

Movement or Monument

From where I live you can see Knockagh Monument. Situated on Knockagh Hill above Greenisland, the huge basalt obelisk, 100 feet high, dominates the landscape and offers amazing views over Belfast Lough and over to the Scottish coast. It is dedicated to those from County Antrim who lost their lives in two world wars. It is silent up there - deliberately created as a place apart. It is impressive and commands respect but it's also stark and lifeless – pointing to the past and rooted in what happened then. A monument like Knockagh is relatively easy to manage. You can set it up and rest happy in the knowledge that it will always look the same and remain exactly where it is.

This reminds me of something that was said at our recent Conference in Carrickfergus. Pete Greig, leader of the international 24/7 Prayer Movement was one of the keynote speakers. “The Church” he declared “is a movement, not a 2,000 year old monument.” He was absolutely right. A movement is all about life and vitality and change. The Church should be like that - a people on the move who live under the Lordship and authority of Jesus Christ and have the immense challenge and privilege of representing Him and championing His cause. We should be a movement not a monument.

Methodism of course began as a movement – a movement within the Church of England. The Wesley brothers never wanted it to be anything other than a network of local societies within the Anglican Church. (We still preserve this idea today by referring to our congregations as societies and appointing society stewards.) In contrast to the monument – like formality and lifelessness of established church in the eighteenth century Methodism pulsed with vitality and energy. It could not be confined within the old structures. God was doing something new and the new wine needed new wineskins – flexible and experimental ways of reaching people with the Gospel message.

One new way was open air preaching. In a situation where the poor no longer felt welcome in parish churches, John Wesley travelled over 200,000 miles on horseback preaching in fields, village greens, towns and market places taking the message to where people were. At first he found it strange and uncomfortable but he quickly saw how God was blessing his work. He wrote “Field preaching is a cross to me, but I know my commission and see no other way of preaching the gospel to every creature.”

Methodism as a movement quickly gave rise to all sorts of new ideas. It used lay people to lead small discipleship groups; it used homes as meeting places; it held love feasts to encourage fellowship and quality relationships; it moved its preachers on after fixed periods. In terms of social welfare it set up schools, promoted prison reform, gave aid and medicine to the poor and challenged slavery.

When he had to, for the sake of the Gospel, Wesley could be truly radical. He thought outside of the box and refused to be constrained by convention. He wrote “I look on all the world as my parish.” In 1784 in the chaos that followed the American War of Independence he shocked the church authorities by ordaining Thomas Coke to be a superintendent (bishop) of the Methodists in the newly formed United States of America. Technically he himself was acting like a bishop in doing this and grossly exceeding his authority. Wesley however was effectively setting American Methodists free to celebrate their own sacraments and form their own church. Sometimes the leaders of movements have to do things differently.

The early leaders of Irish Methodism had a similar movement mentality. An example of this was Gideon Ouseley. Converted in 1791 through the influence of a group of Methodists meeting in an inn in Dunmore, County Galway, he immediately set about witnessing to his newly found faith. He travelled across the countryside speaking to people in their native Irish language, visiting wakes, funerals, fairs, markets and jails. Often he would turn up out of nowhere at an open air mass and translate parts of the Latin liturgy which expressed scriptural truth, calling out the priest's words after him in Irish and saying to the crowd "Listen to that". Then he would depart as silently as he came.

In 1799 the Irish Methodist Conference formally designated him, along with two others, James McQuigg and Charles Graham, as "Missioners to the Irish". Ouseley was thrilled but in reality he was simply being confirmed in a role to which God had already appointed him. Together with his companions, he moved from place to place preaching from horseback. The typical method was to take up position outside a chapel as people were leaving, sing a hymn, pray and start preaching in Irish. To avoid stoning he and his companions would often back their horses up against the window of a local trader. Then it would be on to somewhere else sleeping that night in a loft or on a damp floor. Thousands were converted. Graham declared "We do more in spreading truth in one fair or market day than we do in weeks or months in private places."

Gideon Ouseley never lost his pioneering spirit. At the Methodist Conference in 1813 when Thomas Coke called for volunteers to go with him to Ceylon and the East Indies Ouseley was one of the first to volunteer and plead with tears for the opportunity. Thankfully the Conference thought otherwise and he stayed in Ireland to continue his work.

So where does all that leave us today? Maybe we're back to that choice between monument or movement. A monument is a thing of order, dignity and prestige but essentially it remains where it always has been. Being part of a movement is untidy and risky but perhaps we need to recover that kind of spirit I think our President calls it going forward in faith and getting your feet wet.