

It can be argued that one of the most significant pointers to the health of any congregation is what happens within five minutes of the Benediction. In some churches the place is almost empty as people rapidly head for their Sunday lunch. In others members are happy to linger, greeting one another and catching up on what is new. Many of our churches provide tea or coffee after the service to allow such contact to take place and some offer personal prayer ministry to those who seek it. All part of what it means to belong to a modern church family.

John Wesley would have approved of this. He famously said that “the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion”. From the beginning Methodists have always been characterised by the warmth of their fellowship and the quality of their relationships. Many of us can vouch for the wonderful friendship and support we have received from church members at times of crisis and trouble. We recognise that the Christian journey of faith, although it begins with the exercise of personal choice, is a shared journey in which we need the help and encouragement of fellow believers. Charles Wesley’s wonderful hymn captures it well:

*“He bids us build each other up;*

*And, gathered into one,*

*To our high calling’s glorious hope*

*We hand in hand go on”*

For early Methodists that journeying together was of great importance. It expressed itself in a number of ways. The first of these was lively Sunday worship characterised by heart-felt praise and a common focus on the Word of God as it was read and preached. Later on as they came together to the Lord’s Table they experienced a special sense of communion with God and with each other. During the week there were the “class meetings” where small groups met to share their joys and struggles as ordinary believers. Then there were special events such as cottage meetings where folk would gather in someone’s home for prayer and praise or perhaps to listen to a travelling preacher.

One such special event was known as the love feast. This was a practice which Wesley had first seen among his Moravian friends. Usually held on a quarterly basis, it was an evening where people gathered for simple eats – often just bread and water or tea and cake. As they sat down at table the conversation centred on spiritual matters so that by the end people went away encouraged and strengthened in their faith. Burdens were lightened as they were shared; confidences were exchanged; sins were confessed and above all love was expressed.

It makes you wonder what is left of that sort of thinking and practice in modern day Methodism. We certainly see echoes of it in our after-church coffee, our friendship clubs and perhaps especially in our home group Bible studies or midweek meetings. The opportunities to meet are there. What may be more in question is the depth of our fellowship and our willingness to be open and vulnerable to one another. It could be argued that a modern meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous gets closer to the heart of what a Methodist class meeting was like than many of our fellowship groups.

It's been said that George Whitefield was a much better preacher than his friend John Wesley and more effective when it came to seeing people converted. Wesley's strength, however, humanly speaking, lay in his ability to put interested people into the new Methodist societies where he knew they would be encouraged and looked after. It was an understood thing that when you belonged to Christ you were part of a family of other believers who were there to rejoice with you in your joys, pray for you in your struggles and help you along the path of discipleship. Your commitment was not only to Christ but also to others in the fellowship.

It was for this reason that Methodists were encouraged to speak out and share something of their personal experience of God with others. Sometimes a person would "give their testimony" during a Sunday service. They would tell the story of how they came to faith and witness to the way they had found forgiveness for the past or were finding victory over sin in the present. On other occasions a person would share their experience informally - at a love feast or with a few fellow class members perhaps describing how they wrestled with a particular temptation or issue and found deliverance.

It must have made for meetings that were of enormous practical and spiritual help as ordinary lay people shared insights and lessons that would have been remembered long after many a theoretical sermon had been forgotten. One of Wesley's rules was that no testimony was to be more than two weeks old. That must have been quite a challenge and a real incentive to keep in close step with God.

Happily this sort of testimony is not something relegated to the past in Irish Methodism. We still ask ordinands and candidates for the ministry to give an account of their conversion and call. The Lay Witness Movement actively encourages and facilitates faith sharing in our churches. Our experience has been that as teams of lay people have gone into churches and told their stories with openness and vulnerability, often through laughter and tears, God has used their witness to speak powerfully into people's lives. We have found that people today are just as interested in listening to real life stories as ever people were in years gone by. Lay Witness seems to be tapping into something that links us to our Methodist roots. It is the religion of the warmed heart in the language of ordinary people. It's where the rubber of Christian truth meets the road of real life experience. It's what Methodism has always been about.