

Rumy

## THE FUTURE CONTRIBUTION OF METHODISM TO AUSTRALIAN CHURCH LIFE

D'Arcy Wood, Lecturer in Theology, Parkin-Wesley Theological College, Adelaide.

### I. THE RELIGIOUS COMPLEXION OF AUSTRALIA

*no chance for the national church sense of the U.Ch. of Canada.*

According to recent statistical analysis the religious complexion of Australia is more or less as follows:  
Roman Catholic 30%, Anglican 30%, Uniting Church 10%, Orthodox 6%.  
The other 24% comprise people who claim no religion, as well as a variety of smaller churches such as Baptists, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Salvation Army. There is a small but growing number of Muslims and a small but significant population of Jews.

In 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia was formed. This Church includes almost all of the Methodists, over 90% of the Congregationalists and about 70% of the Presbyterians. Presbyterians who did not enter the union have continued to function on the constitution of the former Presbyterian Church.

Recent changes in this complexion include the rapid growth of the Orthodox churches due to migration, the significant growth of Roman Catholics due both to migration and to natural increase, the relative decline of the Anglican Church and the even sharper decline of the Uniting Church. Some of the small churches in Australia, particularly several branches of Pentecostalism, are growing quite rapidly.

### II. A TYPOLOGY OF AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIANITY

In my opinion there are divisions in theology and ecclesiology which are much more significant for Australian christianity than the denominational divisions just outlined. In order to understand the future of Australian christianity and the possible contribution of Methodist emphases to that future, it is important to distinguish the divergent theological tendencies of the present. These divergences cut across the denominational divisions. I have worked out a typology, which is only a tentative one, but which may help to explain why I have come to the conclusion that I have in this paper.

#### (1) The traditional "Catholic" emphasis

I would include in this group Roman Catholics of the pre-Vatican II variety, a significant number of Anglican-Catholics still adhering to the Anglican Church in Australia, and most of the Orthodox denominations in Australia. This theological group is characterised by an authoritarian structure which limits participation by lay people and therefore maintains a strong division between the clergy and the lay people. There is a strong emphasis on sacramental grace, and grace is understood as something that is mediated by the church. This theology is profoundly conservative in the sense that any major reconsideration of theological content is difficult to envisage.

#### (2) The Charismatic/Pentecostal/Evangelical emphasis

These people, found in many denominations, are characterised by biblical literalism, a strong emphasis on evangelism, an emphasis on individual faith and individual conversion, a tendency to what Ernst Troeltsch called 'sect-type christianity', and conservative political tendencies. Some christians who would call themselves 'evangelical' would not fall within this group. For example, the inheritors of 18th century Methodism I would include in group 3, rather than group 2. But there are certainly former Methodists in Australia who would be included in group 2.

#### (3) The Reformation "Centre"

This theology and ecclesiology is biblically based but it allows for biblical criticism and therefore the principle of significant renewal in theology. There

is a strong adherence to the catholic creeds of the church but there is also a strong sense of community, i.e. the church consists of those who respond to the call of Christ and are incorporated into him by baptism. In this theology there is a strong line from doctrine to ethics and therefore an involvement in political and social issues.

### III. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In recent times there has been a tendency for the third category, the Reformation Centre, to decline. The most rapid growth is in category 2. Category 1. are largely 'holding the line' although there is a gradual decline. The fact that these categories criss-cross the denominational divisions is illustrated by the fact that many Roman Catholics would be included, in my understanding, in group 3. Another surprising feature is that many Lutherans (a small church in Australia) would be included in category 2. Therefore, when I use the term 'Reformation', I am referring to major emphases of the 16th century reformers and the 18th century Methodists rather than a lineal descent by denomination.

The growth of the Eastern Orthodox and of Pentecostal churches in recent years has meant that the proportional strength of the Uniting Church and other denominations which might provide numbers for group 3. has declined. But not only is this a proportional decline, it is also a decline in absolute terms. There have been major defections from the Uniting Church to Pentecostal and Baptist churches in recent times. A common interpretation of this cross-over is that those who embrace an individualistic and pietistic form of christianity find themselves more at home in those denominations. Another possible reason is that the Uniting Church, during the 10 years of its life, has had difficulty in identifying itself with a particular theological and ecclesiological stream. Some call this a "problem of identity". To illustrate this, there has been a major struggle within the Uniting Church concerning the doctrine of baptism. A variety of theologies of baptism is to be found in the Uniting Church, and the divergence of practice became so great that in 1985 the National Assembly felt called to declare that re-baptism was contrary to the Church's discipline and that the baptism of infants was legitimate. I think it is fair to say that a few years ago such statements (in the Methodist or Presbyterian or Congregational churches) would have been unnecessary.

### IV. THE PLACE OF METHODISM IN THE RECENT PAST

In 1901 various branches of Methodism in Australia united to form the Methodist Church of Australasia. Shortly after the formation of this union there were moves for a wider union of protestant churches and the call for such a united protestant church was heeded by the Congregationalists, the Methodists and the Presbyterians. This union proved difficult to achieve, and during the decades following World War I it was the Methodist Church which kept the vision alive when the other two partners were inclined to lose heart. In the Uniting Church, since 1977, the Methodists have been the largest component numerically.

In the wider ecumenical movement Methodism has been influential. It has had an influence beyond the strength of its numbers in such bodies as the Australian Council of Churches which was formed in 1950. In other ecumenical bodies across the country Methodist ministers and lay people are often to be found in key positions.

