It seems to be more important to develop and maintain a relationship with each other that developing a relationship with God*³²

³⁰ The Methodist Worship Book. (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 1999) Preface vii

³¹ Philip Escott and Alison Gelder: *Church Life Profile 2001*

³² Susan Johnson. *Methodist Spirituality Today*. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Sheffield 2006

Further, Haley and Francis report that two-thirds of ministers feel that worship is often dull.³³ They express the view that there is much uncertainty about the quality of preaching. They support the idea that preaching remains at the heart of worship, designed to bring people to faith but state that there is a lack of confidence amongst ministers about the quality of preaching.³⁴ I think we need to ask, not just does the 'preaching' service serve the purpose of the past, but also if the 'preaching' service has a purpose at all in its current format. Perhaps some think that the service has a role to nurture and the sermon to convert, although Blackley reports that the majority of sermons are 'to deepen spiritual awareness'; but also notes that '*[t]he overall impression of the diet of teaching and preaching on offer was one of fragmentation.*'³⁵ The 2001 Church Life survey noted that Methodists now value Holy Communion more highly than preaching; suggesting perhaps that this form of worship is more closely attuned to current needs and theological priorities.³⁶

It strikes me that one of the 'issues' that causes boredom, or frustration, or tension is that, whilst we have maintained a 'preaching' service, and some still have the goal of evangelism and some the nurture of the 'individual soul', we have not fully recognised that, if we accept Maizel-Long's analysis that our theology today emphasises ecclesiology and what it means to be church – this requires a different approach in our liturgical practice to support this

³³ Haley and Francis. *British Methodism* pg. 87

³⁴ Haley and Francis. *British Methodism* pg 89-95

³⁵ David Blackley. 'An Audit of Worship at a Methodist Church' *Epworth Review* Volume 30, Number 4 October 2003 pg 49

³⁶ An option just not available to British Methodist is to pursue the route of some United Methodists in the USA of having weekly Communion. This is because British Methodist rely heavily on 'Local Preachers' to fulfil preaching appointments.

aim.³⁷ What has happened is that the liturgical movement has influenced our service orders and content, and yet we have not recognised the different goals for our worship. So, in the Methodist Worship Book, services without Holy Communion are entitled 'Morning, Afternoon or Evening Services', not preaching services as they might still be colloquially named, and are given the four-fold shape. Indeed this process started in 1960 with a Commission on Methodist Worship reporting to Conference that stated: *The structure of the service of Holy Communion and the structure of the service where there is no Communion bears a certain resemblance to each other.....[i]n this way our people may come to see some correspondence between what is done on Communion Sundays and what is done on other Sundays'*.³⁸

I want to propose that today's worshipping people, in the context of today's sociological and theological climate, whilst still needing to encounter God for transformation, are not likely to respond, as it simply does not meet their condition, to the agenda of salvation set out by Burdon as a key Methodist emphasis. And, if the preaching service was designed to achieve soteriological and evangelical outcomes, it suggests that other forms of service are required today – which, as I have indicated previously, is what has been happening as the 'preaching' service has been modified over the last 50 years. The liturgical movement has been trying to assist this process, but the form and style of worship it proposes has not been fully understood or adopted. This does not mean the abandonment of preaching; it does mean

³⁷ Blackey gives an interesting if somewhat biased and prejudicial commentary on the nature of services held in British Methodist churches. 'An Audit of Worship at a Methodist Church'. *Epworth Review* 30.4 (2003)

³⁸ Methodist Church, Conference Minutes, Representative Session, 1960. *Conference Committee on Christian Worship* pg. 15

understanding worship as much more than preaching (supported by hymn-singing) to transform the religious affections of people.

Pastoral Considerations

David Hempton, writing about early Methodist worship writes: *What is striking about Methodist hymns and sermons, taken together, is the close fit between theology, practice and style. The communication media, the communicators, and the content of the message displayed a harmony of values.....Its emphases on invitation to new life, freedom of choice, and journey to holiness, combined with its fusion of preached word and sung verse, offered an obvious appeal to populations breaking free from the more static and emotionally restrained worldviews of Established churchmen, Calvinists, and Deists. Methodism marched on its message.*³⁹

