

Peter is fairly new to Methodism. His taste in worship music owes more to Redman and Townend than to Wesley and Watt. Recently he has come under fire from some in his home circuit who say that he is “not Methodist enough”. He understands the value of tradition but he doesn’t want to see it becoming a barrier to progress.

He asks... When do you bow to tradition and when do you try to innovate?

Peter, I would imagine that half the local preachers and ministers in Irish Methodism will sympathise with your situation and your question. As a relative newcomer to Methodism I can imagine that you find our seeming obsession with Charles Wesley rather difficult to get your head around. You are probably too polite to say it but you are most likely struggling to understand what some of those old hymns actually mean – and you reckon that if you don’t understand them then neither will most of your congregation.

You’d be absolutely right in saying that some of those hymns can be hard work. They were written in eighteenth century and often the expressions sound strange and even unintelligible to uninitiated modern ears. Older people however have a love for that which has been familiar to them since childhood and so that sentimental attachment remains strong.

For young people of course it is a very different matter. For many of them worship songs seem only to have value when they are of recent composition and led by a decent praise band. It doesn’t seem to matter if the lyrics are simple and repetitive and the shelf life is short as long as the tune is catchy. In that they are maybe not so very different to the older generation – it is often the tune rather than the words that counts.

One of the things the “Faith and Worship” course tries to do is to give you a feel for worship in a Methodist setting. That is not done to stifle new ideas and force you to into a liturgical straightjacket. It is simply recognising who we are. It is saying unashamedly that we come from a particular tradition when it comes to expressing worship. Our music is an important part of that. Methodism has always seen hymn singing as a way of transmitting our teaching and belief. It’s all there – the great undeserved love of God, salvation through faith in Jesus, the inclusion of all in the scope of what Jesus did on the Cross, victory over sin possible for every believer, the joy of knowing yourself to be a child of God... The list goes on and on. Those hymns cover the whole gamut of Christian life and experience. Their survival is testimony to their worth. Without being too unkind one cannot really say that about many (not all) of modern worship songs.

I would say to you, then, to think very carefully before you dispense with traditional elements in our worship such as Wesley hymns which have fed the spirituality of many of our older members for years in favour of what is seen as contemporary worship. Modern does not necessarily mean better and we are, in a bid to seem popular, in danger of throwing away a heritage which is priceless and timeless.

Near where I live there is a Reformed Presbyterian church. Its worship is characterised by unaccompanied psalm singing. Most of us would see this as a recipe for terminal decline and yet the reality is that the church is thriving and is full of young people and young families. Somehow

they have managed to transmit their austere tradition in such a way that it is loved and valued by the next generation. It will never be every believer's cup of tea but they clearly are proud of it and enriched by it. I can't help but wish that Methodism could learn from this – so that, in a bid to be contemporary, we don't lose touch with something very precious.

Always remember that worship is far more than music and praise songs. It is wrong to call the person at the front who leads the singing the "worship leader". He or she has an important role to play in the worship but the real worship leader is the minister or local preacher who carefully crafts the service, putting together hymns, prayers, readings and message in such a way that people are taken through praise, adoration, confession, intercession and response to scripture. The whole thing is worship.

Your challenge when taking a service is to keep in mind the needs of young and old, newcomer and mature believer. Think how frustrating it must be for young people to sing only traditional hymns in church when they love modern worship material. Think also of how soul destroying it is for deeply committed people to have to stand and sing the same simple lyrics over and over again when they long for something with a bit more depth and substance. It's got to be about balance.

We need to remember that at the end of the day God doesn't really mind or care about styles of worship. Jesus once reminded the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4 that "worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth". That is all that really counts. When we go out of church and pronounce about whether we "really enjoyed it" or "didn't get much out of it" we are speaking as if we were the audience or the consumer and therefore somehow entitled to pass judgment. That is wrong. Our worship is primarily meant to be offered to God. He is the one whose verdict really counts. Maybe if we stopped worrying about pleasing people and focused more on pleasing Him we would end up with worship that transcended human preferences and really connected with the heart of God. The best apologetic in the world is the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.