Methodism has, throughout Australian history, been an active voice in the cause of social justice. At times the definition of 'justice' has been restricted to issues such as gambling and the misuse of alcohol. However, through most of its history, the understanding of justice has been broader than this. In recent times important issues include disarmament and world peace, problems of poverty and discrimination, human rights, racism and aboriginal affairs (particularly aboriginal land rights). Although the numerical

size of the Uniting Church is such that its voice is often disregarded by politicians, there have been periods in the history of Australian christianity when Methodism has had a powerful influence on political decisions and there are still occasions when that influence is discernible.

Within the family of Methodism in Australia, and therefore within the Uniting Church, there is another trend which neglects social justice. This might be termed 'individualistic pietism'. This tendency would, of course, be included in group 2 in my typology. It is possible to discern within Methodism a considerable gap between those who belong to group 2. and those who belong to group 3. This is not to say that members of one group or the other agree with their own group on all issues, but I do think it is possible to make the broad distinction.

## V. THE FUTURE

Because Methodism as a Church has disappeared from the Australian scene, I do not see that there is a 'future' for Methodism as such. However I do believe that Methodist emphases, particularly as seen in the 18th century, have a potentially important influence within what I have called group 3. Many of the emphases of Methodism have, of course, been similar to those of the Reformed churches and of some Lutherans. Included in such emphases I

would list:

- \* *Justification by faith;*
- \* *the centrality of the word of God in the church;*
- \* *the universal call of the gospel;*
- \* *the sanctification of the person and of the church; and*
- \* *the principle of constant reform of the church in response to the Word.*

On these principles, ecclesiology includes a critical approach to both scripture and tradition. These emphases allow for a historical understanding of the development of theology. There is an adherence to the historic emphases of ecumenical christianity, but there is openness to renewal in the light of scholarship and of the developing consciousness of the church as it responds to new situations. Because of its historic engagement with social problems, I believe Methodism, within this Reformation Centre, can contribute to a dialogical engagement with the changing culture of Australia. This culture is marked by a growing variety of languages and cultural backgrounds. There is at present, in Australia, a major debate over what is called "multi-culturalism". People in the churches who belong to group 1. and group 2. are generally unsympathetic to multi-culturalism, whereas christians in group 3. are open to it. Just as Methodism has been marked by the application of doctrine to ethics and politics, so I believe the Reformation Centre in Australia will be marked by a desire to proclaim the gospel in the real and living context of Australian life. The Reformation Centre will therefore search for solutions to some of the pressing problems within the Australian community such as growing unemployment, a decline of living standards, discrimination against particular groups (especially aborigines), and the role of Australia within the changing Pacific region.

## CONCLUSION

The Uniting Church in the future, including its Methodist component, will therefore need to join forces with christians in other denominations to develop the role of the church in the terms I have outlined. Many of these christians are to be found in the Roman Catholic Church. Some are to be found within the Anglican Church in Australia, and a few are to be found in the Churches of Christ and the Lutheran Church. Those who hold these theological convictions tend to support bodies such as the Australian Council of Churches.

*How seen in relation to  
Catholic tradition?*

It is common in the western world for members of particular denominations to be unsympathetic to the ecumenical movement. This is certainly the case in Australia. The Australian Council of Churches includes the Anglican Church, the Uniting Church, the Churches of Christ, the Salvation Army, the Quakers and most of the Orthodox Churches. Although it does not include the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, the Baptists or the Presbyterians, these churches do co-operate in many of the programmes of the A.C.C. The traditional Methodist emphases will continue to be influential in these ecumenical bodies. Although criticized from many quarters within the Church and beyond, the A.C.C. continues to bear witness to a dynamic form of christianity which is engaged with the Australian culture and which seeks to raise the sights of Australians beyond our shores to the problems of Asia and the Pacific. It is increasingly true that there are people outside the churches who are more sympathetic to A.C.C. than some people within the churches!

#### A WORD ON HYMNOLOGY

One of the signs of the continuing Methodist emphasis in Australia is the strong representation of the hymns of Charles Wesley in the Australian Hymn Book. This hymnal, published in 1977, was sponsored by the Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Unlike the Canadian Hymn Book, which jettisoned many of the glorious hymns of Charles Wesley and gave undue prominence to inferior hymn writers, the Australian Hymn Book has preserved most of the greatest of the Wesley hymns. Because this is an ecumenical book, these hymns are being sung by congregations of the largest denominations in Australia. It is proving to be true, yet again, that the greatest writings of the past in poetry, in theology and in hymnology have an enduring quality which enables them to be used in a wide variety of historical and cultural contexts. This is the case with the Wesley hymns. It should be added that in many congregations, even in the Uniting Church there is a tendency toward chorus-type singing with its weak theology and even weaker music, but the wide acceptance of the Australian Hymn Book means that there is a definite future for the Methodist contribution to hymnology. Even those who know little or nothing of the origins of Methodism have nevertheless absorbed a good deal of its theology through these hymns - an absorption that is often unreflective but an absorption nonetheless.

22 July, 1987.

*Method contribution:*

1. Dialogue without reductionism & reductionism.
2. Evangelicism - on basis of looking at world situation & the need for the gospel.

*[Note this was my "conversion"]*

*Opening up people to look at their own situation on the basis of gospel.*

3. Dialogue with other religions
4. Social witness

*Is this really pluralistic*

*Outline -*

*Australia - Meths (now UCA) most easily able to operate a bridge with RC's, Orthodox, Luther, some Anglicans*

*ecum  
itality  
sense of  
UC denomination  
?*