I have tried to show above that we have moved a long way from this position, especially over the last 50 years or so. Karen Westerfield-Tucker, albeit writing on American Methodist Worship, makes this observation, as to how Methodist tradition changed and the processes involved: *[M]ethodists were inclined to describe what they did in worship as decisively and authentically 'Methodist'. Or, if church leadership or certain individuals felt that a congregation or denomination had strayed too far from what were construed to be the denomination's defining characteristics, appeals were made to return to 'Methodist' practice. Such a fluid, and occasionally contradictory, attribution gives evidence that Methodists recognized their heritage in terms of historical fact, and that they interpreted their liturgical identity dynamically in light of present circumstances, recent memories, and an idealized and romanticized understanding of their denomination's past. In*

³⁹ David Hempton. *Methodism – Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2005) pg. 77-78

other words, to be 'Methodist' in worship automatically carried with it a variety of meanings at different times and in different locations. That this was so should not be surprising. An ecclesiastical family that put such heavy stock in the work of the Holy Spirit and in the reason and experience of the individual would be expected to understand itself as being remade in each generation, not ex nihilo, but grounded in the events and practices of the past. In effect, Methodist liturgical self-perception was formed by non-identical repetition, whereby certain linkages with the past were carried forward, some were re-interpreted, while others were unwittingly forgotten in response to new definitions of personal and social religion.⁴⁰

My experience is that it is still the case that many people in my congregation want to describe themselves as Methodist; yet at the same time there are many in the same congregation that are from other or no previous denomination. There is a recognition that 'life has changed' and that change is either required or inevitable. Some have been influenced by charismatic worship styles, some by 'evangelical' experiences like Easter People and Spring Harvest, others by more reflective styles, like Iona and Taizè. Most conversations that take place centre around choice of hymns, translations of Scripture to be read, format of how to conduct Holy Communion and other content matter. Sometimes there is pressure to do other types of services – Mission Praise song services; Iona style; Café Church and so on. The general sense is that 'you can't please everyone all the time', so variety is required. We are deeply influenced in this response by the consumer culture of choice. Nevertheless most of us still regard ourselves as Methodists and we still wish our worship to be in some way Methodist. This is

⁴⁰ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker. *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford University Press 2001) pg. 274

best illustrated when some practices are simply regarded as being to 'Anglican' i.e. standing for the reading of the gospel.

In this context I have been trying to widen my congregation's perspective on the purpose of worship and its linkage with form, and style, as well as content. I have been engaged in discussions about the main service, affirming that we consider that to move forwards with 'authentic' worship that meets today's needs, which the church should not see as consumerist choice, but as that which transforms our religious affections, requires certain attributes and style, in order that today our worship might have '*a harmony of values*'. But I also try to pursue an agenda that recognises that we are Methodists and we therefore need to seek out what might be called congruently Methodist. This I suggest is not a particular historical form or an evangelical ethos, but is, as Westerfield-Tucker shows some basic liturgical praxis.⁴¹ The first is that of Worship in Spirit and in Truth, where liturgical forms ought not to be imposed nor mandated; where externals, should not inhibit or offend; and rites not used as substitute for inner religion. The second is Decency and Simplicity, with simple understandable language and a sense of decorum making up the worship. Lastly she points to Freedom of Expression, which means 'flexibility within certain parameters'. *She concludes: [W]esley conveyed that there would be a certain "ethos" characteristic of Methodist worship: an organised, coherent, simple – and variable form; freedom of expression as warranted by the movement of the Spirit, the particular occasion or event, and the context of the worshippers; the articulation of concern for the needy which leads to intercessory prayer,*

⁴¹ Karen B Westerfield-Tucker. 'Form and Freedom: John Wesley's Legacy for Methodist Worship'. *The Sunday Service of the Methodists – Twentieth Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books 1996) pg 25-30

*discipleship and service; and active participation of the congregation in song and prayer.*⁴²

How then do we combine a purpose, a form of worship and a style of worship? Let me be clear about purpose, as I envisage it for today's worshipping people; and reminding ourselves again that we have only one hour to do this and that we cannot do everything. The purpose, or maybe better stated the outcome of worship, is to provide the time and space in which people hear and speak of and act out the reality of the gospel or the reign of God. This space and time will be and acts as a counter-culture to the world, which for the other 167 hours of the week tells us that life should be lived by a different set/s of values and perceived through a different lens. This is not a negation of the world or a belief that God does not operate in the world or speak to the church through the events of the world. Yet it is a belief that *[t]he core of our community identity is enacted in worship'*⁴³ and that the community of the church does possess in the gospel story a set of values, a way of see and imagining the world as different from how the world sees. As Lyall says: *'Christian preaching and proclamation are essentially an enterprise in imagining the world through the rhetoric of texts';*⁴⁴ and, further: *It is in the telling (of) the Christian story and the celebration of the liturgy which funds the imagination and which enables pastoral care to be transformative of human lives'.*⁴⁵

