

Introductory Article

As an RE teacher you never know what pupils will write in exams – like the time in Methody recently when the test question was asked “What do you think is impressive about John Wesley?” and the reply came “I don’t know but he must have been important to have had a tin of tuna named after him!!” (apologies to John West!) It has to be said however that ignorance of Wesley and all things Methodist is not confined to non church-going adolescents. Often the people in our pews don’t know all that much on the subject either. Over the next few months we hope to do something about that by taking a look at what makes Methodism distinctive.

People today call themselves Methodist for a variety of reasons – they find the members friendly; the church is the most convenient to where they live; their children are catered for in youth organisations; they like the praise group and the style of worship. One wonderful thing that has happened in recent years has been the influx of believers from other countries who have come to Ireland, attached themselves to local Methodist churches and greatly enriched the life of many congregations.

It is increasingly rare however to find people becoming Methodist because they are convinced by our traditions or theological emphases. In a way this is not a bad thing. There is little excuse in these days of numerical decline for denominational pride or superiority but neither should we be too quick to abandon the special convictions and viewpoints that give us our distinctive place in the Christian family. Those who are Methodist by conviction will make loyal and dependable members who are much less likely to drift from one church to another in pursuit of some non existent model of perfection.

Of course some would argue that the days of denominations are coming to an end. They are a luxury we can no longer afford. They hinder the work of the Kingdom by creating unnecessary competition and rivalry. Can it be right, they ask, for three declining churches in the same location to be struggling to keep going on a Sunday night when amalgamation would produce a worship experience that is infinitely more uplifting and satisfying. The church of the future will be lighter in structure and more able to respond to the leading of the Spirit and to the needs of a rapidly changing world. We are witnessing, they say, a stripping down of the Church as we have known it so that something new and better might come to birth.

Well, that’s pretty challenging talk for those of us who are Methodist by conviction and who love our heritage and traditions. We are almost made to feel guilty for our attachment to a particular denomination and especially to a movement which has its roots in something that happened nearly three hundred years ago. We find ourselves accused of trying to preserve a historical curiosity which belongs in the past.

We must be brave enough to ask ourselves some hard questions What is it that so inspires us about being Methodist? What do we have that is worth preserving? What would be lost if we went out of existence? What are our distinctive beliefs and emphases? What does Methodism still have to contribute to Christianity in the twenty first century? These are important questions because if we are not careful the next

generation will have lost their understanding of Methodism's history, its theological outlook, its worship, its breadth of outlook and its approach to social action.

So, what do Methodists believe? Why do we still sing Charles Wesley's hymns after all this time? Why do we seek to evangelise? Why did we pioneer inner city missions? What do we mean by "assurance", holiness and "perfect love"? Why are many Methodists wary of alcohol and gambling? Why do we make so much room for differences of opinion among our members?

Perhaps you would like to submit your own questions – a form of "what you always wanted to know about Methodism but were afraid to ask"! As an ordinary lay person I would not for a moment claim to have all the answers but maybe over the next few months we can explore the issues together. Just write to the editor and she will pass on your comments and queries.

Toward the end of his life John Wesley wrote these words which serve as a timely warning for us

"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist whether in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out."

Now there's a challenge! I look forward to hearing from you.

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Perhaps the time has come to look again at "the rock from which we were hewn" so that whatever the future has in store for us – whether we remain as we are or find again a place within Anglicanism – we make our voice heard and stand for the gospel truths and values that men and women and a broken society so badly need to hear.