

Time was, when you could have gone into any Methodist church in Ireland and been fairly confident about what to expect. The hymns and tunes would have been instantly familiar; the service would have unfolded in the same pattern you knew so well; and even the announcements would have sounded similar to the ones at home. There was a kind of corporate identity that was Methodist worship. It was a bit like an old shoe – comfortable, reliable and greatly loved.

The last thirty years have blown this out of the water. Now, you have to be prepared for the unexpected. A rush of creativity in hymn writing along with the use of digital projection has transformed our approach to praise. Traditional choirs often now sit uneasily alongside praise groups and pipe organs have been forced to come to terms with modern keyboards. The traditional “hymn prayer sandwich” has been replaced by “times of praise” which can be an endurance test to those more senior folk who find standing for long periods a bit of a challenge.

And it’s not just the music. The whole feel of worship is changing. People used to come into church, find a seat and bow their heads in a silent prayer. Now the buzz of conversation is such that sometimes it is only quelled by the minister talking over the noise to get people’s attention. When I was little, children sat quietly under their parents’ control and were taught a certain way of behaving in church. Now we so love to see little ones in church at all that we seem to allow them the run of the place in a way that would have been unthinkable years ago.

Some things we’re better at. We enlist our people to help with leading singing, reading scripture, doing prayers of intercession, speaking to the children and performing drama. This takes us away from the bad old days where lay people often saw themselves as spectators rather than participants. We’re also much better at creating a sense of community and welcome as we share in tea and coffee after the service. In a growing number of churches we offer people the opportunity to receive individual private prayer ministry as a natural expression of what it means to be church.

The challenge of declining numbers has led many congregations to seek new ways of reaching people who have lost contact with church and church culture. No longer does anyone care what anyone else wears in church and this fosters a relaxed sense of acceptance and inclusion. Ventures such as “café church” and “messy church” deliberately set out to create an enjoyable informal and thought provoking experience, presenting the message in a way that connects easily with people who have had very little exposure to Christianity. They are making church going accessible to a new generation of young families.

So, in terms of babies and bathwater, what is there in Methodist worship that is distinctive and worth preserving? Some might point to the way we draw on our Anglican roots with the occasional use of liturgy and responsive readings. Others might want to highlight the important and central place we give to preaching. But surely for most it’s got to be our rich heritage of hymn singing. We’re told that Methodism was born in song. Charles Wesley published 6,500 hymns. He used them to teach theology and biblical doctrine to ordinary believers. The Methodists sang out their

faith, expressing their praise and declaring gospel truth. As they committed the hymns to memory so they found the doctrines expressed in the hymns taking root in their hearts.

There is no doubt about it. We are the inheritors of a fabulous spiritual legacy. I was at a Methodist funeral recently where we sang *O for a Thousand Tongues*, *And can it Be* and *Love Divine*. The congregation was deeply stirred; the singing powerfully filled the church and those lovely hymns, coming down to us across 250 years, still carried an impact that left no heart untouched. For many of us the hymnbook is second only to the Bible itself as a devotional aid. Just to read those old time honoured hymns is to be lifted to a new plane of worship and delight.

But there is a danger with all this. It would be tragic to be so wedded to the past that we fail to recognise and appreciate the fact that God is still inspiring the creation of wonderful new hymns today. By comparison with the old classics some of the new stuff may seem shallow and repetitive to older ears and of doubtful duration but we have to remember that the vast majority of Wesley's hymns have not survived either. Time subjects material to a natural selection process. No doubt a lot of modern stuff will quickly be forgotten but some modern pieces like *In Christ Alone* and *The Power of the Cross* written by the likes of Keith Getty and Stuart Townend are set to become the twenty-first century equivalents of the old greats. The point is, we don't have to choose between classic and modern – we can have both.

What matters much more than style is a worshipping heart. Here is what John Wesley gave as instructions for praise *“Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve.”*

I can only imagine that 250 years on he would be thrilled to see a new hymnbook, *Singing the Faith*, which celebrates and values the old and yet eagerly embraces the best of the new. Perhaps that's a good description of what is happening in modern Methodist worship across Ireland.