This way of doing the liturgy is in itself a pastoral act for it enables people to live in the world with the hope of the gospel. And there are two vital ingredients of this hope – indeed it is our hope - that the whole world is

⁴² Westerfield-Tucker. 'Form and Freedom' pg. 30

⁴³ Elaine Ramshaw. *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Press 2000)pg. 30

⁴⁴ D. Lyall. *Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK 2001) pg 83

⁴⁵ Lyall. *Integrity of Pastoral Care* pg 84

meant to be a community and in church do live in community; and that God who is God of us all, has in Christ enabled this so to be. Worship of the God who comes to us in Christ will shape our community and religious affections toward forgiveness and reconciliation and peace and joy. This will point us to the form of worship we use and how we enact it. Our worship is corporate – acted out by different people, with different skills and voices and interpretations; yet none the less united by the gospel. Our worship hour therefore must be about being together, celebrating the good news.. The idea of different types of worship, held at different hours, must be resisted. We must identify ways to worship together – which will mean recognising and graciously allowing for difference, for God has created and values our differences. I believe that the four-fold shape of worship in our service book allows this possibility, whilst I would not wish to deny that other forms may also be able to do so.

The liturgical movement has been making these kinds of observations for many years – these observations have a vital impact on how leadership is exercised by the ‘preacher’ – the involvement and engagement of others in worship - the words used – the images of God portrayed – the ritual actions enacted. So too have some of the critics of the liturgical movement, feminists and post-colonialists for example, and we must combine the various thoughts offered to build worship that is inclusive and corporate. But my experience has been that this purpose of inclusive and corporate worship, supported and encompassed by the four-fold shape has not been explained sufficiently; and the consequence is that debate and dispute is conducted over choice of hymns or seating arrangements or translations of scripture. We end up with different styles of worship for different groups, thereby accepting and

adopting the power of our culture, rather than the power of the gospel to unite us in the love of God.

Consequently, there is a vital act of pastoral care to be carried out so that the liturgy may itself be an act of pastoral concern. This task is to bring people to an understanding of worship as this counter-cultural event that we accept will shape us as one community under God. Perhaps the best known maxim of Vatican II is that the congregation should have '*full, conscious and active participation*' in worship. But of equal significance is the next paragraph that states '*[i]n all their apostolic activity, pastors of souls should energetically set about achieving it (full, conscious and active participation) through requisite pedagogy.*'

To teach people the purpose of worship is to explain to them and lead them to see that it is not for them as individuals. Whilst worship is always for God, '*God's command to us to worship him (sic) is a concession to our needs*';⁴⁶ our worship is for the sake of each other, that together, young and old, men and women, white and black, able-bodied and disabled, hetero and homo sexual, might hear and practice the good news that God is for all.

The encumbrances we face in promoting such an ideal are multiple – we battle the current culture of individualism; we battle the entrenchment of those in our congregation who want it their way, which may be the way they perceive it has always been, or the way they think it should be 'modernised'; we battle romanticised ideals of what Methodism is supposed to be about. Yet, to be pastoral means we cannot battle as a strategy of change. We can teach and we can offer. I have spent my first year, generously supported by my congregation doing such, and, therefore, have been able to model a

⁴⁶ Attributed to Vic White by E. Ramshaw in *Ritual and Pastoral Care* pg 16

form of worship, which has the goal of practising being community under one God. I have chosen to use the four-fold shape of worship that is in our Methodist Worship Book, but adapted to meet, I hope, the liturgical praxis that Westerfield-Tucker describes as Wesley's inheritance. By this I mean: Our worship is ritualistic, in that it follows the same shape week by week⁴⁷; it follows the lectionary and the seasons of the Christian year; it includes prayers of thanksgiving when not a Holy Communion to declare the 'Pascal Mystery' in ritual form. It is then comprehensive, including all the main rites of worship – yet it is simple. We do not do fussy ritual; but we do ritual. Bread and wine are bought to the table during worship, not just uncovered; and many people, including children, distribute bread and wine. I place my stole on readers and intercessors to emphasise that they too are ministers to the people. We use lots of hymns and songs not from Hymns and Psalms, and do so because they contain theology (and language) that is inclusive and simple and affirming of our core message, but try to use tunes that all know so that all are included. We also value learning new songs to some that are well loved by others from different traditions. I pray most often in extempore fashion, but always in a Trinitarian form and I use the Collect each week, so our freedom is not outside of certain historical parameters. In many ways our services are varied, in that the specific content of them changes – yet they are the same in shape and in form, their ritual being to gather the congregation in praise each week, to tell again the gospel in reading and proclamation, to respond in prayer and praise to the good news, offering ourselves to God's service and departing to the world having had our lenses focused by the gospel.

⁴⁷ In as much as I am 'leading' worship. One very serious pragmatic issue is that others lead worship on weeks I am leading other congregations. We are working towards a local liturgy and will be seeking the co-operation of other 'preachers'.

In many ways we are doing a lot in worship – in the most vital of ways we are doing only one thing – celebrating as a community the gospel. Our purpose is to be together as community doing the four-fold shape week by week in order that we might hear the gospel and respond to that same gospel – which is that God is for all and we are for each other. I am sure that if I attended Boldovin's church, because of its own historical past, the service held there would appear different to those I conduct. Yet I think that, under the surface, we would recognise each other as doing the same. I am encouraged in my work by Wainwright's thought: *Thus ecumenism's goal becomes not only evangelization but an acceptable doxology*'.⁴⁸ My congregation is already ecumenical – our Methodist future probably lies in greater and greater co-operation and merger with other denominations. A goal of our current worship practice is then to understand that we do the same as others – even if in different ways. I am encouraged in my ministry by Salier's comment: *The liturgy is in itself a country we must learn to live in*.⁴⁹ We all do one thing in worship today – we tell the gospel story and our evangelism is to invite people to come and listen and to join in, because it makes a difference to life and living. We don't have to make the liturgy relevant to people – we have to enable people to live in it.

Conclusion

Is worship then, in any way linked to mission? Not if we want it to be pragmatically so; this temptation we must resist, like the repetition of sermons aimed at creating guilt and calling people to greater effort to attract more people to Christ through our own endeavours, or themed services on mission

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright. *Worship With One Accord – Where Liturgy and Ecumenism Embrace* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997) pg 1

⁴⁹ Don Saliers. *Worship as Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994) pg 139

and service. But our four-fold shape and our practice of worship as a gracious and generous community will generate mission. This is an essay (or book!) in itself – so I will only point out some of the most obvious and salient links here. Clearly prayers of intercession are an invitation to mission, as is the giving of our financial gifts. In receiving Holy Communion we may hope that the idea of sharing bread enters our consciousness as going beyond sharing the sacramental meal amongst the congregation. My own mentor, Stephen Burns writes of ways in which the four-fold shape is mission orientated and specifically how the actual act of sending at the end of the service in the four-fold shape can be a direct link to a life of mission and service.⁵⁰ In the Methodist Worship Book this is expressed with words like 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. This might be more strongly emphasised as a word of mission by a direct reference to the world and people, or we could take up the suggestion made by Stephen Burns: *[i]n terms of sending, we might recall that early account of worship from Justin Martyr who speaks of people engaged in forms of mission at the very point that the word of mission is recovered in some contemporary resources. Justin speaks of portions being sent to the poor and a collection being gathered at the conclusion of the sharing around the table. Congregations might also do well to revive and celebrate these and other acts of generosity at this moment in their liturgies, so enacting the mission of which the word speaks.*⁵¹

Beyond these links between worship and mission, as two separate entities or activities, we would also do well to ponder how the church at worship is in itself doing mission – for it is proclaiming and acting out the gospel. If it believes the good news of God for all, then its worship, will be a

⁵⁰ Stephen Burns. 'Mission-Shaped Worship'. *Anvil* (Volume 22 No. 3) 2005 pg 185-198

⁵¹ Burns. 'Mission-Shaped Worship'. pg 191

celebration, that however strange and irrelevant it might at first seem to be to those outside, will be, if they can be invited to inhabit this liturgy, a good dwelling place to be. In this way our harmony of values is established for today's Christian community and for those who choose to seek with us the good news of Jesus Christ. Those who participate, even if for only one hour a week, may begin to have their religious affections shaped by a worshipping community that practices in its worship the way of being that God so desires of us.

It is my further hope that those that are core to the congregation, also having religious affections shaped by this way of worshipping, will increase their capacity to shape all church life and activities in ways that are inclusive, hospitable, gracious, generous and community building and so to contribute further to the church's mission to the world today.

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